Signposted by Song: cultural routes of the Australian desert

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Abstract

The ‘songlines’ of the Western Desert are the tracks of the ancestral beings of the Tjukurpa, Aboriginal creation law, recounted in song and story. This ancient oral mapping tradition covers vast stretches of time and space in the desert regions of Western Australia, Northern Territory and South Australia. Some knowledge of these ancestral cultural routes of the first peoples of Australia has been shared with the wider community as Aboriginal people share stories of their country through art. However, the complexity and beauty of their oral heritage of song and story is not widely appreciated. Traditional song sagas recount the ancestors’ exploits and indicate the location of water and food sources essential for survival in these dry lands of Australia. Songlines are living cultural routes, a web of oral knowledge of country that maps places of significance for the Indigenous peoples of this land. Appreciation of songlines as a sophisticated system of interconnecting cultural routes mnemonically signposted in song has the potential to expand the concept of cultural routes and heritage practice in Australian and internationally. This paper describes the genesis of an Australian Research Council (ARC) project: Alive with the Dreaming! Songlines of the Western Desert (hereafter The Songlines Project). Several early positive outcomes of the project are presented as part of an iterative research development process.

Introduction

Australian mainstream heritage practice often foregrounds places and routes significant as a result of European colonisation. Beneath this shallow time layer of surveyor pegs and straight lines marked on maps lie the deep time traces of the first peoples’ foot tracks marked in the land. The Canning Stock Route, an iconic Australian cultural heritage route, follows European straight-line logic running north-south against the grain of the Western Desert country. While the indigenous foot tracks follow the intelligence of the land; tracking waterhole to waterhole, diverging for good food sources, marking the trees, caves, hills, grass plains, creekbeds and water sources that sustain the life of people and animals travelling through the land. Long before European colonization the Australian deserts were crisscrossed by a network of these routes established by Aboriginal creation beings of Tjukurpa, their Law and Dreaming tracks colloquially called Songlines. Alive with the Dreaming! Songlines of the Western Desert is an Australian Research Council (ARC) project that intends to redress the balance of history by emphasising these pre-existing tracks that traverse Australia. Tracing the connections and logic of Indigenous Australian law and knowledge of country re-centers the cultural history of the region to an Indigenous perspective.
The Songlines Project has been developed with Anangu and Martu who want to record the traditional stories of two Creation Ancestors that cross the Western Desert lands of South Australia, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. It is a collaborative research project involving the Martu, Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people and researchers from the Australian National University, The National Museum of Australia and the University of New England who have expertise in anthropology, archaeology, rock art and environmental and art history. The Anangu and Martu have asked researchers to work with them recording the Indigenous and western knowledge of the ecological, economic and cultural heritage values of the corridors travelled by their ancestors across the vast Western Desert.

Elders from the Aboriginal partner organisations have decided that the focus of the research will be on two great Tjukurpa that cross the desert from west to east with many detours along their course: Ngintaka or Perentie Lizard who stole the grindstone and Kungkarangkalpa or Seven Sisters.

This paper recounts the rationale for the project that was developed by academic researchers in partnership with traditional owners. The ARC project has developed out of a long history of engagement between some of the researchers (including the author) and the Aboriginal communities involved. Its overarching aims are to explore the interrelated strands of Indigenous knowledge of country within and transmitted through ‘open’ (non-restricted) teachings of Tjukurpa law and culture of the Western Desert. Anticipating that an understanding of the Indigenous ontology and knowledge organization of songlines will expand the concept of cultural routes and heritage practice in Australian and internationally. This paper focusses on the central focus of the project the recording, interpretation and performance of the narrative elements of the two songlines. Although the project is in its early stages there have already been significant achievements in terms of the recording and interpretative performance of the songlines as outlined later in this paper. The paper concludes with a brief consideration of the possibility of these songlines being protected as national and/or world heritage.

Intangible signposts to tangible sites

‘Knowing the song I can travel through country I have never seen before and find water’ (Tjilari, pers. comm. 1975).

Andy Tjilari, a Pitjantjatjara elder with extensive oral libraries of song in his mind guided the first Ngintaka trip of the Songlines Project by song. His visual and aural memory for these intangible maps of country is vast, detailed and accurate and whether travelling by day or night he can find his way. When he sings he sees country with the acuity of an eagle as it soars over the desert, a detailed topographic and cultural map of the land rolling out before his mind’s eye. The songlines that map his land are the tracks of the creation ancestors of the Tjukurpa. Elders like Tjilari, cannot see this landscape without hearing song.
The signs of the ancestor’s passing are only visible to those who know the lines of the songs connecting sites of creative manifestation of Tjukurpa, where the ancestor created plant and animal foods, water, language, social customs and law or simply rested on their travels. Anangu and Martu senior men and women who know the song can travel vast distances over country following these cultural routes signposted by stanzas in the song saga that link sources of water and food essential for survival. For those who do not know these songs and the routes they signpost, the vast central and western deserts of Australia are trackless wastelands in which travellers without compass, map or satellite navigational aid are lost and risk death.

This knowledge network of living songlines has relied on mnemonic memory to transmit vital survival information between small groups of hunter-gatherer peoples across the vast sandy expanses of Australia’s deserts for the last 35,000 years (Smith 2005). It is one of the great resilient oral knowledge systems of the world. A knowledge system that has proven adaptable to climate and seasonal change over millennia ensuring the survival of human beings in one of the harshest dry environments on the planet, the central and western deserts of Australia.

**Songlines and Tjukurpa: translation of meaning**

Words hold worlds of meaning specific to oral and written language contexts. Subtleties of cultural references are often lost in translation from one language to another and between the oral performative form and the written text. One such concept is Tjukurpa (or Jukurrpa) a word used across the Western Desert to refer to the Law and the creation sustaining force in all things. Tjukurpa is variously translated into English as Law, Dreaming, story, a word or the spoken word, or a birthmark that identifies an individual with their creation ancestor (Goddard 1992). Pitjantjatjara people also use Tjukurpa to refer to the Christian concept ‘the Word of God’. The ‘Tjukurpa’ or ‘the Word’ in both languages can be a noun or have the dynamic qualities of a verb; it is both a creation story and the act of creation (Cooper 1977). The intangible Tjukurpa or Word refers to an active source of life that manifests in physical forms in the animate and inanimate environment. In both ontological belief systems Tjukurpa or ‘the Word’, refers to the continuing presence of creation and sustaining life force of the ever present now. The metaphysical aspects of Tjukurpa need to be understood as a central to Aboriginal ontology, the first principle of things, including concepts of being, knowing, substance, essence, cause, identity, time and space. Tjukurpa is an unfolding mystery the meaning of which has to be earned and lived in the country that it continues to enliven.

The common translation of Tjukurpa as ‘Dreaming’ has unfortunately limited wider community understanding of the conceptual complexity of Tjukurpa. The ‘Dreamtime’ or ‘Dreaming’ has variously been analysed by western anthropologists as myth or unreality, as fantasy, as psychological defences against fear or as a functional social institution (Elkin1964; Hiat 1975; Radcliff-Brown1945). Eliade (1949) was the first to study all religion non-pejoratively as ontology, the expression of ideas on the nature of reality through myth, rite and symbol embodying abstract metaphysical concepts. Stanner concurred with Eliade and called for a more complex understanding of the Dreaming as a world-and-life view expressing a metaphysic of life that can and should be elicited (Stanner 1989).

The Aboriginal elders who initiated the project have stated their desire to promote understanding of their metaphysic of life in the wider community through investigation of the ‘open’ songs and stories of their Songline tradition. This project aims to extend the previous research into the significance of Aboriginal songlines as a mnemonic method of conveying large amounts of oral knowledge (Ellis 1985, 1996; Glowczewski 1991; James 2009,1996, 1994; Morphy 2008,1991; Myers 1986; Peterson1986; Stanner 1989). The extent to which cross-cultural understanding can be achieved will be determined by acts of translation across the ontological cultural and linguistic divides.

The colloquial term ‘songlines’ has been chosen to translate the Pitjantjatjara term *inma*, the song and dance performance of the Tjukurpa creation ancestors’ travels. ‘Songlines’ is a valuable cross-cultural conceptual metaphor as it resonates for people around the world who celebrate epic song sagas. Bruce Chatwin first coined the term in 1987 when he published a
book on his travels in Central Australia entitled Songlines. His experience of the living Aboriginal song tradition reconnected him powerfully to his own and the global heritage of epic ancestral song sagas:

I have a vision of the Songlines stretching across the continents and ages; that wherever men have trodden they have left a trail of song; and that these trails must reach back, in time and space, to an isolated pocket in the African savannah, where the First Man shouted the opening stanza to the World Song, “I am!” (Chatwin 1987).

Chatwin’s concept of songlines celebrates the universal human heritage of ancestral song sagas that have survived in many cultures in oral form for thousands of years. India has the epics of the Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita, Sweden and Norway have Viking sagas like Frithjof’s Saga; the Icelandic Sagas, including The Saga of Burnt Njal, were song sagas before being written down between ca. 1100 AD and 1300 AD, as were the song poems of The Iliad and The Odyssey written down by Greek scholar Homer in 800 BC (Fagles & Knox 1996). This universal oral tradition of recording ancestral history in song sagas is exemplified in operas like Wagner’s Ring Cycle. These trails of song intangibly weave a web of cultural routes around the world.

The Australian Oxford Dictionary definition of ‘song line’ narrows the concept to, ‘the map drawn by the journeyings of an ancestral being or beings; a dreaming track’ (Australian Oxford Dictionary 1999:1285). While the composite word songlines combining both song and line expands the referends of both; the intangible voice of song moves over the topography of physical landscape in a line that is not confined to one plane or direction but flows multi-dimensionally through tonal and rhythmic dimensions following the cultural landscape contours of the land. This rich conceptual metaphor inspires new ways of seeing and hearing the way people travel through and know country. The universal oral heritage qualities of these cultural routes lie in the intangible rhythmic dimension of landscapes redolent with songs sung over the centuries.

Wangkara kulilkatinyi discussing and rethinking as we go along.

The Songlines Project has adopted a community based approach (Greer 2010) which emphasises the iterative nature of project development when researchers and communities work together to produce outcomes of value to the community. The how and why of heritage research theory and practice needs to be relevant to the Indigenous communities involved. As Maori scholar Linda Tuhiiwa Smith in her seminal work ‘decolonising methodologies’ points out Indigenous communities have for too long been passive objects of research. Now as active participants they are involved in the why, how and where of research in their communities (Smith 1999).

Heritage consultants and academic researchers predominantly schooled in the western tradition of assessing heritage value of objects, buildings, monuments and written texts need to open up to new ways of knowing. In the context of oral nomadic cultures like those of the Western Desert peoples of Australia they have to retrain their ears and eyes to hear the richness of the oral tradition and see the cultural values in the landscape. The visiting researcher needs to appreciate that these songs and stories of Tjukurpa are part of the living law of the people, not just of past historical value. The Tjukurpa is the past, present and future core of Western Desert peoples’ spiritual, physical and social life and relatedness to their kin and lands.

This oral heritage has been passed down the generations in a continuous process of revelation through the performance of songs and ceremonies, levels of knowledge being acquired over a lifetime. Any visiting researcher will not be initiated into all levels of knowledge but will be in the position of a novice in this Indigenous world. Visitors must wait with respect to be invited in to share stories or songs around the campfire. The principle to apply is ‘always ask before joining conversations or visiting places in country or recording in image, word or film. Respecting the limits to secret sacred or gender specific knowledge set by the local people, the researcher must learn what questions not to ask. Researchers are required to be responsible to the local community elders discussing what can be recorded and how the research material is stored, accessed and published in public cultural institutions and made accessible to the wider community.
To fulfil these ethical protocols the Songlines research adheres to the action research method of the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Women’s Council (Figure 2). This cross-cultural method involves visiting researchers working alongside Aboriginal co-researchers with interpreters. It incorporates the practice of ngapartji-ngapartji ‘the reciprocal sharing’ of knowledge and resources.

This bi-cultural research is a process of translation of meaning and significance of local traditional knowledge to the wider cultural and natural heritage management discourse and practice. Recognition of the synergies between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems enables collaborative researchers to appreciate different perspectives and value orientations while finding common ground. Indigenous communities, local filmmakers and artists are increasingly utilising digital technologies and web-based communication in recording and archiving cultural materials and disseminating information both internally and to external audiences. The Songlines Project builds on this collaborative background environment to achieve core research objectives that will both facilitate cross-cultural communication and achieve better outcomes for the management of key Indigenous cultural resources.

The Songlines Project is tasked with increasing national recognition and understanding of Indigenous songlines. The prime aim of the Aboriginal elder custodians is to record specific oral traditions of story, song and dance in digital sound and film for the instruction of future generations. The researchers bring skills in recording oral heritage, documenting and dating the visual record of cultural continuity in rock painting and modern canvases, and investigating the archaeological record of settlement and movement through country. The indigenous and non-indigenous research team will combine these strands of intangible and tangible cultural to substantiate the songline tracks through the country. It is known that this ancient knowledge system has sustained cultural routes across Australia’s vast inland deserts for many generations; we are investigating how it continues as a vital part of desert life today.

The Western Desert people who are engaged in the research project have clearly delineated the scope of the research to ‘open’ or public knowledge of their stories and song traditions; there will be no research into sacred or secret areas of traditional knowledge or practice.
Senior custodians of each Tjukurpa are involved in the governance of the research process and the approval of any resulting exhibitions, films or books. The public research output will be designed to increase understanding of songlines as an integrated knowledge system that can enhance the theory and practice of Australian and potentially world cultural and natural heritage management.

The Anangu voice: antecedents to the Project.

Anangu of the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands have long been communicating through their politics and art the importance of Tjukurpa and the Songlines Project can be seen in the context of this history. Nganyinytja, a leading Pitjantjatjara spokeswoman for Aboriginal land rights and reconciliation addressed the international ANZASS Conference of Indigenous women in 1980 with these stirring words:

“Ka ngayulu kuwari alatji wangkanyi nganampa ngura ngaratja. Kulila nganana ngayulu, nganana tjukurtja tjunkunytja iiriti ngura nganampa winki Australiala winki tjukurtja tjunkunytja – kulila!"

I am now talking about our country over there [Pointing to northern south Australia on a map of Australia, Nganyinytja then covered the map of Australia with circles indicating Aboriginal land all over Australia.]. I am drawing the places all over Australia where our Dreamtime started a long long time ago—Listen! (Nganyinytja Ilyatjari, 1983:55)

Nganyinytja was an outspoken advocate of the importance of all people in Australia understanding the significance of Tjukurpa, the foundation law and the creation stories of their country. Her strong voice has strongly influenced the author’s role as an anthropologist and bi-lingual interpreter over the last thirty years. The current Songlines Project was inspired by Nganyinytja’s vision to communicate the richness of the Indigenous voice of country through documenting the song, story and dance of the ancestral Tjukurpa tracks of the Western Desert.

The process of documenting one of the ancestral tracks, that of the Ngintaka perentie lizard, began in 1988 when Nganyinytja and her husband Charlie Ilyatjari with their extended family started a ‘bush college’ at Angatja in the Mann Ranges (James 1994). They invited visitors from all over Australia and the world to come and camp with them at Angatja for a week and experience their way of life, land and culture. Visitors were instructed to kulila ‘listen with understanding’ to the story and song of Tjukurpa and then to ground the learning by walking the ancestral track, touching the ground, rocks and seeds created by the ancestor while hearing the song for to each specific site. This mirrored the traditional Anangu way of teaching their own children and grandchildren the importance of Aboriginal Law and Inma Way.

Charlie Ilyatjari, a medicine man and renowned Pitjantjatjara songman, said the most important knowledge to be communicated cross-culturally is Inma Way; the songs, story and dances of the Tjukurpa. Ilyatjari explained that the knowledge of inma is essential to survival in this land; knowledge of country, water sources, food and game sources is carried in the verses of the song-cycles which are place specific, a topographical map of country in song.

‘Inma Way ngunti wiya; nganaga inmakula mula-mula ngintiringanyi! The song and dance of our ancestors is not make believe; we are communicating important knowledge through song!’ (Ilyatjari 1990 cited in James 2006:265)

The performance of the song and dance brings the footprints of the ancestors to the surface; inma maps the cultural routes of Tjukurpa through country.

Tjukurpa uti ngarinyi! The Law and the Dreaming is clear to see.

(Ilyatjari pers.comm. 1990)

Europeans and others not of this indigenous tradition may not have the ears to hear or the eyes to see the complexity and beauty of traditional desert inma. Skilled ethnomusicologists like Catherine Ellis can assist wider appreciation by translating the oral song tradition into a European musical nomenclature. Without this translation the tradition is so ‘foreign’ that
subtleties of tone and melody are lost on the outsiders’ ear. Simply listening to Anangu inma without translation of language and musical form does not convey the complex interrelationship of song, country, community and law.

Ellis asserted that an academic analytic appreciation of Anangu inma was essential to understanding the complexity of Anangu thinking. She believed that ‘music is the central repository of Aboriginal knowledge’ (Ellis 1985:83). Ellis’s detailed analysis of the structure of rhythm, tone, text and melody of Anangu music and song draws attention to the complex structure of knowledge and thinking:

Aboriginal music has an iridescent quality. The colour depends on which aspect holds one’s attention at any time. The structures, even if completely unaltered, can appear first in one form, then in another. The multiple sets of possible variants around one pattern increase this potential. (Ellis 1985:82)

The beauty and variants of the sung form are intrinsic to its power and sustainability as a mnemonic form of knowledge transfer. It requires great skill and memory to learn and perform the many song cycles that are the heritage of Aboriginal custodians of tracts of country. Some individuals of exceptional skill become knowledge holders of the songs, dances and stories of the travels many creation ancestors. These individuals of prodigious memory like Charlie Ilyatjari and his wife Nganyinytja, Andy Tjilari and his daughter Inawinytji Williamson, become the oral librarians of their communities, custodians of history, law, story and song.

Why Anangu value Songlines research

Anangu and Martu elders prioritise the importance of taking their children and grandchildren back to country to teach and record their songs, stories and dance performances. This desire to pass on their knowledge has become more urgent as illness and age has depleted the numbers of custodians of the vast and beautiful oral heritage of the Western Desert peoples. The human and technological resources to assist the elders’ heritage recording and transmission are scarce in remote Aboriginal communities across the Western Desert. Often it is assumed that cultural knowledge will be documented in association with art centres or caring for country programs, which are not specifically resourced to provide this service. Oral heritage recording ideally involves inter-generational trips to country where the stories, songs and dances can be performed along the songlines. This process requires vehicles, and human resources, specialist equipment and skill to ensure high quality digital sound and video recording, ethnographic understanding and translation skills to prepare material to be archived. These resources while scarce in remote communities are plentiful in the universities and museums of Australian cities. To bridge this gap the Songlines ARC Project was initiated to make these resources accessible to Aboriginal peoples in small communities across the Western Desert.

David Miller, the Aboriginal chairman of Ananguku Arts and senior Ngintaka traditional owner, put the aims of the research succinctly when he said, ‘Irititja a long time ago our iconic cultural symbols were painted on rocks in caves. Now these icons are being painted on canvas, we are proud to exhibit our knowledge of country. We need to bring the whole story along the Ngintaka songline out, not let it be cut up by new state boundaries’ (Miller 2010).

Aboriginal elders and researchers discussed how the research would benefit people in desert communities. The history of researchers ‘taking’ Indigenous knowledge and artefacts to store in institutions remote from the people and their lands is a raw wound for many Indigenous peoples in Australia. Karina Lester, an articulate Yankunytjatjara woman, challenged the ARC research team to say what the benefits to Anangu would be from this research project. A senior Nganyatjarra woman Elizabeth Ellis responded that it is time for Aboriginal people to take the initiative and direct collaborative research to achieve their own community goals. Elizabeth Marakilyi Ellis, spoke passionately of the need to re-empower the language and knowledge of her people. She said, “English and the language of missionaries took away the power of our law, our Tjukurpa. The law of kulata ‘spear’ and wana ‘digging stick’ needs to be taken back by our people. This research project takes our knowledge seriously, working together with respectful researchers we can stand strongly, and the power of our Tjukurpa law and
knowledge will be recognised. This research project is an opportunity to work together to redress the balance and ensure that the cultural knowledge in the language of song, poetry and story of Tjukurpa is recognised and respected (Ellis 2010).

The enthusiasm of Elders across Martu, Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara lands to record their knowledge with the support of regional Land Councils provides a unique opportunity for Indigenous knowledge holders to collaborate with an inter-disciplinary team of academics on a research project of this size and scope. The expertise of senior Tjukurpa songline knowledge holders, artists, singers, storytellers, caring for country rangers and Aboriginal multi-lingual interpreters is complemented by academic expertise in the analysis of material culture, the anthropology of art, ethnography, cross-cultural interpretation, archaeology, museum and art exhibition curatorial skills, and cultural heritage and ecological land management.

Ngintaka Songline; the perentie lizard grindstone thief

Versions of the ‘open’ Ngintaka story of the perentie lizard man who stole the grindstone have been in the public domain for many years. In 1971 the story was written down and translated by David and Lesley Abrams to accompany carved works of art produced at Amata for sale in southern markets. Billy Wara a master punu or wood carver living at Amata carved enormous larger than life perentie lizards out of coolibah branches and red river gum roots. Ngintaka was his Tjukurpa, and his carvings are strong manifestations of his ancestral being. At the request of his descendants one of these magnificent beasts will take pride of place in the Ngintaka Songline exhibition in the South Australian Museum in 2014. This exhibition will be co-curated by Anangu custodians and researchers on the Songlines Project.

Anangu from the APY Lands once depicted this Tjukurpa story on rock walls of shelters now they paint the story with acrylics on canvas; the story is the same though the medium changes. Josephine Watjari Mick, a Pitjantjatjara artist and law woman, spoke eloquently at a community meeting in Mimili of the history of sharing this story with the world as the precursor to the Songlines project:

‘This project started, as we all know, with that Ngintaka Inma you are holding (a CD) that was recorded at Angatja. And the nguraritja (traditional owners) artists with Ku Arts across the lands have been painting the Ngintaka story. Because of this it has become a big story; from Inma and paintings. This is how the government knows about this, they have been seeing that Art...

From that past is how it has grown to now, this project idea. From that is how the Western Desert Songlines Project grew. We the custodians of these Tjukurpa sing the songs, dances of these stories and want to record them for ourselves Anangu and our future generations.

You can listen to this CD, we custodians have been happy to record these songs and stories clearly for others to listen to. What do you think, is it that good?’ (Mick 2012)

Josephine Mick clearly asserted Anangu agency and control of the information being shared with the public regarding Anangu Tjukurpa through their art and recordings of songs, stories and dances as part of the Songlines Project. Anangu have been painting the Ngintaka and Kungkarangkalpa Tjukurpa and sharing these stories with the public for many years. The
Ngintaka Inma was recorded and has been publically available through the Anangu owned tour company Desert Tracks since 1996. The Songlines Project will continue to work with Anangu recording in detail the public versions of these stories and songs. Recording cultural heritage for future generations is an important strand of the Songlines Project with other strands including archaeology, rock art, modern art and ecological information useful for caring for country. These ways of tracking the Songline through time and space will be incorporated into the multi-dimensional exhibition to be held at the South Australian Museum in 2014.

Kungkarangkalpa: Seven Sisters Songline

Elders from the Martu lands in the west to the Yankunytjatjara lands in the east claim that the Seven Sisters Songline has been orally transmitted for thousands of years by peoples’ who traversed the Western Desert bloc an area of some 670,000 km² stretching over Western Australia, South Australia and Northern Territory (see Fig. 1). This region is identified anthropologically as the Western Desert cultural bloc due to the historic and current strong cultural and linguistic links between the estimated 7,500 Aboriginal people living there. The Songlines Project focuses on the journey of the Seven Sisters west to east along a cultural route over 6,000 kilometers from Roebourne on the Western Australian coast to Port Augusta in South Australia.

The research to date has concentrated on a section of the Seven Sisters Songline from Kings Canyon past Mt Connor in the Northern Territory to the Musgrave Ranges of South Australia. Within this stretch of about 300 km of winding ancestral track there are hundreds of verses of song. Senior custodian Inawinytji Williamson identified over fifty verses that were written down sung and recorded as part of the project. Inawinytji’s transcription provided the libretto for the performance of Kungkarangkalpa: Seven Sisters Songline at the National Museum of Australia in March 2013. The performance was dramatic with full stage lighting, projected filmic background of country enlivened with the sound effects of wind, birdsong and thunder at appropriate moments. The semicircular curved stage was designed to replicate the shape of a bush windbreak and also be a screen for the lush projection of desert landscape and digitally enhanced imagery depicting magical events in the story. Anangu danced on red earth and real fires provided necessary warmth on a cold southern night by the shores of Lake Burley Griffin.

This staged performance was an act of translation from the bush to the city, from the analogic to the linear storytelling, from impromptu to scripted performance; all necessary steps in translation of a traditional inma for a modern city audience. While staying true to the traditional chorus song and dance form the creative director Wesley Enoch worked with the Anangu artists and myself to translate inma into a transcultural performance. The Canberra performance of Kungkarangkalpa was the first time a long tract of the Songline was presented to a city audience. The traditional inma was successfully translated from the context of ‘ceremony’ to the public performance context of ‘opera’ in which story, song and dance tell the epic song saga of the Seven Sisters’. The performance was true to the intent of Anangu as the audience felt the power and presence of the ancestral creation beings of Tjukurpa. Nyurpaya Kaika Burton, senior custodian and dancer, said the performance brought her great joy and pride but also brought tears to her eyes as she felt the presence of her ancestors (Burton pers. comm. 2013)

Tracking the length and depth of the Seven Sisters Songline across the Western Desert is a continuing...
process. The researchers together with Anangu and Martu custodians will travel this Songline over the next three years. The team will be led by senior custodians with the mnemonic knowledge of this song track through desert country that appears dry and barren to a western eye but in reality holds pockets of water and food that are associated with the sites along the songlines of the ancestral beings. These trips will rely on song and story to find the way.

**Songlines significance as Cultural Heritage Routes**

The local importance of songlines as cultural heritage routes has been clearly expressed by the Anangu leaders as the basis of transferring their cultural heritage to the next generation; the importance of sharing open versions of their songlines with the wider community through their art and tourism; and also the importance of songline cultural heritage as a basis for the local industries of arts, tourism and ranger work caring for country practice. The significance of the songlines tradition for the wider Australian national community was demonstrated by the capacity crowds, over a thousand each night, who attended the public performance of Kungkarangkalpa Seven Sisters Songline in Canberra. This performance, broadcast on live webcast across Australia and internationally, was greeted by enthusiastic phone, text and emails messages from people in remote desert communities to commentators in New York.

The national and international respect and interest in the Australian Aboriginal Songline tradition leads to the question of whether songlines should be recognized as World Heritage cultural routes of universal significance. There is debate within the heritage discourse about whether or not National or World Heritage inscription is supportive of local heritage value and sustainable protection practice (for example see Smith & Akagawa 2009; Villalon 2005; but also for an alternative perspective see Hill et al 2001; Sullivan 2004). Often arguments against the value of world heritage listing ignore or underestimate the strong agency local indigenous peoples have in the way their cultural heritage is managed and protected on their own lands. Indigenous people in Vanuatu for example are ‘actively selecting and adapting global and local principles of both economic development and heritage conservation according to their local aspiration’ (Trau 2012).

National or world heritage recognition of Australian Aboriginal songlines may assist in accessing the financial and practical resources needed to protect and sustain local cultural heritage. Anangu and Martu peoples are aware that their young people need employment in community if they are to stay and thrive in their traditional lands. The economic value to local communities of sustaining traditional knowledge has long been evident in the burgeoning Aboriginal art industry, Indigenous cultural and eco-tourism, and Indigenous land management across Australia (Altman 2001; Hill 2008; Hill et al. 2007). The recording and digital archiving of intangible cultural heritage will provide Indigenous knowledge banks of cultural heritage and sustain such local Indigenous cultural enterprises of future generations.

The challenging question then for national cultural institutions and international cultural heritage organisations is how to assist Indigenous peoples’ safeguarding of their intangible and tangible cultural heritage. To begin with this requires the development of heritage theory and practice that sustains Indigenous ways of knowing and local governance within the wider national or international heritage legislation and practice (Marie 2009). At the national level, Australian recognition of Aboriginal songlines as travelling routes with spiritual, ecological, economic and social networking dimensions would expand the concept of cultural heritage routes. The Songlines Project aims to increase appreciation of songlines as a sophisticated system of interconnecting cultural routes mnemonically signposted in song. Thus redressing the current emphasis on tangible markers of cultural routes and recognize the vast intangible oral libraries of Indigenous song and story as markers of the foundational cultural heritage routes of Australia. Songlines research has the potential to expand the concept of cultural routes and heritage practice in Australian and internationally.
References


