



Community Research Report

Openings for collaborative theology through classical Yolŋu and Warlpiri epistemologies

University of Divinity

July 2021 – November 2022

Investigators

Dr Samuel Curkpatrick, University of Divinity

Professor Aaron Corn, University of Melbourne

Professor Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu, University of Melbourne, Warlpiri ceremonial leader

Daniel Wilfred, Australian Art Orchestra, Wägilak ceremonial leader

Sarah Bacaller, University of Divinity, Western Sydney University

Overview

Our research explored ways in which Yolŋu and Warlpiri narratives and law can shape genuine and equitable dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

We focused on the ways we understand relationships across different cultural and linguistic groups, and patterns of ceremony that bring people together to learn, share and grow as a diverse community. Some of the themes we explored are introduced below. These are various but held together with the notion that *what we know and experience* is shaped by our relationships and interactions with others.

To better understand these *relational dynamics of knowledge*, we have explored different patterns of thinking and relating which extend from Yolŋu and Warlpiri traditions of storytelling, performance and education. These have been offered as ways to approach cross-cultural understanding and collaborative activities such as teaching, research, performance and artistic practice.

Funding from the University of Divinity enabled us to facilitate dialogue between Indigenous theologians, consult with Indigenous communities and ceremonial leaders, conduct interviews and document stories, and produce a range of publications, videos and other outputs that explore these themes in detail.

We are grateful for the support and involvement of other organisations in this work, such as the Indigenous Knowledge Institute at the University of Melbourne, National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia, Australian Art Orchestra, Nungalinga College, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and the Ngukurr Language Centre. Other individuals have been acknowledged below.

Why did we do this research?

Christian faith is important to many Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. There are different ways that we understand Christian faith and its implications for life among others. Theology is an activity that seeks to understand faith. Or, we could say, theology is a way of attending to experience *through* the tangible commitments of faith – in the ways we relate to one another with generosity, humility and love. Through this research, we have looked for ways to understand one another more deeply through these characteristics, which resonate across Christian tradition, and with Indigenous Australian traditions of thought and performance.

Going beyond an appreciation for different cultures and ways we understand Christian faith, this project has explored *openings* offered by Yolŋu and Warlpiri knowledge, through which we can grapple with Christian faith together. Because of the connections and background of the research team, we have focussed on Yolŋu and Warlpiri ideas about *gathering* and *relating* through stories that shape responsible and responsive communities.

In many ways, various forms of Indigenous law, ceremonial practices and stories have been the means through which theological exploration has taken place in Australia for countless generations. Not only does engaging with these traditions hold the potential to enrich broader theological discourse in Australia, but non-Indigenous Australians might hear their own theological traditions cast in new ways, embodied within the complex relations of people and place indigenous to this land. It is this sense of renewal that Wanta Pawu has in mind when he extends a generous and challenging invitation to the Australian church:

The first thing is for the church to understand ceremony ... The church needs to learn about this country; it needs to learn to sing and dance this country. Songlines are saying that if you follow these sacred stories, you become home. You feed [on] all the knowledge. To feed on Australia, you become Australia ...

Unless you start singing and dancing this country, you can't be Australia. Come to a ceremony, try singing a song. That makes me feel like I am feeding together with you. [WP]

At her inaugural lecture as Professor of Indigenous Studies at the University of Divinity (2 November 2022), Anne Pattel-Gray called for Australian theology teachers and researchers to 'own our own education' – to 'go and meet with Aboriginal community, go and meet with Aboriginal land councils, meet with Aboriginal people in the community. It's your responsibility to get educated.' We hope this project demonstrates, in part, how this responsibility might begin to play out. By looking at

ideas and patterns of working together through ceremonial narratives, we have wanted to provoke further conversation between intellectual traditions and cultures in ways that are both critical and creative.

This means more than incorporating Indigenous perspectives and metaphors into an established curriculum or performing analogical translation from one culture to another. Collaboration means finding ways that we can work productively together, even though we have different experiences, histories and ways of knowing. In good collaborative work, we create something new but also retain our own traditions and agency in the process. At the same time, our perspectives and self-understandings are changed and enlarged, as we grapple with identity and purpose through interactions with those who are different.



Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu in Melbourne, November 2022

What we have learnt

Public expressions of Yolŋu and Warlpiri song, narrative and law are concerned with the life-giving relationships between people and place, and how these relations are sustained through the generations. Importantly, ceremonial practices are not exclusive, in the sense of asserting autonomous identities that are separate from others. Rather, these practices incorporate diverse people and narratives within a complexly layered and expansive understanding of identity and purpose.

You know, Captain Cook came – we recognise foreigners [for who they are]. But I can't even use that word, foreigners. I don't want to. Because no one is a real foreigner. They are *ngajarri*, which means 'guest'. Everyone is a guest. And those guests can easily be transferred to family. We recognise your *ngurra* (home within) is somewhere across the big water. But to bring you in here, with your *ngurra*, means accepting each other, adopting each other. So when you acknowledge those who are here, when you acknowledge country, it's more like welcoming you – to claim you really, to give you a sense of belonging. [WP]

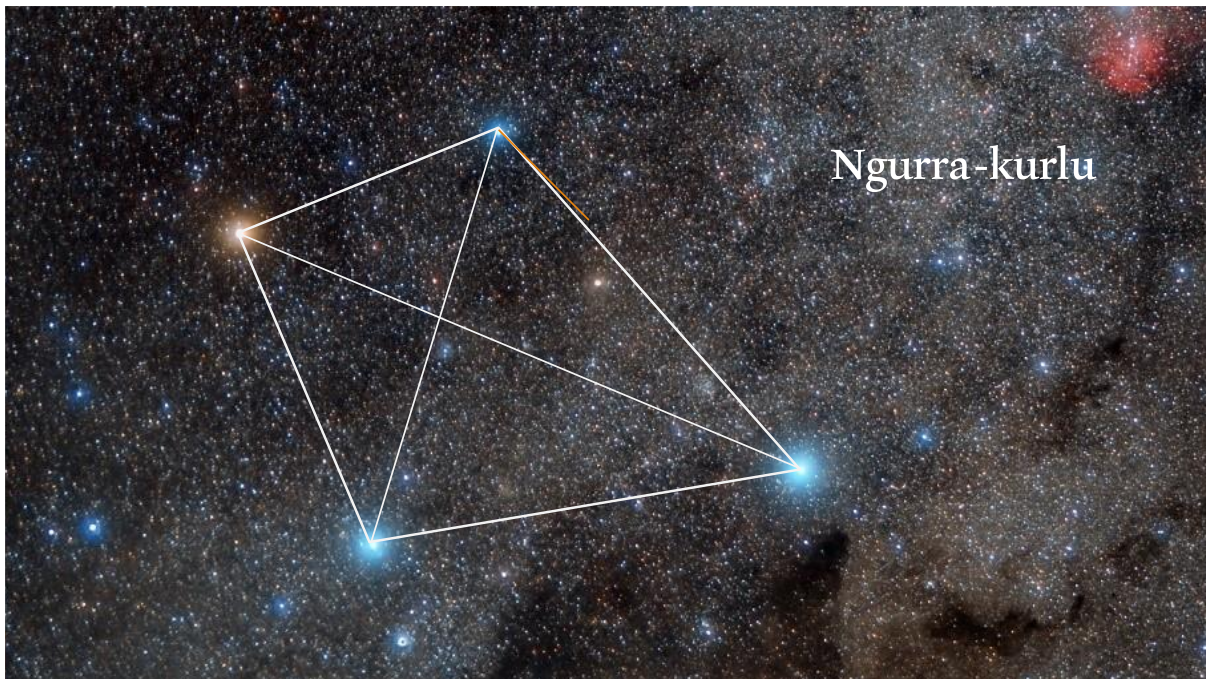
Our publications and media outputs (listed below) have explored numerous themes and concepts related to Yolŋu and Warlpiri thought and performance. Here, we introduce a few of these to share something of the flavour of our work.

Ngurra-kurlu (Warlpiri)

Ngurra-kurlu ('home-having') is a pattern for relationships that Wanta Pawu has utilised in his teaching and research. It is a social, intellectual and ecological *compass* that helps us navigate life with belonging and purpose. Warlpiri ceremonies teach about *ngurra-kurlu* and shape community as an interactive, interdependent *palka* (body).

Milpirri (Warlpiri)

The intermingling of different pressure systems that form *milpirri* (thunder clouds) show what *ngurra-kurlu* looks like in action. This is a call to start looking at each other's stories and valuing one another, to learn about the ways our culture and values might work productively together to produce lifegiving rain. When we involve ourselves in this process, we *become our homes* – we have identity and purpose through our interactions.



Ngurra-kurlu, a pattern for flourishing community read from the Southern Cross

Wantarri-tarri (Warlpiri)

Wantarri-tarri means ‘travelling route’ and *wantarri* means ‘gift.’ *Wantarri-tarri* is a ceremony about the relationships between different groups that criss-cross the entire continent. When we understand how we are bound together in our differences, we become a gift to one another. *Wantarri-tarri* can nourish our understanding of what it means to be Australian.

Yitaki-mani (Warlpiri)

Yitaki-mani (tracking) offers a pattern for intellectual enquiry that builds from traditional Warlpiri pedagogic methods. The term also means *hunting to share*, to bring back that which nourishes community. Through our intellectual work, we discover new connections between ideas, contexts and people that can nourish mind and body. Like hunting, intellectual work means becoming responsive to the environment around us and responsible to others, so we can eat together and become *wungu-warnu* (companions), a cross between family and friends.

We need to embrace this sharing so we do not drift too far away from one another but come together. That’s what we do in ceremony, to celebrate who we are together, feeding together on those things that nourish mind and

stomach. So identity, we mustn't try and put something else there: we must keep the original identity of this country—the gift-road. You can learn it from Indigenous people all over. They can teach you to read this story. (WP)

Raypirri' (Yolŋu)

Raypirri' translates as 'respect' or 'discipline', a characteristic expressed in learning from elders. It also has to do with a careful, diligent attention to ancestral law and the many interleaved connections of people and place – to the ways our ancestral story fits together with the stories of others. *Raypirri'* is considered essential to sustaining healthy relationships and responsibilities within community and through the generations. It also shapes how we might work together in our differences, so that we can grow together while respecting the relative autonomy of other cultures.



Daniel Wilfred explaining *raypirri'* in Darwin, April 2022

Raki' (Yolŋu)

Raki' (string) is an important narrative subject in Wägilak *manikay* (public song). Through the performance of ancestral narratives, songs, dances and designs, those in the present generation are joined with those who have gone before. *Raki'* also provides a metaphor for the many different voices that interweave together on the *bambula* (ceremonial ground), the place of our gathering as an extended family. In

the thick, complex textures of song, different stories and stringlines of tradition weave together, strengthening one another in vibrant, variegated community.

As these stories come, they form together. This is the law that governs ceremony, which is not competitive, like challenging each other, racing, or making money: it's there to show the new generation how to learn. When they meet up on that lovely sand, they respect each other; on that lovely sand, they gather up and make this ceremony happen. They're there to sing and share how this law is still in their lives. (DW)

Publications and events

The following events, publications and media items have been produced as part of this research project:

Wantarri-tarri: The Gift Road

A two-day symposium held 8–9 December 2021. At the University of Divinity in Melbourne, Nungalinga College in Darwin and online.

The first day of this symposium was titled “Wantarri-tarri: The Gift Road” and enabled a virtual gathering of Indigenous Christian thinkers, theologians, teachers and leaders from across the country.

The second day of this symposium ran as ‘Cooking the Kangaroo: Conversations on Indigenous Spirituality and Connection’, in partnership with the Indigenous Knowledge Institute, University of Melbourne, and in association with the 2021 Annual Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia and the 20th Symposium on Indigenous Music and Dance, University of New South Wales.

Thanks to those who shared and attended *Wantarri-tarri: The Gift Road*, especially Dr Denise Champion, Ps Ray Minniecon, Dr Garry Deverell, Professor Peter Sherlock, Associate Professor Glenn Loughrey, Naomi Wolfe, Professor Marcia Langton, Dr Ben van Gelderen, Dr Peter Knight, Auiua Endean, David Wilfred, Sunny Kim, Professor Brian Djangirrawuy Gumbula-Garawirrtja, Renelle Gondarra, Dr Anthea Skinner.



Clockwise from top left: Samuel Curkpatrick, Peter Knight, Auiua Endean, David Wilfred, Daniel Wilfred. ‘Conversations on Indigenous Spirituality and Connection’ symposium, December 2021.

Special issue, Journal of Intercultural Studies

A special issue of the Journal of Intercultural Studies (JICS) published by Taylor & Francis was launched, titled:

Interweaving fibres: Relational epistemologies in Indigenous Australian thought and performance. Edited by Samuel Curkpatrick, Sarah Bacaller and Aaron Corn.

This interdisciplinary issue of the JICS gives focus to the relational dynamics of Indigenous Australian thought and performance. It involves twenty-two contributors from nine different universities, including ten Indigenous Australians. *Interweaving fibres* is slated for publication in 2023. The contents includes:

Preface. Wanta Jampijinpa Patrick.

Interweaving fibres: Relational epistemologies in Indigenous Australian thought and performance Samuel Curkpatrick, Sarah Bacaller, Wanta Jampijinpa Patrick, Daniel Wilfred (University of Divinity, Western Sydney University).

Soundings on a relational epistemology: encountering Indigenous knowledge through interwoven experiences. Samuel Curkpatrick (University of Divinity).

Yol̩kala gumurrllili - towards whose chest? A relational portrait of Yol̩ḡu social organisation. Bree Blakeman and Dhambiḡ Burarrwaḡa (Australian National University).

Luḡgutja: Songs of Yol̩ḡu trade with foreigners. Brian Djangirrawuy Gumbula-Garawirrtja, Renelle Gandjitjiwuy Gondarra, Anthea Skinner, Aaron Corn (University of Melbourne).

Holding Tightly: Filmic ecologies, life flourishing and the more-than-human method. Lisa Palmer, Susanna Barnes, Tamsin Wagner and Amias Hanley (University of Melbourne, University of Saskatchewan).

Yawulyu mardukuju-patu-kurlangu: Relational dynamics of Warlpiri women's song. Georgia Curran and Enid Nangala Gallagher (University of Sydney).

Inma Way: relational dynamics of song, kin and country in Anangu performance. Diana James, Inawinytji Williamson, Charlie Ilyatjari and Iuy Nganyinytja (Australian National University, University of Adelaide).

Art Yarning: On an Indigenised Social Science Research Method. Elinor Assoulin (RMIT)

Gift to one another: interpreting songlines through the relational dynamics of *kuruwarri*. Wanta Jampijinpa Patrick, Samuel Curkpatrick.

Woven together in song: collaborative knowledge and the creativity of *raypirri'*. Daniel Wilfred, Samuel Curkpatrick.

Dislocation, exploration, invigoration: A dialogue on artistic values and ethical relationality. Juanita Mulholland, Sarah Bacaller (Western Sydney University)

Additional project publications (accepted or under review)

Journal articles:

Curkpatrick, S. Difference Within Identity: Recognition, Growth and the Circularity of Indigenous Knowledge.

Curkpatrick, S., Bacaller, S. and Pawu, W.J., Who is Country? An Indigenous Imperative to Theological Response(ibility) in Australia.

Curkpatrick, S., Pawu, W.J. and Sustanto, H. Symbolic Cohesion and Interpretive Freedom: Embodying Unity in Diversity through Warlpiri *Ngurra-kurlu* and Indonesian Pancasila.

Curkpatrick S. and Wilfred, D. The Wind is Always Blowing: Generative Crosscurrents of Ethnographic Dialogue in Australia.

Book chapters:

Curkpatrick, S. and Wilfred, D., 2023. Shimmering Brilliance: A Yolŋu Aesthetic of Creativity and Collaboration. In Kerry Murphy, John Gabriel and Sarah Kirby eds. *Australasian Music at Home and Abroad*, North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2023.

Wilfred, D. and Curkpatrick, S., 2023. The Groove of *Raypirri'*: Following the Clapping Sticks into a New Generation. In Aaron Corn, Anthea Skinner, Anita Archer, Frederic Kiernan and Peter Otto, eds. *Varieties of Imagination, Creativity and Wellbeing in Australia*. Unlikely e-books.

Wilfred, D., Peters, A. and Curkpatrick, S. Converging Currents: Memories of Migration, Diplomacy and the Gathering Winds of Ngukurr." 2022. In Haley, K. ed. *Ludwig Leichardt: Before the Clearing*.

Media and popular publications:

Pawu, W.J., Petty, C. & Curkpatrick, S. 2022. Reading country, being read by country. *Surrender Co.* podcast. Broadcast tbc. <https://www.surrender.org.au/podcast>.

Curkpatrick, S. & Bacaller, S. and Pawu, W.J. 2022. Beyond angry protesters and inked arms, there's this First Nations story of the Southern Cross - one of unity and belonging. *The Conversation* (AU), 6 May. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/beyond-angry-protesters-and-inked-arms-theres-this-first-nations-story-of-the-southern-cross-one-of-unity-and-belonging-181161>. Accessed 16 May, 2022.

Curkpatrick, S., Bacaller, S., & Pawu, W. J. (2022). Beyond angry protesters and inked arms, there's this first nations story of the Southern cross - one of unity and belonging. *Zadok Perspectives*, (156), 6. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.692973166500034>.

Bacaller, S. Hunting with Jampijinpa: Beginning home. Under review [Island Magazine].

Bacaller, S. Woven Culture: Juanita Mulholland. *PIP: Permaculture Magazine*. Issue 25 (2022), 74–78.

Media

The following short clips were developed from recorded symposium material and project-funded discussions. These clips will soon be published and distributed through ICTV (Indigenous Community Television) and the University of Divinity YouTube channel. They are designed as resources to stimulate learning and discussion on key themes explored throughout this project:

Please see: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtTFZcoa-nWlBjjOBhsmROFZib2H-XLYU>

Juice and tea: Ngurra-kurlu in Melbourne. Wanta Pawu (3:00)

Find your story and share it. Daniel Wilfred. (4:37)

Manikay - an invitation to share and understand. Daniel Wilfred (2:21)

Raki' - pulling us all together. Daniel Wilfred (2:57)

Raypirri' and attentive listening. Daniel Wilfred (5:00)

Wata - the cleansing wind. Daniel Wilfred (6:17)

Yolngu way, Balanda way - learning from each other. Daniel Wilfred (7:26)

On Milpirri. Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu (4:30)

The seed that started Milpirri. Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu (1:20)

On the University of Divinity YouTube channel only:

Doing theology - who are we listening to? Ray Minniecon (2:25).

Two ways of doing theology. Garry Deverell (3:03).

What is listening? Garry Deverell (2:27).

From the desert to the sea and beyond. Glenn Loughrey (2:53).

Searching for Peace. Glenn Loughrey (2:53).

An Elephant on Country. Glenn Loughrey (3:31).

Healthy River, Healthy Country. Glenn Loughrey (2:09).

Lunġutja: Songs of Yolŋu Trade with Foreigners

Full recordings of the symposium above (parts 1 and 2) are also available on the University of Divinity YouTube Channel.

Education Resources

Utilisation of resources in collaborative teaching at the Australian Art Orchestra's *Creative Music Intensive* (in December 2021 and September 2022) and Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

Bochner, N., Curkpatrick, S., Wilfred, D., Endean, A. 2022. *Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Classroom: WATA. Interactive webinar*, 2 May. Live broadcasts on Youtube, 11:00–12:30pm, 1:00–2.30pm and video available through Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's social media. Department of Education and Training, Victorian Challenge and Enrichment Series. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQQkneaD3cQ>. Accompanied with high-school resources developed by Bochner, N., Curkpatrick, S. and Le Feure, J.

Conference proceedings

Curkpatrick, S. 2022. Embodying unity in diversity through Warlpiri ngurra-kurlu and Indonesian Pancasila. In *Gracious Engagement: Dialogue across the Theological Spectrums*. Association of Practical Theology in Oceania, 2 December.

Curkpatrick, S., Pawu, W., Bacaller, S. 2022. New Connections and New Separations: Songlines as an Approach to Theological Enquiry. University of Divinity Research Day, 1 June.

Curkpatrick, S., Wilfred, D., Wilfred D., Knight, P., Endean, A. *Raki* (String): The Character of Collaboration. In *Cooking the Kangaroo: Conversations on Indigenous Song, Spirituality and Connection*, facilitated by Curkpatrick, S. University of Divinity and Indigenous Knowledge Institute, University of Melbourne. In association with the 2021 Annual Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia and the 20th Symposium on Indigenous Music and Dance, University of New South Wales, 10 December.

Garawirrtja, B.D., Gondarra, R.G., Skinner, A., Corn, A. and Langton, M. *Lungutja*: Songs of Yolŋu Trade with Foreigners. In *Cooking the Kangaroo: Conversations on Indigenous Song, Spirituality and Connection*, facilitated by Curkpatrick, S. University of Divinity and Indigenous Knowledge Institute, University of Melbourne. In association with the 2021 Annual Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia and the 20th Symposium on Indigenous Music and Dance, University of New South Wales, 10 December.

Pawu, W.J. 2021. Wantarri-tarri and Ngurra-Kurlu. Keynote address. In *Wantarri-tarri: The Gift Road*. Symposium. University of Divinity, 8 December.

Pawu, W.J., 2021. Cooking the Kangaroo. Keynote address, in *Cooking the Kangaroo: Conversations on Indigenous Song, Spirituality and Connection*, facilitated by Curkpatrick, S. University of Divinity and Indigenous Knowledge Institute, University of Melbourne. In association with the 2021 Annual Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia and the 20th Symposium on Indigenous Music and Dance, University of New South Wales, 10 December.

Pawu, W.J., Curkpatrick, S., Loughery, G., Deverell, G., Minniecon, R., Sherlock, P., Champion, D. 2021. *Wantarri-tarri: The Gift Road*. Panel discussion. University of Divinity, 8 December.

Contact

For further information on this project or to get in touch with any of the investigators, please contact Sam Curkpatrick through the University of Divinity staff directory, <https://staff.divinity.edu.au/staff/samuel-curkpatrick/>.