

DESERT KNOWLEDGE CRC

Ngurra-kurlu: A way of working with Warlpiri people

Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu
(Steven Jampijinpa Patrick)

Miles Holmes

(Lance) Alan Box

Report
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... because if it wasn't for him we wouldn't have put this together. He taught me how to make sense of ngurra-kurlu and therefore myself. Jangala [Miles] and Jangala [Alan] and other kardiya [non-Aboriginal] too who helped build my confidence. My family who have supported me and listened and the young men who are now learning this and seeing the relevance. Tracks Inc who organise the Milpirri production; Tim Jampijinpa and David Japaljarri for being family for my people. The Lajamanu CEC and PAW Media and Communications for their ongoing support.

Miles and Alan, like many *kardiya* before them, were (and continue to be) 'grown up', that is educated, in Warlpiri culture, by patient and knowledgeable Warlpiri people. Miles and Alan wish to acknowledge the Warlpiri of Lajamanu (particularly the elders) for their trusting and generous sharing of important knowledge over the years. Those deserving of a special mention in relation to this paper are Billy Bunter Jampijinpa, Jikirrilypa (Jerry) Jangala, Martin Japanangka Johnson and of course Wanta (Steven) Jampijinpa.

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Pronouncing Ngurra-kurlu

Ngurra-kurlu contains one sound that is never used at the beginning of an English word, and therefore can be difficult to say; and two sounds that are not used in English at all. The *ng* sound is the same as in 'sing'; the *rr* sound is a rolled or trilled 'r'; and the *rl* sound is retro-flexed – that is, it is made by bending the tongue up and touching the top of the mouth while making a normal 'l' sound. The 'u' sound is the same as in 'put' and the 'a' makes the same sound as 'u' in 'cut'. For ease of pronunciation, the word can be divided into syllables as follows: ngu●rra - ku●rlu. The stress is pronounced on the first syllable of each word.

1. Introduction and rationale

The lead author of this paper is Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-kurlpurlurnu (Steven Jampijinpa Patrick), a Warlpiri man from the Northern Territory Aboriginal Community of Lajamanu. Warlpiri country includes parts of the central and northern Tanami Desert (Figure 1).

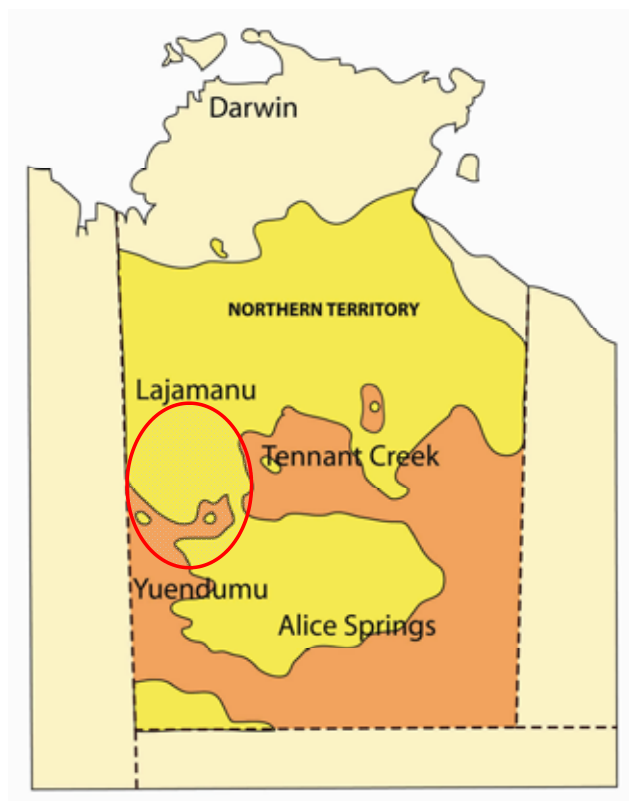


Figure 1: Approximate area of Warlpiri Country

Ngurra-kurlu is a representation of the five key elements of Warlpiri culture: Land (also called Country), Law, Language, Ceremony, and Skin (also called Kinship). It is a concept that highlights the primary relationships between these elements, while also creating an awareness of their deeper complexities. Understanding ngurra-kurlu has many benefits for Warlpiri and also for those who work with them. It can be thought of as:

- a template for the whole of Warlpiri culture
- an efficient pedagogy (way of teaching)
- a process for building identity and self esteem
- a way of looking after the health of people and the health of country
- a framework to create successful projects that are relevant to Warlpiri people.

While ngurra-kurlu is grounded in Warlpiri culture, there are similar structures in many Australian Aboriginal groups and therefore the ideas in this paper are likely to be applicable beyond Warlpiri Country.¹

¹ Other published examples of concepts in the same style as ngurra-kurlu include Bob Randall's film from Yankunytjatjara country called 'Kanyini' which means the 'principles of connectedness' (www.kanyini.com) and MK Turner's poster 'Everything Comes from the Land' from Arrernte country: <http://www.iad.edu.au/News/MK%20Turner%20poster%20MR%20doc.pdf>

Ngurra-kurlu is a new design.² However, it represents the same relationships that Warlpiri have been expressing with remarkable consistency over the years. There are published accounts, from any era since the Warlpiri were first encountered, where the same themes are repeated, albeit using different words and styles. The benefit of ngurra-kurlu is that it presents these themes in a clear and contemporary fashion and is directly authored by an authoritative Warlpiri person. As Wanta says: *‘It was an unseen thing and now it is a seen thing’*.

Some people will see this paper as ‘too cultural’ to be relevant in the contemporary world. It might even be said that culture is not relevant to young Aboriginal people. However, Wanta’s vision is not to return to the ‘old days’ but to find the ‘timeless’ principles of culture and apply them to contemporary community living. This is the origin of ngurra-kurlu; it was developed by Warlpiri people for the benefit of Warlpiri people, and Wanta has already used it successfully to motivate youth, to structure cultural events, and to influence school curriculum. Other Warlpiri people argue for the same outcomes based on practical success. For example, Gwen Brown, the Warlpiri chairperson of the successful Kurduju Law and Order Committee, states:

The success of these [law and order] initiatives occurs because we have been able to draw on the strength of our culture. Our message is simple. No fancy programs and no big expenditure items ... culturally based problem solving does not cost a lot. As we have said throughout this report, the Kardiya [non-Aboriginal person] way for addressing these issues does not work for us and it is time communities received assistance, encouragement and practical support in developing and implementing community-based initiatives.

We urge other remote area communities to do as we have done: include your culture in the search for answers to your problems. We ask that government supports this, by supporting the development of programs and initiatives which can accommodate our culture. (The Kurduju Committee 2001:1)

It is important to remember that ngurra-kurlu is only a template. It is not necessary (or possible) to understand all of its deeper complexities. The way to use ngurra-kurlu is as a tool to identify the key elements of culture and then *work with* local Aboriginal people and share expertise so as to find the application to community projects. As this paper will show, given the opportunity Warlpiri people produce solutions to problems which are highly innovative and would probably never have occurred to a non-Warlpiri person. These novel solutions stem from the desire of many Warlpiri people to live in harmony with the mainstream but in a way that preserves the core values of Warlpiri identity.

This paper will be of interest to those wanting an introduction to the main themes of Warlpiri culture, whether or not they are working directly with Warlpiri people. It will also be of interest to practitioners working with the Warlpiri. For example, environmental managers will be interested in how ngurra-kurlu is a template for Warlpiri approaches to sustaining country, while educators will be interested in the ways that ngurra-kurlu can link literacy and numeracy to Warlpiri culture³ and therefore provide a more appealing curriculum for Warlpiri youth.

The remainder of the introduction describes ngurra-kurlu and how we came to write this paper. Section 2 examines some of the benefits of ngurra-kurlu in more detail. Section 3 defines each of the five elements and then gives some examples of how ngurra-kurlu operates in relation to people, while Section 4 describes ngurra-kurlu in relation to country.

² While it is known to some elders and young people, the term ‘ngurra-kurlu’ is not commonly used by Warlpiri speakers. It has been popularised by Wanta and his father Jerry Jangala as a reference to the five elements (and the relationships between them), which are widely known to all Warlpiri people.

³ For example, links can be made in education between mathematics and Skin, between language and Country, and between vocational training and the Law.

1.1 What is Ngurra-kurlu?

In the following pictures and text (translated from Warlpiri) Wanta introduces the ngurra-kurlu design. Each circle represents a key element of Warlpiri culture: Land, Law, Language, Ceremony, and Skin. The information is extracted from a documentary made by Warlpiri filmmakers with the assistance of PAW Media.⁴ The five elements of ngurra-kurlu are highlighted in **bold**. Wanta uses the word *yapa* to refer to Warlpiri people or any Aboriginal people and *kardiya* to refer to non-Aboriginal people.

Table 1: Introducing Ngurra-kurlu



*This one is Ngurra, home. Walya – the **Land**.*



*Top circle: And this other one is Kuruwarri – the **Law**.*



*Left circle: This one is juju/manyuwana (like purlapa, Jardiwarnpa). Whitefellas call it **ceremony**, performance dance, all that.*



*Right circle: This one is jaru – language that the people from this land speak. Jaru is the Warlpiri word for **language**.*

⁴ The original video was sent to Melbourne as Wanta's acceptance speech for an Innovative Curriculum Award he received in relation to the use of ngurra-kurlu in education. It is available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZq7AduGrc>.



*Bottom circle: This one is Warlalja-yapa, family. Families that are in their skin groups. Yarriki [N/Japaljarri + N/Jungarrayi] skin group), Wurruru [Na/Jupurrurla + N/Jakamarra skin group], Kirda [N/Japanangka + N/Japangardi skin group]. Whitefellas call it **skin** name.*

All these things govern yapa lives; this is ngurra-kurlu.

Everyone in their own way in Australia, in this land, has this. Everybody.

These five things. Yapa have all of these.



Lines joining circles: All of these are connected to each other.

*If the **skin** name is not strong, if we don't use it according to our marriage system law, marrying to the wrong skin group, these others will not be strong as well.*

*Even our **language**; if it is not strong the other four principles will not function well too.*

*This one too, the **law**; if we become lawless, both the **country** and yapa will become sick.*

*And this one as well, **ceremony**; if we don't respect our ceremonies and the rituals that belong to skin groups we will become sick and the country will become sick as well.*

*If we disrespect the land we will forget what the **land** is trying to say.*

We will disappear as Warlpiri people.

All images © Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-kurlpurlurnu (Steven Jampijinpa Patrick).

1.2 Method

Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-kurlpurlurnu (Steven Jampijinpa Patrick) has spent decades thinking about ngurra-kurlu, talking about it with his elders – in particular his father, Jerry Jangala. He is constantly searching to find the relevance of ngurra-kurlu to modern community living, his ideas growing as he himself moves through the levels of Warlpiri learning. This journey led Wanta to being the lead author of this paper.

This paper is a collaboration between Wanta, Miles and Alan, who together have attempted to render an orally and visually transmitted Warlpiri philosophy into the medium of a written English language paper. To do this the authors have used as much of Wanta's own words as possible, recognising that his turn of phrase is uniquely Warlpiri, and his words carry the emotion that is inherent in ngurra-kurlu. Quotes have been taken from video, recorded conversations, speeches, or from jotted down notes. In some cases we authors would all discuss how to render a particular word or concept into English before turning on the tape and asking Wanta to summarise. Using his skill with metaphor, the result was often more powerful than Miles's and Alan's carefully constructed English. Throughout the paper direct quotes from Wanta are *italicised* and have been edited as sparingly as possible during the editing process.

Apart from direct quotes, Wanta also determined much of the remaining text. In some cases he dictated English sentences while we all sat around the laptop during editing sessions. In other cases it was a more organic process. For example, often the final English terms are the result of years' worth of conversations in which the authors talked together about how to render Warlpiri philosophy into English language. Hence this paper is a cross-cultural work, a combined attempt to find English counterparts to Warlpiri philosophy.

An important part of the method is the way in which this paper came to be published. The authors wished to see ngurra-kurlu in print so that Wanta's vision and work could be formally acknowledged and become available to practitioners working in the Aboriginal industries. Desert Knowledge CRC (DKCRC) and CSIRO (which is the lead partner in DKCRC's Livelihoods inLand™ project) offered to facilitate the publication and dissemination of this work. Partnering with DKCRC gave the authors the ability to distribute this Warlpiri story to a wide audience in a professional fashion. In addition to some technical and financial support, considerable effort was also invested by DKCRC and CSIRO to ensure that Warlpiri cultural knowledge and the authors' intellectual property would be protected.

2. The benefits of ngurra-kurlu

This section outlines the applications and benefits of ngurra-kurlu. The central theme of this paper is that ngurra-kurlu, when it is supported, promotes the healthy functioning of Warlpiri people and Warlpiri country. This outcome is aligned with the multitude of mainstream programs which, in one way or another, seek to decrease Aboriginal disadvantage. Ngurra-kurlu can therefore be used by practitioners and/or Warlpiri to increase the success of such community projects. There are three main ways in which this can be accomplished:

- Ngurra-kurlu is a template or catalogue that highlights the primary elements of Warlpiri culture. It can be used for program design or for teaching.

- Ngurra-kurlu is the feeling of a ‘common sense of belonging’. Engaging with this feeling promotes a strong Warlpiri identity and can increase levels of participation in community programs.
- Ngurra-kurlu is *purami*⁵, the path to follow to develop a contemporary and vibrant Warlpiri culture living alongside the mainstream.

2.1 Ngurra-kurlu as a Library Catalogue

One of the applications of ngurra-kurlu is to present the complexities of Warlpiri culture in a simple and clear way. Wanta compares Warlpiri culture to all of the books in a library. He compares the five elements of ngurra-kurlu to the subject headings in the library catalogue. In Wanta’s words:

I’ve been thinking about how to present it [Warlpiri culture], instead of just going, do this, do that one, learn this one, learn that one. Like, some sort of direction.

Whitefellas have a lot of books and stories in those libraries and what we are doing here [with ngurra-kurlu] is putting them all in order – all those books in the library. In the library you go in and you want to look up dogs – you know you have to go for the ‘D’. Something directs you there. So that is what we are doing, we like to see people learn better by teaching them in sequence.

We know all these things [about culture] but when it comes to teaching you might start somewhere in the middle if we don’t have any headings or sections to start under. So that is what we are doing here when we are teaching ngurra-kurlu. Looking, for instance, at that skin name. It is always better to start at Warringiyi [paternal grandfather⁶] and work your way down to Jaja [maternal grandmother⁷].

Ngurra-kurlu is those five categories. You can start talking about something first and then connect it with the other four. It is what you call in English a template. It helps us understand it [Warlpiri culture] – to learn it and to teach it.

By definition a template is a representation of the whole, and as such ngurra-kurlu is just the starting point from which someone can further their knowledge. In this way ngurra-kurlu is a pathway to deep learning. Wanta says that:

When we want to learn something we have to understand the underneath parts, the deep knowledge. ‘Pangirninjaku nganju’: ‘Nganju’ means root and ‘pangirninjaku’ is digging up. It means that there are many layers to knowledge and you have to keep digging them up to find out – deep learning.

2.2 Home – A common sense of belonging

The previous section showed how ngurra-kurlu is a template, but Wanta has been relentless in stressing that, for the Warlpiri, ngurra-kurlu is as much about ‘feelings’ as it is about ‘structures’. We attempt to convey these feelings by a translation of the phrase ‘ngurra-kurlu’.

⁵ *Purami* is a verb meaning ‘to follow’; it can also mean ‘to take after’ or ‘be like’.

⁶ *Warringiyi* is also the term used for the speaker’s paternal grandaunt, 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), or grandniece (brother’s son’s daughter).

⁷ *Jaja* is the term used for the speaker’s maternal grandmother and the maternal grandmother’s sisters and brothers.

The Warlpiri word *ngurra* can mean ‘camp’, ‘home’, or ‘residence’. *Kurlu* is a suffix meaning ‘with’, ‘having’, or ‘about’. *Ngurra-kurlu* is therefore translated as ‘about home’, ‘with home’, and ‘home within’.

In talking around this topic, trying to find the right translation, Wanta often used the English words ‘relationships’, ‘engagement’, and ‘belonging’. The authors eventually settled on the rather dry definition that *ngurra-kurlu* means ‘a common sense of belonging’. However, we were still not satisfied that we had ‘got it’. Then followed a memorable moment in cross-cultural communication as Wanta cited a metaphor from a 1980s Australian rock song. The song is called ‘Down Under’ from the band Men at Work.

Buying bread from a man in Brussels
He was six foot four and full of muscles
I said, ‘Do you speak-a my language?’
He just smiled and gave me a vegemite sandwich
And he said, ‘I come from a land down under’

For Wanta, the moment when one man passes the vegemite sandwich to the other is an example of the feeling of *ngurra-kurlu*. The men are travellers in a foreign country and at this point there is an instant realisation, with perhaps relief and excitement, that they are both Australian, that they share a common sense of belonging, that they are not strangers.

Engaging with this common sense of belonging, that is with *ngurra-kurlu*, has motivational benefits. It is now common knowledge, if not common practice, that many Aboriginal people are more willing to participate in projects if they are locally run and culturally relevant. This fact is supported by a significant body of literature, as shown in the following extract from the recent Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse:⁸

There is now sufficient evidence to show that well resourced programs that are owned and run by the community are more successful than generic, short term, and sometimes inflexible programs imposed on communities (e.g. Commonwealth Grants Commission 2001, Commonwealth Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2001, and House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2004) ... This is because community-based and community-owned initiatives inherently respond to the problems faced by the community and are culturally appropriate to that community. (Wild and Anderson 2007:55)

Wanta has proven this fact on a grass roots level with local events such as Milpirri, which caused, among other things, soaring school attendance. Milpirri is a Warlpiri cultural event, now in its third year, which is run in conjunction with the Lajamanu School and Tracks Dance Inc. It seeks to reinterpret traditional Warlpiri stories in the context of a modern celebration and modern community living.⁹ Milpirri precipitated a host of educational, employment, health and wellbeing outcomes. In 2006 Alan and Miles asked Wanta why he thought the Milpirri event was so successful. Wanta responded: ‘*People tasted it, they liked that taste in their mouth and they*

8 The Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse (Wild and Anderson 2007) is the most recent comprehensive report into social issues on Aboriginal communities. It proposes nine Rules of Engagement required for success in any community project; six of those rules state that the programs should be based on local values with local control. The report suggests that if these rules were adopted it would represent a ‘radical change’ to current practices (p. 50).

9 http://www.tracksdance.com.au/html/work_2007_milpirri2.html

came back for more'. The taste Wanta refers to is ngurra-kurlu. In 'coming back for more' they are enjoying the feeling of connecting or reconnecting with their culture, with a common sense of belonging. Wanta also said that in Milpirri people enjoyed *'Feeling human again and not a shadow, that is, feeling like we have a voice and are not just a background people'*.

2.3 Purami – following the way

When Wanta talks about ngurra-kurlu, the benefit he is most concerned with is how it can promote the healthy functioning of Warlpiri people and country.

Importantly, promoting ngurra-kurlu does not mean a return to historical times. For Wanta it is about maintaining core Warlpiri values while living alongside¹⁰ the mainstream Australian culture.

I've been looking at ngurra-kurlu. I saw that it is something that is beautiful, that is going to be lost. Then looking at it slowly – talking about it – I realised maybe it is not just something that can be done in the bush, it can be done here [in Lajamanu] too.

For Wanta there are principles in ngurra-kurlu that can provide direction and support whether people are living in the bush or in the community.

Ngurra-kurlu kept the country going and it kept people together. Same thing I see today. I'm sure it can keep the community together and not divided. I remember telling you a story about community. My lecturer asked for a definition of community and everyone was writing a couple of sentences about it and giving it in, and I thought I was the laziest one writing just a few words. But I think I was right, ngurra-kurlu is what binds people together into a community.

Same thing with keeping country going. I'm sure that it can keep the country going because that is where they first learnt it, they got it, I guess. Old people were using all that then.

For Wanta, ngurra-kurlu provides an inherent structure, a way to live that is harmonious and beneficial. He has called this *purami*, 'the way'. Wanta compares *purami* to the role of traffic lights in a city:

Same thing when I looked at the city, when I went there for the first time. I thought, why does everyone have to stop for the red light? Why can't we just keep on driving? But you can see – everyone thinks about the right way of driving a car, otherwise – poof! Everyone needs to understand the colour and what that is telling them. You know that's one of the things that captured me when I first went to the city: this light is telling you when to go and when not to go.

You see, ngurra-kurlu [is like the lights] – it brings people together so that they can understand each other, and like the motor cars and streets everywhere they don't pile up. Sometimes they do, you know, kardiya [non-Aboriginal people] respond to that [pile up] really quick and yapa [Warlpiri people] have ways to do that too.

Wanta is referring to the fact that when there are metaphorical car crashes, such as social disputes, crimes, or accidents, Warlpiri culture has specific mechanisms for administering justice or mediating disputes.

¹⁰ The word 'alongside' was chosen after some discussion. Wanta referred to the idea of a partnership with the mainstream as being like two people walking down a track side by side, leaving two sets of footprints. He referred to the *Jardiwarnpa* ceremony story where the *Wampana* (Hare Wallaby) and the *Yankirri* (Emu) had a common direction and shared obligations. They respected and cared for each other.

The reality of life in Lajamanu is that Warlpiri culture is being overwhelmed by a pervasive and powerful Euro-Australian culture. Wanta argues that ngurra-kurlu can provide some stability and guidance in this challenging time. For example, he has identified that most Warlpiri feel trapped between two cultures. Young people particularly feel that engagement with the mainstream organisations that run Lajamanu requires too great a departure from their Warlpiri life, while on the other hand the culture of their elders seems increasingly irrelevant. The result is that many people are in a kind of social no-man's land where the values of neither culture are learned. Grappling with this choice causes confusion, apathy, and violence. In some cases youth now know so little of their own culture that they do not even have the luxury of choosing which culture they want to follow. Wanta also states that older *yapa* now have little confidence in their own ideas and therefore are afraid to speak (see also Folds 2001).

Wanta's goal with ngurra-kurlu is to address this fundamental issue. The message is deceptively simple: Warlpiri law and culture once provided people with stability, self esteem and direction. It can still do this if it is reinterpreted in the context of community living. Said another way, Wanta is promoting the message that it is 'OK to be Warlpiri'. He states that by maintaining a strong identity Warlpiri can have good lives and opportunities to engage with the rest of the world, without being smothered by it.

Wanta's philosophy is similar to that of other Aboriginal leaders, such as Arrernte elder Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, who said:

In times where land and culture appear to have forsaken us, what is it that we need to establish more than anything? I put it to you that if we are to accept change then it must not come at the expense of our identity. (Kunoth-Monks 2007:3)

A similar sentiment was expressed by one of Australia's foremost anthropologists, WEH Stanner in 1968 (reflecting on the previous 30 years). Stanner suggests that Australians have failed to grasp that:

... on the evidence the aborigines [sic] have always been looking for two things. A decent union of their lives with ours, but on terms that let them preserve their own identity, not their inclusion willy nilly in our scheme of things and a fake identity, but development within a new way of life that has the imprint of their ideas. (Stanner 1968:28)

Programs such as the Milpirri cultural event run by Wanta and Tracks Dance Inc are already doing the work of finding the relevance of Warlpiri culture to modern community living. The following illustration is from Wanta's Milpirri speech at the 2006 Garma festival.

The third story [of Milpirri 2005] was about wardapi, the goanna. This set of dances told the story of a young man's initiation ceremony. During the ceremony, mothers exhort their sons to be guided along the straight track, following in the footsteps of those who are proven to be wise. The sons are not to be distracted and deceived by goanna holes, which seem to promise good tucker, but actually may hide a snake, a thing of great danger. Many aspects of mainstream culture, such as grog, greed for possessions and money and such like, have tricked our people and gotten them caught up in lifestyles that are leading to tragic death. Our traditional story lights up the path that will lead us back to health as a nation, and we call this 'purami'. (Pawu-kurlpurlurnu [Steven Jampijinpa Patrick] August 2006)

2.4 Summary – the benefits and application of ngurra-kurlu

The first benefit of ngurra-kurlu is its ability to be a template, a clear and concise model of the complexities of Warlpiri culture. For Warlpiri, the template helps focus attention when teaching or learning Warlpiri culture while also providing a pathway for advanced learning. For practitioners seeking to develop culturally relevant programs, ngurra-kurlu ensures that they recognise the key elements that need to be discussed and incorporated in program design.

Secondly, ngurra-kurlu is the feeling of a common sense of belonging. According to Wanta, programs that incorporate this ‘feeling’ as part of the design process are inherently more attractive to Warlpiri people because they ‘look’, ‘feel’, and even ‘taste’ Warlpiri.

Finally, ngurra-kurlu is *purami*, ‘the path’ or ‘the way’. For Warlpiri, and young people in particular, ngurra-kurlu highlights the essential features of being Warlpiri against the deafening background noise of mainstream Australian culture. As Wanta says: *‘This way we can turn the volume down to hear ourselves.’*

For practitioners, following the path of ngurra-kurlu can ensure that community programs do not inadvertently create circumstances whereby Aboriginal participation comes at the expense of Aboriginal identity. This approach is recognised as being able to create more successful community programs (The Kurduju Committee 2001; Wild and Anderson 2007).

3. Defining the elements of ngurra-kurlu



In this section we define the parts of ngurra-kurlu and explore how they are interrelated. It is important to note that the relationships between the elements are more important than the elements themselves, a concept that will be repeatedly explored.

When we started to think about writing this paper, it seemed a simple process (to Miles and Alan) to write a section about each of the elements of ngurra-kurlu (Land, Law, Language,

Ceremony, and Skin) and then piece them together to become the whole story. The initial questions that guided Miles and Alan were like this: ‘Ok Jampijinpa [Wanta], define Skin’. Wanta would then talk about ‘Skin’ in terms of Land, Law, Language, and Ceremony. Similarly, asked to define ‘Land’ or ‘Country’ he would talk about Skin, Language, Law, and Ceremony. Eventually, in frustration, Wanta said, *‘I feel that I’m talking about the same things over and over again.’* And indeed he was, for in the Warlpiri perspective each element of ngurra-kurlu is defined *in relation* to the others. Any one of the elements can be considered as a focus, but in doing so all of the other elements, by necessity, will be included in the discussion.

Wanta compares each of the elements of ngurra-kurlu to the organs within *palka* (the body):

Look at it this way. This ngurra-kurlu is palka: he’s got his own heart, he’s got his own kidneys, he’s got his own liver. If you take one of them away his whole body will drop – that way.

For example, if Language becomes weak then people will not know the proper terms to address each other respectfully. This means Skin becomes weak because the social relationships are not being reinforced. If Skin is weak then people will not be able to follow the Law which establishes

the rules and responsibilities that people must show towards each other and country. If people do not know the Law then it is not possible to run Ceremony. If people do not run Ceremony they will not know the rules and ecological knowledge to look after country. If country is sick then it cannot support people. The whole of ngurra-kurlu will fall apart if one piece is neglected.

This world view has practical ramifications for westerners working in communities. At any given time in Lajamanu there may be visitors holding *separate* meetings about health, law and order, housing, education, land management, land tenure, employment, family services, art, tourism, governance, and so on.¹¹ From the Warlpiri point of view these programs are attempting to achieve the same outcomes as ngurra-kurlu, and therefore could be based on a ngurra-kurlu framework. In this paradigm they would be connected to each other so that success in one program naturally promotes success in the other. For instance, law and order programs would be supported by working with those programs that promote healthy families.¹² Bicultural Warlpiri schools and the environment sector can collaborate because education is supported by visiting country and vice versa.¹³ Similarly, when ngurra-kurlu is functioning well, links are created between the health of country and the health of people, a philosophy often expressed in the statement ‘when you look after country it looks after you’. In this way there is basis in ngurra-kurlu for collaboration between the physical and mental health sectors and the environmental sector.

In this section each sub-section begins with a short description of each ngurra-kurlu element followed by some examples. This section primarily uses examples that show how ngurra-kurlu supports the healthy functioning of people, while the next section (Section 4) is concerned with examples that show how ngurra-kurlu sustains country. The separation is somewhat artificial as people and country are inextricably linked, but we have separated them here in order to illustrate how ngurra-kurlu operates in different contexts.

If there is an order of importance to the elements of ngurra-kurlu, it might that the three Ls – Land (Country), Law, and Language – come first, followed by Skin and Ceremony. However, some technical understanding of Skin is required to make sense of the other elements so we start our description of the ngurru-kurlu elements with Skin.

3.1 Skin – *Kurrwa*, responsibilities to people and country

In the introduction, Wanta described Skin as ‘*Warlalja-yapa – family. Families that are in their skin groups*’. Wanta is referring to the fact that Warlpiri culture divides people into different social groups, which are known as ‘skin groups’. The important point for this paper is that each group has a known set of relationships that determine responsibilities and obligations to the other groups (as well as to the other elements of ngurra-kurlu). Skin relationships and responsibilities keep Warlpiri people and country running smoothly. As Wanta states:

Skin starts with yourself. It is about relationships to people, place, and country. Skin is a system of relatedness, connectedness, how things integrate, roles, functions, boundaries, limits. That’s an important word ‘kurrwa’ [‘stone axe’ which is symbolic of responsibility], skin name holds that one.

¹¹ There is an acknowledged amount of ‘meeting fatigue’ in Lajamanu at the present time, with many elders being on multiple committees. For example, Jerry Jangala (Wanta’s father) was required to attend and contribute to nine committee meetings in two weeks late in 2007.

¹² Lajamanu had a very successful culturally based law and order project called Kurduju, which won a major award at the Australian Violence Prevention Awards in 2002. It was discontinued when funding was removed.

¹³ Incorporating regular family-based country visits into school curriculum was a key desire of Warlpiri elders in the recent (2008) Northern Territory Government Remote Learning Partnerships consultations.

Below we describe some of the major groupings in the skin system.

Warlpiri skin names

There are eight Warlpiri skin types. Men's names begin with 'J' and women's names begin with 'N', giving 16 in total (See Table 2). Skin names are the common form of address in Lajamanu and are used in the same way that westerners use personal names.

Table 2: Warlpiri skin names and patricouples

Female and male skin names	Patricouple link	Female and male skin names
Nampijinpa and Jampijinpa	+	Nangala and Jangala
Napanangka and Japanangka	+	Napangardi and Japangardi
Nakamarra and Jakamarra	+	Napurrula and Jupurrula
Nungarrayi and Jungarrayi	+	Napaljarri and Japaljarri

Having a skin name immediately gives a person a place in Warlpiri society because they have a known set of relationships. A pronouncement of someone's skin name will usually elicit a response such as, 'Ahh, you are my uncle,' or 'you are my mother,' and a noticeable relaxation because people know how they should treat the new person. It is for this reason that most *kardiya* (non-Aboriginal people) who work in Lajamanu are given a skin name. It means that they will not be a stranger. Indeed, Warlpiri people may sometimes appear rude to new people who have not been given a skin name because they do not know how to relate to them appropriately.

Skin names can be grouped together as a kind of quick reference guide to the important categories of the broader Warlpiri kinship system.¹⁴ Some of the examples given here are the moieties, semi-moieties and descent lines.

Moieties

Moiety means two halves of a whole and refers to the way in which people are split into two groups (or quarters for semi-moieties). For example, Warlpiri have four semi-moieties, which are also called patricouples. In Table 2 each skin name is joined with a '+' sign to another skin name, making a pair, or patricouple. Patricouples are a function of the male line of descent and are passed on through the father's father, the father and so on. A son or daughter receives their skin name from their father's patricouple. That is, a Jakamarra man will have a Jupurrula son and a Napurrula daughter. Male skin names alternate (within the patricouple) with each generation so that great-grandfather is Jakamarra, grandfather is Jupurrula, father is Jakamarra, son is Jupurrula, and so on. Women's skin names cycle in a pattern of four as shown in Table 3 below.

Warlpiri Law, ceremony, song, country, plants, animals, weather, and so on, also have skin names. It is the patricouple groupings that are particularly significant in determining the skin names of these entities. For example, Wanta is Jampijinpa skin and his father is therefore a Jangala. Wanta's family is responsible¹⁵ for the Emu dreaming story between the sites *Warnirripatu* (near Mt

¹⁴ For more information on Warlpiri kinship see Laughren (1982) or Meggitt (1962).

¹⁵ Responsibility for Dreaming stories and associated lands is shared between the kirda and kurdungurlu; see section 4.3.1 for a more detailed explanation.

Davidson) and *Parlukuna* (between Kalkarindji and Lajamanu communities). (Other Jampijinpa/Jangala families have responsibility for different sections of this story.) In relation to Skin this means that:

- The Emu dreaming story is N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala skin.
- The site *Warnirripartu* on the dreaming song line is N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala skin.
- The Emu ceremony is N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala skin.
- The Emu itself is called a N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala.

This link exists because Warlpiri Law has imbued all the manifestations of the Emu, including the Warlpiri people who are custodians of the Emu entities, with the same N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala skin grouping.

The dreaming, that is the Law, marks those things as N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala. It ‘possesses’ the country, people, animals, and the Law.

It could be said that groups of country, people, and ceremonies all share the same essence, and that the essence of N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala, for example, is different from that of N/Jakamarra + Na/Jupurrurla. In this way Skin brings country, plants, animals, ceremony, and song into the same system of relationships and obligations that exist between people. For example, just as a person must respect their mother’s mother, they must also respect their mother’s mother’s country, or their mother’s mother’s ceremony. Similarly, to learn about a particular plant or animal, it would be appropriate to ask someone who is in the same patricouple as that organism because they will be the trustee for that knowledge. This close link between same skin entities is also reflected in language. For example, it is appropriate to say, ‘I am going to visit my Warringiyi (grandfather)’, to mean ‘I am going to visit my grandfather’s country’.

As will be discussed in Section 3.3 (Land – Country), patricouple relationships inherited through the father’s line of descent create strong obligations towards the Law and towards Country. By respecting and practicing these relationships, people and country function smoothly and with less conflict. The continuing importance of the patricouple groupings can be seen in the way that Aboriginal people organise their own governance structures. For example, many committees in Warlpiri communities include a member from each of the skin groups. This is because skin law says that one skin group cannot generally speak on behalf of another skin group. Wanta says that skin is like a ‘*copyright over knowledge; one group cannot invade another.*’

Matrimoieties – Lampunu (Breast milk line)

An important aspect of a person’s life is which matrimoiety they belong too. ‘Matri’ refers to matriline¹⁶, or as Wanta calls it, the ‘breast milk line’, which is reference to the nourishing role of matrimoieties. A Jampijinpa such as Wanta is in a matrimoiety with all the people who share the same skin name as his mother, mother’s mother, mother’s mother’s mother, and so on. Table 3 below shows how the skin names are divided into the two matrimoieties. The names and the order of the names in Table 3 are the same as for the patricouple relationships in Table 2, but now another relationship pattern is revealed, with all the skin names on the left belonging to one matrimoiety and all those on the right belonging to the opposite matrimoiety. (In addition, there are two patrimoieties which are related to the male line of descent. The names in **bold** belong to one

¹⁶ A matriline is a line of descent from a female ancestor to a descendant (of either sex) in which the individuals in all intervening generations are female.

patrimoiety while the un-bolded names belong to the other patrimoiety. Patrimoieties are discussed only briefly in this paper but have important functions; for example, the responsibility for certain ceremonies is divided according to patrimoieties.)

Table 3: Warlpiri matrimoieties by skin name

Matrimoiety	Other matrimoiety
N/Jampijinpa	N/Jangala
N/Japanangka	N/Japangardi
N/Jakamarra	Na/Jupurrurla
N/Jungarrayi	N/Japaljarri

A man or women calls their own matrimoiety *makurnta-wangu*, which means ‘being one mob, being familiar, *drinking the same milk*’. A person calls the opposite moiety *makurnta* which means ‘with deference, respect, and sometimes reverence’.

Wanta’s experience at a first aid course gives a practical example of how matrimoieties affect behaviour. On completion of the course the first aid instructor told Wanta that because he was certified he had a legal responsibility to render first aid to anyone who required it. Wanta replied, ‘*but I can’t help my makurnta* [people in the opposite matrimoiety] *or I will be the one who needs first aid!*’ There are rules about who can help whom and there are rules about how people should behave. As Wanta states:

When someone is dying the makurnta will sit outside the house and show respect, but they would feel shame to come inside and actually help. In this way the two groups are being witnesses to each other, making sure that they are doing the right thing all of the time.

There are other rules and patterns in the matrimoiety system. For instance, a person finds their ‘main’ partners in managing country and ceremony in the opposite matrimoiety. Referring to Table 3, a N/Jampijinpa will work with a N/Japaljarri. This relationship is called *kurdungurlu* and is discussed further in relation to land tenure in the following section. The roots of the word show another reference to the mother’s line because *kurdu* means ‘child’ and *ngurlu* means ‘from’. (A person’s ‘2nd’ *kurdungulru* is found in the same matrimoiety see Figure 4.)

Another pattern is the cycle of female skin names. The skin names of women and their daughters cycle in a defined order through the same matrimoiety. Referring to the arrows in Table 3 above, a Napangardi woman has a Nangala daughter who has a Napaljarri and so on. In the other matrimoiety it flows the opposite way: a Napanangka woman has a Nakamarra daughter and so on.

A final example is discipline. A father’s son is in the opposite matrimoiety. Referring to Table 3: a Jampijinpa man has Jangala sons (and Nangala daughters). A father can only discipline the sons when they are young, because his relationship with the opposite matrimoiety is *makurnta*, which means ‘with respect and deference, almost reverence’. When the sons are put through initiation the responsibility of discipline passes to someone in the sons’ own matrimoiety, in particular their uncle. For a Jangala son, this uncle would be a Japangardi. This is relevant to governance: for example, electing one leader is problematic because they only have authority over half the people they are elected to lead or represent.

Wanta states that the matrimoiety is about flow and balance:

The two moieties balance each other because they make sure that everything stays connected and not disconnected. That is the point of the mother's line.

There are other moieties that have different roles and relationships, such as the generational moiety, which Wanta has called the 'contest mode', in which each group motivates and challenges the other. They are important in traditional games and initiation ceremonies. There are also numerous other individual skin statuses between people such as the well known 'avoidance relationship' between a person and his or her mother-in-law, which is actually an expression of deep respect, or the 'teaching relationship' between a person and his brother-in-law.

The important point that comes from these examples of skin relationships (such as skin names, patricouples, and matrimoieties) is that because everyone has a skin name each Warlpiri person knows what their relationships and responsibilities are to other people and to country. The result is a system that creates order. Wanta states:

The importance of the skin name is that it directs the behaviour, the way of living. Skin names are a system that goes the right way. It is a functioning system; if we move with the system we will be nourished.

Being 'nourished' is a reference to the way in which skin names support Warlpiri identity by giving people a sense of belonging. It is similar to the way in which westerners are often drawn to tracing their ancestry. Wanta says:

Skin is about knowing where your roots are. This is also a way of feeling whole by knowing where you belong in the system by knowing your four grandparents.

In these last two quotes Wanta is reminding us that order is generated in two ways. Firstly, by structures and rules; and secondly, by creating the emotional feeling of a 'common sense of belonging', which in turn creates group cohesion.

Practitioners can benefit from aligning project goals with the existing responsibilities and obligations derived from the skin system. For example, the Lajamanu Community Education Centre (the school) has had success working with skin to improve the structure of classes and assemblies. In addition, teachers like Wanta are using skin to teach life skills to children.¹⁷ As Wanta states, learning skin helps children learn connectedness and staying together – the concept of unity. However, he also speculates that it could be used to teach mathematics, as Aboriginal kinship systems are recognised as incorporating many mathematical patterns (e.g. Cooke 1991).

Thinking laterally, Wanta argues that skin groups could influence employment. For example, his patricouple group, the N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala, are trustees of the Emu song cycle and ceremonies. One of the metaphors of the Emu story is the value of being a good teacher. At the 2007 Milpirri event, the young Nangalas and Nampijinpa really connected with the Emu story and started to take on a greater role in teaching the younger children. Wanta argues that because some groups already have a connection and obligation in relation to certain types of work that they will find more pride and success in doing that job. He gives another example of the Japaljarri and Jungarrayi group. Most of the famous Warlpiri police have been Japaljarri or Jungarrayi, which

¹⁷ As they frequently do, when given the chance, Warlpiri people have invented a unique way to teach skin. The skin names have been colour coded so that they relate to the dreamings that are owned by each group. N/Jakamarra + Na/Jupurrurla are red because they are custodians for the red kangaroo and many other land animals. N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala are blue because of the primary importance of the rain dreaming. N/Napaljarri + N/Jungarrayi are yellow because they have many bird stories and star stories. N/Japangardi + N/Japanangka are green because they have many plant stories like the bush potato, which is very important and has very green leaves. In Lajamanu it is common now to hear kids refer to skin as the green group, yellow group, etc. This is a modern interpretation of an old system. As Wanta says, *'The colour coding gets them started, then they can learn the other relationships'*.

Wanta suggests is more than coincidence. As Wanta explains, the two most important symbols of Warlpiri Law are *Witi* (two leafy poles¹⁸) and *Wawirri* (red kangaroo). The N/Japaljarri + N/Jungarrayi group is *kirda* (custodians) of the Two *Witi* poles story and *kurdungurlu* (managers) for the kangaroo. Wanta suggests that perhaps their connection with these stories drew them to police work. Warlpiri recognise these meanings in the Northern Territory police badge which, interestingly, features a kangaroo and two leafy poles (Figure 2).¹⁹



Figure 2: Northern Territory Police Badge

3.2 Law – the guiding principles

Wanta uses the Warlpiri word *kuruwarri* to introduce the Law. *Kuruwarri* is the knowledge, beliefs, customs, practices, rules, and regulations of the Warlpiri way of life. It may include rules such as who can marry whom, or the principles of land tenure, as well as ethical and moral edicts such as ‘don’t be greedy or irresponsible’. The Law fulfils the same function as mainstream culture’s criminal and civil law as well as the practices, ethics and codes of behaviour established by secular and religious institutions. The Law also fulfils the same role as mainstream culture’s body of scientific knowledge. That is, it explains the proper functioning of the world. For example, the fact that a plant flowers at a particular time of year is said to be the Law for that plant. The reason why people should burn country is said to be the Law for looking after that land. For Warlpiri, the Law is the highest reference for direction about how to live in the world – a strict but adaptable code.

The Law is something to follow like a road guide. The law is a serious thing and it needs to be followed. Wawirri [red kangaroo] is a symbol of the Law. Men cooking a kangaroo is a serious thing ... even the dance and ceremony for that one is serious.

A definitive list of all Law is the elements of ngurra-kurlu and the multitude of ways in which they interrelate. The Law is contained in many forms. It is in the structure of language, the functioning of the skin system, the words of the dreaming songs and stories, the sacred objects and paintings, the performance of ceremony, and in the land itself.

¹⁸ The Two *Witi* poles represent choice: to follow the law and be a good person or to choose another way. Along with the Kangaroo they were celebrated in Milpirri 2007. More information on the meanings of the stories is available at http://www.tracksdance.com.au/html/work_2007_milpirri2.html.

¹⁹ <http://www.petespatch.net/policepatch/ausstate%20ntpol.jpg>

A Warlpiri person has a responsibility to learn the Law, and particular status can be achieved by becoming a Law man or woman.

A man who has been through the Law is called Marliyarra²⁰ which means ‘without without’ [i.e. not empty], and when you become a fully initiated man that is what you are full up with – that ngurra-kurlu – that knowledge possesses you now.

Beyond *marliyarra* are other levels. Perhaps the highest level, *rdirrinyapa*, refers to a person who, in addition to understanding Warlpiri Law, has also studied the Law of surrounding tribes. This person will possess a clear and penetrating mind. They can assemble all this information. They can see the universal truths, and through this they can find the relevance of the Law to any situation, contemporary or historical. There is also an expectation that a person of this status can be relied upon to put this knowledge into practice to help people: to arbitrate, to educate, and to support.

Benefits can be achieved by considering the relationships between Warlpiri Law and mainstream institutions. For example, a Warlpiri policeman will gain more respect and authority if they have been through the Law.²¹ A local ranger will be a better naturalist if he or she knows the Law for particular plants and animals. Acknowledging this traditional training through recognition of status and pay scales for Warlpiri employees would be one way of linking Law with modern community programs. It would also recognise that the upper levels of traditional Aboriginal education (i.e. learning the Law) are as hard-earned and as worthy of respect as master craftspeople or professors in mainstream Australian culture.

There are also benefits to be had by using Warlpiri Law to radically rethink the *underlying* structure of programs. Warlpiri elders have long argued that in all sectors Warlpiri Law contains equivalent but different systems to the mainstream that could be used in the modern context. For example, Warlpiri compare their land tenure to the Australian system of states and territories and their levels of ceremony to the mainstream education system. They see their naturalist training as comparable to mainstream botany and biology courses and their system of Law as providing the same law and order outcomes as the Australian judicial systems. Warlpiri argue that within their Law are systems that have, for a long time, been delivering the outcomes desired by community projects. With collaboration between local people and practitioners, this Law can be adapted to the modern context, creating projects that are more appealing and relevant at the local level. The Warlpiri also consider that their Law holds philosophy that is of use and interest to all Australians.

3.3 Land (Country) – caring for ‘home’

Wanta usually refers to this element of ngurra-kurlu by using the word ‘land’ or ‘country’. They are used interchangeably throughout this paper. In Warlpiri there are several words that can be translated this way. For example: ‘country’ can be *walya*, literally the ‘earth’; or it can be *ngurra*, ‘one’s camp or home’. Words such as *ngurrara* appear to fall somewhere in between, as the following definition from the Warlpiri dictionary explains:

²⁰ These terms are related to men. See these texts for information about women’s Law and Ceremony: Bell 1983; Dussart 2000.

²¹ The phrase ‘been through the Law’ relates to a person moving through the various levels of ceremony and teaching. For the purposes of this paper ‘going through the Law’ can be thought of as the process of developing a strong understanding of, and practical experience with, all the elements of ngurra-kurlu and the ways in which they interrelate.

Ngurrara is the place that belongs to an Aboriginal, or to a white person, or to a kangaroo, or to a lizard, where their own earth is like the place where they were born and grew up, they are from that country and walk around and sleep in their own country. (Laughren, Hale et al. 2005)

Ngurrara for Warlpiri people is the Tanami desert, particularly a person's father's father's country within the Tanami desert. It may also be one of the four Warlpiri settlements.²²

There are different types of country or homes. *Kirri* is a permanent camp, country that is full of water, where people can come and live with confidence; the settlements are *kirri*. *Ngurra-wardingki* is your birth place and *ngurra-jinta* is 'one family camping together, country men, people who belong to the same earth' (Laughren, Hale et al. 2005). As the last two terms imply, 'country' is as much a concept that speaks about relationships as it is a geographical location.

When asked to talk about what 'country' means in relation to a place called *Kurlpurlurnu*, which is in his ancestral lands, Wanta's response included the following points:

'Country' is walya, the land, and it is the animals that live at Kurlpurlurnu, the Wawirri (red kangaroo) and the Jajirdi (native quoll). It is the people living there, their history and their roots. Country also reminds us about the neighbours of Kurlpurlurnu, sites which are close by such as Wingki. These sites are geographically close by but they also share a history in the Ngapa dreaming stories. Wingki is a place where a bushfire killed a Na/Jupurrurla + N/Jakamarra Rain-being. The N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala Rain-being managed to protect himself with mud and dived on the sacred objects to protect them from the fire. This shared history makes the sites countrymen. Because the sites are countrymen the people who are custodians for those places are also countrymen.

Wanta says that if Jupurrurla family members wanted to fight Jampijinpa family members, then they would think about not fighting because they have that shared history: they are countrymen.

The example above shows how Country is defined by more than just the natural environment. In this case Wanta has referred to animals, places, Skin groups, Law, history, and families. Placing country in the middle of the *ngurra-kurlu* template provides a simpler method of defining country in Warlpiri terms (see painting by Daniel Rockman Jupurrurla, Figure 3). It can be seen that in addition to the physical environment, the Law of country, the Language of country, the Skin of country, and the Ceremony of country together become the Warlpiri concept of Country. By understanding, practising, and living all of these *ngurra-kurlu* relationships in the company of other people, country – that is, the raw natural environment – is transformed into 'home'. Indeed, in Table 1 of this paper where Wanta first introduces the *ngurra-kurlu* element that we have been calling Country, he uses two Warlpiri words: *ngurra* (home) and *walya* (the land). 'Home' is a better word for country because non-Aboriginal Australians relate to it in much the same way as the Warlpiri. Mainstream Australians can readily imagine home as being more than a house, or a block of land: it is also the family or friends who live there, the suburb or city it is located in, the activities to do there, the history, the pets, the experience of eating and relaxing together there, the celebrations, and so on.

²² There are four communities that are regarded as Warlpiri: Lajamanu, Yuendumu, Nyirripi, and Willowra.

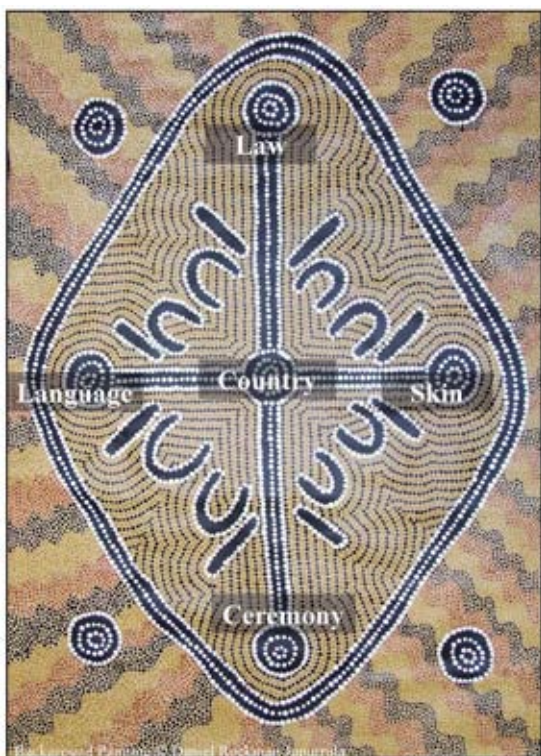


Figure 3: Country in the Ngurra-kurlu template

© Daniel Rockman Jupurrurla

Re-imagining ‘country’ as ‘home’ has important implications for practitioners such as those in the environmental fields. For example, changing the common phrase ‘caring for country’ to ‘caring for home’ makes it easier to conceptualise, in a mainstream paradigm, that sustaining country needs to include sustaining those relationships that make it home. This means attention needs to be paid to the Law of country, the Skin of country, the Language of Country, and the Ceremony of country, not simply the ecology of country. Thinking of country as home introduces another important Warlpiri concept in relation to the land: that of reciprocity between people and the environment.²³ As Wanta says:

That country was meant for you to look after it and it was meant to look after you.

Warlpiri argue that the actions and activities used to sustain people inherently sustain the physical landscape. Conversely, the activities done on country, if done in accordance with the Law, will sustain the relationships that keep people healthy. Section 4 provides specific examples of how this process works. For example, we show how ceremony is directly related to managing the natural environment, and, in return, how engaging with the natural environment provides knowledge for running ceremony. Alternatively, when people visit their paternally inherited country they are reinforcing skin relationships that in turn provide stability back in the community.

This process is possible because of the definition of ‘country’ as the physical landscape as well as all the other elements of ngurra-kurlu that connect people to it and turn it into a home. When one system is supported, the other is too. The benefits that flow from this reciprocity are the same as those for non-Warlpiri: a nice home looks good, makes you feel good, and looks after you with food and water, comfort, shelter, familiarity, memories, and so on.

²³ The philosophy of reciprocity between people and country has been widely reported amongst central and western desert tribes. See, for example, Fred Myers’s (1986) authoritative work *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place, and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*.

When Wanta draws the ngurra-kurlu template he usually puts ‘country’ (being *ngurra* – home, and *walya* – the land) in the central position in recognition of its importance to Warlpiri identity. All the elements of ngurra-kurlu are in some way interwoven within country. When people engage with ngurra-kurlu (through their family, their law, their skin, their ceremony, and their natural environment) they are automatically drawn into deeper connections and understanding of country. The multiplicity of ways to connect to place continues to be a powerful force in communities, even for young people who may be familiar with only a few of the elements of ngurra-kurlu.

The strength of this connection is illustrated below where Wanta talks about homesickness:²⁴

Understanding all that ngurra-kurlu [about country] makes you want to go back to country. Why do you reckon a lot of people came to Lajamanu and then walked off again.²⁵ You see it makes people want to go back there. I went to Alice Springs when I was young. All I could do was think, ‘This is not my country’. I wanted to be back in my country so I was crying all the time there. When I went to Darwin, that sea, ‘Ahh, no sea in my country’. I ended up crying in that little room. It really made me homesick. That means to make me really want to go back and to be part of it.

We asked Wanta what it felt like to back on country. He said:

You are alive. [Long pause] ... that’s what I’m still trying to get my head around. Kardiya [non-Warlpiri people] leaving their country and being willing to be adopted by another country. For yapa [Warlpiri people] when you are back you feel part of it. You know?

What Wanta is referring to above is that healthy people and healthy country depend on each other to be fully alive. In one sense they are part of the same system. Wanta uses the following anecdote to explain further:

Consider a music player: ipod or walkman. The battery is people and the battery charger is ceremony. Sometimes batteries go flat and die if they are not recharged. So too if people are not going to ceremony. They will not be refreshing or learning their knowledge about country. The knowledge for people is like the electricity for the battery. Now, the place where you put that battery is its little home – it slots in there. Similarly Warlpiri people’s home should be on their country; they belong there, it’s the right place for them. When the electricity, the battery, and the slot all come together then you can turn on the music player and listen to it: the whole system is functioning. You can learn from it now: learn to sing that song, to talk that language, that language of country.

The continuing importance of country is seen in the way that Warlpiri include country in many of their plans for community projects. For example, parents and elders of the Lajamanu Community Education Centre (the school) have argued (for three decades) that proper Warlpiri education should include an ‘on country’ component. Similarly, Miles Holmes’s PhD research (unpub) shows that Warlpiri strategies for revitalising ecological knowledge are based around being on country.

As Wanta says:

If we live in the community we will be yapa [Aboriginal] but if we go on country then we will be Warlpiri.

²⁴ *Yirarru* is the Warlpiri word for homesickness and also carries notions of being lonely, lonesome, or forlorn. It is a very prevalent (and deeply felt) theme in women’s song (M. Laughren 2008, pers. comm., 5 July.)

²⁵ In 1948 the Native Affairs Branch of the Federal Government decided to establish a settlement at Lajamanu (then Hooker Creek) to provide a home for the families of Aboriginal workers on cattle stations to the north. The settlement was (and is) on the land of the Gurindji people. Contrary to the original vision, the settlement was used to relieve population pressure in the Warlpiri settlement of Yuendumu many kilometres to the south. In 1951, 150 Warlpiri were trucked to the new settlement. Many people walked the 600 kilometres back across country to Yuendumu. They were then removed again, and walked home again. The third time they were removed, most people stayed. The fact that Lajamanu is a Warlpiri settlement on Gurindji land continues to be a source of conflict and emotional pain for both tribes.

This is because all of the elements of ngurra-kurlu are fully realised when the right skin groups are on the right country speaking strong language in accordance with Warlpiri law, which has been taught and rejuvenated through strong ceremony. Youth diversionary projects have used this ability of country to support identity and therefore increase self esteem and alter damaging behaviours. For example, the Mt Theo project successfully used on-country time as a key strategy to drastically reduce petrol sniffing among Warlpiri youth in Yuendumu.²⁶

Acknowledging connection to country may help in other projects such as boarding school placements for Aboriginal youth, which often fail because children suffer from intense homesickness. Acknowledging the strength of attachment to home allows strategies to be put in place in advance.

Interestingly, one of the major problems in Aboriginal settlements such as Lajamanu is attracting and retaining good staff. Most workers, especially in coordination roles, are generally non-Warlpiri and on a three-year contract or even shorter. There is a very high turnover and subsequent loss of corporate knowledge as well as truncated relationships in a cross-cultural environment where personal relationships (between Warlpiri and non-Warlpiri) are essential to effective practice. Staff turnover is often put down to the tough conditions of community work, the remote locations away from family and friends, and the challenge of working cross-culturally. Meanwhile, in Warlpiri communities there are many motivated Warlpiri who do *not* find the conditions tough, who live with their family, who love their country, and who are not leaving because they are already at home. It is a tremendous waste of resources that more community projects are not focused on solving the question of how to engage local people to run their own programs.

3.4 Language – communication between the elements

The language of Wanta and his relations is Warlpiri. There are around 3000 Warlpiri speakers. As well as English and Warlpiri, many people also speak one or more of the neighbouring languages: Warumungu, Jaru, Gurindji, Kukatja, Anmatjere, and Pintubi. For Warlpiri, language is akin to identity because it encodes the unique Warlpiri worldview. As Wanta states:

Language is like a tree: it makes you stand firm in country, gives you a sense of identity ... I was born Warlpiri and I will die Warlpiri but if you lose language then you are gone ... Language is a defence; it is kurdiji [a shield]. It is strength.

Each element of ngurra-kurlu has its own language. There is Skin language, Land language, Ceremony language, and Law language. Skin language is the way people change speech to show respect towards each other. Land language is all the Warlpiri names for the land and things in it, but it is also the way land can ‘talk’ to Warlpiri people, such as their interpretation of seasonal indicators. Ceremony language is the way speech changes in ceremony. It is also the language of songs and the messages of sacred object and designs. Each language supports the smooth function of ngurra-kurlu. Law language is the ability of a person to use all the other languages. In this way there is law *in* language because using the right language inherently directs people and keeps them on the right path.

Language makes you stay on that road – there is law in language. If you talk the right way you won’t upset people. If you talk wrong way you have gone off the road a bit. Using proper skin language keeps people in line. Even the drunks know how to behave when they know that skin.

²⁶ <http://www.mttheo.org/home.htm>

Lose that one and we will be just being rude to each other. Too straight maybe. But having that skin name language, or land language, or ceremony language, having all that one, they all communicate. Those five things communicate really well.

Wanta is referring to the fact that when all the registers of Warlpiri are being used they support the proper functioning of all the other elements of ngurra-kurlu; that is, ‘they all communicate’. As it is beyond the scope of this work to discuss all the registers of Warlpiri²⁷, just one example is given here: the relationship between Skin language, Land, and Ceremony.

Skin language involves changing the pattern of speech and vocabulary depending on the social situation. For example, consider Wanta’s introduction at the start of this paper (in Table 1).

‘This one is Warlalja-yapa – family. Families that are in their skin groups. Yarriki [N/Japaljarri + Jungarrayi skin group], Wurruru [Na/Jupurrurla + N/Jakamarra skin group], Kirda [N/Japanangka + N/Japangardi skin group], Whitefellas call it skin name.’

In this translation the skin names, in brackets, were not actually spoken. They have been inserted so that the phrase makes more sense to English readers. In its original form Wanta is using special skin language terms. Rather than saying the actual skin names, such as ‘N/Japaljarri + N/Jungarrayi skin group’ he uses the special word *yarriki* which describes *his* relationship to the group from the perspective of a person of Jampijinpa skin. The terms a Warlpiri speaker uses change depending on the skin of the speaker. A Warlpiri person is able to automatically determine that Wanta is a Jampijinpa skin and knows that when Wanta says *yarriki* he is referring to the N/Japaljarri + N/Jungarrayi group.

Skin and country are intimately connected and therefore a person also uses these special skin terms when talking about country. For example, during song recording a Jakamarra man was talking about two places in Warlpiri country, *kurlpurlurnu* and *mungkularri*. The custodians of these places are N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala families, and therefore Jakamarra called those countries *wurruru*, the same term as if he was talking to an actual N/Jampijinpa or N/Jangala person.

By using these terms when talking, it is a much more respectful way to talk. It is like knocking on the door rather than just bursting through.

Using right words will bring people together; if you use weak words you will drive them away. With strong language there is more trust, respect, and honour between people.

Continuing with the above example, if Wanta places *kuyu* in front of the special skin term *wurruru*, it indicates to listeners that he is now talking about a person’s ceremony, song or dreaming story.²⁸ Wanta explains:

So when we are talking about the Yankirri [emu] story we know that it belongs to Jampijinpa and Jangala, so I would call it Kuyu-wapirra. Jupurrurla and Jakamarra would call the same ceremony Kuyu-wurruru. Jungarrayi and Japangardi call it Kuyu-kirda. Japaljarri and Japanangka would call it Kuyu-yarriki.

The special skin terms remind people of their responsibilities and also the appropriate behaviour. For example: *Wapirra* means ‘father’ and shows that Wanta calls the Emu in all its manifestations (i.e. dreaming ancestor, song, land, ceremony, actual species) ‘father’ and that it is N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala skin (the same as Wanta and his father). The term identifies that Wanta is a custodian of

²⁷ For information about Warlpiri linguistic registers see Laughren (2001). In addition, Dr David Nash maintains an exhaustive reference list of Warlpiri linguistic and anthropological articles at <http://www.anu.edu.au/linguistics/nash/aust/wlp>.

²⁸ *Kuyu* is the Warlpiri word for meat, and Wanta sees a link between the primary importance for living of both meat and ceremony.

the *Yankirri* story and therefore has the most rights but also the most obligations in relation to this story and the land and ceremony to which it relates. Alternatively, *wurruru* implies ‘with deference and respect’; people who call the various Emu entities *wurruru* can participate in matters related to this story but they have to show deep respect.

In summary, by using the correct language all the relationships of ngurra-kurlu are supported, and because ngurra-kurlu is flowing smoothly, the healthy functioning of people and country is supported. The next section provides some specific examples of how ‘Land language’ sustains country.

3.5 Ceremony – education and unity

There are many types of Warlpiri ceremony. There are the ‘big’ Warlpiri ceremonies such as *Kurdiyi* (the initiation ceremony) and *Jardiwarnpa* (the atonement and reconciliation ceremony). There are *yawulyu* (public and secret rituals performed principally by women), *parnpa* (family- and land-based rituals), *yilpinji* (public songs or entry level songs), *purlapa* (public dances and performances). For men after initiation there are the secret *Kajirri* rituals often called ‘high school’ or ‘university’ in Aboriginal English.

Ngurra-kurlu can be used as a template to define ceremony. That is, ceremony is defined in relation to the other principles of ngurra-kurlu. For example:

Law: Ceremony is the celebration, teaching, and re-enactment of the Law. There are also the designs, body paint, and ritual objects that are representations of the Law. In Aboriginal English, Warlpiri compare learning Law in ceremony to western education, in which one progresses from preschool to university.

Skin: Certain skin groups are trustees for particular ceremonies, and ceremony is also a time when skin relationships are reinforced and skin obligations demonstrated.

Country: Each country (and every species of plant and animal as well as phenomenon such as the weather) is represented in ceremony. Those Warlpiri who are trustees for ceremony are also trustees for the country that it represents (they have the same skin). As discussed further in the next section of this paper, Ceremony can also be thought of as a book that teaches people how to look after country.

Language: There is the language of ceremony, including respectful skin language, joking language, and song language. Some examples of song language are given in the next section.

Thus ceremony relies on all the elements of ngurra-kurlu to function properly, and in return, ceremony, when it is run, supports all the elements of ngurra-kurlu. A full treatment of ceremony is beyond the scope of this work. More information can be found in any of the Warlpiri ethnographies (Meggitt 1962; Munn 1973; Dussart 2000; Glowczewski 2001). What is most relevant here is how ceremony supports the goal of ngurra-kurlu, which is the healthy functioning of people and country. As Wanta says:

Ceremony is a bit like reminding us who we are, who we should be, what we can do. It makes you involved in something that is functioning right. I mean, who wants to function the wrong way?

For example, the Milpirri team in 2005 and 2007 examined the inherent values contained in the *Jardiwarnpa* and *Kurdiji* ceremonies. From *Jardiwarnpa*, five key themes were identified: *Manyuwana*²⁹ (celebration), *Purami* (following the right way), *Mardarni* (protection of those things that are important), *Jintangka* (unity in diversity), and *Jardiwarnpa* (atonement and reconciliation). Other ceremonies would reveal other themes. Wanta argues that although these ceremonies stem from a time when people were living in the bush, these same values can help Warlpiri function well in the current context. That is, they should continue to celebrate achievements, they should protect what is important, they should follow the Law, and so on. It is the principle that is relevant, even if the current generation will find different things to celebrate and protect.

For Wanta, ceremony is the symbolic heart of Warlpiri culture which binds people together. He compares it with some of the major symbols of Australian culture. In Wanta's words:

*Ceremony makes you feel part of something. What if you get rid of ANZAC Day? What's another big one ... kumunjayi*³⁰ *time [25th December], Easter, Australia Day. What will happen? Take away the national anthem; someone do that and he'll be hung. Same with the Australian flag. What if we rip it down and tear it up ...*

Ceremony makes you feel part of it [Warlpiri culture]. It makes your heart pump more, give yourself life, makes you proud, and that way it makes you realise that you have this kurrwa [responsibility].

3.6 Summary – defining the elements of ngurra-kurlu

This section has defined each of the elements of ngurra-kurlu. Skin refers to the principles of relatedness that create obligations and responsibilities. Country is thought of as both the natural environment as well as all the relationships that make 'home' and therefore create a powerful sense of belonging for Warlpiri people. The Law is all the guiding principles that determine the correct way to live. Language is what people speak but also all the various registers that enable the different elements of ngurra-kurlu to communicate. Ceremony is Warlpiri education and is also the symbolic heart of the culture. These elements continue to resonate with Warlpiri people. When they are adapted to the modern context they provide direction and self esteem. Community programs can benefit from ngurra-kurlu because it is a system that is embedded in Warlpiri culture and is already geared towards providing relevant grass roots solutions. Some examples have been given in this section such as the way in which skin names and Law can influence employment. The following section moves to a more detailed level and provides specific examples of how the elements of ngurra-kurlu operate in relation to healthy country.

4. Ngurra-kurlu and Country

Wanta's primary goal for ngurra-kurlu is to support the health of people and country. Here we investigate how ngurra-kurlu encompasses the rules, relationships and obligations to look after the biophysical environment and how these actions are inherently the same as those that look after people.

²⁹ In everyday use *manyuwana* means celebration, fun, laughter, and enjoyment; *purami* is the verb 'to follow'; *mardarni* is the verb 'to hold' but can have connotations of 'looking after' something; and *jintangka* means being 'together at one place'.

³⁰ *Kumunjayi* is a Warlpiri word meaning 'no-name'. It is used in address and reference, instead of a name of a person (or place) whose name cannot be spoken because of its phonetic likeness to the name of a dead person (that is, a person for whom mourning is in progress), or of a secluded initiate (Laughren, Hale et al. 2005).

Country, and in particular the health of country, is influenced by its relationships with the four other elements. Figure 3 (Section 3.3 – Daniel Jupurrurla Rockman’s painting) shows these relationships. This section of the paper is therefore in four sub-sections: the Law of country, the Language of country, the Skin of country and the Ceremony of country.

4.1 Country and Warlpiri Law

Reflecting on all the presentations at a 2004 land management conference in Central Australia, Jampijinpa, a Warlpiri elder, stated that ‘Warlpiri Law is the management of country’. In practice, mainstream environmental management and Aboriginal land management are different, but what Jampijinpa was picking up on was that the goal of both systems is to sustain country.

The *Kuruwarri* or Law for country is contained in all the principles of ngurra-kurlu, that is, the relationships between Country and Skin, Country and Ceremony, Country and Language. Examples of these relationships are discussed throughout the remainder of this section. However, in a more specific sense the Law for country is the actual dreaming songs and stories that relate to country. The following example is an extract from Wanta’s *Ngapa* (rain) story.

In a place near Kurlpurlurnu, two young warriors called warnmajarri-jarra were hunting in the area for kanyarla (euro kangaroos). The two young warriors lit a fire to flush the kangaroos out of the bush, but they realised that they had created a big bush fire that raged for days and was expanding. The bush fire created a big pillar of smoke that built up in the sky. The clouds were drawn into the pillar of smoke and created milpirri, which then sent rain and drenched the land, putting out the fire.
(Pawu-kurlpurlurnu [Steven Jampijinpa] 2008)

In this brief account from the rain story, we are given information that is part of the Law for country – that is, the rules and knowledge needed to sustain Country. We are taught about:

- the presence of hill kangaroos near the place called *Kurlpurlurnu*
- a method to hunt them with fire
- a warning about the dangers of creating a big bushfire
- the fact that bushfires can seed clouds and cause rain.

This information may all be thought of as ecological knowledge. However, the Law is also concerned with the rules and ethics of behaviour. In this example, those who have studied the Law would recognise that the Milpirri cloud referred to in this story is also a reference to the *Jardiwarnpa* ceremony which is about reconciliation for wrong doings. In the story the formation of the Milpirri cloud is a time of intense turmoil when the hot air is rising and clashing with the cool air to form a thunderhead cloud. This action is a metaphor for the times when two families are fighting. In the modern context it is a metaphor for the clash of Warlpiri and mainstream Australian culture. After the build up of the Milpirri cloud the rains come, bringing relief and refreshment to the country. Likewise, after the *Jardiwarnpa* ceremony, wrongs are reconciled and people have a sense of relief and refreshment. Thus the Law provides information about working with country and, conversely, the ecology of country provides information about Law for people (in this case ceremony). Wanta highlights a further link:

I could say this: this Jardiwarnpa is looking after country, because if everyone is fighting who's got time to look after country?

The Law for country is also the proper functioning of country, including what westerners often call 'traditional ecological knowledge' (Williams and Baines 1993; Berkes, Colding et al. 2003). For example, the Law for a berry might be that it is edible, or as Wanta said, when talking about a gum tree:

See that tree. It is shedding its bark. No, we didn't tell it to do that. That is just its purpose, the Law for that thing.

Wanta states that if someone wants to learn about a particular plant or animal then they will have to learn the Law for that organism. In this context 'the Law' means all the elements of ngurra-kurlu. He compares this process to placing a plant or animal in the cross hairs of a rifle scope. It becomes the centre of attention and then one can work around the outside of it, through Language, Law, Ceremony, Skin, and Country (including ecology), to gain a complete Warlpiri perspective of that entity. When Warlpiri people, including young people, talk about plants and animals they might start the story at any particular point. Then over time they begin to make links with the other elements of ngurra-kurlu. For example, a young man in Lajamanu is currently very interested in plants and has started his own education with the skin names. This is a logical move, as by knowing a plant's skin he can place it in the Warlpiri universe, know his relationship to that plant, and know which person has custodianship of the songs or stories in relation to that plant.

Learning or teaching about the environment through the Law is beneficial because it also confers social status on students or workers. For example, we have taken young men on extended country visits with elders (where they have been exposed to the elements of ngurra-kurlu) then, on return to the community we have witnessed an increase in their social status and consequently an increase in their self esteem.

The Law is therefore related to sustaining country on two levels. In a general sense it encompasses all the rules to manage country, which are all the relationships of ngurra-kurlu. More specifically, the Law is the ecological knowledge contained in songs and stories that people must know if they are able to work with country.

4.2 Country and Language

Wanta states that language signifies the boundary of Warlpiri country, the sounds of country, and the way that country communicates to people.

4.2.1 Boundary of Warlpiri Country

In Wanta's own words:

Language marks the boundary line for Warlpiri country. Warlpiri have been given responsibility to look after that particular patch of the Northern Territory. Jukurrpa [the Law Dreaming] put you in that language group to look after country – to keep country. Whether you like it or not you have to be the kurdiji [shield] for that country.

This quote also illustrates that although we are focusing on Language and Country the other elements of ngurra-kurlu such as Skin and Ceremony are automatically invoked.

4.2.2 Sounds

Language is also the sounds of country; for example, the diamond dove (*Geopelia cuneata*) is called *kurlukuku*.

That is the sound of that bird – kurlu-kuku, kurlu-kuku.

Similarly, the crow (*Corvus* sp.) is *kaarnka*, and the zebra finch (*Poephila guttata*) is *jiyiki*.

4.2.3 The Language of Country

The motto of Milpirri 2007 was (in English), ‘Listen to the land and the land will speak back’. It means that land has a language through which it communicates to people. This language is non-verbal and Wanta has called it the ‘body language’ of country. It means that if you are very observant, the land, through its sights, sounds, patterns, and shapes, will tell you how it is functioning and tell you how to live with it.

It’s all about understanding again. About not being ignorant about country.

Wanta provides the following example from Yuendumu:

Somewhere around the 50s or 40s in Yuendumu, when Yuendumu was young too, this missionary was looking at all these yapa running around in the hot day – cloudless sky too and really hot. Running around getting all these boards, plank, twine. And they even asked him, ‘Can we get some of these things off you?’ And he says, ‘Yeah, but why?’ And they say, ‘Ahh, I gotta build ’im house, big wind coming, Yuwayi [yes]. Big wind coming’. ‘Ohh,’ he says, and he looks around at the clear sky, ‘All right’. Anyway, he gives them the things. Overnight they had, like a cyclone going through there, and that person came across and he saw the yapa humpies were still standing. And he asked them, ‘How did you know this? Why did you know this?’ Old people were looking at him. They said, ‘Because this one tell us’. They were pointing to the ants!

Wanta summarises:

It is all about reading the country, and that reading, that is the country talking. But you can’t learn that just learning off yapa, you have to go there and hang around couple of months or a couple of weeks.

There are countless other examples of the ways in which the country speaks. The physical geography of country reveals which animals should be present; the flowering of *Acacias* marks seasonal changes or the mating season of certain animals; the position of the coal sack in the Milky Way indicates that it is a good time to hunt emus, and so on. The actual ecology and biology of country can also teach Warlpiri people how to live with each other. For example, the actual biological behaviour of the male emu is used as a model for good teaching.

Wanta also argues that listening to the language of country can reveal new strategies for living in the modern community context, as the following story explains.

Four of us were driving one day north-east of Supplejack pastoral station on the northern edge of Warlpiri country. We were hunting kangaroo, when someone noticed *marnikiji*, a Conker Berry Bush (*Carissa lanceolata*), which has small edible berries. Michael [another *kardiya*] jumped out to collect the fruit. He got back in the car and announced: ‘Four berries, that’s one for each of us.’ Wanta was immediately reduced to unconstrained laughter. *Kardiya* must be mad, he thought, to only pick four berries. He said *yapa* would have stripped the bush of berries and filled up cans of them and then they would have gorged on them all. Michael said that it must be the end of the season – there were only four berries left to pick.

This set Wanta thinking. Part of the language of country is the seasons. He stated that when the fruit is ripe the country is telling you that it is the right time to eat them. You also better eat fast because there will be no more until next year. In times gone by people listened to country and ate what was in season. Wanta argued that as this was a pattern that the Warlpiri body was attuned to, it could be replicated at the community shop: the shop could stock more or less of a particular type of food group according to the traditional Warlpiri eating patterns. For example, the start of summer is the time when people used to gather *Acacia* seed, and so the shop could stock more carbohydrate food groups in this period (or discount their price).

Knowing the language of country is part of the process of monitoring country and getting to know it, which is in turn an essential part of the management of country. As many social rules and structures are modelled on the natural environment, understanding the language of country reveals and reinforces the systems and codes of behaviour between people. When these systems are strengthened, people's obligations to look after country are also strengthened. Hence the relationships between people and land are self-sustaining.

4.3 Country and Skin

The relationship between skin and country is very close. Two examples are given here: land tenure, and a concept which we have called *yapa-kurlangu*, '[country] with people'.

4.3.1 Land tenure

Previously in Section 3.1, we described how people, land, songs, and ceremonies are linked through the skin system. One outcome of this relationship is that skin determines land ownership or, more accurately, custodianship. Song lines (also called 'dreaming story tracks' or 'dreaming narratives') traverse Warlpiri country. They may be long travelling epics crossing the whole of Australia and passing from language group to language group, or they may be more localised. Within Warlpiri country each dreaming track is usually associated with a particular patricouple skin group. For example, Wanta's *ngapa* (rain) dreaming is N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala. Different N/Jampijinpa + N/Jangala families are custodians for particular sections of the *ngapa* dreaming story track which is in turn associated with specific areas of Warlpiri country. At specified hand-over points (in the dreaming songlines and at sites on country) responsibility changes from one family group to another.

A person becomes a trustee for the country of their father and grandfather; this status is known as *kirda* and is called 'boss' in Aboriginal English. Hence, someone might ask 'Who is the *kirda* for that country?' A person is the ritual manager or *kurdungurlu* for their mother's and mother's father's country; in Aboriginal English this relationship is referred to as 'manager'.

Kirda and *kurdungurlu* must work together in fulfilling their responsibilities towards country. For example, *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* must both be present at meetings to make important decisions about country. *Kirda* and *kurdungurlu* must both be present to run ceremony. Individuals fulfil these roles in relation to country and ceremony on behalf of all Warlpiri people. As Wanta notes about his status as *kirda* for sites on his own country:

Anyone can go there as your guest because they can relate to that country through their father's father [FF], father's mother [FM], mother's mother [MM] and mother's father [MF], but you are the trustee for that place, for all Warlpiri.

A person feels most comfortable in visiting or making decisions about country for which they are *kirda*. They also have a greater responsibility to look after that country than any other place. Wanta uses *palka*, the body, as a metaphor to explain how relationships and responsibilities change according to skin (see Figure 4). The diagram is from Wanta's point of view as a male member of the N/Jampijinpa skin group and would be different for people from other skin groups.

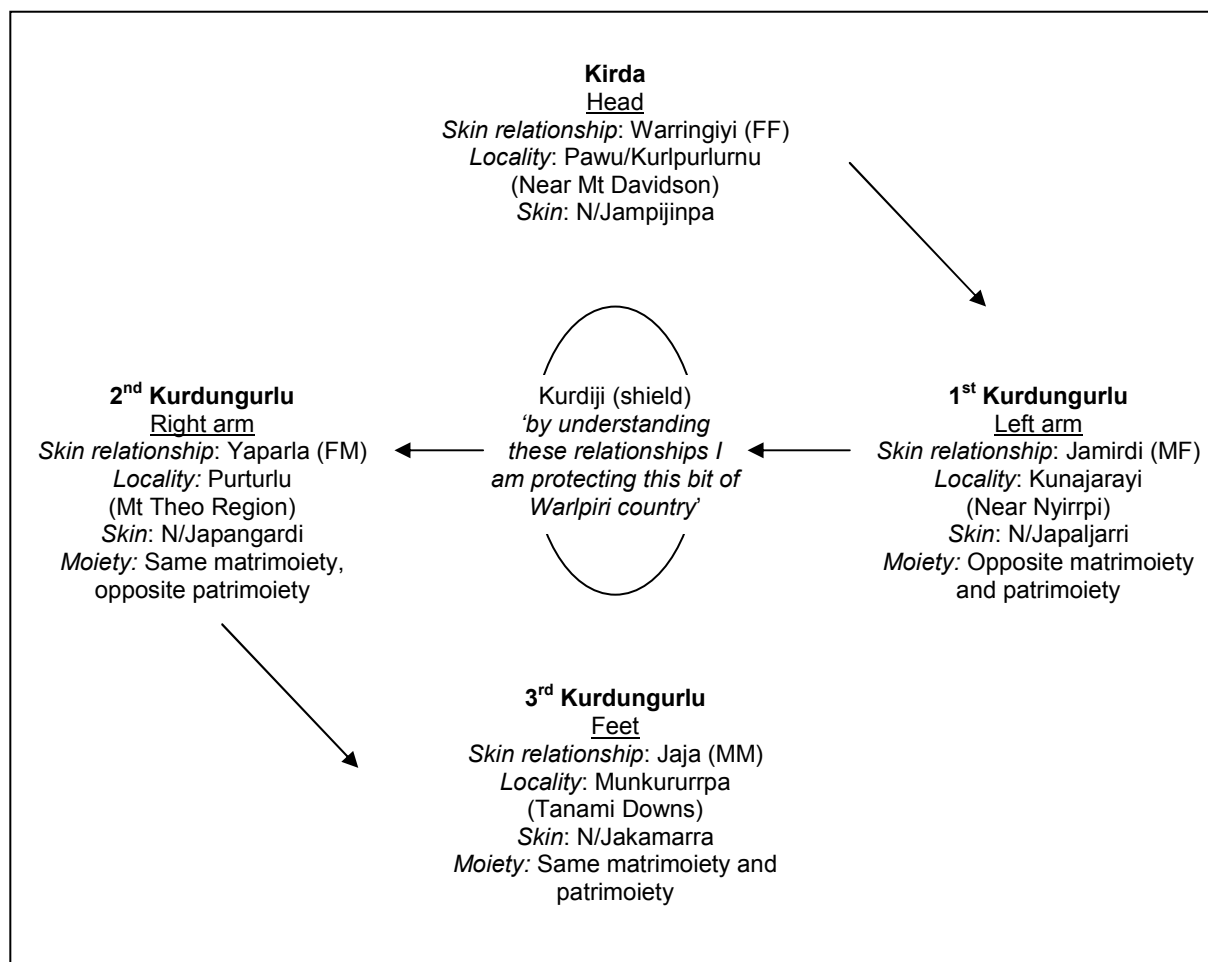


Figure 4: Skin relationships to Country from the perspective of a N/Jampijinpa skin group member

The body consists of the head, two arms, and the feet. The head, at the top, represents country a person has inherited from their father's father (FF); that is, country for which the person is *kirda*. It also represents the person's actual father's father. As noted earlier in this paper, both can be called *warringiyi* – 'grandfather'. Wanta has most rights to benefit from and freedom to speak for the country at his head, such as the sites *Pawu* and *Kurlpurlurnu*. Wanta's rights and responsibilities change as he moves with the arrows. For example, at the 'feet' he has limited rights and responsibilities and must show particular respect for his actual mother's mother (MM) and to his mother's mother's country. Because country, song, and ceremony are all connected through the skin system the diagram can also be used to determine responsibilities in those contexts.

There are obvious implications for practitioners working with Warlpiri. Any projects involving country need to take account of skin relationships. Most Warlpiri will generally refuse to speak for country, or sometimes even refuse to visit country that does not belong to them, and arguments can easily erupt if the convention is broken. If practitioners work with local people who know the skin law then they will know who to approach to speak for particular areas of country.

Skin is also what connects people to knowledge about country. For example, Wanta states that if people want to learn about country then they should ask the skin groups to tell them a story and eventually to sing the songs and ceremony for that country as well. In some cases it will again be necessary for the *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* to come together. Wanta explains that if a person knows all the stories from each family they become valuable to the whole tribe because they are looking after that knowledge.

That is why we are so sad when we lose an old person, because that knowledge goes.

A contemporary example could be the Aboriginal Ranger groups that operate in some communities. Wanta considers that they are well placed, if supported with traditional training, to become custodians of environmental knowledge. He also states that if rangers, or anyone else, know their skin relationships with the environment then they will respect the plants and animals. For example, some boys in Lajamanu no longer shoot male emus with chicks because they know the story of that animal and their relationship to it.

There are additional benefits of people learning traditional law about the environment. They will, by definition, also be learning about Skin, Language, Law, and Ceremony. Learning these elements of *ngurra-kurlu* will introduce them to the structures that maintain a healthy, functioning Warlpiri culture. This could ‘seed’ the community with people of strong character who are respected and can therefore have a stabilising influence on community life. A contrasting example is drawn from a youth leadership project in Lajamanu: non-Warlpiri people identified young people with leadership potential but because those youth did not have any cultural knowledge (i.e. *ngurra-kurlu*) they did not have the respect of their community and therefore were ineffectual as leaders.

4.3.2 *Yapa-kurlu* and *yapa-wangu*

In the developed world there is a persistent idea, popularised by geographers of the nineteenth century, which holds that ‘true nature’ or ‘healthy nature’ is an untamed wilderness consisting entirely of biological processes devoid of human interaction (Nash 1982; Cronon 1996). For the Warlpiri it is the opposite. Untamed wilderness is unhealthy. In Aboriginal English Warlpiri people frequently say that such country is ‘sick’, ‘dry’, or even ‘dangerous’.³¹ Wanta gives the example from a trip to *Pirdi Pirdi* (Thompson’s Rock Hole) in the Central Tanami in 2006:

That country made the old people sad. ‘Ohh’, they said. ‘We walked away from this country, yapa-wangurla now. It’s too bushy; we can’t recognise it. It doesn’t recognise us’. Oh no, that sad feeling came across those men.

Yapa-wangurla is translated as ‘without people’ and implies that country is ‘sick’. In contrast, country that is healthy is *yapa-kurlu*, ‘with people’; it is being used, engaged with, and learnt about. In Wanta’s words *yapa-kurlu* is:

³¹ Similar sentiments are expressed by other Aboriginal groups; see for example, Bradley (In press) in relation to the Yanyuwa people who are from the south-west Gulf of Carpentaria.

People being there for country and country being there for them. Yapa-kurlu is the idea that country can't do it by itself, it needs yapa to do it. It's like in the Milpirri rain song you need people to make the rain. It's like you need a man and a woman to make a baby – they work together.

The point that Wanta and Warlpiri elders stress relentlessly is their inherent expectation that the relationship between people and country is reciprocal: when people look after country, country will look after them. Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (2005) describes that same idea when she states that for Indigenous people 'mutual benefits' integrate an ecosystem. In Wanta's words:

I did talk about long hair. Grow too much hair and you can't see where you are going. If it catches on fire you will be finished. So it is not a bad idea to have a haircut every now and again. So in a way you can feel refreshed. Same with country, when it is yapa-kurlu [with people].

For instance, if there is too much bush, lightning might strike that land and create a bush fire. What about all those little animals and insects? They all have good stories that mob. Maybe it's better to burn that part off and leave that other part for later, that's how it is done. So yapa-kurlu is about being there to engage with that refreshment or re-cleansing. Like Jampijinpa [Warlpiri elder] said: lighting the fire is like making the country refreshed – kuntukuntu [which means] having new fresh growth. But I can ask you, was it yapa refreshing the land or was it land refreshing yapa?

The implications of this statement are that the simple acts of visiting country, visiting sacred sites, using country, burning it, monitoring it, hunting on it, and noticing the status of the plants and animals are all seen as a necessary part of looking after country.³² It is about building relationships, not just 'picnicking' as such visits are often described by non-Warlpiri people (see also Walsh 2000). Warlpiri also see that country will reciprocate the effort by looking after people. Country looks after people literally by providing food and shelter but also through all the other examples given previously in this paper, such as the fact that when people visit country they are reinforcing skin relationships which in turn give people a sense of identity and community. Country is also a multimedia and experiential³³ classroom for teaching ecological knowledge. In addition, country reveals metaphors in animals' behaviour which then become part of Warlpiri Law and Ceremony. Hence when people look after country according to the Law, they are practising the relationships that keep people functioning well in the community.

4.4 Country and Ceremony

In Section 3, Wanta talked about how ceremony created a sense of belonging, of feeling a part of something. During the research for this paper it occurred to us that ceremony was a motivational tool. Miles and Alan talked to Wanta about whether youth might feel 'part of a team' if they attended ceremony, and therefore they might be more motivated to learn about country or to care for country. Wanta's response was a firm 'No'. He explained that although what we said was true, ceremony is also an inherent 'part of the work'.

That ceremony is not a thing to be entertaining and that's all – it is teaching time for how we should walk in this country.

³² Bradley (2001:297) notes a similar relationship form Aboriginal people from the south-west Gulf of Carpentaria. He states: 'The Yanyuwa people in many respects do not see themselves as managers of their environment but, rather, as people who are in constant negotiation with it.'

³³ Experiential Learning is the process of making meaning from direct experience; that is, learning by doing.

In the following excerpt from a recorded interview, Wanta responds to the question, ‘How does ceremony look after country?’ (The initials MH represent the interviewer, and SP is Wanta).

SP: I’ll say this: ceremony is a mother. It is looking after you. What I’m really saying is that it is not yapa [Aboriginal people/Warlpiri] who have ceremony, it is ceremony that has yapa. Ceremony is holding yapa because you can’t look after mother [laughs], mother has to look after you.

When you are talking about mother and sons [in kurdiji, the initiation ceremony], mother is also country. We have to be good sons to look after it. Country gives you trees; you have to know which one to cut for boomerang. It gives you that animal; you have to know when to kill that animal and when to not kill that animal. It gives you all the mangarri [non-meat food]; you have to consume it quickly because you know it will change and you have to wait till next year for it, which is a long time to wait to eat it again [laughs].

MH: Is this the kind of knowledge that comes out in ceremony?

SP: Yes, bit like what I told you before. Take an old fella out and leave him up at Queensland. He only names those trees that he knows. He sees a platypus, ‘Hang on, that’s not in my country, what’s this thing?’ [laughs]. It is the same in the Top End; crocodile, you know. We haven’t got that one, we are a desert mob. But bring that old fella back to his country and he’ll tell you what the animals’ names are, he’ll tell you which animal dug that hole. He’ll tell you why that tree is dying.

MH: Don’t little boys learn that just by walking around with their grandmothers, watching them? What about *Wakirlpirri* [*Acacia coriacea* – bush bean]? Doesn’t a little boy learn that he can eat that one just by watching his grandmother?

SP: Ahh no – when you are a little one you only learn the surface part. When men take you³⁴ then you learn the underneath part. Women teach you how to eat food that is good for you and that makes your body strong. Now you have to go hand over³⁵ in that kurdiji [initiation ceremony] and now they’ll teach you all that story about that plant. What time he’s coming, what time to expect him. They’ll do it in this funny thing you call dance, corroboree [laughs]. You know it is a bit like going to school. When kardiya [non-Warlpiri] go to all this university, ceremony is like that one. To have this knowledge, knowing the way of learning about all these animals and plants.

In ceremony he is learning to celebrate that one now. He is learning how that bean has to teach him something too. I’ve got to know when to celebrate that bean. I have to know its Law. I have to know which family is responsible for it. Even though I’m talking about this bean, it is reminding me of that skin group. Yuwayi [yes]. That boy will think, ‘Ahh, this mob always dance this bean thing,’ and then he’ll start talking about it, ‘My jaja [MM] or my yapurla [FM] been dance this thing’; he can talk about it now. That’s stirring up that knowledge again, bringing it in, refreshing it again, you know. For anything [on country].

I mean how can you [kardiya] learn anything if you don’t have a book, or something written down? So you can say that ceremony is just a book [laughs and laughs]. It’s a book that you can read and learn more about which way is a better way. It talks back to you, it keeps you, it’s like a mother feeding you. ‘Food for thought’, I think there is a kardiya way of saying.

34 In this section Wanta is talking about boys and male initiation. Women have their own ceremony and Law and many are supremely knowledgeable about country. Some Warlpiri women are respected as powerful custodians of Women’s Law.

35 Hand Over is a reference to *Kurdiji* (an initiation ceremony) which is a celebration of motherhood and the symbolic ‘handing over’ of the initiates from the teaching of the women to the teaching of the men.

It is like giving rebirth to your knowledge again. Like old Jupurrurla [Warlpiri elder] there singing about Wampana [hare wallaby]. That way, it is fresh again. That is why we have that fire dance in that Milpirri. Giving rebirth to that country and really rebirth to that knowledge.

Thus ceremony is a book that teaches as in a university course, and it is also a celebration of knowledge and a ‘refreshment’ of knowledge. The following paragraphs give some specific examples of the way in which ceremony teaches about country.

4.4.1 Song in Ceremony

In ceremony, education occurs through dance, song, designs, paintings, and sacred objects. Here we consider just one example: song. Songs can be very long, sometimes many hundreds of verses. Here we limit ourselves to just a few verses. Songs also have different levels. This example is an entry level song called *yilpinji* from the *Ngapa* (rain) song cycle. Higher levels of this song would tell the same basic story but would reveal other information. In accordance with the skin law, this is a song that Wanta and his family have authority to share. The English is a free translation of the original Warlpiri; that is, a poetic attempt to find equivalent words and meanings. The full meaning of the Warlpiri words are explained in the ‘commentary’ beside each verse.

1st Verse

<i>Yujuku lakana</i>	Making a shelter (at <i>yujuku</i>)
<i>janpirta-janpirta</i>	Weaving the Spinifex grass
<i>pungurra-rlu pungu</i>	Working urgently, rhythmically

2nd Verse

<i>Larrpa malinyparlu</i>	Really strong rain
<i>Lawurru kangkarrarlu</i>	Driving, wind-swept rain
<i>Milpa ti jiti na</i>	Rain droplets released into the sky, swirling around
<i>Milpa ti jiti na</i>	

3rd Verse

<i>Paru kangkarrarlu</i>	Running water on the ground, flowing away
<i>Jil-jil kangkarrarlu</i>	Light rain is falling now
<i>Jil-jil kangkarrarlu</i>	There is water foam everywhere, flowing away

The following commentary is pieced together from two sources. Firstly, in the original recording the three men singing the song stopped regularly to explain what was happening. These conversations were translated from Warlpiri to English. Later Wanta, Miles, and Jerry Jangala (Wanta’s father and one of the original singers) went through each verse and Jerry carefully interpreted each word or phrase. Many of the Warlpiri words in the song do not have English counterparts or are deeply metaphorical, and it can therefore take many English words to adequately translate the meaning.

1st Verse

The song is about the actions of the *Ngapa* dreaming being. The dreaming being is a person, or persons, at this stage, but later it becomes the water. There might be three or four people but they are really one ‘being’ who could be any or all of the skin names Jampijinpa/Jangala and Nampijinpa/Nangala. The dreaming being is making a special kind of woven grass shelter called *Yukuju* at a site on country that is also called *Yukuju*. The grass he/she is using is a particular type of spinifex called *Mulkiji*. It must have long flower stalks and be quite green. The dreaming being is working quickly because rain is coming.

The word *janpirta-janpirta* refers to the particular action of weaving that is used to make this kind of shelter. The word *pungurra-rlu pungu* means ‘to begin weaving’. This phrase relates to the feeling that the dreaming ancestor is desperate because the rain is coming. However, the phrase also suggests that the being or beings are working in a ‘song-full’ fashion, they are in the rhythm of the work.

The knowledge in this single verse is considerable. There is the reference to the site *Yukuju*; the knowledge of which house to build for approaching rain; the advice to find rhythm in the work of weaving the shelter, particularly when under time pressure. There are also indications that it is the Jangalas/Jampijinpas and Nangalas/Nampijinpas who are custodians of this song cycle and related country at the site of *Yukuju*.

2nd Verse

The song is saying that it has really started raining hard. The rain is pouring down to the ground and onto the humpy. Then the rain starts to wash away the humpy and the dreaming being is getting wet. The word *Lawurru kangkarrarl* describes the scene created by a particular type of rain. It is the idea of the wind picking up and driving the rain drops around. The rain is coming in waves and the rain drops are being swept up and tossed around by the wind. There is the noise of one curtain of rain coming through and then another coming through; there is the sound of the wind; and there is the belting, crushing contact of the rain on the ground and on the humpy. This strength of contact is described specifically by the word *Larrpa malinyparlu*.

When translating these verses the English word used most often was ‘scene’. Each verse describes a whole scene. The verses show the supreme attention to detail. We are drawn not just to the rain but to the very particular type of rain, and to the behaviour of individual droplets within that rain, such as the quality of the contact they make with the ground. One can understand how someone learning this song would be encouraged to take very close notice of their environment. That is, songs are an excellent way to educate people about the environment.

3rd Verse

The scene begins with the word *Paru*, which describes the flood water that is sheeting across the ground immediately after the heavy rain. The water is yet to form channels and is flowing in a broad ‘sheet’ with a shiny surface.³⁶ It is not yet turbulent brown flood water. *Jil-jil* describes the type of rain falling at this time. It is the rain after the storm front has passed when it is still raining but not with the original violence; there are lots of bubbles and foam on the ground that have been driven out of the vegetation by the heavy rain. All this water is flowing away now across the ground. This is all contained in the phrase *Jil-jil*.

³⁶ Hydrologists call this laminar flow.

There are many more verses to this song section. It goes on to discuss frogs, their habitat and calls, lightning, hydrology, and birds such as the brown falcon.

We have given the example of song to show how ceremony and country are connected. Consider that in ceremony there is also dance, painting, ritual objects, body designs, and other ritual acts. If one of the functions of ceremony is to teach about country, then this is obviously a vastly complex multi-sensory learning experience.³⁷

Comparison to a classroom is relevant. If the teacher is a drone who stands in the front of the class, then a very small amount of learning takes place. But if students are interacting at a whole range of sensory levels such as the visual, aesthetic, kinaesthetic, tactile (through speaking, singing, dancing, listening, writing, and painting), then much deeper learning takes place. In short, ceremony is a good pedagogy.

When Wanta and other Warlpiri speak about this learning in Aboriginal English the word they use more often than ‘learning’ or ‘teaching’ is ‘celebrating’ knowledge. Ceremony is more than an intellectual endeavour; it makes people feel ‘part of something’ and builds emotional connections between people and country. As Wanta states:

Ceremony tells you when the seasons come, it tells you why that berry tastes bitter or why it tastes sweet. Ceremony tells you who it belongs to and who has to look after it. But it goes back to people; they have to benefit. Someone might say, ‘Ahh, this plant is my jaja [MM]. Ahh, this is yaparla [FM]. I’ll eat him.’ They know their relationship and they understand that it is from this country. If it is not from this country it’ll have a question mark.

You’ve got all these surroundings – this ‘nature’ – and ceremony is time for you to know them now instead of just walking aimlessly around. It is connecting everything, showing how it is functioning.

Wanta’s father, Jerry Jangala, outlined the purpose of ceremony (in relation to country) as follows:

Ceremony is Waya-parri-rni [*re-enactment*]. Copying and re-enacting the Jukurrpa. Remembering song, painting and dance, reminding us who to be and how to work with country, but it all comes back to Warringiyi [*grandfather and grandfather’s country*].

4.4.2 Summary of country and ceremony

Ceremony is related to sustaining country in five different ways:

- learning knowledge
- refreshing knowledge
- celebrating knowledge
- building relationships between people and country
- graduating people with all the skills to function on country.

This section has considered country in relation to Law, Language, Skin, and Ceremony. Country, from the Warlpiri perspective, is defined by the sum of all the relationships between these elements. By extension, to ‘care for country’ is to understand and support all of those relationships. In this paradigm sustaining country is not seen as a separate pursuit but as a natural part of living³⁸; the same elements that sustain peoples’ lives also sustain country.

³⁷ In this section we have discussed song in relation to country, but there are also songs that talk about Warlpiri society, kinship, marriage rules, law and order, ceremony, and so on.

³⁸ Bruce Rose’s report to the Central Land Council (Rose 1995) is a good example of the consistency with which central desert tribes have articulated the philosophy that ‘caring for country’ is not separate from other cultural elements. http://www.clc.org.au/media/publications/rose_reports/landman2.asp

5. Conclusion

This paper has shown how the inter-relationship of the elements of ngurra-kurlu create a system that supports the healthy functioning of Warlpiri people and country. The basis of this system can inform the structure of community projects, making them more relevant to the values of local people and, ultimately, more successful.

The elements of ngurra-kurlu are under threat from the pervasive influence of mainstream Australian culture. The five principles are still supported by Warlpiri people, although to varying degrees. Warlpiri people have won legal title to most of their tribal lands, and going on country and hunting remains a popular pastime. The skin system is still in use but some of the moiety divisions are neglected. Everyone speaks Warlpiri, although new dialects are emerging that make it hard for old and young people to communicate with each other (O'Shannessy 2006). Some of the big Warlpiri ceremonies are not performed often, but initiation ceremonies are still run almost every year. There is still respect for Warlpiri Law, but there are fewer and fewer elders who know it intimately.

Wanta's goal is to keep these elements strong for the benefit of Warlpiri and those who work with them. Importantly, he is not proposing a return to historical times but a revitalisation of Warlpiri culture that takes the underlying principles of the Law and applies it to the modern community context. As he puts it, he is '*giving the law a facelift*'. Through his work at the school and projects like the Milpirri event, Wanta and his supporters have shown that this approach resonates with young people: '*They like that taste.*'

Maintaining culture is a Warlpiri responsibility, but it is also significantly influenced by the action of organisations working in Aboriginal communities. As Rose Kunoth-Monks states:

You lose your culture through the choices you take or the choices circumstances force you to take, albeit reluctantly. Culture cannot be taken away; it is given away or reinforced with every decision that an individual makes. (Kunoth-Monks 2007:3)

Ngurra-kurlu can help people make choices that will maintain culture in a way that supports the healthy functioning of people and country. For the local Warlpiri people, particularly youth, ngurra-kurlu highlights the key elements of Warlpiri culture that they should learn and teach. For practitioners, ngurra-kurlu is a template that can ensure that participation in community projects does not force people to make choices that compromise their culture and identity.

Warlpiri and mainstream practitioners need to work together for this way of thinking to be successful. Wanta has articulated ngurra-kurlu in order to provide a common framework and goal. As he states:

The purpose of this thing is setting up strong walls ... That is what ngurra-kurlu does: 'many hands, one mind'. The shop needs to work properly, health needs to work properly ... All thinking about the same thing: the proper functioning of community and people and country.

At a general level, most Australian Aboriginal groups have key elements in their culture that are comparable to those in ngurra-kurlu. The details vary from the Warlpiri examples given here, but the process can remain the same: use the elements of world view and culture that are important to the moral order and identity of local people as a basis for engaging with contemporary issues, including through program design.

What then is the next step for practitioners working with Aboriginal communities? It would be a mistake for practitioners to use ngurra-kurlu as a tool to design more culturally appropriate programs in the office for ‘delivery’ to communities. Culturally adapted solutions to problems always require more detailed local knowledge than is provided by the ngurra-kurlu template. Warlpiri and non-Warlpiri must work together and share their expertise so that the goals of both sides are met. Some novel ideas are given in this paper, such as the way in which skin motivates some people towards certain types of jobs and how ceremony can teach ecological knowledge. There will be many other examples. Ngurra-kurlu is not the end result; rather, it is a template for a process. The ways in which ngurra-kurlu are used will vary from program to program, and it will find its full contemporary application in ways that are shaped by the desires and goals of those who use it to work together. For practitioners the next step is to locate those Aboriginal people with energy and ideas for the task at hand and then, by using ngurra-kurlu (or a similar device), work together to find the ways in which cultural elements can be adapted to contemporary community life.

Warlpiri elders repeatedly make the point that respecting Warlpiri culture is not required simply as a concession to Warlpiri people by those embedded in the dominant mainstream Australian culture. Warlpiri elders maintain that the structures and philosophies within ngurra-kurlu could be of benefit to all Australians. For example, Warlpiri songs could teach people in mainstream Australia about the environment; ceremony could show new principles of dispute resolution; language can provide new words to describe the environment; skin could provide models for community living. As a nation preoccupied with ‘fixing’ Aboriginal issues, it is important to remember that information and help can flow two ways. There are principles borne of a long association with this land that we, the ‘new Australians’, ought to be conscious of (see also Stanner 1968:37). Wanta says:

Everyone has to have this knowledge of living together. It’s towards being Australian, what it really means to be Australian. Both kardiya way and yapa way.

The nation has recently said ‘Sorry’. However, there has yet to be the recognition that in many, many cases, saying ‘Thank you’ would also be appropriate. Ngurra-kurlu is one such case.

In summary, ngurra-kurlu is about providing a clear direction for the future, one which will protect Warlpiri people and their country for the benefit of all Australians. In Warlpiri there is a metaphor for this protection: *kurdiji*, the shield, which has been mentioned throughout this paper. *Kurdiji* is shown as a perimeter around the five points of ngurra-kurlu in the Figure 3 painting by Daniel Jupurrurla Rockman in Section 3.3. Wanta refers to language as a shield (Section 3.4 and 4.2.1) and skin as a shield in Figure 4 in Section 4.3.1. *Kurdiji* is also the name of the Warlpiri initiation ceremony. The central theme behind all these examples is that when a person internalises all of the principles of ngurra-kurlu, they become like a shield for their people and their country. That is, their strength of character metaphorically covers people and country and protects them from damage, in the same way a shield protects a fighter from attack. This is the protection of ngurra-kurlu for people and country.



Figure 5: Ngurra-kurlu design from Milpirri 2007

Note: This is a large ngurra-kurlu sculpture which was set on fire at the end of the 2007 Milpirri event. In a western paradigm fire usually means the end of something, but Wanta notes that in a Warlpiri worldview it is associated with revitalisation.

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