

## TRANSLATING THE NAMES OF GOD INTO WARLPIRI

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This is a practical article describing progress to date in translating the names of God into Warlpiri.

Warlpiri is the language spoken by some 3000 people living in the Tanami Desert region in north-central Australia. Contact with white-European culture dates from about 1920, and steady exposure to the Gospel through mission activity dates from about 1950, with most of that work being conducted through English. However, due to the language barrier, the church is still considered to be in its infancy.

Translation work has been undertaken since the mid-1960s by members of the Baptist Mission and the Summer Institute of Linguistics. My wife and I have been living and working on one of the Warlpiri settlements, Lajamanu, since 1978, and are in the early stages of translation. In addition to a number of simple Bible stories in print, scripture selections from Genesis and Mark are now available on a limited basis. It is from this small amount of translated material that information for this paper is taken.

### History of references to God's name in Warlpiri.

Since the early days of establishment of the Warlpiri church, there has been little variety in the reference to God's names. References to him as "God" in English have not resulted in the widespread common use of this label either in direct address to him or in speaking about him. Rather, the common usage has been of the Warlpiri word *wapirra*. This term is used reciprocally between father and son. Obviously then, the Warlpiri have extended the meaning of "God the Father" to encompass the entire Godhead. References to the Holy Spirit, seldom made and then usually in songs, are made with the term *pirlirra* which is the word used to refer to a person's own living spirit, the principle of life itself.

Some modifications of this term are applied descriptively. At various times God is described as *wiri* "big, boss", *jinta* "one", or *ngurrju* "good". In addition younger speakers have picked up the English term "Lord" as it applies to God. However, there seems to be little understanding of just what this word means. More recently the transliterated term *Kaatu*, "God", has been applied. However, the usage here is primarily limited to written songs and paraphrased stories. Overall, the preference among the people is for the more familiar *Wapirra*.

### Scriptural designations for God's names

Three primary names for God are used in the Old Testament: *el*, *YHWH*, and *adon*, *adonai*. The first of these, *el* in the singular means "God" in the widest sense possible. The plural *elohim* may also refer to "gods" in general. The personal name of God is represented by the unpronounced *YHWH*, the special covenant name which he revealed to Moses (Ex 3.14). While *elohim* exhibits God displayed in his power as the

creator and governor of the physical universe, the name *YHWH* designates his nature as he stands in relation to man, as the only almighty, true, personal, and eternal Being. Often, this designation of God's name is rendered in English as "LORD". Moffatt, in his translation, reflecting perhaps more of the meaning as revealed in the above Exodus passage, renders the name "the Eternal". The third word used *adon*, *adonai*, is the one that Jewish readers of scripture would normally substitute when they came upon the name *YHWH* in text. This, while satisfying the Jewish sense of piety, blurred greatly the true meaning of *YHWH*. *Adonai* by itself commonly meant "lord", "sir", or "master". From this word came the translation *kurios* in the Septuagint, followed by the Vulgate *Dominus*.

In the New Testament two words are used for the names of God: *kurios*, as previously mentioned, and *theos*. *Kurios* is used variously to refer to the *YHWH* of the Old Testament, as a title for Christ, as an expression of ownership, or as a polite form of address. *Theos* is the ordinary, secular Greek word for "god", but the New Testament writers readily took over this pagan usage and adapted it to fit the Christian concept of God.

### Traditional Warlpiri religion

Similar to Aboriginal groups throughout Australia, Warlpiri religion centers around what are commonly called "The Dreamings". The Warlpiri term for this is *Jukurrpa*. *Jukurrpa* may also refer to an ordinary dream, the verbal form being *jukurr-mani*, "to dream".

Warlpiri religion is animistic and highly ceremonial. Basically, in what must be in this limited space an over-simplification, the Warlpiri believe that they are spiritually related to a number of mythical spirit beings, "The Dreamings". These Dreamings can be viewed as spirit persons who often took on the form of animals and who were endowed with supernatural powers of motion and perception. The world as it is now stands is the indirect and often accidental result of their activity. Evidence of their existence is found today in the form of physical landscape features such as waterholes, hills, and trees. Much of the ceremonial life consists of symbolic re-enactments through song, dance, and painting of the activities of a particular Dreaming spirit. It is necessary for the preservation of life as it is known for these ceremonies to be carefully observed, the participants themselves being indwelt by the particular Dreaming whose ceremony is being performed. To ask what a particular ceremony means is in itself a meaningless question to the Warlpiri. One does not expect meaning apart from the reality of the ceremony. Truly for the Warlpiri, to be is to do.

Though these ceremonies are commonly represented as having been passed down unchanged from generation to generation from time immemorial, new ceremonies are constantly being introduced from other areas. Often this involves members of two Aboriginal groups exchanging the rights over a certain ceremony which is then incorporated with all the rest. The same thing has happened with certain aspects of the Christian faith which have been incorporated into some of the ceremonial ritual, much in the fashion of a cargo cult.

It is perhaps improper to speak of an indigenous Warlpiri theology since their religion consists not in a codified body of beliefs but in this living body of ceremonial "law". Thus what has come down from the Dreamings is the *kuruwarri* "law", which to them means essentially "reality, custom and belief". This *kuruwarri* dictates all aspects of ethical and religious behaviour.

### Warlpiri names for God

The problem in translating God's names into Warlpiri consists in maintaining a balance between two extremes. We have not wanted to identify God in such a way that he becomes indistinguishable from the Dreamings. Nor have we wanted to pigeon-hole him through the exclusive use of transliteration.

Warlpiri co-translators have consistently shied away from calling God *Jukurrpa*. So, as mentioned before we have chosen to speak of God *elohim* as *Kaatu*, using the transliterated form. We have retained the word *jukurrpa* whenever it is necessary to speak of other, false gods. However there is still the potential problem with using just *Kaatu* by itself of making the Christian God something foreign, completely unrelated to matters of real spiritual significance.

Thus we have come to rely on another term which emphasizes God's essential nature as *YHWH*, namely *jukurrarnu*. This word is built on the same root *jukurr-* as is *jukurrpa*, "dreaming". Its basic meaning is "timelessness" and it is used to describe physical features of the land which are viewed as always being there. Some speakers view *jukurrarnu* in terms of "history". In all Genesis references to *YHWH* we have used *Kaatu Jukurrarnu*. In all Mark passages where *kurios* refers to God and not specifically to Christ we have also used *Kaatu Jukurrarnu*.

New Testament references to Christ as *kurios* are handled differently. At one stage we experimented with the term *Watirririrri* which refers to a ceremonial boss of highest rank who has the authority to instigate ceremonies. While adequately conveying the sense of Christ's authority, there remained potential negative connotations relating to Warlpiri ceremonial life of which we might be unaware.

Here it is that the Holy Spirit led us to make a chance discovery. Transcribing the personal testimony of the local Warlpiri pastor, I noticed that he described how "my *Warlaljamarrri* called and embraced me (to the faith)". *Warlaljamarrri* is based on the root *warlalja* which means variously "family, possessions, belongingness". A *warlaljamarrri* is the "owner" or "possessor" of something. While previously being aware of the "ownership" aspect of *warlaljamarrri*, this was the first time I had heard it applied spontaneously and naturally in a fashion which did justice to the entire concept of "Lordship". Thus references to Christ as *kurios* are now being handled by *Warlaljamarrri*.

Translating "Holy Spirit" has presented numerous difficulties, primarily regarding the choice of word for the concept of "holy". We experimented with one word, *tarruku*, which has the basic notion of "taboo". This was

deemed unsatisfactory on a number of counts, not the least of which being that it failed to speak of the moral properties of holiness. Although we are constantly on the lookout for a more suitable term, here again we have employed *jukurrarnu* as in *Kaatu-kurlangu Pirlirra Jukurrarnu*, literally "God-possessive Spirit Eternal", "God's Eternal Spirit". Given the Warlpiri's extreme respect for things of antiquity and history, which also have relevance for the present, this is not a bad starting point.

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## USING COMPUTERS IN A TRANSLATION PROJECT

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To produce a first draft translation of the Bible requires a lot of careful work. However, every translator knows that the first draft is only the beginning. Once it is completed there are countless corrections to be made, in part based on comments received from others. These comments need to be evaluated and then entered onto the manuscript. A typist may be hired to prepare the various revised drafts as they are produced. And in the end, a clean copy is prepared for the printer. Every time a new draft is prepared, someone needs to proofread the typescript to make sure that there are no errors. There is certainly a lot of careful work that needs to be done after the first draft has been translated.

There are modern machines available to help a translation team with some of this exacting and time-consuming manuscript work. A computer has the capability of making the work of revision much easier, and in some cases more thorough, than has been possible in the past. This article attempts to explain how a computer can be useful to a translation project.

A computer has a keyboard like a typewriter, which allows a person to type material into it. The text is not typed immediately onto paper, but appears in typed characters on a monitor which is like a TV screen. This text is then stored on a cassette tape or disk, and can be recalled for further work at any time.

There is a tremendous advantage in having the first draft of a translation on a tape or disk. A computer has the capability of taking the stored text and allowing a typist to make changes without having to type the entire text again. This means that once a typist has finished keying in the first draft of a translation, the entire text will never have to be typed again. This also means that fewer proofreadings will be needed.

In some cases in the past, translation teams have had to retype all of their work (sometimes an entire Testament), as many as four or five times before it is ready for publication. With a computer, this is no longer necessary. Once the first draft has been completed, someone can type that text into a computer, and any changes after that can be made in the text stored on the disk. And at any time in this process, a copy can be made on paper with the printer that is attached to the computer by a cable.