GOLDEN DREAMS:
People, Place and Mining in the Tanami Desert

Derek J. Elias

School of Archaeology and Anthropology
The Australian National University

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Except where cited in the text,
this work is the result of research carried out by the author.

Derek James Elias

School of Archaeology and Anthropology
The Faculties
The Australian National University
Canberra, Australia
Dedication

Few of us understand, but we all feel it though, and I say all without exception, because those who do not feel do not count. Each blade of grass has its spot on earth whence it draws its life, its strength; and so is man rooted to the land from which he draws his faith together with his life. I don’t know how much Jim understood; but I know how he felt, he felt confusedly but powerfully, the demand of some such truth or some such illusion - I don’t care how you call it, there is so little difference, and the difference means so little...

Yet you, too, in your time must have known the intensity of life, that light of glamour created in the shock of trifes, as amazing as the glow of sparks struck from a cold stone - and as short-lived, alas!

- Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim

For the Warlpiri people of Lajamanu and Yuendumu who grew me into a man and taught me another way of seeing the world,

I thank you most sincerely.
In Memory

In affectionate memory of my father D. Johnson Japanangka

who sadly passed away in February 2001.

Ngajukupalangu kirdana,
tarnnga karnarla purdanyanyi.
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Abstract

The Tanami Desert is classed as a semi-desert and covers a large area of land in the central-west of the Northern Territory of Australia as well as a much smaller area of the north-east of Western Australia. The majority of the Tanami Desert has been inhabited by Warlpiri speaking Aboriginal peoples for thousands of years; in their terminology from time immemorial since the creative period, or *jukurrpa*, that transformed the world from a featureless mass to the form it has today. For Warlpiri the landscape of the Tanami Desert is covered with places that mark the events and histories of the extraordinary beings and ancestors of the *jukurrpa* whose essences remain in these places, the land and the worlds above and below the surface of the earth.

There have been a number of attempts to account for the complex relationships between Warlpiri people and their land. These accounts shared a common objective that aimed to elucidate patterns of ownership, or land tenure, that related sets of kin, *jukurrpa* and tracts of land. The most sophisticated of these models determined that discrete ‘estates’ existed where the patrilineally inherited rights of ownership were elevated as the strongest form of attachment to place in contrast to other rights that may have been claimed by other Warlpiri people. This thesis isolates rights in place as the key to answering the question of whether there were estates and, if there were, how boundaries of such estates could be determined. The ethnographic data presented here marks the first in-depth survey of accurately plotted site information amongst Aboriginal people of Australia’s interior deserts.

Place is the central focus of this thesis. It examines changes to Warlpiri sociocultural concepts and categories regarding their relations to their land since colonisation within the context of intensive gold exploration, mining and royalty payments. It is contended that Warlpiri people continue to reproduce a cultural order of place that has become increasingly more relevant to daily life beyond the realms of kinship and ritual and has actually reinforced claims of knowledge and authority over decisions regarding the ownership of place. Further, the data illustrates the fact that, in regard to the contemporary development of gold mining in the Tanami Desert the grounds upon which land tenure is negotiated and informs boundaries between people and places demonstrates that indigenous principles which are responsive to changes in history, demography and political economy remain in operation.
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Notes on Data

The spelling of Warlpiri words has been, for the most part, based on the Warlpiri-English Dictionary (15-09-96) compiled by Steve Swartz. Italics have been used for all Warlpiri subsection names, places and words. However, when referring to specific individual people their subsection name has not been italicised.

The information in this thesis has been collected in the context of support of the Central Land Council (CLC) although the views and arguments put forward in this thesis remain the sole responsibility of the author who in no way purports to represent the CLC.
Map of Australia indicating the location of the Tanami Desert