Western Desert and Family Life

Mr Ward was born into a large family that lived in the remote Gibson Desert of WA unaffected by western influences. His father, Kalma, also known as Tjakamarra had five wives and many children. In desert society, all the wives are considered to be mothers to Mr Ward and all Tjakamarra’s children are considered true siblings. Together they lived from the land, camped and travelled with other desert families and regularly participated in desert ceremonial life. His birth mother, Katapi, also known as Pulpurru is now one of the oldest persons still living on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

The family was brought into Warburton Mission in 1965 by government reconnaissance parties charged with finding families living on their traditional desert lands. The removal of these families was a direct consequence of Australian British co-operation during the Cold War. They were endangered as their lands lay in the Blue Streak missile/rocket testing flight path associated with the Weapons Research Establishment program. The removal from their traditional lands changed their lives. Relocated to larger settlements the desert peoples were encouraged to become sedentary dwellers, dependent on western foods, healthcare, education. Extended families were split and members relocated to communities many hundreds of kilometres distant. Kinship ties were rendered asunder. At Warburton Mission the core members of what became known as the Ward Family found themselves on another Indigenous culture’s land. They were often treated poorly in the competition for scarce resources.


Shortly after their arrival at Warburton a film maker Ian Dunlop asked members of Tjakamarra’s family as well as two other families to return to their traditional lands to be filmed living according to their customary ways. They are featured in the subsequent documentary, *Desert People*, processing natural foods, making stone tools, hunting, finding water, using fire, preparing and using bush medicines, but mostly they are featured living together as a family unit — successfully adapting to a harsh and arid environment. Weeks after filming Tjakamarra died and his widows scattered to other parts of the desert where they remarried and had further children thus increasing significantly the number of Mr Ward’s siblings.

Mr Ward spoke four desert languages fluently Mantjiltjarra and Pintupi from his own desert country, Ngaanyatjarra from Warburton his main adult residence and Pitjantjatjara his wife’s language. He was a fluent communicator in English.
Mr Ward as artist and dancer

Mr Ward utilised his vast cultural knowledge of songs and dances as a performer cross-culturally and was often asked to give welcome speeches and performances to the general public, most notably: at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art; at the opening of the Tjulyuru Civic Centre and Art Gallery, Warburton; at land management conferences in Alice Springs, Brisbane, Perth and China and at the native title determination for the Ngaanyatjarra Lands in 2005.

As an artist, Mr Ward initially painted acrylic on canvas and his early works feature in the Warburton Arts Collection (the largest Indigenous owned art collection in Australia). For trust, a multi-media exhibition involving Indigenous commentaries on the impact of mineral and oil explorations on their traditional lands, Mr Ward chose to create a written artwork, stencilled across the length of the gallery from an original in his own hand writing. Who talks for my country now? This artwork formed the opening feature in the travelling exhibition, which in 2004 was opened by the Prime Minister John Howard as part of the Perth International Arts Festival.

With a functioning artglass kiln installed at Warburton Community, Mr Ward chose to create a complex political artwork entitled The Seven Seals of the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, 7 x artglass discs each featuring one of the seminal creative beings in Indigenous culture. His use of the English word ‘seal’ was purposeful to convey that these creative ancestors are the insignia, the emblems, the authentication and the validation of desert culture and reflects the depth of his cross-cultural understanding. Following his death, Daisy Ward chose to use one of these glass seals when speaking on the steps of Parliament House with the Special Rapporteur for Indigenous Peoples about Mr Ward and deaths in custody in general. (A photograph of this event was published in the West Australian).

Mr Ward’s role in desert culture

Mr Ward was killed in middle age, at a time when he had accumulated much desert learning and was responsible for its safe keeping and transmission. To enable his continued work with scientists across central Australia he undertook sacred learning in several Indigenous ceremonial traditions, increasing his personal knowledge and cultural responsibilities beyond normal cultural expectations. This sacred knowledge and participation enabled him to become a respected leader in the cross-cultural domain.

“His death was not only a profound loss for his family and community but also to his culture, as it is clear that a great deal of time had been put into teaching Mr Ward a significant cultural knowledge, skills and experience, in respect to which it was intended he would play a crucial role, passing this knowledge on to the next generation.” Magistrate Benn (KA 326 of 2011, Worksafe and State of Western Australia. The transcript of this finding cannot be reproduced without the prior written consent of the attorney-general unless reproduced for the purposes of a report of a judicial proceeding. This quote is taken from my own notes taken in the Kalgoorlie courthouse at the time of reading and is an exact facsimile of that found in the transcript).
“He was a thinker, a leader, a family man, he respected the elders and they respected him.” David Brooks 2008.

Deeply embedded in his desert culture, Mr Ward acted upon his responsibilities to others: his several mothers, many siblings and even greater number of nieces and nephews as well as others with whom he formed close friendships. Always a successful hunter, Mr Ward took great pleasure in feeding bush foods and sharing his work salary with those with whom he had an affinity.

Mr Ward was chairman of Warburton Community for several years and a youth worker actively campaigning to reduce substance abuse on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

His death profoundly affected the Ngaanyatjarra people and in particular the land and community development aspirations of his close family living at Patjarr Community. In accordance with customary funerary dictates, the people of Patjarr dispersed upon his death. Into the vacuum of an emptying residential community the state acted to remove civic services in terms of the school and the clinic thus reducing the viability of the community once funerary rituals were complete and people were once more under customary law able to return to their homeland settlement.

**Mr Ward’s public role in wider Australia**

In his twenties Mr Ward showed an aptitude for leadership and political engagement. He worked until his death fighting to gain title not just for his own traditional lands but for others with whom he was connected through culture. He was well known throughout the desert area of Western Australia and was often called on to help articulate traditional peoples’ aspirations. “We have to stay in contact with one another to stay strong. Every community has a lot of respect for each other’s country. That is why we support one another and don’t let any one community go down” I. Ward.

Mr Ward was cross-culturally curious— he found intellectual stimulation working with scientists: hydrographers, biologists, botanists, palaeontologists, geologists. This work led to a personal fascination with western concepts of ‘deep time’, the time prior to either Indigenous or settler occupation of what is now Australia.

Together Daisy Ward and her cousin brother Mr Ward conducted many cross-cultural courses for staff and contributed to professional development courses for medical and teaching staff on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands.

He initiated the first of the Indigenous land management unit on the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and was integral to the project *Lurrjturingkulan Kulilku Palyalku/ Working Together: Joint Management of the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve*. He worked to educate lawyers and anthropologists in native title and land management negotiations with governments. He knew what it meant to hold an academic title and said he had a PhD in his own culture. He often called himself “professor of the bush”. Mr Ward was a natural statesman and attended many conferences in Australia and represented Indigenous Australians in New Zealand and China.
This artwork reflects those aspects of Mr Ward that the photographer recalls from her memory of their times together. The red sand is from his country and together the elements indicate his capacity as a desert hunter and as an agent of feral animal control as a component of his land management employment. The lower jaw and the spent cartridges are from camel culling whilst the spears were created for young boys as practice tools. The barb is attached to the shaft of the child’s spears with kangaroo sinew. Mr Ward and his cousin-sister Daisy Ward together gave gender appropriate cultural and cross-cultural education within the Ngaanyatjarra Education school system.
Desert Still Life I

This artwork reflects those aspects of Mr Ward that the photographer recalls from her memory of their times together. The red sand is from his country; the emu feather, wool and spinifex head-ring or manguri, was made by his mother, the painted gum nut beads made by his niece. The three white mice indicate his work on feral animal control and the wooden python his work on protecting and tagging endangered pythons and rock wallabies.

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Jan Turner’s notes on Mr Ward, created and checked with birth family at Mina Mina October 2017. Widow and sons were unable to attend. However, some of the source material quotations come from the funeral pamphlet for which they have given their permission of use for the Deathscapes project. Remaining quotes are from a published source. These notes are created for inclusion in the Deathscapes project (Curtin University).