



EXPLORE AND EXPLAIN THE UNDERPINNING **MEANINGS** OF **COUNTRY.**

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Identify and Discuss Country and Outline the complex and interconnected relationship between First Nations peoples to Country.

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This article contextualises the spiritual and physical underpinnings of country and what this means for an Indigenous person, this will be imbued by academic research of both Western and First Nations scholars. This text illustrates how the nature of knowing, doing and being is experienced within the mature world. The author relates the concepts of intergenerational ideas and experiences of country, unpacking research, and development in its many forms alongside the characteristics of ontology and epistemology and how it relates to Country within Indigenous culture.

Understanding Country

Country is a complex and deeply significant term within First Nations culture, it encompasses the various principles of meaning, including spirituality, cultural value, emotional connection, and practical dimensions.

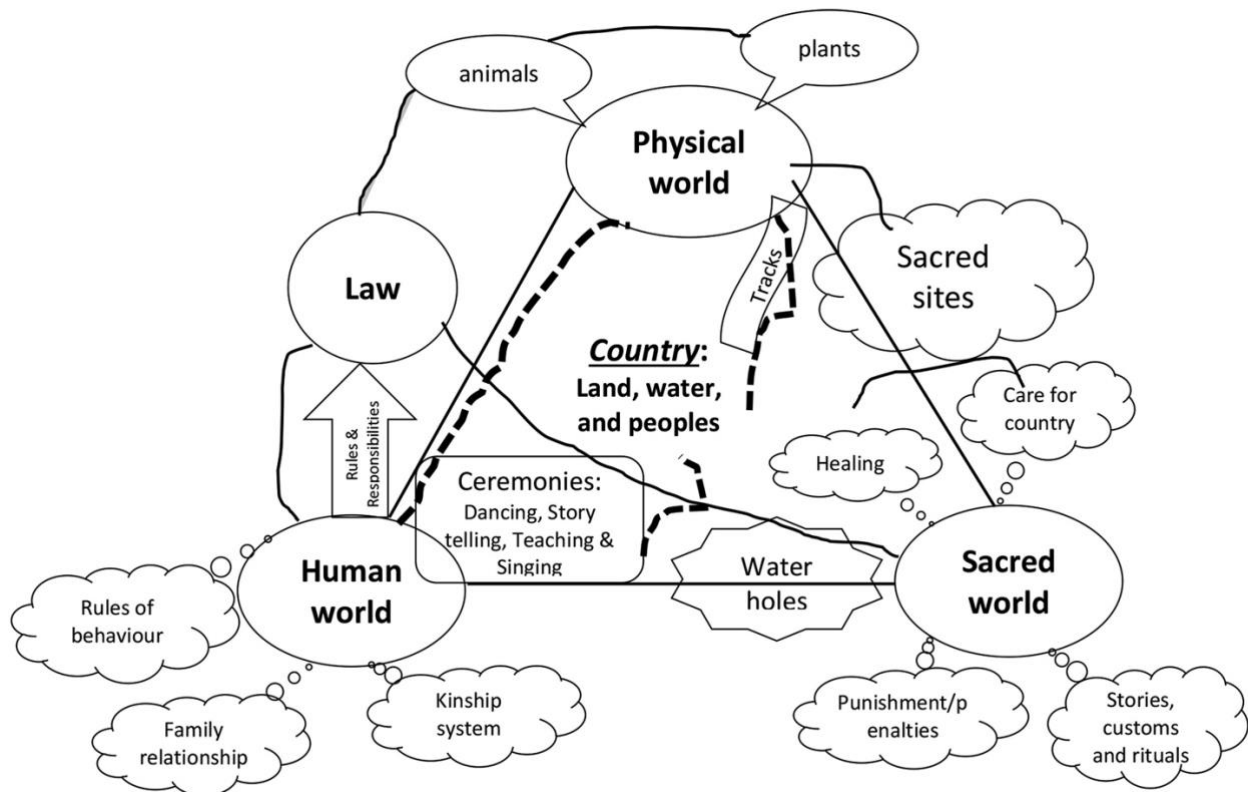
Karen Martin and Booran Mirraboopa define Country as “the Land and People, but...Entities of waterways, Animals, Plants, Climate, Skies, and Spirits... One Entity should not be raised above another, as these live in close relationships with one another. So, People are no more or less important than the other Entities” (2003, p.207). Both Martin and Mirraboopa, emphasize the holistic interconnectedness of all elements within the understanding of “country”. Moreover, country encompasses not only the physical “land” and its “people” (2003, p.207) but also the broader ecosystem, of the waterways, plants, climate, spiritual beings, etc (Kerwin, 2003, p.251-252;). This perspective rejects the Western ideology of hierarchy and stresses the equal importance of all entities, highlighting the intimate relationships that co-exist among First Nation peoples. Individuals here are regarded as part of this intricate web rather than being the central focus above all else as seen within most Euro-Western cultures. Thus, this worldview underlines respect and balance within First Nations peoples, this maintenance of their environment, fosters a harmonious coexistence (Dodson, 1976, p.16; Martin, 2007).

To contextualise this coexistence is Munya Andrews's definition of Country, she states that “country gives us a strong sense of connection and belonging. Because as we walk, we are following in the footsteps of our ancestors that created country... country is not just the land or sea or sky, country is family you feel sorry for country, you long for country” (Evolve Communities, 2021), adding further to this point is a non-indigenous scholar Deborah Bird Rose who implies that “country” and its connection to First Nations peoples is akin to that of its persons (1992 p.106). How it is regarded is that of song, speech, visiting, worry, grief, longing, and care.

That country personifies the action of knowledge to know, listens to hear, smells to have a scent, pays attention to take notice, cares to take the action of care, and feels emotions of joy and sorrow. Country in its essence is, in turn, a living entity that provides a sense of space and time, it has a tomorrow, a yesterday and a present in this case a “today”. Country processes “consciousness” thus being rationally aware, actionability, the action to be doable, furthered by the willingness to live and be living, the motivation to be (Milroy and Revell, 2013, p.2; Rose, 1992; Rose, 1996, p.6-9). Country in turn is “home and peace” it’s the nourishment to all forms, mind, body, and spirit. Thus, both authors identify “country” with respect to a profound connection. Yet, Andrews addresses the meanings of the country via ancestral footsteps, family, and belonging. Whereas, Rose, likens this personhood through expression in practice (Rose, 1996).

In *Aboriginal Story System: Remapping the West, Knowing Country, Sharing Space*, Milroy and Revell cite the Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission’s, characterisations of country as “his or her identity” followed via the idea that its “inextricably and eternally linked to the dreaming” (2013, p.2), this point is expressed more forth by Larissa Behrendt definition of Country. As she states that it is “central to Aboriginal existence” as “we come from the land, that we are born of the land and when we die, we return to the land” (1995, p.55-56). She further notes that the linkage to the land is truly “spiritual” and not “proprietary” (Behrendt, 1995, p.55). This is noted in Bill Gammage’s chapter on country denoting that “country was heart, mind, and soul. Country was not property” (2012, p.142). Milroy and Revell identify the intertwined relationship between land and Behrendt underscores Country’s centrality, being the source of birth and return after death, this symbolises the spiritual significance of ownership. This foreshadows Frederick Bronwyn’s concept of Country. As, he states that country is the “place of origin in spiritual, cultural, and literal terms... and encompasses all the knowledge, cultural norms, values, stories, and resources within that... area... indigenous place” (2013, p.3).

Understanding the interconnection between the physical (geographical) and spiritual (dreaming) is seen within Bill Gammage’s chapter on Country from his titled book, *How Aborigines Made Australia*, he provides an insightful rendition towards the definition of country as he embodies not just country in a geographical sense but in forms of connection to persons and meaning towards spiritual dwelling as much as physical. He defines it as follows “the dreaming thought why the world must be maintained; the land taught us how... land care compulsory, other made it rewarding. One was spiritual and universal, and... other practical and local. Songlines are distributed spiritually, country is distributed geographically” (2012, p.139). He points to the holistic essence of country; he encapsulates it as a balance between maintaining the world and the practicality of caring for the land, interconnecting spirituality with geography through songlines and universal connections (May 2023).



(FIG. 1 – Connection to Country: source; Sangha et al., 2015; Sangha et al., 2019).

Understanding Ways of Knowing

First Nations perspectives embrace a relational ontology (Wilson, 2008, p.74), fostering constant learning via ongoing human-environmental connections (Country et al, 2015). Dissimilar to Western educational frameworks, it diverges from subject-focused testing and instead emphasises continual interactive learning through observation, practice in doing, conversating (yarning), and real-life engagement (Kwaymullina, 2017; Welch 1988). Thus, these practices culminate in holistic growth, encompassing skills, comprehension, responsibility, and interpersonal commitment (Martin & Mirraboopa 2003, p.207).

Understanding this ideology is shown within the example of the “Arnhem Land hunters”, as the hunters can identify associations between plant life and sustenance, noting food supplies, materials for tools, and yields throughout sessions of the year with expert precision. The hunters' extensive botanical knowledge counters, misconceptions, revealing their resourcefulness and diligence (Gammage 2012, p.145), this encompasses the ecological knowledge of First Nations persons, with emphasis on their intricate comprehension towards resources, floras, fauna, and sustainable practices within their culture (Rowse, 2012; Gammage 2012).

Another notable example can be illustrated within Gammage's text of *Country*, as discussed by Eyre which states that 'natives possess exceptional familiarity with their land's details. Rain reveals water-holding rocks, and dew signals tall grass for collection, as a source of abundance. During droughts, gum scrub's locations guide effortless root-based water extraction, ensuring minimal effort and assured outcomes (Gammage, 2012, p.146; Price and Rogers, 2019). Thus, exemplifying the concept of "ways of knowing" which in this case aids survival, harmonising with nature (country). Furthered by localised land awareness which sustains, water and resources, presenting a testament to Indigenous Wisdom and (knowledge) knowing (Martin & Mirraboopa 2003; Rowse, 2012; Gammage 2012).

Understanding Ontology and Epistemology

The ideology of ontology plays a fundamental role in comprehending reality and coexistence. It exudes the profound and interconnected essence of all living entities and elements. According to Shawn Wilson, the notion of "indigenous ontology" can be typified by the presence of "multiple realities" ontology (Wilson, 2008, p.71). Therefore, instead of an "external truth", truth is encapsulated within the dynamics of one's relationship with it (Graham, 1999, p.117; Wilson, 2008, p.73). Consequently, the significance lies not within the object itself, but in the individual's connection to it. Thus, expanding upon this notion, reality can be understood as a series of relationships or interconnected sets of relationships. This view portrays reality as a constellation (cosmology) in relation to dreaming and country, with linkage to diverse relationships, giving rise to an "indigenous ontology" that comprises the essence of "indigenous epistemology" (Wilson, 2008, p.73).

Therefore, at its core, the principal belief is that knowledge is inherently relational. Thus, this idealisation of knowledge is not confined to an individual but rather established through a symbiotic rapport with the entirety of creation (Graham, 1999, Rose, 1996). Hence, this idea that rapport extends to the "cosmos" (dreaming), the animals, plants, and the earth (country) itself, transcends individualistic knowledge and investigates the realm of relational knowledge (Wilson, 2008, p.73-74; Rose, 1996, p.47). Henceforth, this paradigm can also be applied to concepts and ideas. Thus forth, the emphasis shifts from the concepts and ideas themselves to the relationships they embody. Consequently, "indigenous epistemology", is constructively rooted within the interconnectedness of things, and builds upon systems of knowledge based on relationships rather than isolated entities (Wilson, 2008, p.73-74; Martin & Mirraboopa 2003, p.207; Wilson, 2008).

So, recognising that epistemology comprises comprehensive systems of knowledge and relationships is of paramount importance to the practice of First Nations peoples (Wilson, 2008). As these relationships imbued the celestial universe, as well as abstract ideologies. They include interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental, and spiritual connections, as well as connections to ideas (Wilson, 2008). "Indigenous epistemology" incorporates first nations' cultures, worldviews,

boundaries, languages, historical renditions, spiritual beliefs, and our cosmic positioning (Martin & Mirraboopa 2003, Rose, 1996). Thus, it encapsulates the entirety of interconnected systems of knowledge within First Nation's contextual framework and in relation to one another.

Linkage to these notions can be exemplified by the myths quickly spread within Australia via the new settlers deeming First Nations persons as uneducable or uneducated (Price, 2012, p.5), however, this could not be more the contrary as First Nations children start learning at a young age (holistically), as there is a deep complexity of kinship systems, as described by Claude Levi-Strauss stating that “the Australian aborigines [sic]... are so far ahead of the rest of mankind that, to understand the careful and deliberate systems of rules they have elaborated, we have to use all the refinement of modern mathematics” (1956, p.28; Price, 2012, p.5). Expanding upon this notion is George Augustus Robinson's proposition that “... blacks [sic] will keep pace with the whites, for colour neither impairs the muscles nor enervates the mind” (Plomley, 1966, p.476; Price, 2012, p.5).

Growing on this, Gammage states ‘that children learned holistically through the example of a tree. They explore its life cycle, inhabitants, and uses. Thus, this extends to the ecosystem, fostering symbiotic awareness and comprehensive knowledge of interdependent organisms,’ He deems that “ecological knowledge was unavoidably local” (2012, p.145; Rowse, 2012).

In strength to all perspectives within this report, it can be deemed that the articulation towards First Nations contextualises such as spiritual and physical stems of knowledge systems and, context towards ideological comprehension is indeed noteworthy and needed within the understanding of First Nations peoples, as the old notion of first nations persons dwelling within holistic or primitive modes instead of squaring within the scientism and the academic standard is dated, the rooted study of such complexities indeed show to be fruitful and worthy work.

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