CONTEMPORARY RITUAL PRACTICE IN AN ABORIGINAL SETTLEMENT:

THE WARLPIRI KURDIJI CEREMONY

Georgia Curran

School of Archaeology and Anthropology, Australian National University

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of a Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology,
Australian National University

June 2010
WARNING: The names of people who have recently died have been included in this thesis. This has been done solely so their contribution to the research can be recognised in the future. Please do not continue reading if any offence may be taken.
This thesis is dedicated to Jeannie Nungarrayi Egan. She worked so hard to help me understand the songs and ceremonies discussed in this thesis. It could not possibly have been written without her.
This thesis is comprised of only my original work except where indicated and
due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other materials used.

Georgia Curran
Acknowledgements

First and foremost I want to acknowledge all the people who lived in Yuendumu during my fieldwork for incorporating me into their world and sharing with me the rich experience of their daily lives. Certain people I want to particularly acknowledge for their contribution. Jeannie Nungarrayi Egan (who sadly passed away in October 2009) and her husband, Thomas Jangala Rice, were key collaborators in the project from which this thesis was written. Their hard work, patience and passion for teaching me about Warlpiri songs and ceremonies could not have been surpassed. Jangala’s knowledge of Warlpiri songs, their religious significance and the country with which they are associated, and Nungarrayi’s eagerness to write this knowledge down made for a truly remarkable team. As collaborators in the Warlpiri Songlines Project, Jangala and Nungarrayi, apart from their personal contributions, also helped to facilitate my work with other knowledgeable Warlpiri people and came to Canberra to continue research and present some of this information to an audience at ANU. Their hard work has certainly amounted to a substantial archive of Warlpiri songs and associated metadata which will be available for future generations. Other Warlpiri people that were key to this project included especially Coral Napangardi Gallagher and Ruth Napaljarri Oldfield. I became very close to both these women and therefore often relied on them to help me understand details of songs which I felt I could not pester other people with any more than I already had. Their patience in doing this was greatly appreciated, as was their willingness to include me in the events of their lives.
I also want to thank a large group of older women with whom I spent a great deal of time recording songs, talking about their associated stories, visiting the country, going hunting, camping out and attending business meetings. Their good nature in often hard conditions and continued passion for life despite the hardest of knocks will always be an inspiration. It is all these women in particular, through their impassioned inclusion of me in their daily life and business, and their ignoring of my over analytical and meaningless questions, who emphasised to me that it is doing and participating which is central to ceremony and Warlpiri life in general. I thank them all for looking after me: Maggie Napaljarri Ross, Mary Nangala Ross (dec.), Judy Nampijinpa Granites, Ruby Napurrurla Williams (dec.), Ruby Nakamarra Collins (dec.), Lucky Nampijinpa Langton, Nelly Nangala Wayne, Peggy Nampijinpa Brown, Pamela Nangala, Dora Napaljarri Kitson, Liddy Napanangka Walker, Long Maggie Nakamarra White, Lucy Nakamarra White, Biddy Napaljarri White, Ena Napaljarri Spencer, Ruth Napaljarri Oldfield, Lucy Napaljarri Kennedy (dec.), Coral Napangardi Gallagher, Freda Napaljarri, Lena Nungarrayi, Gracie Napangardi Johnson, Rosie Napangardi Johnson (dec.), Lynette Nampijinpa Granites, Yuni Nampijinpa Martin (dec.), Rosie Nangala Fleming, Lorraine Nungarrayi Granites, Emma Nungarrayi, Maisy Napurrurla, Bessie Nakamarra Sims, Daisy Nangala, Mavis Nampijinpa and Topsy Napaljarri.

I thank all the old men with whom I worked at various stages, for the respect they showed in teaching me about their songs and ceremonies: Harry Jakamarra Nelson, Tommy Jangala Watson, Warren Japanangka Williams, Gary Jakamarra White, Shorty Jangala Watson, Paddy Japaljarri Sims, Paddy

Special thanks must go to Nancy Oldfield who not only let me stay in her house for well over a year but also continues to accommodate me whenever I visit Yuendumu. She has been a wonderful friend from the first day I ever met her. Thanks to Perry, Ashley, Zyanne, Kara and all the many other people that lived with us at various stages during my fieldwork, in particular Leanne, Bess, Julie, Katherine, Janet and Isabelle. Nancy looked after me as part of her family making sure I always had company but was also sensitive enough to realise that occasionally I needed some space to work quietly. Thanks also to Barbara, Edgar, Mildred, Maxie, Glenda, Leon, Fay, Luke, Bianca, Leroy, Carlos, Lulu, Troydon and many others for being a secondary family next door who shared my day-to-day life with me. Thanks to Coral Gallagher, Maggie Ross, Marlette Ross, Louanna Williams, Kamen Cook, Ruth Oldfield, Ena Spencer, Lucy Kennedy (dec.), Erica Ross, Enid Gallagher, Reilly Oldfield, Lucy Dixon and Harry Dixon, for looking after me during countless business trips and for always including me in their day-to-day lives in Yuendumu such that I always had somewhere to go when I needed company. To many, many others in Yuendumu who I have not had a chance to list here thank you all for your friendship.

Thanks to all the mob at Mt Theo, particularly Suzie Lowe, Brett Badger and Talitha Lowe, for their support of our project and helping out by giving Jeannie
and Thomas an office which we worked in for many months. Thanks also to the Warlpiri Media mob, particularly Rita Cattoni, Susan Locke, Anna Cadden, Alex Jarvis and Simon Japangardi Fischer, for helping out with sound equipment when needed and assisting with the archiving of the recordings that were made. Thanks also to Frank and Wendy Baarda, Pam and Peter Malden, Gloria Morales, Bob Gosford, Sam McKell, Liam Campbell, Claire Pocock, Lee Williams and Karissa Preuss, as well as Anna Meltzer, Frances Claffey and Hugh Bland at the CLC. To Nicole Lee and Jonno Raveney – thank you both for your hospitality whenever I visited Alice Springs. There are countless other people across Central Australia who provided me with friendship and support over the last few years who I unfortunately have no room to mention specifically.

In Canberra, I especially want to acknowledge the outstanding support of Nicolas Peterson as my principal supervisor. Far exceeding any expectations I had of him, Nic initially got me involved in the Warlpiri Songlines Project, helped organise my fieldwork, visited me several times in Yuendumu, gave me ideas and had lengthy discussions, read numerous drafts of my thesis chapters, provided continual financial support and friendship. Thanks also to Ros Peterson for helping to look after Warlpiri visitors in Canberra. Another special thanks must go to my other supervisor Mary Laughren. Mary initially suggested that I apply to be a part of this project and has given me continued support ever since. She has shared with me her rich knowledge of Warlpiri culture and language through time spent together in Yuendumu and other places. Her intimate knowledge of details of Warlpiri culture and language has significantly
enhanced this thesis, in particular through the invaluable resource of her Warlpiri Dictionary and her insightful comments on my thesis drafts.

Thanks to Yasmine Musharbash for greeting me initially when I arrived in Yuendumu and introducing me to the wonderful Warlpiri world. She certainly made beginning fieldwork a less daunting task and introduced me to many people in Yuendumu who have since become close friends and helped me a great deal with my research. We have shared many fun times over the past few years as we have crossed paths in various places: Yuendumu, Alice Springs, Canberra and Sydney. Françoise Dussart also shared many fun times in Yuendumu with me and has too become a good friend. Many thanks for her support over the years and for her wise, well considered advice on matters both academic and personal.

Thanks to all the staff and students at ANU who have supported me in various ways during the writing-up phase of my research, in particular Liz Walters, Sue Fraser, Patrick Guinness, Francesca Merlan, Alan Rumsey, Melinda Hinkson, Andy Kipnis, Stephen Wild, Magne Knudson, Shio Segi, Sinwen Lau, Kathy Zhang, Yasir Alimi, Fraser Macdonald, Kirsty Gillespie, Anika Koenig, Nelia Hyndman-Rizik, Kevin Murphy and Paul Burke.

Lastly I would like to thank my family for their support over the last five years. My mother and father, Suzanne and Bertram Curran, for supporting me whenever they could both financially and practically and for visiting me in
Yuendumu, Canberra and Sydney. Thanks also to Suzanne for help with final corrections of my thesis. Thanks to Ben Palmer for visiting me in Yuendumu, for lengthy discussions on the phone and for always trying to make everything as easy as possible for me through his endless practical and emotional support. A special thanks to Lachlan who arrived towards the end of this journey but has nonetheless felt like such a huge part of it, and to Val and Will Palmer, Suzie and Bert Curran and Ben Palmer for help looking after him in the final days.
Abstract

Based on fieldwork undertaken in Yuendumu, Central Australia from 2005 to 2008, this thesis is an ethnography of the place of singing and ceremony in the contemporary Warlpiri world. Core to religious life, 'traditional' ceremonies and their associated songlines have always been an important aspect of Warlpiri identity as they link people to their kin, country and Dreamings. Over the last few decades there has been a decline in the learning contexts and opportunities for the performance of many of these ceremonies, such that today most ceremonies do not hold the same relevance. This consideration is set against the backdrop of recent historical and demographic changes consequent on living in large settlements, dependent on welfare payments and store bought food.

The features of Warlpiri songs and ceremonies are outlined as well as the contemporary contexts for the different genres of singing. It is shown how these songs and ceremonies reproduce people’s associations with kin, country and Dreamings through their organisation and performance. The Kurdiji ceremony, in which both men and women are involved throughout, is presented as a central case study. It is held several times each summer for the purposes of male initiation and is particularly interesting as it is still of vital importance for all generations of Warlpiri people. While the numbers of people who attend individual performances and the scale of these ceremonies is increasing, it is in a vulnerable situation as the central songline that is core to its performance, and which guides the sequence of events for the entire night of its duration, is only known by a small group of older men. Once a domain in which people learned
religious knowledge central to survival, *Kurdiji* as one of the few ceremonies still held, is now more vital than ever, as through its performance core aspects of Warlpiri identity are maintained, particularly for younger generations.
# Table of Contents

Table of Contents ........................................................................... xiii
List of Maps ...................................................................................... xv
List of Tables .................................................................................... xv
List of Figures ................................................................................... xv
Glossary ............................................................................................. xvi
Code to Linguistic Glossing .............................................................. xxiv
Preface ............................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1. Introduction ..................................................................... 4
  Previous research into Central Australian songs and ceremonies .... 14
  Adaptation, change and continuity ............................................. 24
  Performance theories ................................................................. 31
  Fieldwork ...................................................................................... 35
  Thesis outline .............................................................................. 40

Chapter 2. Historical and social context .......................................... 43
  Historical background ............................................................... 47
  Daily life 2005-2008 ................................................................ 59
  Continuity and change ............................................................... 68

Chapter 3. Songs, genres and performance contexts ....................... 74
  What are Warlpiri songs? ............................................................ 75
  Song language ........................................................................... 78
  Musical features ........................................................................ 84
  Dancing ....................................................................................... 87
  Painting up ................................................................................. 89

Genres of Warlpiri song ................................................................. 90
  Songs sung by men in large ceremonial contexts .................... 92
  Men’s songs ............................................................................. 98
  Women’s songs ....................................................................... 104

Conclusion ...................................................................................... 110

Chapter 4. Jukurrpa, country and ceremonial organisation ................ 112
  The Jukurrpa .............................................................................. 115
  Associations with country ....................................................... 121
  Ceremonial organization ......................................................... 128

Conclusion ...................................................................................... 133

Chapter 5. Kurdijji, Yuendumu, 2007 .............................................. 135
  Roles of kin .............................................................................. 136
  Getting ‘caught’ ....................................................................... 140
  Day 1: Marnakurrawarnu ....................................................... 145
  Day 2: Warawata ................................................................. 157
  Coming back from the bush ................................................... 161

Conclusion ...................................................................................... 163

Chapter 6. A symbolic journey ...................................................... 165
  The itinerary of the ancestral women ...................................... 171
  ‘Travelling songs’ ................................................................. 190
  ‘Business songs’ ................................................................. 206

Conclusion ...................................................................................... 207

Chapter 7. Themes surrounding initiation ...................................... 209
  Liminality ................................................................................. 210
List of Maps

Map 1. Central Australia p. xxv
Map 2. Yuendumu and surrounds p. xxvi
Map 3. An itinerary of places followed by the Karntakarn Jukurrpa p. xxvii

List of Tables

Table 1. Subsection terms and the relationships they define p. 61
Table 2. Patrimoieties and patricouples p. 125
Table 3. Co-initiate reference terms p. 137
Table 4. Dance movements in Kurdiji p. 169

List of Figures

Figure 1. Relationship between Ngarrga and Nyumpin language groups p. 49
Figure 2. Genealogy for Lloyd Jampijinpa and Kumunjayi Japangardi/Jampijinpa p. 144
Figure 3. The family of Eugene Japangardi p. 144
Figure 4. Ground plan for the daytime of Marnakurrawarnu p. 145
Figure 5. Ground plan for the period after sunset of Marnakurrawarnu p. 150
Figure 6. Ground plan for all-night part of Marnakurrawarnu p. 152
Figure 7. Seating arrangement prior to Warawata p. 158
Figure 8. Ground plan for Warawata p. 160
Glossary

All spelling, English glosses and translations presented in this thesis accord, where possible, with those in *The Warlpiri – English Encyclopaedic Dictionary* (Laughren et al. 2007). Alternate spellings used in the literature are only used for direct quotes. Special words used only in the songs are not given in this glossary as details of their meanings are discussed in the text and in Appendix 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>jaja</td>
<td>maternal grandmother (MM) or granduncle (MMB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jakamarra</td>
<td>male subsection name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jampijinpa</td>
<td>male subsection name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jangala</td>
<td>male subsection name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanangka</td>
<td>male subsection name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japangardi</td>
<td>male subsection name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japaljarri</td>
<td>male subsection name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jardiwanpa</td>
<td>name of a conflict resolution ceremony (see Chapter 3 for further details)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jarnamiljarnpa</td>
<td>generation moiety of speaker’s parents or children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jarrardili</td>
<td>elder brothers of an initiand, Northern Warlpiri word for <em>rdiliwarnu</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jarrawarnu</td>
<td>Australian Magpie-lark, Mudlark; *name for elder brothers of an initiand or the elder siblings of a deceased person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jilkaja</td>
<td>initiation travel, initiation travellers, ‘business mob’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jinpurrmanu</td>
<td>the undulated sound made by mothers, father’s sisters and mothers-in-law whilst they dance during a Kurdiji ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>juka</td>
<td>ritual guardian, initiates brother-in-law (ZH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jukana</td>
<td>(female) cross cousin (FZD, MBD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jukurrpa</td>
<td>Dreaming, dream (see Chapter 4 for a more detailed analysis of the meaning of this word)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jupurrurla</td>
<td>male subsection term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>juyurdu</td>
<td>powerful incantation, evil spell, murderer’s song</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jungarrayi</td>
<td>male subsection term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kajirri</td>
<td>a ceremony associated with initiation in northern Warlpiri regions (see Chapter 3 for more detail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kana</td>
<td>digging stick, yam stick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaninjarra</td>
<td>inside, down, underneath, downwards, way down in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kankarlu</td>
<td>high, up, upper, top, outer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kankarlu</td>
<td>religious festivals in the past held as part of initiatory rites (see Chapter 3 for more detail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kardiya</td>
<td>non-Aboriginal, European, white person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>karnta</td>
<td>woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>karntakurlangu</td>
<td>belonging to women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>karntamipa</td>
<td>exclusively for women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kirda</td>
<td>father, paternal uncle, father’s brother, father’s sister, paternal aunt (*used in this thesis mainly to refer to the people who have inherited ownership of Dreamings, country and ceremonies from their father’s side)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirrirdikirrawarnu</td>
<td>initiation ceremony, in the past held on the second night after Kurdiji (see chapter 3 and 4 for further details)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kumunjayi</td>
<td>no-name, taboo, name used for those whose name is the same or similar to that of someone who has recently deceased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kunapipi</td>
<td>ceremonial name for an initiatory rite held in Arnhem Land (described by Berndt 1951)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurakurra</td>
<td>name of a conflict resolution ceremony (see chapter 3 for further details)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurdiji</td>
<td>ceremonial name for initiatory rites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kurdungurlu</td>
<td>maternal kin, *used in the thesis mainly to refer to the people who inherit managerial rites to Dreamings, country and ceremonies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kurlarda</td>
<td>spear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kuyukirda</td>
<td>Dreaming of father’s mother and their patriline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kuyuwapirra</td>
<td>Dreaming of father’s father and their patriline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kuyuwurruru</td>
<td>Dreaming of mother’s mother and their patriline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kuyuyarriki</td>
<td>Dreaming of mother’s father and their patriline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lampanilyka</td>
<td>maternal uncle, maternal nephew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>larr-pakarni</td>
<td>men’s chanting for <em>Jardiwanpa</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malamala</td>
<td>sorry business, sorry meeting, bereavement ceremony, mourning rite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marnakurrawarnu</td>
<td>part of initiation ground, ceremonial name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>marrkarilyka</td>
<td>part of initiation ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>milarlpa</td>
<td>sprites, spirit people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nakamarra</td>
<td>female subsection term</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nangala female subsection term

Nampijinpa female subsection term

Napaljarri female subsection term

Napanangka female subsection term

Napangardi female subsection term

Napurrurla female subsection term

Ngaliya Southern Warlpiri

Ngajakula conflict resolution ceremony (see Chapter 3 for further details)

Ngapa Jukurrpa Rain Dreaming

Ngarlu Jukurrpa Honey/ Sugarbag Dreaming

ngarnarntarrka own generation moiety

ngarrmarilyka cross cousin

ngarrmirni cross cousin (directed at a specific circumstance)

ngunjungunju white ochre
ngurlu  seeds, grain

Nungarrayi  female subsection term

nyurnukurlangu  a type of yawulyu sung for healing (see Chapter 3 for further details)

pardinjalpa  plant species used to make a strong scented tea which heals colds

parnpa  increase ceremony, men’s corroboree, Dreaming rituals

pukurdi  pointed head dress

Purluwanti  name of conflict resolution ceremony, Barn owl (see Chapter 3 for further details)

purlapa  corroboree, dance, ritual performance, song, singing

purru-pakarni  clap (at crotch), beat time on lap, beat rhythm on lap

puru-nyungu  hidden away, concealed, used to refer to initiands when they are secluded in the bush

rdiliwarnu  senior brother, senior sister

wajamirnilyka  uncle-in-law (WMB), great-grandfather (MMF), great-grandchild (ZDDS)

wampana  Spectacled hare wallaby
wapirralyka  Spectacled Hare wallaby

Warawata  ceremony held directly prior to the circumcision of the initiates

Warlukurlangu  Fire Dreaming (literally: fire+belonging)

Warnayaka  Northern Warlpiri

warringiyi  paternal grandfather, paternal grand aunt, father’s father, father’s father’s brother, father’s father’s sister, grandchild (man’s son’s child), grandnephew (brother’s son’s son), grandniece (brother’s son’s daughter)

warungka  deaf, hard of hearing *senile, *mad, crazy, *ignorant

watikirlangu  belonging to men

watimipa  exclusively for men

wati-rirri-rirri  person in authority, person able to commence ceremonies, ceremonial boss, respected person, leader, boss, knowledgeable (especially for ceremonies) person

wirikirlangu  belonging to business people

wirntimi  dance, hover

Yalpari  particular group of Warlpiri people

yankirri  emu
yarlpurru  co-initiates, age mates, people of same age

yarlpurru-kurlangu  belonging to initiates

yarripiri  python species

yawulyu  women’s ritual, women’s ceremonies, women’s songs, women’s ritual performances, women’s ritual designs, women’s dancing

yilpinji  love songs, love charms, love magic

yinjakurrku  firestick, burning torch

yulpurru parents and great-grandparents of the initiates

yunparni  sing

yurlpa  red ochre

yurrampi  honey ant
Code to Linguistic Glossing

1SGsubj. = First person singular subject (suffixed to the subject), ‘I’
Erg. = Ergative case (suffixed to the subject of a transitive sentence), added to
the subject of a transitive sentence
Loc. = Locative case suffix (suffixed to a noun, often a place name in the song
texts), at, on, with, in
PAST = past tense (suffixed on a verb)
Pres. = Presentative form ‘Here it is’
redup. = reduplication, used when a word is repeated for emphasis

1 Words are also reduplicated to make them a plural. When this is the case I have glossed the
reduplication with a plural marker instead.
Map 1. Central Australia
Map 2. Yuendumu and surrounds