

Saltwater People: The Waves of Memory

Nonie Sharp, 2002.

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NONIE SHARP has spent the past 25 years exploring the dynamic cultural traditions of tropical Australia's saltwater communities, speaking with people indigenous to the coast and recording their unique perspectives on spirituality and sense of place. This book, which flows on from her previous works, is a wide-ranging exploration of the links between saltwater people of many cultures and their seascapes.

This book examines the concept of "indigenous marine tenure" as opposed to the western "tradition" of open access to the seas. This conflict is increasingly topical in Australia as the High Court Croker Island decision, and the recent federal report on Indigenous and Recreational fishing, are debated as contentious issues. Clearly, the argument over who has the right of control over marine resources remains to be resolved.

As Sharp says "The sea culture of saltwater people is hard to express in ordinary prose — song and dance are its usual means" (p. 73), but this is a very good attempt at capturing the essence of saltwater cultures. This book explores complex relationships and concepts difficult for people outside of these cultures to grasp — ideas about ancestry, ownership of and responsibility to the sea. Through the use of metaphor Sharp brings us close to an understanding of what these concepts mean to saltwater people, or as close as one can come without experiencing their country firsthand.

The first part of the book explores the dynamic traditions of cultures ranging from the Bardi and Jawi in northwestern Australia to the Meriam people of the Torres Strait. Nonie uses her own personal research and well-selected sources to illustrate the commonalities in these diverse peoples. She brings in the contrast of western sea peoples and examines the changes that the rise of the modern state and free market forces have made in our conceptualization of who owns the sea. Looking at the western sea-ownership traditions through the lens of indigenous tenure practices, Sharp comes to the conclusion that in the past, these were not so different from the sea tenure traditions seen in northern Australia today. Finally, the book explores the intersections of traditions and their likely future paths, with particular reference to the changing of from open access to property-based rights to fish in western industrial culture and the effect this may have on how other saltwater traditions are viewed.

Throughout the book Sharp explores the "waves" of remembering that bring culture back strongly to a people in times of stress — we understand that time is fluid, but a sense of place is and remains solid. Sharp also considers the idea that two salt

waters, representing different clans, can flow over and through one another without losing their own integrity and identity. A similar concept is raised by the Yolngu metaphor known as *ganma* which refers specifically to the meeting of fresh and salt water, and has been used to represent the intersections of western and Yolngu culture (Watson 1989). This book makes it clear that although the intersections of western and saltwater cultures may be seen as the mingling of different waters, this meeting does not bring the dissolving of one into the other. Sharp expresses the hope that within the *ganma* there is the potential for mutual respect and "two way learning" between cultures.

There is always a danger in drawing together snippets of diverse traditions as Sharp has done, since this can lead to the portrayal of a single homogenous "indigenous" culture which does not exist in reality. A similar problem is also often seen in presenting a contrasting amorphous "western" culture, a generalization that makes comparisons easier but ignores the great diversity found in the cultural groups within such an umbrella term. This book largely avoids this problem, and although the title "Saltwater People" may seem to be the melding together of many cultures, we must recognize that this term is one generated by these people themselves as a way of identification and distinction from other groups. Despite this it is wise to remember that even though there are many similarities, the cultures described in this work are all unique and different.

Sharp's writing is rich in metaphor and meaning which bring alive the oral traditions of the saltwater people. She does not hesitate to draw parallels with examples from western cultural sources and these insights help to paint a picture of an alternative world view. Sharp has begun the task of translating the deep connections that Saltwater people have with their country, and gives us a sense of the entirely different way that these cultures imagine and relate to the sea. In this respect this book reminds me of Deborah Rose's seminal work "Dingo makes us Human" (1992) which is an amazingly in depth exploration of the relationships between one people and their land, covering all aspects of social life. As Sharp investigates a multiplicity of cultures, the scope of this book is not so broad as that covered by Rose, but "Saltwater People" is to my mind an easier book to read, giving an overview of the major concepts in language that can be grasped by any reader. This is a feat indeed given the depth of the ideas encapsulated in these traditions whose complexity might otherwise be daunting to outsiders.

REFERENCES:

- Rose, D. B., 1992. Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Aboriginal Australian culture. Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.
- Watson, H., 1989. Singing The Land Signing The Land. Deakin University Press, Geelong.

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