

## **Song-poetry of Central Australia: sustaining traditions**

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At the time of colonisation in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Australia's Indigenous linguistic landscape, with some 275 known languages and 500 dialects, contained many genres of song. Only in the most remote areas least affected by colonisation, have the Indigenous languages and music survived. Yet these are severely endangered as communities move from speaking traditional languages to varieties of English and Kriol, and popular music threatens to supplant indigenous music.

Concern over their cultural survival has lead Aboriginal people to engage in projects to teach and document their traditional practices, often teaming up with linguists, musicologists and education specialists to take on such tasks. *Sustainable futures for music traditions: Towards an ecology of musical diversity* is one such project. This project draws upon nine international case studies in order to identify factors that influence the sustainability of music cultures (Schippers, in press). This paper focuses on one of the case studies, the traditional music of the Arandic people of Central Australia and their efforts to maintain their music traditions. 'Arandic' is a linguistic term describing a group of closely related language-dialects (Hale 1962). In this paper I describe Arandic music with its relationship to land and identify, and provide some findings on tradition-holders perspectives on how their music can be maintained.

Maintaining cultural practices in a rapidly changing world, against increasing government pressure to assimilate, is a complex undertaking. In the past people learnt through frequent exposure to performances where the intricate conventions of song-poetry were absorbed in much the same way one learns a language. Today performances are too infrequent for younger people to absorb these conventions. For the singers this is frustrating as they see younger people as unwilling, while younger people may feel ashamed as they feel unable to learn this fundamental aspect of their identity.

In Central Australia most traditional music is sung poetry that forms part of larger events, such as ceremonies, story-telling or children's games (Turpin 2007). Ceremony typically involves singing, percussive accompaniment, body painting and dancing. A ceremony may contain as many as 50 songs. These highly symbolic yet brief texts have clear lineation and particular ways to set words to rhythm. New songs which adhere to these structures can be revealed to people in dreams. However, massive social upheaval resulting from colonisation and the spread of popular culture mean that fewer people are receiving new songs.

Most ceremonies are inextricably linked to land, as are Aboriginal spiritual values. Land-based ceremonies, referred to as 'song cycles', are owned and performed by land-holding groups who are descendants of the song-bearing ancestors (Strehlow 1971; Moyle 1983). The 'estate' owned and managed by each land-holding group has its own Dreamings. These are the specific flora, fauna or natural features that are the tangible evidence of the ancestral spirits who created the world and ceremonies as they traversed the country. Through their ancestral origin, performance of song cycles can invoke ancestral powers to cause change, such as bring about rain or maintain a particular species. They are a statement of identity at inter-cultural exchanges, as they are the deeds of land ownership, and through their performance the health of the estate is managed.

A practical aim of this research is to establish clear directions to support the

continuation of Aboriginal traditional music; and identify the formal basis of Arandic song-poetry to assist in developing new methods of teaching and learning ceremonies which are now necessary for their transmission.

### **References**

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