

Ngapa manu Warlu–Rain and fire: Central Australian women’s songlines and biocultural connections

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**Please be advised that the content of this article may remind some readers of traumatic experiences associated with the 2019–2020 bushfires in South-Eastern Australia.*

Abstract Warlpiri women’s ceremonies are centred on lengthy songlines which contain verses holding intimate knowledge of the environment and interconnected cultural practices. These practices and the knowledge they maintain have sustained Aboriginal populations and the environment in the Tanami desert region of Australia over millennia. Indeed, for Aboriginal peoples across Central Australian communities, singing traditions are the primary means by which place-specific biocultural knowledge is passed on through generations, seasons and shifting social and ecological contexts. In this article, we discuss two Warlpiri women’s songs relating to the rain (Ngapa yawulyu), and fire (Warlukurlangu yawulyu). The knowledge and practices surrounding these songs reinforce and reproduce intimate interconnections between these two environmental phenomena, the social groups to which they associated and associated cultural practices. We argue that attention to and support for the ongoing performance of Warlpiri songs enhances broader understandings biocultural knowledge crucial for survival and may be able to contribute to the challenges surrounding contemporary climate crises.

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Introduction

In the Australian summer of 2019–2020 much of the south-east of the continent was blanketed in the smoke-haze resulting from one of the nation's worst bush fire crises for people and forest ecosystems. Warlpiri friends from north-west regions of Central Australia would call Curran during this time, to commiserate with sorrow having seen this devastation on the news, wailing through the phone line in a vocal tone reserved for contexts surrounding death or impending interpersonal grief.¹ The eerie orb of the sun hung as a fireball in the sky for most of the summer – an optical effect caused by the intense smoke in the atmosphere. Kids were not allowed to play outside in their breaks at schools and reading the air quality monitor became a morning ritual. Families fled homes and lands that they had occupied for generations. The news would report on the deaths of millions of animals and loss of entire forests – a level of biodiversity loss that is incomprehensible.² These fires had broader effects on the global climate with Australia's greenhouse emissions increasing dramatically during this time. The Country was sick, and this had ongoing trauma effects for the networks of people, animals, plants, land and other environmental phenomena– a deep suffering of the spirit of Country. As Bruce Pascoe and Bill Gammage, amongst others,

have pointed out in comparing contemporary views of areas west of Sydney, to drawings from early colonial times of the same region, the vegetation and landscape have changed so much it is almost unrecognisable as the same place (Pascoe 2014; Gammage 2011a and b). The once carefully managed landscape of this region had suffered and there are direct links to the violent colonial techniques that saw the removal of people from this Country and subsequent decline in the knowledge and skills required for its management. To make Country well again, the deeply rooted connections between Country, people, ancestral spirits and the vast array of other non-human agents in the world must be nurtured. In this article we explain how song and performance establish, affirm and assist with the continuation of these important connections.

The article in this issue by senior Rak Mak Mak Marranunggu woman and co-editor, Payi Linda Ford and ethnomusicologist, Linda Barwick sets out Country as a central Indigenous conceptual framework (Moreton-Robinson 2016, Linda Tuhiwai Smith 2013). As they state, “Country decentres the human, placing humans within a web of interaction with other beings and the environment itself” (Ford & Barwick, this issue). Clint Bracknell’s article in this issue, draws also on Deborah Bird Rose’s (1996) descriptions of Country as a ‘nourishing terrain’ (Bracknell, this issue) encompassing a cultural, ecological and spiritual framework in which humans exist fully yet are not the only sentient actors. An aptly complex word in Warlpiri, *nguru*, is often used to denote a particular ‘sacred site’, a named tract of land, and also a person’s spirit and the ancestral power that is imbued within a region or place. The Warlpiri Dictionary includes under the entry for *nguru* the following example sentence:

Nguruju karnalu ngarrirni-yangka nyampu kujaka nguna walya. Yangka witakari-witkari. Nguruju karlipa ngarrirni-nyampuju ngulaka warrirkirdikirdi nguna.

– Nguru is what we call like here where the land lies. Like every part of it. Nguru is what we call the land that is everywhere (Laughren et al. 2022:579).

Warlpiri scholar Wanta Jampijinpa Patrick also alludes to these ideas of the interconnectedness of parts of the world in his conceptual framework of *ngurra-kurlu*, ‘the home within,’ emphasising that land (Country), law, language, ceremony and skin must all be considered together for any approach to working with Warlpiri people in Warlpiri Country (Patrick et al. 2008).

As also expressed by others elsewhere in Australia (see Bradley et al. 2016, Walsh et al. 2013), Indigenous knowledge systems are holistic and cannot be adequately understood or represented through the siloed disciplinary approaches of most scholarly work. As the late Warlpiri Elder and educator Barbara Napanangka Martin explains, “It’s not just country – it’s a place with stories and a spirit” (Curran & Gallagher 2023: 716). In a similar vein to Katie Glaskin, based in her work with Bardi families around One Arm Point on Australia’s west coast, we would add that this viewpoint has “consequences for how people and people and country are linked through space and time” (Glaskin 2012:298). Country supports long and deep knowledge and as such is a powerful conceptual framework for carrying forward the knowledge needed to support ongoing wellbeing of these interconnected worlds.

In this article we show that Warlpiri songlines are a primary means for place-specific biocultural knowledge to be passed on through generations, seasons, interannual weather oscillations, and shifting social and ecological contexts. We discuss two major songlines of Warlpiri women from Yuen-dumu, which relate to the Southern Ngaliya region of Warlpiri Country: The Ngapa yawulyu ‘Women’s Rain songs’ and the Warlukurlangu yawulyu ‘Women’s songs belonging to fire’ (see the locations of these songlines in Figure 1). We illustrate through these examples that there are also deep interconnections between these two songlines and the Country, families and ancestral stories, and that these interconnections play out socially, ecologically and spiritually.

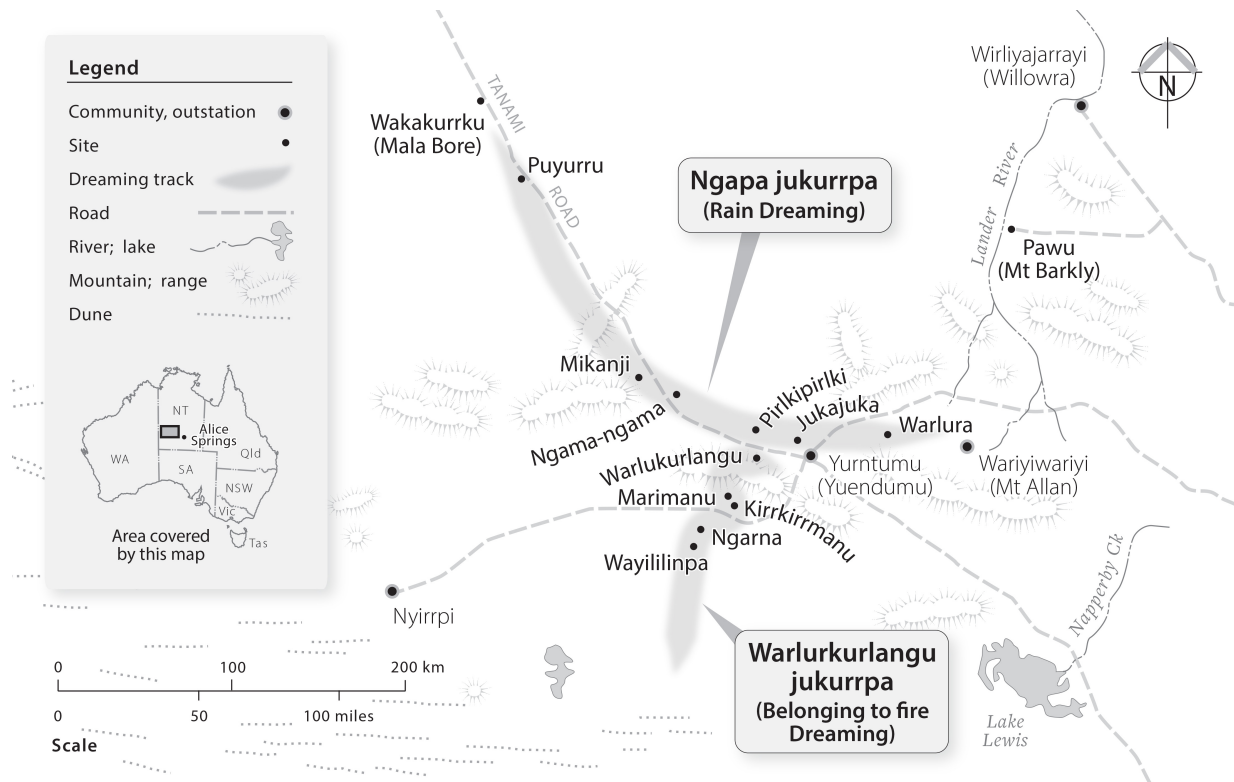


Figure 1. Warlpiri Country, with the Warlukurlangu ‘belonging to fire’ (southern highlighted section) and Ngapa ‘Rain’ (northern highlighted section) songlines. Map by Brenda Thornley.

Our team of authors includes three Warlpiri custodians of these central songlines who are also performers of the stories and songs drawn on in this article (Gallagher, Wayne and Brown) and a non-Indigenous author (Curran) who has been taught by Warlpiri Elders the frames of reference necessary for a Country-focused approach.³ We include the voices of other Warlpiri Elders throughout our article as points of authority for Country and related Indigenous knowledge systems and environments. We emphasise song as a primary foundation and mode of maintaining the relational networks between people, Country, kin and other non-human entities central to this approach. Song is an agent to maintain and continually reformulate these complex interconnections. Performance of these songs by people must be prioritised and valued to ensure that the practices and knowledge required for deep care of Country can continue. In this way, songs deeply implicate our lived understandings of the environments of remote desert regions in Central Australia and understanding of the complex biocultural interactions in this environment. Continuing to manage Country is urgent

with the increasing pressures for centralisation of human populations into settlements and larger towns, alongside the effects of rising heat which may make parts of Central Australia intolerable to permanently unliveable in the future.

The Central Australian desert environment – Warlpiri Country

Warlpiri Country spans the Tanami desert of Central Australia's Northern Territory (see Figure 1). This Country is vast and variable in its vegetation. For the most part it is dominated by shrublands of Acacia species and grasslands of spinifex and other species. This region has been populated for at least 35,000 years by groups of people who have managed dynamic interactions between species (including humans) in their environment. Central Australia has one of the harshest and most variable environments on earth resulting in a boom-bust style economy (see Curran et al. 2019; Nangala et al. 2019). Latz describes that:

[...] Australia's deserts are unique in the world by having such a variable rainfall that they can be suffering from drought one year, and several years later they can be affected by excessive rainfall and floods. During these wet periods abundant grass grows, then the good seasons cease, and the grass dries, then the desert burns (Latz 2007:12).

Aboriginal Australian peoples have lived in these regions for millennia, over this time developing complex interrelationships with these environments and developing acute sensitivity to ecological patterns such that they are bound inseparably with their cultural beliefs and ways of life. In previous decades, Warlpiri families travelled regularly across this Country to attend large-scale ceremonies with other Aboriginal groups from neighbouring regions and to make the most of regionally specific food sources. Nowadays, and increasingly since the mid-1940s, most Warlpiri people live in the four settlements of Yuendumu, Nyirrpi, Willowra and Lajamanu, as well as in the larger town of Alice Springs to the south-east.

Whilst others have described Central Australia desert environments and the ways in which Aboriginal cultural systems have developed alongside ecological factors over millennia to produce complex land management systems (see for example Kimber 1983; Nash 1990; Peterson 1978; Vaarzon-Morel

2001; Wright et al. 2021), the importance of ceremonial song in maintaining and transmitting this knowledge and associated practices across generations has not been widely recognised or detailed. The many songlines that are held in this Country are intimately linked to the identity of people, as well as animals, plants and other phenomena, and are understood primarily through ancestral stories which have been passed down through generations of Warlpiri families.⁴ This complex Indigenous ontology facilitates the relational interconnections central to this understanding and way of living, and importantly has meant that Country has been cared for over a long time period. Country has been cared for to maintain the production of diverse and specific foods, tools, medicines and the resources that people needed to live off.

Ancestral stories that detail the creation of places and landscape across this Country are countless – no place on Warlpiri Country is without a story. The lengthy songlines across this Country are linked to these stories and sung by senior Warlpiri people today (Curran 2020; Curran et al. 2024; Gallagher et al. 2014; Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017). Indigenous knowledge systems from many parts of Australia, emphasise that songs and associated knowledge and ceremonial practices are embedded in rights and responsibilities. This knowledge is earned through a lifetime, a system often described as being like a spiral in that grows and is added to with each new life experience and encounter. As has been described by Bawaka Country et al.:

Songspirals bring the world into existence, they are creation and creativity, they are always in emergence. Songspirals are not human-centred, but humans have a responsibility to nurture, to attend, to contribute to balance, and where balance has been broken, to heal (Bawaka Country et al. 2022:444).

In Warlpiri Country, this deep knowledge is held in Country with ancestral spirits. In a similar way to the Yolngu systems like in Bawaka Country, people access knowledge as they are ready and gain responsibilities for its nurture. Songs are a way to remember and pass on this deep knowledge, and for people to accumulate and add to this over their lifetimes. This system was recognised and described by Catherine Ellis as ‘tribal education’ (1989). The performance of songs in ceremonial contexts keeps this knowledge and rela-

tional interconnections active (Curran & Gallagher 2023). Barwick sets forth the very functional purpose of Warlpiri women’s songs (yawulyu) as:

[...] a kind of soft technology that has operated over long time frames over the course of which song, human practices, and the environment have become deeply entangled and mutually constitutive (2023:96–97).

Warlpiri women’s ceremonial songs

In the Warlpiri region, men and women have separate genres of song, performed in various ways in ceremonies, sometimes together and sometimes apart. The main public genre of women’s song is yawulyu – a genre sharing some similar features in form and structure to those held by other Aboriginal women from different groups across this region of Central Australia, though each ceremony is unique to its own particular Country (Barwick et al. 2013). Warlpiri social organisation is defined around four patricouple groups, each having two named subsection terms– for men these pairs are father-son, and for women paternal aunt-niece. Warlpiri women learn to sing yawulyu from participation in ceremonies alongside their paternal aunts, who are their primary teachers. While rights and responsibilities are defined by inheritance, learning the songs and associated dances must continue throughout a woman’s lifetime (see Curran 2020; Dussart 2000). The Ngapa (Rain) and Warlukurlangu (belonging to fire) yawulyu that we discuss in this article are both owned by Nampijinpa-Nangala group – this social ownership also relating to fire and rain. The intimate social connection between these two environmental phenomena, has also been noted in Nash (1990): “Fire (warlu) is closely connected with rain and water (ngapa), in a cycle whereby one renews the other. This cycle is apparent in nature and is also expressed in the Dreaming (Jukurrpa)”. We draw in understandings of these interconnections with examples from both these songlines, drawing in the stories, the individual words in the rhythmic-text verses and the broader meanings of these as we have documented (Warlpiri women from Yuendumu 2017).

Yawulyu are connected to particular Country and each song set sung in a performance instance consists of many short verses, most of which have an accompanying action, expressed in body painting and/or dance. Typically, yawulyu involve ‘painting up’ over several hours in an afternoon then followed by a shorter period of dancing to the same verses sung with

a faster tempo. A verse typically consists of a couplet of two short lines (sometimes, though unusually, three lines), which often have around two to four words each but are sometimes longer. The couplet has a strict repetition sequence, and each verse is performed with strict syllabic rhythm and tempo, which facilitates remarkable stability in oral transmission over time. Over an unbroken stretch of singing, typically lasting about 30 seconds, during which the verse repeats some three or more times until the completion of the longer melody, the aim is a unison group performance. This unity is enabled by experienced song leaders, who know how to fit the verse with the melody and lead the rest of the group. Other singers join the leader after an initial short solo section of the melody (sometimes hummed) to begin. In addition to the repetition of the verse within a song, multiple renditions of a verse are required before moving on to a different one. The songs we discuss below all are performed in this way.

Ngapa yawulyu ‘Rain Dreaming women’s songs’

Enid Nangala Gallagher and Nellie Nangala Wayne tell the Ngapa jukurrpa story (Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017a, DVD).⁵

Nellie:

Yuwayi, ngaju karna wangkami nyampuju, nyampu jukurrpa ngula kalu ngarrirni ngulaju karnalu ngapa kurlu ngarrirni ngapa jukurrpa ngulalu yanurnu kakarrararni travel jarrija. Ngula karli jarra ngarrirni nyampuju story ngapa kurlu.

Enid:

Ngula yanurnu kakarrarni. Walapanpa ngurlu. Yanurnu ngulaju Wanilypuru kurra. Yanurnu yangka warnirri ka ngunami. Warnirri yinyaju ngapa yangka ngula ka ngunami. Ngulajangkaju yanurnu Warlura kurralku. Warlurarla ngulaka yangka ngapa warrarda ngunami.

Nellie:

Warlura ngurlu yanurnu Jukajuka-kurra. Jukajuka jangka yanu travel-jarrija.

Enid:

Jukajuka-rla yangka ngula ka mangkurdu kankarlarra kari yangka pirli jukajuka karri ngulaju mangkurdu yinyaju. Ngulajangkaju yanu Mikanji-kirra-lku. Yanu ngapaju ngulalpa luwarnu wirnpangku ngulalpa luwarnu. Watiya ka karrimi palka – Wirnpa. Ngulalpa luwarnu. Ngulajangkaju yanu Puyurru-kurra-lku.

Enid:

Puyurru-rla-lku manurra Kirrkarlan-jirli-lki jarna kangu Lungkardajarra. Wanalku kangurra karlarra juku, yatuju juku kangu nganayi kirra.

Yes, I'm telling the story of the Rain Dreaming. The Rain Dreaming that came from the east and travelled. This is the story that we are telling about the rain.

It came from the east. It came from Walapanpa. Then it came to Wanilypuru. There's a waterhole there. At that waterhole, there's water there. And then it came to Walura. At Walura there's water all the time.

From Walura it came to Jukajuka. From Jukajuka it came and it kept travelling.

At Jukajuka the clouds are standing upright. The rocks are standing upright at Jukajuka, those are the clouds. Then the rain kept travelling to Mikanji. Then the lightning struck a few times. There's a tree standing there – Wirnpa – it's the lightning strike. It was striking. After that it travelled towards Puyurru.

At Puyurru the Brown Falcon grabbed hold of it (the rain) and carried it away towards Lungkardajarra. It took it away to the west, then to the north towards that place.

Enid:

Lungkardajarra-ngurlu yanu jingi-jingi karlumparra wana juku Kamura kurra. Kamura-ngurlu yinya ngurlu kulpari jarrija kanunjumparra-lku Puyurru kurra. Kulpari jarrija yinya juku ngula ka ngunami Puyurru-rla-lku tarnngalku. Kirrkarlanji jintakarirli manurnu milpirri manurnu Lungkardajarra-ngurlu Puyurru kurra. Ngulaju jingijingi karirli kangurnu Lungkardajarra-ngurlu-ju. Lungkardajarra-rla-ju jingijingi kangu Puyurru-kurra. Ngula Puyurru-rla-lku yirrarnu ngula ngurrju-manu mangkurdu kajara kajarkalku ngurrju-manu.

From Lungkardajarra it went straight west to Kamura. From Kamura it returned underground to Puyurru. It stayed there at Puyurru. Another Brown Falcon picked up the big rain clouds from Lungkardajarra to Puyurru. It flew straight past from Lungkardajarra to Puyurru. It places (the rain) at Puyurru where it formed fluffy white clouds.)

Nellie:

Ngulajangkaju yanu nyampu karnalu jana yampimi yalumpurla juku karnalu juulpa yampimi. Panu karikilki karnalu jana yampimi. Yatijarra purda ngula travel jarrija.

And now this is where we're going to leave it. The story belongs to other people now. It keeps traveling northwards.

This story continually references places on the Country just to the west of Yuendumu (Figure 1) and importantly ends, as many Warlpiri stories do, with a reference to the continuation of the story, alongside respectfully declining to continue its telling. The features of the landscape, the trees, Wirnpa (lit: lightning) and the vertically structured rocks at Jukajuka, are described as rain clouds (see Figure 2). The Ancestral Brown Falcon, Kirrkarlanji, picks up the rain in different places and carries it to others.



Figure 2. Wispy rain clouds in rock form at Jukajuka, around 30 km to the west of Yuendumu. Photo: Georgia Curran.

Within the fifteen Ngapa yawulyu verses recorded and presented in ‘Yurntumu-wardingki juju-ngaliya-kurlangu yawulyu’ (2017:75–94) there are sixteen different words for rain-related weather phenomena.⁶ These are indicative of the sophisticated terminology used to describe weather in Country.

Table 1. Different rain-related terminology in Ngapa yawulyu in Ngapa yawulyu (2017a).

Warlpiri cloud terms	English description
manngirri	lightning flashes
kuruma (-kuruma)	streaky rain clouds
pararri	rainbow
laputungu	light rain
waralpa	distant rain (a cloudburst, or leg of rain, only visible in the day)
yuluyulu	rain coming in side-ways
yulyurdu	smoke caused by lightning strike
rdinjiljinjiljili	white flood water
kumpu-kumpu	frothy foam on water (from movement)
pirkipirli	lightning that lights up the whole country *also place name
pirpir-wangka (verb)	rain pounding down hard
winmirri	thin streaky clouds that move along
kurdulyurrulyurru	low clouds that come together into a bigger one
jinpirr-karri	rain legs in the distance (verb)
milpirri	wispy rain clouds
riwariwa	clouds breaking up and disappearing

In Figure 3 the verse is sung to draw an image.



Full audio file also is available as part of the web version of this publication

Audio 1. Ngapa Rain song verse about the lightning striking (Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017b, CD4 track 1).

Link to [audio file](#)

MM ♩. =59 [A=3 beats, B=4 beats]

A: man ngi rri larn pa larn pa

B: ku rta ku rta larn pa larn pa

A: Manngirri larnpalarnpa

Lightning flashing

B: Kurtakurta larnpalarnpa

Small clouds streaking

Figure 3. Ngapa Rain song verse about the lightning striking (Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017a: 79).

Judy Nampijinpa Granites describes that:

In this song we are singing about the lightning on the horizon in the distance. As the *Jukurrpa* comes out of the ground we see it in the distance. They dance with white feathers in their headbands and armbands. We see this in the distance, but it seems close, like a mirage (Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017:79).

When women dance for this song they hold bunches of white feathers, which they shake rhythmically above their heads and in front of them (Figure 3). This is a commonly sung first verse in the Ngapa yawulyu. This dance immediately brings to mind the rain for Warlpiri women who have learned the symbolic interconnections between the white feathers shaking in the air, the lightning striking on the horizon, the types of clouds that form and as described by Granites, and the blurring mirage which so commonly forms in the distant horizons across the desert Country. These images have come to signal transitions, including in these instances the beginning of the rain, and the beginning of the Ngapa Jukurrpa as it comes out from the ground (see Curran 2018).



Figure 4. Authors, Enid Nangala Gallagher (back), Nellie Nangala Wayne (front) with Kara Napaljarri Gordon (middle) dance the Ngapa yawulyu, shaking bunches of white feathers into the air. Photo: Georgia Curran.

In Figure 5, presented below, the women sing about the place Jukajuka (see Figures 1 and 2), which Gallagher mentions in the story as depicting the wispy rain clouds milpirri.



Full audio file also is available as part of the web version of this publication

Audio 2. A Ngapa Rain song verse about the smoke caused by a lightning strike (Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017b, CD4 track 6)

[Link to audio file](#)

MM ♩ =126 [A=12 beats, B=6 beats]

A: wa rlu rna yu lyu rdu mun ju ru ku ju rnu

B: ju ka ju ka rna

A: Warlurna yulyurdu munjuru kujurnu

I am the fire, the smoke caused by the lightning strike.

B: Jukajuka-rna

I am Jukajuka

Figure 5. A Ngapa Rain song verse about the smoke caused by a lightning strike (Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017a: 83)

This verse also draws out the link between rain and fire with the A line focused on the fires which are caused from lightning strikes, caused by rain. As mentioned above women who own and lead singing of both these song-lines are of the same Nampijinpa/Nangala patricouple social group meaning there is significant cross-over and interlinks in understandings of this environmental knowledge and the complex ways in which it feeds off each other. Lightning strikes are a way in which fires begin in Warlpiri Country without human involvement, showing interdependence between these phenomena.

The primary way in which fires start, however is from intentional ignition by people as illustrated in the next story.

Warlukurlangu yawulyu ‘Women’s songs belonging to Fire’

The Warlukurlangu [lit: fire-belonging] yawulyu are centred in a story which comes from Country to the south of Yuendumu (see Figure 1). Peggy Nampijinpa Brown, who has inherited patrilineal ownership rights for this Country, its ancestral stories and its songs has recorded the below version (Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017a, DVD).⁷ Jangala and Jampijinpa that she refers to are the male equivalents of the Nangala Nampijinpa female owners – a common gendered reversal with many women’s songs featuring male ancestors, which women embody when they dance.

Peggy:

Yalumpu jukulpa nyinaja yantarli.
Yalumpurla jukulpa nyinaja Jangala-jarra Yalumpuju.

Yalumpu-kurlangu juku Jampijinpa-kurlangu, Lungkarda-kurlangu.

Kurdunyanungu nyangu-jarra Jangkayirla.

Kalalu nyinaja. Wali-kala pala Jangala-jarraju ngunanjarla pikirri manu kurlarda

kala pala manu wakulyu kala pala nyanu

manu.

He was sitting there by himself at home. The two Jangalas belonged to that Jampijinpa, to Lungkarda (the blue tongue lizard). They were his two sons. They used to sit down in the single men’s camp. The two sons used to sleep there. Then they’d gather their two woomeras, two spears and hairstring.

Kala palarla kanjarla yirrarnu yuntangka

juku warluwa yirrarnu kala palarla milkariki nganta. Kalalu ngunaja, ngulajangka yarnka jarra kala pala, japaku karilki pala yanu.

Yalilki palarla panturnu jurnta Kirrkirrmanurla nyanungu nyangu marlu. Kala

pinanyangu langangku, kala pinanyangu

langangku. Wali jurntalku palarla panturnu kurdu kurlu. Wali purranjarla, ngula jinta karilki pala panturnu kulkurru warnu, purraja pala jarnki manu pala, ngula pala yardani panturnu, jinta karilki pala purraja, mix up yaarlpa-palarla yirrarnu. Kala ka milya

pinyi-kijaki kala

nyurru jala milya pungu kangurra palarla

kujurnu palarla yirlara waja wurnmani

yalumpu kula nganja. Wali yaliji ngarnu

marlu pajarnu nyanungu nyangu, jurnta palarla panturnu.

Wali kalarla lawalku pinanyangu kirrkirr-manu kala kurduku lawa kalarla pinanyangu.

Kalarla yaliji milkarirli nganta Lungkardarluju. Wali japaku kariji pala yarnkajarralku, yarda maninjarla ngunajarra, pardijarra pala yanu pala. Warrulpa pala wapaja wirlinyi

kukaku purda.

They came back from hunting. They put their meat up high in a windbreak. They thought their father was blind. They used to sleep there together. The next day they'd go off hunting again. Then they speared (their father's) special pet (joey kangaroo) at that place [...] at Kirrkirrmanu. It was his kangaroo, he used to listen to it. He used to listen to it, but they speared it. The one with the joey. Then they cooked it. They speared another kangaroo and cut it into bits and pieces, they cooked it and then mixed it with the meat of the pet kangaroo. He might know. He might have already known. He ate the kangaroo meat while there were other people sitting around. He tasted the kangaroo meat and he knew straight away that it was his pet. He couldn't hear the sound of the kangaroo. That joey makes the sound 'kirrkirr' and he was pretending to be a blind man that Lungkarda, listening to that sound. Then (the two Jangalas) got ready and started travelling again. They went off walking around and looking for food.

Warlu palangu jangkardu ngurrju
 manu fire stick nyampu piya spe-
 cial one palangu jangkardu ngur-
 rju-manu that him bin sing em,
 special one yunparnu. Not dry
 one, green one lighti-manu green
 one lighti-manu. Wala parrurnu
 rduyu karrijalpa, wali

pala yali jarrarluju nyangu, nyangu
 pala.

Parnkamirni pala parnkamirni pala
 "Ay

purlka mardaka janka waja
 wiyarrpa

purdangirliji". Warlungku

mardaka janka" waja. Kala nya-
 nungu jarraku palangu jangkardu
 lighti-manu

parnkamirni parnkamirni
 parnkamirni kutu

jarrimi, kutu jarrija pala warlungku
 juku

palangu wajirli pungu. Yali jiki
 palangu

murnma juku wajirli pungu. Fol-
 lowmanu-lpa palangu warlungku.
 Warlungku jukulpa

palangu followmanu.

Nuwulpa ngunaja lawa yungkalpa
 pala

Ngunanjunu warlungkulpa

palangu yartarnjurrurnu war-
 lungku

jukulpa palangu kutungku jukulpa
 palangu

yartarnjurrurnu. Yardalpala
 yarkajarra

matajarralku ngari ngawu-ngawu
 jarralku.

Then (Lungkarda) started the fire. He
 made a special fire. He sang it – that
 special fire. He didn't make it with dry
 (grass) he lit the green (grass). He had
 a practice. Then the smoke was com-
 ing up. Then these two (Jangalas) saw
 it. And they started running back "Hey
 that could be the old man burning –
 the fire might be burning Jampijinpa'.
 When they came close to see what
 was happening the fire chase them
 away. That's when the fire chased
 them, making them sore. The fire fol-
 lowing them all the way. The fire kept
 following them.

They didn't have any rest. They tried
 to sleep but the fire kept chasing
 them. The fire kept watching them
 closely. They tried to sneak away, they
 were really tired. They started run-
 ning and kept running right through
 to Wayililimpa. There's a soakage
 there. Then they saw a big black cloud
 from the smoke. They saw the smoke
 clouds there. The smoke clouds were
 forming from the fire, right over the
 top of them. The smoke clouds came
 over. They were where the waterhole
 is. They flew away from Wayililimpa.
 They flew right up high. Then they
 landed on the ground. They were try-
 ing to sleep but this fire monster kept
 following them and wouldn't let them
 sleep.

Parnkamirra pala parnkamirra
pala kulkurru nganayi ngirli
yangka Wayililinyapa ngula kalu
ngarrirni ngula mulju, lirrarnji
pala nyangu, lirrarnji pala nyangu
yilpa palangu nganayi warlujangka
nyanungu lirrarnjilkilpa yirrarnu
nyanungurla kankarlumparra, lir-
rarnjilki palangu yirrarnu. Yanurra
pala ngunajalpa

pala muljunga Wayililinyparla
ngulangurluparr-pardija pala
kankarlarra pala parr-pardijarra.
Ngula pala walyangka jarrija
walyangka jarrija pala wali nganta
yungu

pala ngunayarla. Lawalpa palangu
ngartarn-jurrurnu “Jujungku ka
ngalingki

ngarntarnjirrirni” waja
“Palkangku” waja “Jujungku”.

Yardarralpa pala yarnkaja nga-
pangkarlangurla ngantalpa pala
yukaja yangka walyka karda
nganta... lawa juku. Warlungku
jukulpa palangu follow manu,
warlu jukulpa pala ngaparlanguju
feel-i manu. Parnkamirrapala
ngarilkilpa pala ngawu jarralku
wapaja,

lirrirnpingkilpa palangu wangkan-
jiinanu-lku. Langangkajulpa
palangu warungka jarrakulku
wangkanjinanu lirrirnki. Wapa-
jalpa pala nyampurra lawalku
ngarilpa pala ngawu-ngawulku
wapaja. Parnkaja palaaaaaaa....
parnkanjinanulpa pala lawa kula
pala

nyarrpa ngunayarla warlungku
palkangkulpa palangu wajirli-
pungu. Jujungku ja ngarra
jirrinyparlu yungu palangu
jangkardu jirrinypungu. Lawa,
yanu pala kulkurru pala....

They tried to cool themselves with water. Nothing. The fire kept following them. Even the water was very hot from the fire. The fire kept following them. They were feeling sick now. They could hear strange noises in their ears. They looked like they were going mad. They kept hearing a noise like insects in their ears. All the skin from their feet was coming off. Even their hair was coming out. Nothing. They kept walking. They were feeling really sick now. They ran. They kept running. They didn't get any sleep. The fire kept chasing them. The fire monster, that Jampijinpa sang the fire to keep chasing them. They were in the middle of nowhere but they kept walking...

Watijirla watijirla paka...[singing]
 Pakajulpa palangu muku jankaja
 mukulpa
 palangu jankaja ngula karna
 nyampuju
 yunparni. Kurlurlumpayi parnkaja
 Wardarru kurra.
 Pala parnkanyarra parnkaja warru
 palangu
 Yaliji kulpari manu “Jujungku
 ngalingki
 warlungku kulpari manu waja”.
 Warrulpa
 palangu purraja palkangku juku
 ngula
 kulpari warnulku pala
 warrurnu karrija
 Wardarru-rla. Wardarrurla pala
 ngunaja.
 Yuwayi ngunaja pala yalumpu
 juku.
 Ngulajangka Ngarnakurralku pala,
 ngulajangka yanurra pala ngarilk-
 ilpa pala
 kulparilpa pala nyangu pina ngu-
 rurlangku
 ngulalpa rduyu-karrija. “Ngu-
 rungka” waja “Ngali nyangurla”
 waja “Ngurungku ngalingki manu”
 waja “Ngurra ngali nyangu waja
 kurlirra”. Ngulalpa rduyu-karrinja
 kurralpa nyangu.
 Yanurra palaaaaaa... Ngarnangka,
 Ngarnangka pala nyanu walil-
 manu.
 Walimanta jandarra ngarnangka
 jandarra [singing]. Nyampu juku
 pala
 Lawa nyinaja yalumpu juku pala
 lawa nyinaja.

Watijirla watijirla, paka... [singing].
 They were saying that the dead skin
 was coming off their feet. The fire
 burnt their whole bodies. This is the
 song that I’m singing. From the north
 to the south, they ran to a place called
 Wardardurru.

They kept running and running. This
 fire monster made us turn back they
 said to each other. He kept following
 them. He was still there. Then in the
 place called Wardardurru they lie
 down. At Wardardurru they lay down.
 They went to sleep right there. From
 there they went to a place called
 Ngarna. While they were walking they
 looked back at Country. They could
 see the smoke from a long way and
 they said ‘That’s where our Country
 is’. They were getting homesick for
 the Country they left in the south.
 They saw their Country was full of
 smoke. Then they kept going from
 Ngarna. At the place called Ngarna
 they were pulling each other along.
*Walimanta jandarra ngarnangka...
 they were pulling each other along at
 Ngarna.* And right there they disap-
 peared. That’s where they disap-
 peared.

In this story Brown tells of the ancestral blue-tongue lizard and his powerful manipulation and control of fire to torture his two sons who he believes to have tricked him. This is a strong example of Warlpiri understanding of

human/animal control of fire, as not just a naturally occurring phenomena, but something that people purposefully used to manage their environments, and in this case also their social relationships! Within this story is the belief that even raging, seemingly out-of-control bushfires can be directed by people.⁸

Brown tells the story of Jampijinpa’s magic-like control of the fire, by which he directs the actions of his two sons. Warlpiri people live with fire, and it is part of all aspects of life (see Curran 2018, Musharbash 2018). It is common in everyday Warlpiri life to talk about fire as if it is a tool that can be managed for particular ends. For example, fire can be used to clear the scrub so that it is not overgrown, or can draw out animals for hunting. Latz (2007) described how spinifex has developed over many years to be reliant on fire for its growth – sometimes made naturally by lightning, but mostly by intentionally lit fire people use to manage these lands, and specifically to promote the growth of particular edible seeds and other food plants. As is typical of Warlpiri songs, the esoteric content is further interpreted by the telling of ancestral stories.

The Warlukurlangu *yawulyu* that we recorded in 2006 as presented in our book (2017) includes 22 verses.⁹ Within these verses are 10 different fire-related terms alluding to types of fire. Again, the terms indicate the sophistication of people’s knowledge and their perceptions of fire. These terms make more sense to non-Warlpiri readers when expanded on with further explanations (also see Nash 1990 for other Warlpiri words for fire and further explication). Many connotations are made by Warlpiri speakers upon hearing these kinds of words, connotations picked up over a lifetime of hearing these stories repeated, whilst also living in Country where fire is a regular force.

Table 2. Fire-related terminology in Warlukurlangu *yawulyu*.

Warlpiri fire terms	English description (Warlpiri women from Yuendumu, 2017)
*warlu	fire that is hot to touch
jarramarra	the light spreading around a bushfire
warintiljiti (rdintilji)	sparks that fly up
lirranji	dark smoke cloud that spreads

Table 2. Fire-related terminology in Warlukurlangu *yawulyu*.

jarna	smoke (from fire)
puyurnpuyurnpa	smell of skin burnt from fire
puyu-ngarangu	full of smoke
pintalji-ngarangu	completely ablaze
puju	evil fire [lit: monster]
warlurrumpu	angry fire

**warlu* is the most common Warlpiri word for fire used in day-to-day speech

Figures 6 and 7 from the Warlukurlangu song set recorded in 2006 both reference a particular kind of smoke cloud created from fire, in this instance the fire created by Jampijinpa Lungkarda with the evil intent of burning his two sons. Brown refers to the ways in which Jampijinpa sings the songs to have this effect “He made a special fire. He sang it – that special fire” – indicating the power which songs are understood to have and their capacity to effect change, care for and manage environments, as well as social relationships.




Full audio file also is available as part of the web version of this publication

Audio 3. Warlukurlangu Fire (belonging) song verse about a spreading smoke cloud (Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017b: CD3, track 4)

[Link to audio file](#)

MM ♩ =52 [A/B=5 beats]



A: wa rlu ngku nga li ngki pan ti riny ku ju rnu

B: li rra nji rli nga li ja rra ma rra ma nu

A: Warlungku-ngalingki pantiriny-kujurnu The fire is hot for us to touch.

B: Lirranjirli-ngali jarramarra-manu The smoke cloud is spreading

Figure 6. Warlukurlangu Fire (belonging) song verse about a spreading smoke cloud (Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017b: CD3 track 4)

Judy Nampijinpa Granites explained after singing this song that:

As the two Jangalas come back from hunting they see a cloud of smoke from the fire. They are worried about the old man, Jampijinpa, that he might be burnt. But he is trying to trick them (2017:57)



Full audio file also is available as part of the web version of this publication

Audio 4. Warlukurlangu Fire (belonging) song verse about lirranji rain clouds formed from the smoke of a fire (Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017b: CD 3 track 7)

[Link to audio file](#)

MM ♩ =54 [A=5 beats, B=6 beats]

A: li rra nji la yam parr pa

B: ja nga la ja rra la yam parr pa

A: Lirranji layampirpa

Smoke clouds forming right there where they're standing

B: Jangala-jarra layampirpa

The two Jangalas (the fire came up) right there where they're standing.

Figure 7. Warlukurlangu Fire (belonging) song verse about lirranji rain clouds formed from the smoke of a fire (Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu 2017a: 61)

The clouds which are referred to in these verses of Warlukurlangu yawulyu are commonly called pyrocumulus, also flammagenitis. These kinds of clouds are dependent on weather conditions and can be seen during bushfires, wildfires or volcanic eruptions. In Warlpiri Country, people's acute knowledge of these environmental links and their techniques for land management have allowed them to have a degree of control over the formation of these types of clouds, and the creation of the right weather conditions. Songlines, and their performance in ceremony, are, once again, the primary mode of drawing together this know-how.

The long-term management of Australian landscapes by Indigenous people using fire has been widely recognised. The archaeologist Rhys Jones (1969) coined the term 'fire-stick' farming to describe the ways in which Aboriginal Australian populations used fire as a land management technique through deep history. Nash (1990) has also pointed out that control is an apparent theme of the Warlpiri vocabulary relating to fire (also touched on by Wright et al. 2021). He goes on to give the example of the verb use 'purrami' (human controlled burning, also applied to cooking) versus

jangkami/kampami (the grass is burning) showing clear emphasis on whether the agent is human. After bush-fire crises, such as the one described in the introduction to this article, many Aboriginal people across the continent lament the suffering of Country. For them, Country should always be burned regularly to clean the land, flush out meat animals, and instigate growth of bush foods. Naturally occurring fires are contained by regular burning which creates vegetation mosaics of different regeneration and fire protection stages. For many Aboriginal groups across Australia, this is an important aspect of adequately caring for Country and all its relational components – people, animals, plants and other aspects of the environment.

Rain and fire in Warlpiri Country

The ways in which Warlpiri people use fires to create rain are lesser known. Nash (1990) describes *lirranji* a fire produced cloud that promotes rain and plant growth. In the film *Ngapa Jukurpa*, produced by Wanta Jampijinpa Patrick and Jeff Bruer (PAW Media & Communications 2016). Patrick explains that:

The rangers patch burn the country. They start the fires one at a time so its different from how we do it for making rain. For that we need to make a long unbroken line of fire and burn as much country as we can in one go. This creates the heat and smoke to make rainclouds fall. The Ngapa [rain] ceremony teaches how to do it.

He goes on to explain:

[...] fire can bring its counterpart water into existence by creating rainclouds. It may be hard to believe but some of our elders can make rain in this way. Through them and their ceremonial use of fire the land summons water when its needed.

Patrick's father, Jerry Jangala Patrick, explains the ceremonial patterns surrounding the creation of these kinds of fires and the coming together of fire and water, pointing also to the particular kinds of grasses required to light this type of fire:

In October [...] and [...] in November [...] and finish that ceremony at that time. Might be only for three or four days. First is that spinifex for fire – you know that strong one. *Walmajarri spinifex* we call on this (Warlpiri) side, we call it *marnangarnpa* [feather-top spinifex]. It's a really big one. You know that smoke getting up, really dark one, and some of these grasses here now, right

here, it's a bit light but if they mix up with all the smoke that can make a cloud too – that's called *ngangkarli*.

Ngangkarli is synonymous with *lirranji* referred to in the women's *yawulyu* verses described previously and Nash 1990. J Patrick illustrates the ways in which this type of fire moves in his painting (Figure 4). It depicts a dark smoke cloud rising from a fire, forming a large cloud that hits the top layer of the atmosphere before spreading out horizontally, creating storm-like conditions to create rain.



Figure 8. A cloud from the dark smoke of the fire rises until it forms a large cloud *lirranji* when it hits the top layer of the atmosphere. Painting by Jerry Jangala Patrick, photo courtesy of Jeff Bruer.

Jampijinpa Patrick also reflects on the shifts to Central Australian environments in this climate change era noting in particular rising heat, which in turn affects the availability of water in the underground basins. He also observes that “The rains are getting less predictable as the climate changes” (PAW Media & Communications 2016) arguing for the importance of understanding these knowledge systems if we are to be able to cope with these significant challenges. As these kinds of fires are reliant on human burning of a particular type of green spinifex grass, inadequate underground water supplies have the potential to make it more difficult to implement these envi-

ronmental management techniques. As Jangala Patrick also describes above, the ways to engage with a deeply interconnected environmental worlds is focused on ceremonial cycles.

Similar kinds of effects can also be seen in the more northern regions of Australia, for example in Kurrindju Country, where Ford (in Ford & Marrett 2024) describes how climate change affects the winds in ways which are observable on the white caps on the waves, confusing cultural patterns in that this was a prime indication of when to burn Country. The potential implications for Warlpiri people of rising extreme heat, making fires less controllable and potentially destructive to Country may contribute to a future where people are more vulnerable and less able to live in these regions.

As many of the main ceremonies are held during the summer months, to fit around schedules of work, school and availability of health and other organisational structures, these climate change effects have potential to lead to a decline in their frequency and have flow on effects to the transfer of knowledge and practices associated with care for Country. Again, to draw on Barwick's suggestions that Aboriginal women's ceremonies:

can operate as a soft technology (that is, an intangible technology of memory and emotion) that “intra-acts” with other practices to enable adaptation to changing environments (e.g., social, physical) (2023:109).

As such it is particularly important to support Central Australian Aboriginal ceremonial contexts as these practices are tools which are used to facilitate engagement with climate change-induced shifts for people and cultures.

Conclusions

The interconnections between Rain and Fire and the human capacity to manage their social and ecological worlds described in this article, draw on long passed on systems of deep knowledge. These phenomena are examples of complex biocultural systems that cannot be understood through a disciplinary study on such segregated topics as ecology, music, or culture (Curran et al. 2019). As set forth in the introduction, we argue that Country is a more holistic concept and a better approach to understanding complex biocultural environments. This approach is as necessarily specific to place just as culture and ecology are. Indigenous Knowledge systems, such as those

maintained through song traditions passed through generations have sustained and evolved ways of life in harsh environments such as the Central Australian desert such that humans and non-human aspects of their environments are in a relationship of inseparable interdependence. With Aboriginal cultures across Australia it is the ancestral stories and songlines, and their performance that carry forth these intimate biocultural interconnections between people, places, landscapes, weather conditions, animals, plants, and other biota. In Warlpiri Country, where these singing traditions are alive and valued, these ways of managing the environment continue and are powerful in maintaining and generating deep forms of knowledge. Through the continued singing of these songs in ceremony Warlpiri people upkeep relationships to Country and are equipped with the knowledge to manage the shifts to environments resulting from heating of the planet.

It is unfortunate that it takes crises like the 2019–2020 bush fires in south-eastern Australia for attention to be paid to the deep effects of Aboriginal peoples' loss of access to and rights to manage Country. Whilst this has led to further attention for Indigenous fire management systems in Australia (see for example Steffenson 2020 amongst others), in this article we wish to emphasise the importance of recognition for the interpersonal and relational connections of people, places, animals, plants, weather systems and other environmental phenomena. With Country centred as an overarching conceptual approach, these kinds of complex interactions and interdependencies can be nurtured and cared for through deep time.

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Notes

1. The wailing cry of women in Central Australian communities is a distinct vocal response to news of a death, severe illness or news of an accident and creates a space around the moments of grieving.
2. Extinction of species is still being analysed. The reporting during this time was on widespread observed and inferred deaths.
3. Warlpiri people inherit an owner (kirda) role from their fathers for Dreamings (Jukurrpa), Country, songs and stories. Enid Nangala Gallagher and Nellie Nangala Wayne are owners for the Ngapa jukurrpa (Rain Dreaming), Country to the west of Yuendumu, and Peggy Nampijinpa Brown is an owner for the Warlukurlangu yawulyu (Belonging to Fire Dreaming), Country to the south of Yuendumu. See map for locations of these Countries. Georgia Curran is an anthropologist/ethnomusicologist who is based at Sydney Conservatorium of Music and has collaborated with Warlpiri families in Yuendumu on song documentation and research since 2005.

4. We here refer to the word ‘songlines’ as “the theoretical concept of a series of song verses which all relate to the journey of a particular ancestor, and which bring to mind Country and stories associated with this ancestor as they travelled in a timeless creational moment” (Curran et al. 2024:xxv)
5. A video of Gallagher and Wayne telling this story can also be viewed at the following link: <https://ictv.com.au/video/item/4990>. The place names mentioned in this story are marked on Figure 1.
6. Singers included Judy Nampijinpa Granites, Yuni Nampijinpa Martin, Coral Napangardi Gallagher, Topsy Napaljarri and Emma Nungarrayi – see AIATSIS archive deposit (Peterson-Curran, Warlpiri Songlines 2005–2008). These are presented in *Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu* (2017). We thank Myfany Turpin and Mary Laughren for their contributions to musical and linguistic analyses.
7. This video is also available via the following link: <https://ictv.com.au/video/item/4989>. In the video the Warlukurlangu *yawulyu* songs are also performed with body painting, singing and dancing. The place names mentioned in this story are marked on Figure 1.
8. One way burns were controlled by people is by being run on certain wind directions so they quell or extinguish at a burn break which is commonly an area bare from an earlier fire, or sometimes a creek, river or other break.
9. Singers included Judy Nampijinpa Granites, Yuni Nampijinpa Martin, Coral Napangardi Gallagher, Topsy Napaljarri and Emma Nungarrayi – see AIATSIS archive deposit (Peterson-Curran, Warlpiri Songlines 2005–2008). These are presented in *Warlpiri Women from Yuendumu* (2017). We thank Myfany Turpin and Mary Laughren for their contributions to musical and linguistic analyses.

About the authors

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Enid Nangala Gallagher is a senior Warlpiri woman from the community of Yuendumu in the Tanami desert of Central Australia. Enid leads many activities to support cultural maintenance and performance of Warlpiri women’s *yawulyu* songs. These include her work as a Warlpiri Ranger, her leading role in the Southern Ngaliya dance camps, and research projects focused on archival, documentary and revitalisation work on these song traditions, including publications of song books, song lyric videos and a website platform.

Nellie Nangala Wayne is a senior Warlpiri song leader from Yuendumu community in Central Australia. She has been a key leader for Warlpiri women's yawulyu over her lifetime and works actively to pass on songs central to her cultural identity through the Southern Ngaliya dance camps. Nellie has been involved in the making of two song books (Batchelor 2014, 2017) and is a lead storyteller in four short films, available on DVD (Batchelor 2017) and accessible through <http://ictv.com.au/>.

Peggy Nampijinpa Brown is a senior Warlpiri song leader from Yuendumu community in Central Australia. Peggy has an Order of Australia for her work setting up the Mt Theo Program which has been foundational in youth diversions from anti-social behaviours from the 1990s. She is a co-author on two published song books (Batchelor, 2014 & 2017) and is a lead storyteller in four short films, available on DVD (Batchelor 2017) and accessible through <http://ictv.com.au/>.