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## **Reconfiguring Relational Personhood among Lander Warlpiri**

Petronella Vaarzon-Morel

### **Introduction**

In recent years many Indigenous communities in central Australia have undergone major changes that are affecting the nature of people's lives and social relations. The tensions and disruptions arising from this situation illuminate people's understandings of personhood. From an analytic perspective, while Aboriginal groups in different regions do have notions of personhood that they share in common, it is clear that cultural and historical differences between groups have shaped, and continue to shape, the ways in which personhood is apprehended and configured. Moreover, even within the same community, the broad changes that affect everyone are intensified by radical differences, often generational, between people's life experiences, and this contributes to variations in the way personhood is experienced and conceptualized.

To illustrate with a specific case, this chapter draws on long-term fieldwork with Lander Warlpiri/Anmatyerre from Willowra in central Australia and compares understandings of relatedness among persons during the 1970s era with those of the contemporary period. I argue that in the Lander region factors such as changes in ceremonial and marriage practices that linked people and countries, different embodied experiences of personhood in time and place, and shifting notions of "property" are altering how members of the younger generations now perceive and act upon relatedness. Focusing on the significance the *kirda/kurdungurlu* relationship has had for earlier notions of Warlpiri personhood, I indicate how the relational mode members of the older generation subscribe to is being reconfigured.

My analysis is stimulated in part by Myers' (1986a) observations on differences of relatedness between Pintupi and Warlpiri, among others. Observing that relatedness as a value is widespread in Aboriginal Australia, Myers points out that "what differs is the field to which this value may apply and the way in which it can be employed; that is, the way this value is situated in a larger structure" (Myers 1986a, 294). In my view, with some notable exceptions (including Myers 1986a; Merlan 1998; Austin-Broos 2009; Peterson 1993, 2013; Macdonald 2013), discussions of Aboriginal personhood pay insufficient attention to the varied ways in which relatedness is constituted in larger structures (for example, social, cosmological, ritual and historical structures) across Australia, with the result that generalized statements serve to elide local differences and experiences of personhood.

Recently, Peterson (2013) and Macdonald (2013) have analysed the role of autonomy and demand sharing in the performance of Aboriginal relatedness and their significance for personhood: Peterson (2013) in relation to Warlpiri, and Macdonald in relation to Wiradjuri in Eastern Australia. Noting similarities between Wiradjuri and Mardu Western Desert Aborigines in "a desire for a social autonomy grounded in the value both place on personal autonomy," Macdonald (2013, 23:399) adopts a historicized perspective to consider the increasing constraints placed on the sociality of Wiradjuri people as they

shift from participating in a dual economy, which operated under a regime of pastoralism, to a bureaucratized welfare economy. My focus in the present case is not on demand sharing but on other related modes of exchange and/or reciprocal relations that are pertinent to the performance of Warlpiri relatedness and notions of personhood. Apposite to my discussion, Merlan focuses on the distinction between demand sharing and reciprocity. She observes that with the former “there is a presumption of familiarity and relatively easy mutual access,” whereas with the latter:

there is presumption of distance or lack of familiarity in the context of an overriding sense of obligation felt to be grounded on the one hand in the gift, promise or possibility of a spouse, and on the other in the ideally frequent receipt of return attentions and gifts (Merlan 1997, 113–114).

Up until the past decade or so, reciprocity, like demand sharing and autonomy, was central to Lander Warlpiri sociality and the “moral-political community” (Keen 2006). A major concern of this paper is how changes in the value and emphases accorded to reciprocal relations are influencing people’s understandings of personhood and the multifaceted ways they experience it. In particular, I am interested in the effects of change and transformation on “forms” or cultural frameworks (Myers 1986a) that hitherto have structured Warlpiri relationality.

The paper is divided into four parts. In the first part I provide a brief background on Willowra and the Lander Warlpiri/Anmatyerr people from the region who are the subjects of my discussion. In doing so I note some major historical events that occurred during the early period of settler colonisation which influenced the formation of Willowra community and people’s subsequent struggle for social and cultural autonomy. I also note how people conceptualized processes of change and continuity. In the second part of the paper, I draw on a Dreaming narrative to explore the understandings of personhood that prevailed at Willowra in the 1970s era and continue to do so among older people. I consider how personhood was predicated on and constituted by a form of relationality in which the reciprocal relationship between traditional owner and manager (*kirda* and *kurdungurlu*) was central. In doing so I contrast the Lander Warlpiri situation with that of the Pintupi as described by Myers (1986). In the third section of the paper I reflect upon shifting emphases in social relations that are impacting the way Warlpiri apprehend and experience personhood today, and I note older people’s responses to the situation.

### **Historical Background**

Situated on the banks of the Lander River within Warlpiri country, Willowra is approximately 350 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs. Most long-term residents of Willowra speak, and identify as, Warlpiri, and/or Warlpiri/Anmatyerr. While having kin at other places, senior people nevertheless differentiate the community of Willowra from the predominantly Warlpiri settlements of Yuendumu, Lajamanu and Alekarengge. This difference is grounded in the historical formation of Willowra community on a cattle station encompassing Warlpiri and Anmatyerr country, in contrast to the settlements mentioned earlier, which were established by government outside Warlpiri country, and on which distinctive cultural groups were co-resident. At these settlements Aboriginal

people were subjected to the rules, practices and modes of living introduced during the assimilation era. In comparison, Willowra people were able to maintain a relatively autonomous existence. In what follows I briefly note some major historical events that occurred during the early period of settler colonisation of Willowra which influenced the formation and ethos of the community and senior people's ongoing struggles to retain social and cultural autonomy.

#### *Cattle Station Time.*

European colonisation of Lander Warlpiri/Anmatyerr country occurred in the 1920s, when settlers took up the country to graze cattle. This period was traumatic for local people, with many killed or forced to flee from their country during the 1928 event that has become known as the Coniston Massacre (see Vaarzon-Morel 1993; Batty and Jupurrula Kelly 2012). Those people who remained on their land in the Willowra region continued to live in fear of white settlers<sup>1</sup> until the late 1940s, when the Parkinson family purchased Willowra pastoral lease and proceeded to establish better relations with the locals. In many ways, the relationship that developed resembled the co-dependency that characterized Aboriginal-settler relations on East Kimberley stations as described by Redmond and Skyring (2010). Paid for their labor in rations, Aboriginal men at Willowra worked side by side with the Parkinsons, gaining skills in stock work, fencing and carpentry, largely building the station infrastructure. Women also contributed to the development of the station by carrying out domestic work in and around the station homestead and, in some cases, doing stock work (see Vaarzon-Morel 1995).

The Parkinson family held the station lease for two decades and it passed from father to son. Then, in the late 1960s, during a period of prolonged drought, Parkinson decided to sell the station. Influenced by local people and recognising the debt he owed to the Warlpiri owners of the land who had largely built the station, Parkinson suggested that the government buy the lease on behalf of the local people. Although the government initially rejected the idea, in 1973 the Australian Government purchased the property on behalf of the local resident Warlpiri population. As a result of successful land claims in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Willowra and the neighboring station, Mt Barkly, and Crown land to the north and east of Willowra became Aboriginal freehold land under the 1976 Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act.

For the Willowra community, the imperative for obtaining Willowra station was to retain the social and cultural autonomy that life on the cattle station afforded them and not to become "settlement people". It is important to note here the lengthy and intensive campaign local Warlpiri ran to obtain Willowra before the "self-determination" policy came into effect in central Australia. In particular, S. Martin Jampijinpa<sup>2</sup> played a major role in lobbying government bureaucrats and politicians throughout the process. Jampijinpa was kurdungurlu for Wirliyajarrayi, the country on which the Willowra homestead was located, and acted as something of an intercultural "go-between". Although this gave him a measure of influence that a man of his young age (early thirties) would not normally have enjoyed in Warlpiri society, he always deferred to the senior *kirda* of Willowra in cultural matters.<sup>3</sup> As indicated, the reciprocal relationship of *kirda*

and *kurdungurlu* was fundamental to the “moral-political community” (Keen 2006) of Willowra at that time.

Significantly, the combined effects of the Coniston Massacre and pastoralism served to strengthen existing alliances and ties among Lander groups and helped shape the ethos of Willowra community in the twentieth century. As Meggitt (1962, 25) observed, a legacy of the Coniston Massacre was the deep distrust of Europeans on the part of older men in particular “who had previously tried to dissuade their juniors from becoming entangled with white men”. Furthermore, in addition to shoring up the men’s authority, the shootings led to the conscious “adherence of many Warlpiri to the traditional rules and values” (Meggitt 1962, 25). This continued to be the case at Willowra during the 1950s to 1970s, when the Parkinson owners of the pastoral lease maintained a policy of non-intervention in the life of the Aboriginal community. As a result, conservative aspects of the Law, such as the promised marriage system, which cemented longstanding alliances between patrilineal groups from nearby countries, as well as gerontocracy and polygamy, endured far longer at Willowra than at Yuendumu and other settlements.<sup>4</sup> Against this background, the struggle for local autonomy can be seen to be grounded in the need to maintain the intertwined social relations, practices and moral code deemed fundamental to the reproduction of persons and the community.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, despite the apparent conservatism of Willowra elders in the post 1970s era, change and transformation (see Munn 1970) were a constant in the Warlpiri life-world. This raises questions of how senior people conceptualize change and transformation in relation to enduring forms of cultural life and their social “project” (Eickelkamp 2013)—that is, what it means to be Warlpiri in terms of the production and reproduction of persons, society and morality.<sup>6</sup> It is to these issues that I now briefly turn.

#### *Change and Continuity in the Warlpiri Social “Project.”*

Warlpiri take it as a given that change inevitably happens as people progress through the lifecycle, and social relations transform as a result of marriage, death and shifts in political alliances. Yet, as the following quote from an extensive life narrative by R. Napaljarri indicates, the cultural framework for the patterning of the reproduction of persons, with its implications for growth and death, was felt to endure.

After being young, a man becomes boss for the country, and then he will become really old and die. And another young fellow will come up and he will continue all the way. He will become middle-aged and then an old man, his hair will start falling down, and he will stay in one place until he becomes really old and doesn’t understand. He will become a special Dreaming person, *Jukurrpawiyi*. And when he is old, poor thing, and on top, taking his grandfather’s place, he will pass away—after his father. ...His children will take it over and hold it until they too become old. Then the son gathers up his children and, poor things, they become dead like him. And it is the same today, the same Law. Coming into existence, growing up, growing up, walking along, going along like this...it keeps on going like this, perpetually. (R. Napaljarri pers. comm.1986)

Napaljarri's view of the life process is representative of a generation of older women who were born in the bush and lived off the country until adulthood. In their imaginary, inter-generational relatedness is thought of in terms of a process of becoming, which is ontologically grounded in *Jukurrpa* (cf. Eickelkamp 2013). In her longer narrative Napaljarri associates incipient life and old age with stasis and a vertical schema (emerging from *Jukurrpa*/country at birth, returning to *Jukurrpa*/country on death), and an individual's progression through life with horizontal movement, during which the social ties that constitute the individual as a person are created. This trajectory is framed using spatial imagery ("being on top, coming before") that reflects the individual's embodied encounter with the world (Johnson 2007) and a person's assumption of hierarchical responsibilities as they grow older and nurture younger generations (Myers 1986a).

The brief quote from Napaljarri belies the impact of death on those left behind, and the extensive mourning ceremonies and nostalgic pronouncements about loss that inevitably follow. As most anthropologists familiar with Aboriginal communities know, when a senior person passes away it is common to hear the refrain "everybody is dead, no one left now for that story", when in fact the speaker may be a descendant of the deceased person in question and hold extensive *Jukurrpa* knowledge themselves. What is lamented in such statements is the loss of the unique ceremonial signature of the older generation of Law holders; simultaneously witness is given to the fact that the current generation are yet to leave their imprint by transmitting the Law to the younger generation, as happened with those who came before them. Although "sameness" is valued, this does not mean replication. That there is an acceptance that reproduction and continuity involve variation was brought home to me in the 1980s, when Jungarrayi, a senior man, explained that although the previous cohort of senior men "might have done it a bit different" to the way that his generation ran ceremonies, "the Law never changes". Jungarrayi did not see his statements as contradictory: what mattered to him was that people continued to interpret and "follow the Law" in ways that accommodated the cultural framework and social dynamics of Warlpiri life.

Throughout much of the period from the 1970s to late 1990s, outsiders characterized Willowra as a relatively peaceful, cohesive community whose members lived on their own land and strongly adhered to the Law (Wafer and Wafer 1980; Bell and Ditton 1980; Young 1981). The Warlpiri residents of Willowra shared this view and, as I mentioned earlier, strongly articulated their difference as a community from those communities forged on government settlements. Yet Willowra was not some sort of romantic Eden: as with Warlpiri elsewhere (see Meggitt 1962), negative emotions frequently overflowed, relationships could be volatile, and individuals who had longstanding ties of kinship or alliance were often at odds with each other. The fact that embodied selves are permeable means that they are susceptible to causal powers, be they of human or other origin. Importantly, however, Willowra people labored hard to maintain positive social relations. They employed strategies, including ritual challenges, the performance of ceremony and appeals to moral personhood, which drew upon emotion invested in the power of the

Law, kinship and reciprocal relations to deflect aggressive self-assertions and engender feelings of relatedness.

Faced with new opportunities and pressures—for example, increasing mobility, new media and technology—senior people attempted to harness the changes in support of their social and cultural life. At the same time they attempted to contain what they perceived to be the more negative aspects of change (Vaarzon-Morel 2014). Over the past decade, however, profound transformations have occurred in the Willowra community. The older generation active from the 1970s to the turn of the century has passed away and the bulk of the population is under thirty. During this period the Willowra community has fractured dramatically, and the social integration so remarked upon earlier has given way to periods of conflict and violence (Vaarzon-Morel 2014). There are multiplex causes for this situation which I cannot address in the space available; suffice to say that they do not lie within the community alone.

Smith (2012, 23:57) has observed that, because persons are produced in society, “Every society reproduces itself by socialising its young to conduct themselves in accordance with its particular social imaginary significations (Castoriadis 1987), to conform and contribute to their particular imagined community (Anderson 1991)”. What I want to explore briefly now are the understandings the current Willowra elders have concerning the project of socialising the young, as they have inherited them from their own elders. In order to do so I begin the next section with a Dreaming myth narrated by elder Teddy Jupurrula, which he saw as prescient of the present situation at Willowra.

Although I focus on Jupurrula, other senior people in the community share his interpretations. As is well known, it is commonplace for older people to bemoan behaviors of younger generations which deviate from their own,<sup>7</sup> but one does not simply dismiss the views of older people on this basis. What I present here is, then, a perspective particular to older community members, and, for the present exercise, I have not attempted to balance this with relevant data from the young (see, however, Vaarzon-Morel 2014). My aim has been principally to try to understand the strategies used by current elders to engage youth in moral dialogue.

### **Personhood and Relatedness**

Before discussing the myth, Jupurrula lamented that few senior people we both had known were now alive. He said he worried about the future of Willowra. Commenting that young people today do not learn about country the way he experienced it, and that they lack knowledge about *Jukurpa* interrelationships, he attributed the recent conflict in the community to the fact that many of today’s youth do not “recognize” families who in earlier periods were linked together as countrymen through songlines, ceremony and marriage. Reflecting on older families among whom he’d grown up, Jupurrula said, “They used to be like one big family [but] today people are sitting down separate, like white people. Today people are not recognising each other. They are rubbishing *kurdungurlu*” (see also Vaarzon-Morel 2014). The issue of decreasing salience of *kirda/kurdungurlu* among many younger people is something that I also have observed

and to which I return later in this chapter. Here I take up again my conversation with Jupurrula. Following on from his earlier comments, Jupurrula told me about a video he had made in the hope that young locals would watch it on the Internet and reflect upon what it means to be a Warlpiri person.

The video concerns a myth about rock-wallaby ancestors from Nguyu (Black Hill), an important Anmatyerr place associated with the Japaljarri/Jungarrayi patricouple as *kirda*. The place belonged to the FF of two of Jupurrula's wives and he acts in the role of senior *kurdungurlu* for it. In the myth a rock-wallaby boy of the Jungarrayi subsection is forced to wait too long for his brother-in-law to escort him to his initiation. As he waits and waits for his brother-in-law, who continues to ignore his demands for assistance, he becomes angrier and angrier and grows facial hair. Finally, enraged, he decides to set out on his own and travels underground in a westerly direction, emerging at the place Lunkunjunu. Catching sight of his reflection in a rockhole, he sees that he has grown big and hairy—not like a man, however, but a monster.<sup>8</sup> Consumed with anger and seeking revenge, he heads east toward country of people who belong to the same patricouple as his own, devouring people on his way. As he does so, two males from Ngarnka, who are related as cousins of the Jungarrayi and Jupurrula subsections (and hence in a *kirda/kurdungurlu* relationship),<sup>9</sup> see a cloud of dust rising in the distance and wonder, “What can it be?” At night one of the men has a dream and he tells his cousin, “Something is eating all our people and travelling this way”. Deciding to avenge their relatives, they set out. Eventually they find the monster asleep and surround him. As he wakes up, one cousin, who is a powerful healer and sorcerer (*ngangkayi*), sings his boomerang and throws it at the monster. In doing so, he cuts off the monster's left arm, which becomes Ngarnka hill. He then severs the monster's head, which turns into a rock. The remains of the monster's body become the soakage at Ngarnka. The two cousins themselves become transformed into rocks and are today encircled by trees, which are manifestations of the ancestral women who should have danced for the boy during his initiation.<sup>10</sup>

A key message of the myth (one that is widely shared among elders) is that individuals cannot become proper, autonomous persons by themselves: the production of persons is a process involving cultural practices and the correct performance of relations of kinship and affinity between people interlinked through *Jukurra*. The myth also articulates a cultural logic in which an individual's failure to observe his/her obligations to another person is deemed immoral, because it is a refusal of relatedness and a denial of the interdependency deemed essential for the constitution of another's personhood. Such hard-headed turning away is of a different nature to the denial of a request in demand sharing, which Peterson (1993) notes need not always be met. Instead, it is a repudiation of an obligation which is grounded in long-term exchange relationships involving reciprocity between affines (Merlan 1997). As such, it provides a legitimate basis for the wronged person's anger (Myers 1986a). The myth also speaks to the importance of practices which facilitate correct marriage patterns and, ultimately, the ordered reproduction of society, without which immoral, unconstrained sexuality and chaos would result. As is well-known, according to Warlpiri Law a male must be initiated



before he can enter into sexual relations with a woman. Customarily, his marriage to a prescribed partner of the opposite patri- and same generation moiety was arranged during the process of his initiation.

Here I note that the Warlpiri verb “*ngarninja*”, meaning “to eat”, is used to refer obliquely to intercourse. As I interpret the myth, the monster’s consumption of beings in his own patricouple—which can be construed as a form of cannibalism—inversely speaks to the significance of relations between members of opposite patrimoiety and the interdependence of patri- and matriline. As Peterson (1970) has shown with Ngajakula, and as Morton (2011) has elaborated upon in his analysis of *Jardiwanpa* (the Warlpiri Fire Ceremony), structurally these relationships are central to both ceremonies, as is the theme of marriage bestowal, for which initiation ceremonies are a prerequisite. Furthermore, Morton notes that a function of initiation is to “deal with initiates’ transitions from kinship to affinity” (Morton 2011: 14).<sup>11</sup> However, in the myth recounted above, the monster is denied the opportunity to be initiated and is therefore prevented from elaborating “ties of relatedness to others” (Myers 1986a: 228). He thus resorts to a most tabooed sexual relation, that of incest with members of his own patrimoiety.

For Warlpiri, social relations involve moral practices that are integral to understandings of personhood. As Hiatt’s (2007) analysis of the Warlpiri lexicon makes clear, expressions of moral consideration typically concern sexual relations, cannibalism, relations with affines and kin, and the Law. The link that I noted between cannibalism and transgression of the law involving initiation was also noted by Róheim in the 1930s (1932, 13: 72; 1945, 72ff.).<sup>12</sup> According to Róheim, he was “repeatedly told” by the Ngaatjara and Western Arrernte that “if the young men were not subjected to the discipline of the initiation ritual they would become demons (*erintja*), would fly up into the sky, and kill and eat all the old men” (1945: 75).

Taking into account that a person’s individual identity derives in part from their father’s father’s country, with which they share a spiritual essence and for which they are *kirda*, the myth underscores a mode of personhood that is composite—in that it combines substance and code (see Strathern and Stewart 1998), is embodied, and is anchored in socio-spatial relationships between people and country. In the 1970s era at Willowra, place figured prominently in the constitution of social relations. Personhood was forged within a network of landed social relations that was mediated through practices of ritual, marriage and kinship. It was, and among old older Warlpiri still is, understood within the context of a moral community and economy in which an individual’s autonomy and rights as *kirda* ultimately depended upon the recognition of shared responsibilities with others, in particular those who are related as *kurdungurlu*.

Despite the particularities of the Willowra situation mentioned earlier, the significance of the *kirda/kurdungurlu* relationship to Lander notions of personhood resonate powerfully with dimensions of Warlpiri sociality as Peterson (2013) discussed in his recent article on demand sharing, which I now discuss.

### *Demand Sharing, Reciprocal Relations and Personhood*

In his article, Peterson (2013, 23:167) draws attention to the significance of sharing for Warlpiri relational ontology and personhood. Attending to the importance of asymmetrical reciprocity in domains such as men's ritual, gender, domestic life and intercultural relations, he focuses on demand sharing as an instance of asymmetrical relationships and situates it at "the core of the indigenous domestic moral economy". Peterson delineates four key features of the moral economy, including that it is "embedded in a universal system of kin classification that requires a flow of goods and services to create and reproduce social relationships". Importantly, he points out that a fundamental aspect of demand sharing is that it engenders "the constant reaffirmation of recognition" that is so important to "the sense of self in a relational ontological context" (Peterson 2013, 23:172, 173) and to Warlpiri personhood.

Building on Peterson, I argue that the *kirda/kurdungurlu* relationship that prevailed at Willowra until recently involved a form of asymmetrical reciprocity and recognition of relatedness, without which social reproduction and authentic personhood was thought not to be possible. Put simply, the relationship between *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* was integral to the nature of Warlpiri personhood at that time. Let me explain. As has long been noted, the roles of *kirda*—children of the male members of the patriline—and *kurdungurlu*—children of the female owners of the patriline—are complementary and equal in that they involve joint but different responsibilities. At a wider societal level, the *kirda/kurdungurlu* relationship is reciprocal in that the roles can be reversed, as, for example, when people belonging to the patrimoiety associated with the Jardiwampa ceremony act as *kurdungurlu* for the Ngajakula ceremony and vice-versa. Asymmetry in the relationship arises from the fact that a person who is *kirda* for a particular Dreaming shares the spiritual essence of that Dreaming and related country, whereas a person who is *kurdungurlu* for the Dreaming does not. Nevertheless, *kurdungurlu* are related to the Dreaming and country as a result of birth from a female who is *kirda*. This difference between the two engenders different kinds of rights and responsibilities. For example, as the late Ken Hale pointed out during the Willowra land claim, *kirda* cannot approach sacred sites by themselves, handle objects or paint themselves, as it is considered too dangerous: they are dependent upon *kurdungurlu* to do so. Hale observed that if *kirda* performed the role of *kurdungurlu* for themselves<sup>13</sup> "it would be equivalent to singing oneself" (transcript of proceedings, Lander Warlpiri Anmatjirra land claim 1980, 297).

In the 1970s era, not only was the *kirda/kurdungurlu* relationship structured via enduring alliances between people and countries, but it also influenced the structure of those alliances—and as such dialogically constituted Lander sociality and everyday practices. As illustrated by the myth discussed earlier, the reproduction of persons and of society involved recognition not only of ties of relatedness among people connected by the same Dreaming track and same patrimoiety but also ties of relatedness with the opposite patrimoiety.

### *Differing Forms of Relationality among Pintupi and Warlpiri*

In this next section I contrast the Warlpiri situation with that of the Pintupi to provide further support for my argument concerning the significance of the *kirda/kurdungurlu* relationship to Warlpiri personhood. In the 1980s Myers pointed out that among Pintupi “sustaining relatedness is necessary to achieve autonomy” (1986a, 248). In analysing Pintupi ideas about relatedness, Myers discussed “the moral order of *walytja*”, that is, of family. In doing so he noted that relations were not given but were negotiated and that a tension existed “between ‘relatedness’ (being *walytja*)<sup>14</sup> and ‘differentiation’” (as expressed in conflict and violence). This tension, he said, “defines the basic lived problem of Pintupi life” (1986a, 160).

As illustrated by Jupurrula’s comments and the Nguyu myth which I mentioned earlier, relatedness is also a central concern for Lander Warlpiri.<sup>15</sup> However, while there are similarities in the processes of sustaining relatedness among Pintupi and Warlpiri, there are also differences. As Myers was at pains to point out, the Pintupi problematic concerning relatedness arises from a form of social organisation and land tenure that is distinct from that of Warlpiri. As I elaborate in the following paragraph, whereas Warlpiri possess a structural framework for sustaining relatedness, Pintupi do not. This difference has implications for the ways that the two groups apprehend and experience personhood.

Myers noted that the lack of defined local groups among Pintupi and the focus on “entry into the translocal corporation of men” (Myers 1986a, 294) contrasted with the Warlpiri patrilineal descent grouping and patrimoiety-focused structure of ceremony “which aggregates patrilineal groups into larger categories” (Myers 1986a, 294). “This greater definition”, he said, “implies that some rights may be asserted by them without fear of ...rejecting relatedness among people” (Myers 1986a, 294). At the same time, however, he noted that “an overall relatedness is achieved in Warlpiri society through various mechanisms of reintegrating ‘distinctiveness’” (Myers 1986a, 295) and pointed out that this is a different kind of relatedness to that of Pintupi. Importantly, he notes that: “among the Warlpiri the complementarity of what are known as ‘owner’ and ‘manager’ relations to land is extended to coordinate a wider, regional sociality” (Myers 1986a, 295). Furthermore, he surmises that:

Since the statuses of ‘owner’ and ‘manager’ are defined by different, complementary sorts of rights and duties over sacred sites, a focus on rights and duties could become more prominent for the Warlpiri as the very means through which relatedness was sustained. In other words, this differentiation provides another way of denying one’s exclusive, egoistic control (Maddock 1972, 36–42), although accomplished differently than among Pintupi (Myers 1986a, 295).

Here Myers fingers the problem Jupurrula identified, when Jupurrula complained about the “rubbishing” of *kurdungurlu* by many of today’s youth and linked their lack of understanding of the significance of “located social”<sup>16</sup> interrelations to the rs of conflict in the community. While Myers talks of duties, I prefer the term “responsibilities” because it reflects the fact that *kirda* cannot solely be responsible for their own country and ritual objects: they are dependent upon their *kurdungurlu* who are obligated to look after them.

Further, it also reflects the fact that the role of *kurdungurlu* is not solely defined by descent principles but by seniority and knowledge, so that people who are classificatory *kurdungurlu* and have the requisite authority may enact the role. While I concur with Myers on the significance of rights and responsibilities to relatedness among Warlpiri, it is important to recognize that the focus on rights and responsibilities does not mean that moral evaluations involving feelings of difference and relatedness are absent from people's quotidian interactions. Although particular groups may foreground differing social phenomena in their construction of personhood and one group may appear to be more rule-governed than another,<sup>17</sup> people's notions of personhood are not merely ideational but are shaped by their lived experiences, which are socially and historically particular. Thus, in the next section I briefly consider the effects of changes that are occurring at Willowra and how they are reconfiguring the way relatedness is understood and being challenged.

### **Lander Warlpiri Relatedness Today**

Today, changes such as the demise of arranged marriages that fostered alliances between countries, the cessation of ceremonies such as Ngajakula that enacted regional sociality, and different experiences of place brought about by movement back and forth between established settlements rather than by dwelling in country mean that many young people do not "recognize" links between families established over generations through songlines, ceremony and marriage. In "rubbishing" *kurdungurlu*, *kirda* ignore the reciprocal obligations that serve to conjoin them with members of the opposite moiety. Relatedness is no longer sustained today in the same way as it was in the 1970s era. To reiterate Jupurrula's claim, "they used to be like one big family [but] today people are sitting down separate, like white people, not recognising each other". Other senior and middle aged Willowra people share Jupurrula's observations. Consider, for example, the following comments Napaljarri made in a recent discussion she had with me about this issue, in which she emphasized the importance of spiritual recognition and mutuality of respect, not only in relation to persons but also to country:

*Kurdungurlu* got to be there at all times—because spirit is watching, *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* have to show respect. Today only certain families can do this, not other families. There's a lot more jealousy going on. Greed is coming into it: self and self, they don't want to know other families who they are connected to (M. Napaljarri pers. comm. 2013).

Although I cannot elaborate in the space available here, I note that the Lander Warlpiri concept of property was entangled with notions of personhood and differed in significant ways from capitalistic ideas of property.<sup>18</sup> To the extent that relations between countries and people were constituted by reciprocal relationships of *kirda* and *kurdungurlu*, there was a fractal dimension to property. Today, an increased emphasis on patrilineal identity and a diminished focus on the relationship<sup>19</sup> between *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* has accompanied a tendency of people to claim exclusive rights in property, where once they were more conscious of conjoined responsibilities for country and connections at a regional level that incorporated otherness.<sup>20</sup> Modern bureaucratic and economic interventions in Aboriginal life involving, for example, royalty distributions from mining

and, more recently, monetary payments for the Australian Government's compulsory acquisition of Aboriginal land for five year leases under the Northern Territory Emergency Response ("The Intervention") have contributed to this situation. While the royalty regime has undoubtedly influenced the "valorisation of patrilineal entitlement to money",<sup>21</sup> I argue that what is also occurring is the disembedding of a particular form of sociality (that of the *kirda/kurdungurlu* relationship) that, in the past, was integral to Warlpiri ritual and economic relations. The shift cannot be read simply as a Pintupisation of the Warlpiri model because this would ignore other differences in forms of social organisation and land tenure between the two groups (see earlier and Myers 1986a) as well as different histories of accommodation to modernity. Thus, accompanying the increased focus on patrilineal identity that I referred to earlier is an emphasis on tracing descent via notions of "blood relatedness" or cognacy, with the result that people may also claim entitlements via a variety of non-patrilineal kin connections.

### **Conclusion**

What is apparent from these reflections on Lander personhood is that there is a lack of fit between, on the one hand, the normative ideas older people articulate about persons and the modes in which they experienced personhood and, on the other hand, the present situation. With the demise of the older generations, the framework that structured the relational ontology of the 1970s era can no longer be fully operationalized. Relational ontology is still significant for Warlpiri personhood; however, ways of apprehending and sustaining relatedness are changing. It is tempting to speculate that in the process the weight accorded to the value of demand sharing as a major means of constituting relatedness is increasing and that moral evaluation has become more free-floating, anchored more in the individual and the individual's family rather than including a wider sociality as well.

Lacking the framework in which earlier notions of moral personhood were forged and in which, to quote Myers, "exclusive, egoistic control" was tempered, sectional interests and factionalism that to a lesser extent always simmered beneath the surface now periodically erupt into conflict and dominate social life. An excess of "jealousy" and a focus on individual feelings and "othering" (through disrespect and the non-recognition of relatedness) threatens to confound former modes of sustaining relatedness. For example, although sorry business and funerals continue to unite people in the community, the events are also now used to divide, as occurred recently at Willowra when a particular family was excluded from an invitation to attend a funeral. In reaction to this situation, people are turning toward Christianity as a way to readjust relationships. Elders are also appropriating new methods, such as the use of digital technology, to help fill the gap in younger people's knowledge of *Jukurra* and experience of country. In doing so they are forging new pathways for reconciliation and social renewal.

Thus, to return to Teddy Jupurrula and his narrative concerning the reproduction of persons, Jupurrula recognized the fact that digital technologies are now ubiquitous in young people's lives and he grasped the opportunity to have the Nguyu story placed on

the Internet<sup>22</sup> so that young people might reflect upon what it is to be a moral person in Warlpiri society. As mentioned earlier, fundamental to Jupurrula's notion of personhood is a network of social relationships anchored in country, yet his story now floats in the public space of the web. The new digital technology, which enables individuals to consider Jupurrula's message at a remove from contexts to which the story is linked, constitutes yet one more shift from earlier modes of apprehending personhood and reconfigures them for a new generation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the oral histories I have collected, older women questioned the personhood of these men who acted immorally and shot people like they shot dogs.

<sup>2</sup> Now deceased.

<sup>3</sup> With the support of Parkinson and, much later, Nugget Coombs, Jampijinpa lobbied politicians and bureaucrats. In the process he travelled interstate and met emerging Aboriginal political leaders and members of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), who gave him valuable encouragement (Vaarzon-Morel 2012) and discussed with him the idea of local land rights.

<sup>4</sup> This led to an increase in the numbers of young men leaving the community to find marriage partners elsewhere.

<sup>5</sup> The situation differs from that of Wiradjuri in NSW, for example, whose "desire for local autonomy" Macdonald locates "within the context of *personal* autonomy in self-making" (2013, 23:400; see also 399). Macdonald, who, as noted earlier, likens the situation of Wiradjuri to those of Mardu, noted that "Increasing challenges in reproducing Wiradjuri and Mardu selves accounts for their desire to regain local autonomy".

<sup>6</sup> In thinking about these issues I have been stimulated by Eickelkamp (2013), who defines "society's project" as a society's "self-understanding" and "morality".

<sup>7</sup> This, of course, is not unique to Warlpiri elders; in the past, anthropologists such as Strehlow associated change in Aboriginal culture with decline and loss without recognizing the potential for adaptation and renewal.

<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the monstrous body, that of a person is a social body formed through cultural intervention. Thus, during a youth's initiation certain of his female kin must sing *Jukurrpa* songs that promote the controlled growth of his facial hair and transformation to manhood.

<sup>9</sup> This is an abbreviated summary of a complex myth. Lack of space prevents me from engaging in further elaboration and analysis here.

<sup>10</sup> A version of this story is available at <http://www.indigitube.com.au>.

<sup>11</sup> Myers (1986: 228) notes that initiation involves "the creation of a public self that takes priority over its private qualities, and the development of the ability 'to look after' others". Furthermore, he states "such themes are significant throughout the male cult as well as in the female life-cycle" (Myers 1986a: 228).

<sup>12</sup> I thank John Morton for pointing out this reference.

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<sup>13</sup> The term *miirni-nyina-mi* is used for the activities *kurdungurlu* perform (see transcript of proceedings, Lander Warlpiri Anmatjirra land claim, 1980: 28; Laughren 2012), in exchange for which they customarily were given payment (typically gifts of food) called in Warlpiri *ngijinkirri*.

<sup>14</sup> Although the Warlpiri term *warlalja*, meaning “family”, is similar to the Pintupi term *walytja* and, like Pintupi, Warlpiri use the phrase “all one family” to evoke unity among people, there are differences in the way both construe “family”, which I can only allude to in this paper.

<sup>15</sup> This is the case with many indigenous peoples because, to quote Strathern and Stewart, it is only through relationships that “authentic individual wholeness is realized” (1998, 68:174).

<sup>16</sup> I borrow this phrase from Austin-Broos (2009).

<sup>17</sup> Myers (1986a: 294) mused that “in their approach to cultural forms” Warlpiri are structuralists whereas Pintupi are phenomenological.

<sup>18</sup> Strathern (1988), among others, has noted that notions of personhood are implicated in ideas concerning property (see Myers 1988a; Nadasdy 2002; Keen 2010).

<sup>19</sup> This relationship involves obligations which are founded in ancestral ties between Dreamings and countries. Here it is important to note that the *kirda/kurdungurlu* relationship is not simply a social relationship between people but also between Dreamings and countries and that it is instantiated in the Dreaming landscape. For example, there are sites in the Lander River area where features consist of ancestral *kirda* surrounded *kurdungurlu* (typically stands of trees).

<sup>20</sup> In an important and relevant discussion Austin-Broos (2009: 122) has outlined a similar tendency among Arrernte.

<sup>21</sup> These are the words of an anonymous reviewer.

<sup>22</sup> My point here (and earlier) is that rather than simply regarding social media as alien and belonging to young people, older people such as Teddy are, in fact, strategically co-opting it with the hope of provoking discussion and sustaining cultural continuity. For a detailed discussion of Willowra people’s use of new social media over time see Vaarzon-Morel 2014. The latter explores processes of adaptation to, and incorporation of, new media both among older and younger generations.

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