

Address to the Garma Festival August 2006

Ngajurna yirdiji Jilja-wana Jampijinpa. Ngajurna Warlpiri kurlirra marlu Janami Desert jangka. Ngajunyangu warringiyiji Kulpurlurnu manu Pawu.

Hi! My name is Steven Patrick Jampijinpa. My bush name is Jilja-wana, and it means “near the sand dunes.” I am a Warlpiri man, and I come from Lajamanu, but my grandfather’s country is Pawu-Kulpurlurnu which is located to the east and to the north of the Tanami Desert.

My father remembers the time when he first met a white person (the famous Miss Pink), and members of our family remember being forcefully removed from our home country to Lajamanu, which is on Gurindji country. Some of our old people tell stories of the days when pastoralists hunted Warlpiri like rabbits, shooting and poisoning family members. Some of my people in Lajamanu are of the stolen

generation, having had brothers and sisters taken away from them, never seeing those family members again.

I have been invited to share with you about a presentation called “Milpirri” that our community performed in November of last year, 2005. The Garma Festival, now taking place, is based around a traditional story from the Top End that talks about fresh, creek water meeting salt water from the ocean. In the brackish meeting place of the two kinds of water, there is an abundance of life. This is a metaphor about different cultures and people groups meeting and sharing, and out of the exchange comes a richer life experience. Because the Warlpiri are Desert People, for us this metaphor is better expressed in a traditional story that belongs to most of the Jampijinpa-Jangala clan. This story is a Jukurrpa, a Dreamtime story, about a certain rain cloud. In the story smoke from clearing fires rises and mixes with small clouds. This causes huge rain clouds to be formed. These rain clouds give out lightning and thunder and cause violent rains to sweep the desert. Out of the violent meeting of rising hot air and falling cold air, and the following display, comes

life-giving rain. This rain transforms the sun-baked desert into a place of lush and abundant life. This story is a metaphor about the meeting of Warlpiri and mainstream cultures and people groups. In the past we had our violent meeting, and our cultures were all mixed up, but there is hope for a life-giving future for us all.

The centerpiece of the Milpirri presentation was a sacred ceremony of the Warlpiri people called the Jarda-warnpa, also called the fire ceremony. In our traditional culture there is a long series of song cycles leading up to the performance of the Jarda-warnpa. I selected four verses from the song cycles to be the themes of dance stories in the presentation. With permission from the old people, each of these dance stories was told in four different interpretations. We performed a purlapa, a traditional men's dance; a yawulyu, a traditional women's dance; a contemporary girls' action dance, and a contemporary boys' rap dance. Each dance story was told in four different ways; four groups of four dances.

As in many communities, prior to Milpirri, because of the influences of mainstream culture, most of our young people were not interested in the traditional stories, song cycles, ceremonies and dances. After we got permission from the old people to reinterpret our stories in a more contemporary way, the young people found the stories to be very interesting, and are now wanting to learn in the traditional way, as well as re-interpret the stories in more contemporary forms. This has brought joy to our old people.

The first of the stories that we danced was “Pilapakanu” which tells about wet-season floods. The vast flood-plains that are created by these seasonal rains provide a feast of colour, activity and celebration with the arrival of waterbirds to the desert. This story is the story of “manyuwana,” the season of celebration. Warlpiri people know how to celebrate, and we have celebrated for hundreds of years, in our cycle of ceremonies. The waterbird dance reminded us of the need to continue this tradition of celebration as a major part of our community life.

The second story was about “Warlawurru” the wedged-tail eagle. A strong, wind-tamer, the wedge-tail eagle protects his country, inspiring the Warlpiri nation, our families and our community to learn how to care for all those things that are precious to us; such as our language, our cultural practices, our rich heritage in our old people, and our Jukurrpa. We call this “mardarni,” in the Warlpiri language.

The third story was about “Wardapi,” the goanna. This set of dances told the story of a young man’s initiation ceremony. During the ceremony, mothers exhort their sons to be guided along the straight track, following in the footsteps of those who are proven to be wise. The sons are not to be distracted and deceived by goanna holes, which seem to promise good tucker, but actually may hide a snake; a thing of great danger. Many aspects of mainstream culture, such as grog, greed for possessions and money and such like, have tricked our people and gotten them caught up in lifestyles that are leading to tragic death. Our traditional story lights up the path that will lead us back to health as a nation, and we call this “purami.”

The fourth story is about “Wampana,” the wallaby. These dances tell about the journey a wallaby made which joined paths with an emu. Because the two animals traveled together in unity, with a common direction, their travelling was blessed with rain that provided all their needs in abundance. This unity of direction and common caring and sharing we call, “jintangka.”

The four values that sit under the stories in the song cycle leading up to the jarda-warnpa ceremony, manywana, mardarni, purami and jintangka, are values that previously made our Warlpiri nation strong. They are also values that will make us strong again, if we re-embrace them and apply their wisdom to the problems that we face in our communities; communities which suffer, sometimes violently, due to the clash and mix up of traditional and mainstream cultures. Not only will these values help our communities, but we believe these values will add richness to the mainstream culture. This is why we want to invite guests to our Milpirri festivals in the future.

The 2005 Milpirri presentation was concluded with an extract from our Jarda-warnpa ceremony. In the traditional form of the ceremony, the Traditional Trustees, as covenant heads of their clan and country, submitted themselves to punishment by fire, to pay the penalty for all the wrong things that had been done by the clan in country. After this act of atonement, the two tribes of the Warlpiri nation, Warnayaka and Ngaliya, could sit down, sort out any differences and difficulties, and be reconciled to one another. There could never be reconciliation without atonement. Someone must pay for the wrong-doings. But, after the reconciliation, Warlpiri law forbids the revisiting of the wrong-doings for the purpose of blame. Atonement means that sorries have been said by all parties and shake hands has taken place. Reconciliation means that with the past having been once and for all dealt with, we can sit down as equals and together sort out how to deal with the challenges of today, and prepare for a better future tomorrow. Jarda-warnpa allows the community to start afresh, with strength and hope and a renewed commitment to the traditional Warlpiri values that are embedded in the song cycles, stories, ceremonies and jukurrpa.

We believe that the lessons we have learned from Milpirri are lessons that will help the mainstream. The traditional stories that were told to us by Christian missionaries, were stories of atonement and reconciliation. However, our Jarda-warnpa ceremony was with us long before the missionaries came to us with their stories. It is time for reconciliation, but there can be no reconciliation without proper and thorough atonement. We believe that the mainstream needs Jarda-warnpa, to make progress in reconciliation. In the past, wrong things have been done by both Indigenous and non-indigenous, and we all need to do proper business. We invite everyone who is working for lasting reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous to celebrate atonement with us, and move forward the processes of reconciliation at our next Milpirri presentation in 2007. Copies of the DVD of the 2005 Milpirri can be purchased from me during the rest of the Garma Festival.

Thank you for listening to my talk.

Ngula-juku.