

Introduction



NEW YEAR'S EVE 2005

I sat protectively encased by a group of women on the cement veranda in front of their house—our eyes looking outward to the streets. Our day was just beginning. The campfire smoldered nearby—it was no longer needed as it had already provided us with tea for the morning. The lethargy that would be brought on by the heat of the coming day hung close, but it had not yet hit. Cars cruised past. From the windows, people shouted to their families with a kind of urgency that for some reason did not seem to require any kind of immediate attention. A battered red sedan pulled up to the fence that surrounded the house's yard. Jupurrurla slowly emerged from the car, his wife Nangala following behind with a paper bag full of food. In his characteristically soft but assured manner, Jupurrurla informed us that two more boys had been “caught” last night and had been taken to a nearby bush location to be looked after by a group of senior men until ceremonies began. This news was fresh from his and Nangala's recent visit to the Big shop, one of Yuendumu's two grocery stores, which had opened only an hour earlier but to which the majority of the settlement's residents had already visited for breakfast supplies. Our group began to murmur among itself. Having only come to live in Yuendumu just over a month earlier, I was unsure of what this meant for the coming days.

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I was grateful to have such an encompassing group of women take me under their wing. As a twenty-three-year-old student having lived in and traveled independently to various cities and towns in my short adult life, I was used

to looking after myself. But in Yuendumu it was different. Here, one had to have family. Napaljarri was close to one of my PhD supervisors, Mary, and had been one of the first people I had met in Yuendumu. She gave me my skin name, Nungarrayi, which made her my *pimirdi* (father's sister)—and therefore directly responsible for my learning.¹ Napaljarri was also intimately involved with Yasmine, who was doing postdoctoral research in Yuendumu during this period. I did not know Yasmine before I arrived in Yuendumu, but she met me at the arch over the road when I first drove into the settlement and looked after me in those early days. Napaljarri knew that it was her responsibility to care for me—a duty she did not question due to her relationship with both Mary and Yasmine.

I had a Toyota, which allowed us to go out hunting every afternoon, get firewood when we needed it, and drive around Yuendumu whenever necessary. Unlike most other *kardiya* (non-Indigenous people) in Yuendumu, I had no job—other than to be an anthropologist. I was still figuring out what that meant in this new context. I had some money that I had received as a stipend from the university, but after my monthly car repayment, there wasn't much left, which allowed me to genuinely enter into relationships of equality. Demands were made of me, I obliged when I could, and I was looked after knowing I always had somewhere to go and people to be with. I was incorporated into the extended families of these women, the children and their mothers who spent their days with us, and the young men, who haphazardly visited whenever they needed something.

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By lunchtime, my Toyota was sinking under the weight of blankets, billycans, swags, drums of flour, and many other items that we would supposedly need over the following weeks. Napaljarri told me to go on the “short-cut road.” By afternoon, we would be in the nearby settlement of Wariyawariyi. If it rained, it would wash out the short-cut road, making it impassable, and we would have to drive along the “main road” instead. But there hadn't been any rain for a while.

We formed a convoy with several other vehicles. Three Napaljarri sisters traveled in my car. All were elderly women who had grown up walking around the bush between Wariyawariyi and Yuendumu—Anmatyerr and Warlpiri country. Napangardi came with us too. Over the next few years, I came to love Napangardi's gregarious personality and wit. One of the Napaljarri who I traveled with had once been a big businesswoman, and I had read about her in Françoise Dussart's ethnography of ritual life in

Yuendumu in the 1980s. Now she was *warungka* (mad/senile). Some of the family had not wanted her to come as she'd be too difficult to look after and would get confused. But we also couldn't leave her alone in Yuendumu. Another Napaljarri required a lot of physical help. She had suffered a stroke when she was only in her forties and had never received proper rehabilitation, so she had trouble walking and using one of her arms. I soon learned techniques for helping her in and out of my car, making her bed so she could easily get into it, and setting things up so that she could manage to look after herself.

We left in convoy with several other vehicles also packed to bursting, their roof racks swaying as we drove out through Yuendumu's north camp, the visible dust rising from our cars signaling to others that we had left. After driving eastward for about an hour and a half along a dirt track, we pulled up a short distance from a few makeshift shelters. To our immediate north was the settlement of Mt Allan, spoken of more often by Warlpiri people as Wariyiwariyi; a hill divided the settlement into two sides. I quickly picked up the twofold ego-centered directional language, by which one referred to the opposite side of the hill they were on as the "otherside." To the south of the settlement was a cleared area that had recently been graded in preparation for the upcoming ceremonies. The whole area was buzzing with people who had set up camps nearby. I gathered under the shade of a large tree with the group from Yuendumu, hiding from the intense afternoon desert heat typical at this time of year. Various people came over to talk to us, many of whom I already knew from Yuendumu, many of whom I was meeting for the first time.

In the late afternoon, we put our swags in a long line, forming the camp in which single women would sleep for the next few weeks. Our heads faced to the east. My swag was snugly wedged in the midst of this line, which protected me as a vulnerable outsider in this world. Another Napaljarri who had traveled in one of the other cars from Yuendumu slept next to me. She had known my other PhD supervisor, Nic, from when Nic had worked closely with her late husband in the 1970s. Other married couples and families who had come from Yuendumu camped in their own small groups a short distance away around their own fires. As the day and the year ended, the dry heat slowly became less intense. The setting sun in the distance provided a warm light that brought on an overwhelming feeling of communality. I felt relaxed and at home as I sat on my swag drinking a large pannikin of tea. People sat talking into the night in a language that I had yet to understand. Occasionally a car engine backfired. We heard the shouts of drunks in the distance as one year passed into the next.

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Over breakfast, the women in our camp chatted about needing *yurlpa* (red ochre). Napaljarri produced a hunk of white rock from her bag to emphasize that they still needed the shiny red version of that type of rock for painting designs on the women's chests while singing *yawulyu* (women's songs) later that day. There was a place where we could get it nearby. When I had finished my tea, several women gathered their crowbars and billycans, and we piled back into my Toyota. We spent an exhausting day in the hot sun. There weren't many trees around, and I could feel my skin burning—heat exhaustion began to overwhelm me. These elderly women kept at it, hacking away at the dry, hard earth with their crowbars. In the end, they had a few large chunks of reddish rock. Napaljarri rubbed some onto her hand and whispered to me that when it was ground into powder and mixed with oil, it would shine.

When we returned to our camp, we heard that two more boys had been “caught” during the day. Their mothers were sitting near an area that had recently been cleared for the upcoming ceremonies. They were crying out in an ongoing high-pitched wail, a look of helplessness and despair on their faces. In the late afternoon, as the sun sank closer toward the western horizon, a crowd clustered on the edge of the cleared business area, women sitting on the far western side and men on the far eastern side, around one hundred meters from each other. The women were rubbing oil and some of the crushed red ochre onto their arms and legs, and they encouraged me to do the same. Two teenage boys sat among the women, looking down in what appeared to be intense shame. Silence fell over the group as two men in their twenties walked solemnly over to the women and took the boys' hands, firmly leading them over to sit with the men. Their mothers, with whom they had been sitting, wailed helplessly, hysterically trying to grasp hold of their sons, though intentionally missing as they were escorted away. These women threw themselves against the red earth in despair and sat sobbing dramatically until after sunset. The rest of us went back to our camp. I collapsed into my swag, exhausted from the intensity of the day's events: the heat, the physical labor, and the emotion of the afternoon overcame me.

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After lunch, groups of women began to gather under a large shaded area that they had built on the western side of the business ground. The *yurlpa* we had collected the day before and the white version, called *ngunjungunju*,

which someone produced from their bag, were applied to women's chests in beautiful designs. As they painted one another, the women sang *yawulyu* associated with the same Dreamings as the designs. As these women were painted they became infused with a special quality—they shone with beauty as a magical feeling overcame the group.

On the eastern side of the business ground, the men were dancing. I could see Napangardi's brother, a Japangardi I knew from Yuendumu. He was painted with white ochre to which fluff was attached, and feathers protruded from his hair. Napangardi saw me looking at him and whispered, "That's goanna from Mt Theo—he's looking for Nungarrayi." She smiled mischievously but hushed me when I began to question further. Months later, reminding me of this dance, Napangardi told me the story of an anthropomorphized goanna, Japangardi, from Mt Theo, who was a "loverboy" for his mother-in-law, Nungarrayi, a taboo love match for Warlpiri people. This is who Japangardi had become in his dance.

Three separate groups of women had formed under the shade. Each group was singing different *yawulyu* and smaller groups of women were painting one another independently. The effect of these groups sitting in close proximity was that the singing turned in to a *mélange* of sound, and it was difficult to make out the individual songs. The women in these groups were thus leaning in close together so they could hear each other. This continued until sunset, and afterward I headed back to our camp to get something to eat and have a rest before the big ceremony, which was to be held that night. Again exhausted from the activities of the last few days, I lay down in my swag and fell, unknowingly into a deep sleep.

A few hours later, I awoke to the sound of a heavy beat and singing in the distance. I jumped up, alarmed that I had missed the start of the ceremony. No one was at our camp, so I hesitantly made my way over to the business ground. Aware that there were probably places I should and should not be but completely ignorant as to where these were, I desperately searched for someone I knew. Finally, a Napaljarri noticed me and called out to come and sit with her. She told me that her husband, Japangardi, had been looking for me, and she went to get him. The three of us went to the side of the business area—a place for both men and women to meet. Japangardi told me sternly that it was important that I record this ceremony. He seemed annoyed that I was late and had missed the beginning. I was aware that I had already used up a substantial amount of space on the SD cards I had for my audio recording device earlier in the day. As Japangardi matter-of-factly explained, they would be singing until sunrise, and it was very important that I record *all* the songs. I realized that it would not be possible to record another eight hours of singing while still adhering to the recording

quality of current international best practice. I contemplated how to explain this to Japangardi. As I began, his eyes glazed over, and he firmly told me that I would just have to do it somehow before disappearing back to sit with the male singers. I sat down with the women, deflated, and experimented with different settings on my recording machine to see which ones might allow more space to document these events. Eventually I set it to the poorest quality MP3 recording, realizing that this was the only way I could capture the spectacular singing from this all-night event. I imagined the criticism I would later receive for recording such a brilliant ceremonial performance at such low quality. Fortunately I had a long lead, so I could set up the microphone within the group of male singers while still operating the recording machine from my position on the edge of the group of women a few meters behind to the west. In the space between the singers and the larger group of women, a line of dancers formed in a long row—behind some of the women, several others held their waists lightly as they danced. I set the machine to record and monitored it throughout the night—dogs knocked it constantly, and men tripped on the lead as they regularly went for toilet breaks or yelled to their wives for tea or food. I was called upon many times to dance with the other Nungarrayi women. I followed their movements as best as I could, shuffling forward with arms slumped. Occasionally certain women would hold a firestick, of which several were circulating, before placing it back into the fire to keep it burning. On two occasions, a firestick was passed to me, and I danced at the front of the line to the delighted shouts and encouragement from women behind me. The night was long, and the men frequently yelled out for the time, calculating how many more hours until the sun would rise and bring an end to their all-night effort.

Six teenage boys sat crouched at the back of the business ground. They were the ones who had been “caught” in the days beforehand—two just that afternoon, two the night before we had left Yuendumu, and two in the days before that. For the duration of the night, the women focused their attention to the east, to the female dancers in front of them and to the group of male singers further to the east again. At several points I stole a glance back westward to see the spectacular vision of the boys as they stood up to stretch their legs, their bodies decorated in white fluff and glowing in the firelight bounded on their western side by a windbreak made of thick leaves. Throughout the night, their slightly older and much more physically mature brothers-in-law looked after them. The same men who had taken them from their mothers earlier in the afternoon in ritualized drama were looking after them during this long and arduous night. Dawn began to encroach. The eastern sky slowly became orange. Quite suddenly I was told to pack up, as we had to leave quickly. The microphone was swept up in a frenzy of blan-

kets and billycans, and we raced back to our camp. A dominant whirring sound came from behind us, and I dared not look back as the men finished up their business. At our camp, all the women buried their heads in their swags, clearly indicating to me that I was not to look over to the business ground. I lay down at first, making a point “not to look” at what was audibly a grand event happening nearby. It wasn’t long though before I was asleep.

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This book tells the story of the way I learned about Warlpiri ceremonies. My first time at *Kurdiji* I felt like I understood little of what was going on. At the time, I was overwhelmed in many ways by new faces, a new language, and new experiences. Over the following years, as I worked in Yuendumu recording and documenting many different genres of Warlpiri songs, my learning took a more formalized approach, involving an analytical aspect that simply did not exist in the performance contexts. During this time, Warlpiri people would often say to me in response to questions I had about *Kurdiji*, “You know, you were there, and you danced.” During these years, I went to many more *Kurdiji* in various communities—Yuendumu, Mt Allan, and Willowra—and came to know what to expect. This book presents my understanding of Warlpiri songs and ceremonial practices, including *Kurdiji*, which I have learned through a different process to most Warlpiri people. Similarities exist, however: learning cannot be rushed, and the only way to truly learn is through embodied participation.

When I lived in Yuendumu between 2005 and 2007, as a PhD student on the Warlpiri Songlines project under the guidance of Warlpiri elders and academics with longstanding connections to Warlpiri people, my job largely centered on recording songs and transcribing and translating them with the assistance of elders and literate Warlpiri people. On top of this, I would obtain as much exegesis as possible about these songs. In some ways, this is a sort of documentary project instigated by Warlpiri people keen on recording the rich detail encoded in songs—something that was no longer being learned by younger generations. This project was popular among Warlpiri people in Yuendumu, and I never had a shortage of people wishing to work with me. The research we were doing was regarded as important not only because it created a record of cultural heritage that Warlpiri people were deeply proud of but also because older people who had this knowledge were dying and younger generations were not learning these songs, at least not with the same depth of knowledge or detail as previous generations had learned them. Academically, however, I felt vulnerable. This type of work was in some ways regarded as an old-fashioned “salvage” project, obsessed

with “tradition” and steeped in past practices that hold little relevance in the contemporary world.

In this book, I take a performative approach to the study of songs and their place in ritual, concerning myself with the process of continuity and change to ceremonial life for the Warlpiri people of Yuendumu. My primary aim is to analyze these songs in their contemporary ritual context. I hope that this approach does not undermine the profound significance of the religious knowledge encoded in Warlpiri songs, often in fascinatingly esoteric ways. In 1984, the great scholar of Warlpiri language Ken Hale wrote of the intellectual joy that comes from understanding a Warlpiri song verse (1984: 259). Being privileged enough to have experienced this is a gift for which I am eternally thankful to the many Warlpiri people who have worked with me over the last fourteen years. I hope that this book demonstrates the profound intellectual substance of these songs and their complex systems of interrelated knowledge. While these songs may be sung by older generations, this book aims to illustrate their importance and vitality for all generations of Warlpiri people, even those who may have very little knowledge of the content of the songs.

OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

This book centers on understanding the changing contexts for Warlpiri songs and ceremonies. As many Indigenous Australian² musical practices are considered endangered, this book aims to illustrate that, despite this extreme fragility, songs and their associated ceremonies maintain social vitality and purpose in the contemporary Warlpiri world. Chapter 1 provides an overview of how to understand the continuity and change of the songs and ceremonial lives of Central Australian Aboriginal people and sets out the fieldwork practices that have underpinned the analyses presented in this book. Chapter 2 follows by providing a brief social history of the settlement of Yuendumu and the populations of Warlpiri people who live there. Chapter 3 sets forth the features of various genres of Warlpiri song and introduces the ways in which these songs link Warlpiri people to owned Dreamings and country and broader kinship networks. The central case study is presented in chapter 4, which provides a detailed description of a *Kurdiji* ceremony and highlights both the performance of ritualized actions and the context-specific emergent features of the ceremony; these contribute to its vitality in the contemporary Warlpiri world. Chapter 5 illustrates that, despite the socially imperative nature of contemporary ceremonial life in settlements like Yuendumu and its function in carrying forward many core cultural values, it ex-

ists in contexts of extreme vulnerability in the modern world. In this book's conclusion, I further consider the tensions that arise from this context.

NOTES

1. For a Warlpiri woman, paternal aunts (fathers' sisters, FZ) are responsible for teaching their nieces (brothers' daughters, BD) their Dreaming, country, and songs as ownership is inherited patrilineally.
2. Throughout this book, I use the term "Indigenous Australians" when referring to broader issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Australians. I use the term "Aboriginal" when referring to people from mainland Australia. Wherever possible, I specifically refer to the Warlpiri groups of Central Australia, as this is where the ethnography is based, and I do not wish to make generalizations about other Aboriginal groups.