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SOME SIGNS AND MARKERS EMPLOYED BY THE ADNYAMATHANHA OF THE NORTHERN FLINDERS RANGES, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Bob Ellis

Abstract

This paper describes the use, construction and disposition of ‘direction-markers’ (thowa [also spelt toa, thoa and thuwa in various languages and by different authors]) that were employed historically by the Adnyamathanha and their Aboriginal neighbours (‘Lakes Groups’) in north-eastern South Australia. The construction and interpretation of the Adnyamathanha examples are briefly examined and contrasted with the toa recorded and collected from the Diyari (Dieri/Diari) and northern groups by Reuther (1981), later described by Stirling and Waite (1919) and Morphy (1972) and which have been discussed more recently by Jones and Sutton (1986), Hercus (1987) and Jones (2007, 2012).

This paper also discusses the use and form of ‘drought sticks’ (Widla-widla Wirti/Urda Varti) placed at selected locations by Adlya Wirri (Wilyaru initiated men). Like the explanation of the Diyari toa, these objects were partly buried in the soil by their fabricators. They also involved a degree of prior preparation, in contrast with the Adnyamathanha thowa. However, unlike the Diyari toa (and Adnyamathanha thowa) they were not direction-markers. These markers were installed in association with Wilyaru initiate-restricted verbal invocations at strategic locations during the early 20th century. Their origins and use however, probably precede this period, perhaps in forms described by Jones (2007:252) as ‘magic charms’. The Widla-widla markers and their related verbal incantations were intended to bring about environmental catastrophe (drought) in retribution for perceived personal losses or mistreatment in conflicts with European pastoralists.
Introduction

The Adnyamathanha peoples (Adnya – ‘stone'; matha – ‘group'; plus -nha suffix – usually rendered as ‘Ranges mob’) are the traditional occupants of the northern Flinders Ranges, and the immediately surrounding areas, in north-central South Australia (Schebeck 1973). Their asserted traditional rights and interests were formally acknowledged by a native title consent determination over the main Ranges area made on 30 March, 2009 (Adnyamathanha No. 1 Native Title Claim Group v South Australia (No. 2) [2009] FCA 359) and more recently over additional areas on 25 February, 2014 (Coulthard v State of South Australia [2014] FCA 124).

Contemporary Adnyamathanha society is the result of the amalgamation and incorporation of a number of separate language groups that originally inhabited the Ranges and the surrounding areas. Apart from the central ranges area, those areas of occupation included Murnpeowie Station to the north, Lake Torrens and the plains west, the area associated with Lakes Blanche and Callabonna to the north-east, Lake Frome and the Frome plains east to the Olary Ridge and areas of the lower Ranges south to below present-day Hawker where they abutted the Nhukunu (Nukunu). The Nhukunhu were another Ranges Group that occupied the southern portion of the Flinders Ranges, but unlike the other groups they did not formally amalgamate with their neighbours as ‘Adnyamathanha’. The Ranges Groups and their neighbours were described by Elkin (1931, 1938a, 1938b) as the ‘Lakes Group of Tribes’. This collective description was based upon their acknowledged shared social and cultural features which included named, matrilineal, exogamous moieties (Ararru or Kararru and Mathari or Matheri) and their shared application and practice of the Wilyaru ritual which in this region was the highest stage of male initiation.

\footnote{I was told that this was a result of the fact that at the time of the formal meeting which brought about the merging of the groups, which was convened at Hideaway Well near Blinman in about 1920 (Ken McKenzie pers. comm.), the Nhukunu urgi (‘doctors’) were engaged in a long-standing sorcery-based feud with those of the northern groups. Consequently, members of that group declined to attend the gathering of Wilyaru-initiated men at that time.}
As the name suggests, the ‘Lakes Groups’ were generally located around the series of playa salt lakes of north-central and north-eastern South Australia, including Lake Eyre, Lake Gregory, Lake Torrens, Lake Frome and Lakes Blanche and Callabonna. The member groups of Elkin’s (1931) designation included the Diyari, Thirrari, Ngamini, Kuyani, Walypi, Yardliyawara, Pirlatapa, Ngadjuri, Wirangu, Nukunu, Barngala, Wangkangurru and Yandruwandha, although the Lakes Groups’ traditions also extended south to the Adelaide Plains and Port Lincoln, west to the Great Australian Bight and north-east into south-western Queensland and north-western NSW. Some variation in traditions were recognisable between the groups, such as the Adnyamathanha and Nhukunu, who occupied well-watered territories in comparison with other groups, such as the Diyari (Dieri) and Wangkangurru, whose territories were located in the desert areas of the region.

Like other groups of the region Adnyamathanha people occupied an environment which was not only thoroughly known to them through personal experience, but one which had been ordered and structured as a consequence of thousands of years of human contemplation of and cultural and economic pursuits within that environment. The Lakes Groups were also distinguished by a shared series of Mura ‘histories’ which traversed the region, describing events that had created and shaped the environment and the landscape forms. Those stories and accompanying song verses also explained the origins and habits of the animals and plants which occurred within their traditional lands and which provided sustenance and intellectual foci for the traditional regional occupants. The landscape and its occupants were further structured and classified in accordance with other social and cultural pre-occupations including moiety affiliation, matrilineal ‘totems’ and their associated totemic estates (Schebeck 1973:25–26).

The antiquity of Australian Aboriginal intellectual endeavour, coupled with the observational abilities of the group members and the fact that their societies were small in scale and their members were kin to each other, provided the ideal circumstance for the growth and maintenance of common iconographies and shared comprehension of symbols and signs amongst their member groups. Much of that comprehension and understanding was an unconscious influence on the lives of the
society members as they went about their daily business. The period of European dispossession that occurred during the mid 19th century challenged that comprehension and the continuation of those long-established iconographies.

This paper is concerned with some of the signs and symbols that had been utilised by the Adnyamathanha (and their fellow Lakes Group members) to communicate information to other Lakes Group society members in the period preceding European occupation or shortly after. The objects described shared the common feature of being constructions deliberately left in or on the ground surface, rather than portable objects that had been discarded after their function was complete. For this reason and for purposes of brevity, this paper is not concerned with ‘message sticks’, hand-signing or smoke signaling which have tended to be conflated with toa in discussions of proto-languages and ideographic messaging (Kendon 1988). This conflation is largely a result of early descriptions of toas as “probable sign language” (Reuther 1981:1-2). It is evident however, that the toa are not related to these other activities but are ‘stand alone’ artefacts with discrete functions. Other ground surface constructions, associated with birthplaces, deaths and other events were recorded by the author but they are not related to the ‘direction markers’ which are discussed in this paper. Most of the personal observations recorded in this paper were a result of inquiry by the author amongst the Adnyamathanha during the 1970s.

The Diyari Toa

In 1907, the then Director of the South Australian Museum, Sir Edward Stirling, negotiated the purchase of 1308 items of Aboriginal (predominantly Diyari) artefacts from former Lutheran Missionary, Rev. J.G. Reuther, for the sum of £400. Reuther had lived and presided as Superintendent at the Killalpaninna Mission near Lake Eyre. During his period of occupation he had assembled a comprehensive collection of weapons, adornments, charms and tools from visitors and residents of the Mission. Of particular note in this acquisition was a collection of 385 toa or ‘direction-markers’ and seven spinifex-resin dog sculptures that had not previously been identified or collected by the Museum.
The *toa* were described by the original commentators as ‘direction-markers’ that were left behind in abandoned camps to indicate the destination of the former camp members to others who might come behind. The objects were constructed of wood, gypsum and string and were generally decorated with red and yellow ochre and other materials such as hair or feathers. The work of Reuther (1981) included detailed descriptions of the *Mura* (Diyari – *Mura-Mura*) which related to the places purportedly depicted by the *toa* and which reportedly accounted for their particular form or shape.

Unfortunately, Reuther’s records did not identify the individual makers of the objects, or their method of manufacture, although some of the *toa* manufacturers may have been identified subsequently (see for example Jones 2007:280). This has led to some speculation about the manner of their collection. Furthermore, they appear to have been freshly made and collected during a short period between 1890 and 1905. Jones (2012) has suggested that they were all in fact made in 1903. A contemporary description of the *toa* was provided by H.J. Hillier, an English school teacher who had prepared a map of *Mura-Mura* locations which had been recorded and described by Reuther and who was familiar with Reuther’s collection. He noted:

> ...they make a Thdoa which was usually a piece of wood (mulga - *accacia*[sic] aneura) and on this painted a design, or fastened a few leaves or twigs at the top or moulded a shape of clay or gypsum etc etc on the wood & sticking the pointed end into the ground usually inside one of the huts left there for any relations or friends who came after they had left the camp.

(Hillier 1916)

Almost from the time they were first described in detail in 1919 by Stirling and Waite in the *Records of the South Australian Museum* the *toa* and the spinifex resin sculptures attracted controversy and allegations concerning their authenticity. Contrary to Hillier’s explanation for example, many appear to have been made from soft-wood, probably derived from packing material sourced from the mission. George ‘Poddy’ Aiston, a former police trooper, ethnographer and long term resident of the region, described the existence of the Diyari sign-markers as a “great Toa hoax”, claiming that “German teachers” had
“suggested the designs and supervised the making of those toas” (Aiston 1938). Those allegations and similar claims were never satisfactorily resolved.

Luise Hercus, who had carried out extensive field research in this part of the state from the 1960s, apparently told Jones and Sutton (1986:58) that she had never heard the term *toa* used in the region, while others such as Ben Murray (a part- Thirrari man), had apparently only seen them in the Museum collection (Jones and Sutton 1986:59). Subsequently, Hercus (1987:59-69) published a paper on one Wangkangurru site (MaRaru) that had been depicted by a *toa* in the Reuther collection. She noted that Mick McLean and Maudie Neylon, two of her informants who had detailed knowledge of traditions in that region, “had no knowledge of toas” causing her to conclude that “[i]t is difficult to understand why, amid so much traditional knowledge, there should have been such ignorance” and “I was forced to the conclusion that toas were rarely used in traditional days and became of interest as artefacts only in the early years of this century” (Hercus 1987:61).

During the 1970s I was employed in the South Australian Museum and took a particular interest in the cultural features and practices which had been described from amongst the Diyari during the early years of Mission endeavour in the region. It was evident to me that the Diyari, as immediate neighbours of the Adnyamathanha, shared many of the intellectual underpinnings that informed Adnyamathanha ideology and iconography. Consequently, I made inquiry of Adnyamathanha *Adlya Wirri* (*Wilyaru* initiated men) including Archie McKenzie in particular, and non-Adnyamathanha men from the region like Ben Murray, who were still alive in the early and mid-1970s, about those recorded systems and practices.

From the *Adlya Wirri* I consulted I learned that signs which functioned as direction-markers were also known and employed by the Adnyamathanha. From Archie McKenzie I learned that the Adnyamathanha called them *towah* (my contemporary transcription – I was not aware of Hillier’s form *thdoa* which was closer to my hearing of the name, but I was unsatisfied with Reuther’s *toa* as a record). I have subsequently chosen to refer to the Adnyamathanha version as *thowa* since on reflection this most clearly represents the name as I heard it. I
also recorded *Yara malka* ‘sign marks’, or ‘sign sticks’,\(^2\) as a description of the direction-markers. During my investigations these direction-markers were remembered, but not used. They were furthermore, much less elaborate and unprepossessing signs or constructions, compared with the more carefully made *toa* specimens in the Museum collection.

Recent linguistic inquiry, particularly involving work by Hercus, has suggested that amongst the Bilatapa (Pirlatapa), Yarluyandi and Wangkangurru the obscure term “*thuwa*” was occasionally encountered. This term meant “to bury” or “to thrust” and it was suggested that this might be the origin of Reuther’s *toa* since these were reputedly intended to be inserted into the ground (Jones 2007:257). I do not find this explanation convincing. Unlike the linguists, I have heard Aboriginal people use the name and to me it sounded much closer to *thowa* or *towah* than *thuwa*. Further, amongst the Adnyamathanha where the name also existed there was no suggestion that the direction-markers were buried or inserted into the ground.\(^3\)

While not specifically documented, it would seem that most of the *toa* in the Reuther and other collections were not collected in the course of their use. Instead, they had apparently been manufactured by a few individuals as purpose-made demonstrations of the role and appearance of those markers. They may also have been prepared as Jones (2012) has suggested, as symbols of places that had been separately documented by Reuther. Those constructions provided relatively consistent models or patterns for the collection that were described and categorised by Howard Morphy (1972) in his M.Phil. thesis. Morphy (1972) suggested that there were four basic forms. Subsequently, these objects have been considered works of contemporary art as much as functional tools and their

\(^2\) This term was also used for “message sticks” which were generally incised stones and which are widely discovered in this area.

\(^3\) Reuther records his Entry No. 1974 *toa* as “Toari Pill” meaning “to bury” and referring to the death and burial of Kakalbuna in a Bilatapa story. This is presented as further evidence of the association of the term “*thuwa*” with the *toa* name. In Adnyamathanha (Kuyani) belief Kakalbuna was a neglected child (Papadityidityi) who grew into a giant. After his death at the hands of a “Left-Handed man” and his accomplices in a *pinya* (‘revenge’) attack, his body was not buried but was transformed into Mt Termination (known as *Kakalbuna*) near Lyndhurst (see Tunbridge [1988:52-53] and also footnote 52 regarding the *Thuwari* site in Jones [2007:399]).
later presentation and display has reinforced this view (Megaw 1987).

Jones (2012) has devoted considerable attention to re-examining the Diyari toa and the different forms suggested by Morphy. He has suggested that the earliest forms distinguished by painted symbols on the main blade (described as Type 3 by Morphy), and illustrated by Hillier in his watercolour sketches, may have been prototypes derived from objects used in headdresses in ritual performances recorded in this region. A gradual diversification and miniaturisation of styles possibly followed, coinciding with a determination to reflect Mura-Mura ‘stories’ as a result of the influence of Europeans who had recognised that the ceremonial regalia used elsewhere also referred to particular Mura-Mura sites.

**The Adnyamathanha Thowa**

Not only were the Adnyamathanha thowa not as highly formalised or decorative as the Diyari toa, but in most cases my records did not associate them with Mura traditions or locations. In fact, they were primarily environmental/topographical references, albeit with indirect cultural associations and connections. In my recordings for example, Archie McKenzie (Notebook 2, 1975) told me that Mt Serle Station was indicated by a flat stone with a small pile of sand on it. These simple signs were commonly associated with other markers, normally arranged sticks or twigs surrounding the thowa, which drew a later visitor’s attention to the marker’s existence and which also indicated the immediate direction of travel taken by the departing group.

Despite the shared name, the Adnyamathanha direction-markers would appear to have more in common with markers recorded elsewhere in Australia than with the highly formalised Diyari toa. A.W. Howitt (1904:Fig. 48), for example, recorded an obal, “a guide to a following party” used by the Kurnai which was a “stick with some bark tied to one end, placed in the ground at an angle indicating the direction of the departing group (Jones

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4 I have recorded at least six different camping locations on Mt Serle Station. Some are at least 10km apart. This suggests that the thowa were not always as specific with respect to actual location as the Diyari toa.
2007:235). Jones (2007:235-236) also records a 1963 reference by N.B. Tindale to the use of a quickly fabricated marker in the Victoria Desert and a record of way-markers known as *jilan* recorded by Robert Dixon (1991) amongst the Dyirbal rainforest people of north Queensland. He notes also that deaths and funerals were a common reason for abandoning camps and that some examples of direction-indicators related to such movement were recorded from Cummeragunja mission on the Murray River (Jones 2007:236).

Amongst the Adnyamathanha, *thowa* were employed as sign markers to indicate the destination of a group who had left the camp at which the *thowa* was located. They did not represent a final destination in the proposed journey, as the Diyari *toa* apparently did, but indicated the location of the next camp to be occupied.

The *thowa* I recorded referred directly to shared knowledge of geography and topography and only occasionally, to the *Mura* cultural geography of the landscape. One example which was provided to me by Archie McKenzie (Notebook 2, 1975) concerned a sign that a group had broken camp and were leaving for Angepena Station to make their next camp. In that case a small pile of broken stone (shale) was left on top of a flat stone at the abandoned campsite to indicate the general location of the next camp. This was explained to me as referring to the ‘stony’ nature of Angepena country. I was also told that a firestick with a stone at its apex, left lying at an old campsite in association with the *thowa*, was a marker (*Yara malka*) indicating the direction taken by the earlier group to their next camp location.

A comparison of the Diyari and Adnyamathanha recordings suggests that in several cases the destinations indicated by the sign-markers are identical. In most of these cases the locations are associated by Reuther with Kuyani (Adnyamathanha) *Mura* (and Diyari *Mura-Mura*) and appear to relate to sites near the route followed by the Diyari when travelling to and from the Parachilna (*Vukatu*) ochre mines. This connection was further suggested by Archie McKenzie’s response to my inquiries concerning the spinifex dog sculptures that had formed part of the Reuther collection. He had not seen these or similar constructions but he had no hesitation in identifying several dogs which featured in the Adnyamathanha
Mura explaining the Vukatu ochre deposits. These descriptions were generally consistent with the sculpture's depictions of their identifying colourings. This fact I consider further supports Jones' (2012) explanation of the possible evolution of the Diyari toa. That is to say, that while the sculptures were a new form, their decoration derived from traditional Mura-Mura concerning dingoes and their markings.

Tindale (1959:322) also recorded the names and descriptions of eleven dogs belonging to the woman 'Mingari' in the 'Kungkarungkara' (Pleiades) story suggesting that the form and colouring of dogs (dingoes) was a cultural preoccupation amongst a diverse grouping of Aboriginal societies.

I later learned that C.P. Mountford (1937-39:17) had also observed the Adnyamathanha direction signs, although he had not apparently recorded the name for them. He noted:

The Adnjamatana Aborigines have evolved a series of direction signs by which they can indicate their direction of travel and destination. In general, a mark is made on the ground with the heel in the direction of travel and at the end is placed a symbol that indicates that direction. The symbol appears to have a relationship either to the topography of the country (see Italowie sign) or the mythology (see Copley). The ultimate destination of the party is not indicated but rather the site of the next camp. Thus, if a party left Nepabunna for say Wooltana, they would probably camp the first night at Italowie Gorge and the sign left at Nepabunna would be that of Italowie not Wooltana. The direction sign for Italowie is a [Mountford sketch] straight line with two small stones laid together. Two stones with a gap in between representing the gorge and steep hills either side pointing in the direction of Italowie so there would be little chance of mistaken identification. (Mountford 1937-1939:17)

Elsewhere he observed: “Albert [Wilton] told me the method of showing direction of travel. It consists of no more than a twig, bush or leaf placed under a stone and pointing in the direction in which the individual intends to walk. I took a photo of one such” (Mountford 1937-1939:14). Subsequently, Mountford recorded a number of examples of the thowa signs:
Malkajala Springs: longitudinal marks on stone (indicative of paintings in this gorge). Copley: two stones with a ring directed around them. The two stones indicate the two “snake” hills at Copley. Frome Creek: A pile of dirt on a stone. Angipena: Ashes on top of a flat stone. Mt Serle: a slate stone stuck up on edge. Patsy Springs: A line of soil raked up as an incomplete circle. This refers to the hills that practically encircle the spring. Wooltana: leaves placed on ground. The correct name is wuldana = leaf. [Note: this is the tar-bush: alda, Eremophila freelingi]. Mt Chambers Gorge: one stone on top of another. Refers to the shape of Mt Chambers. Going to a funeral: A bunch of “vaduaku” laid on the ground. “Vaduaku” has an extensive use in burial ceremonies. [Note: Mountford’s “vaduaku” is probably varti walka – Eremophila longifolia]. Mandi Gorge: some hair plucked from the beard is laid between two stones indicative of the beard. Frome Creek: Two stones laid similar to Italowie with branches between. The stones = the high banks, the branches, the trees”.

(Mountford 1937-1939:17)

While Mountford’s records do not exactly conform to my own, it is clear that the Adnyamathanha signs were, in most cases, little more than general environmental references with little or no elaboration or effort devoted to their construction. The variation in the forms I noted would not make comprehension difficult since the symbolism was essentially the same and the destination indicated by the signs was generally not site-specific. Where the signs do refer to Mura associations and specific site locations, such as may be the case of the two hills near Copley, the Adnyamathanha signs are likewise not as elaborate as the Diyari toa. The Adnyamathanha site Ngarnga Wabmi, which Mountford describes as “Mandi Gorge” (Mundy Gorge) and which was identified by some beard hair placed between two stones, may also be associated with a Diyari toa. In Stirling and Waite’s (1919) paper on toa, reference is made to Toa 43: “Ngankaburinani” – “to where the beard was torn out. Here the Muramura, Piridakana, once tore out his beard and threw it away.” Unlike most other toa described by the authors, this one is not attributed to a language group (Stirling and Waite 1919:120). The Diyari toa’s distinguishing feature, like the
Adnyamathanha *thowa* is some hair from a beard in this case held in place by decorated gypsum on a wooden stake.

The site at Mundy Gorge, is known to the Adnyamathanha as *Val(a)napa Ngarngarnga*, (literally “beards of the *val(a)napa*” (two first cousins, in this case male, who use the kin term *vapapa* reciprocally and who are also potential or actual “brothers-in-law” (*vinga*) – usually rendered in Australian English as “mates” and even occasionally, as a pun, as “male wives”- *miru artuna*). The site is also known as *Ngarnga Wabmi*, “the snakes' beards” – a reference to the manifestation, at this place, of the *val(a)napa* in the form of two snakes – *wabma*.

Within the gorge, two patches of lichen (also called *ngarnga*), one broad, the other long and narrow, on the side of a steep cliff face, represent the beards of the two individual snakes, who in turn, personify the moieties. According to the Adnyamathanha, ritually rubbing the chins of young men onto the particular area of lichen coinciding with their moiety affiliation promoted the growth of full beards, in the appropriate form, by the Adnyamathanha youths. The two snake cultural heroes, associated with the place at Mundy Gorge, are *Wiparu*, the yellow-faced whip snake (*Demansia psammophis*) and *Ulkari* or *Udkari*, the mulga, or king-brown snake (*Pseudechis australis*) which are *Ararru* and *Matheri* affiliated respectively.

As I have already noted, there is some difference in the final form of the Diyari and Adnyamathanha sign-markers. This may be partly explained in the case of the Reuther collection by the desire of the maker to produce a collectible artefact capable of long(er)-term preservation. It is apparent however, that at least in the case of the symbols used for *Mura* places, there was a degree of consistency in the manner of the sites’ depiction – a fragment of beard hair and in the case of the Copley Hills, stylized mesas. This suggests that in a local geographic context, an informed member of either community would be capable of identifying the location that had been depicted, just as the resin

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7 The two men feature prominently in Adnyamathanha *Mura* and are probably related to the Wangkangurru “Two Men” history discussed by Hercus (1987:65) in her description of the MaRaru site. In Adnyamathanha *Mura* they climb into the sky to escape a fire they lit and they become the Magellanic clouds.

8 Tunbridge (1988:86) records this as “*Ngarnga Wami*” where “*Wami*” means “bend”.
“dogs” could apparently be identified by their colouring and markings. That would appear to be the case for Toa 283, 43 and possibly 187 (probably Mt Bayley Range) which are ascribed by Reuther as Kuyani or do not have a language association recorded.

Figure 1 Valanapa Ngarrngarra. Ararru beard on left, 21 August 1975. Note rocks at base to facilitate access to “beards”.
**Drought Stick – Widla-widla Wirti**

The Adnyamathanha did manufacture markers that were inserted into the ground in the manner that has been suggested for the Diyari toa (and for “magic charms” to prevent inundation of a camp [Jones 2007:252]). These were generally fabricated in anticipation of their intended use and carried to their final lodging place.

I was told about (but did not witness) the insertion into the ground of a wooden peg, similar in shape and construction to the foundation peg of the Diyari toa by Adnyamathanha men with reputed powers of drought-making. The peg, I was told, once “fired”, would bring about widespread drought in the immediate and surrounding area within which it was placed. The peg was known as a *Widla-widla Wirti* (*Widla-widla* – “drought” from *widla* – “waste”/“spoil”) and was normally constructed from a Dead Finish bush (*Vara* – *Acacia tetraganophylla*), although I later learned that it could be made of stone. The name *Urda Varti* was also recorded by Dr B. Schebeck (n.d.) for the “drought-stick”. The installation of the carved peg or worked

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9 I was unable to discover any reference to “ownership markers” including those described as *paua malka* by Reuther or to “magic charms” (apart from the *Widla-widla*) that are discussed by Jones (2007:252).
stone was accompanied by a song chant, known only to Adlya Wirri men. The invocation, coupled with the installation, would reputedly cause a devastating drought to follow within a few weeks. The drought would last until the object was removed in accordance with correct protocol. Unsanctioned removal would not lift the drought and could lead to harm befalling the person responsible. The Widla-widla Wirti could properly be removed only by the original actor, or by an Adlya Wirri man familiar with the ritual chants who was of the same moiety as the man responsible for the installation.

The use of Dead Finish timber was a reflection of the belief amongst the Adnyamathanha that Dead Finish firewood produces the hottest fire. Likewise I learned that igneous rock was also favoured, including quartz crystal, since this too was a product of and therefore a repository of great and consistent heat. A recent adaption to the traditional Dead Finish peg was the erection, over the peg, of a “Pick-Axe” Beer bottle with the bottom or neck removed with a hot wire. In this case it was thought that the dark bottle glass would intensify the sun’s rays on the Widla-widla stick below and inside the bottle and cause a more intense drought. Such a construction was placed on the fence-line near the entrance to Wertaloona Station by Archie McKenzie following the shooting of his dogs by the manager of the property during the 1950s (Dan Coulthard pers. comm.).
A similar event was recorded at Wooltana Station and is described in a transcript of an interview with an Adnyamathanha Adlya Wirri, Walter Coulthard (Jerico 1977:5–8). On that occasion it appears that the pastoralist (McTaggart) had shot the dogs of “Left-Hand Billy”, a Yardliyawara Adlya Wirri and camp “headman” (Ararru moiety) who had subsequently placed a Widla-widla Wirti on the property, causing a prolonged drought. It appears McTaggart had initially laughed at the threat by Billy to bring about ruinous drought but he had subsequently apologised for his actions and provided compensation, requesting that Billy remove the cause of the drought that had followed. Left-Hand Billy had done so and five days of heavy rain had reportedly followed. The photograph reproduced is of a part-buried stone marker on Moolawatana Station that was discovered in 2006. While its identification as a “drought-stick” may not be certain (that would require confirmation by the person who installed it) the Adnyamathanha researchers present were convinced of its identity. It was not removed.

Figure 3 Presumed Widla-widla Wirti at Moolawatana Station.
Conclusions

The objects discussed in this paper were only part of the collective iconography of the Adnyamathanha and their neighbours. Many other examples were recorded from this region. Each provides a clear demonstration of key features and elements of the ideology of important events and actions. Events depicted or commemorated by installations included removal of the navel cord at the birth of a child, locations where a death had occurred, grave constructions and related funeral practices as well as initiation gatherings and sorcery events. Such event markers have been recorded elsewhere in Australia in forms generally consistent with those recorded amongst the Adnyamathanha.

The objects discussed in this paper have been selected for discussion simply because they appear to most closely resemble the Diyari toa and in the case of at least one of the Adnyamathanha thowa may relate to and commemorate a Mura event depicted by both regional forms. It is clear, however, that in form and construction the Diyari toa and the Adnyamathanha thowa are dissimilar and in the former case, as Jones and others have noted, their manufacture may have directly resulted from the intervention of German Missionary artefact collectors at the beginning of last century.

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