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WARLPIRI SOCIALITY.  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL  
DIMENSIONS OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN A CENTRAL  
AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL SETTLEMENT.

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of  
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Canberra

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Y. Musharbash', written over a dotted line.

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## PREFACE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The anthropologist Michael Young once said to me after a seminar I presented: "Your papers are like soap operas. Afterwards I wonder, did Clive end up married to Nangala, and what happened to Lillie?" One cannot be a hundred percent sure whether it was a compliment, but I took it as one in any case. In this thesis, I have focussed on the dramas of everyday life and striven to portray them in as spirited a way as I could muster. I have done so by heading the advice of three most inspiring anthropologists I was lucky enough to be taught by:

- "anthropology is about people"
- "anthropology is about ideas"
- "anthropology needs to be grounded in solid data"

This mantra (people, ideas, data) sustained and guided me through my fieldwork and the writing up stage. It led to my focus on the everyday, the people living it, the ideas encapsulated in and expressed through it, and the mechanics of it. These seemingly mundane matters, I believe, lie at the heart of anthropology. Kinship, ritual, exchange and so forth all can be formulated in most esoteric terms but ultimately, they need to be understood as grounded in and arising out of the everyday.

The Warlpiri 'everyday' I am writing about is very different from the everyday of previous decades, and, it can very safely be assumed, will be different again from everyday life of the future. The 'ethnographic present' is important to the thesis as a slice of life, and I have therefore used the past tense and the present tense interchangeably in the descriptive parts. The past tense flags that the period of fieldwork is over, and although not in the too distant past, things have already changed since. People have passed away, children have been born, marriages have been made since or deteriorated, government policies and incomes have changed, as indeed did the physical appearance of the setting: Yuendumu in Central Australia. New houses are being built, others have fallen into disuse, humpies occur less and less often and so on. The present tense, on the other hand, is used as a tool to convey the feel of immediacy that everyday life at Yuendumu has to it, and which is one of its most vital characteristics.

Fieldwork was conducted between 1998 and 2002 and was based on living in camps with Warlpiri people, who, luckily, insisted on my incessant participation in everything they themselves were involved in. My co-residents, friends and myself did not only experience the everyday I thus describe but it was created, lived and shaped by all of us, including myself. There is no use even trying to write myself out of the thesis. While I doubt that I caused major shifts and changes my presence and participation was certainly responsible for the crystallisation of disputes that otherwise may have lain dormant, for an increase in options for certain people through access to my resources, in particular my Toyota; and so forth.

It is to the people I lived with, who tolerated my presence and incessant questioning with good humour, who taught me so much, and who made fieldwork such an enjoyable experience and through their friendships turned Yuendumu into a true home for me, that my most heartfelt thank-yous go out to. In no particular order, these were: Kumunjayi Napaljarri Ross, Maggie Napaljarri Ross, Marlette Napurrurla Ross, Erica Napurrurla Ross, Keith Japangardi Williams, Greg Japangardi Williams, Dylan Japangardi Williams, Louanna Napangardi Williams, Alice Napurrurla Nelson, Shane Jakamarra Kennedy, C.K. Jakamarra Kennedy, Nancy Napurrurla Oldfield, Ruth Napaljarri Oldfield, Lucy Napaljarri Kennedy, Judy Napaljarri, Ena Napaljarri, Peggy Napurrurla, Jorna Napurrurla Nelson, Kumunjayi Napurrurla, Kumunjayi Napaljarri, Old Nangala, Lizzie Napurrurla Ross, Kara Napangardi Morton, Jack Jakamarra Ross, Kumunjayi Nakamarra Ross, Cecily Napanangka Granites, Raelene Napurrurla Kennedy, Riley Jupurrurla Kennedy, Ruby Nampijinpa Forrest, Uni Nampijinpa, Andrea Nungarrayi Martin, Samson Japaljarri Martin, Warren Japanangka Williams, Tommy Jangala Robertson, Ritchie Jampijinpa Robertson, Sera Napaljarri Ross, Regina Nakamarra Ross, Elaine Nakamarra Ross, Serita Nakamarra Ross, Tiffany Nakamarra Ross, Teresa Napurrurla Morton, Stephen Jupurrurla Morton, Glorine Nungarrayi Martin, Valerie Napaljarri Martin, Annarita Napurrurla Wilson, Maree Napurrurla Wilson, Annamarie Napangardi Penhall, Shimera Nangala Sampson, Nikita Nangala Sampson, Glenda Napaljarri Wayne, Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels, Molly Nampijinpa, Rosie Nangala Fleming, Kumunjayi Nangala, Kumunjayi Japanangka Granites, Kumunjayi Japanangka Granites, Watrunka Japanangka Dixon, Rickie Jakamarra Ross, Ina Napaljarri Namatjira, Simeon Jupurrurla Ross, Otto Jungarrayi Sims, Paddie Japaljarri Sims, Paddie Japaljarri Stewart, Bessie Nakamarra Sims, Jillie Nakamarra Spencer, Jeannie Nungarrayi Egan, Thomas Jangala Rice, Margarina Napanangka, Dadu Nungarrayi Gorey, Victor Jupurrurla Ross, Esau Jakamarra Ross, and many many others.

I would also like to thank Yuendumu Council and the Central Land Council for issuing the necessary permits and always being of assistance, and Yuendumu Women's Centre, Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Association, Warlpiri Media Association, Yuendumu Mining Co., Yuendumu Social Club and Yuendumu Clinic for being supportive, generous and helpful in many small and some larger emergencies. At Yuendumu and Alice Springs I would like to especially thank Megan Hoy, Tristan Ray, Leonnie and Ronnie Reinhardt, Sue and John Boffa, the Little Sisters, Frank and Wendy Baarda, Andrew Stojanowski (Yakajira), David Raftery, Liam Campbell, Tara Lackey and Jo Victoria for thousands of cups of tea, stimulating conversation, encouragement, and once in while, a quiet place to stay. Lastly here, I am very grateful to Robert Hoogenraad for making available to me an electronic copy of the manuscript for the Warlpiri dictionary. Next to the anthropological literature, the Warlpiri dictionary was the most used source in this thesis, as I constantly cross- and double-checked my own data with it. As it is unedited, unpaginated and comes in a number of files at this stage, I have not been able to reference it properly. Here, I would like to remark that all elaborations on Warlpiri words in the thesis were made in accordance with it, and that the glossary (Appendix) of Warlpiri words used in the thesis draws heavily upon it.

At the Australian National University I am equally indebted. Research was financed through an ANU PhD Scholarship, an ANU Tuition Scholarship, and a Faculty of Arts fieldwork grant. For the financial and administrative support, I am deeply grateful. I was a student with the School of Archaeology and Anthropology, where I would like to thank many people for their support and friendship. Among many others, I wish to express my sincere thanks go to my panel members, Professor Francesca Merlan and Dr Ian Keen for reading and discussing a number of draft chapters and always being there for me; to the administrative and technical support staff, especially Sue Fraser, Kathy Callen, Marian Robson, David McGregor and Paul Johns for fixing anything from a frozen computer screen to admin hassles quickly, efficiently and graciously; to A & A and wider ANU academic staff always supportive especially in regard to providing references, discussion and help: Dr Don Gardner, Dr Tim Rowse, Dr Andrew McWilliam, Dr Michael Young, Dr Melinda Hinkson, Dr Andrew Walker, Dr Chris Gregory, Dr Alan Rumsay, and Dr Howard Morphy. A special thank you must go to 'that CAEPR mob': to Professor Jon Altman for co-financing my fieldwork by employing me and being a fine boss indeed, to Diane Smith, Dr Julie Finlayson, Dr David Martin, Dr John Taylor, Dr Will Sanders and Dr Anne Daly for being very supportive both of my CAEPR work and in

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an ethnography of contemporary Warlpiri sociality that focuses on the everyday life in a women's camp (*jilimi*) at Yuendumu 300 kms northwest of Alice Springs.

As a result of sedentisation and institutionalisation in the 1940s, subsequent integration into the cash economy from 1969, with the full cash payment of social security benefits directly to individual Warlpiri, and the deinstitutionalisation of Yuendumu in 1970s through the introduction of an elected Council, Warlpiri life has undergone many changes. In respect of the family, promised marriage arrangements have virtually disappeared and marriage relationships are frequently unstable and short-lived until people reach middle age. Young mothers now often have children from a succession of husbands. Shifts in the constitution of the nuclear family have led to an increase in individuals' residential mobility and to women's camps, or *jilimi*, taking on increased significance. *Jilimi*, and their older female residents, have become a central social focus for young mothers, children, as well as to men currently unmarried. Life in the *jilimi* is intensely social not least since the great majority of people who pass through it are unemployed and live on social security payments. People's lives are almost entirely taken up with socialising, both in the *jilimi* or in visiting close relatives elsewhere in Yuendumu and in other communities. The intensity of this social life leads, among other things, to outbreaks of conflict from time to time and at others is transformed by participation in ceremonial life, particularly mourning ceremonies (sorry business).

My consideration of everyday life at Yuendumu begins with a formal analysis of the spatial organisation of Warlpiri residences, outlining the residential flux throughout Yuendumu's 'suburbs', ideas of private-public space within individual residences, and their gendered nature, as well as indicating the daily cycle of sociality within them. I then examine the nature of contemporary marriage arrangements to underline crucial changes as well as some continuities that are a feature of life today. Contemporary marriage arrangements are shown to simultaneously be the cause and the effect of an intensification of residential mobility and ensuing living situations for both children and adults. This leads to a discussion of the emergent centrality of *jilimi* within the contemporary settlement context as manifested in their increased number and size and complexity of residential composition. Singling out one



particular *jilimi* as the ethnographic centre of the thesis, I introduce its spatiality and some of its main residents as protagonists for the ensuing chapters. I then analyse the flow of people through the *jilimi*, categorising different types of residents, by their varied lengths and reasons for their stays, which underscores the extreme mobility that is a paramount feature of contemporary everyday life. A detailed analysis of sleeping arrangements is shown to be a sensitive index of the state of interpersonal relations within the *jilimi* and to provide insights into Warlpiri personhood. I then look at the activities that take place during the day outlining the movements of people in and out of the *jilimi* with an emphasis on those aspects to do with provisioning around the sharing of food and other resources. The contrast between the restedness of the night and intensified social engagement during the day is brought to the fore by examining the criss-crossing paths of social engagements during the day. The intensity of interaction, along with boredom, leads to frequent outbreaks of fighting which are considered in the context of a discussion of the various temporal dimensions within which everyday life happens. These incorporate both the mundane everyday and those occasions when social life is broadened out to encompass people from other kinship networks and communities. The thesis concludes with a reflection on the reasons for and impact of this intensified sociality on Warlpiri people's contemporary lives.

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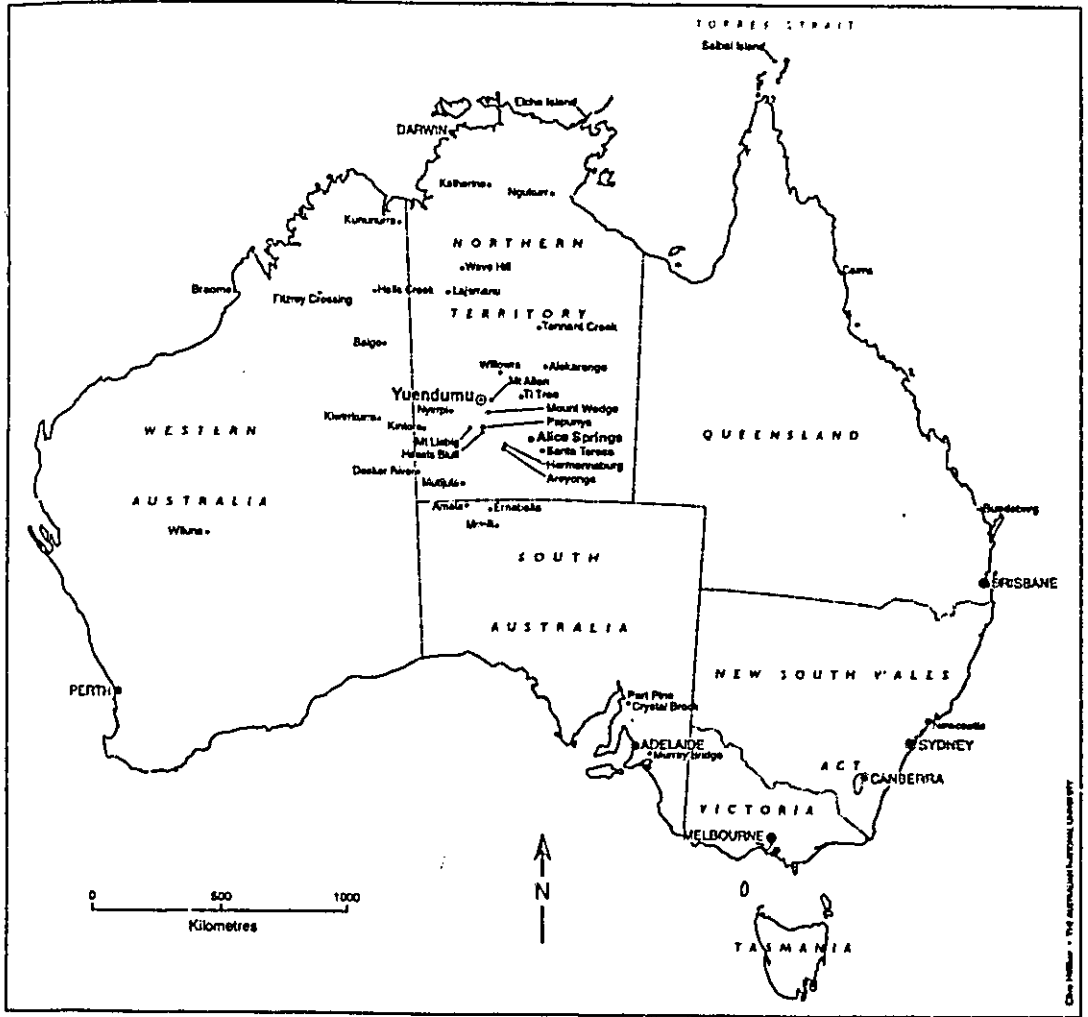


Figure 1: Research Location