

**Curran, Georgia. 2020. *Sustaining indigenous songs. Contemporary Warlpiri ceremonial life in Central Australia* (Foreword by Otto Jungarrayi Sims). London, New York: Berghahn Books. 206 pp. Hb.: \$120.00/£89.00. ISBN: 9781789206074.**

Book review by

**Paraskevi Zotali**

Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences

This book meticulously explores and vividly discusses continuity and change in the ceremonial practices of the Warlpiri people of Yuendumu, a settlement situated in the Central Desert Region (Tanami) of Australia, with an emphasis on songs. The ethnography is based on fieldwork that took place during the years 2005–2008, along with ten years of continuous interaction between the author and the communities. Apart from its theoretical contributions, in terms of community impact, this ethnography supports the Warlpiri in sustaining their ceremonial practices, especially their songs. Being in alignment with this stance, apart from providing feedback for the anthropological discipline (esoteric review), I chose to include in this review comments relevant to the general audience as well (exoteric review) to support the wide accessibility of the book.

The Introduction brings the reader, right from the beginning of the book, next to the anthropologist who first dives into the world of Warlpiri ceremonies, a world unknown to her at the time. The author provides a short yet strong glimpse of how trying to make sense of the experience of Other may feel, which is a start potentially not too welcoming for the general reader, though very appealing to the anthropologist. *Chapter One* briefly offers the multiplicity of state, academic, and community approaches to what maintaining the Aboriginal songs/ceremonies is about, arguing in contrast to the common rhetoric that the Warlpiri continue to hold vital ceremonies such as Kurdiji, the young boys' initiation ritual. The author's arguments are situated within two main theoretical strands. Engaging with the structure/agent understanding of culture, the book argues

that Warlpiri are actively shaping and creatively negotiating the traditional worldviews and practices; however, at the same time, through ceremonial participation, they adopt social values and core themes. Performance theory is the main mode of approaching the Warlpiri songs and rituals (“they are powerful of what they do rather of what they mean”), but the author also stresses the through-language function of songs as guiding manuals for participants. *Chapter Two* constitutes a very well-written, concise account of the history of Warlpiri in the region and contemporary life in Yuendumu, particularly valuable to introducing new readers to Aboriginal life trajectories. In *Chapter Three*, the author presents an overview of Warlpiri song types based on an emic classification relevant to ceremonial context and gender roles, tracing important changes over the years. The main ethnographical case study is presented in *Chapter Four*, a detailed account of a Kurdiji ceremony that took place in Yuendumu in the summer of 2007. It contains the highlight of the book, the description of the verses sung during the ceremony, along with the “thought path” of the singers as they guide the ceremony. The songs narrate the journey of ancestral women from Yapurnu (Lake Mackay) to Yuluwurru (Lake Lewis), forming an intricate and spellbinding connection of places, animals, plants, waters, rocks, and humans. In *Chapter Five*, the author revisits the theoretical discussion of *Chapter One*, now enriched by the ethnographic accounts. The main point is that the Kurdiji ceremony remains of actual social value, while other Warlpiri ceremonies, such as curing, have declined following shifting conditions in the economy, communications, demographics, and other factors. The author argues that the ceremonies serve as “less conscious” ways of transmitting social knowledge while they construct 1) liminal social spaces, 2) male/female realms (a very interesting account is provided here for the complex gender-related transitions and inversions on Jukurrpa songs and ceremonial practices), and 3) widespread social interconnectedness. In the Conclusion, the author provides a synopsis emphasizing the features of the Kurdiji ceremony that allowed it to preserve (adaptability, performance-base, overarching themes, and wide-scale incorporation). Finally, the author shares the agony of the elders to sustain the ceremony and pass it on.

One of the book’s most important contributions to the anthropology of Aboriginal peoples is the eloquent, rich documentation of the Kurdiji songs (*Chapter Four* and *Annex*), including a valuable transcription, translation, and analysis of the texts’ meaning in relation to specific places/stories (Dreaming). It would be useful to present some examples of these verses with this well-presented analysis earlier in the book to help the reader make more concrete the Warlpiri ideas and events described in the previous chapters. A second theme that stands out throughout the book is the exploration of the Aboriginal

cosmological concept of Jukurrpa (Dreaming). Through the detailed ethnographic description coupled with historical and theoretical contextualization, both the general reader and the anthropologist can access nuanced understandings of the multi-level, eternal yet accommodative time-space of Jukurrpa and appreciate the beauty of Aboriginal philosophy. The most challenging aspect for the reader is probably to follow the kinship terms and associated relations, especially for those not well-acquainted with Aboriginal kinship systems. The depiction of the ethnographer's relationship with various members of the community is detailed, multi-leveled, and spreads throughout the whole book, so the reader never loses sight of the agency that the latter exercise in forming the experiences and knowledge of the former. In addition, the account provided on the collaboration between the ethnographer and the community in order to conduct the research serves as an ethnographic tool itself: it illuminates the motives and incentives of the community members; for example, the elders eagerly call the ethnographer to record the song in an effort to preserve it for the future generations, but it also documents in practice ceremonial rules such as the restrictions on performing certain songs (e.g., the ethnographer being a woman can only witness the ceremonial part accessible to Warlpiri women).

In summary, the book is well-structured, theoretically solid, and ethnographically nuanced and delivers what its title promises: indeed, its strongest feature is the account of continuity and change in Warlpiri ceremonies with a focus on songs. While it will be of value to anthropologists interested in themes such as Aboriginal people, anthropology of music and performance studies, it can also offer a nuanced, albeit challenging in a few parts, introduction to the Aboriginal world(s) for the general audience.