

Traditional Aboriginal songs: from digital files to living culture

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Submitted to ASRA Journal, August 2018

Introduction

Traditional Aboriginal songs are the quintessential repository of classical Aboriginal culture. They are described as “precious, jewels” (2010:44) by celebrated Arrernte elder M.K. Turner. However, the massive social upheaval since colonisation has led to a decline in song performance. Some Aboriginal men state “that with the passing of each elder, entire ‘libraries’ or ‘archives’ are being lost” (Gibson 2017:196). World-wide, a vast number of endangered cultures are “being disappeared” to use a phrase coined by ethnomusicologist Tony Seeger (Schippers 2015:425). While the forces causing the disappearance are complex and not something we can readily influence, what we can do is ensure audio recordings of Aboriginal songs, language and histories, as well as ecological and cultural knowledge, are available to people who are fighting the disappearance of such practices and knowledge. In this article I consider the question of what creators, archivists and shepherds of such recordings can do to ensure custodians can discover, access and use these for their cultural survival. This article draws upon my experiences with Aboriginal people in bringing relevant archival recordings of Aboriginal songs to their attention. In particular, my experiences with archival recordings from two different language groups of central Australia: Arrernte and Pintupi. Both case studies involve recordings of traditional or ‘classical’ Aboriginal songs. The term ‘song’ is a somewhat inadequate translation for the traditional Aboriginal music and so I begin with a description of what Aboriginal songs are and how they differ from our English concept of a ‘song’.

Classical Aboriginal songs

In classical Aboriginal culture a ‘song’ is a set of many verses. In some songs verses are sung in a fixed order while in others there is no set order and a verse can be freely omitted.¹ Some songs have an infinite number of verses, as new ones can be added and older ones abandoned. In addition, usually a song includes associated actions, such as painting designs on the body and adorning it with ritual items (such as feathers and headdresses), dancing and the movement and placement of objects (such as poles). The designs and actions are usually highly symbolic at various levels. The lean material culture of traditional Aboriginal society did not include portable forms of inscription (such as books), so oral tradition formed the repository of the community’s knowledge.

These distillations of knowledge in the form of song are performed for all sorts of reasons. Many have religious significance, and praise particular ancestors and places. There are songs to bring about

¹ What is referred to here as a ‘song’ and its ‘verses’ is sometimes called a ‘song set’ or ‘song cycle’ and its ‘songs’. The word ‘ceremony’ is often used generally to mean any sort of song, its verses, dances and designs.

rain, or create cohesion following a dispute, or heal the ill, or turn away a wind storm. Some can also be used to cause harm. Songs were performed at large gatherings of different language groups, where people came together for ceremonial events such as initiation or the exchange of goods, or the sharing of foods in season. More broadly, songs express group solidarity and identity, celebrate the unique features of the country, and provide a curriculum framework for the means of instruction. There are also songs that were performed simply for fun. Some of these were hugely popular and were passed on from group to group, well beyond their place of origin. These may have played an important role in establishing and maintaining large social networks and harmonious relations between different groups.

A more sobering use of songs can be seen in the early contact history in central Australia when many sacred objects were stolen, damaged and sold. At this time ethnographer TGH Strehlow, who produced a huge collection of Arrernte songs and related materials, accompanied a number of Aboriginal men as they discovered their loss. Anthropologist Jason Gibson has done significant research on contemporary use of the Strehlow collection, and he summarises from Strehlow's diary:

'Deeply moved' by the event, Strehlow had been invited by one of the owners of the objects, a man named Arlpalywerrng Kemarr, to join him in singing the associated songs for the damaged objects. (Gibson 2017:118)

I imagine the singing was to settle the tormented ancestors and restore their power, as well as help the singers overcome their grief and anger at the desecration.

Aboriginal songs are perceived as the words of ancestral beings. The poet Barry Hill describes deeply religious songs as "words of sacred beginnings" (2002:6). Song lyrics are often quite different to everyday speech; they are a kind of sacred name and the word for 'song' is derived from the word for 'name' in some Aboriginal languages (Turpin 2011:31). Songs have short poetic texts that repeat to a longer melody. The word for 'melody' also means 'essence' of the ancestor in many languages (Ellis et al 1978). The melody and the short text interlock like two different sized cogs. One of the skills, for a group of singers, is to set these two things in motion smoothly yet creatively (Ellis & Barwick 1987).

While Aboriginal people continue to be socialised into the relationships between song, country and kin (Gibson 2017), learning to perform the songs is a skill at risk, as can be seen by the diminishing number of singers and songs being composed—or in Aboriginal parlance 'being found'. This is where recordings can be a tool. Let me now turn to two case studies from central Australia involving the use of archival recordings of songs.

Arrernte songs recorded in the early 1990s

Arrernte custodian M. K. Turner and linguist Jennifer Green recorded 31 hours of Arrernte singing on audio cassette in the early 1990s.² As instructed by the singers, the tapes were archived at the

²These audio recordings are held at the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies,

Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). In 2007 when I began work on Arrernte songs I sought permission from both depositors to access the recordings. M.K. agreed, excited that we could get copies into the hands of the younger generations. Over the years that we have been transcribing and translating this collection, it has become very apparent that the recordings are an important tool in the learning of these traditions.

Requests from descendants for copies of particular recordings have come to me via M.K., usually in the form of something like, "I need a copy of that recording of uncle singing for my nephew, he wants to practice for this summer." Unfortunately the metadata doesn't help me identify the recording M.K. is after and I haven't imprinted the relationships between all the Arrernte people in my mind. In the catalogue for this collection I have considered making a field that is 'relationship between M.K. and singer'. But there is always more than one uncle and people have multiple ways of reckoning relationships to the one person. Similar difficulties arise with the identification of songs, as songs do not tend to have names. The most reliable way to ensure I am providing M.K. with the correct recording is to play it or sing the song that I think she is referring to.

At the time of making the recordings M.K. and Jenny Green documented the singer's wishes as to who could access recordings and for what purposes. MK knew the original performers well (they have all passed away) and of their desire to have their songs and cultural knowledge recorded. She also knows the people requesting access today and has the cultural authority within her community to arbitrate on permissions. MK is also the co-depositor, and so from the point of view of both the archive and the Arrernte community she takes on the role of ensuring appropriate access.

Unlike photos which can be accessed with the naked eye, recordings require a device to play them on. The physical format of recordings that people have requested has changed over time. Once they were cassettes, then they were CDs now they are USBs. With USBs it is necessary to identify the right file hierarchy and format for the particular player. With cassettes, if the car had a player it would play; but with digital media the problem is exponential. Computers, play stations, smart phones and X-boxes can require different formats and file hierarchies and have different constraints on file sizes, and different operating systems add to this complexity. Both MK and I are a long way from the end-users, who themselves may not know what player they will be able to gain access to in order to play the USB. For this reason, some media production companies will not deliver on USB, guaranteeing only browser-based solutions. Personal computers are not commonly owned items amongst Arrernte users (at least today), and so a browser-based delivery would require institutional support, for example through a library or cultural organisation. There would be some advantages to this, such as no more lost or stolen USBs, but it would be another layer between the user and the sound recording and would keep access institutionalized and limited to the 37-hour week, rather than available in the user's time and place of choosing. Working out solutions to the issue of delivery is

not straightforward.

Recordings made in other contexts, such as for legal cases by Aboriginal Land Councils, rarely included documentations of the singer's wishes for other future uses of these recordings, and so navigating appropriate access to such recordings can be more complex, and therefore frustrating for people seeking access to the recording. Perhaps there is a recording of their own mother singing the songs that are the requester's rightful heirlooms, yet it is held in the impenetrable cupboards of an organisation. One recording in the MK & Green collection was made in the course of work for the Central Land Council. Therefore we sought its permission to give a copy to the descendant who had requested it, again via MK. I contacted the Land Council who agreed to undertake the task of clearing it for access for this person. The Land Council consulted with a relevant senior man who gave permission, but MK felt insulted that the Land Council considered it necessary to ask someone else. A similar scenario is described by Ngarluma man of Western Australia, Andrew Dowding, after listening to recordings of his maternal grandfather and asking the archive for a copy.

I remember feeling that my grandfather had specifically left these recordings for me and the rest of our family to hold, as a legacy of his creative work, and as a vivid auditory display of his love for the cultural traditions of which he was so obviously a master. I spent hours listening through the collection, matching the recordings to the audition sheets, making notes on which tapes I would request. When I had finished, I asked the archivist for copies of the specific tapes, and was told I could not have copies until certain permissions were granted.

At that moment it felt insulting to be told I would not be able to take a copy of those recordings without someone else's consent. In hindsight, I can see the predicament of the archive, and as my experience in this field grows, I too face the complex challenges of individuals wanting access to and copies of audio and video that I record. But at the time I felt deflated and angry at being unable to have copies of my grandfather's songs immediately, particularly after the feelings I had experienced while listening to the tapes. (Treloyn & Dowding 2017:62)

Archives are quite right in safe-guarding the intentions of the singers and depositors of such material. Some members of the community are very concerned about recordings getting into the wrong hands (Gibson 2017:263). This fear has even led to a number of Aboriginal people choosing not to archive recordings they have been involved in making.

Dowding shows there is nothing like putting the boot on the other foot to understand the issues. Perhaps with more visits and closer dialogue with the archives a better understanding of the way archives work and the needs of community members can be achieved. There is certainly an interest among remote Aboriginal people to visit such institutions. And for those who have had that experience, it has been informative (Angeles 2015).

Pintupi recordings of a travelling song

In 2015 I was involved in a project with linguist Felicity Meakins to record and document the

Gurindji songs from the Victoria River District region of the Northern Territory. A number of public songs of the wajarra genre were sung by men and women, some of which were not from Gurindji country. These ‘corroborees’ were described as ‘free’, meaning they were open to anyone.

One of the wajarra songs was called ‘Laka’, which the singers recalled had come to them from Balgo to their southwest. The Laka had a somewhat different status to other songs sung by the Gurindji. Unlike their many land-based songs, held collectively by large family groups and often linking up with the songs of other groups (sometimes referred to as ‘songlines’), the Laka, with its 15 verses, appeared to have no known meanings, religious significance or place of origin, and its dances and choreography remained only in the minds of the eldest singers.

In trying to track down the origins of the song, and with the help of colleagues working in Australia,³ I found recordings of these same songs performed in other parts of Australia dating between 1954 and 1982 (see map). This was no simple task as the song—or corroboree as older people refer to it, perhaps reflecting the importance of the dance—was known by different names in different places.

I wanted to know about the songs and singers on these recordings. For example, where did the song come from, what language is it in, what was it about and why and when did people sing it? So I began a quest to find people in the communities where the recordings had been made who might know the songs, as well as descendants of the singers. Ascertaining the language, words and meanings of the songs would be much more of a challenge. Equipped with the recordings and as much information about them as possible, I set out to ask people about the songs as sung in the Pintupi region of central Australia on the following recordings:

Date	Place	Singers	AIATSIS Archive no	Duration
1975	Kungkayurnti, NT	Nosepeg Tjupurrurla	MOYLE_R03-003588	26 mins
1975	Kungkayurnti, NT	Mick Namari Tjapaltjarri, Wintjiya Napaltjarri, Tjungkaya Napaltjarri & Muwitja Napaltjarri	MOYLE_R03-003592	61 mins
1981	Balgo, WA	Wimintji Tjapangardi	MOYLE_R23-029917	5 mins

Not so long ago Aboriginal people in this region did not want photos and recordings of relatives who had passed away to be shown or played, in accordance with traditional taboos surrounding the deceased (Myers 1986). And while this ban was lifted after some time, a close relative of the deceased might sometimes follow it forever, with those around them obliging out of politeness; for example, by not mentioning the deceased’s name or displaying photos in their presence.

In the Pintupi communities today, however, once the identity of the singers was known, people

³ I thank Richard Moyle, Luise Hercus, Clint Bracknell, Linda Barwick and Reuben Brown for bringing some of these recordings to my attention.

wanted to hear the recordings, including close kin of the singers'. Not only had it been well over 20 years since the singers had passed away but there has also been a loosening of this taboo, with Pintupi people appearing in many films and art catalogues (Myers 2017). One of the singers was a man called Nosepeg Tjupurrurla Tjungkarta, a renowned actor and local whose voice and image can be encountered in many movies and books today.⁴

The responses from Pintupi people testify to the universal power of music to inspire emotion. There was astonishment and joy as people heard a verse of the song, often for the first time in 60 or more years. At Kiwirrkura, 80 year old Patrick recalled fond memories of hearing the songs near Jupiter Well at a place called 'Ngantju'. He then stood up from his wheelchair to deliver a soliloquy on the antiquity of the songs and how his grandparents and others of that generation had carried the songs with them as they travelled north, south and west out of the Gibson Desert. At Kintore some older children of the singers (now in their 60s and 70s) listened and smiled knowingly, picking out key words and deriving possible broader meanings. The language appeared to be Pintupi, or at least a closely related variety.

Most Pintupi under the age of about 60 had not heard the songs before and many people called for USBs to help them learn the songs so they could make their own recording. Xavier, the son of Wimintji on the recording made at Balgo, had not heard the songs or a recording of his father's voice. He, and his relative who was also present in the bush where we sat west of Kiwirrkura, commented on the appropriateness of hearing Wimintji's voice resounding over the hills in his own country.

The descendants said they didn't know these recordings existed, yet these were the songs of their close relatives and well-known people. Musicologist Richard Moyle recalled only one community request for Pintupi recordings. Had no-one in the community asked 'Hey, can you help me find out if there are any recordings of my relatives?' Had no-one fed information to the communities about the recordings of Pintupi people held in archives? Or was it just the corroboree song that people didn't know about, perhaps because of its secular nature? In my experiences elsewhere in central Australia it is the public songs that are more often forgotten than the religious songs, a finding similarly encountered by Gibson (2017).

At Kintore and Kiwirrkura people struggled to come up with a place in the community where a copy of the recordings could be kept for public access. Individuals requested copies on USB and so I gave these out not knowing how long they would last and wondering whether generations in 40 years would know that copies could be obtained from the Australia Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra. When I returned to these communities two months later most people said that the USBs had been lost and asked for another copy.⁵ Irrespective of whether this

⁴ For biographical details about Nosepeg see Lockwood (1964), Kimber (1982, 1986) and the film 'Nosepeg's movie' (1989) directed by Lindsay Frazer.

⁵ Another possibility is that the USBs had been sold or traded; a scenario I encountered in another central Australian community.

were true, there is a clear need for public places within communities where people can go to hear recordings of their forbearers songs, stories and histories.

Song revival

Across the country there are many examples of Indigenous people using songs to perform in the public domain (Angeles 2015, Barwick & Turpin 2016, Emberly et al 2017, Perkins 2016, Treloyn & Dowding 2017). In many cases, songs owned and inherited by land-holding groups (as discussed above) can be too political to serve such a purpose, as these songs can only be performed with agreement by the land-owning group. Well-travelled songs performed simply for entertainment, like the Laka whose provenance is unknown, are somewhat comparable to the ‘anonymous’ songs in our own folk tradition. While some people have preferred their land-based songs to remain in institutions rather than in their own hands (Gibson 2017)—and perhaps for good cultural reasons—this was not the case with the Laka, where in the Pintupi region everyone wanted a copy of their countrymen singing and elders confirmed its open access to all.

The revival of Aboriginal songs is associated with people who could be called the ‘rediscovering generation’. This generation didn’t grow up with the direct experience of loss like their parents. Their parents experienced things such as not speaking the language their parent spoke. For this generation, listening to archival recordings can be painful. But for the younger rediscovering generation, engaging with archival recordings is characterised not so much by loss but by finding one’s heritage language or songs. We heard this perspective from Dowding and Gibson also encounters this in central Australia:

there is growing interest, particularly amongst younger generations of men, in utilising every resource available to them in order to fill gaps in their learning. Men aged in their thirties for example, who in addition to having been initiated and educated by elders, are equally eager to retrieve whatever additional material they can, including archival song recordings, films and ethnographic texts, to help augment their learning. (Gibson 2017:261)

Shaun Angeles, an Arrernte repatriation researcher at the Strehlow Research Centre in Alice Springs, cites examples of Aboriginal men accessing films and sound recordings and using these to teach younger Aboriginal men who now walk around proud that they can now sing this song that most importantly “belongs to us” (Angeles 2015). It is often cited that people feel sorry when there is no-one to sing the songs. Hercus & Koch (2017) write “on many occasions the Lone Singer said that they were sorry for the verses because in the future there would be no one left to sing and remember them.” How pleased the Lone Singers would be to know of the revival efforts being made today!

Returning to the Arrernte recordings from the early 1990s, in 2015 over 100 Arrernte women gathered to perform, teach and learn their songs. This event known as the ‘Arrernte women’s camp’ (Perkins 2016) involved, among other things, using the 1990s recordings, after which further old recordings were discovered (Turpin 2017). Not only were these recordings ‘aspirational motivators’

(Gibson 2017:262), but the recordings were used in much the same way any musician might use them: listening, singing along and writing down what they hear. Some people even performed their songs using the recording as a back-drop to strengthen their voices. There was around them the encouraging words of the elders as they sang. Technically, singing along with a recording of an Aboriginal song is like singing along to any song, but in terms of meaning there is a difference. The recordings were being used as a performative act: a way of connecting with places and people, in much the same way that Xavier regarded the playing of his father's singing on his country as powerful. Gibson writes of a similar view with Anmatyerr men:

The recordings were being apprehended not as historical 'objects' ... or literary 'texts', ... but as embodiments of current connections between places, people and their ancestors ... they evoked a kind of metaphorical journeying through ancestral country, as [Dreaming] stories were recounted they were also located in the landscape. (Gibson 2017:204)

Recordings of songs play an important role in learning to be proficient in a particular genre (Treloyn 2016). Indeed, many musical pedagogies are based on listening rather than explanation. And from memorising a song a person can innovate creating their own style, interpreting words, music and emotion in their own way. Jazz singer Judy Jacques describes using a 1903 recording of an Aboriginal song by Fanny Cochrane Smith along with a transcription by musicologist Alice Moyle:

The process of internalising Spring Song was similar to when I was a young singer listening for hours or days to old damaged 78 rpm records. I would listen over and over for any slight nuances that would help to make sense of song lyrics. I got to the stage where I could almost replicate the wax recording of Fanny's song. However, imitation would not be a choice for me, particularly as the language has not, to my understanding, been clearly defined It was enough to hear Fanny speaking the meaning of her song as a song of birds and flowers. The sound of the song was enough, and the intent was enough, as sound and improvisation convey deeper expression than words. (Jacques 2004:17)

Using archival recordings

Ethnomusicologist Sally Treloyn (2015) argues that an increase in the number and diversity of songs performed in the Mowanjum festival is partly due to using archival recordings. Archival recordings are used in a number of ways. Jay Gibson describes how recordings of ceremonies

... are listened to by large groups of men sitting in secluded 'bush camps' who "discuss and respond to these recordings in ways that explain their significance to younger generations. At this grassroots level, people are indeed taking it upon themselves to personally look after this material and manage its dissemination." (Gibson 2017: 265)

In contrast, there are other people who prefer to listen to recordings alone, perhaps reflecting too the different genres of songs. Some people like to have a copy themselves to listen to in their own time,

while others prefer to visit an organisation to listen to recordings, thus avoiding the worry of having to look after it. In Alice Springs, the Strehlow Research Centre is used in this way (Gibson 2017:238); however, many towns and communities have no such organisation able to provide this service. In some cases a recording is kept for its symbolic value. I have seen published song recordings, with their beautiful covers and interpretive sleeve notes, stored along with other ritual objects.⁶

When I have made recordings of singers and copies are given back to them, I have sometimes been asked to play the songs loudly, such as on the car speakers while we drove around the community. One woman once instructed me to point her rather large speaker outwards towards her neighbours, saying they could do with hearing these songs. I was reminded then, of the underlying faith in the power of songs to influence people. Some time ago I heard of recordings of songs being played in lieu of actual singing at a ceremony. I have not seen this myself; but if true it would not surprise me, as song is very much a tool to accompany action.

Some researchers have suggested that repatriating recordings preserves them artificially and inhibits the process of development and change. Yet old recordings have been used in many song revival movements, in which users do not simply replicate them but use them to create something anew. The Judy Jacques recording of Fanny Cochrane Smith's song is one example.

Others have raised concerns that repatriation may cause pain. This was certainly true with the older generation who remembered the Laka, recalling their relatives and fond memories of the past with sadness; yet this was not the case for the rediscovering generation. Where revival of ceremonies has occurred, sometimes after more than 30 years, tears of sadness in the older generation seem to have been replaced with joy. Successful revival no doubt rests on a number of different factors, one of which is access to and the ability to play archival recordings. The Indigenous Remote Archival Fellowship, run by the Indigenous Remote Communications Association (IRCA), the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) and AIATSIS, has done a lot to enhance understandings of archives and archival recordings. Fellowship recipients Angeles and Nulgit describe in a 2015 interview how this enabled them to not only further their own skills but also equipped them to be able to explain to elders and other community members what an archive is (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JUgfdDSXnw>).

Angeles believes that when archives come face to face with the people of the culture whose materials they hold, it empowers both the archives and Aboriginal communities in their struggle for cultural survival. Angeles states:

It is important for us to work very closely with our Elders to realise the collection's true potential. ... They are the only ones who understand its content and are able to enrich it and

⁶ Barwick (pers.com.) and Gibson (pers.com.) have both observed such uses in other central Australian communities.

enrich the lives of our young men who are coming through the ranks. Our elders were left out of the collection for so long, so now we have a perfect opportunity to rewrite this bit of history and involve them with everything we do. We need to find innovative cultural ways to unlock this potential. For the past 25 years it has been like a sleeping giant.... I believe it's time for us to wake it up and spread its power throughout Central Australia and its people. (Angeles 2016; also partially quoted in Gibson 2017:243)

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