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Chapter 3

Monstrous Transformations: A Case Study from Central Australia

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My chapter is ethnographically situated in the Tanami Desert, the home of Warlpiri people and the monsters that haunt, terrorize, and sometimes kill them. Located to the northwest of the center of Australia, first contact came relatively late in this region, and over the past century the Tanami and its human and monstrous inhabitants have experienced dramatic and tumultuous changes. I explore how one particular monster, called Kurdaitcha or Jarnpa, transformed with these changes, and the meanings that flow from this reality.¹

The hauntees of this monster, Warlpiri people, formerly nomadic hunters and gatherers, were sedentized in the mid-1940s in government ration depots fringing the Tanami, which were set up by colonial patrol officers in response to the effects of frontier violence and a severe drought. Over the ensuing decades, these settlements have grown into typically neocolonial towns. Residents still speak Warlpiri as their first language, for example, and have retained or adapted many of their customs. Simultaneously, they are intimately entangled in the neoliberal world, accessing Australian infrastructure, having bank accounts, being exposed to ever-increasing levels of governance, and so forth (Musharbash 2007; 2008). A clear consequence of these cataclysmic upheavals is that contemporary Warlpiri lives are dramatically different compared to pre-contact times; another is that they also differ from the lives of non-Indigenous Australians. This second disparity is statistically exemplified through what in Australia is called “The Gap”: a drastic differential in measurable inequality between Indigenous and non-

Indigenous Australians, from life expectancy and mortality rates, to literacy rates, incarceration rates, unemployment rates, and so forth.² For the purposes of this chapter, out of these, I single out contemporary mortality rates, which result in a difference of roughly twenty years in life expectancy between Warlpiri and non-Indigenous people. My chapter investigates how we can approximate Warlpiri understandings of these processes through exploring the transformations of the monsters that haunt them.

I contextualize this exploration within the understanding—prominent in monster studies—that as human society changes, so do its monsters (see among many others, Asma 2009; Campbell [1948] 1968; Carroll 1990; Poole 2011). “There are monsters on the prowl,” writes Michel Foucault (1972, 224), “whose form changes with the history of knowledge.” And, adds Richard Kearney (2003, 4): “For as our ideas of self-identity alter so do our ideas of what menaces this identity.” I approach these matters, specifically, by exploring the relevance to the Tanami case of two different paths of monstrous adaptation suggested in the literature: one that sees one type of monster supplanted by another as the world and, with it, understandings of the self and knowledge changes; and the other, which sees the monster changing with the world (see also Chapter 1 herein).

My investigation is ethnographic in nature, but I draw on data from two different periods to allow for historical comparison. For the ethnographic portrait of the monsters active during pre- and early contact times, I rely extensively on Mervyn J. Meggitt’s (1955) meticulous documentation of Jarnpa. This is based on data he collected between 1953 and 1954, when he worked for ten months with Warlpiri people at the newly established government ration station of Lajamanu. I compare and contrast Meggitt’s data with my own, gathered over the past twenty years, while working with Warlpiri people at Yuendumu.

I begin by delineating some critical terminological issues, sketching that Jarnpa appear to be merging with Kurdaitcha. This is followed by ethnographic portraits of Jarnpa at Lajamanu in the 1950s, and Jarnpa/Kurdaitcha and Kurdaitcha at Yuendumu since 1994. This is followed by an exploration into how and why Warlpiri people fear Jarnpa/Kurdaitcha. I then analyze transformations of Jarnpa/Kurdaitcha by drawing on the two models of monstrous transformation suggested in monster studies, proposing that merging the two monstrous figures allows for a more human-like monster, which in turn enables it to keep up with the changes its human victims are experiencing. I conclude by tying together traditional and contemporary Warlpiri fears,

historical developments in the Tanami, and the ways in which Jarnpa/Kurdaitcha managed to transform in such a way that they can continue to haunt, terrorize, and kill Warlpiri people.

Kurdaitcha and Jarnpa: A Terminological Muddle that Makes Perfect Sense

The reason I used both terms, Kurdaitcha and Jarnpa, in the introduction is that the monsters' names are in flux. During Meggitt's time they seem to have been exclusively called Jarnpa (he spells it *djanba*), while at the beginning of my research the terms were used interchangeably, and today the term Kurdaitcha is much more commonly used.

According to Meggitt, Jarnpa have “many human qualities and frailties,” but really are “malicious, indeed malevolent beings, who on occasions seem to be wholly immaterial and to possess miraculous powers” (Meggitt 1955, 378). Kurdaitcha, on the other hand, are *human*. The term Kurdaitcha, and its English version “Featherfeet,” are used widely across Aboriginal Australia (see also Thurman, Chapter 2 and Eickelkamp, Chapter 4 herein) to refer to actual people who, under cover of night, and equipped with emu feathershoes and their sorcery skills, sneak up on their victims and kill them to avenge the death of someone close to them. An early and quite extensive description of Kurdaitcha revenge parties, how they are organized, how they proceed, who is (said to be) among them, and so forth, is provided by Spencer and Gillen (1927, 454–61).³ Elkin ([1938] 1979, 313), in turn, deftly sums up matters by stating that the “term *kadaitja* refers first to the shoe which is made of marsupial fur string and emu feathers, and secondly to the men who perform magic while wearing them.” (The significance of the feathershoes lies in veiling the identity of the person wearing them as central Australian Aboriginal people easily identify individuals by their foot tracks.)

It is of crucial importance to note that the beings that Warlpiri people call Kurdaitcha are—most of the time—quite different from the human Kurdaitcha revenge killers known elsewhere in Aboriginal Australia.⁴ In fact, the Warlpiri dictionary (Laughren, et al. n.d., unpaginated) has no entry for Kurdaitcha but uses it as the English translation for entries that contain Jarnpa; put differently, for Warlpiri people, Kurdaitcha and Jarnpa are synonymous and used to describe monsters, not humans. Unless, of course, they refer to an actual Kurdaitcha revenge party coming from elsewhere to Warlpiri country. The productivity of this terminological muddle is illustrated in my very first encounter in the field with Jarnpa/Kurdaitcha:

It was 1994, and I had never even heard either term. I was a masters student undertaking my first fieldwork at Yuendumu, and accompanying my adoptive fieldwork parents, Joy and Old Man, and the children and grandchildren they were looking after, to Yujarlinpa outstation for the Yuendumu School's annual country visit.⁵ (For a week each year, kids used to be taught in family groups, on country, by their elders, instead of being taught in age groups in classrooms by teachers.) Other families came to Yujarlinpa as well, and they and five non-Indigenous teachers, camped at Yujarlinpa outstation itself, next to the windmill and the little houses. Our little group camped a couple of hundred meters away along the road leading to the outstation. I didn't understand why we were not camping with the others, and my questions were answered with shrugs. The first night in camp, after an excursion to some sacred sites in the vicinity, then digging for yams, and a huge dinner, I fell asleep early, exhausted. Only to be awoken, not much later, by Joy yelling at the top of her voice, sounding scared, angry, and upset all at once. At first I thought she must have been fighting with someone camping at the outstation, and that she was hurling abuse at them, justifying herself, and cursing them. This would also have explained why we were camping on the outskirts of the station. As I woke up properly and got my bearings I realised, however, that she was not yelling towards the outstation but in a different direction, into the night. Everybody else in our little breakaway camp was huddled together, under the blankets, pretending to be asleep. I tried to ask the girl next to me what was going on; "Shhhhhhhh" she replied, and quietly whispered, "Kurdaitcha." This meant nothing to me, and was just one more puzzle during the all too confusing first weeks of fieldwork, where I understood little of what was going on around me. Frustrated, I drifted back into sleep, only to be awoken again as Joy resumed her screeched litany, a pattern that continued throughout the night. She would yell and yell, and then, when she was finally quiet and I was about to fall asleep, I'd hear a bird call and she'd be off again, screaming at what I then thought was the night.

Much later, I realized Joy had not shrieked at the night but, as the girl tried to tell me, at *something* or *someone* out there in the night. Since that first experience, I have spent many a night at Yuendumu awake because our camp was assaulted by Kurdaitcha; and on numerous occasions I joined others in packing up and leaving because Kurdaitcha were about. I have witnessed Kurdaitcha attacking individual camps and I once experienced a two-week period when Kurdaitcha were simply everywhere in Yuendumu.

In retrospect, I understand that Joy's fear was triggered by two separate things: the chirping of that bird—to Warlpiri people, a clear indicator of Kurdaitcha presence—and the danger (that I knew nothing about) that we were in, signified by the position of our little breakaway camp. What I did not know then was that this had been the first time this particular family had returned to Yujarlinpa after Old Man's adopted son, and owner of that outstation, had passed away, and that some people held Old Man responsible for his death. The reason we were not camping with the others was because Old Man and Joy had not yet performed the ceremonies that would clear the outstation for them. Meanwhile, camping further out bush, we were exposed to prowling monsters who haunt, ensorcell, and oftentimes kill, Warlpiri people.

Both Jarnpa and human Kurdaitcha revenge parties have companion birds who announce their presence to Warlpiri people versed in reading these signs. What was out there, Joy feared, had come to get us. What *or* who exactly it was is not clear. Did the girl, when she whispered, “Shhhhhhhh, Kurdaitcha,” refer to an actual traditional executioner from over east or down south, specifically after Old Man and his family in order to avenge the death of Old Man’s adopted son? Or, did she mean that a monster had chanced upon us as we were sleeping defenseless and away from the others? I propose that this is not the relevant question. Rather, it seems to me that the terminological muddle indicates the two *terms* have merged (Warlpiri people now calling Jarnpa Kurdaitcha). Moreover, I propose, and substantiate below through a comparison between traditional Jarnpa and contemporary Kurdaitcha, that the ethnographic data substantiates the two figures are merging: Jarnpa and Kurdaitcha becoming one, the monstrous being taking on more human qualities, the human being taking on more monstrous ones.

Traditional Jarnpa

My description of Jarnpa at the time of sedentization is based on data contained in Meggitt’s (1955) excellent treatise on Jarnpa. Like their human Kurdaitcha counterparts, Jarnpa have companion birds, wear feathershoes, and kill people. They look like humans, but “wild,” with skin darker than that of Warlpiri people and their bodies covered in red ochre; they have red eyes and matted hair standing on end. They are left-handed. All Jarnpa are male and have huge penises, always partially erect. Their language sounds like whistling, but they can also speak Warlpiri. To most humans they are invisible; however, *ngankari* (medicine men) can see them. As can dogs, who often warn Warlpiri about the presence of Jarnpa, and may also attack and sometimes defeat them.

Jarnpa have their own homes, where they keep their (abducted) human wives (their offspring is always male and Jarnpa). However, they are extremely mobile and leave their homes every morning to hunt. Their mobility is enhanced by their ability to fly “as fast as a bullet” (Meggitt 1955, 383). This, combined with their invisibility, allows them to steal, rape, and kill without being seen. Most Jarnpa hunt (and haunt) on their own, but sometimes they come in packs. They have a break during the midday heat and then:

Setting off again in the cool of the afternoon, the *djanba* first hunts animals for food, then looks about for human victims. He rapes any lone woman he meets, then kills her either by twisting her head back over her shoulder, or by forcing her mouth open and thrusting his *jara* [sorcery] bag down her throat . . . The *djanba* is

not a cannibal; rather, he kills for the sheer pleasure it gives him. (Meggitt 1955, 386, note that I omitted some vernacular terms from the original)

This passage is followed by elaborations on the various ways in which Jarnpa kill humans. Their magic is the same as the one that human sorcerers, including Kurdaitcha, commonly use across Aboriginal Australia. Key features include small bags made of hair string that contain curses, and the practice of “singing” the victim. The effects are that at first the victim can still walk around, albeit in a zombie-like manner, and usually will die within three days, unless successfully treated by a *ngankari*. Just as often they use brute force, choking or twisting the necks of their victims. Meggitt describes one such case:

I was told, how one morning, a couple of years ago a . . . man was found lying dead in his camp at Yuendumu. Nobody had heard anything unusual during the night; and the local medicine men had diagnosed it as a case of neck-twisting by a *djanba*. (1955, 389)

In opposition to human Kurdaitcha, Jarnpa never kill for revenge, and as opposed to Mamu (see Eickelkamp, Chapter 4 and Morton, Chapter 5 herein), they are not cannibals. There is no explanation beyond their monstrous lust to kill; as Meggitt said, Jarnpa kill for the “sheer pleasure” it gives them.

This proclivity of Jarnpa to kill while unseen offered Warlpiri people, who do not believe in natural death (except in the case of very young or very old people), a set of logical explanations for otherwise inexplicable deaths. The deceased had the bad luck of a chance encounter with a Jarnpa who used sorcery, which, unless countered by a *ngankari*, manifests as an incurable sickness leading to death, or brute force leading to a sudden unfathomable death. Jarnpa were responsible for random deaths that could not be explained. This, above everything else, indicates why “after nightfall the Walbiri fear of them [Jarnpa] is quite apparent” (Meggitt 1955, 378).

The term monster, as Kearney (2003, 5) and Musharbash (Chapter 1 herein) explain, pairs the meanings of “to show” and “to warn.” The presence of monsters augurs “something” about the world and about the state of things. What exactly that “something” is changes over time, just as the shape, activities, and indeed the name of Jarnpa have changed. While there are significant discrepancies between Meggitt’s descriptions of Jarnpa at Lajamanu, four years after it was set up as a government ration station, and those of Kurdaitcha I collected some fifty years later at Yuendumu, some things have remained the same.

Contemporary Kurdaitcha

I begin my ethnographic portrait of contemporary Kurdaitcha by presenting some extracts from field notes I took during research at Yuendumu between 1998 and 2005. During this period, I was studying everyday domestic life, sleep, and boredom, and—importantly—had no interest in monsters. Yet references to monsters, including a multitude of notes about Kurdaitcha (and Jarnpa), can be found in all of my notebooks. These extracts illustrate just how quotidian the presence of Kurdaitcha had become during my fieldwork and contain important pointers as to how Kurdaitcha transformed and continued to adjust to settlement life, which itself was undergoing significant social, cultural, political, and economic transformations. Examples include:

- (1) Need to drive this massive detour every time I drop S off home because a Kurdaitcha man lives in one of the empty tin houses just south of hers (nobody can see him, except for Kardiya [non-Indigenous people], whom he frequently asks for smokes).
- (2) I was tired but first I gave N a lift, he wanted to pick up his torch and didn't want to walk there, because then he would have to walk past the Kurdaitcha tree.
- (3) Was woken up in the middle of deep sleep, unsure by whom and why and how. All of a sudden I was sitting upright in my swag and saw a face right in front of me. My first thought was "Kurdaitcha" then fear kicked in. As I became more awake and clearer, I thought, maybe some drunks had come to the camp, but then I realized it was S, who needed help with the car.
- (4) Had a flat tire on the way back, close to the church on the bitumen, thankfully not earlier: we drove the last bit in the dark and P always is so scared of the Kurdaitcha on the road to Nyirripi [another Warlpiri community].
- (5) The women were singing for K and massaged her with fat, which enters the body through the navel and makes you strong again. Same as T and her sisters did for N, who had been ensorcelled by a Kurdaitcha, which was the first thing that finally helped her, even the witchdoctors she consulted before couldn't help. After T-mob sang for K, she slept calmly and deeply for the first time in a long while; they got clothes and blankets for the service.
- (6) Everyone headed to the southwest, where B [4 years old] saw two Kurdaitcha men, they tried to wave him over, and everyone believes they are after T's sick daughter-in-law.

- (7) At evening story time in the camp everyone was talking about the white woman working for X Organization, who saw a man from Western Australia at the roadhouse and asked him if he wanted a lift, he said “no” and—pop—he was gone. Everybody pretty spooked.
- (8) B [17 years old] was telling stories about Jarnpa, and how they can appear as kangaroo and then turn into people, and how there are lots of them at the airstrip, they come to paralyze people, like that time, when M was sick. That is what happened.
- (9) N [20 years old] was telling stories about Kurdaitcha and how they always stay at Lake Sarah Hotel. They have shoes [feathershoes] to make themselves invisible, and songs to make their cars invisible. They travel around, specifically, around business time [initiations], to look for women.

While formerly, according to Meggitt, Jarnpa, who had dedicated home sites, were more sedentary than Warlpiri people, they now seem to flock to settlements such as Yuendumu, Lajamanu, and Nyirripi and the region’s service center, Alice Springs. For example, they are known to frequent a particular wooded area along the road between Yuendumu and Nyirripi, to live next to a particular tree on the outskirts of Yuendumu, or in a deserted house in Yuendumu’s West Camp. No matter where they are, they tend to stick to the margins, skulking just beyond the circle of firelight, in the shadows, behind trees, around corners. Like so many other monsters, they lurk in the shadows, literally and figuratively. As Kearney puts it, monsters “ghost the margins of what can legitimately thought and said” (2003, 4). And at night, because of the presence of Kurdaitcha, Yuendumu resembles one of those medieval maps; the familiar houses and roads, knowable and in place, are surrounded by literal darkness: “here be monsters.”

Not only have Kurdaitcha changed their residential habits, they also modified their visibility. In the old days, as Meggitt (1955) reports, *ngankari* and dogs were the only ones able to see Jarnpa and their invisibility was due to either their headdresses or their speed. This has drastically changed. Contemporary Kurdaitcha have no need for invisibility accessories; they are intrinsically invisible to most Warlpiri people, who just can’t see them. However, next to the medicine men (and women), two more categories of Warlpiri people today are able to see Kurdaitcha: children and mad people. I witnessed many a Kurdaitcha sighting like the one detailed in my field note extract 6, where a child reported seeing one or more Kurdaitcha and everybody sprang into action. The most prolonged Kurdaitcha haunting that happened while I was at Yuendumu was mediated by a teenage girl, who had what in clinical terms could be

described as a schizophrenic episode. She first reported being followed and harassed by Kurdaitcha at an outstation a two-hour drive away from Yuendumu. As the Kurdaitcha assaulted her persistently, everybody at the outstation became frightened and collectively moved back to Yuendumu where, in turn, over the next few days, something like a mass panic unfolded. The young girl was persistently guarded by senior people knowledgeable in such matters, who tried to defend her from the Kurdaitcha only she could see. At some point, while being assaulted in broad daylight near the basketball courts, she described their locations to the people around her, and one of the senior women hit one (invisible) Kurdaitcha on the bum! While that particular occurrence caused great hilarity, over the next few days the Kurdaitcha started harassing others as well, and nobody felt safe. In the end, a group of senior women took the young girl on a pilgrimage to another, far away, Aboriginal community with strong medicine men *and* well known for Christian healing miracles. The Kurdaitcha plague ceased after their departure.

It is perhaps not that surprising that in addition to *ngankari*, mad people and children also can see Kurdaitcha. What those three have in common, after all, is that they are known to be able to see things that ordinary people cannot. Much more puzzling is that non-Indigenous people also can, and often do, see Kurdaitcha. As a matter of fact, many Kurdaitcha haunts are known to Warlpiri people through information provided by non-Indigenous people. For example, people knew there was a Kurdaitcha living in one of the deserted West Camp houses *because* many non-Indigenous persons had mentioned being asked for cigarettes by what they took to be an Aboriginal man there. Warlpiri people knew that no person lived there. In this, as in other Kurdaitcha sightings by non-Indigenous people, at the airstrip, the roadhouse, in Alice Springs, the non-Indigenous person is not actually aware they met a Kurdaitcha. They mistake the monster for an Aboriginal person with whom they are not familiar, someone from somewhere else. A number of insights can be deduced from these common and formulaic encounters. Firstly, that Kurdaitcha today also speak English, as they converse fluently with the non-Indigenous persons they meet. Secondly, that Kurdaitcha, who strike mortal fear in Warlpiri people, do not appear the least bit scary to non-Indigenous people. And thirdly, the casual tone of Kurdaitcha engagements with non-Indigenous people—asking for a smoke, talking about the weather, the state of the roads, or the whereabouts of Warlpiri individuals—suggests that Kurdaitcha, who kill “for sheer pleasure,” do not kill just anybody, but Warlpiri people specifically.

Kurdaitcha have adapted to the contemporary neocolonial world; they speak English and they are *au fait* with twenty-first-century amenities and services. In the old days, Jarnpa used to

fly, not like birds, but fast “like a bullet.” Today, they also drive Toyotas, albeit black ones (the color is significant in the central Australian context, where the white Toyotas of government agencies are so ubiquitous that in some contexts “white Toyota” is synonymous with government). When in Alice Springs, Kurdaitcha stay in hotels. One such establishment, Lake Sarah Hotel, used to be patronized by Warlpiri people until, more than six years ago, a non-Indigenous person reported what was interpreted as a Kurdaitcha sighting. Ever since then, Warlpiri people have assiduously avoided staying there. There are suspicions, and it would hardly be surprising, that Kurdaitcha are computer-literate. One morning, as I was scrolling through Facebook, a post by a Warlpiri friend of mine popped up. “Do Kurdaitcha ever sleep?” she asked the Facebook world, clearly both exhausted and exasperated after yet another night without sleep because of them. Before I could take a screenshot, she had removed the post, anxious, in case Kurdaitcha are on Facebook themselves, and not wanting to give them any more reason to terrorize her and her family.

Warlpiri Fears, Kurdaitcha, and Death

Warlpiri people continually impress me by their fearlessness, and at first I was surprised by the seemingly inordinate fear that was palpable every time Kurdaitcha were said to be around. Before delving further into the reasons underlying this pointed fear, it is imperative to note that Warlpiri people are not indiscriminately afraid of anything that *could* be a Kurdaitcha, as the following two examples attest:

- (1) One of the girls told me the following story about one of the houses they used to live in: “that house,” she said, “is full of stories. One time, only myself and Lachlan [4 years old at the time] were there, Lachlan was scared and when the others came home they asked him what was wrong. ‘Kuku jiliwirri-jarri’ [a monster is causing mischief] he said, and my grandmother lit a candle, to walk into the dark room where he said the monster was. She was walking in there and said: ‘Stop scaring the kids, go away!’ But as she entered the room a wind came and blew out her candle. She jumped back really frightened and we all laughed. Oh, we laughed so hard.”
- (2) One time, a large group of us, four Toyota-loads full, went on a three-day trip to visit some sacred sites. The drivers were non-Indigenous, everybody else was Warlpiri. At night, we camped in a dry creek bed. I slept with the Warlpiri women and children in a

row as is Warlpiri custom, and the Warlpiri men slept in a row to our east. The others, one woman and two men, slept higgledy-piggledy around a fire somewhat off to the side. In the middle of the night, I was woken up by the women around me whispering frantically. They were pointing at a red figure, sitting on a rocky bolder in the distance, bathed in moonlight. "Might be Kurdaitcha," one of the women suggested. To which two others hissed, "Don't be stupid! Check the whitefellas first." And true enough, it ended up being the non-Indigenous woman, wearing a red T-shirt, who had woken up and walked to the bolder to "sit on my own for a bit and enjoy the night."

The threat of any Kurdaitcha presence is always carefully assessed. Though ordinary Warlpiri people cannot see them they can tell their presence by other signs: the Kurdaitcha's whistling, or that of their companion birds, by their tracks, and by other telltale signs, such as windhoses travelling in peculiar directions. They also draw on reliable eyewitness accounts. If they perceive the threat to be real, only then do they react with fear sometimes bordering on panic. Camps may be deserted in the middle of the night, houses may be vacated and left vacant for months. They also take precautions. For example, if no senior people knowledgeable in how to detect Kurdaitcha presence and how to ward off the worst danger happen to be present in a house around nightfall, then everybody is prone to move to another house for the night as that is considered safer. People who are seriously ill (e.g., N in field note 4, T's daughter-in-law in note 6, and M in note 8) are assumed to be ensorcelled and to draw Kurdaitcha near so they can "finish them off"; accordingly, they are guarded by senior people. It is understood that Kurdaitcha, frustrated by not having been successful in their kill, lurk close by and may attack others as well, which is why not just the seriously ill are guarded but people in neighboring camps will also be on alert. Well-known Kurdaitcha haunts are avoided at all times, and Warlpiri people, who are rarely alone at the best of times, avoid walking anywhere on their own at night.

The root of the fear of Kurdaitcha, it seems obvious, relates to illness and death surrounding, touching, and deeply affecting Warlpiri people. I illustrate some of the magnitude of these experiences first qualitatively, than quantitatively:

One morning, her grandchildren were surprised that Joy was not up bustling over the fire as usual, but still under the blankets next to them. She must be tired, they thought, and only when they got hungry and tried to wake her, discovered that she had died during the night. Joy was in her early forties. I never met four of her much older sister Dora's children, because they died in their twenties and early thirties, before I first arrived at Yuendumu. Last year, Dora lost a grandson age 37 and a granddaughter age 31. The daughter of another of Joy's and Dora's sisters was taken away by the authorities at age two, her older son died in his thirties, her

other daughter's son died in his twenties. During my 18 months of PhD fieldwork, I spent a total of six months engaged in mortuary rituals, not because I was studying ritual, but because I was studying everyday life, and everyone was in the mortuary camps. Shortly after that, Old Man passed away, followed by the girl who told me about Kurdaitcha that night at Yujarlinpa.

Warlpiri deaths must also be situated within the national context. Australia is one of the wealthiest nations on earth, it has the second lowest level of gross debt among OECD states, and in 2012 its economic growth was at 3.1 percent, largely driven by resource extraction on Aboriginal-owned land.⁶ Australia's Indigenous population, however, does not appear to be benefiting from this wealth in equal measure, and dire statistics paint a picture of high inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' quality of life, including an up to a twenty-year difference in life expectancy (see also Glaskin, et al. 2008). It is difficult to get reliable numbers because of notorious undercounting (including non-identification), so the following should be taken as indicative. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011, 7) states, "Male life expectancy in NT [Northern Territory, where the Tanami is located] is clearly the lowest of all jurisdictions (61.5 years)." It lists "external causes, endocrine, metabolic and nutritional disorders, which include diabetes, and digestive disorders as compris[ing] a higher proportion of Indigenous compared with non-Indigenous deaths" (11). In a nutshell, then, as Warlpiri people became enfolded into the Australian nation, their lives changed drastically, a complex and manifold process that includes experiencing new kinds of deaths, more deaths, and earlier deaths than before.

In the past, deaths happened rarely and randomly, and an accidental *chance* encounter with a Jarnpa served as a plausible explanation for inexplicable deaths. Today, what begs for explanation is not each individual death but the number of deaths that each community, each family, experiences. These deaths are not only inexplicable within the framework of Warlpiri ontology but also, I suggest, in the context of a wealthy nation. In light of this, Warlpiri people's continued palpable fear of Jarnpa/Kurdaitcha—monsters, who derive "sheer pleasure" from killing them—tells us to take seriously the very presence of Jarnpa/Kurdaitcha and what it portends.

How to Make Sense of Jarnpa/Kurdaitcha Transformations

The interdisciplinary literature on monsters suggests two avenues to understand monstrous transformation. The first, and more common, links the succession of a particular series of

monsters to the focus on a succession of a particular series of human anxieties, brought to the fore by historical circumstances. An important example is Stephen Asma's (2009) *On Monsters*. He traces the specifically Western genealogy of monstrosity throughout history—from ancient Greeks through to contemporary cyborgs—to demonstrate how different monsters have served different needs in each historic period. Focusing on America, W. Scott Poole (2011) intertwines American history with American monsters, an endeavor which produces a lineage starting with the monstrous in early colonialism, via gothic America, science gone rampant, alien invasions, to deviant bodies, haunted houses and—most recently—the American undead (see also Carroll 1990). This path understands the monstrous as a concept that emerges in different shapes or forms, embodying historically specific horrors that feed on contemporary self-understandings.

The period in question in this chapter—from early contact days for the people who moved to the new ration station of Lajamanu, to the past two decades at the well-established Warlpiri town of Yuendumu—has been a tumultuous one. From the nomadic hunting and gathering days and early frontier violence (including the experience of new disease, new food stuffs, alcohol, tobacco, and massacres), Warlpiri people emerged as newly sedentized colonial subjects. The ration stations first turned into communities, then towns, acquiring in the process better infrastructure as well as increasing layers of governance. Today, they are stark examples of Australian neocolonialism. Such turbulent historical upheaval is bound to lead to mutations in the monstrous. However, as I hope to have shown, the current case is not simply a case of Jarnpa not capturing changing Warlpiri self-understandings and related fears anymore, and making way for a new and more suitable monster, the Kurdaitcha. While the Warlpiri use of the *terms* Jarnpa and Kurdaitcha may suggest such a path, it appears that not just the terms but also the *figures* merged. In this case, there is no clear succession from one monster to the next, but it could be postulated that the amalgamation of the two monsters into one constitutes a kind of waypoint of monstrous succession.

The second premise of monstrous transformation sheds light on how exactly this particular merging of Jarnpa and Kurdaitcha unfolds and makes sense. Proposed by Nina Auerbach (1995), this focuses on one monster which emerges in different guises at different places and stages of history. It appreciates that a monster can mutate *with* the times. Describing her work as “a history of Anglo-American culture through its mutating vampires” (1), she illuminates vampires versatility and how they thus “blend into the changing cultures they inhabit” (6). She marks this versatility as a vampire-specific trait, saying that she “can think of no other monsters who are so

receptive” (6). I hope to have shown that contemporary Kurdaitcha equal vampires in their versatility.

Kurdaitcha, like vampires, adapt to the world as it changes. As Count Dracula employs a solicitor, and Eric Norseman of *True Blood* runs a nightclub, Kurdaitcha engage in the contemporary world, drive cars, stay in hotels, stop at roadhouses, and so forth. In view of this, my Warlpiri friend’s anxiety that they could also be on Facebook seems reasonable. If anything, the adaptability Kurdaitcha have shown to possess seems to increase Warlpiri fears about them. Vampires, writes Auerbach (1995, 6), “can be everything we are, while at the same time, they are fearful reminders of the infinite things we are not.” It always struck me that the vampire’s versatility in no small part is due to its similarity to humans; “they can be everything we are,” so as we change, they change (see also Musharbash, Chapter 1 herein). It is significant, then, that Jarnpa turned into Kurdaitcha, as this transfused them with more human-like traits, abilities, and likeness than Jarnpa formerly had (today, they pass as human in encounters with non-Indigenous people). This, I put forward, is the source of their versatility and allows them to adapt with ease to the rapid changes their human victims are experiencing.

Conclusion

A key point of monster theories is that a monster’s metaphoric strength derives from its familiarity with a given context, its ability to seem real in a particular cultural logic. I conclude by reflecting on this statement from two different angles: Firstly, I take up the issue of “metaphoric strength,” and secondly, I consider the Kurdaitcha’s “familiarity” with the context through comparison with non-Indigenous people.

I cannot express my feelings about the nexus Kurdaitcha, fear, and death any better than Poole, who said:

It is not enough to call these beliefs metaphors when they shape actual historical behavior or act as anxious reminders of inhuman historical acts, a cultural memory of slaughter. How limp and pallid to use the term metaphor for cultural structures that can burn the innocent to death, lynch them, imprison them, or bomb them. (2011, 25)

There are a number of ways in which one can understand the causal relationships between sedentization, colonization, and dramatically increased mortality rates. Warlpiri people clearly see a connection between settled life, Kurdaitcha following them to their towns, and the traumatic experience of many more deaths than ever before (see also Musharbash in press).

While some monsters fall out of fashion, so to speak, with changing circumstances, and are replaced by creatures more adept at embodying contemporary horrors, other monsters, such as vampires and Kurdaitcha, adapt and maintain their monstrous presence (their ability to seem “real”) across time. Kurdaitcha took pleasure in killing humans in the past, and they continue to do so today. However, they distinguish between Indigenous victims on the one hand, and non-Indigenous people, whom they do not harm. As Meggitt elaborates:

White men’s persons, however, are believed to be immune from *djanba*. As a proof of this, Walbiri men often pointed out to me how white men, including myself, would sleep alone in the bush without being harmed. The clearest expression of this viewpoint emerged one night when [in response to a Jarnpa suspected to be prowling close by] one man advanced cautiously to the edge of the clearing and shouted into the trees: “Keep away, *djanba*! There is a white man here. He has a gun to shoot you.” A minute or so later, after Abe’s courageous action, the dogs returned quietly. This proved clearly that my presence had frightened off the *djanba*. (1955, 384)

Today, Kurdaitcha continue to engage with non-Indigenous people rather than threatening them. More, through their transformations, Kurdaitcha have become curiously similar to, as well as inversions of, non-Indigenous people—that other historically disastrous and now all-encompassing presence in Warlpiri lives. Kurdaitcha, rather than driving white government Toyotas, drive black ones. Rather than structuring the daytime settlement space through their presence and ideas about offices, work, and money structure nocturnal sociality through intimidation. Rather than being visible, they are invisible—but crucially, not invisible to non-Indigenous people, who merrily report sightings of strangers covered in red ochre at the roadhouse, the airstrip, Lake Sarah Hotel, places which henceforth are avoided by Warlpiri people. The fact that non-Indigenous people have the ability to not only see Kurdaitcha but also to fearlessly look them in the eye illuminates that they themselves are impervious to the threat Kurdaitcha pose, and statistics substantiate non-Indigenous people die later in life and of different causes; moreover, they very rarely indeed die in the Tanami. That non-Indigenous people can casually report their interactions with Kurdaitcha (without alarm nor in order to issue warnings), epitomizes that they fail to recognize what kills Warlpiri people in spite of increasing medicalization and intervention, as is evidenced by the continued high mortality rates.

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¹ Note that Kurdaitcha are one example of a vast array of monstrous beings sharing the cosmos with the Warlpiri people. Others include a man-eating giantess (see also Eickelkamp, Chapter 4 and Morton, Chapter 5 herein), evil spirits called Juju, aliens, and Minmin Lights (see also Thurman, Chapter 2 herein). Note also, that the Tanami

Desert's plants and animals have experienced the same dramatic changes, during which some became extinct, others were decimated or pushed away, and so forth.

² For some (government) information on Closing The Gap initiatives, see <http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/indigenous-australians/programs-services/closing-the-gap> [accessed December 31, 2013].

³ See Myers (1986, 167–70) for some autobiographical descriptions by Pintupi people of the experiences of revenge parties.

⁴ It is interesting to note in this context, that Green and Turpin (in press) mention some Arandic instances (to the east of Warlpiri country, from whence the term hails as a descriptor of revenge killers) where the term Kurdaitcha is interchangeably used with other terms translated as “devil” or “monster.”

⁵ Please note that I am using pseudonyms for all personal names and many place names.

⁶ See <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-03-06/australia-gross-domestic-product-december-quarter/4555882> [accessed March 25, 2013].