3. The 'Expanding Domain' of Warlpiri Initiation Rituals

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In his paper 'An expanding Aboriginal domain: mobility and the initiation journey', Nic Peterson (2000) describes and analyses the conspicuous increase in numbers of people and distances travelled for the central Australian Aboriginal initiatory journey known as *Jilkaja*.¹ He contrasts initiation ceremonies that he witnessed in the early 1970s, during which *Jilkaja* journeys to collect boys for initiation were short and involved only a small group of directly related people, with the description of this more recent journey. During the latter, a Warlpiri initiation candidate and his guardian together travelled 2250 km from Yuendumu in the Northern Territory to Tjuntjuntjara in Western Australia and back; furthermore, this journey at some stages involved up to 600 people. Peterson largely attributes the dramatic contrast in scale to Aboriginal peoples' independent ownership of cars, which began in the late 1960s when welfare payments began to be made directly as cash to individuals rather than being administered by the settlement superintendent. Car ownership thus significantly enhances the geographical distance over which central Australian Aboriginal people maintain networks of relationships.

In this chapter, I relate this increase in distance and participation in *Jilkaja*, which is one part of the larger initiation ritual complex called *Kurdiji*, to a similar observable change in *Kurdiji* ceremonies themselves. When I began fieldwork with Warlpiri people at Yuendumu in late 2005, I found *Kurdiji* ceremonies also significantly larger in scale than those described by ethnographers in previous decades (see Morton, Saethre and Altman, this volume, for more on Warlpiri people). Today, up to 20 boys are initiated in the one ceremony and *Kurdiji* involve hundreds of participants once all the initiands' immediate family members have gathered. A number of these large-scale ceremonies are held several times each summer, and dominate contemporary ritual life at Yuendumu. Unlike many other types of ceremonies, *Kurdiji* today are unusual in the frequency of their performance as well as the importance that *Kurdiji* still hold as an essential rite of passage in contemporary Warlpiri lives.

¹ *Jilkaja* is a journey undertaken by initiands, their brothers-in-law (ZH), who act as guardians throughout their initiation, and other family members. During a *Jilkaja* journey, boys are collected from a number of settlements to participate in initiation rituals.

The aim of this chapter is to explore why initiation ceremonies have expanded in such a dramatic way over the past four decades or so—a point of particular interest considering that many other instances of ceremonial life are becoming increasingly irrelevant, particularly to younger Warlpiri generations. I approach this analysis of the increasing relevance of *Kurdiji* and their surrounding rites such as the *Jilkaja* journeys discussed by Peterson on a number of levels: first, I discuss how some core themes surrounding initiation are taken on through the performance of *Kurdiji* such that they make the transition from boyhood to manhood a formalised process in which teenage men feel intense pride in their new roles and responsibilities. Second, I examine how the organisation of *Kurdiji* ceremonies lends itself to incorporating younger generations in these active roles. Third, I discuss the changing population demographics over the past few decades that have led to some of the significant changes in numbers of participants in these ceremonies.

***Kurdiji* and Surrounding Rites**

Descriptions by anthropologists of *Kurdiji* ceremonies held at Yuendumu over the past five decades show a remarkably high degree of uniformity in form, revealing the ceremony to be conservative in nature. Both Mervyn Meggitt (1962: 281–3) and Stephen Wild (1975: 89–103) describe *Kurdiji* as a complex of ritual activities that take a very similar form to those I observed.

First, boys about thirteen to fourteen years old are ‘caught’ and taken into a secluded area in the bush. *Marnakurrawarnu* begins at dawn the next day, with men singing and painting dreaming designs related to the boys on shields. Women sit about 50 m away on the other side of a ceremony ground, singing songs and painting their chests with dreaming designs also linked to these boys. After sunset, the activity moves to another ceremonial ground nearby, where men sing the same songs from the afternoon session. This time, however, the women lie with their heads down so that they can hear but not see—a reversal of the daytime when they could see but not hear the men sing. *Marnakurrawarnu* continues with an all-night ceremony in which the men sing songs relating to the eastwards journey of a group of ancestral women from Yapurnu (Lake Mackay) near the WA border. The songs describe the actions of these ancestral women as they create features of the country by dancing, and the women participating in the actual ceremony dance the same dances using props such as firesticks, digging sticks, necklaces made from the seeds of the bean tree, coolamons and dancing boards (see also Morton, this volume). The dances relate to important changes in relationships that are being established. The *Marnakurrawarnu* ceremonies previously described by Meggitt and Wild

and those observed by Peterson in the 1970s (Peterson, personal communication, 2009) are almost identical with concern to the procedure of their events to those held in Yuendumu today.

The second day of *Kurdiji*, however, shows some differences, with *Kirrirdikirrawarnu* that were held in the past being replaced with the much shorter *Warawata* ceremonies today (this change must have taken place after the early 1970s, when Peterson observed the former) (Peterson, personal communication, 2009). *Warawata* serves the same purpose of culminating in the circumcision of the initiands but takes an entirely different form. An elderly Warlpiri man, Thomas Jangala Rice, informed me that over the past few decades this shorter ceremony has been borrowed from people who live to the south. He emphasised that it was the 'quick and lazy way' as it replaces the more complex *Kirrardikirrawarnu* ceremony, which is heavily reliant on the knowledge of a few older men. Similarly, a secondary phase of initiation called *Kankarlu* was performed for the last time in Yuendumu in the 1970s.² A senior Warlpiri woman, Peggy Nampijinpa Brown, said that since this stage of initiation, which she likened to 'high school', is no longer held, teaching and thereby knowledge of dreamings, country and ceremonies have significantly declined in recent decades.

In ritual practice, as Schieffelin (1985: 707) has shown, 'meanings are formulated in a social rather than a cognitive space, and the participants are engaged with the symbols in the interactional creation of a performance reality'. As the majority of the participants in contemporary Warlpiri initiation do not understand the deeper symbolic content of the songs and dances, this comment seems to have strong resonance. As *Kankarlu* is no longer held in Yuendumu and young men have fewer forums in which to learn detailed ceremonial knowledge, only a handful of very senior men know how to sing the songs crucial to this ceremony and can understand the language and its symbolic associations. The process of understanding through participation in ceremony was made clear to me by Jeannie Nungarrayi Egan, when she dismissed several hours worth of intense, concentrated work during which she articulated to me many of the deeper symbolic meanings behind the songs performed for *Kurdiji*, by saying 'but you know, you were there, and you danced'. It is therefore the *enactment* of this ceremony that is meaningful to its participants—the ways in which the singing, dancing and other associated movements incorporate these symbolic references to make important changes in Warlpiri lives. Several important themes relevant to the lives of younger generations of Warlpiri people are brought forth through the performance of *Kurdiji* ceremonies and associated rites.

² *Kankarlu* is often referred to as 'high school' by older Warlpiri people. It was a forum in which knowledge of dreamings, songs and other aspects of Warlpiri religious life was taught to young men by holding a religious festival.

Distinguishing Male and Female Realms

Kurdiji, like many rites of passage, emphasises themes of transition, of being reborn into the world into a new role with a new social function (Van Gennep 1960). *Kurdiji* ceremonies are held at night; carrying associations of sleep and death, and thus reawakening and rebirth occur when the sun rises in the morning.³ The participants neither hold the relationships they had prior to the start of the ceremony nor have they yet attained those that they will have at its conclusion during the time in which it is conducted (see Morton, this volume, for a discussion of this in symbolic terms).

Peterson (2006) describes the symbols of birth used during the overnight part of *Marnakurrawarnu*. The initiands are crouched behind a windbreak at the back of the ceremonial ground for the majority of the night, and at various points the actual mothers of the boys move around to the back of this windbreak and circle around the boys a few times before rejoining the other women. These initiands are decorated with white fluff, and as dawn breaks this is removed and replaced with red ochre. Once the sun has fully risen, they are covered from head to toe with red ochre. Peterson (2006: 6) argues that this can 'be understood by the anthropologist as gestating in a womb and being identified with women, rather than being appropriated by men'. The boys are represented as babies emerging from this symbolic womb at the end of the night into a world in which they are affiliated with men.

This part of *Marnakurrawarnu* is oriented towards the east and the rising sun. The journey of the ancestral women in the central song series also has this directional focus, as the women come out of the ground in the far west of Warlpiri country and keep dancing towards their eastern goal. The symbolic journey from west to east suggests a move from the world of women (with whom the boys spent most of their time before this ritual), associated with the west, into the world of men, associated with the east (this gendered association of west and east is reflected across a range of other parts of Warlpiri life; see Musharbash 2008b). The spatial arrangements of this ceremony mirror these ideas, with men sitting in the far east of the ceremony ground, women further to the west and the boys who are being initiated in the far west. At the end of the night, the initiands move from this far western position through a divide down the centre of the group of women until they are among the men. After the *Kurdiji* ceremonies are completed, young men are encouraged to participate in men's ceremonies and learn the songs, designs and dances associated with their father and father's father, whereas before this they would have gone along to women's ceremonies with their mothers.

3 Munn (1973: 189) also notes that 'Warlpiri men associated the metaphor of dying with circumcision'.

Ken Hale has written about a men's ritual language called *jiliwirri* or 'up-side-down Warlpiri'.⁴ The general rule for speaking this language is to 'replace each noun, verb, and pronoun of ordinary Warlpiri by an "antonym"' (Hale 1971: 477), and he gives some obvious examples, such as to say 'I am tall', one would say 'You are short'. Further *jiliwirri* substitutions include galah for cockatoo and witchetty bush for mulga tree, suggesting that an antonym is derived from something of a similar taxonomic group. Hale (1971: 477) summarises that 'the *jiliwirri* principle of antonymy is semantically based, ie. that the process of turning Warlbiri "up-side-down" is fundamentally a process of opposing abstract semantic objects rather than a process of opposing lexical items in the grossest and most superficial sense'. During ceremonial gatherings I attended in Yuendumu, a practice also called *jiliwirri* was performed in an exclusively female realm. This involves raucous joking that has everyone in stitches of laughter. As one senior woman, Ruth Napaljarri Oldfield, explained, certain women were 'always making *jiliwirri*' and were renowned for imitating male behaviour in such outlandishly inappropriate ways.⁵ Like the men's *jiliwirri* language described by Hale, these actions are about 'turning upside-down' the normal roles of women in Warlpiri society, making distinct the female realm from which the initiand departs and the male realm he will enter. The performance of *Kurdiji* and its assistance in facilitating such changes are necessary in the life of a teenage boy who would otherwise be unsure of how to make these transitions that affect his day-to-day behaviour.

Forming Relationship Networks and Marriage Ties

As a boy makes the progression from child to young adult during the course of this ceremony, he strengthens and gives meaning to relationships with people whom he might have known only distantly before this. Myers (1986: 228) summarises the overarching purpose of initiation ceremonies in the Central Desert, saying that 'the production of the social person involves an elaboration of the ties of relatedness to others'. Boys who are initiated together may be from the same community but they may also be from geographically dispersed places. They become known as *yulpurru*, forming a strong bond that lasts for the course of their lifetime. Similarly, their *juka* (their sisters' husbands) look after them throughout the ceremonial process, and thus cement a further set of lifelong kinship ties. Myers (1986: 229) explains of analogous practices in Pintupi initiation ceremonies that '[l]ike many ceremonial forms, [they] address the

4 This is a language that men learn in the exclusively male phase of initiation (which is no longer held today); therefore it is inappropriate to discuss this language with Warlpiri women or children.

5 Musharbash (2008a) analysed Warlpiri women's *jiliwirri* as portrayals of men's behaviour by women so 'inappropriate' it causes a fearful reaction by women, which is dispelled through laughter.

problem of differentiation among people who live in geographically separated areas. The symbolic action of the initiatory process, prescriptively including people from “far away”, converts difference into relatedness.’

In addition to the ties between the boys and their brothers-in-law, the boys’ families also form new relationships through the establishment of marriage ties and relationships between the mothers of the initiands. The initiands’ mothers lose a child but gain status as the mother of an adult man, demonstrating how all the participants of this ceremony are ‘reborn’ as new social beings with new sets of relationships in the course of this all-night ceremony. Throughout, the participants of the ceremonies perform actions that result in complex changes in relationships. Peterson (2000: 212) explains that ‘[t]he reproduction of this wider regional sociality is now taking place primarily through initiation ceremonies. It is these ceremonies, which are still vital to the production of social persons, that are also reproducing the conditions of widespread relatedness.’

The new relationships formed in *Kurdi* ceremonies prepare a young man for the next phase of his life in which he commonly travels widely around the Central Desert in the company of one or two age mates, visiting different communities—often those he has come to know through travelling with *Jilkaja* parties.

‘Relatedness’ is also transformed between the initiand’s family and the members of the boy’s future wife’s family, which may have previously been only distant kin. Initially this relationship is established via the brother-in-law acting as guardian during the ritual, but the boy’s future mother-in-law dances with a firestick, confirming her approval for her very young or perhaps unborn daughter to marry the initiand. As well as making this promise, the mother-in-law’s dancing with this firestick also forms a bond between her and the boy’s mother. As the boys who are initiated together are often classificatory brothers-in-law, their mothers are classificatory cross-cousins for one another. Once they have danced with the firestick and promised their daughter as a future wife for the other woman’s son, two such women may no longer call each other by their names and must call each other *yinjakurrku* (literally ‘firestick’). The bonds between their two families are further established when the future father-in-law acts as the young man’s circumciser, and the initiand also avoids mentioning the name of his circumciser(s) for the rest of his life out of respect.

The actions performed during initiation ceremonies thus firmly intertwine the family of the initiand with the family of his future wife. In contemporary Yuendumu, the marriages arising from the initiation ceremonies no longer commonly eventuate, as young people prefer to marry spouses of their own choice and age. As Musharbash (2003: 68) notes, however, ‘even if promised marriages do not eventuate, the respective “promised” spouses are linked to each other in everybody’s minds’. Put differently, initiation relationships remain

important even if the union that they have anticipated does not work out in reality. The establishment of these marriage relationships is core to initiation in Yuendumu and is experienced by the participants in the strict avoidance relationships that are established between the initiand and his future mother-in-law, as well as the women who call each other *yinjakurrku*. The initiand's sisters begin their ritual careers dancing in this ceremony, also transitioning into adulthood in a less formalised way. Participating in these ceremonial events facilitates these broader transitions, which are of significant importance to younger generations living in Yuendumu.

Ceremonial Organisation

The patrimoiety system is the basis for the organisation of most Warlpiri ceremonies and revolves around ownership (*kirda*) and managership (*kurdungurlu*) rights to dreamings, country and their associated ceremonies.⁶ In the instance of the smaller ceremonies held during the day as part of *Marnakurrawarnu*, this means that there will be a focus on the specific *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* roles of respective initiands, whose affiliations will be performed as a way of highlighting the individual identities of the boys going through initiation.

Kurdiji are different in that they are organised around generational moieties rather than patrimoieties, in both the all-night phase of *Marnakurrawarnu* and the *Warawata* ceremonies the following day.⁷ Thomas Jangala Rice explained of the song series sung for these ceremonies that 'it is Japaljarri/Jungarrayi song series but it is really for everybody'. Peterson makes the case that ceremonies that emphasise inclusiveness have retained their popularity, whereas many other ceremonies that emphasise detailed connections to particular people and country are rarely performed due to the deterioration of this kind of knowledge following sedentarisation. *Kurdiji* are examples of ceremonies that naturally emphasise inclusiveness through their organisation. The roles of particular kin in *Kurdiji* are based on two groups of alternative generational moieties and their

6 See Dussart (2000) for a fuller summary of the rights and responsibilities of *kirda* and *kurdungurlu*.

7 The *Kurdiji* song series does follow the dreaming travels of ancestral women and has *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* who are associated with this, but when this ceremony is held these rights are de-prioritised and the ceremony is being spoken of as being 'for everyone'. Myers (1986) has noted that generational moieties are a more common organising structure in the Western Desert than they are in the Central Desert. The organisation of the *Warawata* ceremony around generational moieties most probably stems from its origins in Pintupi country. There are also other Warlpiri rituals that do not organise themselves around *kirda/kurdungurlu*—notably the mortuary rituals immediately after a death and a travelling cult ritual, which came from Balgo in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Neither of these rituals has links to dreamings or country, nor are they based on a song cycle. Both, however, are extremely inclusive, focusing on the active roles of younger participants rather than ritual leaders (see also Laughren 1981).

respective male and female groups. Table 3.1 is a summary of the particular kin in these two groups and the roles they enact in the ceremony (the terms for generational moieties in initiation come from Laughren 1982).

Table 3.1 Generational moieties and their roles

Ngarnarntarrka (ngawakari) = own generation's moiety (including grandparents' generation)	Jarnamiljarnpa (yulpurrukurlangu) = moiety of one's parents' generation
<i>juka</i> (ZH) = acts as the initiand's ritual guardian throughout	<i>yulpurru</i> (F, MB) = sing the song cycles* required for the daytime and night-time parts of <i>Marnakurrawarnu</i>
<i>rdiliwarnu</i> (eB, FF, MF) = supervises the ritual activity and explains its significance to the initiand; this is overseen by senior men of this same generational moiety	<i>jinpurrmanu</i> (M, FZ, M-in-L) = dance in the middle of the line of women using different props, which bring about particular transformations in relationships
<i>rdiliwarnu</i> (Z, MBD, FZD) = dance on the northern and southern ends of the line of women; this is the introduction to ritual life for the younger generation	

* Today not many of the father's or mother's brothers know how to sing the songs, however, they actively participate by sitting with the group of senior men at the front of the ceremony ground.

Membership of a particular generational moiety determines the roles and responsibilities of each participant: where they must sit, dance and move about on the ceremonial ground. In the larger ceremonies held today, women may have two roles, which they move between. For example, when a woman's brother is one of the initiands, she dances in this role but she may also promise her daughter to another of the initiands for whom she dances in the role of mother-in-law. When moving between two roles, a woman dances in two different positions at various stages throughout the night.

In *Warawata* the following day, these generational moieties serve as the dominating organisational structure as well. Initially in the late afternoon, everyone gathers in four groups based on generational and gendered roles whilst one older man lectures about the importance of performing *business* (ritual) properly. He then introduces the circumcisers and jokes about people's roles in *Warawata* with reference to the ceremony the night before. Then, everybody moves further to the west where the men organise themselves to sit facing west in two groups based on these generational moieties. As they sing the same songs as the previous night, the women dance in two groups, competing as to which generational moiety can dance the fastest and have the most people left still dancing at the end. This organisational structure allows for younger and

more able-bodied dancers to participate throughout all stages of this ceremony, ensuring all participants, including the youngest and least experienced, a role in the event.

Demographic Changes

A series of demographic changes provides the most important context for the contemporary ceremonial variations described above, particularly the increase in numbers of boys being initiated in one ceremony and hence the large numbers of people who attend. Peterson (2008) notes that increased birth rates in recent decades (combined with a drop in infant mortality) have resulted in more and more boys needing to be initiated each year. Logistics alone mean that the ceremonies have become larger, with more boys going through at the same time (Peterson 2008), in order to avoid holding ceremonies too many times over the short summer holiday period or, indeed, holding parallel ceremonies. The latter, in turn, is a logistical impossibility, as there are only a small number of very senior men left who can sing the required songs. Peterson (2008) points out that there is enormous pressure on these older men to sing for initiation ceremonies as the particular songs are still vital for the rituals' performance, despite the fact that very little of the content of these songs is understood by the majority of participants. The remaining senior men with this knowledge are mostly in their seventies and sitting up all night singing is a taxing task indeed. Thomas Jangala Rice noted that he would often lose his voice for several days following these all-night ceremonies as there were so few men who could assist with this singing, placing enormous pressure on him to sing loudly for the duration of the ceremony.

Further to these observations, I note another significant demographic change—namely, a drop in the age at which men are having children over recent decades. In the 1970s, men would have to wait until they were in their thirties and had passed through a secondary stage of initiation, *Kankarlu*, before they could marry their wives, who were often about 15 years younger than them. For a while now, young men have tended to marry women of their own age directly following *Kurdiiji* and are therefore having children up to 15 years earlier than they were only a few decades ago. These days, as fathers tend to be only of the age of thirty to thirty-five when their sons are being initiated, there is also an added emphasis on the teaching and ceremonial roles of their own fathers, father's fathers and mother's mother's brothers. Eugene Japangardi Penhall, for example, outlined to me how he followed the strict instructions of the older men present at his son's initiation as this was the first time he had danced in such an important role and therefore he knew few of the dance movements or songs. The

older generation is now required to guide these younger men who have not yet acquired the knowledge needed to perform their role as father of the initiand adequately.

These changes also suggest a trend towards the incorporation of more men into this ceremony, as in the past the great-grandfather generation would not still have been alive, and this contributes in a small way to the increasing numbers of participants. As so many more people are participating in a single ceremony, many more relationships are formed, resulting in the establishment of very broad social networks across the Central Desert and beyond.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to explore the reasons behind the expansions surrounding initiation rituals at Yuendumu over the past four decades. In his recent work on *Jilkaja*—the journey related to initiation rituals—Peterson (2000) emphasised the increase in numbers of people who attend and the lengthy distances over which the networks of relationships are established. My own participant observation-based research during initiation rituals at Yuendumu since 2005 extends the veracity of this observation to *Kurdiji*. *Kurdiji* and surrounding initiatory events are incorporating many more people than they used to and are becoming increasingly relevant in the lives of younger generations of Warlpiri people.

There are several reasons generating these changes to what is otherwise a relatively conservative ceremony. Initiation at Yuendumu marks an important transitional time in the lives of teenage boys where they are transforming from being children to being adult men. Their immediate families are also going through an important transitional phase and new societal roles and responsibilities are being taken on by a number of family members. During the events of the *Kurdiji* ceremony, themes of transition are made clear such that boys can move easily from the world of women in which they socialised as children into their new world of adult men and go on to establish the broader networks of relationships that this entails. The organisation of *Kurdiji* ceremonies around generational moieties naturally gives younger generations active roles that highlight this important time in their lives.

The substantial changes that *Kurdiji* has undergone (away from rituals based on specific knowledge of dreamings, towards a more inclusive alternative generational moiety structure) entail an emphasis on the active roles of younger generations rather than the knowledge of older men. As a result, the majority of contemporary participants manage to find initiation meaningful to their lives because of the roles they can play in it and because of the relationships that they

establish through it. Through this, *Kurdiji* is seen as vital to the continuation of their own and other family members' lives. Other ceremonies that do not have this emphasis are declining in their instances of performance, the numbers of participants and their relevance in Warlpiri lives. This is perhaps the most significant factor in contributing to the expansion of the *Kurdiji* ceremony and related initiatory rituals over the past few decades, surpassing even the significant changes wrought by car ownership.

Last, and despite an emphasis on ritual performance rather than intellectual knowledge, the singing essential for the appropriate conduct of these ceremonies requires a level of religious knowledge held only by a dwindling group of older men. This leaves the ceremonial form of contemporary *Kurdiji* in a fragile situation; it is still vital to Warlpiri people's lives yet might not be able to be held in the same manner in the near future if there are no surviving people who can sing the required songs. The enthusiasm of younger participants suggests that this ceremonial form will continue to be important, but demographic and ceremonial circumstances could require continuing adaptation in order for it to be held successfully in the future. One way in which *Kurdiji* can be sustained is for knowledgeable senior men in other communities to become increasingly mobile, moving to where these rituals need to take place. There is evidence that this kind of inter-community travel is already on the rise.

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