

**Shown but not Shared, Presented but not Proffered:
Redefining Ritual Identity among Warlpiri
Ritual Performers, 1990-2000**

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Little has been written on the construction and projection of indigenous social identity in public ('non-restricted') ritual among Aboriginal Australians. Elsewhere, I have analysed nearly half a century of such public rituals (1946-1990) among the Warlpiri of Yuendumu in Central Australia, concentrating on the shifting forces of gender and kinship. This paper focuses on the key moments motivating senior Warlpiri women, since the 1990s, to reconfigure their ritual participation and roles in inter-indigenous ceremonial events. I analyse how these women participate in inter-Aboriginal performances, exhibiting the iconic and sensory virtues of the Dreaming and weaving new forms of political identity, shaped by the pressures of neo-colonialism, with female ambassadors of other Aboriginal groups. I argue that in this performative process women are reconfiguring the meanings of Aboriginalities and rearticulating their connectedness to one another, a connectedness rooted in their beliefs and responsibilities towards the Dreaming.

For M. Nampijinpa L.
(1936-2003)

Ever since anthropology 'discovered' Australian religion—starting with the mid-nineteenth century contributions of Spencer and Gillen, whose fieldwork fueled the more speculative armchair investigations of Durkheim and his heirs—much focus has been directed at the ritual manifestation of the Aboriginal cosmology known as the Dreaming.¹ And though the frequency of such ceremonial performances has diminished for the Aborigines, this in no way negates the analytic dividends derived from the study of current uses of ritual performance. Indeed, the modified functionality of Aboriginal ceremony, by virtue of its dramatic evolution both in purpose and structure, offers tremendous insight into the dynamic construction of indigenous social identity in a context of extended external colonial pressure.

Among the Warlpiri Aborigines of Yuendumu, a settlement located 300 kilometres

northwest of Alice Springs, perhaps the most significant changes in ritual engagement are those related to gender. It is women who now dominate the public ritual life of the settlement, serving as gatekeepers of the public expression of Warlpiri ceremonial knowledge. This protective role not only functions within what Myers (2002: 6) calls the 'intercultural space' that conjoins Aboriginal and White society, but also extends to settings of intracultural exchange—neocolonial situations in which Aborigines define 'Aboriginality' and exclude Whites.²

The implications of this gender shift should not be underestimated. True, the frequency and pervasiveness of ritual has diminished significantly since Meggitt (1966) and Munn (1973) first documented the ceremonial repertoire of Warlpiri men back in the 1950s. Nonetheless, this scaled-back reality of Warlpiri ritual, now overseen by women, points to how an indigenous society can redeploy its ritual modes of social engagement in ways that offset and even, at times, dilute the pressures of a dominant society. In short, public rituals, however small in number, are large in social significance. They have become one of the primary arenas in which the Warlpiri of Yuendumu negotiate their political identity in relation to other Aboriginal groups against the backdrop of non-indigenous post-colonial hegemony.

The public ceremonies currently performed at Yuendumu resemble, at least on a superficial level, women's only ceremonies (*yawulyu*) as well as joint ceremonies performed by both men and women conducted before sedentarisation in the 1940s. Like their predecessors, current rituals are kin-based events (though the force of the kinship bond has eroded) that reify the Dreaming myths linking performers to their relatives, to their ancestral lands, and their past. But the rationale for these performances has undergone significant change—change that serves to highlight indigenous response to non-indigenous domination. As such, an analysis of public performance as 'a field of dreams' provides a window to understand the contemporary nature of Aboriginal social engagement.

Elsewhere, I have analysed nearly half a century of public rituals (1946-1990) among the Warlpiri of Yuendumu, concentrating on the shifting forces of gender and kinship in the constitution and performance of such rituals (Dussart 2000a). This paper updates that earlier research on the Warlpiri women of Yuendumu, and in particular its ritual leaders, known variously as *yamparru*, who oversee the majority of public rituals that declare the richness of Warlpiri cosmology to a broader public. Over the last ten years, ritual leaders have encouraged other ritual participants to enter an entirely new phase of ritual representation—one that substantively differs from earlier forms of ceremonial experience that were intricately linked to the negotiation and exchange of ritual material (e.g. Meggitt 1966, Kolig 1981, Poirier 1996, Dussart 2000a, Peterson 2000). Indeed, the very notion of negotiation and exchange of ritual material—so fundamental in defining men's ceremonial activities such as *purlapa* and women's events such as *yawulyu warrajanyayirni*—are no longer privileged among the Warlpiri in the public domain.³ Specifically, this paper focuses on the key moments in the decade long realignment of performative priorities motivating public ritual. Public performances might look the same, but their value and place within the settlement have altered substantially. Very little, if any, ritual material is exchanged at these new events. Ritual now tends to be declared or shown in ways that do not follow 'traditional' paths of engagement, which generally necessitated the transfer of performative rights of ritual reproduction from performer to viewer, following (and concluding with) a complex series of inter-kin group negotiations.

In sidestepping the 'traditional' exchange-based dimensions of ritual, predicated on pre- and post-ceremonial negotiations, the female ritual leaders guiding much of the public

ritual life at Yuendumu have revised the purpose of those performances. This provides a further affirmation of the 'constancy of change' that is an inherent part of contemporary ceremonial life among Yuendumu's diminishing population of ritual performers (see also Dussart 2000a: 221). First at ceremonies in the towns of Bagot (1990) and Derby (1991) and later at annual events organised at the Women's Law and Culture Meetings (1993-present), the Warlpiri female ritual performers of Yuendumu have increasingly used public ritual as a vehicle for political expression, connecting them to previously unrelated leaders from other regional towns and settlements located at what Hughes-d'Aeth (1999: 51) calls the 'margins of colonial space'. Numerous aspects of these contemporary ceremonial arrangements—the variably restricted nature of the material exchanged; the motives of performance; the ever-changing geographical loci of enactment; the language deployed during the events—ultimately speak to the manner in which Yuendumu's female ritual performers have been compelled to redeploy and revalue the currency of ritual and how, in so doing, they are adapting themselves to the pressures of post-sedentarised existence, where fewer and fewer women are maintaining the Warlpiri cosmology through 'traditional' forms of ritual representation.

Public ritual: from community to court and from court to canvas

To chart the nature of change in public ritual, it is important to trace some of the shifts from the early days of Yuendumu Warlpiri sedentarisation (1946) to the passage of the *Native Title Act* (1993), the landmark legislation that granted broad recognition of indigenous rights.⁴ As has been documented in some of my earlier publications based on two decades of fieldwork, that first forty years of public ritual at Yuendumu can be characterised by three distinct, albeit overlapping, periods of ritual activity.

The first period—one that lasted some thirty years, until the passage, in 1976, of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act*—was principally indigenous in purpose and consequence. During that period, public ritual at Yuendumu was performed primarily by men, in settlement ceremonies known as *purlapa*, for an audience that was exclusively Aboriginal and sedentarised.⁵ In the second period, demarcated and influenced by the passage of the above-mentioned Act, public ritual expanded to include female performers and an audience that extended to *kardiya*, or non-Aboriginal viewers.⁶ The performance of ritual by women and men during stage two—often (but not exclusively) motivated by new legal and societal pressures linked to the passage of the Act—followed complex lines of kinship that underlined expanded means of internal ritual representation.⁷ Earlier, wholly indigenous imperatives were less consequential during public ritual events stimulated by governmental land rights legislation. Public ritual moved from settlement to Land Claim courts, as externally politicised events generated forums and forms of Aboriginal self-representation in a cross-cultural context, and as such constituted an act of overt advocacy. A profound change in the gender make-up of the public performances accompanied this realignment of purpose. Male ritual performers effectively ceded the public forums (and again, forms) of ceremonial representation to their female kin. Broadly stated, men's *purlapa* ceremonies yielded to women's *yawulyu warrajanyayirni*.

Once land claim litigation matters diminished in this part of Australia, another cross-cultural phenomenon arose in settlement life and it, too, spurred public representation of the Dreaming for non-Aboriginal consumption. The acrylic art movement catalysed public ceremonies tethered to exhibitions of the 'Dot' paintings produced by Central Desert artists. The newfound demand for public performance, which began in earnest during the 1980s, transported the ritual representation of the Dreaming, or *Jukurrpa* in Warlpiri,

beyond the homes and countries of the Warlpiri Ancestors and precipitated public ritual performances tied to art openings all over the world (see Dussart 2000a: ch. 6). The stimulus for public ritual was soon linked more to canvas commissions than to courtroom imperatives. Despite the foreign locale of representation—which prompted extensive discussions about potential effects, negative and positive, on the Dreaming's *ngurra*, or home, as well as the relative strength of the potential performers and their susceptibility to *yirrarru jarrimi*, or to becoming homesick, a condition that could threaten other kin—the performances, particularly in the beginning of this third phase, followed strict ties of residential kinship authority. Indeed, public ritual became a setting in which many residential battles played themselves out. Rights to perform were closely negotiated before enactment and exactly compensated afterwards. Furthermore, prior to enactment there was extensive training (*piljipiljijarrimi*) to assure proper execution at the open events.

Certainly, this trisection of public ritual is not as neat and tidy as my scheme suggests. To give one obvious example, public representations of Warlpiri Dreaming tied to art exhibitions have actually extended beyond the date specified. Nevertheless, it is helpful to establish these markers in order to clarify just how varied the motives fuelling public ritual were during the first forty or so years of sedentarised life at Yuendumu. During Periods One through Three, public ritual, whether performed by men or women or women and men jointly, always served to nurture the *Jukurpa*. This was mainly achieved through the obligatory circulation of ritual knowledge, a process amply detailed in other works (see Dussart 1999, 2000a, 2000b). Even when the material presented had little restricted value, the public ritual always demanded prefatory and post-ceremonial exchange that followed the pattern of restricted rituals—a negotiation of material that increasingly energised and strengthened the prestige of certain residential kin group networks at Yuendumu and the Ancestral Beings associated with those groups. In short, the third phase of public ritual provided a forum for ritual competition that paralleled the restricted events that transpired outside the gaze of the uninitiated. It necessitated negotiation and surveillance between sets of kin known as owners or *kirda* and managers or *kundungurlu*, whose ties are at the very core of Warlpiri ritual expression.⁸

All that began to change, however, in the early 1990s, when the processes of collaborative oversight—a key part of all ritual representation—began to wane. Increasingly, ritual performers took greater self-guided responsibility over the enactment of the Dreamings that they owned. This change pointed to the diminished role of residential surveillance. The suspension of exchange obligations and monitoring acts at public performances of the Dreaming was not seen to negate the ritual effectiveness of the newly modified ritual activity. The dances and songs were still considered *wiri*, or potent. However, the unilaterally undertaken acts did, by their very independent nature, diminish the kind of residential kin group connection found in ritual. Stated in the most basic terms, by sidestepping 'traditional' responsibilities to land and kin, ritual performers, guided by ritual leaders, who enacted their Dreamings during inter-Aboriginal events began to reconstitute their notions of connectedness in matters of ritual. They shifted their foci of affirmation to other female leaders and other performers from other settlements, and by doing so privileged a form of personal prestige in matters of cosmological nurturance less visibly present during the public events performed prior to this shift.

In other work, I have noted that the motives for public performance among ritually active performers included 'education, remuneration, negotiation, protestation, association, and identification' (Dussart 2000a: 227-8). Regarding the final motive on the list, I wrote: 'The last rationale [identification] was one pegged more to camp-specific kin group pride than to broader Aboriginal declarations of self'.⁹ That is less true now, as close study of

the last ten years of public ritual attests. Chronologically, this newest phase of public ritual engagement can be broadly grouped into two subsidiary phases: a transitional period of frequent, if diffuse, ritual engagements lasting three years (1990-1993) followed by a period of ceremonial consolidation and relative regularity linked to the 'Women's Law and Culture Meetings', a gathering organised annually in different Aboriginal centres throughout the Northern Territory.

Public ritual: 1990-1993

In the early 1990s, both female and male *yamparru* at Yuendumu started to resist orchestrating public rituals for Whites. Disillusioned and disappointed by the response from their non-Aboriginal audience, which they perceived as uncomprehending and even, at times, apathetic to their claims and the potency of the Dreaming performed, the *yamparru* of Yuendumu reined in their commitment to public expressions of the *Jukurrpa*. Their frustration was expressed regularly in the phrase '*Wala-nyinaja kularnalujana, lawa!*', roughly rendered as 'We [Warlpiri] are not able to rely [on them]!'—'them' referring to the non-Aboriginal audience. This dissatisfaction and stress grew until cross-cultural expressions of the *Jukurrpa* were eventually characterised as *jatujatu*, or 'real humbug'.¹⁰ As one woman explained of the white viewers: 'All they want is to talk. They do not understand that the Dreaming is there when we dance. They do not understand that we have to dance and sing for our land. Talking gives me a headache really. White people talk too much, like birds!'

This verbal static offends many ritual performers deeply. They see the intrusion of the spectators as *punku*, or 'lacking values, bad, unworthy'. Furthermore, the questions from Whites about their performances diminish, in the eyes of the performers, the impact of the Ancestral Dreaming forces on both the performers and the audience. Learning is about watching, not asking questions. This sense of alienation is by no means unique to the ritual sphere, as is apparent in the rich and varied literature dealing with cross-cultural frustration. Francesca Merlan (1995), for example, has documented a similar sense of Aboriginal alienation in her analysis of the White-indigenous dynamic during land claims. Indeed, many of the complaints she gathered in her fieldwork—complaints regarding Western scheduling demands and the effects of invasive 'chatter' on the dilution of ritual potency—mirror the comments made by ritual performers at Yuendumu.¹¹

Recognising the limited impact of public ritual on non-indigenous viewers, the Warlpiri curtailed performances for non-indigenous audiences and intensified their commitment to the broadly attended Aboriginal ceremonies that brought them into contact with other Aboriginal groups from regional communities.¹² Warlpiri ritual leaders from Yuendumu active in the public representations of ritual (almost all of whom were women) slowly co-opted or adapted various non-indigenous initiatives undertaken by a variety of organisations, such as the 'quasi-governmental, federally-managed Land Councils' (see Merlan 1998: 69), local grassroots organisations, as well as local, national and private women's and arts organisations) for ceremonial purposes. At such pan-Aboriginal events, the performers from Yuendumu slowly began to sidestep ritual patterns of residential engagement and surveillance to focus, instead, on the connections formed among ritual performers and their leaders in attendance. Gone were the cross-kin *kirda* ownership and *kurdungurlu* managerial protocols that accompanied earlier public performances. In their place, the Warlpiri female ritual performers formed bonds with other ritually involved women from (previously) unassociated settlements or small towns. As I said, the seeds of the reinvented functionality of public ritual were planted at Yuendumu at the beginning of

the 1990s, in that period of rhetorical and political turbulence leading up to the passage of the *Native Title Act* of 1993. It was a key moment in the history of Warlpiri ritual life, during which the desire to perform for non-indigenous audiences was superseded by an interest in the declaration of a more holistically Aboriginal vitality through the agency of ritual.¹³

Perhaps the most significant moment of inter-group ritual engagement during this transitional period was 1990-91, when two ceremonial events took place, the first in the Bagot community located outside Darwin and the second in the town of Derby. Taken together these events reflect a significant reconfiguration of priorities among the *yamparru* women. The first of these events, sponsored by the National Aborigines' and Torres Strait Islanders' Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC), brought Yuendumu's *yamparru* in contact with Aboriginal ritual leaders from other Central and Western Desert Aboriginal groups. Unlike many previous events, which were generally funded, in toto, by external entities, participation at the Bagot gathering demanded an indigenous commitment of economic resources to finance the trip. Twenty-two Warlpiri female ritual performers, constituting fully half of the ritually regularly active performers of the settlement, made the 1800-kilometre trip. The women who travelled to Bagot recalled with pride that they had managed to secure enough money to reach their destination and buy food. One of the interviewees clearly explained that such a trip was only possible because their kin, even younger ones, continued to support senior women in the pursuit of their ritual commitments.¹⁴ As Rosy Nangala Fleming noted: 'Since Bagot, we go and dance at these big women meetings, this is important for us, for the Dreaming. We do not take any children, this is serious business¹⁵ for old women who know about the Dreaming, this is not for young kids or uninitiated people'.¹⁶

Initially unencumbered by their daily kinship responsibilities and proud of the financial support they had received from their kin, the Yuendumu women's commitment to the event at Bagot was limited to observation of other Aboriginal groups' activities. As a number of women subsequently explained, they went to Bagot *nyanjaku*, 'to watch', and *wirntijalpalu karntapatuju lawa*, 'women did not go to dance'. Eventually, however, the female *yamparru* of Yuendumu did orchestrate and perform an extensive but unrestricted repertoire of *yawulyu warrajanyayirni* (women's only public events) that invoked the Emu, Goanna, Bush Carrot and Water Dreamings, to name just a few. As Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels later explained of the Bagot event:

We did not want to dance at first. We did not know these women from other places. We did not know their country. However, they danced so we danced as well. We showed them that we are strong Warlpiri women from the land of spinifex [Tanami Desert]. We showed them our Dreamings. We danced every day for a week. We made lots of friends now everywhere.

Dolly's observation contains numerous potent phrases that warrant further clarification. Issues of reluctance, competency, knowledge of performative repertoire and the concomitant physical and spiritual strength necessitated by performance—in short, all those qualities and issues that are folded into the negotiation preceding more 'traditional' and 'restricted' events were present in the initial hesitation of the ritual performers from Yuendumu. The reason Dolly 'did not want to dance at first' was that she worried that she and those of her kin attending the Bagot gathering lacked the sanction of those kin group members with whom she shared the rights and duties over the Dreaming stories. She feared she might not be entitled to perform certain Dreaming stories requested at the event, lacking as she did the appropriate authorisation of other *kirda* (owners) and *kurdungurlu*

(managers) responsible for the particular Dreamings. She also worried about the repercussions of performance in a geographic and cosmological terrain unfamiliar to them ('We did not know their country'). Additionally, the absence of formal ties to the ritual leaders with whom and for whom they would perform ran counter to the 'traditional' dynamics of ceremonial collaboration. However, these various concerns were offset (if not negated) by the predominance of Aboriginal viewers at the *wiri* and *kanunju*, or 'very potent' and 'inside' celebration.¹⁷ Because the audience was predominantly indigenous, the Warlpiri *yamparru* felt an urge to affirm the richness of their Dreamings and associated sites among ritual leaders who could appreciate the performative nuance and the spiritual vitality of their performance. Thus initial resistance faded and the senior women performed *yawulyu* Dreamings for the remaining six-day stay.

When asked why the Bagot event retains a special place in the recollection of Yuendumu's ritual legacy, interviewees noted that though they were accustomed to perform for weeks at a time during 'traditional' ritual cycles, it was rare for Yuendumu ritual performers to have the opportunity to dance with so many groups of Aboriginal women at once, making the ritual events new or different (*jinta-karri jinta-karri*). *Yamparru* articulated the nature of the novelty of such events. They explained that restricted knowledge (*wiri*) was performed by other Aboriginal groups in attendance and yet they felt no obligation either to teach their Dreamings or learn the Dreamings of other groups. This raises a fundamental question: Why did Yuendumu's ritual performers feel comfortable undertaking a representation that lacked the accompanying negotiation over the exchange of performative rights over Dreaming stories? The essence of the answer resides in the last line of Dolly's brief assessment: 'We made lots of friends everywhere'. The Warlpiri term that Dolly used for friends—*marlpa*—characterises the non-kin nature of the bonds formed at Bagot. The nature of *marlpa* bonds differs from the kinship bonds invoked 'traditionally', which find expression in the term *warlalja*.¹⁸ This notion of *marlpa* friendship must be distinguished from *warlalja* in that it expresses today a broadly conceived pan-Aboriginal connection among indigenous ritual leaders that obviates reciprocal ritual obligation formalised in the cross-group exchanges undertaken at Yuendumu. In essence, *marlpa* bonds today do not involve the negotiation of kin-based ritual knowledge for the purpose of performance. Interviews with ritual leaders about the significance of the Bagot event reinvented this newly resonant notion of pan-Aboriginal 'friendship' as a dividend rarely accrued (or valued) in 'traditional' ceremonial contexts. Also worth noting is the absence of previously expressed notions of competition or 'winning', a dynamic documented elsewhere (Dussart 2000a: 91-95, 137-8). In fact, the only ritual materials exchanged at this and subsequent events were *yilpinji*, or love songs, which the Warlpiri of Yuendumu posit outside the repertoire of ceremonies that nurture their ancestors, their lands and their Dreaming.¹⁹

The newly constituted ceremonies established a bond among ritually knowledgeable older women who lacked more formal ties of land-based connectedness. And though the dances and songs avoided the exchange of performative rights, they generated a new sense of solidarity among the ritually knowledgeable women in attendance. *Marlpa* bonds established at Bagot were reinforced the following year in the town of Derby, where Yuendumu's senior women, after collecting enough money for travel and food, reconvened for another predominantly indigenous event—this one sponsored by the North West Women's Association. Here again, public ceremonial displays—principally of the Emu and Fire Dreamings—brought Yuendumu's ritually active performers together with their counterparts from other Aboriginal communities. And once more, ceremonies were enacted without the strenuous negotiations that generally preceded, accompanied, and

followed public ritual enactment. Non-performative matters of cosmological nurturance such as pre-ritual negotiation were subsumed to the culturally affirmative imperatives of the event itself. The women danced to declare their fluency of expression and the knowledge it implied, and they did so unencumbered by the kin group duties that attended such displays. Implicit in these performances was the fact that the dancing was being shown as an expression of the performers' ritual competence, but not being offered to the viewers for use in their own repertoires of cosmological nurturance. In essence it was presented, but not proffered, shown but not 'shared', at least in the 'traditional' sense. The viewers could not incorporate the performative details into their dances, they could only bear 'witness'²⁰ to the viability of the performer's vitality. Performers were consistent, as they did not incorporate into their own repertoire anything they watched of others at any of the women's meetings they attended.

As in Bagot, the Derby gathering was characterised by initial resistance followed by spirited ritual enactment that lasted two days. The Yuendumu ritual performers became aware that they could 'make friends' (again the term *marlpa* was used) among those present and perform for them without violating the kinship obligations of those who were not in attendance. The Derby event brought into high relief the difference between the 'traditional' ceremonies and the newer ones. Celebrations transacted in a broader, pan-Aboriginal context generated an outlet of ritual expression that could not otherwise take place. Even fiercely competitive ritual leaders from different Warlpiri neighboring communities—for example Yuendumu and Nyirripi—could create more casual bonds of ritual and spiritual 'connectedness' not possible during small-scale events limited to related kin. The 'traditional' notion of 'winning' that was an inherent part of previous events was also absent from Derby, supplanted by a broader non-competitive *Yapa* (Warlpiri for Aborigines), or pan-Aboriginal, ethos implied in the following quote: 'All women danced correctly. All women were strong'. These descriptors of strength, correctness and togetherness indicate how important the performance of the Dreaming remains for the participants and how Yuendumu performers construct a gendered practice of 'Aboriginality' primarily based on bonds of friendship rather than kin relations.

Bagot and Derby immediately entered the long-term ritual discourse of Yuendumu's *yamparru* and other attendees. This is noteworthy since the geographic locales possessed no direct performative significance for the *yamparru* from Yuendumu. Neither place was part of the *Jukurpa* itineraries of the performers. And yet participation at those two gatherings was subsequently invoked as consequential to the declaration of leadership during restricted events, as well as offering proof of authority in other ritual (and non-ritual) contexts. As a result, Bagot and Derby became part of a topology of Aboriginality that privileged newer forms of identity politics, forms that overlapped but did not compete overtly with the more 'traditional' expressions of ritual authority enunciated in restricted representations of the *Jukurpa* repertoire.²¹

Public ritual: 1993 to 2000

In the wake of Bagot and Derby more such inter-group events were organised in quick succession. In the early 1990s, events transported Yuendumu's *yamparru* all over the Northern Territory and Western Australia—to Docker River, Utopia, Balgo, Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Bililuna, Darwin—often as many as four times a year.²² For each event Yuendumu women pooled enough money to travel and relied on relatives and friends, as well as minimally on Land Councils to help them attend these meetings in often quite distant places. This frenzied pace of ritual representation created much stress, according to

the women interviewed at the time and subsequently. But the stress was deemed worthwhile as broader bonds of connectedness were formed among Yuendumu's female ritual actors and those from other settlements and towns. Performances for and with non-Warlpiri indigenous ritual senior performers in *wiri* events intensified and repertoires expanded as the concern of reciprocal obligation subsided. By 1993, the schedule of public ritual representation began to focus on a single annual event, one that has grown in significance and size ever since, called the Women's Law and Culture Meeting. Initially hosted in 1993 by Alyawarra women from Utopia and sponsored by the Central Land Council, this yearly meeting brought (and continues to bring) together Aboriginal ritual performers for ceremonial displays that carried little or no performative rights or obligations, according to Warlpiri participants, for the viewers.²³ That first 1993 gathering included 200 ritual performers from nearly a dozen communities.²⁴ By 1995 the event, which took place at Docker River, swelled to 500. By 1999, over 800 women attended the meeting, this time held in Kintore.²⁵

Despite the growing scale, for the first few years, the Women's Law and Culture Meetings resembled the Bagot and Derby events in their avoidance of ceremonial reenactments of the *Jukurrpa* deemed 'restricted'. However, starting around 1996, the Warlpiri *yamparru* extended their performative repertoire to include certain non-public (i.e. 'restricted') women's only versions of their Dreaming stories for an audience of initiated Aboriginal women. Again, it must be made clear that no performative rights accrued to viewers of these Dreamings in the manner they would most likely have had the performance been negotiated along the lines of 'traditional business'. Still, it was recognised by those present that the performance of restricted segments marked a radical departure from the routines that accompanied earlier public displays. There was precedence for performing restricted material among non-Warlpiri, but it was always accompanied by a good deal of negotiation and tended to be tethered to matters of initiation and other 'traditional' ceremonies. By 1997, restricted versions of attendees' Dreaming stories were performed with little negotiation of exchange of rights.²⁶ When asked why such enactments received the sanction, or at least passive acceptance, of kin who did not attend the events, the leaders noted that no performative rights to the most potent of Warlpiri Dreaming ceremonies had been bestowed on viewers. That is not to say that the ritual resonance is debased absent exchange. According to the participants, the dances always nurture the *Jukurrpa*. They regularly noted that the inter-group events made their 'bellies happy', a sign of health, physical and spiritual nurturance shared with all present, with friends.

Conclusion

To reiterate an earlier observation, the performance of public ritual at Yuendumu serves as a space where Warlpiri society is constructed and projected. With the erosion of kin obligations during public events, and the reduction of performances intended for non-indigenous audiences, Warlpiri ritual leaders have reconfigured the social function of ceremony. They now undertake ceremony as a means of establishing connective (and collective) strength with the senior ritual performers from other settlements.²⁷ This reconfiguration is a response to the diminishing demands for traditionally motivated ritual within the settlement and the frustration public ritual generates in inter-cultural contexts. But, one enabling question remains to be studied: What do the Women's Law and Culture Meetings do to the processes of Aboriginalisation? Put differently, we might ask how such meetings change the ways Aboriginal participants see one another, see themselves in

relation to the State and to Australian society.

Following Jeremy Beckett's (1985) pioneering discussion on the construction of Aboriginality, the events discussed in this paper can be understood as forums in which the performers and their leaders express their bonds to other performers, and in which notions of 'Aboriginalities' are made. The competitive dimensions of public ritual no longer find regular expression. This change displays, yet again, the dynamic nature of a so-called sedentary society and points to the fluid declarations of ritual, as an agent of social representation. Stated succinctly, inter-indigenous ritual projects the reality of an aging population of ritual performers who find comfort and nurturance of their cosmology in ceremonies with other like-trained performers, with other Aboriginal friends. At the Women's Law and Culture Meetings, participants embrace their togetherness by watching, showing and proffering, in other words by delineating, the specificity of everyone's responsibility and agency *vis-à-vis* land and kin. In their roles as cultural gatekeepers, senior Warlpiri women are seizing the opportunity to articulate, in a neo-colonial era, 'pan-Aboriginal' socialities. And if the ritual performers of Yuendumu now perform restricted material in a context where they do not have to exchange ritual knowledge, they do so as an act of generational retrenchment.

In short, the Women's Law and Culture Meetings provide aging ritual performers with a new space in which to affirm their prestige, declare their skills, and nurture the cosmology that generates it. The now elderly still active ritual performers regularly note that few among their younger kin are willing to embrace the rigors of ritual obligations in general.²⁸ To counteract this erosion of enactment, those who are ritually active have broadened the contexts in which the 'traditional' can be performed. In remarks tinged with sadness, pride, good humour, and vulnerability, the *yamparru* for the first time declare the fragility of the guardians of the *Jukurpa* and the necessity of its nurturance in broadly Aboriginal contexts. And though the performances at the Women's Law and Culture Meetings outside the settlement may not directly revitalise the ritual life back at Yuendumu, they do make the performers stronger at a time when ritual strength is in short supply. And in so doing, Yuendumu's Warlpiri senior ritual performers establish a new sense of indigenous connectedness with other, non-Warlpiri ritual actors who share their concerns. They dance for themselves, for the other women, and for the *Jukurpa* that unites them.

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Notes

1. The Warlpiri believe that in the Dreaming, human-like beings, animals (for example, kangaroos and emus) and flora-beings emerged from the earth. These legendary ancestors shaped the landscape and told the first humans how to live. Every spot they visited became a sacred site. During their travels, the mythical beings performed marvellous acts that have since been reenacted in rituals.
2. See also the stimulating works of Langton (1993), Morphy (1998) and Pearson (2000).

3. In Dussart (2000a), *yawulyu warrajanyayirni* was accidentally misspelled throughout the book as *yawulyu warrajanyani*.
4. The Mabo judgment handed down by the High Court in 1992 declared that Australia was not *terra nullius* (unowned) at the time of colonisation and recognised the existence of native title where it had not been extinguished by legitimate acts of the crown. In the following year, the *Native Title Act* was passed to facilitate the implementation of the recognition of native title (see also Sharp 1996, Peterson and Sanders 1998 and Sutton 1998).
5. Known often by the generic phrase 'men's public ceremonies', *purlapa* closely resemble, both in performance and social function, the *yawulyu warrajanyayirni* or public performances of women. They are rarely performed today. In the early years of sedentarisation these public performances enabled ritual leaders to manifest, in the broadest and most open context, their control over stories and sites and the resources associated with them to other groups of mainly Warlpiri who were also forced to sedentarise at Yuendumu.
6. *Kardiya* translates from Warlpiri as 'light-skinned people'.
7. In the wake of the Land Rights movement, another set of performances created at Yuendumu under the guidance of missionaries were originally called 'Church corroboree' and later 'Church *purlapa*'. These creolised activities, blending elements of Christian narrative (mainly Baptist) with the rhythms of Warlpiri rituals, were jointly and publicly performed by both senior men and women. Traceable to the impact of long-standing missionary activity, Church *purlapa* were only formally constituted after 1977 and were almost exclusively controlled and performed by members of two residential kin groups. In contrast with rituals performed for Land Claims, and later for other political events, Church *purlapa* were rarely discussed as important events from 1983-1992. It is unclear how participation in such events has affected the realignment of public performances by senior ritual members of Yuendumu, as they placed very little emphasis on these in their explanation of change. Today, they are seldom performed. In their place, younger Warlpiri, who identify as Christians, create musical bands and choirs. Most recently, members of the bands and choirs have attended church meetings in nearby towns and cities and met other Aboriginal groups from all over Australia. Such activities have come to 'replace' the ceremonies originally performed by older ritual actors at Christian festivals and meetings. (see for example Bos 1981, Magowan 1996, 2001 and MacDonald 2002).
8. Both men and women hold paternal rights as owners (*kirda*) and maternal rights as managers (*kurdungurlu*) over territories and associated Dreamings. Siblings, whether male or female, usually inherit rights as owners and managers through patrilineal and matrilineal lines. *kirda* or owners have the rights and responsibilities to acquire knowledge, to pass it on and to perform ceremonies reenacting the Dreamtime stories they inherited, as well as to hunt and gather on their lands. Managers or *kurdungurlu* must make sure that owners perform all their duties 'correctly'. Thus, for any given site and Dreaming there is an interconnected set of relatives who are *kirda* and *kurdungurlu*. The relationship is theoretically reciprocal.
9. Others have noted the tension between self-interest and kinship-interest. See in particular Austin-Broos' recent insightful paper (2003).
10. For reflections on the stress associated with the creation of Aboriginal art by Central Desert Aboriginal groups in non-indigenous settings see also Dussart (1990 and Myers (2001a, 2001b, 2002: 268).
11. In an analysis of what land claim procedures represent for different constituencies, Merlan (1995: 69, 75, 78-79) notes the harrowing experience of Aboriginal people forced to participate in a Western-style tight schedule, imposed by procedures and hearings, in order to claim their original land back (see also Merlan 1998: 75).
12. Though Yuendumu leaders prefer to limit their ritual engagement for a non-Aboriginal audience, they consider their acrylic representations of the Dreaming stories on canvas potent enough to enable the distant creation of bonds between producers and buyers, curators, collectors, museum goers and other relevant parties. How do the Warlpiri assess the effectiveness of this distant relationship formalising bonds of caring and reciprocity? Simply put, requests to buy more paintings coming from places, institutions or individuals are signs of continuing concern for their lands and an appreciation of their knowledge and their acts of

- nurturance for the Dreaming. When they do not get more requests, institutions and people are described as uncaring, without values or *punku* in Warlpiri. For a comprehensive study of acrylic paintings as inter-cultural objects see Myers path-breaking book (2002).
13. The passage of the legislation has had a direct impact on Warlpiri access to land. However, the Warlpiri had been able to reclaim over half of their lands prior to 1993, as these lands were considered Vacant Crown Land and could be claimed under *the Northern Territory Land Rights Act* of 1976. This is not the case for most other groups of Aborigines in Australia.
 14. Holcombe (1993: 11-12) noted also that participants are members of communities enjoying enough prestige to collect the necessary funds to travel to distant locations.
 15. This is a term commonly used in Aboriginal English to refer to ritual activities in general.
 16. This agenda seems to differ from other groups participating in these events. In fact, for some these events are perceived as an opportunity to teach younger girls (see *Central Land Council Annual Report 1992-93*: 37).
 17. *Kanunju* usually refers to restricted ritual knowledge or a restricted event. Interviewees used *kanunju* and *wiri* to refer to the event and explained that it was a restricted event because some Aboriginal groups were showing restricted knowledge.
 18. *Warlalja*, the word the Warlpiri employ for 'family', is not restricted to one's actual relatives but extends, in the same way that all ritual life extends, to residential kin (Dussart 2000a: 44).
 19. It must be noted that although 'love songs' have deep ritual and cosmological significance for many Aboriginal women, including Warlpiri from other settlements, *yilpinji* do not carry much potency among the businesswomen from Yuendumu. For further discussion of the settlement-specific value of 'love songs' see also Berndt (1950 and 1965), Bell (1983), Poirier (1996) and Dussart (2000a).
 20. This quasi-legal Aboriginal-English term, used by performers, is undoubtedly a legacy of their encounters with litigation procedures since sedentarisation.
 21. In his comments on an earlier draft, David Nash reminded me that Aboriginal men and women had travelled during World War II to some of these towns and settlements while they worked on fencing projects, as well as on the famous Stuart Highway. We can safely assume that people from Yuendumu met other Aboriginal people from other places, discussed and exchanged ritual material, creating in a sense the path for the current ritual redeployment I address in this paper. However, none of the women interviewed mentioned a historical connection to these places. This may partly be due to the simple fact that I did not question them regarding the historicity of such connections.
 22. Ann Mosey, personal communication in 1993.
 23. Two events celebrating 'women's business' were sponsored almost back to back in 1993. The first was held in Western Australia at the settlement of Balgo and the second at Utopia in the Northern Territory. The Balgo women's meeting was sponsored primarily by the Western Australia Cultural Foundation (WACF) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (ATSIC), while the Utopia event was sponsored by the Central Land Council (CLC). Twenty-five senior women from Yuendumu attended the event at Balgo, while only fifteen went to Utopia. However, in their narratives, they folded the two events into one story of a single important moment during which 'women's business' was celebrated by over fifteen different groups of Aboriginal women coming from the Northern Territory and Western Australia. The CLC initiative endured while the WACF effort did not. ATSIC, however, continued at the time of writing to be one of the other major sponsors of Women's Law and Culture Meetings along with the CLC and other non-government organisations.
 24. In the *Central Land Council Annual Report 1992-93*: 37, there is mention of 700 women attending the first meeting. Holcombe (1993: 10) also suggested 700 women attended. This seems probable according to my interviews, but most informants maintained that no more than about 200 women actually performed.
 25. See Cox and McCarthy 1999. It is unclear from my interviews precisely how many women performed out of the 700 who attended.
 26. The performance of restricted versions of the Dreaming stories coincided with decisions made by senior women and was later drafted formally by officers of the CLC and senior female

participants attending Women's Law and Culture Meetings. A number of rules are stipulated prior to attending a Women's Law and Culture Meeting, for example who may attend, what the performers should wear, the roles Whites are permitted to play and what can or cannot be publicly reported. The eighteen Yuendumu women I have interviewed between 1993-2000, both prior to and after their return from annual Women's Law and Culture Meetings, wanted to communicate the vitality of these performances and gave their approval for an analysis of this vitality but they did not divulge the content of any of the performances. They did not discuss other Aboriginal women's performances, as they do not own the rights to do so.

27. Holcombe, working with other groups of Aboriginal women from Central Australia, also mentioned the pleasure that participants feels but argues that their experience differs from the one reported by the Warlpiri women I work with. She wrote (1993: 14) that the participants '... are very actively learning from other groups' performances....', but unfortunately does not give any details of what is exchanged, how, why and with whom.
28. Initiation ceremonies are the main ceremonial events that younger women still attend.

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