

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

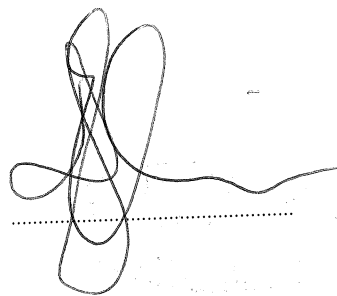
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**A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of The Australian National University**

**January 2001**

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a long horizontal tail extending to the right. The signature is positioned above a horizontal dotted line.

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## 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 trifles, 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.**

## Acknowledgments

I will not try and list the names of all the individuals to whom I owe such an enormous debt as I would invariably leave someone out and many people whom I knew very well have now passed away. I wish to recognise their tolerance and patience in helping me to understand what has been happening in the Tanami Desert over the last twelve years I would like to specifically mention Doug Johnson Japanangka of Lajamanu and Harry Nelson Jakamarra of Yuendumu, two extraordinary men with whom I worked closely in order to do something about it.

To two people in particular I owe the greatest intellectual debt that I most sincerely acknowledge here. First, to Angus Green, my former colleague and friend at the Central Land Council whose intelligent guidance, faith and support never failed me over the years as I came to grips with the complexities of my work in the Tanami Desert. Second, of greatest importance to me was my supervisor Nicolas Peterson who recognised the value of extending the intellectual analysis of that work and with honesty, patience and generosity has conscientiously directed me towards the completion of this thesis.

To Francesca Merlan, the Head of School, I am deeply indebted. The comments and discussions that she shared with me were of immense significance not only in providing a deeper intellectual background within which to situate my thoughts but to help position the data and my experiences within that very discourse. I would also like to thank my adviser, Ian Keen, whose insightful suggestions helped me to fashion this project in its early stages, my father, Gordon Elias, who has helpfully advised me many times already and Jimmy Weiner who provided comments on the final draft.

I wish to gratefully acknowledge the love and support of Catherine De Deckker, Glenn James, Bentley James, Melinda Hinkson and my family who have always been with me and encouraged me when I needed it most.

I wish to thank the Australian National University for their generous support in the form of two one-year scholarships and a field research grant of \$6000 and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies for the award of a one-year postgraduate scholarship that allowed me to complete writing up the thesis.

During the time I spent in the School of Archaeology and Anthropology I was fortunate to make friendships with a number of people many of which I hope will last long after I leave the ANU. From the School I would particularly like to thank Kathy Callen, David McGregor and Don Gardner for their support over the years that I have spent in Canberra and to former fellow students Brad Armstrong and Ian Bryson whose friendship and encouragement has always been greatly appreciated. Hilary Bambrick was kind enough to proofread much of the work at the last minute.

Sincere thanks also go to all of the past and present staff of the Central Land Council where I worked for many years and I would particularly like to mention David Ross, L. Bruce 'Tracker' Tilmouth, and my dear friend Forrest Holder for their support. I would also like to recognise the insights, assistance and friendship of those people with whom I worked with so closely in often very difficult circumstances - Valerie Martin Napaljarri, Anna Kenny, John Cook, Rosita Avery, Sarah Holcombe, Marisa Menin, Sue Williams, David Wilson, Julie-Ann Stoll, David Winstanley, Brendan Lewis, Rodger Barnes, Brett Mackie and Samantha Schooner, thank you all.

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance and support of the management and staff of Normandy NFM, Otter Gold and the Tanami Mine Joint Venture and especially I would like to thank Trevor Ireland and Stan Padgett for their interest and encouragement.

Finally, thanks to Paul Hynch for his insights and the generous provision of his meticulous historical research and references for the exploration history of the Tanami Desert.

## 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.

## Contents

TABLE OF FIGURES .....	IV
NOTES ON DATA .....	V
<b>CHAPTER ONE - GOLDEN DREAMS: WARLPIRI AND SOCIO-SPATIAL ECONOMICS.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Gold and Warlpiri in the Tanami Desert .....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>The context of place data .....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>The social history of place .....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>The temporal history of place: a diachronic approach.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Boundaries of people, places and dreams.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Chapter outlines.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<b>CHAPTER TWO - THE ELEMENTARY FORMULATION OF WARLPIRI LAND TENURE ..</b>	<b>19</b>
<i>The burial of place.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Radcliffe-Brown, the 'horde' and land tenure .....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>The decline of the 'horde' and the revival of place.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Stanner and the estate model .....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Meggitt, the 'community' model and Warlpiri place .....</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>The Warlpiri subsection system.....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>The shifting frame of Warlpiri land tenure .....</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>The work of Peterson and Munn .....</i>	<i>45</i>
<i>The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976.....</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Land claim models in the Tanami Desert.....</i>	<i>51</i>
<b>CHAPTER THREE - A DESERT OF HISTORY .....</b>	<b>62</b>
<i>Placement of the Tanami Desert .....</i>	<i>64</i>
<i>Prospectors, gold and place.....</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>Rupture of place.....</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>Wickham's Find - A myth of gold.....</i>	<i>71</i>
<i>The Granites gold rush.....</i>	<i>73</i>
<i>Warlpiri at Tanami and The Granites.....</i>	<i>74</i>
<i>The establishment of Yuendumu and Lajamanu (Hooker Creek).....</i>	<i>78</i>
<i>State policy, cultural difference and the re-emergence of place.....</i>	<i>81</i>



<b>CHAPTER FOUR - FROM SITE TO PLACE IN THE TANAMI DESERT.....</b>	<b>85</b>
<i>The study area.....</i>	86
THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE TANAMI DESERT.....	88
<i>Climate.....</i>	88
<i>Topography.....</i>	88
<i>Flora and fauna.....</i>	91
<i>Availability of water.....</i>	92
<i>Land use pattern.....</i>	96
SITE DATA OF THE TANAMI DESERT.....	99
<i>Estimated number of sites.....</i>	100
<i>Sites as physical features.....</i>	101
<i>Site names.....</i>	103
SITES AND JUKURRPA.....	106
<i>Localised jukurrpa.....</i>	109
<i>Travelling elemental jukurrpa.....</i>	110
<i>Travelling fauna jukurrpa.....</i>	111
<i>Travelling flora jukurrpa.....</i>	111
<i>Travelling human jukurrpa.....</i>	111
<i>Ceremonial complex jukurrpa.....</i>	112
<i>Gradations of site significance.....</i>	112
<i>Warlpiri gradation of place.....</i>	114
<i>Conclusion: site and place.....</i>	116
<b>CHAPTER FIVE - THE CULTURAL ORDER OF RIGHTS IN PLACE.....</b>	<b>118</b>
<i>The ownership of place.....</i>	120
<i>Claims to place over time.....</i>	122
THE WARLPIRI ORDER OF RIGHTS TO PLACE.....	125
<i>Patrilineal descent.....</i>	125
<i>The 'company' relationship.....</i>	128
<i>Matrifiliation and kurdungurlu.....</i>	130
<i>Knowledge of place.....</i>	133
<i>Succession.....</i>	135
RESIDENTIAL AND PERSONAL RIGHTS.....	137
<i>Place of conception.....</i>	138
<i>Place of birth.....</i>	142
<i>Place of burial.....</i>	144
<i>Place of initiation.....</i>	145
<i>New places.....</i>	146
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	147

<b>CHAPTER SIX - THE SOCIAL CLASSIFICATION OF PLACE .....</b>	<b>150</b>
THE MAPSHEET DATA .....	150
<i>Mapsheet One</i> .....	152
<i>Mapsheet Two</i> .....	154
<i>Mapsheet Three</i> .....	156
<i>Mapsheet Four</i> .....	158
<i>Mapsheet Five</i> .....	161
<i>Summary</i> .....	163
<i>Semimoiety affiliation of places</i> .....	167
<i>Land occupation</i> .....	167
<i>Radcliffe-Brown and the patrilineal estate</i> .....	168
<i>Boundaries and jukurrpa</i> .....	170
<i>Meggitt and the community model</i> .....	172
<i>The heartland and estate models</i> .....	175
<i>Individual agency and negotiation of rights in place</i> .....	177
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	178
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN - THE MEASUREMENT OF DREAMS .....</b>	<b>180</b>
<i>The land claim process</i> .....	182
<i>The mining provisions</i> .....	184
<i>Gold mining returns to the Tanami Desert</i> .....	186
<i>THE MEASUREMENT OF DREAMS</i> .....	188
<i>Mining and the creation of blocks</i> .....	189
<i>The site clearance process</i> .....	195
<i>The work area clearance</i> .....	200
<i>The mining model of place</i> .....	201
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	205
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT - PLACE AND THE DIVISION OF PEOPLE .....</b>	<b>207</b>
<i>Royalties and land tenure</i> .....	207
<i>A royalty distribution case study</i> .....	211
<i>The incorporation of Warlpiri patriline</i> .....	216
<i>The negotiation of group affiliation to place</i> .....	221
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	227
<b>CHAPTER NINE - THE DETONATION OF PLACE: A CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>229</b>
<b>APPENDIX .....</b>	<b>234</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>236</b>

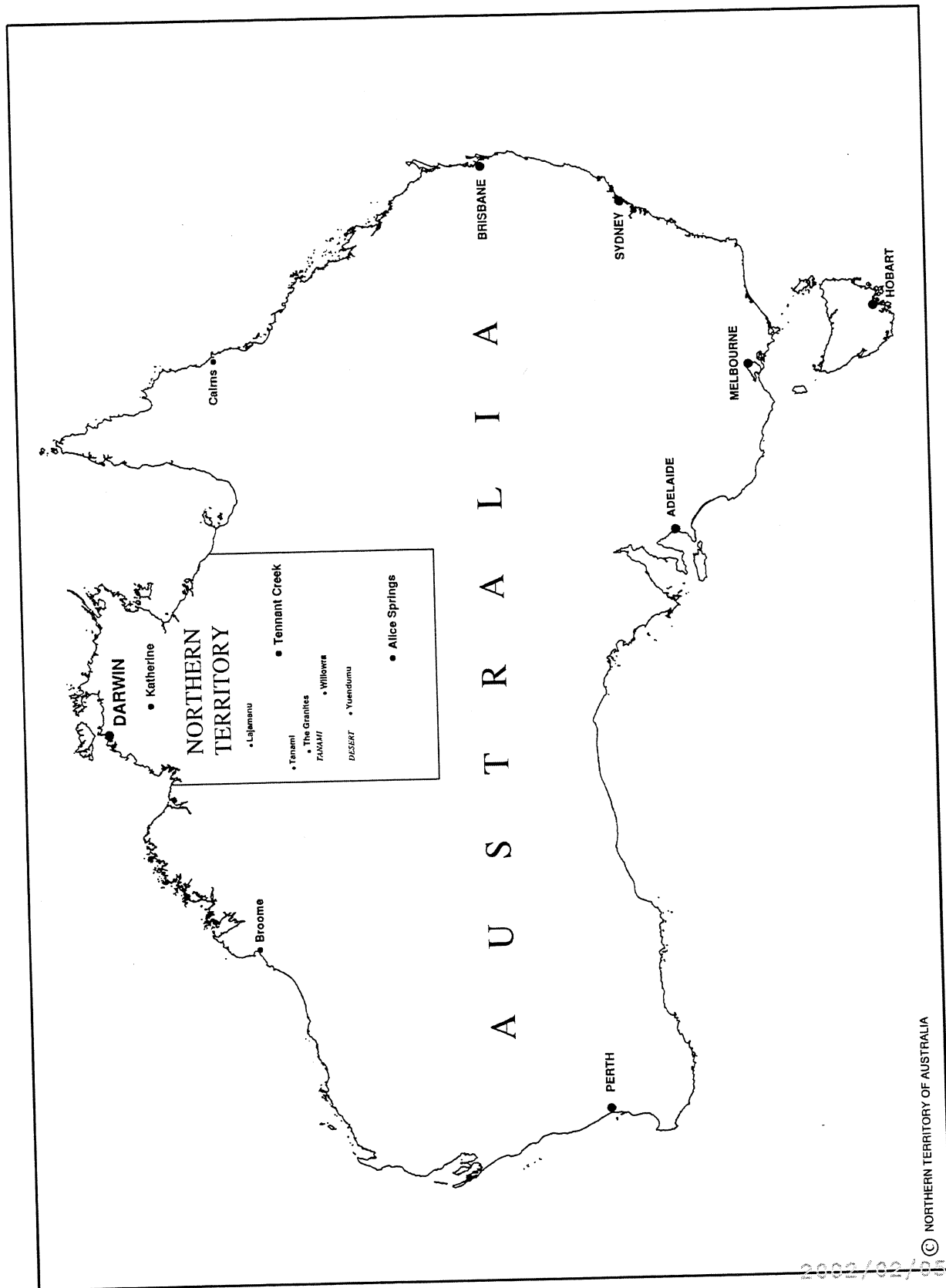
## *Table of Figures*

<i>Map of Australia indicating the location of the Tanami Desert</i> -----	vi
<i>Map of the Tanami Desert indicating major communities and mines</i> -----	vii
<i>Diagram 2.1 - The 'tribe' and constituent 'hordes' model of Radcliffe-Brown (1930)</i> -----	25
<i>Diagram 2.2 - Totemism and the 'local group' (Radcliffe-Brown 1930)</i> -----	26
<i>Map 2.1 - The community division of Warlpiri by Meggitt (1974)</i> -----	34
<i>Diagram 2.3 - Warlpiri subsection terms indicating sibling relationships</i> -----	39
<i>Diagram 2.4 - Warlpiri semimoieties or patricouples</i> -----	40
<i>Diagram 2.5 - Warlpiri patrimoieties, semimoieties and first choice marriages</i> -----	40
<i>Diagram 2.6 - Warlpiri semimoietiy terms indicating ideal first choice marriages</i> -----	41
<i>Map 2.2 - Claimed Areas and Land Trusts of the Tanami Desert</i> -----	52
<i>Map 4.1 - 1:250,000 Mapsheets covering study area</i> -----	87
<i>Table 4.1 - Water supplies of sites in the Tanami Desert</i> -----	95
<i>Table 4.2 - Sites of the Tanami Desert by feature</i> -----	103
<i>Table 4.3 - Categories of site names</i> -----	105
<i>Table 4.4 - Jukurrpa of the Tanami Desert classified by movement</i> -----	109
<i>Table 6.1 - Patrification of places on Mapsheet One (29 Places)</i> -----	153
<i>Diagram 6.1 - Distribution of places on Mapsheet One (29 Places)</i> -----	154
<i>Table 6.2 - Patrification of places on Mapsheet Two (32 Places)</i> -----	155
<i>Diagram 6.2 - Distribution of places on Mapsheet Two (32 Places)</i> -----	156
<i>Table 6.3 - Patrification of places on Mapsheet Three (49 Places)</i> -----	157
<i>Diagram 6.3 - Distribution of places on Mapsheet Three (49 Places)</i> -----	158
<i>Table 6.4 - Patrification of places on Mapsheet Four (87 Places)</i> -----	159
<i>Diagram 6.4 - Distribution of places on Mapsheet Four (87 Places)</i> -----	160
<i>Table 6.5 - Patrification of places on Mapsheet Five (60 Places)</i> -----	161
<i>Diagram 6.5 - Distribution of places on Mapsheet Five (60 Places)</i> -----	162
<i>Diagram 6.6 - Distribution of patrifilial clusters of places</i> -----	165
<i>Diagram 6.7 - Distribution of permanent water supplies and patrifilial clusters of places</i> -----	166
<i>Map 7.1 - Exploration Licences and Applications in the Tanami Desert 1996</i> -----	192
<i>Map 7.2 - Exploration Licences and Applications in the Tanami Desert 1998</i> -----	193
<i>Diagram 7.1 - Exploration licence and location of places - Year One</i> -----	194
<i>Diagram 7.2 - Exploration licence and location of places - Year Two</i> -----	194
<i>Diagram 7.3 - Exploration licence and location of places - Year One</i> -----	202
<i>Diagram 7.4 - Mining Lease and location of places - Year Five</i> -----	202
<i>Diagram 8.1 - Spatial relations of jukurrpa, place and a gold mine</i> -----	213
<i>Table 8.1 - The incorporation of Warlpiri patrines</i> -----	218

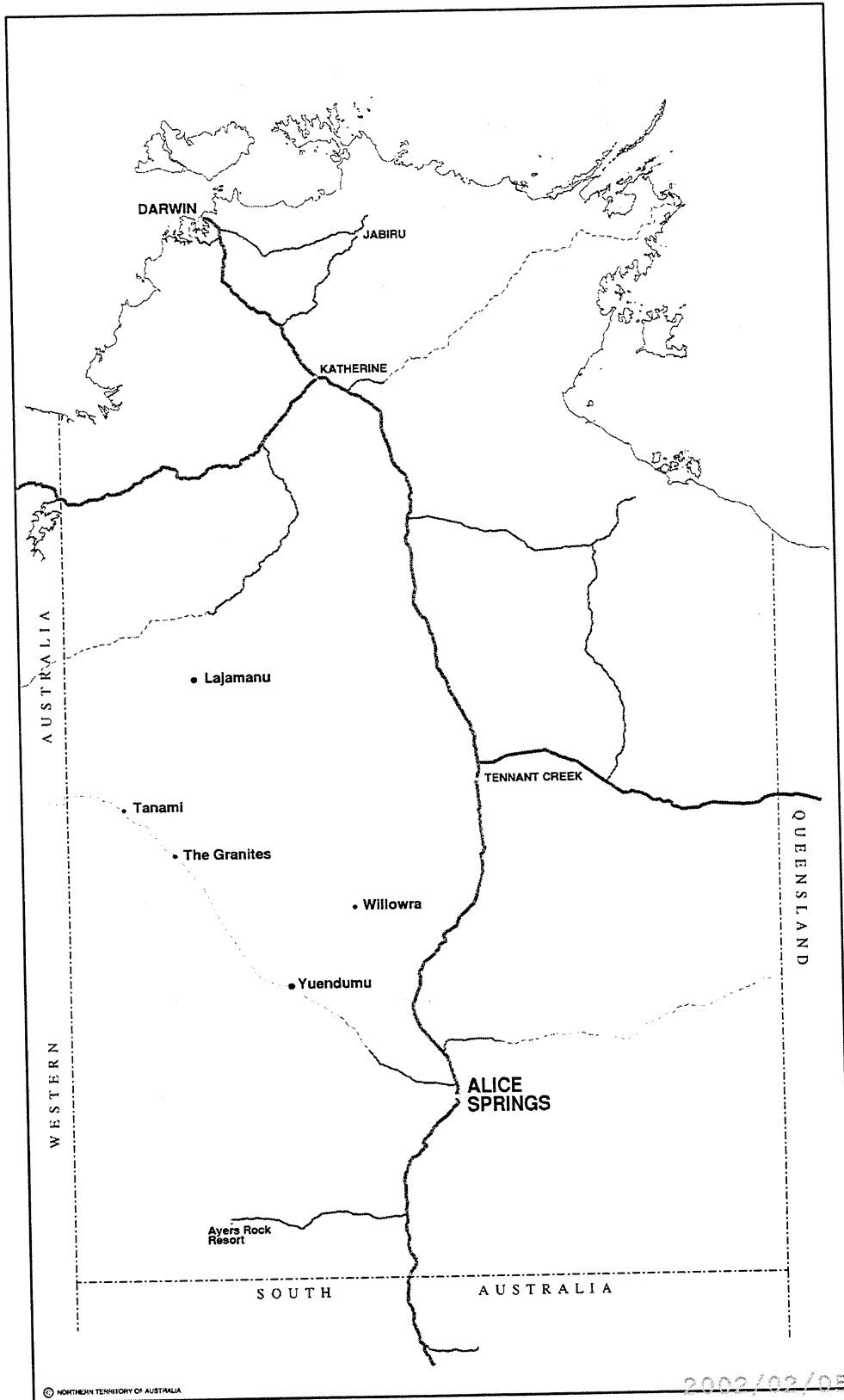
### *Notes on Data*

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



Map of the Tanami Desert indicating major communities and mines