

*A Koori's Perspective of Place: Connections to the NSW Upper South Coast*¹

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Introduction

I am an Educator. I am also an Aboriginal designer and carver. These two beings though are complimentary. My work is inspired by the practice of carving – a practice long undertaken by Aboriginal peoples right around the country known as Australia. Carvings can include tree carving or ‘dendroglyphs’ and ‘petroglyphs’ or rock carvings or rock engravings. My specific influence is the tree carvers as my father and his father both worked in the bush.

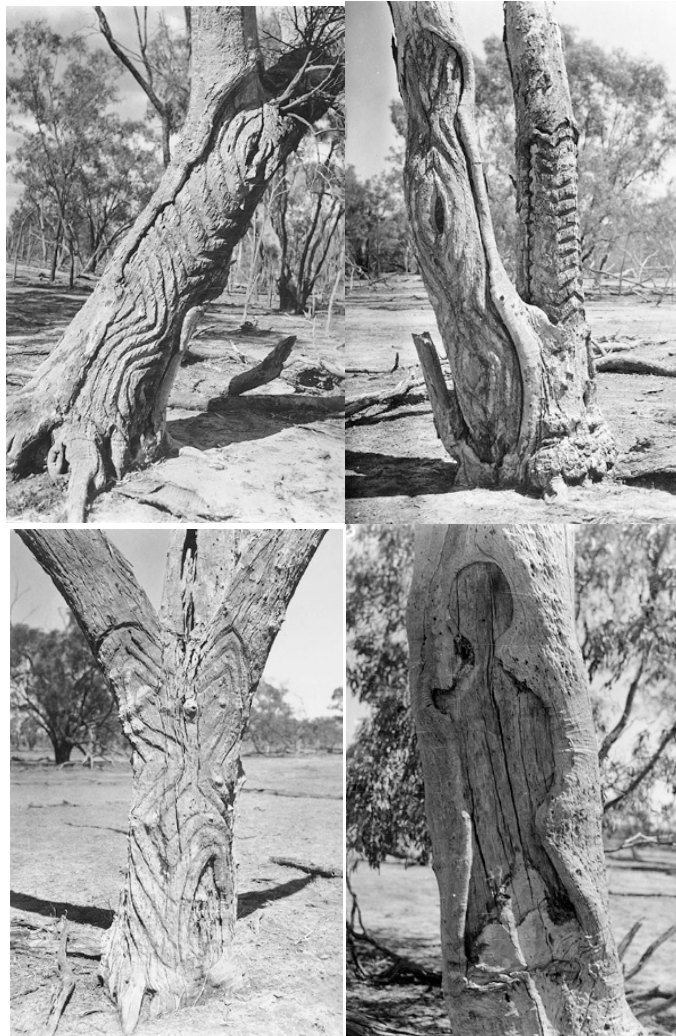
My work is in timber didjeridus and glass objects, including glass didjeridus! I work under the banner of Yabundja Designs. I see what I do in my art as an extension of my work in education. Aboriginal people no matter who you are or where you are constantly educate and re-educate people about Aboriginal Australia. My carvings tell stories and through those stories transpire the educative process.

There are a variety of explanations as to why the tree carvings took place within Aboriginal communities. For example, the Gamilaroi people in the central northwest designed their tree carvings around powerful symbols used for boys being ushered into manhood at elaborate ceremonies called bora. When a host clan was intending to hold a bora, a messenger would be sent far afield to invite neighbouring clans to attend. The ceremonies were conducted over many days and nights between two circles on the ground connected by a path. Around this path were carved trees and ground carvings, both called yammunyamun. Senior men led the initiates from the larger outer circle to the smaller inner circle, explaining the significance of the yammunyamun along the way. Banarway bora ground, or Collymogle as it is also known, in northwest New South Wales, is the site of the greatest number of surviving carved trees – some 60 – from anywhere in New South Wales. While most of the designs on the trees are based on circles/spirals, curvilinear lines and diamonds/chevrons, weaponry and human and animal figures were also included. The last bora took place there in the early 1890s.

¹ This paper is a contribution to the *Placescape, placemaking, placemarking, placedness ... geography and cultural production* Special Issue of *Coolabah*, edited by Bill Boyd & Ray Norman. The Special Issue is supported by two websites: <http://coolabahplacedness.blogspot.com.au> and <http://coolabahplacedness-images.blogspot.com.au/>.

The Wiradjuri people of central New South Wales carved complex designs into trees to mark the burial site of a celebrated man whose passing had a devastating effect on the community. It has been suggested that the carvings were associated with the culture heroes admired by the man in life, and were thought to provide a pathway for his spirit to return to the sky world. Traditionally, the preparation of the burial site, the carving of trees and internment was done by initiated men. Often, a special seating area was created for the women's comfort during mourning. Some examples of dendroglyphs are below so that you can visualise where the inspiration comes from.

Examples of dendroglyphs – photographs from *Album 05: Bora Ground at Banaway, near Mogil Mogil, N.S.W., ca. 1930s-1941, photographed by R.L. Black (i.e. probably Russell Black)*² (reproduced with permission of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Call no. PXE 1018 / vol. 5)



² <http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/item/itemDetailPaged.aspx?itemID=874328>; State Library of New South Wales *Carved trees: Aboriginal cultures of western NSW*, NSW Government 2011

Connections: Ode To Dendroglyphs (© Yabundja Designs).



This image is “*Connections: Ode To Dendroglyphs*”. It is three didgeridus with separate but related carvings which tell three different but inter-connected stories. It was a finalist in the 2012 Parliament of New South Wales Aboriginal Art Award.

This paper explains the meanings behind the carvings as they relate to place - or as we would say – country.

Didjeridu 1

Didjeridu 1 (to the left of the photo) is the story of five significant mountains on the New South Wales South Coast, where I was born, raised and educated. These five

mountains – Mt Keira, Mt Kembla, Mt Pleasant, Coolangatta Mountain and Cambewarra Mountain – all have significance within Aboriginal culture and stories that go with that. They are equally important to my personal story.

Mount Keira, according to the Alcheringa, the dreaming of the local Aboriginal peoples – the Thurawal Nation and Wodi-Wodi clan – is Geera, the daughter of Oola-boola-woo, the West Wind. The story of the creation of Mount Keira is tied to the creation of the Five Islands, which sit just off the Wollongong coast (Organ and Speechley, 1997). In the story, Oola-boola-woo had six daughters, Mimosa, Wilga, Lilli Pilli, Wattle, Clematis and Geera. They lived a-top the Illawarra escarpment, and one by one the first five children misbehaved, raising the ire of Oola-boola-woo, who cast them and the stone beneath them out to sea, forming the Five Islands. Geera, who was now the only child left on their escarpment home, had no-one to play with and no-one to talk to as her father was often away. Geera spent all day sitting, hunched over and watching the camps of the local Aboriginals and looking out to sea to her five sisters. Eventually she turned to stone, dust and leaves building up around her until she became a part of the escarpment. She is known today as Mount Keira.

Mt Keira, seen from Figtree (Source: David Waterfall Panoramio³ with permission)



Mount Kembla, from the Thurruwal meaning “plenty of game”, is seen as a men’s site, while the nearby Mount Keira is seen as a women’s site.

Mt Pleasant is at the top of the escarpment just south of Kiama (which has its derivation from the South Coast people’s creator – Biame – from the Dreaming). It has a great vantage point from both the north and south.

³ <http://www.panoramio.com/user/859351>

Coolangatta Mountain has been described to me in two manners. My family oral history describe it as a meeting place with a bora or ceremonial ring and also as described in Michael Organ and Carol Speechley's work:

The thin coastal strip east of the escarpment has often been likened to a 'Garden of Eden', with its abundant supply of natural resources, though when we look at Aboriginal society this tag could also be applied in the spiritual sense, with Mount Coolangatta on the Shoalhaven River long revered in local mythology as a gateway to the hereafter - to an Aboriginal 'heaven' beyond the seas.

Cambewarra Mountain has had two versions as to its meaning. One that Cambewarra means 'mountain of fire', as it was thought to have once been a volcano, and second because of the low clouds that shroud the mountain giving it the appearance of smoke and the associated fire. Even on a beautiful summer's day there is a hint of the 'smoke' to remind where Cambewarra is named from!

Mount Kembla – a view from Mount Nebo (Source: Google Images, © 2011 Google)



The southerly view from Mt Pleasant towards Seven Mile Beach (Source: Google Images, © 2011 Google)



**Coolangatta, viewed from the ocean (photograph by Alan Farlow Panoramio⁴,
with permission).**



Cambewarra Mountain (photograph by Terrence Wright)



The screenshot below highlights parts of the New South Wales Upper South Coast showing the five mountains labelled A (Mt Keira), B (Mt Kembla), C (Mt Pleasant), D (Coolangatta Mountain) and E (Cambewarra Mountain) and highlighting nearby towns.

⁴ <http://www.panoramio.com/user/872106>

Screenshot of the New South Wales Upper South Coast, showing the five mountains, Mt Keira (A), Mt Kembla (B), Mt Pleasant (C), Coolangatta Mountain (D) and Cambewarra Mountain (E) (© 2011 Google).



Didjeridu 2

Didjeridu 2 (the centre of the photo) is the story of my sibling group – the central figure representing my brother who has passed away and the other four figures representing the remaining siblings. The carving is reflective of the practice of signifying loss. The didjeridu was carved based on the traditional practice of marking a site, a place of significance for burial or ceremony purposes. No one knows for sure when the practice of tree carving ceased in terms of ceremonial practices. It is probably yet another of the many cultural practices that were put to sleep while we sorted out the relationships with the invaders. This artist is looking at how we can ensure that this practice is not altogether lost and can be reinvigorated. The carving was done as an artistic and

physical expression that whilst my brother is not here in body that there is and always will be five siblings and the five make up the story.

Didjeridu 3

Didjeridu 3 (the right of the photo) is the story of the Shoalhaven River highlighting Longreach, Burruga (Pig Island) and Crookhaven Heads. It is where I grew up and spent many a time exploring the river's cliffs and waterways including fishing and other water activities.

The screenshot below shows the Shoalhaven River. As with a lot of Aboriginal art, there is a depiction from the air as Aboriginal people believe in the ability to move out of the physical body in order to move around country. This topographic view is a visual of how one can look at the Shoalhaven River as it winds from its origins near Goulburn down to the ocean. My grandmother's country is to the south of where the river splits around Comerong Island and Crookhaven Heads. The path of the river has been interpreted as its winds around the didjeridu.

Screenshot of the Shoalhaven River (© 2011 Google).



Conclusion

The three didjeridus highlight connections to the land and to the people – of place and country. The stories of the three didjeridus – the river, the family group, siblings – and the geographical/topographical are all interrelated to my story of a Koori growing up on the South Coast of New South Wales. They are in this case seen as one story yet can stand alone. Aboriginal people have long had many literacies, Aboriginal art and storytelling are but two. My art is simply a continuation of our literacies.

References

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- Wright Family *Oral histories from my family including those told to me by father and my father's mother.*

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge the custodians of the lands upon which this paper is read. May we work in harmony and learn together.

Terrence Wright is an emerging Aboriginal artist who wants people to have a sensory experience both with the eye and the touch. Yabundja Designs use timber and glass, primarily didjeridus and slump glass. The use of copper and brass wire is also being explored. Terrence describes his work as being “art in the first instance - just that some is usable and some playable”. His inspirations come from his family, nature and the tree carvers or so-called dendroglyphs. Terrence is not formally trained in art, but as an educator Terrence sees his art as an extension of this work. (Yabundja Designs, P.O. Box 7050, Gwynneville, New South Wales, Australia. Email yabundja@gmail.com)