

Milpirri: performance as a bridge that joins the ancient with the modern

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Introduction

This paper is about the bi-annual Milpirri event occurring in the Warlpiri community called Lajamanu, and how through Milpirri, 'performance' has become a bridge that joins the ancient Warlpiri cultural practices, and their underlying values, with the modern world.

Defining Milpirri

Milpirri is a number of things that operate at various levels. Milpirri is the Warlpiri name for a rain cloud. At this level, Milpirri describes the process of rain clouds building in the wet season, sending out lightning and thunder, and resulting in life-giving rain that transforms the deserts of central Australia.

Milpirri is a jukurrpa (dreaming) from the Jangala/Jampijinpa clan, of which the author is a kirda, or trustee. This jukurrpa is from the Warnayaka Warlpiri. In a place near Kulpulurnu, two young warriors called warnmajarrijarra were hunting in the area for kanyarla (euro kangaroos). The two young warriors lit a fire to flush the kangaroos out of the bush, but they realised that they had created a big bushfire that raged for days and was expanding. The bushfire created a big pillar of smoke that built up in the sky. The clouds were drawn into the pillar of smoke and created Milpirri, which then sent rain and drenched the land, putting out the fire. At this level, Milpirri is a set of dances, songlines, paintings, body paintings and performances that communicate this story and assist with the telling of the values that underlie the story.

Ngajurna Jampijinpa Jilja-wana, yirdi jinta-kariji Wanta kuja-kajujurlu yirdimani ngajuju. Ngajurna palkaku jirramaku kajanyanuku, palka kaju nyina kirdarnaju manu palkaku warringiyiki. Ngajurna Lajamanu-wardingki. Ngajurna Warlpiri; Warnayaka Warlpiri.

I am Jampijinpa descended from Jilja. I have another name, which is from the sun. I am from Lajamanu. I am Warnayaka Warlpiri.

Milpirri is a metaphor. The rising hot air and the falling cold air create the Milpirri clouds and describe the meeting of two very different cultures and ways of life. At the point of meeting there is a clash. The thunder and lightning portray the pain and confusion that came about at the meeting of traditional Warlpiri and mainstream European cultures. However, the metaphor goes on to suggest that there is a way of merging the two, without violating either, to create refreshing and life-giving results.

Milpirri is a process. In this process, Lajamanu Warlpiri are revisiting their ancient and continuing culture and rediscovering the values that are imbedded in the jukurrpa: the ceremonies, the songlines, the paintings, the law, the body paintings, the dances and the stories. These underlying values are unchanging and show how to live life, whether in the bush, in the community or in the jungles of modern cities.

Milpirri is a performance. In this performance, these ancient, unchanging values are rehearsed, explained and acted out in a traditional mode, in a contemporary mode, and in a blended fusion of traditional and contemporary music and dance. In 2005, the theme of the Milpirri performance was the Jarda-warnpa Ceremony (the Warlpiri Atonement and Reconciliation Ceremony — sometimes also called Jardiwanpa or sometimes Jarda-warnpa). In 2007, the theme was the Kurdiji Ceremony (the Warlpiri Initiation Ceremony) that celebrates mothers and sons. In 2009, the theme of the Milpirri performance will be Juntu, which is the Warlpiri Law and Justice Ceremony.

In this regard, Milpirri is unique and offers a hope for co-existence of Warlpiri with the mainstream. It also creates a hope that the ancient Warlpiri values will continue to be passed from generation to generation well into the future.

Some history behind Milpirri

When the author was much younger, he observed one of the Lajamanu community leaders stand up in the middle of Ceremony time, look around at what he saw and say quietly, 'This is the end of our culture. We are finished as Warlpiri people.' This man was a role model for the writer. He was a much-respected leader and what he said affected the author very deeply.

The author then became an assistant teacher in the Lajamanu community school, which was supposed to be a two-way school (that is, a school that supposedly teaches in, through and about Warlpiri language and culture, and at the same time teaches in, through and about the mainstream language and culture).

However, something was not quite right, and the author saw the Warlpiri culture in Lajamanu going down. He started to think that the only way forward was to walk away from traditional culture and fully embrace the mainstream value system.

For some years, Tim Newth, from the Tracks Dance Company, had been coming to Lajamanu to help our community put on performances about our lives as Warlpiri. The writer said to Tim, on one of his later visits, 'Can you help us make a performance that will enable the school to understand what two-way really means'? He agreed to do that. As the time for the performance approached, the writer spoke to some friends and family, and we realised that the idea was much bigger than just two-way teaching in the school; it was about igniting a passion for traditional Warlpiri culture amongst the young people, and returning hope to the Old People that there was a future beyond their generation.

As it turned out, the first Milpirri featured four stories from the songlines leading into the Jarda-warnpa Ceremony—one story from each of the clan groups. We then arranged a traditional performance from the men's side, a traditional performance from the women's side, a contemporary dance routine from the young boys and an action dance from the young girls for each of the four stories. That is, we had four stories, each told four different ways.

Next we assigned colours for each of the clan groups, so that the individual groups could be easily identified from the audience. Blue was assigned to the Jangala/Jampijinpa clan, because many of the jukurra stories in that clan are ngapa (water) stories. We assigned green to the Japanangka/Japangardi clan because many of their jukurra stories are about vegetation. The Jakamarra/Jupurrurla clan was assigned red because many of their stories are about animals that are eaten as meat (kuyu). Because the Japaljarri/Jungarrayi clan has many bird stories (jurlpu), we assigned them the colour yellow.

It is amazing, but despite never having been part of Warlpiri culture, these colours have been integrated into the culture to such a degree that children will tell you that they are part of red group or blue group when discussing their clan membership.

Some of the journey of Milpirri

As mentioned, in 2005 we celebrated the Jarda-warnpa Ceremony. This was the first Milpirri performance and it was made into a video. The writer was interviewed on radio and the performance featured in several newspapers and internet reviews. After the performance many of the community asked when the next Milpirri would be held. To be honest, the Old People did not understand what we were trying to do,

even up to minutes before the performance was staged. This created a lot of difficulties for the Tracks Dance Company representatives. Many of the Old People thought that we were trying to steal and change their ceremony. However, after the performance, some of them came to the writer and said that now they understood what we were trying to achieve.

During 2006 there was a lot of disappointment about the fact that the next Milpirri would not occur until late 2007. It is hard for the community to comprehend the cost of putting on the performance and how difficult it is to raise the money. The increased attendance at school that happened during the rehearsals leading up to the 2005 performance, and in the time just after the performance, dropped away in 2006.

By 2007, we had received a substantial grant from a government agency and a major corporate sponsor, to be dispersed over three years. The excitement built to such an extent that we had people from Yuendumu come to Lajamanu to be a part of the rehearsals and the performance. Yuendumu is a southern Warlpiri community, and is nearly 1000 kilometres from Lajamanu, travelling on the Tanami Track across the Tanami Desert. They made an enormous sacrifice to be with us for a week.

The theme for 2007 was the Kurdiji Ceremony, and the performance told the story of how mothers hand over their sons to the men to be initiated into manhood and begin the lifelong task of learning what it means to be a Warlpiri man; a Kurdiji, or shield, for his family, for the community, and for the Warlpiri Ngurra-kurlu (the five elements of a Warlpiri world and life view).

Unexpectedly, we discovered that the symbols appearing throughout the Warlpiri Kurdiji Ceremony also appear in the Australian coat of arms. This revelation inspired the Old People. For years they had been wanting to find a way to get Kardiya (mainstream people) to understand Warlpiri Law. For the Old People, sharing symbols that appear on Parliament House in Canberra with the symbols of the seat of Warlpiri Law, their ceremony, marked a great hope that there could be mutual understanding. The Australian coat of arms appeared in the performance, and each of the elements in the coat of arms was acted out in traditional and contemporary music and dance, each of the clan groups taking responsibility for their part in the Kurdiji Ceremony.

The performance concluded with a fusion song, blending both traditional and contemporary music and dance, and led into the lighting of the witi poles, which represents the climax of the Kurdiji and Jarda-warnpa Ceremonies.

The meaning of Milpirri

Milpirri means a number of things personally to the author, and to the Warlpiri people as a nation. Personally, the writer is now passionate about keeping his culture. That doesn't mean that the culture has to remain fossilised as a museum piece, or jailed in a human zoo. It doesn't mean that the culture has to be lived in the context of naked desert wanderers. However, it does mean that the essential values of traditional Warlpiri culture are sustainable and can be expressed in whatever lifestyle confronts one. The culture can be passed on to children and to children's children, and there is a confidence that the values that these children learn through the culture will help them to meet any kind of challenges that the future may present to them.

Milpirri is a process that will enable the Warlpiri nation to rediscover the underlying values of its ceremonies. As a nation, we did our ceremonies, but we forgot how to understand what they were telling us.

There are now young people who want to learn the old songlines and understand what they are teaching and how to apply those messages to their lives in the twenty-first century, whereas before the young people did not want to listen to the Old People. The Old People and the young people were like two strangers living in one place. Now the young people have a hunger for all that the Old People hold in trust.

Milpirri has taught us that there can be a blending of the old and the new. The old does not have to be discarded and resigned to the scrapheap of history, and the new doesn't have to become all-consuming. The new can be informed by the old, and the old can be honoured and preserved by the new. This blending can create a richer and more dynamic life than either the old or the new can create on their own.

In Warlpiri culture we have an act where a kurduwu (a stone axe) is passed from an old man to a younger man. This symbolises an old man's trust in a younger man, that the younger man has learned sufficient knowledge to be entrusted with the task of making hunting implements on his own. *Milpirri is the passing on of the kurduwu*. It is the older generation passing on to the younger generation the responsibility of keeping the culture. The younger generations can now dream about the future with their rich heritage in mind.

Milpirri's future direction

We have sufficient grant money to form a base for the next two performances. We will still need to raise a significant amount on top of the money that we have. However, we can move forward. We have two successful performances behind us, and videos of each are available through Tracks Dance Company's website¹.

Hopefully, by the end of March we will have completed a business plan. This plan will outline the next five years of Milpirri events. It is hoped that the 2009 Milpirri will feature the Warlpiri Juntu Ceremony, which is a ceremony about law and justice. This will be a timely topic. We had a serious breach of Warlpiri Law in Lajamanu recently by members of the Northern Territory Police Department. We published our concerns through a video on Youtube². There have been responses from around the world to this video. The issue of Warlpiri Law and mainstream law needs to be openly discussed and we need to find a way to blend the two.

The plan is to hold a Warlpiri Convergence in the centre of Warlpiri Country in either 2011 or 2012. This will involve the gathering of the whole Warlpiri nation in one place to celebrate their heritage. Certainly, Jarda-warnpa will be an important part of the celebration but the details have not yet been sorted out.

It is also planned that a vibrant local economy will be developed around the Milpirri event, and it is hoped that the event will develop into a major festival on the Northern Territory's festival circuit.

Ongoing benefits from the Milpirri event

The spin-offs from Milpirri have been many and varied and are still being discovered. Milpirri has changed the way that we do school, and will be written into the school curriculum as an ongoing feature of two-way education. The colour-coding of the clan groups has been fully integrated into the life of the school, and you can hear students say, 'I'm in blue group, what group are you in?' This makes the teaching of Warlpiri skin relationships³ much easier, and makes it much easier to teach the Kardiya⁴ teaching staff about Warlpiri culture. We are hoping that there will be a greater use of the performing arts as a teaching tool in the school, and Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses that relate to skills needed in putting on a Milpirri event will be offered as part of the school curriculum.

The land south of Lajamanu was recently declared an Indigenous Protected Area. Milpirri has inspired the idea of joint-agency country visits⁵ into this area. The purpose of country visits will be to give the Old People an opportunity to share with the young people their ceremonies, stories and other knowledge. Rangers will be trained in Warlpiri land management strategies and families will be exposed to their heritage again. The whole process will be recorded on digital camera so that the footage can be used in school for teaching literacy, by the Central Land Council to learn more land management skills, and by Milpirri to create themes for future events.

Tourists could also be taken on country visits. We are hoping to introduce cultural and educational tourism. We envisage music students, law students, tourism students and students from other university faculties coming to Lajamanu to learn about Warlpiri culture from the Old People, while we still have them. We envisage taking them on country visits and showing them where the ideas for the Milpirri events come from.

In the future, as Milpirri builds in size and reputation, we are hoping that Lajamanu will become the place where people come who want to study the Warlpiri heritage. Soon a database will be installed in our community library, and it will hold digital images and sound bites of things Warlpiri.

Because of Milpirri, many of our young men are calling for a night school to be established so that they can learn the songlines, have them explained to them, and get fully prepared for each of the Milpirri events a long time before they are to be presented.

Milpirri the performance: Milpirri the bridge

Milpirri is a performance that acts as a bridge that connects the ancient Warlpiri values and heritage with the modern world. Milpirri has been a personal journey, and the author is happy to say that many Warlpiri people are starting to think that they also would like to come on that journey, especially some of the young people. Some who are the writer's own age also want to come on that journey.

In time, it is hoped that people from the mainstream will also want to walk with us on this journey. There is something about music and performance; it is a language that speaks across all kinds of barriers and divisions. Anyone is welcome to walk over the bridge and join us at our next Milpirri event in Lajamanu in 2009.

Where more information about Milpirri may be found

http://www.tracksdance.com.au/html/work_2005_milpirri.html

http://www.tracksdance.com.au/html/work_2007_milpirri2.html

<http://www.ausdance.org.au/outside/interest/community/milpirri.html>

<http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/milpirri>

<http://www.yawiktionary.com/m/1148373486865.html>

<http://wmtv.regionalarts.com.au/raa1/newsletter/issue3/milpirri.htm>

http://www.ovationchannel.com.au/ovation/main/index.php?PID=44&ch_table=link7&SID=&sel=content

- <http://www.ausdance.org.au/outside/nt/news/nov2005.html>
<http://www.missionandjustice.org/intervention-tackles-truancy-australiaeducationculture-aboriginalchildren/>
http://www.deadlymob.org/col2_obce46.html?randid=870261
<http://www.myspace.com/nickpoweronline>
http://www.lajamanu.nt.gov.au/council/content/download/218/1086/file/19_Sept_2006.pdf
<http://printaustralia.blogspot.com/2005/11/northern-exhibitions.html>
<http://troopytravels.com/Blog/>
<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22788066-5013404,00.html>
<http://www.globalinteraction.org.au/content/documents/Stories/Indigenous%20ministries.pdf>
http://www.mttheo.org/pdf/newsletter_June07.pdf
<http://www.danceinforma.com/CurtainUp4.html>
<http://www.cdu.edu.au/garma-2006/documents/key-forum-report-garma06.pdf>
http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet_ctte/estimates/sup_0607/dest/e695_07_att.pdf
<http://www.troopytravels.com/Lajamanu/Milpirri/index.htm>
<http://www.clc.org.au/aboutus/annualreport.asp>

¹ http://www.tracksdance.com.au/html/indig_works.html

² http://au.youtube.com/watch?v=aU*m³bRyRqU

³ In Warlpiri culture, everything in the universe relates to everything else. This integrated network of relationships is achieved through giving everything one of sixteen kinship names (skin names). Male skin names begin with the sound 'J' and female skin names begin with the sound 'N'. The eight male skin names are: Jangala, Jampijinpa, Jungarrayi, Japaljarri, Japanangka, Japangardi, Jakamarra, Jupurrula. The eight females skin names are: Nangala, Nampijinpa, Nungarrayi, Napaljarri, Napanangka, Napangardi, Nakamarra, Napurrurla.

⁴ Kardiya is the Warlpiri term used to denominate white-skinned people.

⁵ 'Country visit' is the term used to describe a visit by Warlpiri family groups back to the area of land that their grandfather grew up in. These country visits are essential because Warlpiri were forcibly removed from their land in the earlier part of the 20th Century. The family's land is the hub of the Warlpiri world and life view. Without being on proper country, Warlpiri become disconnected from their sense of place in the universe, and their culture is eroded. A paper is currently being developed that will elaborate on the place of land in the Warlpiri 'Ngurra-kurlu' (the name given to the Warlpiri world and life view). A very brief introduction to Ngurra-kurlu is available on Youtube.