The Conquest of the Peri-Urban: Sustainability and Postcolonialism

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Abstract: This paper takes the case of the proposed building of the Traveston dam on the Mary River in Australia to examine the ways postcolonial power relations are played out in city/regional relationships to further the interests of the city. Postcolonialism is concerned with unravelling multiple histories of colonisation, and identifying the reproduction, contestation, ambivalence and transformation of modes of domination and subordination in colonial relations. Political contingencies and contestations by residents, farmers, traditional Indigenous owners and environmentalists seeking to protect endangered species are examined to highlight the dominance of Western anthropocentric, technocentric, and eurocentric epistemologies in political, ecological, environmental, bioethical debates.

Keywords: Urban/Peri-urban Relations, Water, Sustainability, Postcolonialism

Introduction

This paper takes the case of the proposed building of the Traveston dam on the Mary River in South East Queensland, Australia to examine the way postcolonial power relations are played out in city/regional relationships to further the interests of the city. Postcolonialism is concerned with unravelling multiple histories of colonisation, and identifying the reproduction, contestation, ambivalence and transformation of modes of domination and subordination in colonial relations. Political contingencies and contestations by residents, farmers, traditional Indigenous owners and environmentalists seeking to protect endangered species are seen here to underline the overarching dominance of anthropocentric western epistemologies in this particular conflict.

The Mary River originates in the Conondale Range and flows 225 km to the coast. In 2006 the Queensland government proposed building a dam at Traveston crossing. Intended to mitigate dwindling water supplies to the region’s growing population the dam was to flood farmland and fragile ecosystems including the habitats of the endangered Mary River Turtle and Mary River Cod. In 2008 independent Federal government reports challenged the environmental impact statement undertaken by Queensland Water Infrastructure Pty Ltd (QWI), an agency established in 2006 by the Queensland Government to ‘progress the feasibility and potential design and construction of several major water infrastructure projects in South East Queensland.’ The project is currently in limbo in the aftermath of an independent Federal Government report released in 2008 which indicated that the dam was unlikely to be approved due to environmental concerns relating to endangered and vulnerable species.
Impact on these species triggers national environment laws designed to reject proposals that threaten endangered species. Unfortunately however, eighty-five per cent of the land needed for the project has already been purchased by the state government (ABC News, 2008a).

Conflict over the fate of the Mary River Valley is to some extent an outcome of neglected governance issues common to peri-urban regions (Buxton et al., 2006). However, in the case of the Mary River, a government initiated integrated catchment management project undertaken in 1992 sought to address environmental, social and economic sustainability in the region (Stevenson, 2008). Problems identified at the time were pressures on natural resources due to population growth claiming agricultural land, clearing along river banks, poor management, demands on water and limited understanding of these issues. While the Mary River Catchment Strategy, produced in 1997 appears to have had little impact on the government decision to build the dam a decade later, the relations and structures it established may have facilitated subsequent community activism.

The whole region is festooned with anti-dam signs and placards strategically located on poles, roadsides, cars, houses and in fields. Slogans like ‘NO DAM’, ‘Save our valley’; ‘Do not dam prime land’; ‘There are alternatives’; ‘Let us pray save our valley’; ‘Rivers run free’; and ‘Kandanga, here today flooded tomorrow’ are indicative of community passion and commitment (Stevenson, 2008, p. 7).
Peri-urban regions are located between urban developments and rural countryside and consist of distinct forms of settlement that are neither urban nor rural. Changes in land use are usually irreversible and long term planning, resource management and governance arrangements are usually poorly defined, which is why conflict frequently occurs (Buxton et al., 2006, p. 2). However, we suggest that conflict is not entirely a matter of ill defined governance arrangements. They are also intensified by a postcolonial imaginary; a view which regards others’ land and regions as in need of taming, civilising, occupying or putting to better use. Expunged of ‘significant’ life and intrinsic value such locations are little more than vacant commodities requiring improvement and effective utilisation.

The postcolonial imaginary comprises of an anthropocentric Western epistemology. It dominates understandings of environmental and social relations such that animal life and Indigenous and local connections to land are rendered irrelevant and insignificant. Land, cultural diversity, biodiversity and ecosystems are of little value their own right; rather they exist to serve the needs of urban centres and cities. The influence of this perspective explains why the proposed dam was taken seriously by the Queensland government. It explains the absence of community consultation, the reliance on vague assessments of environmental impact and dubious hydrological studies such as the decision to locate the dam on an alluvial floodplain.

Mary River Valley

The Mary River Valley has a rich history. The valley was first settled by the Aboriginal Ka’bi Kga’iya clans who lived a nomadic life moving between the dense rainforest of large trees including cedar species, black bean, beech, maple and silky oak in the south and open eucalyptus forest in the North (Stevenson, 2008). The Ka’bi Kga’iya peoples and related clans intermittently occupied upper Mary River Valley (Kenilworth and Obi Obi areas), central Mary River (Imbil, Gympie and Widgee areas) and Lower Mary River (Theebine, Miva and Bauple). More pronounced evidence of occupation was provided by the discovery of scrub turkey eggs, water mollusc shells, and the burnt and calcined bones of macropods, quadrupeds and mammals in the Glastonbury excavation (McNiven, 1988) and in the increased silts in Moreton Bay dating back 3000 years and attributed to the Aboriginal use of fire as a land management tool (Singh et al., 1981).

The Ka’bi Kga’iya clans owned land communally. Individual family groups were bound by language, customs and rituals, and similar life support activities including clay pottery, canoe constructions, drum making and body decorating, but had different totemic names (Green, 1996). Each family group had hunting territories protected from exploitation by non family members. By 1885 the Ka’bi Kga’iya clans were decimated by massacres, timber exploiters, landlords and the native police. Elderly survivors, worked as servants for European settlers or in towns (Green, 1996). There is no record of any significant changes to the Mary River valley during the Indigenous occupation. However their nomadic life and land management strategies could have promoted early siltation problems.

The 1840’s saw the European occupation of the Mary River Valley. One of the pulling forces was the extensive rainforest which attracted a significant timber industry and resulted in massive exploitation of the forest (Stevenson, 2008; Pedley, 1979). During this time the Mary River performed a significant role transporting logs downstream for milling. In the 1850’s the river provided a trading link for ocean bound ships. The river also provided fish...
for both food and sport for the settlers. Pastoral land use became common in the late 1840’s with an increase in cattle and sheep production (Mary River Catchment Coordinating Committee, 1997). Wool was produced for export and by the late 1850’s commercial wool and timber production were well established (Mary River Catchment Coordinating Committee, 2001).

Figure 3: Mary River Catchment Land Use. (Source Pointon, 1998)
In 1867 gold was discovered throughout the middle and upper Mary River bringing gold panning along watercourses. The discovery of gold increased the demand for agricultural products including dairy, meat and timber and production activities increased. The Gold rush also saw foreign investment trickling in with the establishment of horticultural production and Chinese farms to provide for the gold miners (Pedley, 1979). Dairy production grew significantly which led to the establishment of Gympie butter factory. Agricultural activities in the 1920s and 1930s were dominated by sugarcane, bananas, pineapples and dairy farms. Meat production was introduced in the 1960s (Mary River Catchment Coordinating Committee, 2001). Growth came at a cost and gold mining activities choked the river with sediments. In addition hope pine plantations established on steep sided valleys in 1944, coupled with the 1950 floods, also resulted in sedimentation of the river prompting sand and gravel removal from the river in the early 1970’s (Mary River Catchment Coordinating Committee, 1997).

More recently the Mary River has been subject to community driven river and catchment rehabilitation programmes including: the Integrated Catchment Management Program (1993); the Voluntary Riverbank Restoration Grants Scheme (1995); and the Rivercare programme (2000) (Wilson at al. 2007). By 1998 grazing constituted 48.5 percent of the total Mary River area whilst forestry was taking up 29 percent, being the second largest land use activity (Pointon, 1998).

The Mary River Valley landscape and vegetation is a reflection of all these various forms of land usage and change. Towns, roads and railway lines have emerged - some thrive and others have been abandoned – and forests have been replaced by agricultural crops. In 2006 the state government came up with a with controversial proposal to dam the Mary River and build a dam at Traveston Crossing.

**The Traveston Dam**

Queensland Water Infrastructure Pty Ltd was established by the Queensland Government to determine the feasibility of water projects and the construction of related infrastructure. The Traveston dam proposal involved relocating and modifying existing public and private infrastructure including mining and rural residential areas likely to be impacted by the project.

The Mary River project area is better characterised as peri-urban than rural since it is only 25kms from the urban centre of Gympie and 60kms from Nambour. Approximately 77.9 percent of land in the project area is used for dairy farming and cattle grazing. The rest is taken up with forestry, crop production, sports and recreation. Small service towns and rural residential areas occupy non agricultural land area close to the proposed dam wall (QWI, 2007) (See figure 3 for the dam site and existing land uses within the Mary River catchment). Four land tenure codes apply for the project area namely:

1. Freehold - land held by the state in free simple (freehold title) which includes titles surrendered to the state of Queensland (or Crown) under Section 358 of Land Act 1994;
2. Leasehold - land owned by the State of Queensland and leased for a particular purpose, such as grazing and pastoral activities;
3. State land reserve - State land reserved for community or public purposes;
4. Road reserve - State land dedicated as roads under the control of either the Department of Main Roads or a Local Government. (QWI, 2007).
The population of South East Queensland is currently booming with an annual growth of 50,000 to 60,000 people. The economy is also growing and constitutes 60 percent and 11 percent of gross State and Australia product respectively. Consistent droughts in the last 100 years underline the vulnerability of water supplies in the area. The proposed Traveston dam is was expected to provide a long term solution to water needs in the region where drought induced water use restrictions, water supply deficits and irregular rainfall forecasts are expected due to climate variability and climate change (State of Queensland, 2007).

It has been argued by those same proponents of the dam that adoption of water efficient technologies, recycling and use of substitute sources such as rainwater tanks and groundwater will not meet the region’s water demand without long term water supply restrictions which negatively impact the economy, residential and other public activities. Other options, such as desalinisation of sea water, were seen to be prohibitively expensive in terms of investment, operational costs, and energy use (QWI, 2007). The dam, with an expected storage capacity of about 153,000ML, wall height of 59m above its foundation and surface area of 3039 hectares is expected to provide an additional 70,000ML/a of water to both Brisbane and Sunshine Coast regions by 2011 (QWI, 2007).

The proposed dam has however met with strong with resistance from Mary River Valley communities, residents, farmers, traditional Indigenous owners and environmentalists seeking to protect endangered species. Destruction of aquatic and terrestrial animals’ habitat is widely cited as major impact of the dam construction. Endangered species include the Mary River cod, Mary River turtle, the giant barred frog, the cascade tree frog and the Coxen’s fig-parrot. Vulnerable species include the tasked frog, honey blue-eye, Richmond birdwing butterfly, and llidges ant-blue butterfly. The Queensland lungfish is especially significant to local Indigenous people. It is ‘the last living link to the first animals to walk on land about 350 million years ago’ (Stevenson, 2008), and the Mary River system is the only natural habitat left to them in the world. Without this breeding habitat they will no doubt become extinct (Save Mary River Coordinating Committee, 2007).

The proposed dam site will submerge furtile agricultural land currently utilised by dairy and cattle industries and other businesses. A number of downstream industries also depend on water supply from the Mary river. Lans use Land use directly affected by the project totals 3838 ha comprising 334 properties, including about 144 ha of rural residential area, 1910 ha of intensive animal production and 1188 ha of grazing area (QWI, 2007). QWI also estimated that 60 agricultural based businesses will be affected by the project with loss in production of about four percent. About 6073 ha will be indirectly affected by the project comprising 265 properties (QWI, 2007). A number of mitigation measures to compensate for the impact were proposed by QWI including leaseback and purchase of affected areas.

Finally, the Mary river catchment, including the Great Sandy World Heritage area is premier tourist destination. The likely reduction in total river flow volumes will negatively impact fisheries productivity and therefore recreational fishing. Change in river flow will also change the shape of the Mary River downstream from the dam resulting in loss of riffles and pools essential for Mary River cod and Queensland lungfish breeding habitat. These changes will also adversely impact on the habitat of many species of macro invertebrates. Finally it will have a detrimental impact on downstream sections of the Great Sandy Staite Marine Park (Save Mary River Coordinating Committee, 2007).
**Sustainability and Postcolonialism**

This section introduces the main themes of postcolonial critique in order to show what a postcolonial approach brings to our understanding of contemporary contestation over land in the Mary River region. As noted above the region was not uninhabited or pristine before European settlement. Certainly European occupation effaced previous patterns of Indigenous land use however the proposed dam will erase traces of both; it will flood an Indigenous Bora ring of the Gubbi-Gubbi people and the Kandanga cemetery. Postcolonialism geography is interested in recuperating complex and shared histories of colonisation. In particular the approach emphasises the ambivalence, contestation and transformation of modes of exploitation and subordination and the ways previous forms of colonial domination have been re-worked and revised in the postcolonial era.

There is some confusion about the term ‘postcolonial’ because the prefix ‘post’ suggests that we have moved beyond colonialism. Most postcolonial theorists do not however regard postcolonialism as referring to a state beyond colonisation, achieved through formal political process of decolonisation, but a to the complex ways that postcolonial states continue to remain enmeshed in their colonial past (Jacobs, 2002), rather postcolonialism:

> denotes a range of critical perspectives on the diverse histories and geographies of colonial practices, discourses, impacts and, importantly, their legacies in the present – critical engagements that often preceded and must continue long after formal political independence (Nash, 2002, p. 221).

There is also some confusion regarding Australia’s colonial status since the European colonial project was a vast and sprawling geo-political project of subjugation and domination; and Australia differs from occupied colonies in India and Africa where ‘indigenous people remained in the majority but were administered by a foreign power’ (Ashcroft, Griffith, & Tiffin, 1998, p. 211). Australia was established as a settler colony in the late nineteenth century and settler/invaders displaced, removed and killed Indigenous populations to exercise domination. The occupation of Australia was ‘a haphazard product of commercial interests and group settlement’ (Young, 2001, p. 17) and settler/invaders stayed to occupy territory and formulate a new national identity. Australia is thus testimony to the capacity of colonialism to adapt over the time and place and to adopt many forms and practices.

Over the past decade postcolonial geographers have been fascinated by the links between geography and the imperial/colonial past (Clayton, 2002). European geographical knowledge rationalised imperial expansion, exploration, mapmaking, theories of climate, classifications of race and species and the spatial practicalities of colonial occupation, governance and settlement (Jacobs, 2002; Nash 2002). Contemporary postcolonial geography has focused on the ways the material and discursive processes of colonisation established particular kinds of relationships in particular locations at particular points in time. These accounts show how colonialism comprised of economic, political and cultural processes that even in its most extreme forms of profit and violence were enframed and mediated by signs, metaphors and narratives able to create new structures of meaning. From a postcolonial perspective ‘oppression’ and ‘domination’ are not simply masked, mystified or rationalised, but come to be expressed in ways that may replicate, but may also reconstitute, rework, revise and even resist colonial conditions (Thomas, 1994, p. 2). The malleability of relationships established
under colonialism challenge the idea that conquest and domination conducts its business on a singular set of axis where the centre oppresses and the periphery is oppressed. Rather postcolonial geography posits more nuanced, complex and ambivalent sets of relations while remaining focused on the overarching material and cultural costs of colonial relations.

Postcolonial geographers have examined the way nature, wilderness and natural environments are constructed in colonial imaginary as empty cultureless commodities expunged of indigenous habitation (Jacobs, 2002). They have highlighted colonial myth and imagery to underline how deeply embedded Western anthropocentric, technocentric, and Eurocentric epistemologies are in dominant understandings of environmental and social processes. One such myth has it that since precolonial land lacked population density and productive land uses, indigenous people failed to use land effectively. Success and development measured in these terms devalues non western and traditional alternatives (Sluyter, 1999 cited in Nash, 2002). Studies of precolonial and colonial environmental history and impact are revealing complex accounts of agricultural systems, as well as environmental recovery and change (Nash, 2002).

The underpinning principles elaborated in postcolonial discourse are sustained in the case of the Mary River where it is possible to identify the dominance of a postcolonial imaginary where nature is unquestionably something to be dominated, melded and changed for the ‘betterment’ of an increasingly urbanised society and its habits and practices of land and water use. These traditions have evolved to focus on supply of natural resources to satisfy consumerism and economic growth, particularly within urban centres and with complete disregard of biodiversity and animal life. In this way the current power struggles in the Mary River region underline the marginalisation and irrelevance of peri-urban communities, landholders and those who do not conform to urban consumerist worldviews such as environmentalists and Indigenous owners seeking to protect endangered species. Ironically, the postcolonial imaginary sustains these views as rational in the absence of reasonable estimates concerning environmental impact.

In conclusion, in March 2009 it was reported that the Queensland government intend to push ahead to bulid the Traveston dam (Roberts, 2009). The case of the Mary River provides an example where urban and rural perspectives collide to sustain the conquest of the peri-urban. For urban dwellers natural resources are commodities to be exploited and consumed, while for rural dwellers natural resources are a series of interconnected systems that can be exploited, but also need to be nurtured and sustained. Rural communities see social and economic spheres as connected to the environment, through for instance a sense of place and the need to produce and create however in peri-urban contexts, primary decision makers are often more sympathetic to urban privilege. This persisting urban societal bias is highlighted by postcolonial perspectives, which also underline their association with the continuing domination of nature and anthropocentric worldviews. The cultural divide between urban and rural communities continues to be played out in highly contested peri-urban environs such as the Mary River

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