

4 *Finding Arrernte songs*

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Abstract

Traditional Aboriginal songs are regarded by Arrernte people as the quintessential repository of their law, culture and family heritage. Knowledge of these songs and the dances and narratives that accompany them is a significant part of Aboriginal identity. However, the massive social upheaval since colonisation and the changes in lifestyle resulting from urbanisation have led to a decline in the performance of these songs. In 2015 a group of Arrernte women initiated a song revival that culminated in a five-week camp in Alice Springs. Here the women practised their songs with guidance from tradition-bearers, listened to audio recordings from the past and performed their songs. Amidst all the excitement and optimism of the project, further heritage recordings were located and shared amongst the relevant family members. A song inventory was created to assist in the documentation and retrieval of the songs on the recordings. In addition to producing the first ever audio-visual recording of many of these songs, other outcomes of the Arrernte camp included increased community involvement in traditional Arrernte singing; a corresponding increase in participants' understanding of the songs; and personal testimonies of an increased sense of identity and belonging. An ongoing issue is the long-term management of and access to both the legacy recordings and the newly created film from the camp.

Keywords: song, Aboriginal ceremony, women's ceremony, Arrernte

1 Introduction

Since the introduction of the first land rights legislation for Australia's Indigenous people in 1976, the legal processes for securing title to Aboriginal land have been heavily resourced. By contrast, far fewer resources have been put towards securing the knowledge and practices that underpin these systems of land tenure. Yet many types of traditional Aboriginal knowledge, including ceremonial songs, are close to being lost throughout Australia (Barwick & Turpin 2016). In this chapter I focus on the case of Central Australia, where Arrernte people have borne the brunt of non-Indigenous incursions into the region since 1871, when Alice Springs was established in the centre of their territory. For Arrernte people, holding onto their traditional songs is of vital importance.

Alice Springs is a town of some 35,000 people that services a vast area of inland Australia. It has an Aboriginal population of approximately 20% (2006 census), many of whom are not Arrernte. It is also the largest town in Australia where the Indigenous language is still being passed on as a first language. In 1994 there were said to be 1500–2000 speakers of the Eastern and Central Arrernte variety (Henderson and Dobson 1994); a more recent report finds 2444 speakers of Arrernte (AIATSIS and FATSIL 2005), but this conflates speakers of two quite different varieties: Western Aranda and Eastern & Central Arrernte (E&CA).

Eastern and Central Arrernte enjoys a relatively large speaker base, at least by comparison with other Australian Aboriginal languages today. However, the traditional songs are scarcely known, and those that are known are sung only by members of an older generation, who are mostly well into their 60s.¹ Like Aboriginal people elsewhere in Australia (Evans 2009:185), many Arrernte people are passionately interested in learning their hereditary land-based songs, even though some may be diffident about (or unable to use) the spoken language. While a number of younger Arrernte people participate in ceremonies in which they help assemble the necessary ritual items, join in the dancing and are frequently ‘painted up’ (Barwick and Turpin 2016), rarely do they participate in singing.²

In Arrernte society, as is often the case for Central Australian Aboriginal groups, participation in many activities, including singing, is divided along gender lines. In the 1950s, the anthropologist and linguist T. G. H. Strehlow (1971) recorded a vast corpus of Arrernte men’s songs, but no Arrernte women’s songs. It was not until the 1990s that a significant number of Arrernte women’s songs were recorded (and archived) by Arrernte custodian M. K. Turner and linguist Jennifer Green (Green 1994). The fragility of these traditions was well recognised at the time, and, with the collaboration of two senior Arrernte singers (M. K. Turner and the late Edward Johnson), the team recorded 31 hours of Arrernte singing, and interpretation of songs, on audio cassette. As instructed by the singers, these tapes were archived at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), with copies housed locally at the Central Land Council (CLC). The present chapter is concerned with the women’s songs recorded in 2015 in a more recent project. This contributed to the earlier body of work with further recordings of some of the same songs and the addition of some hitherto unrecorded songs.

In the twenty-first century there has been increasing interest in reviving traditional songs. Partly inspired by the Yeperenye Festival in 2000, and partly by a growing awareness of the decreasing number of accomplished singers at the annual Women’s Law and Culture meetings organised by the CLC, a number of Arrernte people and a few organisations have sought opportunities to re-engage with their singing traditions. The most notable of these is Akeyulerre, the Arrernte Healing Centre, which aims ‘to sustain, develop and celebrate Arrernte cultural practices’. It is in the context of the extreme fragility of these traditions that the Arrernte Women’s Project was inaugurated in 2014, resulting in a five-week camp in 2015. This is described vividly in a personal account by Rachel Perkins (2016).

In the present chapter I elucidate the importance of traditional songs to Aboriginal people and the challenges involved in maintaining these songs today. I also detail the achievements of the women’s camp. One of these was the bringing to light of a significant collection of recordings of Arrernte women’s songs from the 1960s, which had not been archived or documented.

2 The value of traditional songs

The importance of traditional songs to Aboriginal people is amply attested throughout Australia. In regions where the intergenerational transfer of songs has been interrupted and legacy recordings exist, the audio material provides a critical link to once vibrant traditions. In 2002, jazz musician Judy Jacques issued a CD that commemorated the Aboriginal songs from a 1903 recording made in Tasmania. Of this project, she wrote that she ‘needed, above all, to respect their utmost importance to the Palawa, the Indigenous people of Tasmania’ (Jacques 2004:11). In this section I consider the role of song in traditional society, as a means of conveying how significant such legacy recordings are considered to be by contemporary Aboriginal people.

¹ Note that life expectancy for Aboriginal people in the NT is 14 years less than for non-Indigenous people.

² It seems unlikely that traditional singing was ever only the domain of old people. In the areas to the north, where Northern Arrernte, Alyawarr and Anmatyerr are spoken, young people (i.e. under 60) join in the singing of the same types of songs that are sung by the Arrernte.

For Arrernte, as for other Aboriginal groups, traditional songs have mythological and religious significance. They honour particular ancestors and places through their allusion to creation stories, which M. K. Turner (2010:44) describes as ‘precious like jewels’. The songs are performed with associated visual components: choreographed dance, body painting, costume and symbolic props, often representing places and totemic ancestors. 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 history, religion, geography and genealogy, as well as many other types of knowledge. Songs could, under certain conditions, be performed to cause change; for example, to bring about rain, or create cohesion following a dispute, or heal the ill. Many songs were also performed at inter-cultural gatherings, where people came together for ceremonial events such as initiation, or the exchange of goods, or the sharing of particular foods in season. More broadly, songs express group solidarity and identity, celebrate the unique features of the relevant country, and provide the means of instruction for younger generations about sites, history, cultural practices and Aboriginal law more generally (Barwick and Turpin 2016).

Most Arrernte songs are the personal heritage of large family groups, and women’s songs are no exception. Across Central Australia, women’s songs (and ceremonies) are the principal means by which women demonstrate their patrilineal clan identity, as belonging to a defined clan estate (Peterson and Long 1986, Curran 2010). Clan groups are responsible for tracts of land and the associated *Altyerre* (‘Dreamings’) and creation stories. It is up to family heads to decide when, how and where their songs can be performed. Land Rights and Native Title have reinforced the value of Indigenous systems of land tenure, and claimants have often performed the songs of their estate as evidence of ownership of the land and responsibility for the Dreamings.

In the contemporary era, new forms of social activity and entertainment, often accessible through the internet, radio and television, have taken over many of the functions once fulfilled by traditional songs. Live music events in a variety of genres, including rock, pop and country, are all popular with Arrernte women, many of whom are also regular church-goers. As in other parts of Australia, Aboriginal teenagers are hooked up to their mobile phones, absorbing the commercial music that engages teenagers across the globe, as well as more local Aboriginal forms.

Given that traditional songs are associated with a vastly different way of life and economic basis, why are they so highly valued today? One explanation is that many Indigenous and minority peoples, while embracing the ‘new’ way of life, are at the same time anxious about losing their identity in the global melting pot. Cohen (1985:44) argues that ‘as the structural bases of the boundary [of a culture] become undermined or weakened as a consequence of social change, so people resort increasingly to symbolic behaviour to reconstitute the boundary’. When it comes to reconstituting the boundaries of their cultures, for many Aboriginal people the learning of traditional songs and language – even if only in emblematic form – may be the obvious first choice. For some, the performing of traditional estate-based songs is also a way of demonstrating their opposition to the assimilation policies of mainstream Australian society.

Today the interest in family heritage and cultural identity extends well beyond the Indigenous minority. This is evidenced by the popularity of TV shows such as *Who do you think you are?* among other Australians, including those who have suffered far less dramatic social change. There is an increasing awareness that a strong sense of cultural identity is an important aspect of health and well-being, and the value placed on identity by the broader society is indicated by the cultural diversity visible at arts festivals and in the media. A number of studies have recognised that, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, engaging in traditional practices and understanding one’s connection to country are important aspects of identity (Phipps and Slater 2010:8, Dockery 2011:2, Kingsley et al. 2013:678, Guerin et al. 2011). Furthermore, Indigenous people themselves affirm that traditional dance and song, and the associated knowledge, are a key to achieving positive health outcomes (Abbott 2004:5). This is borne out by a statement by Arrernte woman Kumali Riley, one of the key instigators of the Arrernte Women’s Project:

. . . learning how to sing and dance, being able to perform, makes me feel so good and proud of who I am; and that I am privileged to learn my grandmother’s stories, our dances and our body designs which represent what the ceremony is about. I don’t want

to see it lost. It makes you feel so good about your belonging, where you belong (Kumali Riley pers. com. 2015).

Traditional Aboriginal performances are often used to represent Aboriginality in the media, the tourist industry, sporting events, arts festivals and politics, where they promote a variety of Indigenous, government and commercial ventures. Yet there are few opportunities for Aboriginal people to learn the performance practices that are so often called upon in these contexts, even though these activities are held in high esteem by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike.³

Amongst Arrernte today, the number of people who know how to perform their traditional songs is small. Generally, most people under the age of about 40 do not know them. Many people aged approximately 40–60 are familiar with the songs and dances, but not to the extent that they can lead a performance. Women who can lead performances and direct the activities tend to be older than 60. And there are even fewer people who claim to know the meaning of the songs.

The Arrernte Women's Project was set up to reverse the decrease in the number of singers. To this end, the Project aimed to provide opportunities for Arrernte women to perform and teach the songs and associated knowledge. Other goals included: to create recordings for future generations; to provide economic incentives for performing; to facilitate access to role models for younger Arrernte women; to assist in accessing archival recordings; and to create opportunities for Arrernte people to engage in songs in new ways.

This was never going to be an easy task, for reasons discussed in the next section.

3 Overcoming the impediments to learning songs: some approaches

In the past, Arrernte songs were not taught explicitly. As elsewhere in Central Australia, song teaching is not formally recognised as a skill distinct from performing. Learning the songs, dances, paintings and meanings mostly occurs in performances, through constant repetition and (initially) imitation. Learning requires a solid relationship with a senior singer and the ability to overcome the fear of making a mistake (Barwick and Turpin 2016).

Yet traditional songs are not being performed as often as they once were, so the opportunities to learn them are far fewer now than in the twentieth century. This is partly the result of Arrernte people's movement away from country and into an urban lifestyle. Moreover, those in the diminishing pool of singers are often separated by vast distances, which means that logistical feats may be required to assemble the necessary performers. Additional transport is frequently needed to ensure the participation of younger people, for the sake of intergenerational learning.

Learning through exposure is not possible unless a long-term immersion context is created, but for Arrernte people there are few occasions when traditional songs are performed today. Such performances tend to be limited to one-off public events such as book launches, or the opening of a building, or the annual (but private) women's law and culture meetings organised by the CLC. In some other parts of Australia, funerals are a context for traditional singing (e.g. Brown 2014). But this is not the case in Central Australia, where the ways of learning these hitherto oral traditions may now involve the use of literacy – at least for those Arrernte people who grow up literate in both Arrernte and English. Some learners, especially those with little oral fluency in Arrernte, write down the song texts to practice and use as a prompt in their own performances.

One of the most obvious impediments to learning the traditional songs is that they are very different to the common English genres, such as rock, pop or folk. Many fluent speakers of Arrernte find they struggle with the songs, which require mastery of an esoteric language, an unfamiliar music and unfamiliar ways of meshing the lyrics with the melody. The songs employ a musical meter that

³ Here a parallel can be drawn with what Heller (2003:486) describes as a commodification of minority identities (language and culture) coupled with a lack of institutional support for the maintenance of this identity in North America.

disregards the stress patterns of everyday speech, and the vocal style makes use of microtonal ornamentation and diverse vocal timbres rarely encountered in western music. A singer must also be able to fit the uninterrupted repetition of lyrics into different parts of a melody that may be much longer than a single verse (Ellis 1985, Turpin 2011).

Apart from these technical difficulties, there are social impediments as well. The learning of songs cannot be separated from the maintenance of all the other social practices that surround their performance (Barwick and Turpin 2016), so a further challenge is to find ways of incorporating the relationships, knowledge and functions of songs (as alluded to above in section 2) into the learning process.

In addition to these complexities, there are broader contextual factors that make any learning activity difficult for many Arrernte people today. The statistics on Aboriginal social disadvantage and poverty in the NT are very sobering (Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, 2016). As a result of these liabilities, the pressures of everyday life – the number of funerals to attend, the time spent caring for relatives, raising children, circumventing violence and standing in welfare and housing queues – are greater for Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal people, and this leaves less time for concentrated learning.

The Arrernte Women's Project made a number of decisions to deal with these hurdles. The live-in camp that was the culmination of the Project provided a safe place and time for the intensive teaching and learning of ceremonial life. While the camp was focused on live intergenerational transmission, it also created recordings for future generations, and for the personal use of the participants. In addition, a number of songs from pre-existing recordings were identified and translated.

The Arrernte participants at the camp varied in their language fluency and educational background. For some, their first language was Arrernte, while for others it was English. Some had minimal experience with the Western education system and very little literacy, while others were highly literate and worked as teachers. It soon became apparent that these different experiences led to individual preferences in ways of learning. Some women memorised more by ear, while others used audio recordings and their own written versions of songs as back-up.

4 The Arrernte Women's Project camp

Over many years, discussions about how to support the practice of singing traditional songs had been ongoing between Arrernte film-maker Rachel Perkins and a number of senior Arrernte women. In 2013 Rachel secured a number of small grants to support a camp where Arrernte women could learn their traditional songs and the associated knowledge. This became known as the Arrernte Women's Project (Perkins 2016). It was made possible with the assistance of Arrernte members of Akeyulerre, (an Arrernte healing centre) and the present author. Under the direction of members of the broader Arrernte community, Rachel organised the camp, documented genealogies of the central Arrernte land-owning groups and appointed a recording crew of one video camera operator and one sound recordist.

My role in the Project was to document recordings of the songs.⁴ I worked with undergraduate student Lana Henderson to create an inventory of all the public Arrernte songs that had been recorded to date (that is, prior to the recordings made in the course of this project). These included two major collections (recordings made by Green and Turner in the 1990s and my own recordings from the period 2007-09⁵), plus a recording held at the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), which was probably recorded by Philip Batty in the 1980s⁶. Our inventory lists 66 different audio files consisting of 937 song items. ('Song items' are the smallest stretches of

⁴ This work was part of a larger project on traditional songs across inland Australia, funded by the Australian Research Council (FT140100783, DP1092887).

⁵ Turpin's 2007 recordings were made possible from an Endangered Languages Documentation grant (IPF0100), funded by the Hans Rausing Foundation.

⁶ Philip Batty pers. com. 2015.

uninterrupted singing in a performance, usually lasting between 30 and 90 seconds). A comparison of the rhythmic texts of these 937 song items revealed 291 different Arrernte verses. As is common in much traditional Aboriginal singing, a verse is performed two or three times (i.e. for two or three song items) before moving on to another verse. (In Arrernte this is explained as ‘spreading out’ the verse.) Thus, in any single performance there are always more song items than verses.

The culmination of the Project – the women’s five-week song camp – began in April 2015, in Alice Springs. The camp was located just outside the town centre, so that the women could immerse themselves in ceremonial business unimpeded by the pressures of everyday life. Here they practised their songs under the guidance of tradition-bearers, listened to legacy audio recordings and discussed their meanings and significance. Their performance of the songs were filmed for posterity.

Once the camp was underway, the issues of ownership, privacy and access to the newly created recordings became topics for discussion. In most cases there was agreement over these issues within individual family groups, so the recordings were distributed on USB sticks amongst the family members. In a few cases, however, there was an impasse, so the recordings at issue remain, at this stage, unarchived and undistributed.

The camp proved to be very popular, with over 100 Arrernte women of all generations participating in the course of the five weeks. Their ages ranged from the teens to the seventies. Many young people came because they found the camp an exciting place to be. They showed great respect for the senior women, the teachers and keepers of the songs, who allot the tasks involved in the performance. The order of verses, who should commence the song, the discussion of its meaning – these were all negotiated in the moment of performance, often with much hilarity and a blending of contemporary contextual events with matters of deep cultural significance. A performance is a group activity, and the younger women were courageous enough to participate fully, by being painted up and entering the dance arena.

On a practical level, the camp was run like a film set, with different family groups booked in for particular periods of time. This provided a chance for each of the groups to be the centre of attention, as the cameras focused on their learning and performance. The camp was big enough to have up to 40 people stay at one time, so women from some family groups would stay beyond their allocated time-slot to support the next family group. This facilitated continuity, provided encouragement for the next group and contributed to the atmosphere of a broader Arrernte women’s network aiming to uphold their traditional singing practices.

The camp created its own momentum, and this led to the discovery of yet more legacy recordings. The Arrernte caretakers of these recordings requested assistance with digitisation and redistribution, so copies were provided on USB data sticks. One particularly significant collection of recordings that came to light was recorded by Aboriginal woman Ada Laughton in the 1960s and delivered to Rachel in two biscuit tins (Perkins 2016). This collection is discussed in detail below.

5 Ada Sylvia Laughton’s collection of Arrernte women’s songs

Ada Sylvia Laughton was born on Hodgson Downs Station around 1925. She was a member of the stolen generation and was raised in Alice Springs at the Bungalow, an institution for children of mixed descent. She married Herbert James Laughton (‘Limpy’), an Arrernte man of mixed descent who worked for the Alice Springs municipal council and later the hospital. Ada was adopted by her Arrernte in-laws and spent most of her life in Alice Springs, raising her four children (see photos).

During the 1960s and up to the mid 1970s, Ada recorded her older Arrernte relatives singing traditional songs. It is not clear whether she made the recordings for the sake of posterity or because she wanted to learn the songs and intended to use the tapes as a memory aid. Ada’s youngest daughter, Heather Laughton, who is now caretaker of these recordings, believes both motives were likely (pers. com. May 2016). Ada used a reel-to-reel audio tape recorder. It was perhaps an unusual appliance for an Alice Springs family at that time, but music was very much part of the Laughtons’

life. Ada's husband Herbert played piano accordion and harmonica, and his nephew, Herbie (Patrick) Laughton, was a well-known country singer (Walker 2000).



Figure 4.1: The Laughton family (top: Ada Laughton, ca. 1940; ca. 1990; below: Herbert and Ada Laughton with their four children: L-R, Kenny, Keith, Jennifer and Heather, ca. 1960; photos courtesy of Heather and Sonya Laughton)

Ada's husband's family were very dear to her, being the only family she knew.⁷ It was with their permission that Ada took on the responsibility of recording and learning their songs – a task she did not undertake lightly. The trunk containing the reels was always kept under lock and key. Heather recalls the first recordings taking place in the evenings at their Alice Springs backyard, on Gap Road, when she was eight years old. The women would make a fire and cook food, prepare medicines, sing and massage one another. It is worth recalling that at this time such an activity, however inoffensive and benign, was actually illegal. People of mixed descent, such as the Laughtons, were not allowed to socialise with their 'full-blood' relatives. Herbert's solution was to have his relatives listed as 'housekeepers'. Nevertheless, it was only under cover of darkness that the older women felt safe to sing, for fear of the authorities.

Ada was clearly unique. To my knowledge, no other person was recording Arrernte women's songs at that time – neither ethnographers nor community members. In 2008, M. K. Turner, with whom I had been working on the documentation of her own songs, informed me about Ada Laughton's recordings. She explained that she would like to access these, as some of her relatives, including her own mother, had sung on them. They would also be of great cultural significance to many Arrernte people. But the recordings were housed a considerable distance away, in Port Augusta, with Heather; and as I was a stranger, I left the matter in the hands of M. K. Turner.

The recordings did not materialise. This was not surprising, given the size of the task: how does one make copies of a group's 'crown jewels' (Marett and Barwick 2003:144), located some 1200 kilometres away, and distribute these in accordance with the appropriate cultural protocols? It was not until the Arrernte Women's Project that there was a viable process in place and a convergence of personnel who were capable of handling both the ethical and technical requirements of the task. In a conversation long after the camp, Heather mentioned that it was only because of the close relationship between Rachel Perkins's father and her own father (Herbert Laughton) that she decided to make the recordings available and have them archived for future generations.⁸ As in traditional times, the sharing and trading of songs is grounded in close relationships between groups. In the past, this only ever happened as the outcome of live performances; but the contemporary use of audio recording technology means that this sharing now also occurs across time and space.

During the Arrernte Women's Project camp the recordings were entrusted to Rachel, with instructions for them to be digitised at the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC), and for M. K. Turner and I to transcribe and translate the songs. The collection consists of 12 reels, some recorded on both sides and others on one side only. Some of the recordings are interspersed with lengthy sections of radio, so the duration of the recording on any particular reel does not necessarily reflect the duration of the traditional Arrernte singing. Most of the song material consists of singing alone, but on a few recordings there are brief interpretations of the songs, and in some cases there are auditory hints of accompanying dancing (HL006). One reel is a recording of Ada herself practising the traditional songs (HL007, see Appendix).

The exact dates and the individual identities of the singers on the recordings are uncertain. However, Heather was able to recall the names of relatives involved in the night-time singing, who often stayed with them in Alice Springs. These senior Arrernte women, all of whom have passed away, were Tiny Webb (Penangke), Tilly Nelson Mulladad (Kngwarraye) and Maria Bird Cavenagh (Perrurle). Jessie Neale (Penangke), the mother of M. K. Turner, was also present on many occasions. In addition, Heather recalls Tilly's son, Louis Mulladad, and his wife, Doreen Palmer, visiting them in Adelaide, where further recordings were made (HL012).

⁷ According to her daughter Heather (pers. com. May 2016), at the age of 72 Ada discovered where she was originally from and met some of her family for the first time. This followed the federal enquiry into the Stolen Generation (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997).

⁸ Rachel's father was Charlie Perkins, an Aboriginal activist who was a key player in the 1965 Freedom Ride and the 1967 Referendum, which gave a number of rights to Aboriginal people.

The Appendix lists the digitised reels of the Arrernte singing in this collection.⁹ There are 659 songs in total, comprising 84 unique Arrernte verses, many of which occur on multiple recordings. For example, Verse 20 can be heard on nine different recordings, incorporating a total of 26 renditions (song items). Verse 33 has a total of 35 renditions, again spanning nine recordings. The songs in the collection are mostly sung by women only, although Louis Mulladad was present with his mother, Tilly Mulladad, for the recording of some of them. He can be heard explaining the meanings of the songs in HL012, which was likely to have been recorded in Adelaide between 1968 and 1974.

On some of the recordings the songs are identified as being *ilpentye*. This is a genre that has a slightly different meaning in Arrernte to that in neighbouring languages. Its meaning is discussed below.

5.1 *Ilpentye* ‘Arrernte women’s songs’

Among the multiple meanings of the word *ilpentye*, the best known is ‘love song’ or ‘charm’. According to the Arrernte dictionary (Henderson and Dobson 1994:361), *ilpentye* are songs people sing ‘to make a particular person fall in [or out] of love with them, but . . . not sung directly to that person’; men and women sing separate *ilpentye* songs. The dictionary also identifies another meaning of *ilpentye*, as ‘women’s singing and dancing (not necessarily love songs)’. For many Arrernte women, it is this second, broader sense that applies to their understanding of the term. Participation in *ilpentye* helps them develop a sense of pride in their own identity as Aboriginal women (Heather Laughton 2016 pers. com.).

An even broader meaning of *ilpentye*, as ‘song’, is evidenced in compounds such as *ilpentye-warre* ‘singer’; moreover, in a closely related language (Kaytetye), *ilpentye-impentye* means ‘singer; women’s singalong’ (Turpin and Ross 2012:391). Another phrase, *ilpentye artwe*, is encountered in six Arrernte verses, where it is said to refer to a male singer (*artwe* ‘man’). This suggests that, depending on the context, the most general meaning of *ilpentye* may be ‘song’, unspecified for gender or function. It is also possible that *ilpentye artwe* refers to a male love-song singer. In a neighbouring language, Warlpiri, the cognate term *yilpinji* is a type of song performed by both men and women. When needing to distinguish love songs from women’s singing in general, the latter can be disambiguated with the phrase *arrkene-kenhe* ‘for fun’ (as opposed to being for a specific purpose) or *arrartenhe-artenhe* ‘for public display’ (a nominalised form of the verb *arrarte*- ‘to come out’).

The semantic association between singing and romance is widespread, as is the association between music and special powers. Music is considered capable of invoking ‘realms of knowledge to which we otherwise have little access’ (Becker 1994:41). In Arrernte, the close connection between singing for fun and singing for causing effect (i.e. inducing romantic feelings) can be seen in the following exchange between the late Arrernte singer Maria Bird and M. K. Turner, who is seeking clarification of the function of these songs.

- MB: Proper *ilpentye*. Number one.
These are real ilpentye songs and very powerful.
- MKT: Arrkene-kenhe akweye?
Are they for fun?
- MB: Arrkene-kenhe akwele-aye, *ilpentye* nhenhele akwele inerreke.
*Of course they are fun, and you can change how a person feels with these songs.*¹⁰

The broad range of meanings associated with the word *ilpentye* suggests an artistic practice that is flexible in its contexts and functions, yet its forms are remarkably fixed. The verses themselves show very little variation across time and context. Nonetheless, in private love songs, the style of vocal delivery and the associated actions may differ from those used in women’s public performances.

⁹ The Ada Sylvia Laughton collection is being prepared for deposit at AIATSIS.

¹⁰ AIATSIS archive tape JG02_019566, recorded in 1993, translated by M. Turpin 2016.

Throughout Central Australia some songs are associated with particular places. But in the Laughton recordings there are only a few where the singers mention a connection with a specific locality. For example, on HL001_02, Verse 19 is said to relate to Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa). In some cases we know of associated places because the songs exist on other recordings, where they are described in more detail. For example, M. K. Turner and linguist Jennifer Green recorded Maria Bird singing some of the same verses in 1993, where she describes them as *ilpentye* from Lyelthe [JG02_019594].¹¹ Lyelthe, a synonym for Unemarre, is an area north-east of Alice Springs that overlaps with parts of Huckitta cattle station.¹²

While some words in these verses are easily identifiable, others can refer to a broad range of phenomena, so their core meaning is not easily packaged in a single English word or phrase. Many of these words occur in multiple verses and thus become associated with the *ilpentye* genre. For example, *arlere-arlere* means ‘something far away that appears to be close’. It is often used to describe a person or a hill coming into view. The word occurs in three verses in Ada Sylvia Laughton’s collection (84, 35 and 41), and the first of these is translated below. (A verse is a repeating couplet, so two verses may create a quatrain, as in the present case.)

Intye palepale-ame ayenge arnpetyenhe
Intye palepale-ame ayenge arnpetyenhe
Ilewerre arlere-arlere-ame ayenge arnpetyenhe
Ilewerre arlere-arlere-ame ayenge arnpetyenhe

Through the grass, confidently I walk
Through the grass, confidently I walk
The mirage appears close but far as I walk
The mirage appears close but far as I walk

(Verse 84, heard on HL005_02, HL004A, HL006_01, HL008_01 and HL011. Transcribed and translated by M. K. Turner and the author.)

Mirages and other shining phenomena are frequently referred to in the songs. It may be that the word *ilewerre* ‘mirage’ is used symbolically here to refer to other, more subtle aspects of things that shimmer. Identifying the words, their meanings and the broader significance of the verses is a lengthy task. It requires the kind of specialist knowledge that is held today by only a few Arrernte elders.

6. Directions for the future

The Arrernte Women’s Project was a rare opportunity for large intergenerational family groups to focus on the teaching and learning of their traditional songs, unimpeded by the pressures of everyday life. Rachel Perkins’s presence, as a prominent media figure and an Arrernte woman, was no doubt one of the factors that helped to create a safe space. The fact that she wanted to learn her own traditional songs encouraged other women to undertake the challenge of trying to acquire the necessary performance skills.

On the final day of the camp there were many personal testimonies about its significance in the women’s lives. As an ethnomusicologist, it was a deeply moving experience to witness people expressing how much their songs and the camp experience meant to them. Perkins (2016) recalls one woman who, when her family sang the songs of her mother, said ‘we are rich’. She also recounts that:

¹¹ Verses 48, 26, 18, 20.

¹² *Lyelthe* also means ‘fragments of wood, wood-chips, debris’ (Green, pers. com. 2016).

(p)eople were expressing how their culture and songs connected them to their land and to their identity. Said one woman who had only just learned her local Dreaming song, ‘Now no one can tell us we are not from here’.

Many participants wanted the camp to be an annual event, but finding funding for such a purpose is not easy, especially when the immediate output does not take a publicly accessible form; for example, as a film, a festival or an unrestricted performance. Some participants suggested the camp should be located even further from Alice Springs, to ensure full-time involvement from all participants and to prevent external interruptions. However, this would increase costs and reduce the number of people who could take part. For example, those in full-time employment would only be able to participate in the evenings. A number of participants suggested that the USB sticks of song recordings should be treated as ceremonial objects, with a formal handover based on established cultural practices. Reaching agreement on issues such as access to and distribution of recordings will require time, the experience of further camps and increased usage of the recorded songs. In spite of these concerns and different points of view, there is a consensus that the recordings must be treated with the utmost respect.

Since the camp I have encountered several of the Project participants in Alice Springs. Some have got together as a family group and sung on country for the first time; some requested further copies of their newly digitised recordings; and some described the experience of listening to the old recordings of their relatives singing as if they had spent the afternoon ‘with Nanna’. Songs connect Arrernte people to their ancestors and their country, and they assist in the formation of identity and self-worth. The opportunity to restore these treasures that were on the brink of being lost forever is a rare and priceless gift.

Appendix

Table 4.1: The Ada Sylvia Laughton collection of Arrernte women’s songs

| Recording Digital file | Original | Number of song items | Number of verses (from a total of 84 unique verses) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|--|
| HL001_01 | Reel 1 side A | 18 | 7 |
| HL001_02 | Reel 1 side B | 46 | 25 |
| HL004_01 | Reel 2 side A | 94 | 21 |
| HL005_02 | Reel 3 side A | 24 | 10 |
| HL006_01 | Reel 4 side A | 38 | 14 |
| HL006_02 | Reel 4 side B | 43 | 15 |
| HL008_01 | Reel 5 side A | 20 | 11 |
| HL009_01 | Reel 6 side A | 8 | 4 |
| HL010_01 | Reel 7 side A | 24 | 8 |
| HL010_02 | Reel 7 side B | 13 | 6 |
| HL007_01 | Reel 8 side A | 2 | - |
| HL007_02 | Reel 8 side A | 15 | - |
| HL011 | Reel 9 side A | 107 | 42 |
| HL012 | Reel 10 side A | 49 | 20 |
| HL013 | Reel 11 side A | 24 | 7 |
| HL014 | Reel 11 side B | 58 | 19 |
| HL015 | Reel 12 side A | 26 | 10 |
| HL016 | Reel 12 side B | 50 | 23 |
| Total songs | | 659 | |

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