

# Engaging with Archived Warlpiri Songs

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## Abstract

In the Central Australian Warlpiri community of Yuendumu, efforts to document and revitalise Warlpiri songs take place in an era where there are fewer contexts for the performance of associated ceremonies, consequently increasing the endangerment of this unique intellectual tradition. This paper outlines recent initiatives providing contexts for Warlpiri people to engage with archived recordings through repatriation based on-country at the Warlpiri Media Archive. We examine the community's perspectives and responses to legacy recordings made in the 1950s and 1960s, which captured a particular way of singing that has undergone significant change over the last few decades, even though some of the people who were recorded are still alive today. The individuals who have so far engaged with these archived recordings have drawn out unique perspectives on their contents, including insights into language change, shifting musical structures and the markedly different performance contexts in which these songs were once performed. These examples illustrate that repatriation efforts are much more than a simple process of 'return' of cultural materials to their communities of origin—re-engagement with legacy recordings influences performance traditions in their contemporary contexts.

## Introduction

In this paper, we discuss recent initiatives to repatriate legacy recordings of Warlpiri songs made in the 1950s and 1960s to people living in the community of Yuendumu. Just as the original contexts shaped the content and how these recordings were made, so too contemporary contexts, including contingencies of present-day social life and relationships between the intercultural teams of people who undertake this research, shape and influence the effects of repatriation activities on Warlpiri social, political and ceremonial life today. Archived recordings are often seen from a conservative community perspective as capturing a more 'traditional' version of songs and ceremonies. In this paper, we consider the effects this perception has on present-day understandings of cultural heritage, and consequently, on linguistic, musical and performance components of contemporary Warlpiri ceremonies.

To begin this paper, we outline some of the history of academic research in Yuendumu, outlining a community-focused shift that saw Warlpiri people in the 1980s claiming the right to represent themselves in research contexts, to be the creators of their own records of cultural heritage and the initiators of research projects that drive cultural revival. Following this, we discuss our recent Australian Research Council Linkage project 'Vitality and change in Warlpiri songs' (2016–2019) and the central role of the Warlpiri Media Archive as the on-country base for repatriation initiatives. From here, we present some Warlpiri perspectives on recently repatriated recordings originally made in the 1950s and 1960s and brought back to Yuendumu from the Canberra-based audio collections of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). Individual Warlpiri perspectives on language change, along with historical shifts in musical styles and performance contexts, are brought to bear to demonstrate that repatriation efforts always exist within

a historical setting that is affected by the dynamics of contemporary social contexts, and thus can ultimately influence the ways in which contemporary ceremony, too, is held and thought about.

### Archived recordings and research on Warlpiri songs

Yuendumu is a Central Australian settlement situated around 300 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs with a population of around 800 people. The language spoken by most residents is Warlpiri, although the community is also home to speakers of other Arandic and Western Desert languages. Currently estimated to have around 3000 fluent speakers, Warlpiri is not particularly endangered by Australian standards, but the distinct and often quite esoteric language used in songs is only known in detail by a small group of elderly men and women. It is this dwindling group who possess the cultural knowledge required to fully understand and reproduce the complex rhythmic and linguistic structures of Warlpiri song and associated dances and body paint designs.

Despite their endangered status, songs remain key to Warlpiri identity and cultural heritage and Warlpiri people, young and old, have a deep desire to ensure continuation of the ceremonies centred on them. For these reasons, it is a priority for community members to document songs, along with associated cultural knowledge connecting Warlpiri people to this important aspect of their cultural identity. This need has been recognised by the Warlpiri people and scholars alike for many decades, so a rich legacy of recorded materials and research has been created, beginning as early as the 1930s. Warlpiri culture is the focus of 12 books (Meggitt 1962, Munn 1973, Kendon 1988, Glowczewski 1991, Napaljarri and Cataldi 1994, Vaarzon-Morel 1995, Dussart 2000, Musharbash 2008, Saethre 2013, Hinkson 2014, Gallagher et al. 2014 and Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017). A large body of linguistic and performance-focused work includes an extensive semantic-domain dictionary (Laughren and the Warlpiri Lexicography Group 2007) and several unpublished theses (Curran 2010b, Dail-Jones 1984, Elias 2001 and Wild 1975). Musical features of Warlpiri songs are still relatively under-analysed, although works by Wild (1987), R. Moyle (1997) and Morais [Dail-Jones] (Morais, 1992) provide key information and recent efforts, discussed below, have attempted to further address this gap.

Many research recordings of Warlpiri song exist, some already archived in Yuendumu at the Warlpiri Media Archive. The oldest were made by Tindale in 1931 with Warlpiri men living at Cockatoo Creek, well before the establishment of settlements (including Yuendumu). The AIATSIS archive in Canberra is Australia's largest repository for the collections of materials relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and holds extensive Warlpiri materials. The AIATSIS library

catalogue lists recordings made by 31 researchers over an 80-year time span. David Nash's 2006 online bibliography of Warlpiri song materials lists around 60 items. Independent scholars (e.g., Dussart, Bell, Laughren and R. Peterson) also hold significant collections of Warlpiri songs recorded over many decades.

Despite this large number of song recordings, research documenting their content has been slow, and in some areas non-existent, probably because of the highly specialised knowledge and sustained engagement with traditional bearers needed for the painstaking work of identifying genres, repertoires, and songs, and then transcribing and translating the cryptic texts. Dussart's (2000) book sets out the social context for Warlpiri ceremonial life in Yuendumu in the 1980s, mentioning the chief song genres and performance contexts. Two unpublished theses by Wild (1975) and Curran (2010b) also give some details of performance genres and repertoires, but they focus mainly on the songs' social contexts. More recently, more research has been undertaken on the song words and rhythmic analyses of the Warlpiri women's song genre *yawulyu* with a number of articles discussing different repertoires (Curran 2010a, Curran 2016, Laughren et al. 2016; Turpin & Laughren 2013, 2014; Barwick et al. 2013, Barwick & Turpin 2016). Two books by Warlpiri women in collaboration with Curran (Gallagher et al. 2014, Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017) and a DVD by Laughren et al. (2010) also incorporate song words and rhythmic transcriptions. In 2008, O'Shannessy also recorded several Warlpiri song genres in Lajamanu (archived in the WMA and in the Endangered Languages Archive, SOAS, London). The 'Warlpiri Songlines' (LP0560567) project (2005-2007), carried out by Peterson, Laughren and Curran with now retired ethnomusicologist Wild and Warlpiri research collaborators, Jeannie Nungarrayi Egan and Thomas Jangala Rice, included preliminary documentation of song recordings (Curran 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2013; Peterson 2008). Warlpiri researcher Wanta Patrick has also engaged with archival records, including Wild's 1970s recordings, in his work at Lajamanu engaging new generations through the Milpirri Festival (Patrick 2015).

A number of research projects based in Yuendumu since the 1980s have recognised the need to address the ways in which Warlpiri cultural traditions, including songs and ceremony, are changing. Whilst some musical change is normal and indeed healthy ("if there is anything really stable in the musics of the world, it is the constant existence of change" Nettl 1983:275), of more concern is attrition (of repertoires and songs, especially for land-based ceremonies) and loss of intergenerational transmission, sometimes driven by large-scale external forces such as sedentarisation and consequent loss of knowledge of country (Barwick et al. 2013).

This recent work has contributed to a better understanding of Warlpiri songs; but equally, it has made obvious that the substantial recorded legacy of this important element of Warlpiri cultural heritage is still inadequately documented. Without documentation, archival recordings are of limited usefulness as a basis for revitalisation. It is urgent to bring older and younger generations of Warlpiri people together to engage with these legacy recordings and to document further details of their language, music and other associated cultural information, with a view not only to pass down the cultural knowledge that is embedded in them, but also to plan for how to sustain their traditions into the future<sup>24</sup>.

### The Warlpiri Media Archive in Yuendumu

Against this background, the current Australian Research Council Linkage project 'Vitality and change in Warlpiri songs' (2016–2019) aims to investigate the nature and extent of change through systematic longitudinal analysis of selected Warlpiri song repertoires performed at Yuendumu, and applying frameworks developed for assessing music vitality and change developed through the work of Grant (2014) and Treloyn (2013, 2015). On top of this our project also aims to develop ideas for community-based activities and strategies aimed at increasing community engagement and intergenerational transmission of song,

This project work is headquartered at the Warlpiri Media Archive located at Pintubi Antmayerr Warlpiri (PAW) Media and Communications, in central Yuendumu. Originally formed as Warlpiri Media Association in the early 1980s, this community organisation is widely accredited as being the first to develop and facilitate video production in remote Aboriginal communities. The Archive houses a rare and unique collection of videotapes (VHS) produced during the period 1983–2001, after which date their productions were shot in digital. The Warlpiri Media Archive also contains many donated audio-visual materials and still photographs. It is a living collection,

<sup>24</sup> In other parts of Australia, projects arising from similar concerns have taken place. Barwick collaborated on several such projects based in the Daly Region and Western Arnhem Land; see Barwick, Birch, Evans & Marett (2007), Marett, Barwick & Ford (2013), Ford, Barwick & Marett (2014), and also works of her present and past PhD students, R. Brown (2016), G. Campbell (2012), I. O'Keefe (2017) and S. Treloyn (2007). Broader issues of repatriation and sustainability of Indigenous music have been the concern of the ARC Linkage projects *National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia* (LP0560530) and the *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures* project (LP0989243). In recent years Treloyn has spearheaded a number of projects centred on the revitalisation of *junba* songs from the Kimberley region (Treloyn & Charles (2015); Treloyn, Charles & Nulgit (2013)).

with the content used for community TV and radio scheduling, and new materials added on a regular basis.

PAW Media has a history of participation in research projects, from Eric Michaels' work on Warlpiri engagement with television in the 1980s (1986, 1987), through to Hinkson's doctoral research on the impacts of new media on the community in the late 1990s (Hinkson 1999) and more recently, the 'Whole of Community Engagement' project with Charles Darwin University and the current ARC Linkage project outlined above. These projects emphasise the value of Warlpiri-controlled and -initiated research that prioritises Warlpiri perspectives and representations. Since its foundation, PAW Media (then Warlpiri Media Association) has produced films on their country that are owned and produced by Warlpiri people. Against a long history casting Warlpiri people as subjects of academic research, the current project initiatives foreground unique and innovative Indigenous perspectives on questions of song repatriation and revitalization, and ultimately, on the understanding of song change. A priority is for the younger Warlpiri people to dedicate significant time to working with senior generations so as to learn and document their own cultural knowledge on their country, thus producing an emic understanding of song change and ultimately, leading to more effective ways of revitalising song traditions through place-based knowledge management.

Simon Japangardi Fisher, a partner investigator on the 'Vitality and change in Warlpiri songs' project, has worked and been active on the board of PAW Media and Communication since its inception. Holding a Master of Arts in Indigenous Studies from Charles Darwin University, Fisher is familiar with research contexts and the importance of Indigenous perspectives for projects focusing on the continuity of cultural knowledge. On top of his research endeavours, Fisher manages the Warlpiri Media Archive and reviews its content. Taking the lead from previous projects of Barwick, this project has seen the set-up of an iTunes database of song recordings – mostly containing, at this stage, recordings made with the residents of Yuendumu as part of the 'Warlpiri Songlines' project (2005–2008). This includes, amongst other genres, a significant set of women's *yawulyu* recorded by Egan and Curran in 2006 as well as many hours of *kurdiji* recordings<sup>25</sup>.

Some of these recordings have formed the basis for two song-book projects (Gallagher et al. 2014 and Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017), which led to Warlpiri women's public performances in Yuendumu, Alice Springs and Sydney in 2017. The iTunes database is

<sup>25</sup> *Yawulyu* is a public genre of women's song. *Kurdiji* is the name of the public component of a ceremony held for boy's initiation and the songs sung during this all-night event (see Curran 2010b for further details).

open for community use and allows for recordings to be copied to CD or USB. Fisher's role ensures that song content is managed sensitively, so that songs with restricted content are not made available through the database, but are rather kept in the Archive room under suitable conditions.

### **Some Warlpiri perspectives on legacy recordings from 1950s and 1960s**

In March 2017, Fisher travelled to Canberra to visit the AIATSIS audio collections. As previously mentioned, thousands of hours of recorded Warlpiri songs and stories are housed at this national repository, many of which have not been heard since they were originally recorded. During this visit, Fisher reviewed a collection of recordings made by a dental anthropologist, Murray Barrett, who visited Yuendumu during the 1950s and 1960s. In possession of a reel-to-reel recording machine, Barrett recorded many hours of interviews during his periodic visits to Yuendumu over these two decades. Alongside his interests in dental health, he also recorded many Warlpiri songs and stories with a number of key informants, mostly elderly Warlpiri men but also some women and then-younger men, some of whom are still alive in Yuendumu today. Fisher's grandfather was one of Barrett's informants. Many Warlpiri people living in Yuendumu today, including Fisher, remember Barrett's visits and some were important interviewees themselves, particularly Harry Jakamarra Nelson, now a senior leader for ceremonial business in Yuendumu, who, at the time, was a young man in his early 20s assisting with translations between Barrett and the more senior men. In 2017, Fisher returned to Yuendumu with an MP3 CD loaded with over 10 hours of these recordings, which he then deposited in the Warlpiri Media Archive. Sensitivity has been shown to community politics, so the repatriation of these recordings has been gradual and paced, with senior Warlpiri men and women choosing to engage with these recordings at appropriate moments. (For example, Nelson has not yet listened to them due to recent extensive commitments surrounding sorry business, although he has plans to do this soon.)

Whilst aspects of this project work involve documenting the details of the content of these recordings, in this paper, we instead draw out some more generalised comments and observations on language and musical shift and attitudes towards continuity and change of these traditions. It would be impossible to adequately address the varying and deep emotional responses evoked for people today when listening to family members who may never have been known, or may have passed away in the interim. On a more general level, we found that the contexts in which interviews took place, the particular individuals or groups interviewed, and their relationships to the other involved

parties all affected the kinds of information that interviewees chose to draw upon. Our observations draw from interviews conducted by project investigators in three different contexts.

### *Rex Japanangka Granites*

In May 2017, Fisher (with Barwick and Curran in attendance) interviewed Granites, a senior Warlpiri man (Dussart & Peterson 2014) about recordings made by Barrett in the early 1960s for which many relevant details are missing. So that additional metadata could be added to the archived deposit, Fisher questioned Granites about their content. Since many recordings clearly include men's voices, the female researchers, Curran and Barwick, had been wary that these songs might have been restricted to a male-only audience. Granites confirmed that the songs on the recording were open for women to hear, stating notably that whilst some aspects of the ceremonies associated with the songs on the recordings were male-only restricted genres, it was fine for women to *hear* the songs because the nature of the recording meant they could not *see* the associated ritual events and dances. He related this to aspects of the *kurdiji* ceremony with which Curran was familiar, where women are required to pretend they are asleep and to bury their head in their arms without removing themselves from the auditory space of the ceremony.

Further to this, Fisher asked for Granites' views on how the songs on the recordings differed from those held in Yuendumu today. Granites interestingly responded to this question with the repeated statement that 'Country doesn't change', confirming the often-stated Warlpiri understanding of the country as timelessly holding the Dreamings and associated songs, dances and cultural knowledge. Such views have been used to discuss Warlpiri understandings of the introduction of 'new' songs and ideas for dances and designs as more revelatory than creative (Hale 1986, Dussart 2000). In this case, Granites was also contending that, in a context of widespread expressions of concern about the loss of cultural knowledge, there is assuredness that even if lost from the minds of present-day Warlpiri individuals the Dreamings and all the associated performance practices and knowledge will always be held in the country. In this respect, Granites confirms an optimistic view that revitalisation of ceremonial practices is accessible at any point.

### *Ruth Napaljarri Oldfield and Nancy Napurrurla Oldfield in Yuendumu*

A section of the Barrett recordings contains the singing voices of two women, who clearly identify themselves

on the recording as Yuni Nampijinpa Granites and Rosie Nangala Fleming—at the time, quite young women. Y. Granites passed away five years ago and Fleming is still alive in Yuendumu, although suffering from severe dementia. R. Oldfield, a senior Warlpiri and Anmatyerr woman, and her daughter N. Oldfield listened to the two women singing and identified some of the songs and genres on the recording. R. Oldfield is of the same generation as Y. Granites and Fleming and grew up close to them. Listening to them singing so long ago was for her an experience steeped in nostalgia and associated emotive responses.

R. Oldfield noted that they were singing in a "strong" (difficult) form of old Warlpiri language that is no longer known, even in songs which still today often carry on quite old forms of language. She stated that the women were singing a genre known as *purlapa*, which today would more often be sung by men.<sup>26</sup> The rhythms of these songs distinguished them clearly from the more commonly sung women's song genre *yawulyu*. Whilst listening to this recording, R. Oldfield was almost re-learning these songs, waiting for repetitions of the song verses, after which she would join in singing. She also described in some detail the dance movements that would accompany some of the *purlapa* songs—distinctly emphasising that they were 'older' styles of dance no longer performed (e.g., flicking feet energetically to the side). N. Oldfield also reminisced about the 'older' styles of dancing, remembering the ceremonies associated with these songs, which were held mostly as fun for entertainment when she was a young girl.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Warlpiri women yawulyu performers in Sydney*

In August 2017, a group of Warlpiri women travelled to Sydney: Lorraine Nungarrayi Granites, Lynette Nampijinpa Granites, Alice Napanangka Granites, Barbara Napanangka Martin, Enid Nangala Gallagher, Marlette Napurrurla Ross and Madeline Nungarrayi White (with five-year old grand-daughter Risiah Walker). During this visit, they went to many state institutions housing Warlpiri materials and performed and presented some *yawulyu* songs for a Sydney-based audience at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music as part of a launch event for their new book and CD set

<sup>26</sup> The Easter *purlapa* which Warlpiri people have held up until quite recently has similar features in being sung by both men and women, in this case with accompanying dances by men.

<sup>27</sup> Also within this women's recording there was a 'sung' chant ('*rrarrarrarra*') which the two women explained was not part of the singing but was rather designed to lull babies to sleep.

'*Yurntumu-wardingki juju-ngaliya-kurlangu yawulyu: Warlpiri women's songs from Yuendumu (2017)*'—itself aimed at being a document for preservation and potential future revitalisation of these songs. During visits to view and hear Warlpiri materials archived at the 'off-country' locations of the Australian Museum, the State Library of New South Wales and the University of Sydney Archives, the women had the opportunity to listen to the previously mentioned women's singing recorded by Barrett. Listening to the 1960s recordings as a contemporary group travelling to share *yawulyu* with a non-Warlpiri audience, their present-day concerns and interests showed when they identified a particular song as 'the Ulladulla one', being one of the *purlapa* taken in the early 1990s by Warlpiri people from Nyirripi to be performed in Ulladulla, New South Wales, several thousand kilometres from Yuendumu (a videotape is known to exist). Although at the time of recording in the 1960s this ceremonial complex would not have had such associations, for these women today its primary association was the more recent Ulladulla trip by the Nyirripi dance troupe, and this fact will be included in the WMA metadata for the song. Follow-up interviews with Alice Nampijinpa Elwood, the leader of the Nyirripi dance group, are planned as a result.

#### **Conclusion**

Whilst Warlpiri people in Yuendumu today unanimously express a desire for documentation of contemporary songs and ceremonies to include the repatriation of legacy recordings as part of projects to create contexts for the revitalisation of these traditions, it must be acknowledged that there are distinct differences in individual attitudes to these activities. These individual Warlpiri perspectives come through in interviews around legacy recordings—particularly in ideas around change and continuity of the Warlpiri traditions.

In this paper, we demonstrate that the contexts of repatriation efforts today are as complex in their social engagements as were the original events recorded. In the particular examples outlined in this paper, the relatively long time period since Barrett's original recordings were made has meant that significant changes to the songs' language, performance contexts and musical structures are evident (even though they are still distinctly identifiable as belonging to particular genres). Even though they were remembered in varying ways, many repatriated songs are no longer known or performed by present-day Warlpiri people or have undergone changes such as the noted differences in gendered allocations of performance roles in *purlapa*. Furthermore, many songs have since accrued additional histories (e.g., the 'Ulladulla songs' which travelled to New South Wales), distinctly changing how they are remembered in Warlpiri minds and perhaps the ways in which they may be reconstituted for future performance.

All these contingencies and histories may have profound effects on the ways in which legacy materials, such as the Barrett recordings, are handed back and re-integrated into the lives and memories of the residents of Yuendumu. Repatriation activities have already had an impact for present-day Warlpiri people engaged in this research, so it is important to consider the potential for further impact in the domain of contemporary ritual activities.

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