

Yuupurnju: A Warlpiri Song Cycle

Sung by Henry Cooke Anderson Jakamarra

With transcription and interpretation by
Jerry Patrick Jangala, Steven Dixon Japanangka,
Wanta Steven Patrick Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu Jampijinpa,
Carmel O'Shannessy and Myfany Turpin



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First published by Sydney University Press 2024

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia.

We acknowledge all First Nations Australian people who have passed on their culture through generations and continue to do so into the future.

ISBN 9781743329481 paperback

ISBN 9781743329573 epub

ISBN 9781743329603 pdf

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Cover design: Nathan Grice

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Preface

Song cycles are foundational to the ceremonies in which Warlpiri people celebrate the ancestral beings that created their world and in which they draw on ancestral power to affect people's lives today. The ancestral beings emerged from the subterranean spirit world and through their activities fashioned the many features of the landscape, including creating sacred places. Especially sacred are places where the ancestral beings emerged from and returned to the ancestral world. In the many different song cycles, the travels and actions of particular ancestral beings are traced as they moved from place to place. The ancestral beings, their travels, the places they created, and the laws and customs they laid down for people are all known as part of the *jukurrpa*, the Dreaming as it is called in English.

In this book, we document one important song cycle, *Yuupurnju*, associated with the Warlpiri male maturity ceremony that transforms boys into men. The songs trace the travels of a group of ancestral women taking boys to a ceremony far away from where they set out at Minamina, in the west of Warlpiri country.

Recording this song cycle was the idea of Warlpiri Elder Henry Cooke Anderson Jakamarra from Lajamanu community in the Northern Territory. He was concerned about the future of the *Yuupurnju* song cycle, and felt it was important to have it recorded for the benefit of future generations. While songs Henry Cooke recorded here are still sung at some Warlpiri man-making ceremonies, another Warlpiri song cycle about a related group of women is now more commonly sung at man-making ceremonies.



Henry Cooke singing *Yuupurnju*, Lajamanu, NT.
Image from recordings of the song cycle, 2013.

The book includes the words of the songs, interpretation in English as given by Warlpiri Elders Jerry Patrick Jangala OAM, Wanta Steven Patrick Pawu-Kurlpurlurnu Jampijinpa and Steven Dixon Japanangka, and the verses (text and rhythm) by ethnomusicologist Myfany Turpin. Forewords by senior custodians Jerry Patrick Jangala and his son Wanta Jampijinpa provide a rationale for the book.

Introduction to Warlpiri song cycles

Carmel O’Shannessy and Myfany Turpin

Traditional song cycles are part of foundational Warlpiri beliefs and practices known as *jukurrpa*, Dreaming. The performance of a song cycle is part of ritual actions and events. The song cycles are sung by senior people in ceremonies. Some are only performed by women, such as *yawulyu* “public women’s ceremonies” (Curran 2017), and there are some only performed by men, such as *Yuupurnju*, which both men and women can listen to. There are also others that only men can perform and listen to. Song cycles are sung in ceremonies for different purposes; for example, during male maturity rites, to resolve conflict or to make rain (Wild 1975). This book presents one song cycle, *Yuupurnju*, that forms part of a male maturity ceremony.

We first provide some contextual information about Warlpiri song cycles and *Yuupurnju*, the song cycle represented in this book. Each song in the cycle is then presented as a sung text and rhythm, with the words on which the song is based, and their interpretation as given by the senior Warlpiri men.

The context of traditional Warlpiri songs

Two central aspects of Warlpiri life are key to understanding the context and importance of traditional songs. One is the Warlpiri belief system, *jukurrpa*, translated into English as “Dreaming” or “Dreamtime” (e.g. Nicholls 2014), “everywhen” (Stanner 1979: 24), or “creation time” (Dobson 2007). The other is the system of social classification by subsection groups, known colloquially as the “skin” or “skin group” system, an abstract model of the named kinship relationships such as mother, father etc., relevant to all aspects of *jukurrpa*, ceremonies and also everyday interactions. All traditional Warlpiri songs are linked to *jukurrpa*. Senior Warlpiri woman Jeannie Nungarrayi Herbert† explains the everyday presence of *jukurrpa* for Warlpiri people:

The Jukurrpa is an all-embracing concept that provides rules for living, a moral code, as well as rules for interacting with the natural environment. The philosophy behind it is holistic – the Jukurrpa provides for a total, integrated way of life. It is important to understand that, for Warlpiri and other Aboriginal people living in remote Aboriginal settlements, The Dreaming isn't something that has been consigned to the past but is a lived daily reality. We, the Warlpiri people, believe in the Jukurrpa to this day. (Cited in Nicholls 2014)

The integration of kinship into *jukurrpa* was explained by ethnomusicologist Stephen Wild:

Patrilineal descent groups are the basic social groups in Walbiri¹ society. Each descent group is associated mystically with several sacred sites, which consist of notable features in the countryside: hills, rock formations, water holes, watercourses, stands of trees, fields of yams, caves, and the like. These sites are believed to have been created by supernatural beings in a timeless dimension of existence known in Australian English as the Dreamtime,² a concept common to all Australian Aboriginal peoples. The Dreamtime is spoken of as the remote past, but it also has a present existence in the form of its supernatural power which is responsible for the fertility of the country and of the Walbiri. As well as creating the features of the countryside and maintaining its fertility, the supernatural beings of the Dreamtime are believed to have instituted Walbiri culture; the validity of Walbiri patterns of social life is believed to have its source in the actions of the Dreamtime beings as commemorated in the religious rituals of the Walbiri. The adult members of a descent group, particularly the males, are responsible for performing the commemorative rites associated with the sacred sites on the descent group's estate. An estate is defined as the country in which are located the sacred sites having a mystical relationship with a descent group. It is not necessarily continuous (Wild 1975: 6–7).

In the subsection (or skin) system, each individual has one of eight subsections, with distinctions by gender, making 16 names in all. Skin names of males begin with J, and skin names of females begin with N. In addition, there are a number of junior skin names for each subsection. An individual is born into the system according to the skin classifications of their parents. The system situates an individual's relationship with every other individual, including the

1 Walbiri is an earlier spelling of Warlpiri, used by Wild (1975).

2 Wild (1975) used the term Dreamtime whereas in this book we use Dreaming.

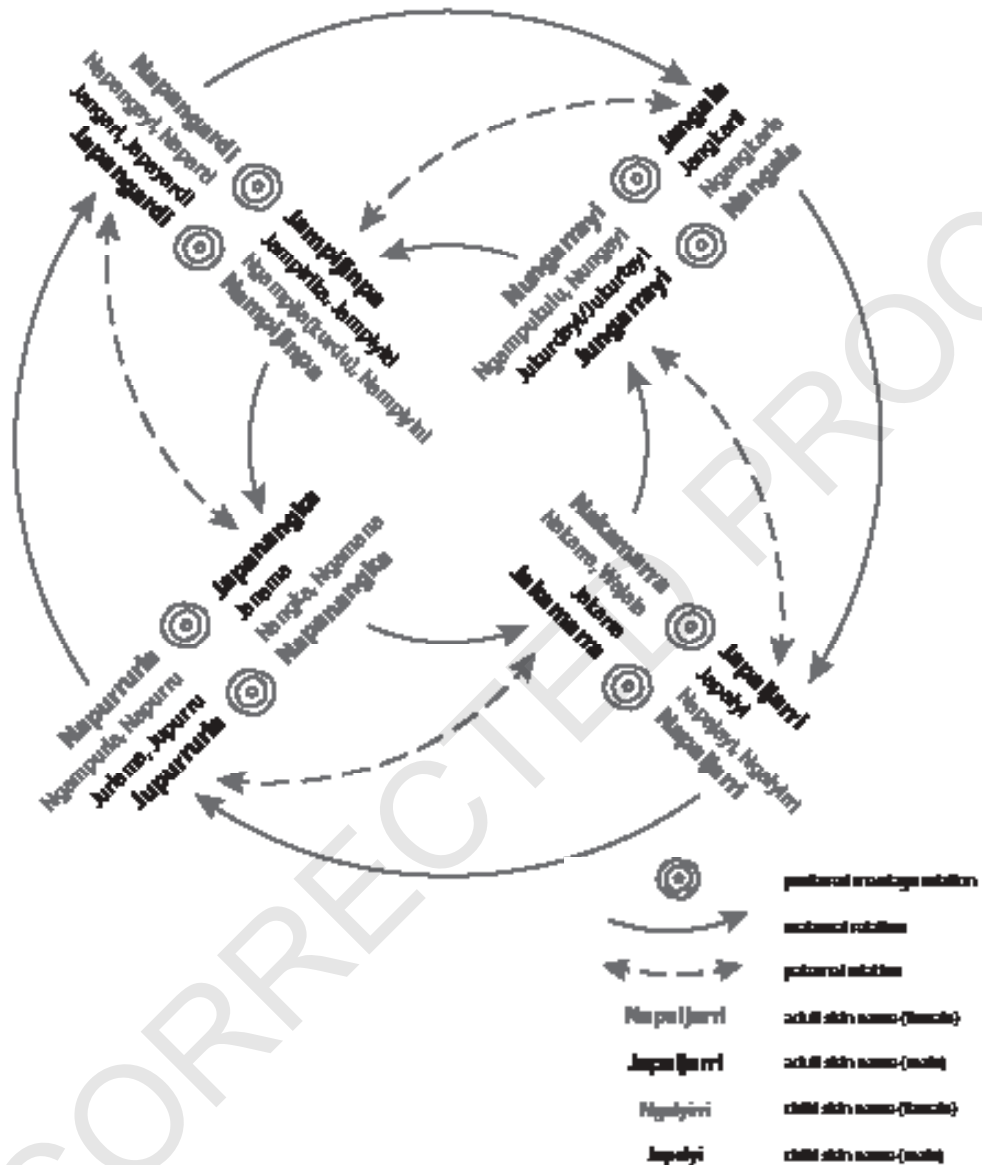




Figure 1. Warlpiri subsection (or skin group) system. From Laughren et al. (2022: 1361).

skin category from which a spouse would come. The system is both biological and classificatory; for instance, a person refers to their biological mother, and women with the same subsection or skin name as that person, as mother. A graphical representation of the system is provided in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1 shows the eight skin groups with a name for each gender, and the relationships between them. Each pair represents a brother and sister; for instance, *Jangala* and *Nangala* are brother and sister. The solid line arrow

() shows the relationship of mother to child, and the double-headed broken line arrow () shows the relationship of father to child. The concentric circles show preferred spouse relationships. For example, *Jangala* and *Nangala* are the children of *Jampijinpa* (father) and *Napangardi* (mother). The preferred marriage partner of *Jangala* is *Nungarrayi*, and the preferred marriage partner of *Nangala* is *Jungarrayi*.

In everyday life in Warlpiri communities, subsection terms are the most common way of addressing people and referring to others. Although Warlpiri people have both Warlpiri and English-derived individual and family names, and use kin terms such as mother, older sister and so on, the subsection terms are the most commonly used terms.

Underlying the subsection system is a division of two patrimoieties between which the subsections are divided:

Walbiri music and dance are performed in the context of magical and religious rites ... Songs are arranged in long song cycles, and the text of each cycle refers to the activities of a Dreamtime being in his³ travels across the country. Particular songs are associated with particular sacred sites along the traveling route of a Dreamtime being, so that one song cycle is associated with the estates of several patrilineal descent groups (Wild 1975: 9–10).

The sites are linked with different patrilineal descent groups, and the specific *jukurrpa* stories and songs are the responsibility of those groups. Only a few of the twenty or so patrilineal groups of the *kirda* patrimoiety are the primary custodians of any song cycle and the *jukurrpa* that it represents. Likewise, only a few of the twenty or so patrilineal descent groups that make up the opposite patrimoiety have the primary task of being *kurdungurlu* (managing custodians) of the *jukurrpa* being celebrated. For all ceremonies, the participation of members of both patrimoieties is required (Wild 1975: 39).

The performances of song cycles typically involve group singing during a ceremony, often led by one or a small number of senior singers who are *kurdungurlu*, collaborating with the traditional custodians or owners of the cycle. Percussion is provided by clapping two boomerangs together, or beating sticks (or more recently empty plastic bottles) on the ground. Typically, the song cycles recount aspects of the ancestral beings' travels across Warlpiri Country, as the ancestors themselves held ceremonies, sang and danced at specific sites. There are different genres, or types, of song cycles, and one of these is the type associated with the male maturity ceremony, called *kurdiiji* (a word meaning

3 Ancestral beings may be either male or female.

“shield” (Laughren et al 2022: 418)). Other types of song cycles include *yilpinji* (love songs) (Wild 1975: 137; Curran 2010: 103), *Jardiwanpa* (conflict resolution rituals) (Wild 1975: 140; Gallagher et al. 2014) and *mikawurru* “rain-making rituals” (e.g. Wild 1975: 133). For details of different types of ceremonial songs, see Wild (1975), Curran (2010) and Gallagher et al. (2014).

Male maturity ceremonies, generally referred to as *kurdiji*, are held in Lajamanu community annually in the summer, or the wet season. The first day and night are referred to as the *Marnakurrawarnu* (written as *mana-kura-wanu* in Wild 1975: 284) and a second stage as the *Kirridikirdawarnu*. The whole ceremony may be called *kurdiji* because of the practice of displaying painted shields to the novices on the first night (Meggitt 1962: 284, cited in Wild 1975: 100). During the all-night ceremony, men, women and children gather at the ceremonial ground, the men singing the song cycle throughout the night and the women dancing. Curran (2020) provides observation and analysis of the role and importance of *kurdiji* ceremonies for Warlpiri people:

Kurdiji ceremonies have remained an essential part of Warlpiri life while many other ceremonial forms have disappeared. Warlpiri people would argue that this is because these ceremonies are essential for “making young men”: it is the only way for boys around the age of thirteen or fourteen, as well as their male and female family members (particularly their mothers and sisters), to be socialized into new roles, in which they have different responsibilities and are expected to behave in different ways. (Curran 2020: 232–3)

In the Kurdiji ceremony, the emphasis is on being reborn into the world in a new role with a new social function, albeit after the symbolic death. It is held at night, a time associated with sleep and death, and thus the morning equates to reawakening and rebirth when the sun rises. The social status of the participants of the ceremony also ceases to be as it once was, as during the ceremony they neither hold the relationships they had prior to its start nor do they yet attain those that they will have at its conclusion. (Curran 2020: 238)

Rituals such as Kurdiji are important because they maintain traditions that give meaning to people’s lives in a rapidly changing world where traditional values are often hidden. The effectiveness of rituals in doing this derives precisely from their emergent nature, which gives the participants a great degree of control. Warlpiri people go to immense effort to hold ceremonies like Kurdiji, indicating the events’ continuing importance to Warlpiri lives. (Curran 2020: 255)

Nicolas Peterson (personal communication 2022) also notes the importance of women in this ceremony:

The focus of this male maturity rite is the relationship between males and females or men and women, which is why women are present for the greater part of the ceremony and absolutely vital to it. It would be meaningless without them. It is not just about turning boys into men but also about turning some women into mothers-in-law, sisters coming of age, and modifying the relationship of boys to their mothers.

Discussion of the complex interrelationships of Warlpiri ritual, kinship and gender is provided in Dussart (2000, 210), who concludes that the status and power of women are “irrefutably crucial to the reproduction of the *Jukurrpa* and correlative psychic health that accompanies that act of reproduction”.

O’Shannessy has attended the public components of several ceremonies in the time that she has been in Lajamanu community. Families discussed with each other ahead of time who would be involved in the ceremony. In the days before a planned ceremony, a group of boys would be “caught”, or physically located, and led by law men with specific roles in the ceremony to the ceremonial preparation area. High-pitched cries would be heard – a signal to others not to observe. If anyone noticed a group of men walking through the community at that time with a sense of purpose, they would duck their heads and hide because the event cannot be observed by others.

When the ceremonies take place, there is great excitement in the community. The ceremonies contain some restricted sections, which only men may participate in, but much of it is public. Within the public components, women occasionally need to bow their heads and close their eyes or cover themselves and their children with a blanket.

In preparation for the all-night part of the ceremony, men and women will have spent hours painting traditional designs on their bodies that are appropriate for the ceremony being performed. During this process, the women will have been singing *yawulyu* “traditional women’s songs”. Appropriateness includes the relationship of each person to the *jukurrpa* and the subsections of the boys undergoing the ceremony.

People arrive at the ceremonial ground with food and bedding, usually “swags” – canvas covers with a thin foam mattress inside. The ceremony is held in the hot season in January–February, so the nights are fairly warm and minimal bedding is needed.

All ages are involved, from young children to Elders. Men sit facing east, with a small fire burning, and sing the songs with percussion, often beating sticks or

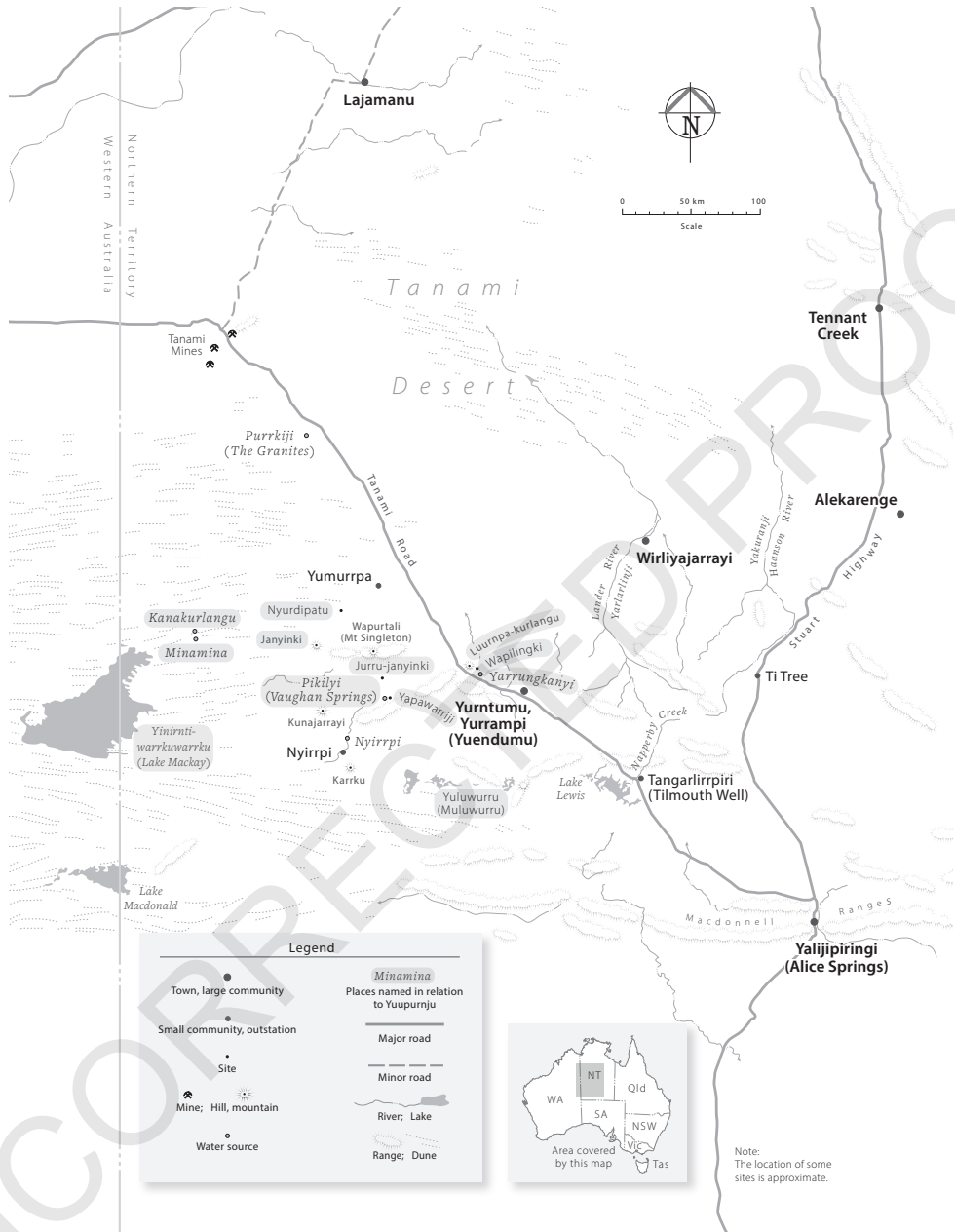


Figure 2. Significant places related to the Yuupurnju song cycle. Places named in the songs or commentaries are shaded. © Brenda Thornley 2022.

empty bottles on the ground. The women form lines behind the men to dance. The dance movements differ according to the part of the song cycle being sung. The women alternate dancing with resting and sometimes napping. Children play, join the dancing, and sleep. For details of ceremonies, see Meggitt (1962), Wild (1975) and Curran (2010, 2020).

The Yuupurnju song cycle

Yuupurnju is a genre of ceremonial song cycles situated within the *kurdiji* ceremony. The song cycle relates to a traditional women's *jukurpa* story. A group of ancestral women travel across the country, dancing and singing at significant locations. The *jukurpa* story and route of travel begins at Kanakurlangu and travels east to the Napperby area and stops there. The place name Kanakurlangu literally means "having a digging stick", and a digging stick is a symbol of women. In the song cycle, the women travel from west to east digging for *yarla* "yams". The people in the story went to Kanakurlangu and then separated into groups. Some went to Yinirnti-warrku-warrku, the Lake Mackay area, a large salt lake near the Western Australia–Northern Territory border (Laughren et al. 2022: A1), while others went to Minamina. The Lake Mackay group became Nungarrayi and Napaljarri subsections, and it is the travels of this ancestral group of women that is more commonly followed at Yuendumu community. The Minamina group became Napangardi and Napanangka subsections. The men went back north and the women continued travelling east, and this is the ancestral route followed in the song cycle represented here. They travel through Janyinki and all join up at Pikilyi. Many of the verses tell where and how the women were dancing. Henry Cooke Anderson Jakamarra, the singer, describes the song cycle as women's Dreaming, and names himself as the person in a *kurdungurlu* relationship who can sing the songs. This was confirmed by other senior *kurdungurlu* and by a senior man in a *kirda*, owning patrimoiety, relationship to the song cycle.

For this song cycle, the *kirda*, or owning patrimoiety, are the people in the following subsection groups:

Nungarrayi/Jungarrayi
Napaljarri/Japaljarri
Napangardi/Japangardi
Napanangka/Japanangka.

The *kurdungurlu*, or the patrimoiety of the managing custodians, belong to the following subsections:

Jakamarra/Nakamarra
Jupurrurla/Napurrurla
Jangala/Nangala
Jampijinpa/Nampijinpa.

Yuupurnju as sung by Henry Cooke Anderson Jakamarra in 2013

Henry Cooke Anderson Jakamarra, a senior Warlpiri man and the singer of this song cycle, requested that these songs be recorded, kept safely and made available for future generations to learn from. *Yuupurnju* is normally sung only by a group of men during a man-making ceremony, from about 10pm until dawn. But Jakamarra was particularly interested in the song cycle being recorded and saved for younger men to learn, and so invited Carmel O'Shannessy, a linguist with a long-term relationship with the community, to record him singing them solo. Jakamarra was in a *kurdungurlu* relationship to the Yuupurnju song cycle.

The recordings took place in August 2013 in the front yard of the house in which O'Shannessy was temporarily staying, across from where Jakamarra lived. He sang them in the daytime, singing for one to three hours most days, over three weeks, recorded by O'Shannessy. Over subsequent years, O'Shannessy worked with Jakamarra, Jerry Patrick Jangala OAM, Steven Dixon Japanangka and Wanta Jampijinpa to transcribe the words and provide interpretations of the meanings of the verses. Myfany Turpin, a linguist and ethnomusicologist, wrote down the verses (sung syllables and rhythm).

The words of ceremonial songs are sometimes different from the words in everyday Warlpiri speech. Some of the words might have been used long ago and have changed over time. Others words are used only in traditional songs and not in everyday spoken Warlpiri; many of these resemble the everyday spoken words in neighbouring languages such as Anmatyerr and Kaytetye. Sometimes words are shortened or extended to fit a preferred rhythm. There can also be words that are the same as spoken language but that have complex meanings in the ceremonial context in addition to their everyday meanings. For these reasons, there is not always a one-to-one relationship between words in the songs and words in modern spoken Warlpiri. This is why interpretations from knowledgeable senior custodians are needed. Sometimes a verse, such as verse 34 in this cycle, is sung in another language – in this case Anmatyerr, the language on the south-east of Warlpiri. This is because the ancestral dancers were at that point in a location that Anmatyerr people belong to.

Some of the songs in the *Yuupurnju* song cycle presented here were also sung in the *kurdiji* song cycle sung in Yuendumu in 2010, documented in Curran (2010). Different versions of a song cycle are sung in different communities. A song cycle may also change over time; that is, some songs are left out and other songs added to the song cycle, depending on by whom and where it is being performed. New songs can be introduced into a song cycle, and a whole new song cycle can be introduced to a community.

Musical structure of the song cycle

In this recording of *Yuupurnju*, Jakamarra sang some 1335 songs, comprising 38 unique verses. Each song lasted 30–60 seconds. The number of iterations of each song varies – one song was sung only once; most were sung many times, at different points in the whole cycle. A song consists of a short verse set to a particular rhythm that repeats until the end of the longer melody (see Wild 1984: 191–4; Turpin 2007). Depending on its length, the verse might be repeated four to six times until the song gradually fades out. After this, there is usually a break of a few seconds during which the singer might cough or take a sip of water and then begin the same verse again, sometimes starting and ending at a different place in the verse, changing the way the verse and melody interlock. Thus, these singings of the same verse are rarely identical. In between the change of verse, there is usually a longer break (up to two minutes) than that between songs of the same verse. A list of the verses that were sung over the course of the recordings on which this book is based appears in Appendix 2.

There is no set pitch for each syllable of the verse because, as the text repeats, the syllables fall on different parts of the melody. Only the verses (rhythmic texts) of each song are written down in this book. We do not represent the melodic setting of each verse, as there are many ways a singer can align the verse and melody of a song and we do not wish to imply that each song always aligns in this way.

Most verses have two lines that repeat in an AABB pattern, although some verses have only one line and the occasional verse has three (Laughren et al. 2016: 430). Often the lines within a verse are different lengths; and some lines occur in more than one verse. What is written in this book are actually verses: you can listen to the songs by clicking the QR code, while reading the verses. The verses are presented here according to the order in which they were first sung in this performance. In its ceremonial context, each verse is repeated many times during the night. Jakamarra frequently returned to a previously sung verse much later; however, we do not repeat this verse in the text and only include audio of the first time he performed each verse. For example, for verse 1, Jakamarra returned to this song eight times throughout the performance, yet we only include the first time he sang it. The full audio (over 12 hours) can be accessed at the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.



Wulpararri or *yuwarra* "Milky Way," the path in the sky, rises over dunes.
© Harry Moore, 2023



1. Kanaku kanakurla

*Kanaku kanakurla yuwarra jarnti manu
Kanaku kanakurla yuwarra jarnti manu
Kanaku kanakurla yuwirripirnti manu
Kanaku kanakurla yuwirripirnti manu*

J-120



Lib: A Ka na ka ka na ka na yu wa ri jarnti ti na na
Lib: B Ka na ka ka na ka na yu wa ri jarnti ti na na

*This song has a fairly free rhythm, with the long notes (such as q) in particular sometimes lengthened.

A man called Yuwirripirnti, a Japangardi, picks up a digging stick and is moving it in his hand, looking at it. A person with the kinship (skin) name Japangardi is named Yuwirripirnti in the jukurrpa.

jarnti: walking.

kana, yuwirri: digging stick.

Kanakurlangu: the name of a place, from where the song cycle begins.

manu: commonly occurs at the end of lines in songs; it can mean do, make, create.

pirnti: on the side.

yuwarra: also road and the road in the sky, the Milky Way, *wulpararri*.

Yuwirripirnti: the name of a person in the *jukurrpa*.



Woman straightens the tip of a digging stick.
Photo by Areyonga School 2023 © Ara Iritija archive number AI-0290069-001



2. Karrinjapardi



*Karrinjapardi karrinjapardi yakanarra
 Karrinjapardi karrinjapardi yakanarra
 Yuljurrurnpuju yuljurrurnpuju yakanarra
 Yuljurrurnpuju yuljurrurnpuju yakanarra*

J -77 beats per minute

Line A: **Line B:**

Line A: **Line B:**

*This song has a fairly free rhythm.

The women are dancing. The sticks are on the ground beside the dancers, who are sitting. The women get up, pick up the sticks and dance, holding them in a digging motion, dragging the sticks across the ground.

karrinja-pardi: get up; “I want to get up, get the digging stick, and walk.”
puju: “Quick!”
yakanarra: get up.



Lander River, Willowra, Ngaliya country, NT.
© Carmel O'Shannessy 2023



3. Tangkirrina



*Yirla tangkirrina tangkirrina
Wurangkurlu ngarrka ngarrkanjarna*

J 4/4

Label: Au Yl rlu tang lel lel lu tang lel lel lu

Label: Ba U tang lu lu tang lu tang lu lu tang

*The sequence of short notes, r t y, is sometimes sung with a longer last note, dg q.

The song is coming from the west to the east, from Ngaliya Country, which is the south-west of Warlpiri Country.

yirangkurlu: this is an important ceremony. “We’re going to dance for a long time, all night.”

yulu-tankari-nga: the women are dancing now to the singing, with the digging sticks, and using their hands too, with no sticks.

ngarrka-ngarrka-jurnu: may mean that a boy is being brought into the male maturity ceremony now.