

Performing *purlapa*: projecting Warlpiri identity in a globalised world

Georgia Curran (University of Sydney) and Otto Jungarrayi Sims (Yuendumu Community)

Abstract

Performances of Aboriginal musical traditions have become widespread in various national and international spaces and are key ways in which Aboriginal people from distinct regions project their specific identities to a broader world. Warlpiri people, from the remote settlement of Yuendumu in the Tanami desert of Australia, have in the last few decades increasingly gained interest in performing their ceremonial songs and dances in intercultural spaces and to audiences with little understanding of the religious importance. Against a historical backdrop of settlement history and the shifts that have occurred to public ceremonial forms during this period (Dussart 2004), we analyse a recent performance of a *purlapa* at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra. We suggest that Warlpiri people are using these performance opportunities to engage a broader world in specific aspects of their identities, being recognised as global citizens, whilst also maintaining important links to their specific cultural heritage.

Key words: Warlpiri songs, Indigenous Australian music, performance, cultural heritage, modernity, Indigenous identities, global citizens

The global recognition of Australian Aboriginal art is one example of a way in which traditional aspects of Aboriginal identity have been recognized worldwide. Place based designs that link to Aboriginal cosmological beliefs, are painted in ways that are aesthetically pleasing to a western audience which often has little understanding of the meaning-laden and powerful cultural symbols incorporated in them. Previous research into the activation of place-based identity in intercultural situations has mostly focused on these visual art forms including Indigenous media, acrylic painting and sand drawings to show them to be powerful forms of cultural production and social action (Myers 1994; Ginsburg & Myers 2006; and Eickelkamp 2014). Underpinning these art forms are always songs, the key mode for transmitting and reproducing knowledge of country and heritage among desert Aboriginal people. At art exhibitions in distant Australian cities and even in New York, associated song and dance performances have been shown to “weave new forms of political identity” (Dussart 2004: 253), and to “constitute salient contexts for the contemporary negotiation and

circulation of Indigenous peoples' identities" (Myers 1994, 679), such that these performances have ongoing vitality in the settler-colonial present and future. Yet being less tangible, as well as highly multimodal and embodied practices, the musical performances in such intercultural situations have received less analytical attention.

Songs and ceremonial practices, being fundamental to Warlpiri lives, are mentioned in all 16 of the books that document Warlpiri culture (Meggitt 1962, Mountford 1968, Munn 1973, Kendon 1988, Glowczewski 1991, Napaljarri and Cataldi 1994, Vaarzon- Morel 1995, Dussart 2000, Biddle 2007, Musharbash 2008, Saethre 2013, Gallagher et al. 2014, Hinkson 2014, Warlpiri women from Yuendumu 2017; Burke 2018; and Curran 2020). This ethnographic literature mostly foregrounds Warlpiri people's worlds as remotely located, small-scale and kin-focused, and presents the primary value of traditional songs as religious with predominantly functional importance in nurturing the links between people, Dreamings and land. Despite the ubiquity of boldly-coloured Warlpiri designs in a globally recognized art market, these stereotypical representations are still pervasive. An important scholarly exception is Paul Burke's book *An Australian Indigenous Diaspora* (2018), ethnographically focused on Warlpiri people who reside in diasporic communities in larger Australian towns and cities. In this book he comments that "[t]he social embeddedness of Warlpiri people in networks of kin attached to particular tracts of country would ... seem to be the antithesis of the mobility of modernity" (Burke 2018, 15). Yet, he goes on to detail the multifaceted desires of Warlpiri people to make lives in places far from their desert homelands and to develop pan-Indigenous and broader Australian social connections which infuse their cultural identity.

Despite these dominant representations of Warlpiri people, ethnographic literature from across the Central Australian region also provides details of a Warlpiri intercultural history going back to the beginnings of the region's pastoral industry in the 1880s. This literature provides some evidence for the history of ceremonial trade and exchange across broad areas of Central Australia (Berndt & Berndt 1964; Meggitt 1966; Kolig 1981; Glowczewski 1983; Moyle 1986; and Michaels 1991). Many elders today reflect on the past trading of ceremonies and can give extensive oral histories of the places and Aboriginal groups involved in these social networks to time-depths well beyond their own memories. Although ethnographic accounts of ceremonial practices have declined in recent decades (see Curran 2019 & 2020 for some recent accounts), substantive collections of song recordings and video

footage do however exist in archives, demonstrating that widespread travels for the performance of ceremonies, both in inter-Aboriginal and intercultural contexts, has been continuous for at least the last seven decades and likely much longer. At the beginning of this period of dramatic historical and social change in Central Australia, Aboriginal peoples have begun living in centralised settlements, often far away from the sites to which they draw their spiritual identity, and are engaging increasingly in globalised forms of mass-media linking them through every moment of their lives to a wider world. Westernised values, morals and desires. Yet ceremonial singing in their own Aboriginal community contexts remains potent as a modern form of cultural production (Bourdieu 1994) and is still one of the main contexts in which traditionalized and highly-valued ideas about Warlpiri connection to places, Dreamings and kin, are maintained, rejuvenated and shared.

In this paper, we explore how and why Warlpiri people are asserting and reformulating their place-based identity in performances which are held in widespread geographical locations and increasingly more expansive intercultural spaces. A performance of a *purlapa* at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra in 2018 is a central focus of this paper. Purlapa is a genre of Warlpiri public ceremony, once held frequently for community entertainment but which has declined in recent years. In order to properly understand the choice of this genre by the men present during the performance we present some our consideration of the shifts in priorities for Warlpiri performance with respect to the social history of the seven decades. In exploring these shifts we throw light on the modes in which Indigenous self-representation is being carried out in a global context and is asserted through traditional song.

Performing at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, March 2018

In March 2018, a group of 16 Warlpiri people travelled from the remote Central Australian settlement of Yuendumu to Canberra to visit the sound archives at the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). With this institution holding a big place in the history of ethnographic research across Aboriginal Australia, the group were aware that here they would find many recordings, photographs, video footage and other documentation of their ancestors, immediate families and cultural heritage. A project with the University of Sydney and PAW Media and Communications, supported this trip with its focus on the repatriation of sound recordings to take back to the Yuendumu-based Warlpiri

Media Archive¹. Our task was to determine which recordings we wanted to have transferred to hard drives for community access through PAW Media. Some of the group had visited AIATSIS before, and for others it was their first time. Two of the most senior men who had travelled with our group, sadly both now deceased, Harry Jakamarra Nelson and Rex Japanangka Granites, had at a younger age been school teachers at Yuendumu but also educated in a westernised system and both had lived and worked for periods of their life in larger Australian cities including Sydney, Canberra and Alice Springs². Nelson had been politically active during his youth in the 1960s and 70s Australian civil rights era, and still is to a more localised degree as a community spokesperson representing both Yuendumu and Central Australia more generally. He famously spoke at the National Aborigines Day at Martin Place, Sydney in 1963 at the young age of 19 and is well-known for his lifetime of commitment to social justice and political issues. Granites, who in later life became an ordained pastor, alongside Nelson had long standing commitments to Land Rights issues throughout the 1970s, and social justice issues surrounding the 2007 Emergency Response.³

With Nelson and Granites' connections, most afternoons during the trip our group found ourselves at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, on the lawns to the east of Old Parliament House. Initially the women were shy to join, but were enticed to descend the steps down to the lawns by the familiarity of the smoking campfire, makeshift tents, billy tea and people who like them, like to sit around and have good yarn – a welcome relief in many ways from the rushed pace of surrounding city life. We were greeted initially by Roxley Foley, the son of Gary Foley, Gumbainggir activist who was an important political figure for the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 1972. Over several days discussions covered significant ground – Aboriginal politics, systematised racism, contemporary social movements, as well as the basic difficulties of running the Tent Embassy on meagre donations, especially as the Canberra winter began to set in for the year and firewood supplies were low. Nelson and

¹ The 'Vitality and Change in Warlpiri Songs' project was funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant from 2016 – 2019, a partnership between University of Sydney, Australian National University, Pintupi Anmatjere Warlpiri Media and Communications and Kurra Aboriginal Corporation (LP160100743).

² Sadly Granites passed away only two months after this trip. His name has been used in this publication with permission from his late wives, Lorraine Nungarrayi Granites and Ida Nangala Granites, who wish for his contributions to be properly acknowledged.

³ More recently and since this trip to Canberra, Nelson has also been a key spokesperson for Yuendumu with regards to the human rights and social justice issues raised by the police shooting of Kumunjayi Walker in Yuendumu, October 2019.

Granites saw it as their role to lean into these discussions as clear elders whose views and ideas were vital support for the young group running the Tent Embassy at the time.

On the third day of this trip, the group of women decided they wanted to dance at this site, in front of the letters spelling out ‘Sovereignty’ which face Old Parliament House, and are backdropped on their other side by the Australian War Memorial. The year before a group of six of these same women had come to the Sydney Conservatorium of Music to launch a song book and danced on the stage of the Music Café for a large audience⁴. Remembering the high that they got from this performance and their joy in sharing their songs and culture with a crowd of until then unconnected but deeply interested others, they began to plan for a performance in the coming days. Nelson, who had planned to return to Alice Springs earlier than the rest of the group for another engagement, announced that he would have to rearrange his travel plans stating “this was important... we have to do business⁵”. The following afternoon after much running around looking for white feathers, red and white ochred paints and black skirts in which to dance, our group returned to the Tent Embassy. Few people were there that day, and the women began to murmur about needing an audience, like they had had when they had danced in Sydney the year before. Foley came over to inform us that he had ordered new sand for the dancing ground which would be delivered the next day, an added reason to delay the performance. Nonetheless the women sat singing as the shadows of the iconic Sovereignty sign became longer and the chill of the evening eventually sent us back to the hotel where we were staying. This was also an opportunity to spread the word amongst the many Warlpiri contacts and their extended networks in Canberra to come the next afternoon to watch the performance. In addition, Nicolas Peterson, who had been reviewing materials with our group at AIATSIS had contacted two of their film staff who agreed to film the performance the next day⁶.

The following day, we regrouped at the Tent Embassy. The women settled themselves into a space on the grass at the bottom of the steps. They began slowly to paint up their chests and sing softly. As they did so the men went into a private area amidst the tents where the

⁴ The Warlpiri women held an at capacity masterclass in *yawulyu* for over 80 people and launched the song-book *Yurntumu-wardingki juju-ngaliya-kurlangu yawulyu: Warlpiri women’s songs from Yuendumu* (2017).

⁵ ‘Business’ here refers to the Warlpiri-English word used to hold ceremonies with important social functions.

⁶ Acknowledgements to Colin Macdougall and Nathan Dukes for voluntarily filming this event, Roxley Foley, Daniel and others at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy for hosting this performance and, Nicolas Peterson, Joanne Thurman and Amanda Harris for practical support of various kinds.

youngest of the men and most able-bodied dancer Otto Jungarrayi Sims was painted with white ochre and adorned in preparation to dance.



Harry Jakamarra Nelson and Nicolas Peterson prepare Otto Jungarrayi Sims to dance *purlapa*, March 2018 (Photo: Colin Macdougall)

As the women's singing became louder and this spectacle more obvious, a largish crowd of connections and passers-by began to gather on the steps. Led by senior women Lorraine Nungarrayi Granites, Lynette Nampijinpa Granites and Alice Nampijinpa Henwood the group of women sang beautiful *yawulyu* verses as they painted the associated designs on each others chests. Once the whole group were all painted they rose to dance two Warlpiri *yawulyu* dances: *Ngapa yawulyu* (Rain Dreaming) and *Yarlpurru-rlangu yawulyu* (Two age mates Dreaming). The choice of songs significantly reflecting the patrilineally inherited identities of the particular women. *Ngapa yawulyu* were danced Lynette Nampijinpa Granites (as leader), Nellie Nangala Wayne (an owner), Enid Nangala Gallagher (another owner) with Marlette Napurrurla Ross and Valerie Napaljarri Martin. *Yarlpurru-rlangu yawulyu* by Alice Napanangka Granites, Barbara Napanangka Martin and Jean Napanangka Brown, all owners for the Mt Theo and Minamina *jukurra* that come together in this ceremony. Ormay Nangala Gallagher, Sims' wife and another owner for the *Ngapa yawulyu* was also present and played a key role in the preparation and explanation of this performance but could not dance due for health reasons. R.Granites took on the role of spokesperson for the group explained to the observers "We like to dance in the open air like this, not all stuffed up in a room, we dance about our country, all the way back at home in Central Australia" (See .

When the women had finished their *yawulyu* dances Nelson and Granites positioned themselves with their backs to the steps where the audience had now gathered, Nelson holding two boomerangs which he used to keep a steady beat for the duration of the performance. All the women had moved over to sit in a group on the ground behind the two men. The two older men began to sing, with the women joining in following their lead, as Sims emerged from within the tented area adorned with a spectacular feathered headdress, white body painting and feathered arm bands and holding a dancing stick horizontally in his with both hands in front of him – he stepped out towards the dance ground raising his knees high towards his chest to the steady rhythm set by Nelson’s clapsticks and singing led by Nelson and Granites and accompanied by the women behind them. A short two-line verse was sung over a 30-second period, following a pause and then the same verse repeated. In the style typical of *purlapa* Sims continued this high-stepped dance style, curving his movement around in a circle, pausing between verses but continuing to shift his dancing stick from side-to-side to the rhythm implied by the verse, until he eventually faced the group of singers. His dance finished in front of the two old men, Nelson clapping his boomerangs together in the faster and freer beat which typically marks the end of a *purlapa* song. The heightened mood of the group was infectious and led to a buzz for the rest of the evening as the performers were crowded with compliments, photographs were taken and the importance of this highly culturally-valued ceremonial genre consumed the space⁷.



Otto Jungarrayi Sims dancing *purlapa* at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, 2018. (Photo: Georgia Curran)

⁷ Video footage from this event can be viewed at the Warlpiri Tent Embassy unlisted [youtube links](#)

***Purlapa* – a Warlpiri men’s public ceremonial song genre**

In order to understand the choice of this *purlapa*, we will digress to give some background to the historical and social contexts in which Warlpiri men have maintained this genre of song for public performance.⁸ Unlike other genres of Warlpiri men’s song which are heavily restricted to men-only contexts of high religious importance, *purlapa* is open for everyone to attend and participate with women often taking part in the singing, as they did at the 2018 performance in Canberra⁹. *Purlapa* is a specifically Warlpiri genre, separate to other Warlpiri song genres such women’s *yawulyu* which are similarly sung by people across a broad area of the Central Australian desert (and named in various cognate forms eg. *awely*)¹⁰. Mervyn Meggitt has described this ceremonial genre as for ‘public entertainment’ (1962: 244) – a description which concurs with recollections that Warlpiri people have of *purlapa* ceremonies held in the 1960s and 70s. Upon listening to recordings made by Murray Barrett in the 1950s, Nancy Napurrurla Oldfield (2017: pers.comm) immediately recognised the songs from their strong percussive beat, describing how when she was a young child, they would gather in the evenings in the south camp of Yuendumu and perform a large circular dance in which men beat their chests with alternated fists. She remembered these events fondly as having an exciting and frivolous atmosphere. Stephen Wild (1984: 190) has described *purlapa* in the more northern Warlpiri settlement of Lajamanu as being public songs performed by both men and women in a residential camp area – distinct from other genres of song sung by Warlpiri men which are held in more restrictive contexts.

In Françoise Dussart’s outline of Warlpiri rituals she has also pointed out that *purlapa* do more than just entertain, but in addition allow people to “manifest...their control over stories, sites, and the resources associated with them” (2000: 76). Like other restricted genres of Warlpiri men’s song, *purlapa* are associated with specific places and the singing of *purlapa* activates and maintains important connections between Warlpiri people and sites on their country. Wild too notes that they are related to the management of particular sites, serving a

⁸ The much celebrated Jardiwanpa ceremonial songs are also sung by men in open public contexts today and men also since for *Kurdiiji* ceremonies each summer (See Curran 2020 for further details).

⁹ *Purlapa* are not mentioned in any of the key literature focused on the music of other Aboriginal groups from this region (A Moyle 1966; R Moyle 1979, 1986 & 1997) suggesting that this genre term is specifically Warlpiri, although neighbouring groups have songs with similar functions, eg. the Gurindji song genre *wajarra* appears to be very similar in its entertaining purposes (Turpin et al. 2019: 85).

¹⁰ *Yawulyu* are sung only by women, mostly in private women’s contexts although men are welcome as audience members in the performed *yawulyu* which have recently become common at openings, launches and staged productions. See Curran (2020) for further descriptions of the various genres of Warlpiri song.

functionalist purpose other than entertainment as well as being “ ... believed to be received by contemporary individuals from spirit-agents of the Dreamtime (1984: 190). He describes these songs which were performed regularly during his fieldwork as always being accompanied by a beat such as clapping together two boomerangs or sticks or hitting a bottle on the ground. He also notes that women join in, sometimes even with the singing, cupping their hands and hitting the insides of their thighs (*purrpu-pakarni*). Wild (1975) describes how these songs can also be performed without any dancing in which case the men sit in an inner compact circle and that women and children sit around the outside. However, when accompanied by dancing the seating arrangement for the performance of *purlapa* is different. Peterson (2010: pers.comm) describes *purlapa* held in the 1970s in which the women and some men would sit in the east of a ceremony ground and the men would dance towards them from the west. When compared to the above description of the performance of *purlapa* at the Tent Embassy in 2018, this generalised description of *purlapa* appears not to have undergone significant change in a period of almost five decades. Yet there is much more going on here than extreme conservatism of tradition. Rather, *purlapa* are rarely performed today in Yuendumu and have not been for several decades, the event at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy being a stand-out contemporary performance.¹¹

There are however a number of notable exceptions, including the Christian *purlapa* which have been held until recent years at Easter time and for which the majority of Yuendumu population would travel to the settlement of *Alekerenge*.¹² A Christmas *purlapa* was also once held at Christmas time, particularly in Lajamanu, but disruptions due to logistical matters have meant that this has not been held for a number of decades. Neville Japangardi Poulson (2006: pers.comm) explained that in the 1970s the Christian-themed *purlapa* were composed by a group of older men and women as a way in which they could make sense of and pass on Christian stories and were highly inclusive with men, women and children from many different settlements come together to sing and dance. The Easter *purlapa* which have been held until recent years in *Alekerenge*, are focused in their performance around the

¹¹ During the Warlpiri Songlines project (2005-2008) in which Curran worked closely with many Warlpiri people in Yuendumu to record and document various genres of Warlpiri song, only two *purlapa* song sets were recorded – *Janganpa purlapa* and *Warlukurlangu purlapa* both sung by Thomas Jangala Rice and Paddy Japaljarri Stewart (now deceased). *Purlapa* are also often sung during the Yuendumu School’s country visits for the education of children but are rarely danced.

¹² The COVID-19 pandemic meant that the Easter *purlapa* at Ali Curung this year was not held. PAW radio however provided space for a local broadcast but this mostly consisted of the specific Central Australian gospel singing which frequently follows and often nowadays dominates the events of the Easter *purlapa*.

events of the Christian Easter story. On Good Friday afternoon, men and women sing seated in the above described eastward facing group with men also accompanying the singing with boomerang clapsticks. During the Friday evening, the group sings the same songs accompanied by a march-like style of dancing by men and male children in which they were decorated with white fluff whilst they re-enact the Easter story, even rising early on Sunday morning to enact the resurrection of Jesus Christ. All these dramatised events are accompanied by *purlapa* singing – the words to these songs having been written down and are carefully followed¹³. The members of the Baptist churches in Yuendumu and Alekerenge are extremely proud of the Easter *purlapa* and showcase it to Christian visitors to the settlement as a kind of example of how indigenous culture has incorporated Christianity. Like other *purlapa* which are more connected to places, these Christian *purlapa* are open for all to attend and often attract many non-Aboriginal people particularly those connected to the Baptist Missions in Warlpiri settlements. Although plans are still often made to hold Easter *purlapa*, and for Warlpiri people from Yuendumu to travel to this settlement for the Easter weekend, it has been many years now since this has been held. Often these events also become dominated by the sing-a-longs of Central Australian gospel which are highly popular and can dominate and even sometimes interrupt the Easter *purlapa* events.



Easter *purlapa* at Ali Curung in 2006. (Photo: Georgia Curran)

¹³ This is highly unusual for Warlpiri traditional song genres, most of which have been passed down orally over many generations.

Another notable event in which *purlapa* are also regularly held is the *Milpirri* festival, a biennial event in Lajamanu, supported by Tracks Dance Company. A spectacular one-night performance in which younger Warlpiri school children perform choreographed hip-hop, intermixed with men's *purlapa* and women's *yawulyu* – a unique opportunity overseen by senior Warlpiri men who sing into microphones such that they are audible to the large audience who travels to Lajamanu for this event. However, despite the shared family connections and history between the two settlements, *Milpirri* remains exclusive to Lajamanu with only a small number of people from Yuendumu attending as audience members. Due to this festival, hybrid forms of *purlapa* performed by these more northern Warlpiri people find a space to continue to be activated but *purlapa* associated with people in the more southern Warlpiri country struggle to find relevant contemporary performance contexts (cross-reference to Dowsett this issue).¹⁴

Performing *purlapa* – Shifts in purpose for ceremonial performance

Sims was the youngest man, and the obvious and only potential dancer for the *purlapa* performance at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, although at the age of 60 he is a respected Warlpiri elder in his own right. Sims is passionate about his cultural identity and travels widely sharing his stories and artwork with broad global audiences. Both Sims' parents were esteemed international artists, as Sims is now himself whilst also fulfilling his role of current chairperson for Warlukurlangu Artists – Yuendumu's community art centre. Sims's father, Paddy Japaljarri Sims, was one of the men who painted the Yuendumu school doors in the 1980s, in the early days of the Central Desert acrylic art movement which is so famous today (Warlukurlangu Artists 1987). Bessie Nakamarra Sims, his mother, was also an esteemed and highly valued painter – painting the Dreamings for which Sims is now also an important custodian (*kurdungurlu*). Nelson is also Sims' maternal uncle (mother's brother) and has ownership (*kirda*) rights for the same Dreamings such that the two men must work in complimentary roles to maintain and look after particular country. Being raised by these strong cultural leaders, Sims is passionate about maintaining cultural continuity and integrity and occupies significant time on these efforts, including nowadays a preoccupation with a more global Indigenous rights movement. The previous year, he had travelled to San Francisco for an art exhibition returning home with stories of his 'one-man *purlapa*' from the

¹⁴ The Milpirri creative directors, led by Steve Jampijinpa Patrick, note the tensions that existed amongst the senior men in Lajamanu when Milpirri first was envisioned, and it was suggested that *purlapa* be performed in this way outside of ceremonial context (*Kaja-warnu- jangka* 2020). For the senior men of Yuendumu this tension still exists.

exhibition opening. Despite Sims' passion for cultural reproduction and his supportive and extensive networks, this event in Canberra was however one of the only opportunities he had had in recent years to dance. Sims describes these performances as "Showing the world who we are as Warlpiri people" and considers them to have an activist motivation in making his own Indigenous culture heard and seen by a broader audience. Sims aspires to do more performances like these across the world as a way to assert his pride in his Warlpiri cultural heritage.



Otto Jungarrayi Sims in San Francisco with two boomerangs for singing *purlapa*, 2017.
Photo courtesy of Otto Sims.

The Warlpiri women in Yuendumu, in contrast have enjoyed for over a decade a high-degree of support for various kinds of activities aimed at sustaining their *yawulyu* - including biannual dance camps, and workshops to support the creation of song books and films (see Curran 2020b; Gallagher et al. 2014; Warlpiri women from Yuendumu 2017a & 2017b)¹⁵. Many of these activities had resulted in performances of *yawulyu* for which these women have travelled to broader Australian towns and cities. In 2017 and 2018 alone, this group of women had travelled to dance at the Barunga Festival, the Northern Territory Writers Festival, the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and performed at a community-arts event 'Unbroken Land' in Alice Springs, on top of their community-based events. Over many years, beginning in the 1990s the Women's Law and Culture meetings organised by the

¹⁵ The Southern Ngaliya dance camps have been held biannually since 2010 with senior Warlpiri women being supported by Incite Arts and Warlpiri Youth Development Aboriginal Corporation.

Central Land Council have also given a space to nurture and hold *yawulyu* showcasing Warlpiri songs and dances to large audiences from across Central Australia and beyond (Dussart 2004:261). Additionally, Warlpiri women also sing *yawulyu* as part of the annual initiation ceremonies which are today still held several times each summer (Curran 2020a). The extent of this prior work at performing, recording and publishing, alongside it being a more expansive genre across a broad area of the desert has resulted in *yawulyu* being positioned as “...one of the major ceremonial song-dance genres of Australia (Treloyn 2019:303). *Purlapa*, however, does not receive this same level of contemporary attention with little support from community organisations for men’s ceremonies and few traditional contexts for *purlapa* performance¹⁶. This is a sharp comparison to the heyday of *purlapa* in the 1960s and 70s as described in reflections of the this era by Warlpiri people and in the ethnographic literature.

In the period following the settlement of Yuendumu as a government reserve in 1946, Warlpiri people saw many dramatic changes to their social worlds. Dussart explains that after Warlpiri people came to live in this centralised location, public performances were dominated by *purlapa* which were held for predominantly Aboriginal audiences (2004). It is likely that segregation of men and women increased with settlement as there were so many avoidance relationships occurring amongst people living in a restricted location¹⁷. This factor alone would have significantly restricted where women could go in the settlement area and impacted on the kinds of ceremonies that could be held. With the establishment of a more northern settlement at Hooker Creek (now Lajamanu), and large numbers of Warlpiri people being taken to live outside of Warlpiri country, ceremonial performances were also used to forge new connections to this more northern country (Wild 1987: 100)¹⁸. Wild has considered the particular use of borrowed songs from neighbouring Aboriginal groups during the early settlement decades in Lajamanu, noting how they were performed predominantly as they better “...express [ed] contemporary political realities...” (1987: 109) in which Warlpiri people were now living outside of Warlpiri country and interacting more with Gurindji and other more Kimberley-focused groups to the north-west. Large-scale ceremonies also came to

¹⁶ Men do still sing other genres of public song connected to larger ceremonies particularly the *Karntakarnta* song sets for *Kurdiji* initiation ceremonies (Curran 2020a) and *Jardiwanpa* songs though this ceremony has not been held for many years (Curran 2019a). No current support exists from Yuendumu’s community organisations for *purlapa*.

¹⁷ It is customary for an avoidance relationships to exist between men and their mother-in-laws, this being ongoing for life after a woman’s daughter is promised to a man during his initiatory education (references).

¹⁸ These resulting in a joint land claim by Warlpiri and Gurindji people in 1978 (Peterson et al. 1978).

dominate as they better represented the settlement identities which were now developing as many different groups now lived together. Alongside this was also the decline in singing of smaller-scale songs which nurtured people's specific connections to Dreamings and sites on Warlpiri country (1987: 105).

Dussart has demonstrated that the above described shifts in gendered roles and performance contexts have paralleled a change in the purpose of performances (2004). The decline of *purlapa* and the rise of the female-focused genre of Warlpiri song *yawulyu*, was observed by Dussart in the 1980s and coincided with the onset of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976, and the subsequent need to perform public ceremonies as proof of legal rights to land. Women came to dominate these public performances and in these contexts audiences extended to include non-Aboriginal viewers. Dussart has discussed how during this era *yawulyu* had come to replace the men's performances of *purlapa* in different settings such as courts and art exhibition openings (2004). Additionally with the beginning of the acrylic art movement in the 1980s, there were demands for public performances at the openings of art exhibitions all over the world. Dussart's analysis highlights how Warlpiri performative priorities during this era shifted away from traditional systems of exchange, towards presentational modes that forge connections to non-Indigenous people. With frustration at the lack of understanding of these ceremonial performances by these audiences, Warlpiri women, then began to reorientate themselves towards inter-Indigenous spaces where they could showcase their ceremonial songs and dances to other Indigenous women. In this early 1990s era, the Women's Law and Culture meetings described above became key forums in which Warlpiri women showcased their *yawulyu* repertory and were 'witness' to those of other Aboriginal groups without the pressure of traditional ceremonial exchange (2004: 254). In this era truly presentational modes of performing *yawulyu* emerged in which it was widely acknowledged that other Aboriginal groups would not perform the Warlpiri songs and dances that they had witnessed and Warlpiri women also knew they could not add to their own repertory those that they saw other groups perform. The decades following this have further seen Warlpiri women represent aspects of Warlpiri culture to broader non-Indigenous Australia and in many instances Warlpiri women's *yawulyu* are drawn on to represent the vitality of Aboriginal ceremony in Central Australia. The Warlpiri women's *yawulyu* performances of recent years, including those performed at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 2018, are clear representations of Warlpiri cultural identity to a broader world spanning non-Warlpiri remote Indigenous communities, non-Indigenous aficionados of Indigenous culture

and art, visitors to cultural institutions and as was the case at the performance at the Tent Embassy, Indigenous activists and allies, many of whom are based in big cities. This is a space dominated by women making the *purlapa* performance focal to this paper, in which men also desired to take on this representational role, of particular interest for considering contemporary motives and current reorientations of the purposes for performance of ceremonial songs.

Performing *purlapa*: Reorienting representations of Warlpiri identities?

Why then did the group who travelled to Canberra in 2018 perform *purlapa* in a location far from the Warlpiri homelands which are the referenced sites in the songs? What cultural work was being done in this performance at this symbolic political site for Aboriginal Australian people? And why at this particular historical moment were men joining the women in representing their cultural identity in this way after decades of women's *yawulyu* dominating this arena of showcased public performance? We suggest that these intercultural spaces are becoming increasingly recognised by Warlpiri people as being central for the continuation of these valued cultural traditions. Though women have come to occupy Warlpiri public performance over the last 10-15 years with little involvement from men, this seems to be shifting in the contemporary global context. Men are now considering public spaces, such as the dancing ground at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra as an important forum in which to maintain the songs central to their culturally-distinct ways of life as context and project this identity to a broader world¹⁹. Songs which are not restricted to male only contexts were chosen so that this assertion of Warlpiri identity and links to Dreamings, songs, and country could be asserted in a public space, in a similar fashion to how the group of Warlpiri women had been doing for decades.

Ceremonial performances are vital in keeping Indigenous cultural knowledge alive yet they are increasingly at-risk. Survival of performance contexts is essential to maintain the modes through which Warlpiri people operationalise the social interconnections and associated links to the places that are fundamental to their wellbeing. Whilst song knowledge has long been transmitted from one generation to the next according to strict protocols that ensure integrity and authority of the knowledge (Barwick et al 2013) it is evident from the observations of

¹⁹ This is not dissimilar to the argument made by Ottoson (2015) in which men's bands sought out gigs in bigger towns for the prestige of having played outside of their own corner of the world.

Wild and Dussart outlined above, that there are key moments in Warlpiri social history in which a reorientation of ceremonial purpose adjusts to shifting social contexts. In this paper we have suggested that the last two decades have seen a shift to the showcasing of ceremonial songs and dances into broadening intercultural spaces. Warlpiri women began this redirection before 2010 when they began the Southern Ngaliya dance camps which established relationships with key community organizations that could assist them in creating further opportunities to perform both within Warlpiri country as well as in festivals and other events. This shift to showcasing of ceremonial songs outside of their intimate kin-based contexts is reflected in the concerns that the Warlpiri women had for an audience when they were planning for their performance at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 2018.

Whilst men may have had no desire or means to join or replicate a male version of the intra-Aboriginal contexts for performance exemplified by the Women's Law and Culture meetings in the 1990s, this situation nowadays seems to have changed. Sims had brought with him to Canberra his large feathered headdress, clearly anticipating that he would dance while on this trip. Having been told by the senior women involved in the trip to Sydney the previous year and the success of their performance at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Sims considered this performance to be an important part of the trip despite the contingencies being left to arrange in the moment. It is important for Sims as a rising male leader in Yuendumu, to carve out a role for male ceremonial performances like *purlapa*. Whilst *purlapa* may continue to have been sung in Yuendumu by Warlpiri men, it has been many decades since they have had a distinct social function and as such the *purlapa* danced in 2018 reflected those held in the 1990s, an era in which men would sometimes travel with women for performances in Australian cities.

Based on her observations in the 1990s, Dussart has summarised the motives for public performances as "...education, remuneration, negotiation, protestation, association, and identification" (2000b: 227–228). These motives appear to have remained the same over many decades, but the worlds in which Warlpiri people now live have dramatically changed to those in which knowledge and images are rapidly shared with easy access to technology, even in the remotest parts of the Australian continent. With consideration to the significant political, cultural, economic and technological changes within the Warlpiri region in recent decades, it is important for Warlpiri people to represent the relevance of their unique ways of life to broader Australia and the globe. Of particular influence is rapidly advancing

technology which eases social connectivity across the globe, albeit in a much altered and less intimate form to the kinds of sociality that Warlpiri people have with kin. These technological advances assist with engagement with other Indigenous groups whose ways of life and political struggles are familiar. Additionally, significant social shifts in the last 10-15 years in which Warlpiri people now identify as global citizens, and whilst also committed to residing predominantly in their remotely located settlements in Central Australia, have desires to engage with people from across the world. In the words of Steve Jampijinpa Patrick, creative director of the *Milpirri* festival, performances like the *purlapa* at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy are a way to "...make *jukurrpa* [Dreamings] relevant to the twenty-first century future" (quoted in Biddle 2018: 569). Contemporary Warlpiri-led initiatives to travel to perform both nationally and internationally represent a systematic Indigenous effort to be heard and seen, and to have others value their culturally distinct forms of identity.

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