

# Encoded Cultural Heritage Knowledge in Australian Aboriginal Traditional Representation of Country

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## Abstract

*From tactile paintings in sand to acrylic on board, Australian Aboriginal performative art can be thought of as also cultural heritage survival maps. This paper synthesises the two key authors' work [1; 2] that address this concept. In so doing, it sheds new light on understandings of the indexicality of the Australian Aboriginal cultural heritage survival map to form a theory of the cultural specificity of the conventions used and their role as storytelling navigation aids.*

**Keywords---** Cultural Heritage, Cultural Knowledge, Australian Aboriginal Art as Survival Map.

## 1.0 Introduction

In the early 1970's Geoffrey Bardon [2] was instrumental in overseeing a transition in communication technology where traditional Australian Aboriginal graphic representation was transferred from sand painting<sup>1</sup> to acrylic on board. While sand painting is still practiced, its acrylic on board form is now more widely known. As a method for cultural heritage survival, these paintings also function as journey maps. They render in abstract form an eternal sense of land and supernature making it at once both visible and tactile. David Turnbull [1] has also studied these journey maps, claiming the iconography contained are not just metaphors for land masses but come together as complete theories of landscapes. Moreover, he claims these maps, and maps in general, contain metaphorical referents to embedded cultural values, language, and the mindset of their creators. In this sense, the Australian Aboriginal painting can be seen both aesthetically and, more importantly as part of a cultural heritage knowledge communication technology.

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<sup>1</sup> Sand painting is a performative art involving the inscribing of petroglyph forms in sand accompanied by dance and song. Its transition to acrylic on board is clearly problematic, not least regarding what knowledge could be depicted in its more permanent form. Nevertheless, their maintenance role in the continuance of the longest surviving cultural practice has been largely retained.

For Bardon [2] an understanding of Australian Aboriginal art is contingent upon the stories they contain. More than this, they coalesce space, time, and the Ancestors' wanderings in a form that is navigable to those who know its conventions. In this sense, they manifest as cultural heritage survival maps also. The conventions are localised but transferable and extensible by agreement with adjacent clan societies. Western map production, by comparison, eradicates signs of local, contingent, social and individual production, gaining power by rendering transparent any inherent indexicality. Hence, at first appearance, it appears there may be little or no overlap between Western conventionalised map reading and Australian Aboriginal survival map navigation. However, as Turnbull [1] points out, the indexicality of the Australian Aboriginal survival map is more about the transparency of the map reader's own cultural background to the conventions used than the legibility of the symbols used *per se*. As such, this paper brings together Bardon [2] and Turnbull's [1] understandings of the indexicality of the Australian Aboriginal cultural heritage survival map to form a theory of the cultural specificity of the conventions used shedding new light on their role as storytelling navigation aids.

## 2.1 Bardon on Sand Painting

Section 2 largely draws from Bardon's [2; 3] work with the Western Desert Aboriginal peoples of Papunya Tula.

According to Bardon [2], sand painting has been used as a traditional ceremonial or ritual form of story telling by Australian Aboriginal peoples for millennia. It relies on pictographic or hieroglyphic styles of illustration, song and dance that resonates with the rich stories they are telling. Their sand doodles include arcs, circles, meandering spirals and tracks similar to those found in ancient petroglyphs dated to 30,000 years. A selected area of ground is prepared by clearing away any debris and smoothing it. Coloured sands, ochres, feathers, charcoal and other materials are used to depict the story. The area is completely destroyed on completion of the story-telling ceremony (much like the Buddhist mandala) (see figure 1).



**Figure 1. Western Desert sand painting [3, pg101].**

A number of anthropologists have tried to interpret the language and meanings of their ephemeral works over the years [4; 5; 6; 7; 8]. Including elaborate body paintings, carved boards, and sand paintings, they constitute 3-dimensional tactile forms<sup>2</sup> of cultural expression through an organised pictorial language. Many are performative depictions of journeys through the landscape. These landscapes are not seen from the outside but from the inside as a continuous humanised narrative. Different tribes and clans use different styles. Some use symmetrical, formalised, linear designs while others use more abstract flattened apparently randomised designs. This reflects the rich and varied landscape of the Australian continent. Their sand paintings are part of their Dreaming ceremonies<sup>3</sup>. They can describe particular places and events. The painter refers to their painting as a kind of survival map which can be used for navigation and information about places and natural features.

The recent transference of sand painting to acrylic on board has retained much of its prior meaning and form. It retains also its haptic expression. Where Western style painting is unquestionably a visual practice, the Australian Aboriginal painter-storyteller will handle their painting elucidating its hidden messages by running their fingers over its various elements (see figure 2). The work is thus revealed by this haptic approach. It also means it is difficult for the Australian Aboriginal painter to copy another painting by simply observing it. As the artist has

<sup>2</sup> As 'art works' they may also contain secret sacred motifs that are not meant to be seen by all.

<sup>3</sup> The dreaming refers to a time when the ancient Totemic Ancestors wandered the landscape giving its places their names and leaving tracks forming the rivers and valleys. It transcends the present and the landscapes it inhabits. There is an ongoing belief that the Ancestors are inextricably linked to the fate of the contemporary Australian Aboriginal person, thus the compelling need to maintain their culture through performative storytelling.

to *tell* their story, meanings and origins become subjective. The painting is 'read'<sup>4</sup> as a story about the wanderings of the Totemic Ancestors through the landscape. This demonstrates a transcendental reality of spirit and world in the painting and the telling of its story.



**Figure 2. Western Desert Australian Aboriginal artist 'telling' the story of his painting haptically [2, pg129].**

One is literally a 'part' of these paintings; virtually walking around in it – not external to it, observing or looking on. The paintings themselves rarely have any particular orientation. They can be looked at from many different angles and sides depending on one's orientation to what is depicted and their orientation to the story. Indeed, the painting can be seen from all sides at once and seen through like an x-ray image. The arbitrariness of the painting's edge means its relativity to the viewer is absolute. It is this arbitrariness that denies the normal certainty we associate with Western art. It stems from its origins in the sand-mosaic<sup>5</sup>. Unlike the Western style, the Australian Aboriginal artist enters, rather than is opposed or external to, the world. Moreover, interaction with the surface of the painting, as a creative principle, can be seen as a form of grammar: the hieroglyph as noun; colours, intensifications, stresses and clarifications as adjective or adverb; and their reconstitution in space as the verb.

## 2.2 As Maps without Temporal Direction

With the transition from sand-mosaic painting to acrylic on board, the once ephemeral/transient images were given permanence. With it the stories could be preserved and interpreted by others not having access to the original ceremonial sand constructions. But, this also

<sup>4</sup> Not in a literal sense, but as a cognitive act of understanding.

<sup>5</sup> and body-painting.

means the new form changes the way the stories could be told. In the original form, space was continually expanded upon by the infinity of the sand to transform. Now the frame of the painting itself became a metaphor for the perimeter of the space beyond. On the other hand, the land that is re-presented in the painting has distinct form and has an eternal life force which transcends space and time. In a sense, floating above the land, seeing it from all positions at once, the Totemic Ancestors depicted in the painting are temporally manifest in the land surface itself. In an eternal present, this is beyond any Western notion of the metric progression of time.

The European artists Delaunay, Kandinsky, and Klee understood this relativism of perception and that temporality is within ourselves. In the Australian Aboriginal paintings,

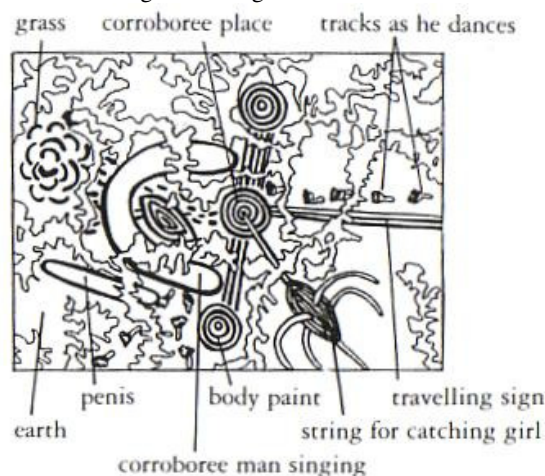
*the images do not provide a mere graphic equivalent of spoken words, thereby attaching themselves to the temporality implicit in the ordinary syntax of a sentence. Quite to the contrary, and importantly: time has become space. There is no conventional sequentiality in the 'stories', but rather the accretion of space or 'place'. Since the space or 'place' is only the retelling of story already known to the painter, the so-called 'story' is an eternal idea in the culture of the painter. The elements or images of the story therefore have no reading direction as we understand it [2, p134].*



**Figure 3. *Ngarlu Love Story*, Clifford Possum, Tjapaltjarri (Acrylic on canvas, 143x100cm, 1992). The painting depicts a story of forbidden love between a Tjapaltjarri man Liltipililti and a Napangati woman. Liltipililti (shown as a large U-shape) spun hair string on a spindle or 'wirrakurru' singing a sacred love song to draw a Napangati woman to the campsite. As the Napangati woman approached, Liltipililti lost concentration and clumps of unspun hair were blown away. These events are glimpsed through a cloudy overlay.**

Unlike the European landscape painting with its horizon separating land and sky, in the Australian Aboriginal painting these two are united as one.

As pre-eminently a symbolic way of reducing all understanding to space, space and time are intertwined. Bardon [2] claims, this four-dimensional simultaneity can be seen in Clifford Possum's (1992) painting, *Ngarlu Love Story* (see figure 3 & 4). It looks like one is looking at their feet but also looking at themselves looking at their feet from above the clouds. One is depicted coming towards the fireplace as well as seeing themselves approaching it. The same place in space is perceived of at the same time but also at many moments in time and is revisited through its telling.



**Figure 4. Annotation of *Ngarlu Love Story*.**

### 3.1 Turnbull on Survival Maps

Section 3 largely draws on Turnbull's (first published in 1989) series *Imagining Nature*.

The telling and retelling of stories recounts journeys through time and space. In this sense, according to Turnbull [1], Australian Aboriginal paintings can be thought of as navigable survival maps – for the survival and transmission of their cultural heritage. However, they do not resemble the objective navigational maps more familiar in the West. Yet, like Western maps, they are indexical. That is, they are rarely understood outside the specificities of the culture that created them.

All maps have this conventional, selective, indexical, and embedding of the culture from whence they came. They are dependent on the understanding of particular cognitive reasonings peculiar to that culture, that can be learned. At their base is a metaphor for the demonstration of knowledge. More than this, as most of our experiences of our environments are in some way mediated (if only by cultural familiarity<sup>6</sup>), our understanding of our environments is constituted by a

<sup>6</sup> See Gombrich's [9, p84] comparative study of how a Chinese artist interprets the English countryside through the prism of their prior environmental understandings depicted in accordance with their own peculiar iconography, with the English painter's interpretation of the same environment.



dialectic interaction between its various nodes (visual, cognitive, memory markers) of importance to us. Hence, experience and representation are formative of each other and only separable when we attempt to diagrammatically analyse space [see 10]. Hence, the map becomes the territory. Although, the territory can never be the map, as it is only in the symbolism of the diagrammatic map that we take possession of the territory [11]. Thus, all maps have local, contingent and indexical character intimately tied to human purpose and action. In this sense, Australian Aboriginal survival maps *can* serve a similar purpose to the Western norm.

Turnbull [1] uses the example of the Crocodile Totem as a topographic map. In figure 5 a crocodile is clearly depicted. The crocodile – the totem for the region referred to – can be seen to map the area in a conventional sense (see figure 6). We can extend Turnbull's notion by literally overlaying the crocodile's form on a conventional map of the region referred to. The legs straddle the opening of the river mouth and the extent of the land either side is represented by the animal's body (see figure 7). Despite doing this, the crocodile painting is still a highly conventionalised map, in that one needs to be learned on its conventions to be able to read it in the ways it is meant to be read. For, it also contains other sociological knowledge. For example, the diamond pattern is symbolic of the flickering flames representative of knowledge in general: the red diamonds flames, ashes yellow, sparks white dots, charcoal black lines, flaming coals white with red lines, dust white lines on yellow – all combining to manifest knowledge in different ways (see figure 5). The crocodile itself is used to teach the children of the ancestor's presence and that if they do not treat this place with respect the crocodile ancestor will retaliate – literally and metaphorically.

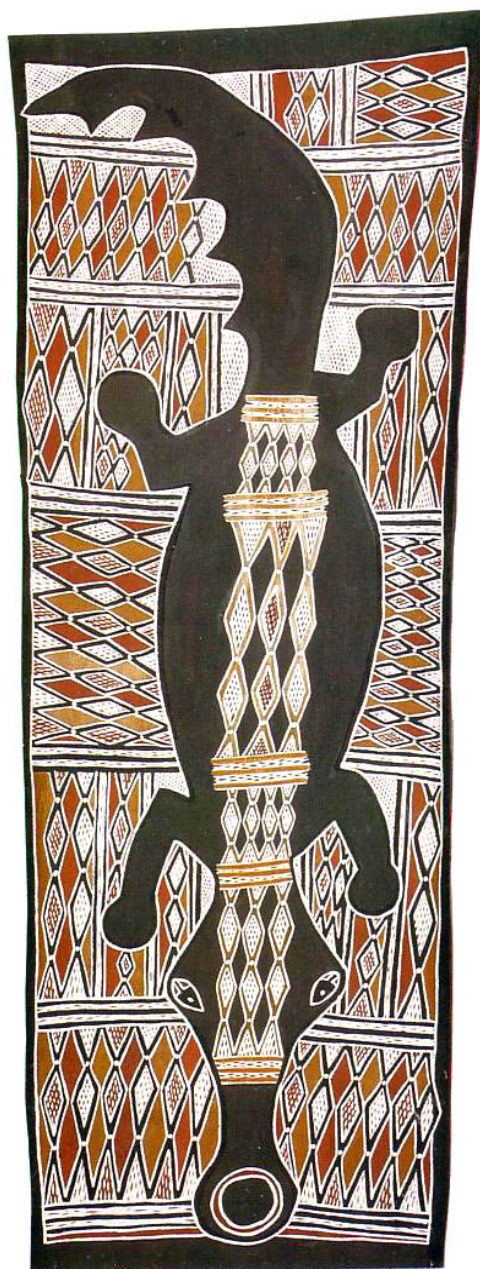
The indexicality of Australian Aboriginal survival maps cannot thus be simply equated with their practicality. Although, a stranger to Australian Aboriginal culture is able to read their map language with training. Hence, claims that a map, such as an Australian Aboriginal map, is more indexical than a European map is more about the transparency of the map reader's own cultural background to the conventions used than the legibility of the symbols used *per se*.

Australian Aboriginal maps are only fully understood by those who have been initiated to the knowledge necessary. For that reading, there will always be some knowledge that is undecipherable reserved only for those fully initiated. European maps, on the other hand give the appearance of being completely open to an external coordinate system supposedly outside its own culture. In this case,

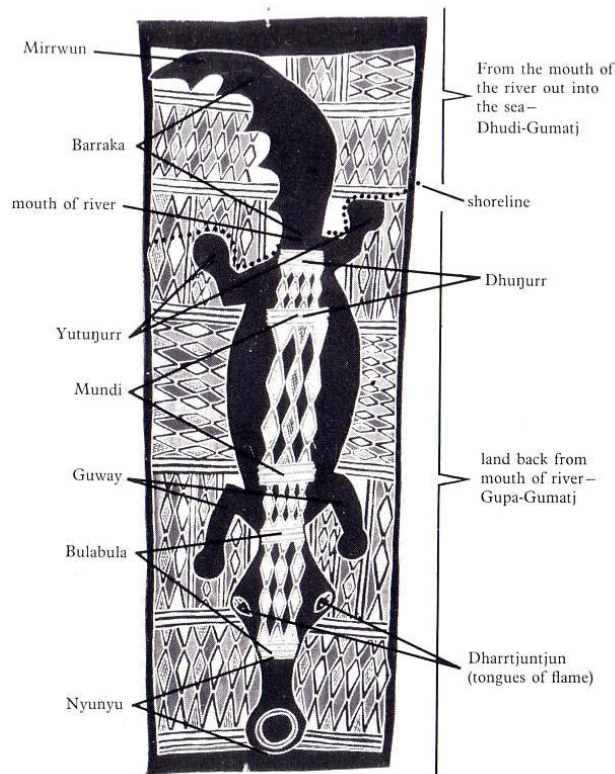
*one could argue that, in Western society, knowledge gains its power through denying, or rendering transparent, the inherent indexicality of all statements or knowledge claims. In the Western tradition the way to imbue a claim with authority is to attempt to eradicate all signs of its local, contingent, social and individual production. Australian Aborigines, on the other hand, ensure*

*that only the initiated can go beyond the surface appearance of local contingency [1, p42].*

While maps from different cultures may appear to be distorted, conventional and totally indexical by the regimented standards of the Western model, once recognised as route maps, their workability becomes apparent – just as workable as Beck's abstracted map of the London underground. In this sense, maps can have a variety of functions imposed upon them beyond simple route indicators. Hence, their latent symbolic values reflect the society's realities and values.



**Figure 5. Crocodile Totem painting**  
[1, p32].



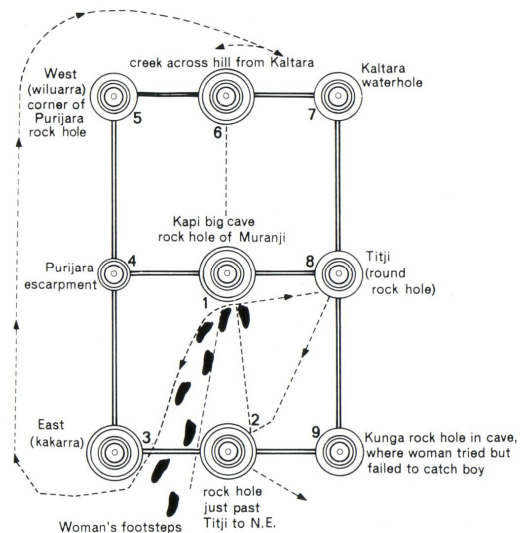
**Figure 6. Crocodile Totem painting as conventional topographic map**  
[1, p32]



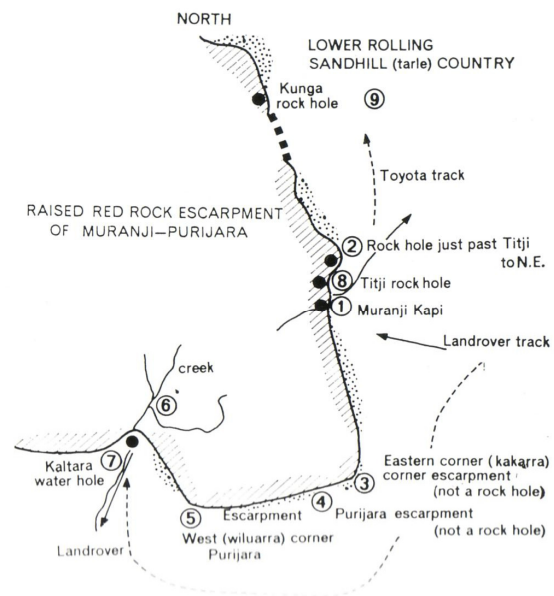
**Figure 7. Overlay of Crocodile Totem map on conventional Western map of the region.**

As an example, Turnbull [1] provides a clearer journey map. Despite the difficulty in detecting clear topographical features in an Australian Aboriginal map and the large amount of esoteric knowledge required to

be learnt to be able to read them, spatial locations can be ascertained once the basics are learned (see figure 8, 9 & 10).

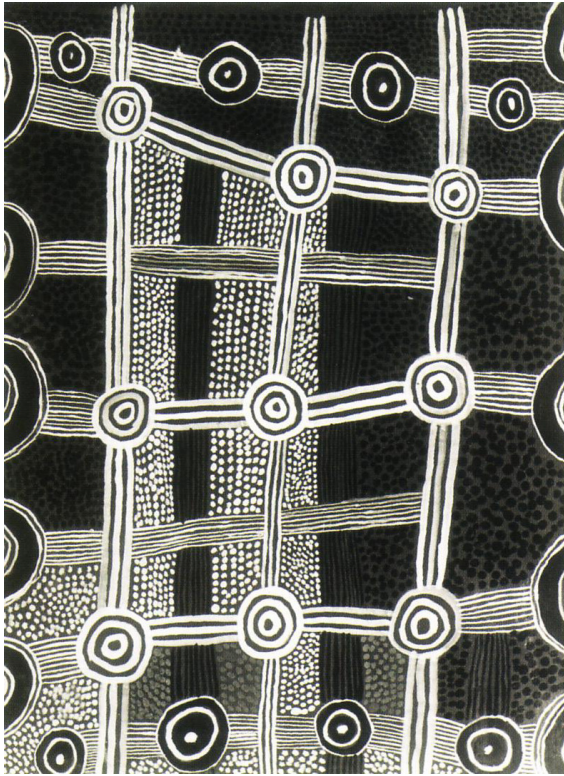


**Figure 8. Journey from Maranji Kapi to Tarle Kunga using traditional mapping conventions**  
[1, p53].



**Figure 9. Journey from Maranji Kapi to Tarle Kunga using Western topological referents**  
[1, p53].





**Figure 10. Although this is not the actual journey to Tarle Kunga painting that Turnbull refers to (unavailable due to public viewing sensitivities), there are clear parallels in the iconography [3, pg132].**

### 3.2 Landscape as Map

If, according to Turnbull [1], maps, thought of as metaphors, not just for land masses but as theories of landscapes, contain metaphorical referents to embedded cultural values, language, and the mindset of their creators, and spatiality is fundamental to our consciousness [12] and events are bound in space and time through the logical relations of grammar and metaphor in language, then Wittgenstein's [13] proposition that the limits of one's language is the limit of their world holds. We can go further and add that the limits to one's language is determined by their spatial consciousness and that these are interrelated. Hence, space is fundamental in ordering our knowledge and experience.

It is not surprising then that, while maps as spatial metaphors for cultural knowledge is fundamental, the relative location of objects in space is different for different cultures. Moreover, how one culture goes about representing spatiality and its meaning within the specificities of their world view is not always easily understood by others. Hence, natural objects and their spatial relations are also a part of a culture's world view, episteme, cognitive schema, ontology, and may not be

invariant (the Western, objective, ontologically certain, position).

Therefore, while in the West objects are thought of as having fixed characteristics, defined boundaries, and position in a spatial coordinate system, it may simply be that the Western ontology is reinforced by the role maps play in Western culture. If the Western experience of the world and representations of it are mutually interdependent then they are inseparable. Hence, the map *is* the territory. Beck's London underground map is an example of a map which distorts distances and relationships to fit a particular schema, yet it is readable by non-Londoners *once they know its conventions*. It follows then that, all maps are indexical, as no map, representation, diagram, equation, theory and so on, can be completely independent of the culture that created it. Indexical statements rely on their context for their truth.

Australian Aboriginal paintings are recognisable as describing places and events, but the information they contain can only be understood within the cultural specificities of the circumstance that the stories they contain are told. They cannot be generalised beyond this. But, while we can think of some Australian Aboriginal paintings as maps they cannot be compared to their European counterparts. However, despite not having a grid or standardised metric they can still be used as navigational devices (as evidenced by the Crocodile Totem painting and journey to Tarle Kunga). Rather than describing places in a static sense, they describe events that have *occurred* in place (such as in *Ngarlu Love Story*). Indeed, due to their intertwining of space and time in a four-dimensional simultaneity, not present in conventional Western maps<sup>7</sup>, they can also be used to recount journeys across unknown lands<sup>8</sup>.

Not all Australian Aboriginal paintings can be thought of as maps. To what extent they can is open to debate. Often the depictions contained represent what might be called the ancestors footsteps through the land – not literally footsteps but remnants of their presence from the dreamtime. Each clan is responsible for its Songline (a journey for which its story is told through

<sup>7</sup> This is distinct from diagrammatic representations of past or future events, such as Minard's graphic of Napoleon's 1812 march [see 14] which happens to use also a map (or the reconstruction of JFK's assassination: as an annotated route map etc).

<sup>8</sup> As narratives of journeys across the landscape, they inculcate and invoke conventions through ceremonies and rituals. Called Songlines, journeys of their Ancestral Beings in the Dreamtime are recounted, criss-crossing the country. Individuals only 'know' or have responsibility for localised sections of a Songline. The network is formed through exchange and negotiation in the form of bark paintings or song cycles. The conventions used, known only within the existent cultural framework, means representations of unknown lands can be added to local knowledge to form an extended network. The 'nodes' and their locations are embedded in the visitors' ceremonial storytelling.

illustration, song and dance) which refers to the dreaming when, through their socialising, the ancestors left their 'footprints' and 'tracks' in the now known landscape. It refers to the specific series of stories, songs, dances and graphic representations about that creative epoch as well as the Country it defines. More than this, the Songlines or tracks form a network which constitutes the political and economic processes of the surrounding society.

The dreamtime transcends the present and the landscapes it inhabits. As the ancestors in the form of animals acquiesced with the landscape creating its features they gave the world its forms, identities and names. These features and the tracks connecting them and their significances link all identifiable places into a whole. As Australian Aboriginal knowledge is coincident with the creative activity of the Ancestral Beings which created the topography, providing the names for places along the songline paths, and link groups of people, all interact forming a cohesive knowledge network, hence the map metaphor is appropriate. Constituted by their spatial connectivity, knowledge and language coalesce in these maps.

For the Australian Aborigine, knowledge is a commodity to be earned, traded, and restricted. It is the basis of the ceremonial power it imbues in ritual. Through constant negotiation the knowledge is maintained and shared. While the notion of a network is essential to all cultural formations, the way it manifests varies. For the Australian Aboriginal it is not simply the naming of places (more common to the Eurocentric view) but the interconnectedness of these places and the meanings behind the names that count. This interconnectedness takes a long time to learn and hence much capital is invested in what knowledge each individual is allowed to retain. More than this, the network is tangible (it is embedded in a changing landscape) and needs to be actively maintained. Landscape is central to their storytelling. Places are created by socialising the space, and events coalesce in space and time in these places. This is most acute in the performative recounting of ancestral, historical or contemporary events. Hence, unlike the European approach, which makes connections between places using abstract metric qualities, for the Australian Aboriginal, the tracks *are* the landscape. In this sense, the Australian Aboriginal theory of land sees the landscape as a map of itself [1].

#### 4. Discussion

Bardon [2] and Turnbull [1] set out to describe, in their own ways, how Australian Aboriginal art can be reinterpreted as a form of cultural heritage survival mapping. Moreover, contained within the petroglyph representations are navigable journey maps – journeys through time and space without direction. This is very different to how Western maps are perceived. However, both can be used to navigate traversable landscapes. In this sense, they can be said to share a common function.

With the transference from sand mosaic to acrylic on board Australian Aboriginal paintings retain their role as cultural heritage knowledge survival maps. Not constituting a language as such, rather their indexicality is contingent on understanding the conventions used. Intertwining space and time, their lack of sequentiality differentiates them from the Western map. Western maps, by contrast, especially those that include time scales (such as the Minard graphic), rely on a time metric which has a clear direction vector. As navigable maps their formative knowledge is embedded in the map iconography. Western maps become the territory by virtue of the transparency of their objective symbolism. Whereas, Australian Aboriginal maps are more subjective. In this sense, both present theories of landscapes. For the Australian Aborigine the landscape is a map of itself by virtue of the infinitude of the sand that is transformed in the traditional map-making process itself – now transferred to acrylic on board.

Both Bardon and Turnbull agree indexicality of any map is a function of understanding the conventions used. Australian Aboriginal maps can only be differentiated from Western maps by the objective/subjective divide. However, this is a cultural differentiation that only presents itself when we attempt to compare them. Within the frameworks of their own cultures this does not present as a problem. Culturally, the West derives its truths from the transparency of its indexicality, whereas, for Australian Aboriginal culture, power is vested in the apparent subjectivity of its indexicality, thus protecting the knowledge contained by restricting its legibility to only those initiated to its conventions. In terms of cultural values, it could be said that this reflects the main cultural differentiation between the Australian Aboriginal and the West – spirituality and materiality respectively. For the West, maps provide objective, concrete, information about topographic forms, places and events in a quantifiable time scale. For the Australian Aborigine, their survival maps are more ephemeral. Not conforming to any strict time scale, they manifest events and places through their performative uttering into existence. However, with some training it is possible for the uninitiated to retrace journeys between distinct topographical features in a similar manner to the way the Western map provides.

The value in addressing Bardon and Turnbull's work in this way has been to tie together the differing approaches to the notion of Australian Aboriginal art as survival map. Where Bardon focused on the stories contained in their art as an aesthetic and cultural function, Turnbull focused on a more literal reading. Neither is particularly useful in isolation. Synthesised here, we can see a new way of 'reading' the significance of Australian Aboriginal art as not just survival map but as cultural heritage archive of past and future journeys. With no written language, Australian Aboriginal peoples have relied, and continue to rely, on this highly performative cultural mapping as a means for communicating social meaning-making across the eons.

## 5. Conclusion

With their transference from tactile sand paintings to acrylic on board, this part of the role of Australian Aboriginal performative art, that can be thought of as cultural heritage survival mapping, continues. In synthesising Bardon and Turnbull's work in this field new light has been shed on understandings of the indexicality of the Australian Aboriginal cultural heritage survival map to form a theory of the cultural specificity of the conventions used and their role as storytelling navigation aids. More specifically, landscape as a map of itself and the profound significance of this in the connection Australian Aboriginal people have with the land expressed through their performative art.

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