The Value of Documenting the Dreamtime:
Designs and Songs of the Present, in the Past, for the Future

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Values Rendered in Ethnography and the Ethnographic Data

This paper addresses a variety of values: the value of the ethnographer in the documentation of indigenous cultural and intellectual property; the intrinsic value of this documentation to the indigenous people themselves; the benefits of archival documentation for revitalization of culture and self-esteem, including the value in investigating how indigenous people choose to access their historical record. The focus is on the documentation of Warlpiri women's ceremonies that took place in 1981-2 in Willowra, central Australia.

I believe the ethnographer is essential for the historical record of rapidly changing cultures. The ethnographer can provide an insight into the values expressed by the culture, through analysis of research. The documentation provides the ability to retain traditional means of exercising and proving Land Title for indigenous communities, as well as providing the ability to pass ceremonial data to future generations. When ethnographic materials are returned to the indigenous community, the people have the autonomy to govern what happens to the documentation. The historical record can help with reducing loss of culture and provide the opportunity to revitalize and practice one's culture. The recorded evidence can contribute to the self-esteem of individuals and of the community as a whole.

Ethnographers: recorders of the present, which becomes the past

By the end of 1982, my research was done. As Malinowski encouraged in the early 1920s, I had been a "participant observer." AIATSIS (the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies) had provided a grant for me to document Warlpiri women's dance

and formal movement at Willowra, central Australia. Willowra was considered a stable indigenous community. No alcohol was allowed. The people were still semi-nomadic—residing in humpies/lean-tos, and they practiced their traditions and taboos. The women placed me in a "skin" group so that I could learn from my "grandmothers" and "mothers." These women had ritual authority for women's business in the community. I spoke some Warlpiri. I participated in their ceremonies. I went on hunting trips, and when appropriate I slept at the single-women's camp. I worked daily with the Warlpiri women, listening, recording, and asking questions about them and their various activities. We shared time, space, and concepts for over a year.

Ethnographers – catalysts with an etic perspective

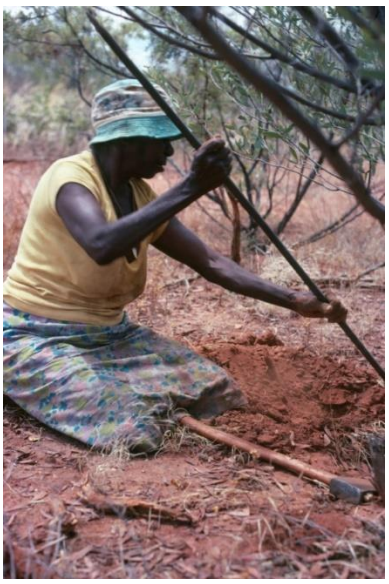
What value does the community get from people researching and documenting their cultural and intellectual heritage? This question was addressed at the Colloquium of The International Council for Traditional Music held in Queensland, 1988: "It is only by documenting dance that we have a stable, unchanging record of a dynamic, spatiotemporal expression of a culture that often changes with time. The document provides an opportunity for future generations to learn about their cultural heritage" (Morais 1992:130). In addition to creating an historical record, the ethnographer can be a catalyst.

Potentially, cultural activity is stimulated by the presence of interested people, such as an ethnographer. Ellis states when writing of her documentation of women's songs in northern South Australia, "As a result of the fieldwork, women in this area often began reviving ceremonies which had not been performed for many years…Thus my requests for songs stimulated an interest in them, so traditions were again passed from one group to another, and children began to be taught long-neglected songs" (1992:156). When outsiders are interested in what the community is doing, people take pride in their activities and create opportunities to

practice and share their culture. Thus, there is a strengthening of culture, due in part to the presence of the ethnographer.

There also were some very real, tangible, material benefits to the Warlpiri women with my presence. They were paid to work with me, through the grant from AIATSIS. The women were anxious to have a women's motorcar in order to be able to go hunting where and when they wanted. They chose to have their earnings, accrued from the research project, deposited in a bank account so that they could save up for a motor vehicle. When the vehicle was purchased, the community dynamics changed: the women had more autonomy. It was also clear the women were happy to have their own vehicle.

Besides being catalysts, ethnographers can gain a certain insight into culture that would not necessarily be perceived by the members of the culture--the etic perspective can be useful. When observing Warlpiri women's dance movements, I was empathically and consistently struck with the similarities between specific activities which the women referred to as dancing, sorrowing (being sorry), hunting, and fighting. These four activities appeared to involve many of the same or similar structures, functions, and movement patterns.



Nangala digging on a hunting trip

Nampijinpa dancing at Mt. Barkly

When discussing this with the women, they considered my observations and conceptualizations to be "true" albeit somewhat foreign. To them, the significance of an action is the performing of it, not its analysis, nor the comparison of it with other actions. They much preferred to show me the movements and sing the accompanying song verse rather than to define and verbalize their activities (also see Bell and Ditton 1980:52; Wild 1975:61-62, 65).

In 1967, Catherine Ellis led a team to film a ceremony performed by the Antikirinya women of northern South Australia. In 1989, she invited Linda Barwick and myself to analyze that film (see Ellis, Barwick, and Morais 1990). Through observation and analysis of that recorded dance I realized that analysis of nonverbal behavior patterns can reveal unconscious symbols of the culture which are embodied within constellations of behavior (Morais 1995:90; also see Wild 1975:84). Through observation, documentation, and analysis, the outsider can be privy to perceiving the culture in a way that would not be normal for members of the community. What is the value in that?

Kaeppler suggests that the analysis of nonverbal behavior patterns may indicate the deep structures of the culture (1978). Basically, these structures help hold the culture together. The deep structures operate at an unconscious level and are the core assumptions of a culture. They transmit a culture's beliefs about life. The deep structures within family, community, and religion--and the messages they carry--are one way cultures are able to continue in spite of cultural diffusion and assimilation.

Values Demonstrated in the Material Renditions of a Culture: documentation of Yawulyu, songs, designs, dances

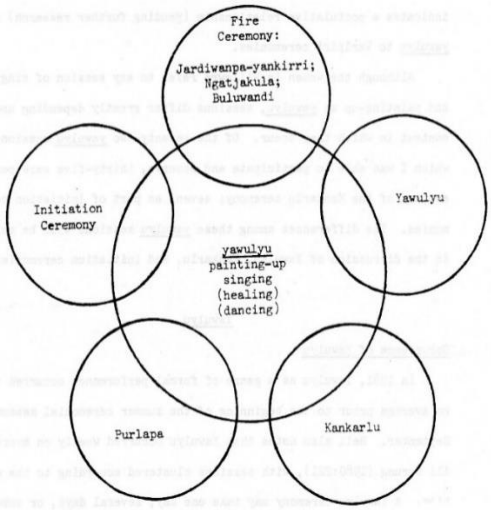
Yawulyu and ceremonial designs – deep structures

For the Warlpiri, a major cultural and religious focus is on their relationship to the earth and its contents. The Warlpiri are related to the land, the waters, the fauna and foliage on it, as well as to each other and to their universe. Through their descendancy from totemic ancestors, the Warlpiri originate from the Dreamtime (Jukurrpa)—a timeless dimension of existence, during which there is/was a creation period. Jukurrpa is the law (Capell 1952:120). Bell states it is "an all-encompassing law which binds people, flora, fauna and natural phenomena into one enormous interfunctioning world" (1983:91).

A totemic Dreamtime ancestor is a prototypic, mythological being of the Dreamtime who created certain aspects of the Warlpiri universe. It is an archetype of a class of phenomena and a symbolic figure. Several events, objects, beings, and places ("country') are associated with a Dreamtime ancestor. All Warlpiri are descended from these ancestors. They are "owner" (*kirda*) of particular Dreamtime ancestors inherited from their fathers with patrilineal descent, and "manager" (*kurdungurlu*) of their mother's Dreamtime ancestors. Yawulyu is the term used by the Warlpiri for women's ritual. Through Yawulyu the women re-enact the activities of their totemic ancestors. "Owners" and "managers" have different, important ritual responsibilities.

Jurlarda (Sugarbag) Dreaming – manifested in the environment & Yawulyu

Yawulyu includes painting designs on bodies (and sometimes symbolically multi-referential ritual implements) while singing, Singing instills the power of the Dreamtime; the designs are signs of the Dreamtime spirit/power. During this activity, healing and/or dancing sometimes takes place, and which may be followed by a formal dance. Yawulyu as a genre focuses on maintenance of "country" (that is, locales, territorial regions pertinent to the Warlpiri) and people. It can include love management, rain-making, or curing, according to the needs at the time. One ceremony may take several days, weeks, or months to complete in entirety. Its relationship to other ceremonies can be seen in the following diagram:



Yawulyu and its Relationship to Other Ceremonies

The purpose of Warlpiri women's ceremonies can be summarized as the maintenance and growth of people and of land, including all that's on it (Morais 1998:464). By means of Yawulyu the women "hold up the land," maintain the dreamings, and look after the country (Toohey1980:31; TP 1980:264, 272, 275). Their ritualized performance of the Dreamtime ancestors' activities in the creation era helps maintain the creation (Dail-Jones [Morais] 1984: 372; also see Bell 1980: Chapter 5; Wafer and Wafer 1980).

Documentation of a range of values

By documenting religious expression we are documenting the deep structures of their religion and culture. For Warlpiri women, Yawulyu reveals multiple values, including moral, ethical, practical, aesthetic, personal and social. I observed that Yawulyu sessions serve the following functions.

a. Education—through participation in Yawulyu, young girls are taught social laws, history, geography, religious beliefs, and survival (where, when, and how to find food and water).
b. Expression of aesthetic values of the group—ritual is the primary outlet and expression of Warlpiri creativity: art, music, dance, story, sculpture.
c. Expression and confirmation of religious values and beliefs—all ritual activity is concerned with, and sanctioned by, the Dreamtime, the Law.
d. Establishment and maintenance of social roles and hierarchies—women must continue to be active in Yawulyu to maintain their status in the community as ritual leaders; ritual authority is not entirely separate from authority in secular matters.
e. Social cohesiveness, reinforcement of the group—establishment of a meeting situation where local political issues and future plans can be discussed: establishment of group solidarity.

f. Tension management—ritual business cannot take place when there is considerable social disharmony; women try to avoid tension in order to be able to complete an extensive Yawulyu performance.

g. Entertainment—for the women themselves, and for visitors.

h. Exchange and barter—cloth, clothes, money, ritual paraphernalia, may all be exchanged at the end of a yawulyu session, thereby manifesting and maintaining social ties, economic distribution, and ritual reciprocity.

i. Adaptation and acculturation—occasionally Yawulyu can take place for young girls as part of school activities or as an expression of Christian beliefs, thereby functioning to help assimilate non-Aboriginal institutions into the sanctions of Warlpiri tradition.

Most Yawulyu sessions are concerned with more than one purpose. In a Yawulyu session primarily for a particular country, the women might have dancing for that country after painting-up but during painting-up also ritually attend to someone who is not well. In such a case, the sick person would have the dreaming design pertinent to her country on her breasts and arms, and a Jurlarda (Sugarbag) design on her stomach (Dail-Jones [Morais], 1984:90-91).

Napangardi painted-up during Kankarlu – initiation ceremony for boys

The value of ceremonies in establishing Aboriginal land rights and traditional country

It is through traditional knowledge, demonstrated in ceremony, that the Warlpiri exercise their responsibility to maintain the land and dreamings. During the hearing for the Warlpiri/Anmatjirra Land Claim to Willowra Pastoral Lease, His Honour Mr. Justice Toohey, Aboriginal Land Commissioner asks Diane Bell, "Anybody who does paint other people—apply the paint, could then well fall within the scope of a person having primary spiritual responsibility?" Bell's answer is, "Yes" (TP1980:513).

According to the Central Land Council,

> "Warlpiri land ownership is fundamentally a religious relationship between people and land. It is these religious links that give certain rights, such as the use of the economic resources of the area, and certain responsibilities, such as looking after the country through performing ritual."

Clearly, there is a huge value to the indigenous people of Australia to maintain their traditions and ceremonies. It is by such knowledge that they have been able to prove their ownership of land. And it is by continuing their ceremonies that they maintain the land and dreamings. In *Central Australian Women's Traditional Songs; keeping Yawulyu/Awelye Strong,* Barwick and Turpin note, "Recognizing the importance of ceremonial performances in upholding Aboriginal law, some Aboriginal organizations have sponsored bush trips for learning of *yawulyu/awelye*" (2016:124). Barwick and Turpin further report that Nampin, a community leader in Tennant Creek, a member of the Central Land Council, and a woman who has participated in several land claims, regards "maintaining knowledge of *yawulyu* as essential for ensuring a continued voice for Aboriginal people in legal disputes" (2016:128).

Valuable Revitalization Efforts

The changing cultural climate

Currently, indigenous Australian ceremony (painting-up, singing, dancing) is endangered. Much ritual knowledge has been lost over time. According to UNESCO terms, Aboriginal music from Central Australia is "in urgent need of safeguarding" (Schippers 2016:4). Barwick and Turpin state:

"Today the main threats to *yawulyu/awelye* stem from disruption of traditional languages, lack of access to country, and lack of knowledgeable singers living, or able to get together, in one place. In addition, a number of government policies—such as the closure of bilingual programs in Northern Territory schools and an increased focus on mainstream employment under the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act (2007)—have had the possibly unintended effect of encouraging people to abandon traditional practices" (2016:130).

In 2019, I returned to Willowra. During our participation in an initiation ceremony, I noted these changes from 1981-82: the mothers of the initiates were not painted-up prior to the all-night dancing, and the women's public dance style no longer was based on a travelling dance step. (Note: today the Warlpiri in Willowra live in houses.) In a 2018 video clip of Warlpiri women at the Barunga Festival, the younger women participating in the Yawulyu dance wear dresses over their torsos, covering up most of the Yawulyu designs (YouTube). The research into culture change, such as how Warlpiri ceremonies are developing, and what designs currently are being painted on whom, by whom and how often, is a role for future ethnographers.

Communities accessing their cultural and intellectual property

What are the community benefits of research into music and performance practices? The community benefits are sometimes hard to measure. As noted by Curran and Gillespie, "These

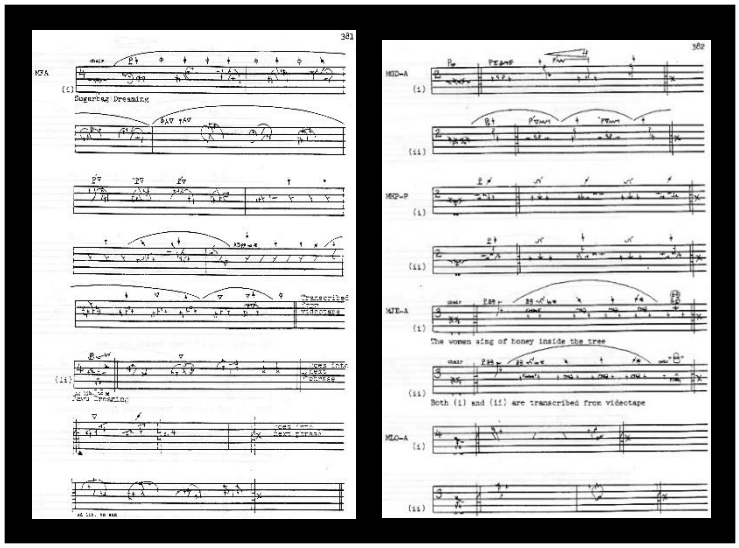
musical forms are often significant forms of intangible cultural heritage, such that research with this focus is strongly valued by communities in which we work" (2019). Indeed, this was the case in Willowra. In 2019, the community was hungry for their past creativity, their past traditions. Somehow, much of the creativity over time has been narrowed down to fewer designs and fewer occasions for ceremonial participation.

Clearly, many indigenous peoples of Australia find value in their traditional culture. Included in the Murrawarri Republic's Statement of Rights, is the "right to revitalize and practice our culture" (Cultural Survival). Twenty-seven other indigenous tribes in Australia have followed this lead—seeking self-government, and requesting templates of the Murrawarri constitution (Abbondanza 6, 10). It is reasonable that all indigenous peoples should be able to acquire their historical documentation and choose how to access and utilize the information. For the Warlpiri, Dreamtime activities used to be the ordinary way of life in both secular and sacred realms. Their sacred rituals and traditions might be the only key for them to hold on to cultural strength, hope, and success in an increasingly changing world.

The Value of Returning Documentation to the Community

The value of archival recordings

The data I gathered in 1981-2 was stored in a holding tank--AIATSIS. For several reasons I did not publish my findings. First, much data was about women's ceremonies, many of which were secret, not for men to know about. Second, the readership would be selective, due to the focus on movement (see Dail-Jones [Morais]).



Archived Benesh Movement Notation of Yawulyu Dance Movements associated with Jurlarda Dreaming (Sugarbag)

In 2010, Myfany Turpin—a linguist with the University of Sydney, requested access to the archival recordings I'd made of the Warlpiri women's songs. This led to her analysis on the recordings with the women in Willowra. She, and linguist Mary Laughren, met with the women in 2011 to work on the song transcriptions and translations. They also made a film on women's Yawulyu. In 2012, Myfany and I met. I shared my field notes, photographs of the designs and copies of the recordings. Myfany took these back to Willowra and shared them with the women there. The women were pleased but also dismayed because so many of the designs weren't done any more. They'd been "lost," "forgotten." And so the designs (as well as the songs, dances, and data) I'd recorded in 1981-82 had become an historical record.

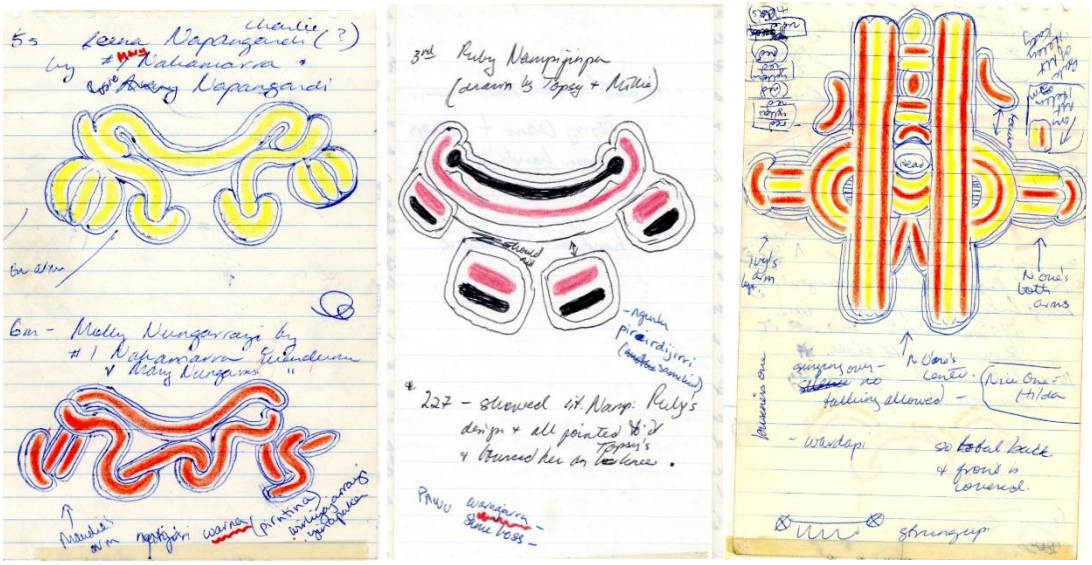
The value of investigating how people intend to use the ethnographic data--their own indigenous cultural and intellectual property

The value of investigating what people want done with the documentation of their culture is that it provides the owners autonomy and self-determination. Without investigation, there is the possibility of the outsider pre-determining what should be done with the data. That could lead to the community feeling coerced or manipulated. In 2018, I sought advice from AIATSIS

regarding my documentations. They recommended discussion with the Warlpiri women to determine what the women wanted done with the data I'd recorded.

I returned to Willowra in 2019, with Turpin and Laughren, 37 years after my field work. I shared photos from 1981-82 with the Willowra community. The community loved to look at these. All wanted copies of themselves and deceased relatives. Unfortunately, in 1981-2, photography was not so viable. At that time, photography had been severally limited due to the sensitivity surrounding death, and the possibility of seeing photos of deceased relatives. The women had discouraged photography, but welcomed audio recording of songs, movement notation, and drawings of their designs.

By visiting with the women in Willowra in 2019, and showing them photos of the 400+ ceremonial designs I'd previously documented with colored pencils and notes, I was able to get their input into what they wanted done with the designs. Mostly, the women were very interested in seeing the multitude of designs. Some younger girls particularly wanted to see "their own designs" for which they are "owner" (*kirda*).



Field notes of Yawulyu Designs

According to Schippers, "Documentation is not just about preservation; it can play a leading role in the maintenance and revitalization of genres" (2016:33). "The nature of tradition is not to preserve intact a heritage from the past, but to enrich it according to present circumstances and transmit the result to future generations" (Aubert, 2007:10). In regards to indigenous Australian dance and music, Ellis states, "Traditional performers have the right to create their own meaningful contemporary system" (1992:162). Myfany and I hoped to discover the best outcome in the return of cultural and intellectual property. We did not want to be patronizing, self-serving, or exploitative. We reviewed various ideas, keeping in mind the logistics of the community. We discussed ideas with the women.

Returning the past to the present, for the future

When we met with the women and showed them various books, posters, photos, etc., it became clear that not only did they want a book of the designs, but they also wanted the songs that went with the designs. Additionally, they wanted posters for the classrooms. They felt it was important to be able to pass on their cultural inheritance to their children and grandchildren. As Jeannie Nampijinpa Presley said,

> "My mother's dreaming is Budgerigar Dreaming. We want to learn more about that Dreaming. There are only a handful of elders at Willowra. It is really important for us to learn about country designs so we can know. We want to teach our children and grandchildren, the girls, about their designs. My mother was a really strong leader. She was teaching lots of people. We want her knowledge to keep going because it's really important. We want it in a book so we learn from it."

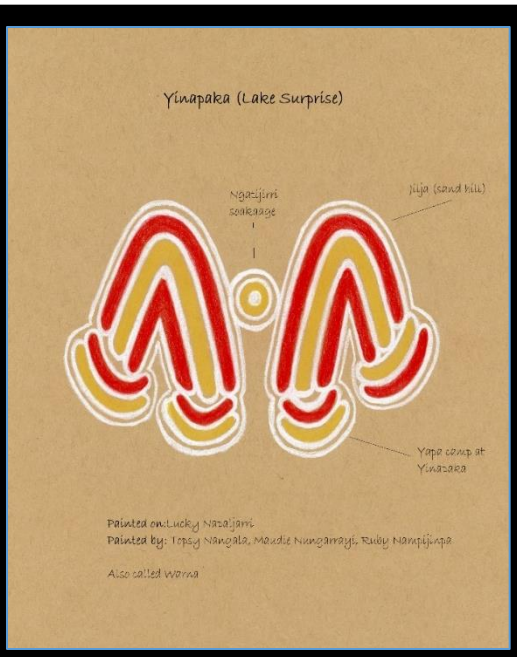
They all agreed they wanted a book on the Yawulyu designs. They could take it out in the bush and refer to the designs for painting up. They also wanted the songs recorded to help them

sing them while painting on the designs. On separate occasions, two of the older women actually started singing when they saw a particular design. It was clear the songs and designs needed to be together.

Song Item 8

Text:	*Warrapapinya*	*wantiminya*
Translation:	hole in the ground	it's falling
Text:	*ngurnurlurru*	*nangkalija*
Translation:	*jilja* (sandhill)	Jurlarda (honey)
Text:	*kipirni-kipirni*	*nangkalinyarna*
Translation:	winnow/running in coolimon, jurlarda	

Explanation: The honey is falling down into the hole in the ground. It forms a small mound as it falls on the ground. It's running in the coolimon. The women sing of Jurlarda at Yinapaka (sandhill country). As it is taken from the tree and put into the coolimon it drips down to the ground. In the Dreamtime, Jurlarda went into the ground at Yinapaka after he flew there from Jarrajarra.



Jurlarda Dreaming, Song Item 8, and Yawulyu Design pertaining to Jurlarda at Yinapaka

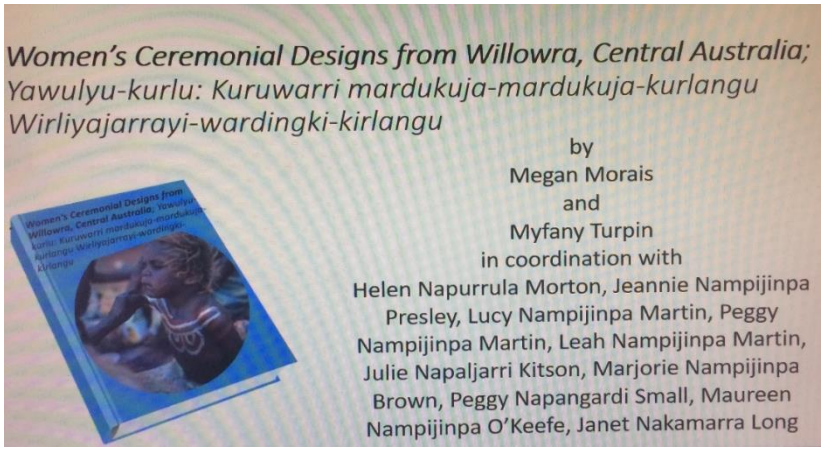
Since internet is sporadically available in Willowra, it was decided to use sound printing for the book instead of a QR Code. With sound printing, the women can take the book out to the bush and be able to hear the songs that go with the designs. Internet is not needed. The only issue with sound print is that the hand held device used to hear the recordings could be lost, or out of batteries. Potentially, a CD with the songs could also be included with the book.

The biggest shock I had upon returning to Willowra was not how it had grown and changed (that was to be expected), but how things that were taboo before, were no longer. Time has changed the community's attitudes. Photographs of deceased relatives are sought after. A book with the women's sacred Dreamtime designs and songs (previously women's secret

business) is allowed. Not only allowed, it is desired and necessary for the transmission of culture. Fortuitously, a book is also a way to maintain copyright of indigenous intellectual and cultural property.

Books with Yawulyu songs provide statements in the opening pages, that guarantee copyright: "Dealing with any part of the knowledge for any purpose that has not been authorized may breach the customary laws of the Warlpiri people, and may also breach copyright and moral rights under the *Copyright Act 1968* (Australian Commonwealth)" (Gallagher, Brown, Curran and Martin). We asked the women if the book could be public. Could it be left in the Learning Centre available for anyone to look at? Could it be on-line for the world to see? Yes, they agreed it could, and twenty-seven "owners" and "managers," with ritual authority for the dreaming designs and songs, signed contracts to that effect.

I discovered I would need some of them to advise me on certain aspects for this book of their designs and songs. Also, they needed to sign a publishing contract which would make them a part of the publication as co-authors and thereby receive royalties. Today, we currently are working on a book with the designs and songs, titled, *Women's Ceremonial Designs from Willowra, Central Australia; Yawulyu-kurlu: Kuruwarri mardukuja-mardukuja-kurlangu Wirliyajarrayi-wardingki-kirlangu*.



The book is about history, religion, indigenous culture and art. It contains over 200 Warlpiri women's ceremonial designs and some of the related song verses as documented in 1981-82 in Willowra. The book discusses the symbolism of the designs and the role of "painting up" in performance. Warlpiri women discuss the importance of their cultural inheritance; there are 12 co-authors. It is due for publication in 2020.

The recorded evidence can contribute to the self-esteem of individuals and of the community as a whole. The book enables the Warlpiri to continue to embrace their historical past and explore their creativity. With posters hung in classrooms, and the resources available for bush camps, the youth of today might be motivated to carry on with their traditions. The book can inspire the Warlpiri to be proud of their inheritance, history, and culture. In the final analysis, from my perspective based on my experiences, there is value in what the ethnographer does. Without the historical record of traditions and culture, documented by the ethnographer in the present, which overtime becomes the past, there would be reduced possibility of revitalizing the culture in some future date.

Yawulyu designs showing how they would look on a woman's body. Note the thigh and stomach designs, the ritual implement--*yukurrukurru,* and the traditional pubic dance skirt--*majardi*

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