

*The Aboriginal People  
Of Central Australia:  
A Brief Introduction*

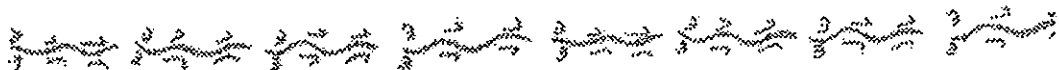
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## *Introduction to the Notes*

We offer you this booklet of notes as a reference for you to take with you at the end of our presentation. It contains information on the topics covered in the course. Some of the views and information we give you here have already been presented during the course itself. In other cases we give you more information and comment for your consideration in relation to what has already been presented to you. We are interested in your views and welcome any feedback on these notes if you are willing to take the time and make the effort to do that. We are always looking for ways to improve our presentation and to further explore the complexities of cross-cultural interaction.

These notes are yours but please ask our permission before copying them or using them for any purpose other than your own reading and study.

### **Yangapiki**

For our daughter and the old one whose name she bears.

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# *Why are Aboriginal People so Different?*

## **Use Your Imagination.**

Imagine a world without cities, governments, armies, towns, planes, cars, or any vehicles, or even wheels, no beasts of burdens. No TV, radio, computers, fast food, shops of any kind, hospitals, pubs, clubs, schools, universities, churches, libraries, no books, no writing, no numbers, no geometry. Imagine a world with no houses, no concrete, bricks, mortar, dressed timber, corrugated iron, plastic, no cloth. Imagine no concepts of such things, no memories, they have never existed. Imagine yourself in that world, just you and your family, naked on the landscape.

You have no clothes at all, except perhaps a thin belt of human hair around your waist and a small tassel in front, also of human hair. There are no shoes on your feet. You have no bed, no sheets, no blankets, no hat on your head, no block out or moisturiser, no artificial protection at all for your bare skin. There is nothing between you and the Earth and the elements. The environment you live in is one of the world's harshest and driest. Sand and rock, clay and salt pans, tough, dry grasses, shrubs, and large trees only where the water collects after rare rainfall. The temperature reaches 45oC+ in Summer for days on end. In Winter it regularly falls to below zero sometimes plummeting to -10oC at ground level just before dawn after a clear, still, dry, freezing night. You can't get off the ground.

To feed yourself and your loved ones you have five or six tools you, or other family members have made, maintain and replace from available materials. Your only shelter comes from nature or small temporary constructions you've made yourself from local materials that you will abandon when you need to move - which you do often. There are babies, children and aged relatives to feed as well as those in their prime. You are born, grow up, marry, have children, raise them, become a grandparent, sicken and die in this world. It's all you know - family and landscape and nothing else.

You need to put all of your courage and intelligence, all of your intellectual and creative abilities, into living in this world. But not just to survive. You expect to enjoy yourself as well. You need to express yourself artistically and spiritually, as a complete human being and you do this through your relationships to all you know in your world - to the landscape and to your kin.

If you can imagine living in this world then you should be able to appreciate that people who, until very recently, did so have a very different way of thinking from the average contemporary, urban Australian about almost everything in their lives.

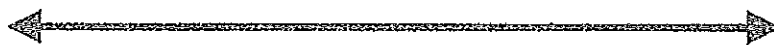
Think of the world's cultures arranged along a straight line, a continuum. At one extreme is the technologically complex, hierarchically ordered, materially wealthy and large scale. At the other is the technologically simple, egalitarian, materially basic and small scale. Then modern, industrial, urban Australia and traditional Desert Aboriginal culture would be at opposite ends of that continuum.

### Technology-Institutions-Wealth

Desert Aboriginal

Contemporary Australian

Simple



Complex

Let's think up another continuum. This time we put the world's most complex kinship system at one end, and the world's simplest at the other. Again these two cultures would be at opposite ends only this time the positions are reversed.

### Kinship System

Contemporary Australian

Desert Aboriginal

Simple

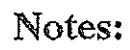


Complex

We believe that cultures can't get more different from each other. A significant proportion of the Aboriginal population of Central Australia were living in the world we have described above and you have just been imagining, three or four decades ago, some only two decades ago. All of them lived that way in the childhood of our grandparents.

Bess' father and mother lived that way as children and adolescents. They had clear memories of their first sight of a Whitefella. She now lives in the suburbs with one of those strange whitefellas, has acquired a degree in Applied Science from Curtin University and works as a consultant to government and industry. We believe that few other human groups in the whole of history have undergone such drastic and sudden cultural change.



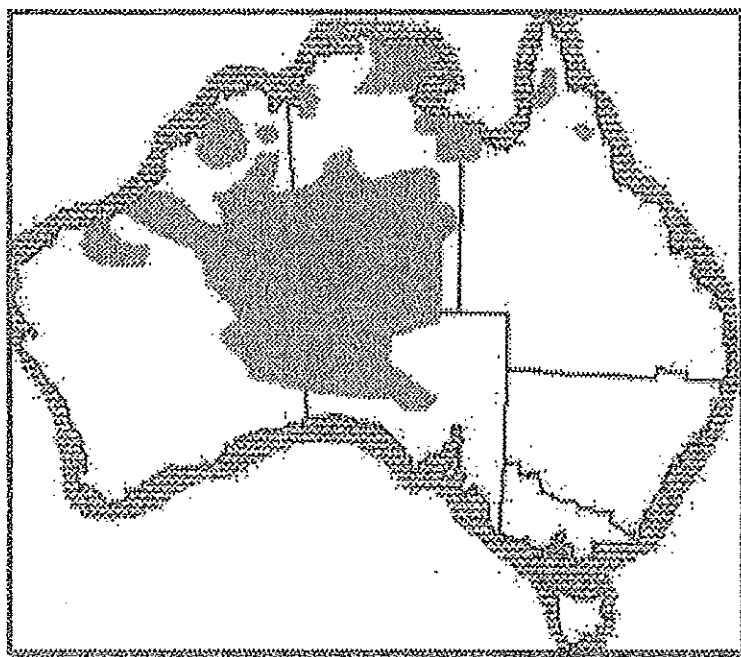
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# *Languages*

## **Many Languages – Few People.**

In the 1970's a survey found over 100 Aboriginal languages still being spoken in the Northern Territory. Warlpiri is one of the largest of these. It has about 3,500 speakers. The map below shows where Aboriginal languages have survived into the 1980's. These are deserts and wet tropics, rugged and remote country that was set aside as Aboriginal reserve land, too hard for the settlement of large white populations and uninteresting to European Australians until they became subject to commercial development such as mining and tourism. These languages are now under threat but they are still spoken by large numbers of people many with very little knowledge of English.

**Use of an Aboriginal Language by over 100 people in the late 1980's.**



Census figures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (over 5 years of age) who speak:

	English only	A language other than English
<u>1986</u>	150,350	36,930
<u>1991</u>	177,268	42,716

## The Languages of Central Australia.

Listed below are the main languages of the Central Australian Region. Most of these have regional dialects as well. All of these can be heard spoken in the streets of Alice Springs because of its location and its role as regional service centre. Besides these groups and individuals speaking dozens of other languages, as well as Kriol and Aboriginal English, from all parts of Australia come here to live and work or just to visit. The numbers of speakers are small but the variety and complexity of the language situation is immense.

Each language has its own word for 'person' or 'human being'. This word is now usually used to mean 'Aboriginal person'. Some of these languages, like those that use 'anangu' and 'yanangu' are very closely related and their speakers can understand each other. Others are as different as English and German, or English and Russian, related but very different.

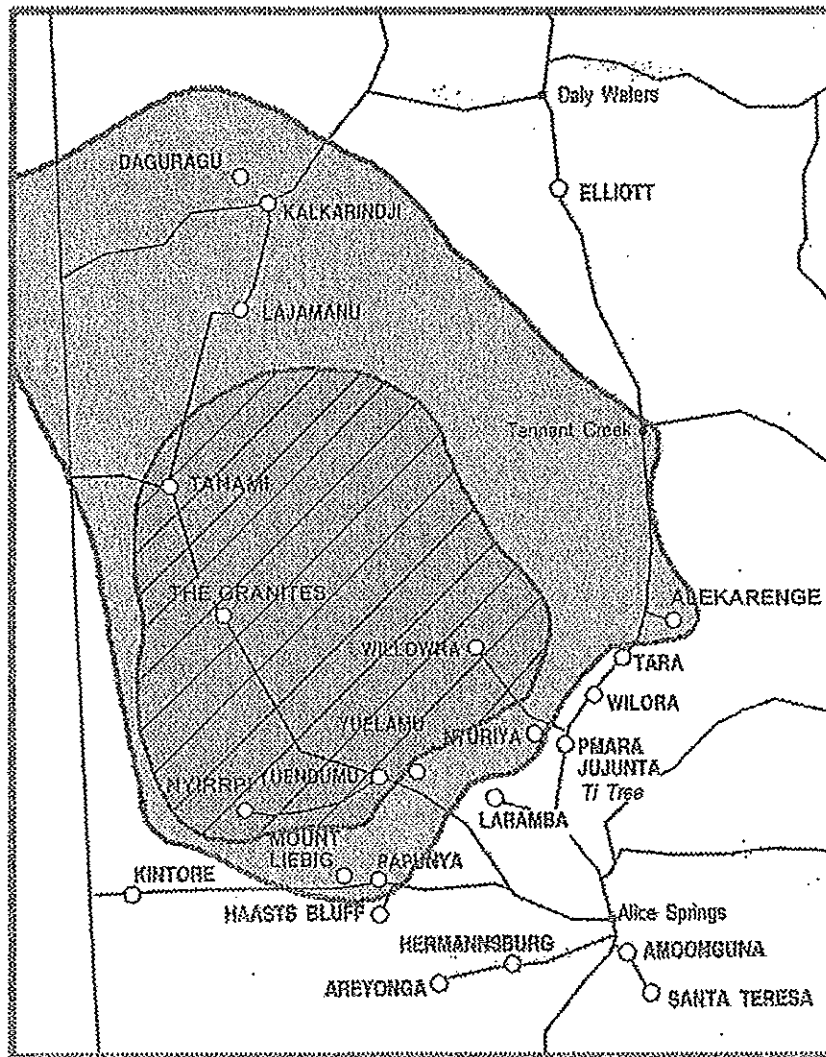
<u>Language Name</u>	<u>Word for 'Person'</u>	<u>Main NT Communities</u>
Arrernte	Tyernty urperle/ Arelhe	Mparntwe, Ntaria, Lytentye Apurte Aputula
Anmatyerre	Tyernty urperle	Yuelamu, Pmara Jutunta, Engawala
Kaytetye	Tyernty urperle	Alekarenge, Tara
Alyawarre	Irpwerle	Alekarenge, Urapuntja, Ampwerlatwatye, Ilperrelhelame
Warumungu	Wumparrarni	Tennant Creek, Alekarenge
Warlpiri	Yapa	Yurntumu, Lajamanu, Wirliyajarrayi.
Luritja	Yanangu	Papunya, Utju, Aputula
Pintupi	Yanangu	Walungurru
Kukatja	Yanangu	Walungurru
Pitjantjatjara/ Yangkuntjatjara	Anangu	Kaltukatjarra, Mutitjulu
Ngaanyatjarra/ Ngaatjatjarra	Anangu	Kaltukatjarra

## Alternative Community Names

<u>Aboriginal</u>	<u>English</u>	<u>Aboriginal</u>	<u>English</u>
Mparntwe	Alice Springs	Tara	Neutral Junction
Ntaria	Hermannsburg	Urapuntja	Utopia
Lytentye Apurte	Santa Teresa	Ampwerlatwatye	Amaroo
Aputula	Finke	Ilperrelhelame	Lake Nash
Yuelamu	Mt. Allan	Yurntumu	Yuendumu
PMara Jutunta	Ti Tree	Wirliyajarrayi	Willowra
Engawala	Alcoota	Utju	Areyonga
Alekarenge	Ali Curung	Walungurru	Kintore
Kaltukatjarra	Docker River	Mutitjulu	Ayer's Rock Community

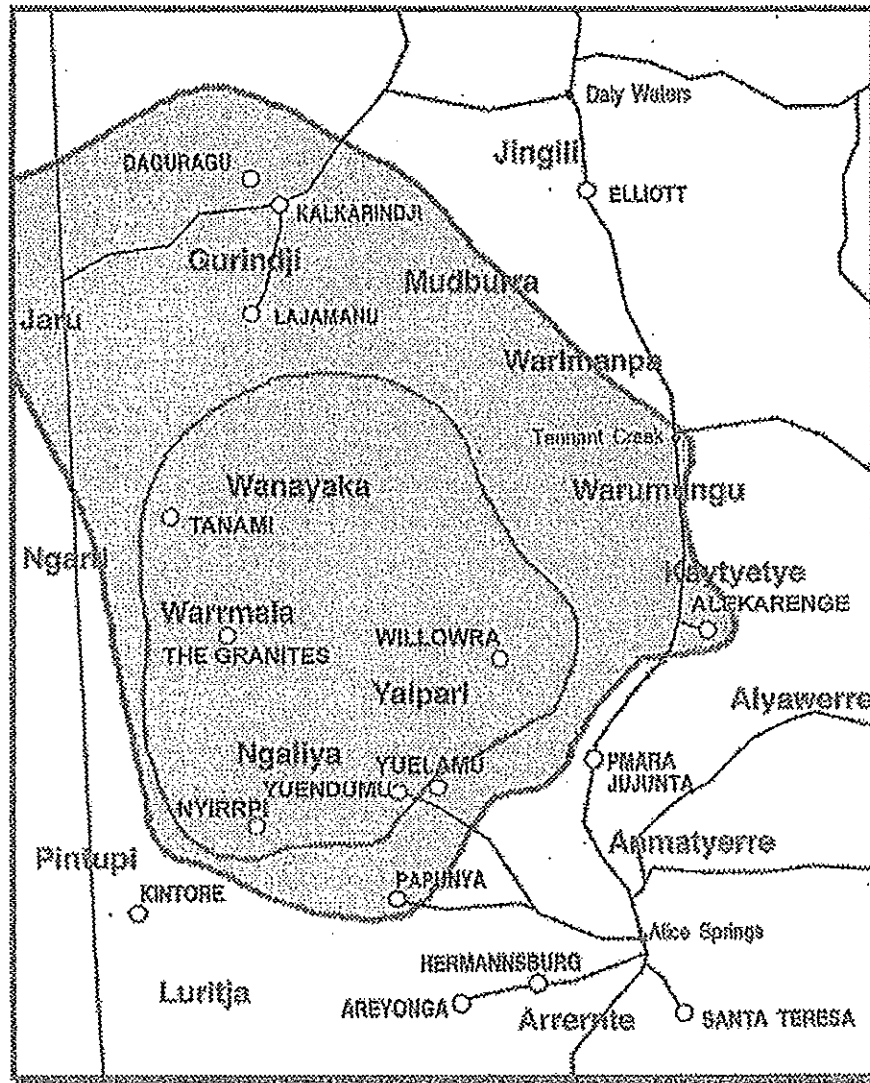


## Warlpiri Country - Nguru Warlpirikirlangu



- The cross-hatched area represents the approximate extent of traditional Warlpiri country before the settlements were established and the Warlpiri people moved out of the desert.
- The blue area represents the region where Warlpiri is now widely spoken. It extends off the map up to Balgo in Western Australia just across the border. It also extends, of course, into Alice Springs as do all the languages of the Centre.

## Warlpiri – its Dialects and its Neighbours



- The labels in the central area, eg **Ngaliya**, are the names of the main Warlpiri dialects where they were spoken before the move to the communities.
- The labels outside the hatched area, eg **Pintupi**, are the language groups that are the closest neighbours to Warlpiri.

## Aboriginal Languages are Different

Aboriginal languages are extremely different from European languages. There are very few whitefellas who have managed to learn to speak an Aboriginal language well. Because there are so many Aboriginal languages Aboriginal people are used to being bilingual or multilingual. However, for many people on remote communities, especially the old, English is very difficult to learn because it is so different. A lot of people of all ages have only a basic grasp of English. Those who speak it well are rare and obviously talented.

Below there is a copy of the Lord's Prayer in Warlpiri followed by a free translation back into English. This should give some idea of the difficulties of translation. "Wapirra" is the term used to address God, it is the respectful term used to address a 'skin' father, ie a man who is not an actual, biological father. There was no 'God' and no 'Satan' in the Warlpiri world-view. There is no equivalent of 'Heaven' in Warlpiri. The translators chose a word that usually translates as 'camp' or 'home country'. Because of the Warlpiri relationship to the land the word for 'home' could mean 'country' as well. The translators added a word that means 'holy' or 'sacred'. We have therefore retranslated that as 'Holy Home' rather than 'Heaven'.

'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us' has been translated using a word that can mean 'to be satisfied with payback after a fight or after a crime has been committed against a family'. In Warlpiri society when a crime is committed against a person the victim's family accuses the offender and demands payback. The offender's family is entitled to meet with the victim's family so that both sides can decide on the guilt of the accused and then decide on a just punishment if the verdict is 'guilty'. Punishment is dealt out by an appropriate member of the victim's family, in a public place, so that all can see that justice has been done properly. This should satisfy all parties and bring an end to the conflict. Similar meetings are held when someone is accused of sorcery causing death or serious illness. This is a long way from the Christian notions of sin, contrition, forgiveness and atonement but it is related and is as close as traditional Warlpiri culture gets.

All ideas can be translated but the process is often cumbersome and round about and can lead to confusion to the reader or listener. Meaningful communication requires tact and patience on both sides.

## The Lord's Prayer

Jesus-rli kangalpa pinarrimani God-ku wangkanjaku

Wapirra, nganimpakupalangu kuja kanpa nyuntu Tarruku nyina ngurrararla  
nyuntunyangurla: nyuntunyangu yirdi

yungurnangkulu yirriyirri yirdimani, manurnangkulu  
pulkapinyi jintawarlayirijuku.

Nyuntu karnangkulu payirni, Warlajamarri Wiri, yungunpanganpa  
Wiri nyina jintawarlayikijuku manu nyiyarningkijarraku.

Ngurrara nyuntunyangurla, yangka kuja kangkulu warrarda  
ngungkurnnyina wiljiwangu, ngulapiya yijala

yungulparnangkulu purdanyanjarla ngungkurnnyinayarla  
nyarrpa kajinpanganpa nyuntu wangka.

Wapirra, payirni karnangkulu, 'Miyinganpa jalanguku yungka  
nganimpaku yungurnangkulu marlajangarni.'

Wapirra, nganimpa yungurnalujana yawurujarri yapakarirlanguku,  
ngulapiyayijala nganimpalangukunganpa yawurujarriya  
wiljijangkaku.

Wapirra, mardakanganpa muurlparlu Jujukujaku Wirijarlukujaku,  
kalakanganpa yimirr-yinjarla karlirr-kanyi.

## The Lord's Prayer

Jesus teaches us how to speak to God.

Our Father who is in your Holy Home: So we will call your name  
respectfully and we will all praise you always.

We ask you Great Lord and so you make everything great for us. In  
your home, thus they always agree with you without argument, so  
we should also listen and agree with what you might say to us.

Father, we ask you, "Give us food for today so that we can eat what you  
given us." have

Father, just like we are satisfied with payback with others after trouble,  
so also forgive us after trouble.

Father, look after us carefully because the Great Demon might trick us  
and lead us astray.



**“We lose our ancestors when we lose our language”.**

Peter Ladefoged.

Notes:

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## End Notes

# *History*

## **Remaking Our History**

It is only in recent times that most Australians have been presented with the unpleasant facts of the history of contact between white and black Australians. Aboriginal Australians were not granted full rights of citizenship until the late sixties. Up until then they were basically ignored. They were left out of our 'history', our national myth. Now, with the coming of the centenary of the Commonwealth and the debate over a possible Republic, we are going through the pain of reinventing ourselves as a nation. It is important we do this without throwing the baby out with the bath water. A sense of guilt about the past is not very useful but we do need to acknowledge that this country has a black history and allow Aboriginal people their rightful place in our national story. Frank Brennan puts it well when he says:

*We cannot undo or make right all the injustices of the past. But we own our history. The history of Aboriginal dispossession and of European settlement is not contained in legal declarations made by Governor Phillip when he landed at Sydney Cove. This history played itself out in many different ways across the length and breadth of the land. Every local community, every shire, every region and every city has its story. Aborigines want us all to know that story and to own it.<sup>1</sup>*

## **Phases in the Development of Government Policy**

### **1 The Frontier: Terra Nullius, Dispersal and Protection.**

- ❖ Aboriginal ownership of the land is not recognised but Aboriginal people are regarded as subjects of the British Crown.
- ❖ Official tolerance but the reality of massive frontier violence both officially sanctioned and covert illegal. The Myall Creek and Waterloo Creek massacres.
- ❖ Dispersal in retaliation for 'outrages', guerrilla warfare, often meant massacre. Protectors were usually police or magistrates.
- ❖ Recruitment and use of Native Police as frontier shock troops. Divide and rule.
- ❖ Christian Missions acted as sanctuaries from violence but accelerated the loss of culture and languages. 'Smoothing the Dying Pillow'

**Aims:** To settle the land and to destroy Traditional Culture replacing it with Christianity and Capitalism and Aboriginal languages with English.

### **2 Pacification: Assimilation and Welfare.**

- ❖ The remnants of Aboriginal populations become 'the most controlled ethnic minority on Earth'.
- ❖ Remnant groups forced into itinerant lifestyle, moved from reserve, to mission, to fringe camp, to town. Land available to Aboriginal people gradually whittled away.

- ◆ Settled life subject to institutionalisation and rigid control, official neglect and abuse. All aspects of Aboriginal lives are controlled by petty officials and missionaries.
- ◆ Removal of large numbers of children from Aboriginal families, in some cases with family agreement, in many cases by force and deceit. The 'Stolen Generation'.
- ◆ Genuine concern for Aboriginal survival and welfare expressed, especially by missionaries but structure of control guarantees injustice.

**Aims:** To train Aboriginal people to accept mainstream culture and employment on the bottom rung of the ladder, and to live in the wider community rather than on reserves and missions.

### 3      **Citizenship: Self Determination and Self Management.**

- ◆ Aboriginal people gain full citizenship rights after the 1967 referendum.
- ◆ The Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Aboriginal Development Commission are established and then combined to form the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission to administer Commonwealth policy.
- ◆ Representative advisory and management bodies established to decide policy and manage Government funds.
- ◆ The Northern Territory Land Rights Act passed granting inalienable community freehold title.
- ◆ The principle of Terra Nullius overturned and Native Title is recognised by the High Court.
- ◆ The Commonwealth adopts a policy of Reconciliation.

**Aims:** Recognition of historical injustices and the failure of previous policies. To allow Aboriginal people to decide their own destiny and manage their own affairs.

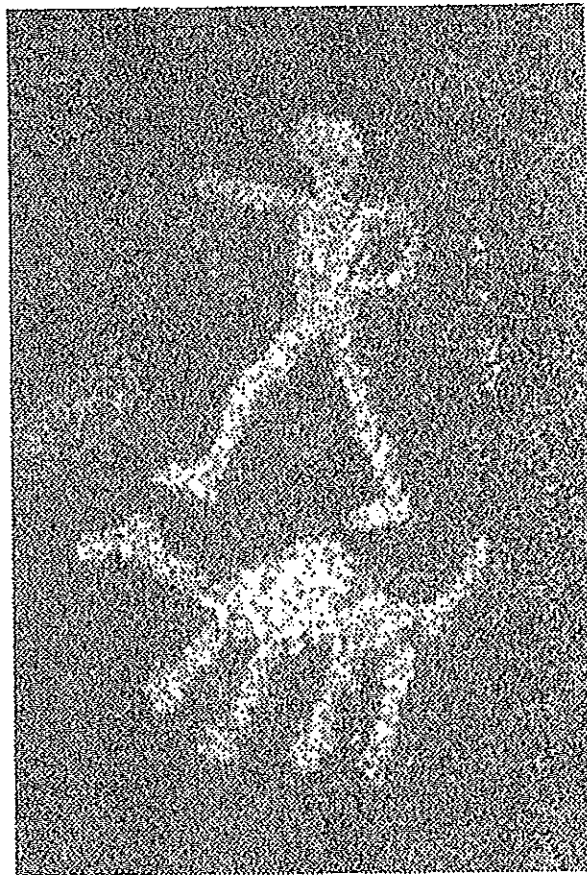
### **The Warlpiri**

The people of the Western Desert regions have had a far easier time of it than groups in other parts of the continent. They had no contact at all with Whitefellas until the 1870's. There was no full scale invasion of their country though many children fathered by white men were taken from their Warlpiri mothers. Many Warlpiri lived unmolested on their country until after the Second World War. Some stayed independent and autonomous until the nineteen sixties and so missed out on some of the worst excesses of previous policies. Some small scale violence did occur on the goldfields but it was probably no worse than the violence that occurred fairly regularly between Aboriginal groups themselves. In 1928 a posse of police and civilians (including Aboriginal civilians) massacred a large number of Warlpiri and Anmatyerre people in the area of the Hanson and Lander rivers in retaliation for the death of an old dingo hunter, Fred Brooks. Two Warlpiri men had killed Brooks because he was co-habiting with the wife of one of them and had refused to return her to her husband.

There are many Aboriginal people still alive now who witnessed this event. Such violence continued in other areas of the North until the forties. For the Aboriginal peoples of this area such events are recent not ancient history, and they still grieve for the victims. However, the descendants of the victims do not blame Whitefellas as a group for these killings. They know

the killers as individuals, by name. They also level blame at the killer of Fred Brooks who they say should not have been so ready to give his wife to the white man in exchange for tobacco, tea and flour and should have offered himself for pay back as he would have been expected to if his victim had been Aboriginal. At the time Warlpiri men near Vaughan Springs in the far West told a Lutheran Missionary that they would have handed the killer over if they'd been asked to.

Since those times the Warlpiri have done very well out of the Land Rights Act of 1976. They now have Community Freehold Title over most of their ancestral country. They have had bilingual and bicultural programs in their schools since the seventies and have control over their own communities through elected Councils. There are still daunting problems to overcome but at least now there is a genuine attempt on the part of government and the wider community to make up for past injustices and to allow Aboriginal people to manage their own affairs.



History in stone – whitefella and camel,  
The Granites (Yarturluyarturlu).



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<sup>i</sup> Frank Brennan, *One Land, One Nation. Mabo – Towards 2001*. UQP, 1995, p. xi.

# *Religion, People and the Landscape.*

## **Aboriginal Religion:**

Desert people needed to know the landscape in intimate detail. There was nothing else except people and landscape. The desert is vast and harsh but it was all that they knew and gave them all they needed to survive, not just to survive but also to enjoy and fulfil themselves. Like all other members of their species, no matter what climatic zone they inhabit or society they live in, they expected that life would bring pleasure as well as pain, spiritual fulfilment as well as the drudgery of the 'daily grind'. It is only natural that they felt very close to the landscape, they didn't have a choice. And it is only natural that they expressed their spiritual needs through their relationship to the landscape, there was nothing else.

Aboriginal religion is "primal religion". Primal religions are not "universal". They are ethnocentric and non-missionary, belonging to one people, and there is never an attempt to convert others. There is a deep sense that humanity is closely akin to nature. Plants and animals have their own spiritual existence and place in the universe and humanity shares in this existence. There is a spiritual realm that humanity has access to sacramentally. People can share in the benevolent power and blessings of this realm and gain protection from evil and dangerous forces both natural and supernatural. There is no distinct and obvious boundary between the world of the concrete and the living and the realm of spirit, they overlap and interact continuously.

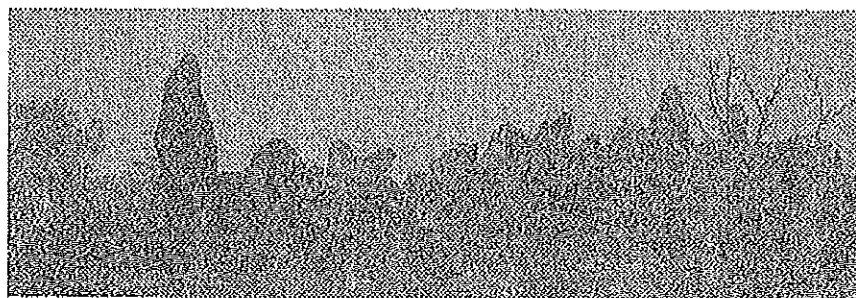
## **Initiation**

Women give life when they give birth and sustain it as carers and nurturers throughout their lives. They are initiated into adulthood by nature. Men need to be initiated ritually. Through ceremony and training, much of it conducted in secret, boys are taken dramatically, and traumatically, from the world of women and children, which they 'die' to. They are then inducted into the world of men, to which they are 'reborn'. At this time the boy, reborn as 'young man', is promised a wife and acquires the potential to become a father, grandfather and eventually an ancestor. Much of the spiritual knowledge of men is considered dangerous to women and the uninitiated and must be kept strictly from them. However, both men and women have responsibilities to maintain the Law by which Aboriginal people live and to maintain, by rituals and ceremony, the physical world and its bounties. The knowledge and experience needed to carry out these priestly functions are learnt throughout life. For men initiation is just the beginning.

## Jukurrpa - The Dreaming:

The following is an attempt to explain, in a very general and simplistic way, some of the religious beliefs of the Warlpiri people. Aboriginal culture varies greatly across the continent. There seem to be some general principles shared by all, or at least, most groups. Much of the belief system of the Warlpiri people is certainly shared with other desert people. However, what follows we offer with confidence only in relation to the Warlpiri people.

The landscape was once flat and featureless. The 'Creation Ancestors', spiritual beings of immense power, moved across it and created its features as they travelled. They may be thought of as human or non-human and sometimes as both at once. They may be male or female. In some places they passed into the landscape and were themselves transformed into one of its features. In other places they left their 'marks' on the landscape, with tools or with their own bodies. In yet other places they drew objects out of their bodies which they passed onto men to preserve and care for. In all of these places where marks were made the ancestor left part, or all, of him or herself behind. In Warlpiri these marks are called *yirdi* which also means 'word', 'story' and 'song' - "in the beginning was the 'Word'". Another word that is used for these marks is *kuruwarri* which also is used for 'ancestral totemic designs' (the 'dreamings' in dot paintings), 'dreaming', 'spiritual essence' and 'powers of fertility'. The Warlpiri use the word *yirrarni* for 'put' as in *kuruwarri ka yirrarni*, 'he puts his mark'. This word is also used for 'write'. The action of 'putting a mark' is also equivalent to 'naming'. So the Ancestor Beings also named the features of the landscape. The names of the places where they have been transformed is also their own proper names. So the powers of the Spirit World are inextricably bound up with the physical landscape.



Jukajuka, a rain Dreaming site West of Yuendumu.

The stories of their travels are the *jukurrpa*, the 'myths' that explain the world's creation and the coming into existence of the Law that Aboriginal people live by, the Law that determines how people interact with each other and with the land, with plants and animals. The word is also used for 'Dreamtime', 'law', 'totem' and 'dream'. The verb 'to dream' is *jukurrmani*. The Ancestors may have dreamt their travels before undertaking them. Humans may also communicate with the processes and characters of the Dreamtime and the World of Spirit in general through the process of dreaming. New songs and ceremonies come to men this way.

## **Sharing in the Power of the Jukurrpa.**

Human beings have unbreakable bonds with certain places in the landscape, with their country. And through these bonds they are given their social identification but they also share in the spiritual essence of the Creation Ancestor as well as the animal or plant 'totem' associated with those places. These bonds with the country are established in two ways. The first is by inheritance through fathers. A person's Spirit Ancestor travelled through the country 'singing it' that is creating and naming it's features as he or she travelled. Therefore rights and obligations to that country are passed down from father to sons and daughters, from that Spirit Ancestor to the current generation. So places in the landscape, in the case of the Warlpiri, 'belong' to father/son pairs of subsections, eg Japaljarri/Napaljarri - Jungarrayi/Nungarrayi, Jangala/Nangala - Jampijinpa/Nampijinpa and so on.

Secondly a bond is established with the place that a person's conception spirit came from. The Warlpiri believe that a child's spirit passes from a place in the landscape into the child's mother. A person therefore shares the spiritual essence and some of the powers of the Ancestor Creator of that place. Knowledge of the nature of a person's conception spirit will come to the father of that person through interpretation of certain signs he notices in association with the birth or in dreams. At death the spirit returns to that place and joins the ancestors whose spirits reside there and protect and care for the living generations.

Those who have a spiritual relationship to particular plants and animals have a responsibility to make sure that those plants and animals are always available as a food source. They believe that by performing certain ceremonies, dances and songs at the appropriate place that this will ensure that there will always be a supply of the animal or plant they are responsible for. They have an agreement with the Creation Ancestors to take an active part in the maintenance of Creation. The Jews have such a Covenant with God, as do Christians. Catholics believe that the performance of their Liturgy helps to keep Creation going. All Christians believe that farmers can bring forth the bounty of the Earth because it has been 'blessed by God'. Aboriginal religion has another version of this notion of a spiritual relationship to the Earth and a duty to make sure that it continues to be productive.

Some places embody particularly dangerous powers and energies. Such places can be extremely dangerous except for those men who have 'ownership' of the related Dreamings and the responsibility to ensure that they are cared for and not damaged. Sacrilegious treatment of such places causes illness, misfortune and death to those who approach them without the appropriate knowledge and ritual, let alone those who damage or mistreat them. Such behaviour by others may bring disaster also to those who are responsible for them. This is why the Warlpiri are so concerned to control mining activity on their land. They feel responsible for the well being of those engaged in such activity as well as for the maintenance of the sites themselves and the welfare of those with spiritual ties to those places. Mining is OK in areas where sacred and dangerous places can be avoided and not damaged. So the gold mines at the Tanami and the Granites could go ahead as long as certain sites in the area remain untouched.

Spiritual power also abides in certain objects that have come from the Creation Ancestors, usually drawn from their bodies. As with ownership of 'country' and sites within country being the 'boss' or 'owner' of such objects implies responsibility more than ownership in the whitefella sense. Responsibility for them is also passed from father to son. Each generation becomes the receiver and then the giver of these objects and their power. Each man in that chain eventually becomes an ancestor passing on some his will, authority and spiritual essence with the object, added to those of previous generations. They are also powerful and dangerous and must be carefully preserved and kept away from the vulnerable and uninitiated for their own good.

## Summary

Warlpiri people are bound to the physical landscape which is seen to be living and charged with spiritual powers. The social world of kinship and Law is a product of the Creation of the landscape and continues to interact with it through ritual and ceremony. A person's conception spirit comes from the country. Throughout life that person is bound to the land spiritually and partakes of it's powers. At death the spirit returns to become once again part of its spiritual essence, to join the spirits of previous generations of ancestors as guardians and benefactors of the living. The physical world is criss-crossed with 'song-lines' or 'Dreaming Tracks'. When an Aboriginal person learns the myths and songs which explain Creation and the origin of the Law he or she has a mental map, spiritually interpreted, forever implanted in his or her consciousness. Apart from giving spiritual comfort and establishing a foundation for society and culture it also passes from generation to generation the intimate and immensely detailed knowledge and love for 'country' which is absolutely essential for survival in such a physically harsh environment.



Thomas Rice Jangala and Curtis Fry Jampijinpa  
preparing for a ceremony - Yuendumu

### A Word of Caution.

Religion is a sensitive subject. Be careful when discussing these things with Aboriginal people. There is a strict segregation of the sexes in these matters. Women cannot talk in any detail about men's 'business' and vice-versa. Attitudes vary from group to group. We suggest that you get to know an Aboriginal friend fairly well before bringing these subjects up, then be guided by their reaction. Conversations on these matters can be intimidating and offensive. They can cause anger and distress. If information is given to you treat it and your informant with respect. Giving away secret information is one of the worst of all offences against Aboriginal Law. Be guided by your informant and always be discrete.



Notes:

[illegible]

### End Notes:

Apart from Bess Price's original input many of the ideas in this paper were drawn from Nancy Munn, "The Transformation of Subjects into Objects in Walbiri (sic) and Pitjantjatjara Myth". in M. Charlesworth, H. Morphy, D. Bell & K Maddock eds. *Religion in Aboriginal Australia: An Anthology* Univ. of Qld. Press, 1992 and from Paul Albrecht, *Aboriginal Australians*, Lutheran Publishing House, 1988.

# Kinship

## A complicated and useful system.

In Aboriginal society there were two things central to life – the landscape and family. Traditional Aboriginal society and all human relationships within it were organised on the basis of kinship. It was possible in such a society for each individual to be able to be acquainted with every other individual speaking the same language. Every body was either related by blood, or treated as if they were related, to everybody else. Each language group had a slightly different system that meshed in with that of its neighbours. So Aboriginal languages have far more kinship terms and far more ways of talking about kinship relations than English does. There are also different levels of politeness in addressing or talking about kin relations. For example, special forms of language are used to address in-laws or even for talking to others within their hearing. Children are taught the rules of respectful communication very early and breaking them is considered a serious offence for an adult.

Aboriginal kinship is organised very differently from the Western system. For example a Warlpiri person has several mothers because, if you are Warlpiri, all of your mother's sisters are also your mothers. In fact all of the women that your mother 'calls' sister, which includes many women that we would call her cousins rather than sisters, are your mothers. Your mother's brothers you call *ngamirni* which is usually translated as 'uncle'. But your father's brothers you call *kirdana*, that is the same term you call your father. So all of your father's brothers are also your fathers. Your father's sisters you call *pinirdi*, which is usually translated as 'aunt'. All of the children of your mother's sisters and your father's brothers you call the Warlpiri equivalent of 'brother' and 'sister'. So everybody has lots of fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters not to mention cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents and so on. When the Warlpiri use English terms like 'father' or 'sister' they use them to apply to a great many more people than English speakers do. They sometimes use terms like 'cousin-brother' or 'sister-like-cousin', or 'full brother, same mother same father' to try to get across the extra meaning that they give to such terms. This sort of thing can be very confusing for the poor, English speaking new arrival who does not understand how complicated and different the Warlpiri system is.

All of the functions of modern institutions, the courts, churches, legislatures, police, schools, universities, corporations, defence services and so on, were all performed in one way or another through the intricate web of rights and obligations based on kinship. In social terms then 'family' was everything and so the kinship systems were very complex. As the institutions of modern society have impacted on Aboriginal culture and society much has been lost or has been changed to respond to the new pressures. However kinship is still central to Aboriginal people's relationships and dealings with each other and to a large extent with the outside world.

## Adapting to the modern world.

Because all of their dealings with other people are based on kinship Warlpiri people were originally puzzled by the idea of unrelated 'friend' and by the relationships between supervisors and workers, and co-workers. White Australians are a strange lot with a very different, and simple, kinship system. In order to be able to relate meaningfully with them the Warlpiri have tried to integrate individual outsiders into their own system by classifying them as kin. An outsider will be 'adopted' into the family of a friend or co-worker. They usually classify a 'friend' as a brother or sister because this is a fairly relaxed and informal relationship implying affection something like 'friendship'. They do this out of practical necessity as well as genuine affection and respect. This is the only way they know how to relate to other human beings. Aboriginal people will take the obligations and rights implied by these assigned kin relationships as far as the adopted one is prepared to go. There are advantages and disadvantages for both parties.

## Skin names

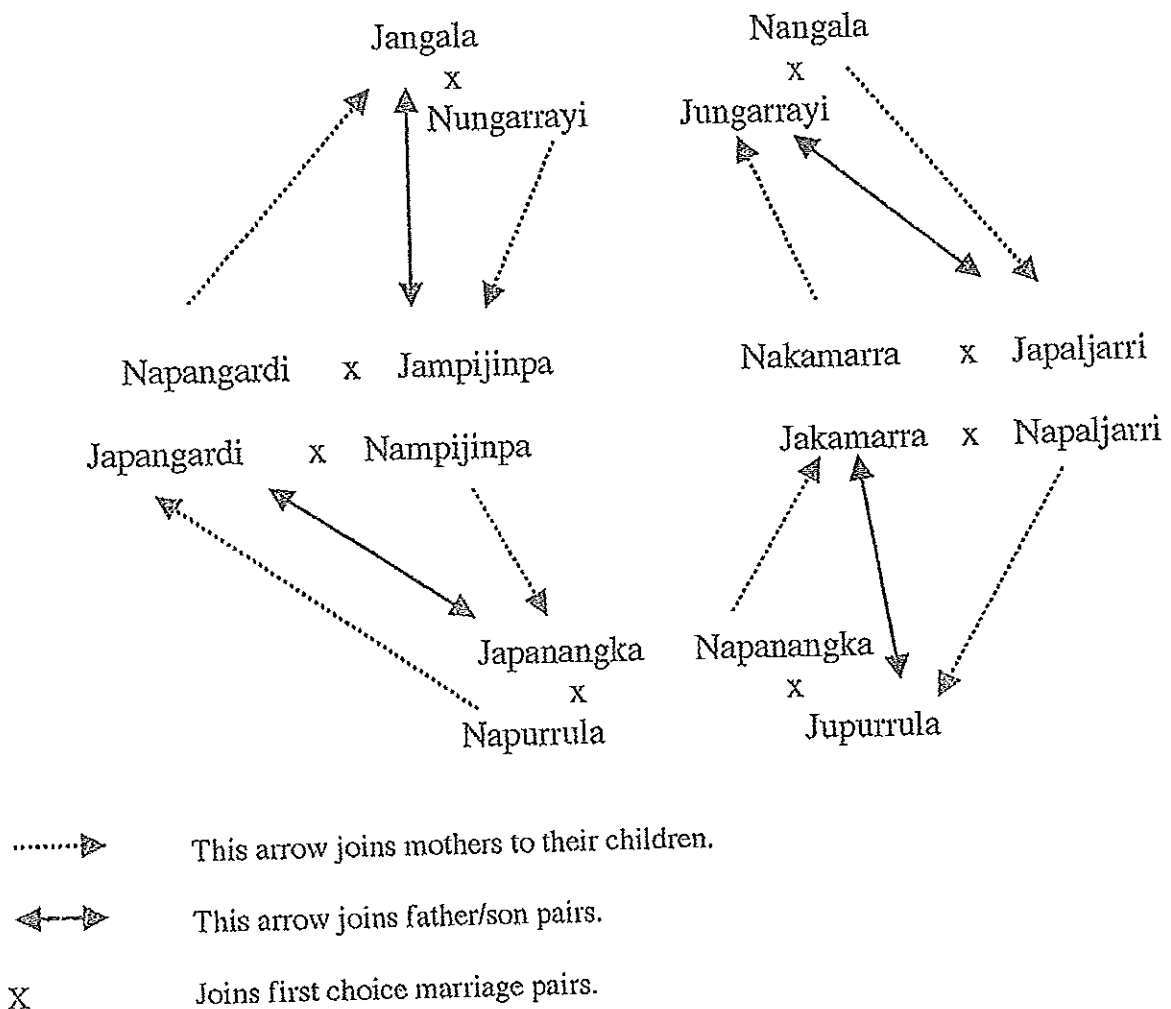
A short hand way of dealing with all of the complexity of the kinship system, and a handy way of including others, is the 'skin name' system. In order to help you understand what skin names are try thinking of a small scale society, every language group, as a circle which contains all of that society's people. Every such society is at least divided into halves. These are called 'moieties'. The people of East Arnhemland, for example divide themselves into moieties called 'Dhuwa' and Yirritja'. Everybody in that society is one of these two. A person should marry somebody from the other half. So Dhuwas marry Yirritjas and vice versa. To marry within your own group would be a serious crime.

Some societies divide themselves into four groups. These are called 'sections'. The Alyawarra people of North Eastern Central Australia do this. Again the section you belong to will determine who you can marry as well as almost all other ways of relating to other people. Warlpiri society, and some others, are made up of eight different groups called 'subsections'. Everybody belongs to one of the groups. Each group has a name. This is what is called a 'skin name'. It is the most common polite term of address and reference. When a skin name is used the speaker acknowledges the kin relationship with the person being addressed. When outsiders are assigned skin names all Warlpiri (and other language groups) will then recognise a kin relationship with them and therefore will know how to behave towards them as if they were family.



The chart below gives an idea of how the Warlpiri skin name system works. Remember that Jangala and Nangala are brother and sister, as are Nakamarra and Jakamarra and so on for all of the others. The two headed arrows run between father and son pairs, so Jangala/Jampijinpa, Japangardi/Japanangka etc are such pairs. The single headed arrows run from mothers to children, so Nangala is mother to Japaljarri and Napaljarri, Nampijinpa is mother to Japanangka and Napanangka and so on. The x's join first choice marriage pairs, Jakamarra should marry Napaljarri, Napurrula should marry Japanangka and so on. The relationships go around in two circles. Women pass through a cycle of four groups through the generations and men through a cycle of two. Nungarrayi's daughter is Nampijinpa, her daughter would be Napanangka, her daughter Nakamarra which is Nungarrayi's mother. Jangala's paternal grandfather is also Jangala, his father is Jampijinpa as is his son, his grandson (son's son) is Jangala like himself.

### The Warlpiri Skin Name System and How it Works



If all of this makes your head spin it is understandable, it's complicated. The system takes most people a long time to learn and the description above only scratches the surface. Warlpiri culture has no arithmetic. It has no words for numbers except for the equivalent of 'one', 'two', 'a few' and 'many'. Obviously Warlpiri give the mathematical part of their brains a good work out computing kin relations. Older Warlpiri thoroughly enjoy the intellectual challenge of instantaneously computing the kin relations, reciprocal obligations and proper standards of behaviour holding between individuals, taking into account skin group membership, actual blood relation, relative generation levels, ceremonial obligations, land tenure rights and obligations and other political and social affiliations. It's all great fun, a little like playing chess at high speed - in your head.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

## English and Other Ways of Communicating

### Borrowing Words from English

All Aboriginal languages are heavily influenced by English. Aboriginal people have had to learn at least some English to survive. Now communities have access to radio, TV signals and the internet. Bilingual education and other government funded programs aimed at preserving languages have been run in some communities since the early '70's.

In the Warlpiri communities like Yuendumu almost everybody uses Warlpiri as a first language and there are some, mainly old people, who do not use English at all. Few people of any age speak standard English. However the Warlpiri of younger people is now full of words borrowed from English. Some are borrowed because there are no equivalents in Warlpiri, others because they are heard so often. These words are fitted into the sound system of Warlpiri and an English speaker would not recognize them. Some are given different meanings from the original English. Some they are just borrowed across and used as they are in English. The following is from a conversation between a fourteen year old girl (A) and her aunt in her mid-thirties, (B). English words are in italics:

- A     *Tumaji jiliwanijarrijarna* Yirararlaju manu punku *tumaji*, *that's why*-rna ngurra kurrajarrija.

I was too silly at Yirara and it was too awful, that's why I went home

- B     Nyiya jangka punkuju?

Why wasn't it any good?

- A     Yangka nyinami ngurrangka *one place* purdanyanyi *tape*.

Just staying in the one place listening to tapes.

Apart from obvious English words, the following have also been borrowed and changed:

tumaji	too (from too much)	jiliwani	silly (from 'silly one')
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Borrowings like these are put together with Warlpiri to make expressions like:

*tumaji jiliwanijarrijarna* to mean 'I was being too silly'.

Straight English words are also joined up with Warlpiri to make phrases like:

*that's why*-rna ngurrakurrajarrija, 'that's why I went home'.

## Pidgin English

Aboriginal people whose first language is a traditional Aboriginal language and who only need to use some English on occasion usually use 'Pidgin' English.

*A pidgin is a system of communication which has grown up among people who do not share a common language, but who need to talk to each other, for trading and other reasons. Pidgins have been variously called 'makeshift', 'marginal' or 'mixed' languages. They have a limited vocabulary, a reduced grammatical structure, and a much narrower range of functions, compared to the languages of which gave rise to them. They are the native languages of no-one, but they are nonetheless the main means of communication for millions of people...<sup>1</sup>*

Pidgin gets most of its words from English though some, like 'savvy' and 'piccaninny', have survived from Portuguese, since the speakers of that language were the first Europeans to establish trade with Africans and Asians in the modern period. Pidgin is used everywhere in the bush where an Aboriginal language is still strong.

## Creoles

Some pidgins eventually become creoles. This word also comes from Portuguese.

*A creole is a pidgin which has become the mother tongue of a community...First, within a community, increasing numbers of people begin to use pidgin as their principle means of communication. As a consequence, their children hear it more than any other language. And gradually it takes on the status of a mother tongue for them. Within a generation or two, native language use becomes consolidated and widespread. The result is a creole, or 'creolized' language."<sup>2</sup>*

Creoles have low status because they are used by the poorest and most powerless people in a society. Even the people who speak it are often embarrassed to use it in front of whitefellas who they think will regard them as stupid and uneducated. However, the important thing to understand is that a creole is a fully functional, complex language that can function as well as any other language. The national languages of many modern nations are creoles, Bahasa Indonesia is a good example. Modern European languages probably began life as creoles resulting from the mixture of the Latin of the Romans and the Germanic languages of the barbarian conquerors.

In Australia creole, written 'Kriol', developed in areas where people speaking many different languages were together in the one community. It is now spoken widely in the Cape York peninsular area of Queensland, the Roper and Daly River areas of the NT and the Kimberley area of Western Australia. It is spreading to other areas because it is an Aboriginal language that reflects the Aboriginal way of life and world view better than English does. It is moving into Lajamanu because of the community's connections with the Katherine region, and Alekarenge because there are four Aboriginal languages spoken there. It is not used at Yuendumu or the other Southern Warlpiri communities yet.

## Aboriginal English

Apart from Pidgin English and Kriol almost all Aboriginal people use a distinctive Aboriginal form of English. It is very widespread and varies from region to region. It is influenced by the local Aboriginal languages. It is understood by other speakers of English though it may sound strange. Kriol must be learned like a foreign language although English speakers find it much easier to learn than traditional Aboriginal languages. Some words used in Aboriginal English are very old and have dropped out of mainstream language. The word 'bogey' (used in the Top End for 'swim', 'wash', 'shower') is from the language spoken around Sydney Harbour and then taken into convict slang. There is a convict-built swimming pool at Newcastle called the Bogey Hole. 'Gammon' is a very common word used to mean 'pretence', 'artificial', 'deceptive', 'dishonest'. It is an older form of 'game', as in Back Gammon, that has dropped out of Standard English. Now these expressions are becoming common in the speech of Territorians generally. They came from other Aboriginal languages and old forms of English slang and are now being passed back from Aboriginal English into the language of white adolescents in the towns of the Northern Territory.



Family life - Yuendumu

Aboriginal English also reflects the Aboriginal worldview. For example, in Aboriginal culture direct questions are discouraged. The polite Aboriginal approach to acquiring new information is to make a vague statement expecting somebody else to supply more detail rather than to ask a question directly. In Warlpiri the word *ngana* means both 'who' and 'somebody'. So the sentence '*Ngana ka yanirni, mayi?*' can be translated as both 'Who is coming?' or 'Somebody is coming'. If somebody present knows the identity of the person coming then it is assumed that person will supply that information and answer the question. If nobody knows the identity of the one coming then the response may be, '*Karrija, ngana mayi ka yanirni?*' Which again can be translated in two ways as, 'I don't know, who is coming?', or 'Is somebody coming?'<sup>iii</sup> This polite vagueness is common in Aboriginal English as well. The words 'somebody' and 'who' are often used interchangeably, as are 'something' and 'what', 'where' and 'somewhere'. Vague expressions 'thing', 'what's his name', 'maybe', 'might be' and so on are also very

common. So we can get some sentences that sound very odd to speakers of standard English, for example:

'Where's Bob?'

'Oh, he must be somewhere'.

What sounds odd and vague to standard English speakers is common sense politeness to speakers of Aboriginal English. They are trying to avoid, what to them, is the impoliteness of direct questions and assertiveness.

### **The Influence of Aboriginal languages**

In all these cases, Pidgin, Kriol and Aboriginal English, the influence of English is obvious on vocabulary. Although many of the words come from English originally they are often used with different meanings. For example 'kill' means 'attack' or 'hit'. English 'kill' would translate as 'kill im properly'. The influence of traditional Aboriginal languages can be found as well, especially on grammar.

We went to Katherine.

She's fishing

That's John's car

Can I go home?

Have you got any ripe mangoes?

Mepala bin go Katherine.

Im fishing.

Dat John for car.

I can go home?

You got em any cook mango?

The language situation in Northern Territory is complex. Aboriginal people use a wide range of language resources to communicate. Many can switch from a traditional language, to Kriol, to Aboriginal English and over to Standard English in one conversation. That takes a great deal of skill. English speakers need to understand that this variety exists and that it should be respected if effective communication is going to take place.

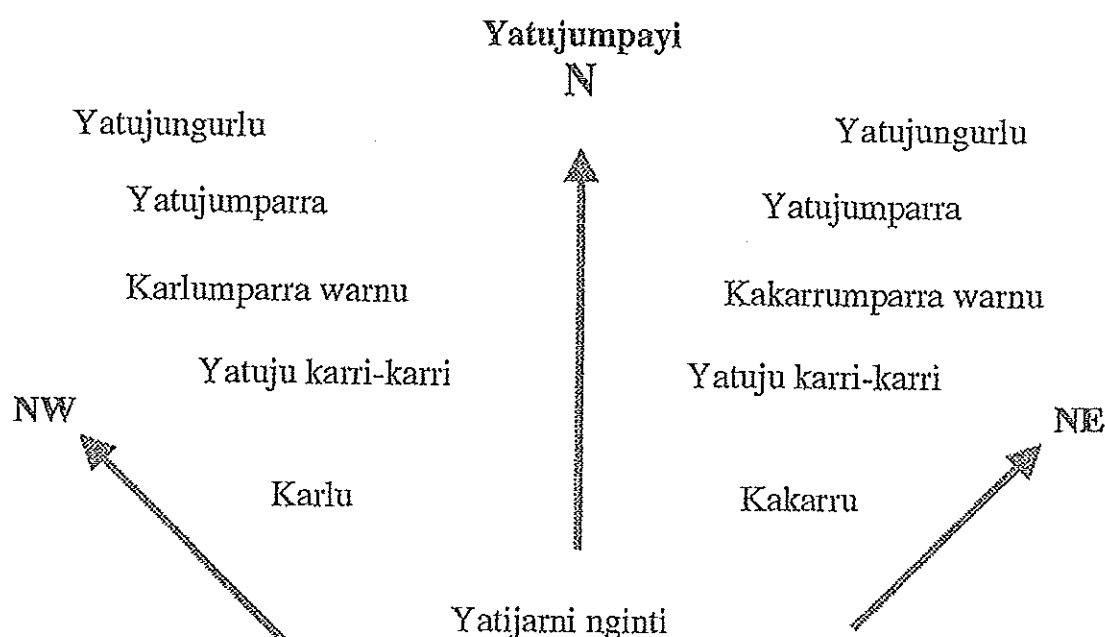
### **Communicating Without Words**

A lot of communicating goes on without words. We give away information about our feelings and inner thoughts through facial expressions, size of the pupils of the eyes, variations in skin tones and movements of the body. A lot of this is done unconsciously. When we are attracted to somebody our pupils enlarge (bedroom eyes), then grow smaller if we feel hostile towards somebody (snake eyes).

Our skin flushes red with embarrassment and goes white with fear - that is if we are whitefellas. Anger and aggression makes our muscles tense. Staring can indicate fascination or aggression (What are you looking at, mate?). Aboriginal people are much more used to reading these signals than the average whitefella. They pick up on emotional states very quickly. You need to keep this in mind if your words don't reflect your true thoughts in conversation with them.

When Aboriginal women were in mourning at the death of their husbands they were not allowed to speak out loud for an extended period. When men were hunting game keeping silent was essential. As a result Aboriginal people use a very elaborate signing system (rdaka-rdaka in Warlpiri). It is still used frequently, especially by women, to communicate across a distance and with people who are hard of hearing or under speech taboo. It is also often used to accompany ordinary conversation, to reinforce what is said or to save the voice, or just for the drama of it. Learning and using some of the more common signs will make Aboriginal people more relaxed with you. They appreciate whitefellas making a little extra effort to communicate their way.

### Direction and Location -- Precision without numbers



Warlpiri had no numbers but it is capable of impressive precision in relation to direction and location. *Yatiji* or *Yatuju* mean North. *Yatijarra* means "in a Northerly direction". *Yatujumpayi* is "Far North". *Yatijirni nginti* is "to the North close by". The other terms define gradations of distance between those points. Similar terms are used to label portions of space along all the other directional axes as well. Warlpiri children are taught the language of direction and location very early in their lives as English speaking children are taught to count. The acquisition of this knowledge is regarded as a kind of intelligence test.

What we call the compass points in English are used to indicate all direction and location, even very close up and within buildings and vehicles etc. Sometimes Warlpiri speakers sound clumsy when they try to be as precise in English as they can in their own language. An expressions like 'little bit long way' is an example. It wouldn't sound silly when translated into Warlpiri.

[illegible]

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- <sup>i</sup> David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, CUP, 1987, p 334.  
<sup>ii</sup> David Crystal, 1987, p 336.  
<sup>iii</sup> Colin Yallop, *The Structure of Australian Aboriginal Languages*, in M. Walsh & C. Yallop, *Language and Culture in Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1993, pp 23-26.



# ***Politeness and Communication***

## **Background**

It helps to understand something of the rules of politeness of other people's cultures if you want to communicate effectively. In the workplace we are expected to show politeness to our colleagues and our clients. To a large degree effective communication depends on mutual respect. Politeness is about showing respect and acceptance. Most people want to be polite and don't go out of their way to upset and anger others. In the workplace it is essential that workers and supervisors have enough respect each other to get the job done. Workers in all kinds of service industries are expected to offer services to their clients in a positive, non-threatening, non-offensive manner.

The problem is that different cultures have very different ways of showing respect, of being polite and well mannered, of establishing and maintaining social relationships. Aboriginal people as a rule are very concerned about politeness, about being relaxed and making you feeling relaxed, about avoiding giving offence and being offended. Unfortunately some of their rules of politeness are very different from the Anglo-Celtic mainstream, some the very opposite, as can be seen from the following chart following this section. This causes a lot of misunderstandings. Misunderstandings can cause anger and confusion resulting in breakdowns in communication and therefore in cooperation and productivity.

The following comments are meant as general guidelines only. Hopefully they will give you some insights into why Aboriginal people seem to behave so oddly on occasions and why it can be difficult to communicate when you need to. It is important to remember that all human groups are made up of individuals. Individuals behave in individual ways. The degree to which Aboriginal people know and understand Whitefella behaviour and values and choose to cooperate and the extent of their knowledge of English will vary. However, they will be following the rules their culture has set for them to some degree. Most of the following comments relate to other Aboriginal groups as well as traditional people from Central Australia.

## **Mutual respect.**

Respect should of course be mutual. You will relate well to Aboriginal people, as with human beings generally, if you 'know who you are', are comfortable in your own social world and expect others to respect your own culture. Generally older Aboriginal people who are happy with their position in the universe recognise this in others and respect it. Aboriginal people generally are very tolerant and forgiving. They understand that Whitefellas do things differently. When in doubt 'be yourself'. Always act with confidence, dignity and in a relaxed and friendly manner and expect to be respected.

## **Names**

Given names are not used as freely as in Whitefella culture. Aboriginal people usually address each other and refer to others by using kin terms (the equivalent of 'father', 'uncle', 'grandmother', 'sister', etc) or skin names. This is the most polite way to do it. Using given names is OK though. Aboriginal people usually have a given Aboriginal name but this is rarely used with Whitefellas. They also have an English given name, often pronounced in an Aboriginal way. They also have an English surname. For desert people these are a recent acquisition. And of course everybody has a skin name, the most commonly used of the lot. Aboriginal people often change their English names, both given and surnames, but the skin name never changes.

## **Kumanjayi**

After a death the name of the deceased, and other words that sound like it are not used. The word 'Kumanjayi' (this is the Warlpiri spelling, the same pronunciation but different spelling in Arrernte and Kunmanara in some Western Desert languages) replaces the name as a term of reference and address. Some people change their English names rather than be called 'Kumanjayi' for years. The skin name is not affected. The practice avoids reminding bereaved relatives of their loss and rekindling their grief. It is still a very strong taboo and to deliberately use the name of a deceased person is a gross offence. The deceased is never referred to as 'Kumanjayi'. They can be referred to by their kin relation to others, eg 'So and so's father'.

Photos or other images of a dead person should not be seen by relatives. Sometimes grieving families will ask that they be destroyed. They should at least be removed from public view. Many families now don't mind if they are put away so that later, usually several years later, they can be viewed again and be kept as keepsakes. This is a very sensitive area though and you should not take the initiative but allow the family of the deceased to decide when this may be appropriate. Even years after a death the sight of such a photograph can cause great distress.

Sometimes it is very difficult to find out about a death so that you can avoid offending the bereaved. Aboriginal languages are set up to cope with the avoidance of names and there are special ways of getting this information around but English doesn't cope as well. If you are genuinely concerned Aboriginal people are very understanding and may whisper the information to you or use a code that avoids the tabooed words. Be patient and try to be observant without asking too many questions and it usually works out OK.

## Relationships between men and women

In Aboriginal people society there is more division between the activities of men and women. Men most often interact socially with men, and women with women. It is best not to touch a person of the opposite sex you do not know well in public, except formally, as when expressing condolence by shaking hands. Working alone in private with just one person of the opposite sex is not a good idea. Many a young married person has left a job because of the jealousy of a spouse though there may have been no intentional flirting or suggestive behaviour on the part of the Whitefella colleagues - just misinterpretation.

Men and women do not usually show affection for each other in public but physical touching and signs of affection between people of the same sex is OK. Handholding, hand on shoulder etc, is very common between close friends and relatives of the same sex. It can cause embarrassment to Whitefellas not used to it. It is reasonable to explain that the affection is appreciated but the way it is being expressed may be a problem in your culture.

## Eye contact

Respect as well as embarrassment is expressed by averting the eyes in many of the world's cultures. In English we call somebody who won't look us in the eyes 'shifty eyed' which means that he can't be trusted, he has something to hide and may be up to no good. In Warlpiri the term for a person who uses too much eye contact is *milpanyangu* or 'eye looker/starer'. There are similar words in other languages. In Aboriginal culture that implies envy, lust, bad motives and that person can't be trusted. Aboriginal people feel very uncomfortable when they are being stared at. The expression 'look at me when I'm talking to you' that English speaking teachers are fond of is repulsive to Aboriginal people. The use of eye contact often reflects status. Older people who feel that they are of equal status will use more eye contact with Whitefella but still less than English speakers expect.

Human beings show emotional attraction or sexual interest in members of the opposite sex by eye contact. The dilation of the pupils is an unconscious signal between lovers as is the discreet smile just before the aversion of the eyes. Aboriginal people send such signals as well but much more economically and subtly than Whitefellas. The normal Whitefella use of eye contact can very easily be misinterpreted by a member of the opposite sex with embarrassing results.

## Obscenity

Sex and other bodily functions are very private matters for Aboriginal people as they are in all cultures. Bawdy jokes and humour are fine between people of the right kin relationship but never in relation to other kin groups present or within hearing. What is

acceptable when said to a classified sister-in-law or brother-in-law may be grossly offensive in the company of a classified mother or daughter. Traditional stories are often full of sex, violence and bodily functions (as are Old Testament Bible stories) but this is a very special context and the telling of such stories is bound up with rules and rituals. It is safest not to broach the subjects at all in mixed company and cautiously, if at all, in same sex company. Be guided by your companions if you are concerned.

## Avoidance

Extreme respect, as between a man and his mother-in-law, is shown by avoidance. A man cannot talk directly to, look directly at or even share the same physical space as his mother-in-law. He must communicate with her through others and use a special, polite form of language if she is within his hearing. There are others who are also treated with great respect and should be avoided. Often their name cannot be used by the one required to show respect. These relationships are created by ceremony and do not apply to Whitefellas. However if you are given a skin name then it is very bad form and impolite to try to cultivate a relaxed, joking relationship with those people classified as your parents-in-laws, your parents and so on. More deference and formality should be shown them than those classified as your siblings, cousins, grandparents and children.

It is very important that Aboriginal people who are required by their culture to avoid each other are not expected to work together. It will simply not work. It would result in acute distress and probably in one or both walking off the job.

## Privacy

Aboriginal camps are structured. Where a group places itself in relation to the camps of others will depend on kin relations between the groups. A living area without walls still has defined spaces. People's living areas should be respected. If you need to approach a camp or a house you should make sure that you can be seen or call out to attract attention before you reach the living area. You will be invited in or more likely someone will come out to meet you and find out why you have come and to assist you. It is polite to call out the name of the person you want to see and you will be told where they are or most likely to be. Within the family though there is very little privacy. The lives of members of the group are open to the group.

What is called gossip in English is the favourite past time of many. They are usually very careful not to offend and not to let the one being talked about know that they are the subject of gossip. "You've been talking about me", can be fighting words. People are also careful to restrict information, if possible, so that it doesn't reach the ones who would need to respond with violence if they had that information, a spouse who is being cheated on for example. If accepted into a group or having regular visitors coming around Whitefellas may have to explain their need for privacy and define the space they want to keep to themselves.

## Dress

Some Whitefellas think that Aboriginal people aren't offended by nudity because not long ago they did not wear clothes. In fact both men and women have very strong feelings about the appropriateness of dress. The upper body is not so much a problem. Women are quite happy to breast feed in public and older women will sometimes dance with the breasts exposed. Younger women are tending to adopt Whitefella practice in that regard however. Trousers, particularly shorts, are not as commonly worn by Aboriginal women as they are by Whitefellas. Swimming is usually done fully clothed. Men may be much more coy about nudity in front of other men than Whitefellas generally are. Desert men usually wear long trousers except when playing sport. When a person feels offended and angry enough to engage in mortal combat they will sometimes remove their clothes as a sign of their anger and willingness to fight. If you see that happen it would be wise to leave the area.

## Shame - Kurnta

The rules of behaviour in Aboriginal people society are based on 'shame' rather than 'guilt'. In Warlpiri and Western Desert languages the word is *kurnta*. If you hear the word *kurntangka* it means that the person using it has been 'shamed'. Cultural rules of behaviour are very powerful. Warlpiri use the expression *miyalu maju* 'bad belly' when they are affected by shame or worry. Feeling that you've broken the rules or that somebody you feel responsible for has done so turns your belly over and can literally make you feel sick. If Aboriginal people are asked to do something that they can't do or don't want to do they may agree to it anyway because they feel too 'shamed' to say 'no'. Aboriginal people may agree to go out hunting but then not turn up and not feel guilty. Whitefellas may feel no shame about saying 'no' if they don't want to go but would feel guilty if they have agreed to go and then don't make it. This fundamental difference causes a great many problems in cross-cultural relationships especially in the workplace.

## Conflict

Aboriginal communities are often traumatised. The statistics on rates of serious illness and untimely death on Aboriginal communities translate into misery at the human level. Moodiness or sulkiness in the workplace may have little to do with relationships on the job but may have to do with worry about family back home. It is important but difficult to be aware of such circumstances that may be bothering a co-worker. The most effective way is to find out from other Aboriginal people but sensitively without too much direct questioning. Direct questioning of the one affected can make the situation much worse.

The avoidance of conflict is an important principle in Aboriginal people society. Small scale societies can't afford a lot of conflict. If people are angry or moody they may withdraw from the group rather than express that emotion openly. Direct aggression is a very serious business and can result in violence so it is avoided as much as possible. Conflict is very common in the work place and is considered positive if it is managed and positively channelled. If Aboriginal workers need to be told that they are doing the wrong thing a direct attack on the individual is the most unproductive way of handling it.

When Aboriginal people are unhappy about the behaviour of others they may make statements to the group generally or appear to be addressing the sky or the whole world. The person doing the wrong thing will get the message without a loss of face, without suffering shame. A statement like "We really need to get the job done on time" will be more effective than "You're always goofing off and wasting time". Demonstrating a particular technique or required practice, perhaps several times, is better than verbally instructing especially if you are feeling cranky.

Anger or frustration is held in to avoid conflict. The problem is that if it builds up a head of steam that can't be held in the result may be explosive. Cultures with an emphasis on strict codes of conduct also have the tradition of 'running amok', of the rare but sudden and explosive expression of powerful emotions. This is one of the reasons that alcohol causes havoc in such cultures. It encourages the explosion rather than the suppression of emotions. The way to avoid this is to get to know your colleagues, get information and support from the group and take advice from concerned relatives and friends.

## Alcohol

Apart from its recreational use and the temporary stress relieving effects of alcohol many Aboriginal people will drink to suppress *kurnta* or shame. Getting drunk gives the excuse to 'be yourself' to 'say what you really think' and get away with it. The ancient Romans had a saying 'In vino veritas' - 'There's truth in wine'. The same thing goes for Aboriginal people. The situation is made disastrous by the devastating consequences of chronic alcohol abuse on the health of drinkers and on the well being of communities generally. The majority of Aboriginal people do not drink at all and are deeply disturbed by the impact of drinking on their families. Most are at a loss to know what to do about it. All of the following conspires against the non-drinkers in their struggle to control its effects:

- the levels of trauma in communities,
- the emphasis on individual autonomy,
- deeply ingrained loyalty to kin relations and an inability to say 'no' to those relations,
- the desperate search for excuses for the intolerable behaviour of their loved ones,
- lack of confidence in dealing with the world of the Whitefella,
- the insistence of Whitefellas on the citizen's inalienable right to constant access to that drug and its glamorisation through advertising.

In a small scale society conflicts should be played out in public. In any conflict between individuals each of the families concerned needs to be properly represented to play out their sanctioned roles in terms of kin relation to the protagonists and their relative social status. Such conflicts are highly choreographed with a lot of dramatic threats and fierce gestures, and highly structured ritual control over escalation and the degree of actual violence allowed.

That is why drunk people fight loudly and publicly in the streets of Alice Springs. Unfortunately, when alcohol is present those drinking can not be relied upon to apply the rules. The result is often uncontrolled escalation and a much higher level of violence inflicted. Too often this means death and serious injury and a spiral of payback and continuing violence back in home communities. This then leads to the overtaxing of the police and ambulance services, hospitals and Aboriginal service organisations. It also causes an unacceptable affront to tourists law abiding citizens of the town, of all cultural backgrounds. It is intolerable in terms of the rules of both cultures.

Drunks are most violent with other drunks, usually spouses or other close family members, or those with whom their families are in conflict. Some will get drunk to get up the courage to settle old scores. Aboriginal people will react quickly to protect others from the violence of drunks if they believe that they have the duty to in respect to their relationship to the drunk or to the one threatened. If the priority is to avoid violence then drunks should be dealt with patiently and non-threateningly. Close kin can be asked to assist in dealing with them. A drunken person may still respond to requests for calm from family members with the right status and personal relationship. All of the comments made above in relation to politeness and the avoidance of conflict apply with a great deal more delicacy to drunks. They are more touchy but usually do not use violence randomly. Don't give them a reason for aggression if you can avoid it.

The emotion that predominates with intoxicated people, especially young males, is self pity. Expressing sympathy may win you a friend for life. It may also lead to a very long and boring monologue on why this person's problems are worse than anybody else's in the world. Intoxicated conversation is repetitious and more often maudlin than aggressive. You can extricate yourself but try to be polite, avoid confrontation and keep smiling pleasantly.



## SOME RULES OF COMMUNICATION

### ANGLO-CELTIC

- 1 Business relationships are based on impersonal professionalism.
- 2 Friendship is highly valued.
- 3 Talk is concerned with passing on information and getting things done, instructing as well as socialising.
- 4 Privacy is maintained by physical separation.
- 5 Silence can indicate unfriendliness or resentment.
- 6 Extended breaks during conversations may cause discomfort and concern.
- 7 Greetings are mandatory and often be boisterous.

### ABORIGINAL

- 1 All social relationships are based on kinship.
- 2 The idea of 'unrelated friend' is alien. Kinship is the basis of friendship.
- 3 Almost all talk is about maintaining harmony and group solidarity.
- 4 Privacy is maintained by the use of language and the rules of personal interaction.
- 5 An unwillingness to talk is acceptable and everyone's right.
- 6 Long breaks in conversation are acceptable and may mean simply taking time to think.
- 7 Greetings are unnecessary and usually restrained. A period of 'ignoring' may be the polite way to greet.



## ANGLO-CELTIC

8 Handshaking is used to greet and is usually firm.

9 Eavesdropping on others conversation without formal introduction is impolite.

10 Extended eye contact is expected in conversation. Avoidance of eye contact is 'shifty-eyed, untrustworthy behaviour.

11 Direct questions are normal in conversations.

12 It is polite to ask a person directly for information about themselves.

13 Negative and either/or questions are common.

## ABORIGINAL

8 Handshaking is used to show condolence after a death and is usually very restrained.

9 Listening to others' conversation to determine if you should join in is normal and polite.

10 Extended eye contact is 'staring' and untrustworthy behaviour. Avoiding eye contact is respectful.

11 Direct questions are rude and cause embarrassment, even distress.

12 It is polite and normal to ask a relative for information in relation to another in their presence.

13 Negative and either/or questions cause confusion.

## ANGLO-CELTIC

- 14 Truthful answers are expected.
- 15 A direct concise response is preferred.
- 16 Opinions are asked directly.
- 17 Assertiveness is encouraged. Circumspect questions are viewed suspiciously
- 18 Requests are made directly and the one asked is expected to give a straightforward reply.
- 19 'Please' and 'thank you' are essential polite terms when requesting and receiving.
- 20 Asking is not always obligatory. Sometimes there is an invitation to 'just help yourself'.

## ABORIGINAL

- 14 It is more important to please than to tell the truth.
- 15 A round about response is more polite and sometimes an attempt at greater precision.
- 16 Statements are made allowing an opinion to be given.
- 17 Assertiveness is discouraged. Circumspection is polite.
- 18 Requests are indirect giving the one asked a chance to avoid refusal. No response is the same as refusal.
- 19 There are no equivalents of 'please' and 'thank you'. Asking is a right and giving an obligation.
- 20 An 'owner' must always be asked though a request is rarely denied.

### ANGLO-CELTIC

- 21 A joke is told once and the effect is lost if it has to be repeated
- 22 Social transactions are backed up by guilt.
- 23 Binding decisions are made at meetings.
- 24 Decisions should be made by the majority.
- 25 Leave taking can be lengthy and public.
- 25 Names of the deceased can be used respectfully in polite conversation.

### ABORIGINAL

- 21 A joke is repeated as often as it gets a laugh. Sometimes many times.
- 22 Social transactions are backed up by shame.
- 23 Social bonds are strengthened at meetings. Decisions may not be binding.
- 24 Decisions should be made by consensus after everybody who has a right to speak has thought about the issue and had their say.
- 25 Leave taking is brief and may be furtive.
- 25 Using the name of a recently deceased person, especially to surviving relatives, is deeply offensive. Kumanjayi is used as a substitute for the name.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



## A Short Reading List.

There are many good books on Aboriginal culture and history and many not so good. We have found the following books worth reading and useful for our work. This list is far from exhaustive:

- Napangardi, G & Long, J N, Vaarzon-Morel, P (ed), *Warlpiri Women's Voices: Our Lives, Our History*, IAD Press, 1995
- Victoria Burbank, *Fighting Women, Anger and Aggression in Aboriginal Australia* UCLA Press, 1994.
- M. Charlesworth, H. Morphy, D. Bell & K Maddock eds. *Religion in Aboriginal Australia: An Anthology* Univ. of Qld. Press, 1992.
- TGH Strehlow, *Central Australian Religion: Personal Totemism in a Polytemic Community*, Aust. Assoc. for the study of Religion, 1993.
- *Warlukurlangu Artists, Kuruwarri: Yuendumu Doors*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra 1987.
- Diane Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming*, Allen & Unwin, 1983.
- Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, James Cook Univ. 1981.
- Henry Reynolds, *Frontier*, Allen & Unwin, 1987.
- Geoffrey Blainey, *Triumph of the Nomads: A History of Ancient Australia*, Sun, 1978.
- Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians since 1788*. New Holland, 1998.
- Penny Rockman Napaljarri and Lee Cataldi, *Warlpiri Dreamings and Histories, Yimikirli: Newly Recorded Stories from the Aboriginal Elders of Central Australia*, Harper Collins, 1994.
- Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World*, Duke University Press, 1995.
- Peter and Jay Read, *Long Time, Olden Time: Aboriginal Accounts of Northern Territory History*, Institute for Aboriginal Development, 1991.
- Fred Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place, and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*, UCLA Press, 1991.
- Barry J Blake, *Australian Aboriginal Languages: A General Introduction*, Angus & Robertson, 1984.
- Frank Brennan, *One Land, One Nation: Mabo - Towards 2000*, QUP, 1995.
- Gillian Cowlishaw, *Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas: A study of racial power and intimacy in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, 1999.
- Michael Walsh & Colin Yallop, *Language & Culture in Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1993.
- Richard Trudgen, *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die*, ARDS, 2001.
- D Hartman & J Henderson (eds), *Aboriginal Languages in Education*, IAD Press, 1994.

Dave & Bess Price.

