“Secret Women’s Business”: Indigenous Rights, Anthropology, and the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Controversy
What makes something a secret?
What is worth keeping secret?
Should secrets be revealed?
The Setting for a Dispute
Goolwa, South Australia, & Hindmarsh Island
the area “is crucial for the reproduction of the Ngarrindjeri people and the cosmos which supports their existence. The waters are a life force to the Ngarrindjeri women, whether past or present, and should anything cover these waters, then the strength there will be taken from the Ngarrindjeri women and they will become very ill”.

Native Title

Aboriginality, gender, secrecy, the judicial system, colonial history, economic development, cultural conflict—anthropology
Secret Women’s Business

- opposing Aboriginal views
- The Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission
- Prime Minister John Howard, the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Act (1997), bridge completed in March of 2001.
- Dr. Deane Fergie, anthropologist at the University of Adelaide
Confidential: to be read by women only

Rod Lucas
Neil Draper
The Roots of Aboriginal Dissent

- Aboriginal women who claimed that secret women’s business was a hoax
- Ignorant of the origins and nature of Ngarrindjeri beliefs
- Knowledge selectively distributed within a community
- "no point in reliving the past"
- Christian converts

Anthropologists at War over the Truth

- Male anthropologists
- Ethics
- A feminist agenda?
Anthropology and the Culture Wars

- 2010, Government of South Australia: “secret women’s business” was real and authentic.
- Tom Trevorrow: “We may use the bridge to access our land and waters but culturally and morally we cannot come to terms with this bridge”.
Australia’s culture wars
political correctness run amok
“The willingness of white people to believe the Aboriginal women, marked the high-water mark of politically correct soft-headedness and sentimentality” (Simons, 2003)

Ron Brunton and Roger Sandall

Roger Sandall: The Culture Cult
“designer tribalism” & “romantic primitivism”
fantasies held by “spoiled white urbanites”.

THE CULTURE CULT
Designer Tribalism and Other Essays
ROGER SANDALL
the “invented traditions” approach
Eric Hobsbawm, Richard Handler, etc.
James Clifton’s *The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions and Government Policies*
Margaret Simons:

“Aboriginal culture is periodically attacked for being nepotistic, secretive and not accountable. I believe the story of the Hindmarsh Island affair makes it clear that the similarities between cultures are often more interesting than the differences….the story of the Hindmarsh Island bridge shows that, in both Aboriginal culture and in our own, information follows the lines of power, and secrets are the inevitable accompaniment to power.”
References


