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# CONTINGENT, CONTESTED *and* CHANGING: DE-CONSTRUCTING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE *in a* SCIENCE CURRICULUM RESOURCE *from the* SOUTH COAST *of* NEW SOUTH WALES

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## ■ Abstract

The nature and status of Indigenous knowledge is often debated, but the idea that Indigenous people's knowledge is local knowledge seems widely accepted: knowledge is place-based and may reference a range of places, from traditional land to other places known from social and cultural connections. Through collaboration with Koori people from the south coast of New South Wales to develop a web-based science resource, other distinctive characteristics of their knowledge emerged. This paper explores some transformations in contemporary Indigenous knowledge, while acknowledging the history of colonisation in south eastern Australia. A focus on two examples of Koori art demonstrates that Indigenous knowledge is contingent, contested and changing in culturally defined ways. These aspects are often overlooked in educational practice that essentialises Indigeneity and Indigenous people's knowledge.

## ■ Introduction

My research on Indigenous knowledge on the south coast of New South Wales is part of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project, *Indigenous Knowledge and Science Pedagogy: A Comparative Approach*. As partners in this project, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSWDET), the Australian National Maritime Museum (ANMM), Yirrkala Community Education Centre (YCEC) and the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at The Australian National University (ANU) researched the most effective ways of incorporating Indigenous knowledge within the New South Wales secondary school science curriculum. The inspiration for this research was the Saltwater Paintings collection from northeast Arnhem Land, now held by the ANMM. These bark paintings reflect a Yolngu perspective on the natural world and showcase Yolngu people's environmental knowledge, particularly marine ecology. As part of the comparative approach of the Linkage Project, my research focuses on the Indigenous knowledge of Aboriginal people on the south coast of New South Wales, some of which appears in the Koori Coast component of the project's Living Knowledge website (The Australian National University, 2008). Aboriginal people on the south coast of New South Wales generally call themselves "Koori" or "Koorie", although some identify as Yuin, the name of the group recorded in this area by Tindale (Tindale & Jones, 1974) and others.

This paper focuses on two Koori artworks (featured on the Living Knowledge website) to illustrate the changing form of knowledge on the south coast of New South Wales. I argue that Indigenous knowledge is contingent, contested and changing in culturally significant ways, as Koories actively reconstruct and represent their knowledge of the relationship between people and place. Contrary to the view that Indigenous people and their culture were eradicated in the south east, Indigenous cultural knowledge not

only exists on the south coast of New South Wales but is active and dynamic. It is based on an acute sense of place and includes knowledge of the south coast and places elsewhere. The knowledge presented here is drawn from my work as a non-Indigenous researcher in collaboration with Koori people and exists in the public domain. In the following discussion, I explore the transformative and resilient qualities of their knowledge of place.

While preparing material in consultation with the Koori community for the Living Knowledge website, it was possible to take advantage of certain features of the internet to reinforce the distinctive characteristics of south coast Indigenous knowledge. Stories, artwork and the voices of the people themselves communicate an Indigenous perspective in ways that other media cannot. The web format facilitates associations between people and places in new contexts: people from different regions are juxtaposed making new connections and similarly, places are linked in ways that show social and cultural as well as biogeographical connections. Throughout the website, there is an important connectivity between people and knowledge. Access to video and audio clips through “click” interactivity creates a dialogic relationship between the viewer and the viewed. The viewer can navigate through the website, seeing and hearing people in both northeast Arnhem Land and on the south coast of New South Wales voice their contemporary ideas about people and places and the connections between them.

### ■ Ways of knowing

Aboriginal people in south eastern Australia have a very different history from remote northern communities and their relationship with the environment reflects their own history and worldview. In the south east, Aboriginal people’s knowledge of land and culture has been severely eroded by the effects of colonisation but the people have survived. I explore the category of Indigenous knowledge as it operates on the south coast arguing that Koori perspectives on the natural world are complex, changing, and culturally defined. I use the following definition: Indigenous knowledge is a constructed, umbrella concept which encapsulates the motivations and values relating to specific knowledge of an Indigenous cultural group. Rather than signifying only a corpus of knowledge of Indigenous origins, Indigenous knowledge includes all knowledge that is socially and culturally recognised as Indigenous, including new knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is a term that relates to the “knowledge holders”, their values and motivations and how they represent changing knowledge, as well as denoting the kind of knowledge involved.

Until recently educational discourse in Australia privileged a narrow view of Indigenous people and their knowledge which often failed to consider

relevant cultural knowledge. The use of numerous lists that record the ethnic counterparts to scientific taxonomy of the natural world contribute to this view. Language names and classification systems for plants and animals demonstrate the kind of knowledge that is most readily translatable into Western science (Carter, 2004, p. 9). This knowledge is typically used to teach about the contrasts and complementarities with Western science. Within this approach, Western science categories are dominant while Indigenous cultural categories are often unidentified, under-represented and not understood.

An Indigenous knowledge approach takes into account different ways of knowing and other forms of knowledge which reflect the cultural values of the group. People know the world in many different ways and the kind of knowledge can depend on how it is acquired. According to one typology, Indigenous knowledge can come through: “traditional knowledge” such as creation stories and technologies, which have been passed down through the generations; “empirical knowledge” which relates to knowledge of the natural and physical world gained through observation; and, “revealed knowledge”, “acquired through dreams, visions and intuitions that are understood to be spiritual in origin” (Castellano, 2000, p. 24). In south eastern Australia today, Indigenous knowledge includes a complex mix of these kinds of knowledge but also knowledge learnt and adapted from other knowledge systems. It is more important in a globalised world where most people operate with multiple knowledges to understand the meaning of knowledge for particular people, as well as the knowledge source.

### ■ Mount Dromedary: Knowing a significant place

Mount Dromedary is a prominent geographical feature near the coastline between Narooma and Bermagui on the south coast of New South Wales (see Figure 1). It is an important place for Yuin people and all Aboriginal people on the south coast. Scientific description of this mountain began on 21 April 1770 when Captain James Cook recorded in his journal:

At 6 oClock we were a breast of a pretty high mountain laying near the shore which on account of its figure I named Mount Dromedary Latde 36°..18' So Longde 209°.. 55' Wt/The shore under the foot of this Mountain forms a point which I have named Cape Dromedary over which is a peaked hillick At this time found the Variation to be 10°..42' Et Between 10 and 11 oClock (Journals of James Cook’s First Pacific Voyage, 1768-1771).

Cook’s knowledge of the places such as Mount Dromedary was framed through the worldview of

an eighteenth century English explorer. Without landing, Cook and his companions applied their contemporary scientific worldview and expertise to record the physical co-ordinates and appearance of the place. Since the late eighteenth century, the south coast region has been surveyed, mapped, gazetted and photographed and although scientific studies have recorded various aspects of the biogeography and geomorphology of the region, this is only one kind of knowledge of place, i.e. scientific. Throughout the history of settlement, people have formed other perspectives on the mountain. Whether as Indigenous or non-Indigenous Australians, in the early colonial period as explorers, farmers, foresters or fishermen or more recently as residents or tourists of the area, the landscape is known in many different ways. Many people who live in the vicinity of Mount Dromedary today, where the land remains relatively undeveloped as small towns and farmland feel strongly about the beauty of the mountain and value its significance as a place with natural and cultural values. Just as it would be misleading now to think of our Western knowledge of the region only in terms of scientific “quantified” description, so too it is unacceptable to suppose that the sum total of Indigenous people’s knowledge about the mountain could be presented in terms of ethnoscientific categories or “lists”, as knowledge about significant plants, animals and geological formations.

### ■ Gulaga

We have no way of knowing what the Aboriginal people knew about the mountain at the time when Cook passed by. Gulaga, however, is on the record as the name for that place from the early days of contact history, although spelt in different ways (Goulding & Waters, 2005, p. 49; Wesson, 2000, p. 167). Today south coast Koories know the mountain as Gulaga and in recent years, some have shared their understanding of Gulaga’s cultural significance. Although in some circumstances, Yuin people have been reluctant to release much of their knowledge, at other times they have demonstrated the continuing importance of Gulaga as a spiritual place (Egloff et al., 2005; Howitt, 1904; Rose, 1990).

“Gulaga and her Sons”, painted by local Indigenous artist Cheryl Davison (see Figure 2) offers an alternative perspective on the landscape and demonstrates many aspects of cultural significance. The artwork expresses Aboriginal people’s knowledge that cannot be properly understood without reference to people as well as their values and beliefs. The knowledge is diverse and layered. As Cheryl reveals one layer of meaning through the story below, other stories are brought to mind for local Indigenous people. One painting has many references. This story is often told to children:

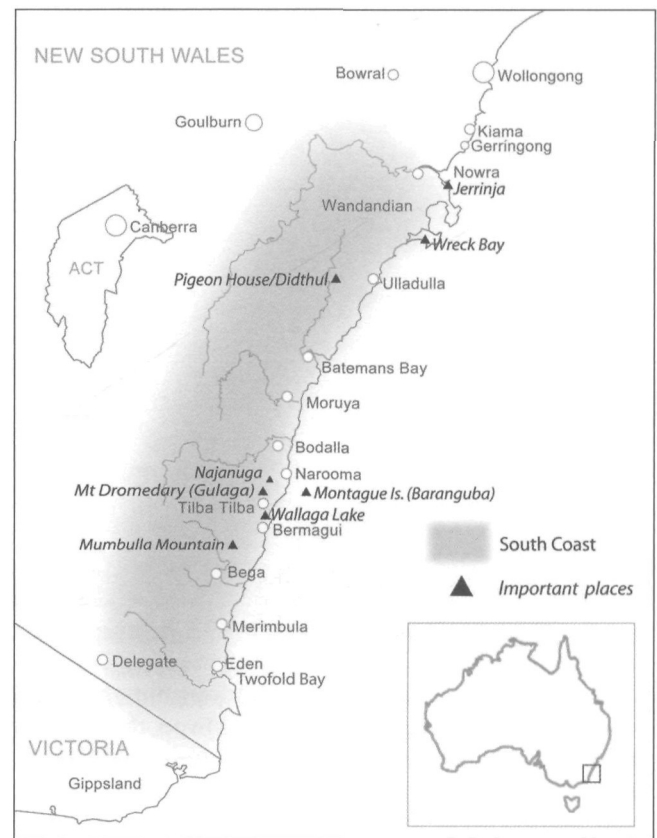


Figure 1. South coast of New South Wales (The Australian National University, 2008).

The story goes that Gulaga was walking east collecting bush tucker with her two sons, Najanuga and Baranguba. Baranguba said to his mother, “I want to move away and set up my own camp”. She said, “Well you can just move out there into the ocean with the fish and the whales and the dolphins, not too far away you can set up your camp because I still need to keep an eye on you”. And so he went out into the ocean and lay down and turned into the island. When Najanuga saw this he said, “Well I want to move away and have my own camp as well.” But she said, “No, you’re too young, you just stay here at my feet so you’re within arms’ reach of me and I can look after you”. So, he just sits there at her feet and she’s the mountain, and she’s pregnant, having a baby. Now the landscape itself, of the mountain around this area which is the Central Tilba, Tilba Tilba area, that’s traditionally all birthing place for the south coast women. The possum cloud there is actually her possum skin cloak, and when it’s cold the cloud comes over Gulaga like a big possum skin cloak, so I always put the possum in that painting. This is where I’m from (Davison, 2008).

The story is well known in the Koori community and varies with the teller and each re-telling. Clearly this

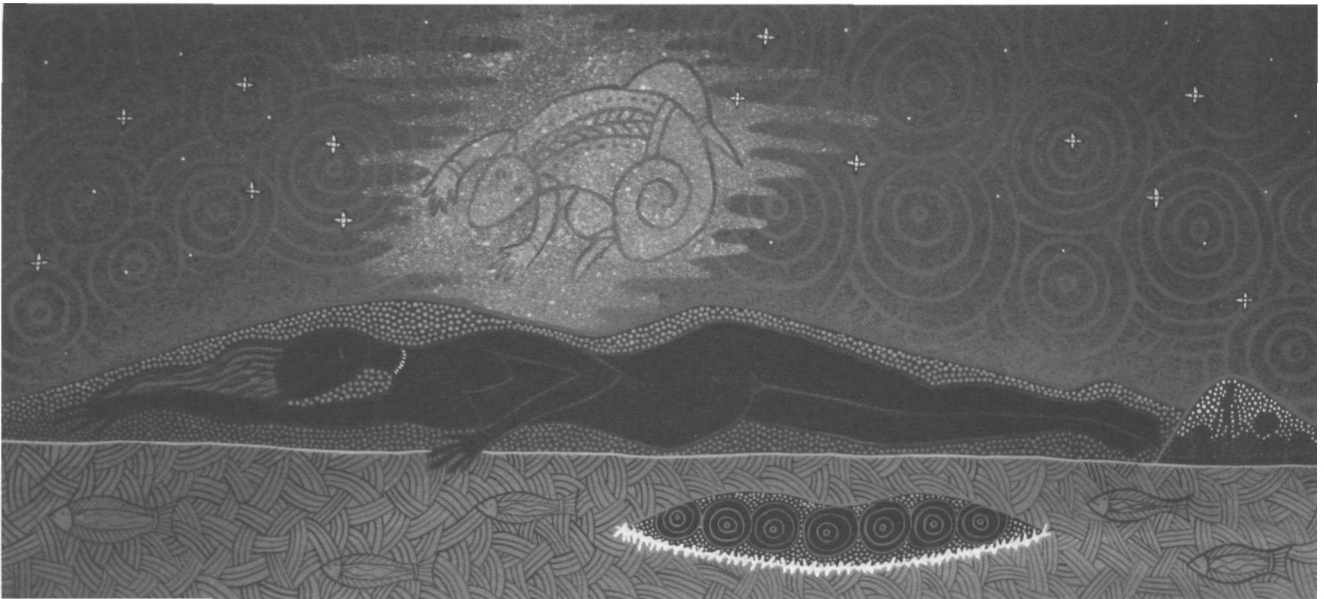


Figure 2. "Gulaga and her Sons" by Cheryl Davison. Acrylic on paper. (580 x 260 mm) (The Australian National University, 2008).

story has special relevance for children but there are other stories with a different focus. Even though the stories of Gulaga are well known, there appears to be no tradition (or at least no modern tradition) of representing them in art. While some other Aboriginal artists have painted the landscape of Gulaga, their reference to the cultural geography and heritage of the place has not been so clear. In south eastern Australia, where people have endured the longest and most severe disruption to their cultural traditions through colonisation, Indigenous artists have retained knowledge of traditional stories about their land and explore this aspect of their history and culture in their paintings to varying extents. Cheryl Davison has painted Gulaga several times over the last few years and while each painting focuses on the same story, she emphasises different aspects of her knowledge in the works. A close, visual analysis of "Gulaga and her Sons" within its cultural and historical context demonstrates the depth of knowledge in this painting and the artist's attachment to place.

#### ■ "Gulaga and her Sons"

Looking at the painting, the eye is drawn to the sleeping form of a pregnant woman encased in a landscape, and then to an island in the foreground, fringed in white by the breaking sea. From the viewer's perspective, the landforms appear as they would from out to sea, an obvious way to include the three locations featured in the story. With the same perspective that Cook described in his journal, the painting presents a visual alternative, rich in interpretations of another culture. The figure of the woman draws a connection between the island and mainland as her left hand dips into the sea. In the dark sky above floats a cloud in the form of an ethereal possum, surrounded by stars.

The small hill at the woman's feet connects to a tiny human figure.

A unifying element of the painting is colour, and rich, dark-red ochre tones cover the entire surface. The ochre is over-painted with patterned spaces representing fish and the sea, landforms and the sky at night. Dots, concentric circles and geometric woven patterns in darker tones demonstrate a disciplined approach to the overall composition of the work. Minimal use of white paint effectively highlights several natural features: stars, sea foam, rocks on the small mountain, a possum cloud and the woman's necklace that shines like shells.

The structure of the painting is motivated by the landscape of Gulaga, Najanuga and Baranguba, (Mount Dromedary, Little Dromedary and Montague Island) interpreted through the story of Gulaga and her two sons. While the work combines figurative and geometric styles reminiscent of other Indigenous Australian art traditions, the particular integration of styles is recognisable as the artist's own. In several paintings of Gulaga over the last few years, Cheryl has incorporated dots, circles and sequences of lines and patterns for landscape and figurative forms with the x-ray style possum "cloud" reappearing in each work.

Apart from its visual appeal, the power of the painting comes from the connection that it makes between the past and present for local Indigenous people and their relationship to the mountain and the surrounding area. The artist is free to explore the meanings of places in her own way, especially given the lack of an established mode for depicting the local cultural geography. Aboriginal people recognise familiar places from their daily lives in artwork. They also make connections to other times and events such as, the 1892 sinking of canoes when many local Aboriginal people died; they were caught in a storm

while returning from Montague Island to Wagonga Inlet with a collection of seabird eggs (Goulding & Waters, 2005, p. 160). The features of the landscape are the mnemonics for this and other stories held in the local community.

In the painting, new knowledge merges with the old as the story is told in a new way, allowing other perspectives and cultural understandings of the mountain. Some have told the story of the old woman Gulaga who puts on her possum cloak and brings on the rain (Rose, 1990, p. 55) or of the young woman wearing a white fur which her new husband brought her (Morgan, 1994, p. xix); and others relate the importance of Gulaga as a complex of sites of ceremonial significance for both men and women (Egloff et al., 2005, 51-57). Although Koori people recognise various mythological connections to Gulaga, the story of Gulaga and her sons has become the artist's template for exploring beyond any particular narrow or specific understanding of the cultural significance of the places. Images and iconography recombine, transforming local knowledge and making significant connections. The allusion to the possum cloak makes social and cultural connections with other south eastern groups who are actively cloak-making in their communities, and for whom the cloak is an important marker of south eastern Australian Indigenous identity (Reynolds, 2005).

Overall, the painting is a metaphor for the reciprocal relationship between people and country: as Gulaga cares for her sons so will the people care for their country. As the imagined interpretation becomes reality so the painting extends the corpus of cultural knowledge. The mountain is Gulaga, the pregnant woman in her possum skin cloak watching over her two sons and, by extension, caring for the local Indigenous people.

#### ■ "Interwoven": Weaving knowledge of significant places

Traditional stories and paintings are not the only sources of Indigenous knowledge on the south coast of New South Wales. Phyllis Stewart, a "weaver" from Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Arts and Craft Studio at Gerringong near Nowra has created "Interwoven" (see Figure 3) giving her perspective on family history and culture. The fibre mural showcases Indigenous knowledge in various forms demonstrating the multiple sources of Indigenous knowledge today.

Framed by slightly irregular covered saplings, there is symmetry in the design. Long coiling stems divide the internal space into six roughly equal sections or "frames", and each frame has a motif to elaborate the story. Small, coiled discs sit in each corner of the frame, and also half way along the bottom and top frame pieces, visually dividing the mural into half lengthwise. Several discs of varying sizes sit on the sides and within the space, roughly dividing it into

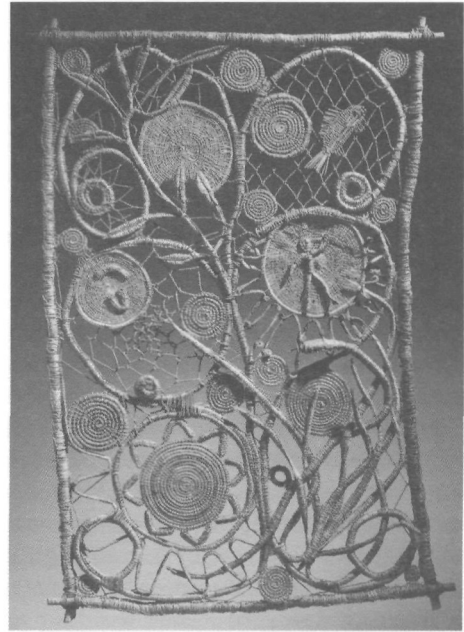


Figure 3. "Interwoven" by Phyllis Stewart. Branches, Soft Twig Rush, Spiny-headed Mat Rush, Red Hot Poker (1800 x 1200 x 90 mm) (The Australian National University, 2008).

thirds horizontally. Of these, four contain significant motifs. Three large roundels in the upper part of the work are roughly balanced by three more in the lower part. The repeated circular shapes with varying colour and texture are an effective unifying device, that complement the long flowing stem shapes.

Visually the impact of the mural is appealing but with few figurative forms, its meaning and significance may not be apparent to the viewer beyond recognition of a coastal fishing theme. As a whole, the mural is a complex statement of cross-cultural engagement combining various aspects of Indigenous knowledge in fibre form. It is a powerful, local account of Koories engaging with their environment: a visual narrative, a map, a social history, a personal reminiscence, and an exploration of contemporary Indigenous environmental knowledge and fibre art practice.

Events in the lives of Indigenous people on the south coast of New South Wales are interwoven through common daily experiences and shared community, skilfully rendered in a fully reticulated design. Each of the six frames contributes to an account of Aboriginal people's lives, including their participation in the rural economy from the 1950s to the 1970s and their continuing and changing traditions. The interpretation proceeds from the top of the mural and then from left to right. There is a definite botanical influence on the design, although the motifs badge the work as primarily cultural, particularly about Indigenous culture and identity. The large roundel in the top left frame represents a typical gathering of Koori "pickers" camped together usually in temporary dwellings (tents, tin huts) on a farmer's land during the harvesting season. Pea pods

and tendrils represent the peas, beans, potatoes and other vegetables commonly grown in the region at the time. The plants evoke memories of the mobile lifestyle when farmers used to transport people in trucks to their farms across the Victorian border into Gippsland and up along the New South Wales coast to Eden, Bega, Bodalla and Nowra.

In the top right frame, a fish (possibly bream or mullet) is caught in a net, representing the importance of fish as a source of food and cash income. In the middle frame on the left, a section of a string bag stretches across the surface where two elders sit. String bags were used to carry shellfish, such as periwinkles (*Bembicium*), conks (*Anadara*) and abalone (*Haliotis*), when the women collected food on the shoreline. Reference to the net bags also acknowledges a past food-processing practice, where beaten cycad nuts (*Cycas media*) were placed in a running stream to leach out the poison. In the middle of the mural in the right frame, a figure of a man holding a spear is superimposed on a large roundel. This is the largest roundel of the entire work and represents Wreck Bay community and the artist's father who was a fisherman there for many years. Phyllis remembers her father and other male relatives hunting kangaroo regularly to supplement their food supply, when she was young. The surrounding, irregular open-coiled work mimics the waves on the beaches at Wreck Bay. Extensive knowledge of spear construction, fishing and hunting techniques and location of resources is implicit in this figure.

At the bottom on the left, a large roundel is encompassed by eight hook shapes: the artist's mother and her seven children sit together in tight and closed formation. The hook shape representing a person is associated with Western Desert Aboriginal art today (Munn, 1966) but may have been more widely used in Australia in the past. A bean stem surrounds the family group and an arc of waves extends around the bottom corner. At first glance, the roundel appears floral or sun-like, associating sunny days with the long working days in the paddocks.

Finally, a Spiny-headed Mat Rush (*Lomandra longifolia*) rises in the bottom right of the mural, a plant of multiple uses, with edible seeds and leaf bases, and leaves for fibre work. Camouflaged within the strappy leaves of the plant lies a snake: a warning that snakes can be encountered when collecting leaves for basket-making, especially in summer time. The artist recalls her intense fear of snakes as a young person but also acknowledges that in the past, snakes were a valuable food resource.

The mural showcases a range of transforming knowledge relating to cultural geography and fibre craft techniques. Firstly, the artist demonstrates her ecological knowledge of fibre plant distribution in the Shoalhaven region having collected much of the fibre from nearby locations. The sites of these resources

are now culturally significant places constituting a re-mapping of the area from a revived Indigenous cultural perspective. Each plant has been selected for certain technical and aesthetic suitability to enhance the overall design. There is evidence of historical fibre work on the south coast (Atkinson, 1854) and these traditions have been revived through connections in adjacent regions such as Gippsland in Victoria. Phyllis and other members of the group have learnt about the plants, their locations and the associated traditional processing techniques and fibre skills through trial and error, research of the historical record and through their links with living knowledge-holders. Although it has been important for Phyllis to incorporate these traditional practices, innovation is also a feature of her work, constantly challenging the old with the new.

The technical and empirical knowledge in the mural has cultural and historical inflections but the form is new. Phyllis innovates with the three "classic" forms of fibre art traditionally associated with south-eastern Australia: coiling, twining and knotting (Allen & Greeno, 2005, p. 18), although coiling is dominant. Apart from the frame, the plant stems are coiled, creating the main structural components. The artist began by positioning the long, curling plant-like stems within the rectangular structure. She filled the internal spaces in a style reminiscent of decorative cast iron work. The open pattern with several roundels also resembles needlework forms: embroidered laced-edged doilies were familiar handcrafts for women in the period of the artist's youth. The roundels are mostly coiled discs of varying sizes but some are also twined. Of the larger disc shapes, three are twined and one coiled where the contrast in design and colour is achieved through the use of different material as well as method. The radiating mat form of the twined roundels is made from a native sedge, soft twig rush (*Baumea rubiginosa*) which is lighter in tone. Coiled roundels are made from the processed stems of the Spiny-headed Mat Rush (*Lomandra longifolia*) producing variegated colour across a flat, spiral form.

The artist displays much inventiveness with coiling in her design. By combining a traditional south eastern zigzagging pattern (Cooper, 1996) with iconographic and figurative work, she casts a modern, eclectic design that takes account of historical and cultural influences on her art practice. The hook shape representing a person is associated with Western Desert Aboriginal art today but may have been more widely used in Australia in the past. String work cleverly binds much of this work together. It features in three frames as well as artfully reinforcing the structure of the entire piece. Once again the artist demonstrates her innovative skills as she uses an introduced species, Red Hot Poker (*Kniphofia uvaria*) to make string for knotting into fishing net in the traditional way. In another frame the string has been looped to create an

expandable net in the traditional style of a string bag. The artist has adapted a new plant into an old form and so an introduced species is now incorporated into local Koori heritage knowledge, demonstrating the transforming nature of Indigenous knowledge on the south coast.

As well as different kinds of technical and ecological knowledge, the weaving reflects a view of an Indigenous social world demonstrating the primacy of motivations and values such as the importance of close-knit family. The artist weaves memories to honour her father, mother, brother and sisters. These are “happy times” when all the families were together but nostalgia is tempered by memories of long, hard days in the paddocks during all weather, with the pressure to pick faster for more money. The scene encodes aspects of Koori life which were well known at the time, as important social history to be passed on. When reflecting on the mural the artist talked about how people recall the fear of the “welfare” coming after the kids who weren’t in school because they were shifting camp with their families. She suggests that sometimes the relationship between the Koories and the farmers was demeaning. The Koori workers were often transported in the back of cattle trucks and unceremoniously dismissed at the end of the picking season.

Phyllis and the other artists at Boolarng Nangamai studio enjoy reminiscing about these times but there are other influences at play. Their resolve to learn and excel at fibre work is motivated by a strong sense of their Koori identity and the part they can play in strengthening it through knowledge. As Phyllis states, “It was lost and I want to bring it back” (quoted in The Australian National University, 2008) and her artwork encapsulates this aspiration as she mentors other artists, including her family members sharing her technical, artistic and ecological knowledge. While the artists enjoy their weaving, they also want to gain some economic independence at the same time as strengthening their cultural heritage. “Interwoven” is a strong step in this direction where a complex statement of cross-cultural engagement combining various aspects of Indigenous knowledge in a new form has been recognised and purchased by the ANMM. This is south coast Indigenous knowledge in production.

### ■ Contingent, contentious and changing

A closer analysis of how Indigenous knowledge is operating on the south coast draws on the knowledge expressed in the artworks. It demonstrates the contingent, contested and changing characteristics of Indigenous knowledge that resists categorisation in any predictable way (e.g., modern or traditional, urban or remote) and reveals how Koori artists are transforming knowledge in culturally defined ways.

One person’s knowledge is only a fraction of the group’s knowledge since knowledge is distributed throughout a community depending on gender, age, class, occupational and other lines (Sillitoe, 1998, p. 232). The ways in which the knowledge is shared in the south coast Koori community is not easily mapped today compared to knowledge for pre-colonial societies where roles are more clearly defined. Nevertheless, there is a common core of local knowledge in the Gulaga stories which relates to the enduring cultural significance of the mountain and surrounding country to the local Koori people. For Indigenous people in this place, the stories are the evidence that knowledge has been passed down for many generations and the knowledge comprises their cultural heritage. Likewise the fibre mural lays claim to a particular Indigenous perspective about places and the past in the south coast region.

The Gulaga painting references more than one story, each with different levels of meaning suited to different purposes. The storyline presented above is especially appropriate for children, telling them about their country or heritage places, about a mother and two sons and about behavioural consequences. Another interpretation relates the possum cloud to the object of a young man’s quest, aimed to procure a white fur cloak for his bride. These stories may have had other specific cultural and geographical referents in the past which over time have become associated with Gulaga, the mountain. Knowledge is historically contingent where colonising events have dramatically influenced the transmission process. In the case of Gulaga, many stories still exist and each story and its retelling consolidates people’s attachment to place through their knowledge. Colonial history has also brought new contexts and new knowledge.

The fibre mural demonstrates how the representation of Indigenous knowledge depends on the artist’s skill and a desire to express knowledge within a certain historical perspective. By choosing to pass on certain Indigenous knowledge about significant places in a modern context, the artist is reaffirming a contingent relationship to place – without such deliberate action, there is no continuing relationship. In whatever textual form whether art or oral history, the story of Gulaga and the fibre mural “Interwoven” hold knowledge of the local Indigenous people about significant places. The two artworks are important additions to a visual archive of Indigenous knowledge that is changing in different ways for different purposes.

Indigenous knowledge is contested in a range of social and political spheres, as the Gulaga story illustrates. The story presents a double challenge in the way that all Indigenous history does. Firstly by offering an alternative history to south eastern Australian settler history, it presents an Aboriginal perspective on the land. The fibre mural supports this alternative view of history where Aboriginal people’s lives are



circumscribed to some extent by the Australian state but the mural also alludes to the pursuit of economic independence through activities closely associated with the land.

Secondly, the period of ancestral creation invoked by the Gulaga story is an alternative to scientific interpretations of the area. The story is most probably a small fragment of the knowledge that Cheryl's ancestors knew of the place including its resources and their uses, special locations and their cultural significance. Rather than an indication of people's lack of scientific knowledge, the story is a marker of the richness of a past ecological knowledge system. It is also a reminder that Koories on the south coast are keeping their connection to the traditional past.

Contestation may occur at the individual level also. At times there may be disagreement over specific knowledge and also over whose right it is to speak, act and/or paint the knowledge. The disagreements are indicative of an ever-present and underlying tension about identity, legitimacy and authority within the Koori community. Individuals can take action to reveal knowledge in a certain form but the community may not be in agreement about either the form or the content represented. Through processes of active negotiation, individuals and groups are continually establishing the protocol for the representation of Indigenous knowledge in their community. Working together, the Yuin people told the Gulaga story to support the case for Aboriginal ownership of the Biamanga and Gulaga National Parks, along with their other knowledge of people and other places. Gulaga has become a symbol of Aboriginal past, present and future in the region and is part of the contingent, contentious and changing face of Indigenous knowledge on the south coast.

Both the mural and the painting represent the transmission of old and new knowledge. Indigenous knowledge transforms according to the forces and powers which stimulate all cultural transformations, so at any moment, knowledge is potentially different from another moment due to the processes of cultural change. Like all knowledge, "local knowledge has history and is synchronically dynamic" and for the purpose of research it is important to investigate the source of the knowledge, its transmission and its reproduction (Antweiler, 2002, pp. 13-14) in order to ascertain its cultural value. Static representation of Indigenous knowledge may lead to false impressions of Indigenous people's cultural continuity but on the other hand, new representations of knowledge may risk rejection as "inauthentic" for not following known traditions. Although fibre art and technology is a pre-contact tradition, the mural constructs the knowledge of place and its significance in a new form. Similarly, the painting of "Gulaga and her Sons" reflects a way of expressing knowledge of that place where innovation plays a significant role.

Through their artwork, Indigenous Australians from the south east are promoting awareness of their culture and making connections to the wider community. Indigenous artists participate in the art market today for a variety of social and cultural reasons. In remote regions especially, art has been a significant source of income and an important means of communicating about culture and identity by Indigenous Australia to the rest of the world. In this way, art can be significant for reasons other than financial ones. In the sense of "the gift" (Mauss, 1970), an exchange is set up through the sale of art which transforms the artwork and bonds the giver and receiver. Anecdotally the buyers of Koori art are mostly non-Indigenous and so the cultural knowledge in the art is circulating beyond the Koori community and may benefit the artist and other members of the community. The circulation of the two artworks discussed here can increase the cultural value of the artworks as representations of Indigenous knowledge as well as promoting the work of individual artists. There is no guarantee that circulation will bring either but each transformation of knowledge in art reinforces this potential.

Recognition of south coast Koori art reached a new high point in August 2008 when the ANMM showcased the painting "Gulaga and her Sons" and the mural "Interwoven" in a special exhibition for NAIDOC week. As a direct result of collaboration with the ANMM on the Living Knowledge website, the exhibition placed these two artworks adjacent to a selection of bark paintings, known as the "Saltwater Paintings", from northeast Arnhem Land. Although based on very different traditions, the common theme of Indigenous knowledge resonated between the works. Instead of a focus on cultural loss in the southeast, the juxtaposition of the artworks reinforced the strong associations between people and land that Indigenous people in both places continue to hold, closing the distance both physically and conceptually between the two groups. It is important that one of our pre-eminent cultural institutions was able to reinforce south coast Koori representations of their knowledge in this way, another valuable step in the promotion of a culturally rich and diverse Aboriginal Australia.

## ■ Conclusion

The Living Knowledge website provides an opportunity to visually showcase the way in which knowledge is transforming in culturally defined ways on the south coast of New South Wales. It is a forum where the work of emerging Koori artists stands in association with the established art traditions of the Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land in new and interesting ways. Both physically and conceptually the distance has been closed between the two groups, challenging the binaries such as, traditional/modern, Indigenous /scientific that commentators sometimes impose. The

painting, "Gulaga and her Sons" and the fibre mural, "Interwoven" are two culturally rich examples of innovative Indigenous art which cannot be dismissed as merely imitative of other art traditions. Without the flexibility and accessibility of web presentation, the distinctive cultural features of these works could not have been demonstrated so clearly or accessed so widely.

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