

## **Arandic songs: documenting Aboriginal verbal art in Central Australia**

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This paper reports on a study of Arandic songs, a post-doctoral fellowship funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Program 2007–2008. It surveys the number of song styles and ceremonies, their structure, and in particular the divergence between song language and speech. The complexities involved in maintaining these traditions is also considered.

The contexts of Aboriginal music are vastly different to most Western music. In Central Australian Aboriginal societies all traditional songs are part of larger events, such as ceremonies, games or story-telling; or they are sung to specifically alter a situation, such as to make someone fall in love or heal a particular illness. Ceremonial songs are created by ancestral Dreaming spirits and revealed to people in dreams, and are then passed on orally through the generations. The songs are inextricably linked to country and are owned and performed by land-holding groups who are descendants of the song-bearing spirits (Strehlow 1971; Moyle 1986:3). Performances can summon ancestral powers, for example to bring rain or resolve conflict, as well as being a statement of identity and a source of entertainment.

The songs draw upon a relatively constrained set of vocabulary laden with cultural symbolism. A song may contain as little as two words, while four or five is common. One of the difficulties in learning Arandic songs arises from the immense differences to spoken language. Many of these differences are the result of conforming to principles for how words should be set to musical rhythm. For example, all notes must begin with a consonant. This is not easily resolved in Arandic languages as most words begin with a vowel. Different song styles achieve this in different ways. For example, one song style favors deleting the initial vowel of a word, while another song style takes the final consonant of the preceding word as the onset to a vowel initial word. Other song styles simply insert a meaningless consonant before a vowel initial word.

Such issues have implications for making learning resources for communities. Should textual representations (such as subtitles) be the speech word or the sung form? Should unique song words be written or their everyday speech equivalents? I illustrate these issues with some community resources that have been made in the course of this project. The complexities of these issues have implications for learning and transmission of songs.