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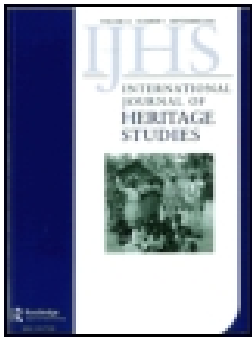
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# Ethnographic sound collections and Australian Aboriginal Heritage: Kaytetye song traditions remembered

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## ABSTRACT

Song was one of the principal methods of transmitting knowledge in the fundamentally oral societies of Indigenous Australia. As the breadth of song traditions has greatly diminished over the past 200 years, archival recordings of song now form a significant resource of intangible cultural heritage for Australia's Indigenous people. The song performances recorded in the past are now being rediscovered, remembered and in some cases revived. This paper presents findings from a recent project involving the return of a set of poorly documented recordings of songs to Kaytetye people in central Australia. These newly discovered recordings, the earliest ever made of Kaytetye singing, are shown to be an important heritage resource for these communities. Working collaboratively with senior song experts in order to gain a better understanding of the meaning and cultural significance of various songs, I document the how this discussion of audio material generated important social-histories and memories, reinforced local understandings of rights in cultural heritage, and revealed both continuities and changes in Kaytetye ceremonial and song practice.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

In Australian Indigenous society, song traditions are intimately connected to the land, the stories of Ancestral beings and the transmission of 'the Law'. Because knowing and singing these songs was a critical method of conveying knowledge in these orally based societies, song stands as one of the most important forms of cultural heritage for Aboriginal people (Wafer 2017, 1). Some songs are said to have come directly from Ancestral beings, others are 'dreamt' or 'caught' by singers via Ancestral inspiration and they can be used for a range of purposes; to heal, entertain or hurt, but also to honour and cooperate with Ancestors (see Strehlow 1971; Sutton 1987; and Bradley 2014). There are many types of song in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society, but the diversity and number of these traditions has been greatly diminished over the course of the last century. Australian musicologist, Alan Marrett, has for example noted that 'only a tiny fraction' of the 'vast, rich and dynamic ceremonial complex that reached into every corner of the continent' has persisted (Marett 2010, 253). This is why the recording, transcription and translation of recorded song is now considered to be one of the most critical dimensions to Aboriginal cultural heritage work.

The recording of Australian Indigenous song for ethnological research purposes commenced in Australia in the 1890s and continued well into the twentieth century. Although some notably sympathetic, written transcriptions of songs (not audio recordings) were produced by scholars early on (Howitt 1887; Strehlow 1907), those who did make early audio recordings rarely

documented the meaning or import of what they were capturing. Some even claimed that these singers did not even know the meaning of their ‘chants’ (Spencer and Gillen 1904, xiv). It was not until the mid-twentieth century that the significance of songs to Aboriginal society became better understood, thanks largely to the work of the more linguistically oriented anthropologists like Berndt (1952), Strehlow (1971) and Ellis (1964). But the early recordings of Aboriginal songs remain little understood. In many cases they are poorly documented and have never been played to contemporary Aboriginal song experts in the hope of achieving a better interpretation of their contents. Originally intended to preserve threatened traditions or for use in comparative anthropological research, these song collections are now nevertheless being reclaimed, revalued and recirculated (Wafer and Turpin 2017; Harris 2014) to reaffirm a distinctive aspect of Indigenous identity in the twenty-first century.

This post-colonial cultural-political agenda has encouraged Aboriginal communities to return to these recordings as artefacts of their own cultural heritage. Concurrent with these changes has been the move towards decolonising methodologies in anthropology (Allen and Jobson 2016) and greater collaborative research agendas involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in museum studies (Lonetree 2012) which has progressively seen the return, or repatriation, of ethnographic materials from state and private collections to their source communities (Brown and Peers 2013). Making a contribution to this field of study, this paper considers some of the benefits of returning archival recordings of traditional Aboriginal song both in order to support local, Indigenous objectives in reusing and reappropriating this material, but also to better understand the unique anthropological content that was sometimes unwittingly recorded by the recordist. Of course, these two objectives are not necessarily separate and may often be intertwined. A community may, for example, find song content relating to land tenure or a past ceremonial practice just as valuable or interesting as the anthropologist. It may be the job of the anthropologically minded heritage professional therefore, as Geismar (2015) argues, to document and evaluate the resonance of these collections with those that rarely get to ‘manage or control the recognition of their own pasts’.

The pioneering Australian ethnomusicologist, Alice Moyle, argued very early on in her career that it would one day be necessary to return to the field with archival recordings and collaboratively examine them with Aboriginal song experts (Moyle 1966, ii). That day has certainly now come. The process could, as Moyle put it, help ‘fill a gap in some song “cycle” or sequence’ and better develop our knowledge of Australian song heritage and practice more generally. As the benefits of returning archival song recordings to communities is now well documented (Lancefield 1998; Kahunde 2012; Bendrups 2015; Treloyn, Martin., and Charles 2016; Gillespie 2017) I have written this paper with the specific purpose of unpacking what these songs can tell us about intensely local forms of ownership over cultural heritage. In the case study discussed below, I present the various ways in which the return of archival songs can both give rise to these important Indigenous responses and can play an important role in the revival of ceremonial practice and inform contemporary cultural identity. I also show how this process can deepen the understanding, and influence the policies, of collecting institutions that handle this material. Knowing and documenting what songs mean for people today, how they are used, remembered, revered or feared, is becoming increasingly important to how they are managed and cared for by institutions.

### **Some issues with early aboriginal song recordings**

The oldest recordings to work with are those made on wax cylinders, using phonograph technology from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. First used for the purposes of ethnographic study in the early 1890s in the United States, the technology was soon after adopted by British and European scholars working across the globe (Levine 2002; Brady 1999; Clayton 1996). As valuable as these recordings are, working with them can be extremely challenging. They are

often of terrible quality and crowded with machine-derived noise. The earliest recordings of Aboriginal singing in south-eastern Australia made by A.W. Howitt, for example, were so badly produced that they now offer very little that is useful to the listener (Moyle 1959, 26). Even the best of these earliest cylinders will suffer from skips, pops and a rather meagre fidelity that often makes identification and interpretation of songs difficult.

Those who continued to use the wax cylinder technology in Australia in the early twentieth century produced better technical results, but difficulties remain. Like many of their earliest counterparts, their documentation associated with the songs recorded continued to lack descriptive detail. As these recordings were often made during fleeting anthropological expeditions, the recordists generally lacked the necessary competence in the local language and had a limited understanding of the socio-cultural context in which song was deployed. The first musicologist to work on Aboriginal song, Harold Davies, for example, elicited either formulaic interpretations of songs given by singers or vague song 'titles' for material he recorded during trips to central Australia, such as the 'Snake song' or 'Rat song' (Davies 1932, 455). His descriptions were also often constrained to the 'decorative' and 'tonal' attributes of (what he termed) 'palæolithic music' (Davies 1927). T.G.H. Strehlow, an ethnographer-linguist specialising in Arrernte song later commented that 'white investigators' of this 'earlier generation... did not even attempt' (Strehlow 1947, 8) to explore a song's content or social meaning.

Given that our appreciation of Aboriginal song has considerably improved in the preceding decades, partly thanks to the work of Strehlow (1971), Berndt (1952) and Ellis (1987), there is now scope to productively return to this material. But as the cohort of Aboriginal people with the required expertise to interpret these songs reduces in number, despite evidence of intergenerational transmission of some songs, in some areas (Gibson *forthcoming*), there is an urgency to this work. We also need to regard these collections as sites of positive engagement. The act of recording song is not necessarily, as is suggested by Tomlinson (2007), tantamount to colonisation itself. The attenuation of song has come about due to a range of tumultuous and negative social effects that have affected Indigenous peoples everywhere but hearing these songs again can highlight potent evidence of Indigenous presence, agency and talent.

## Kaytetye heritage

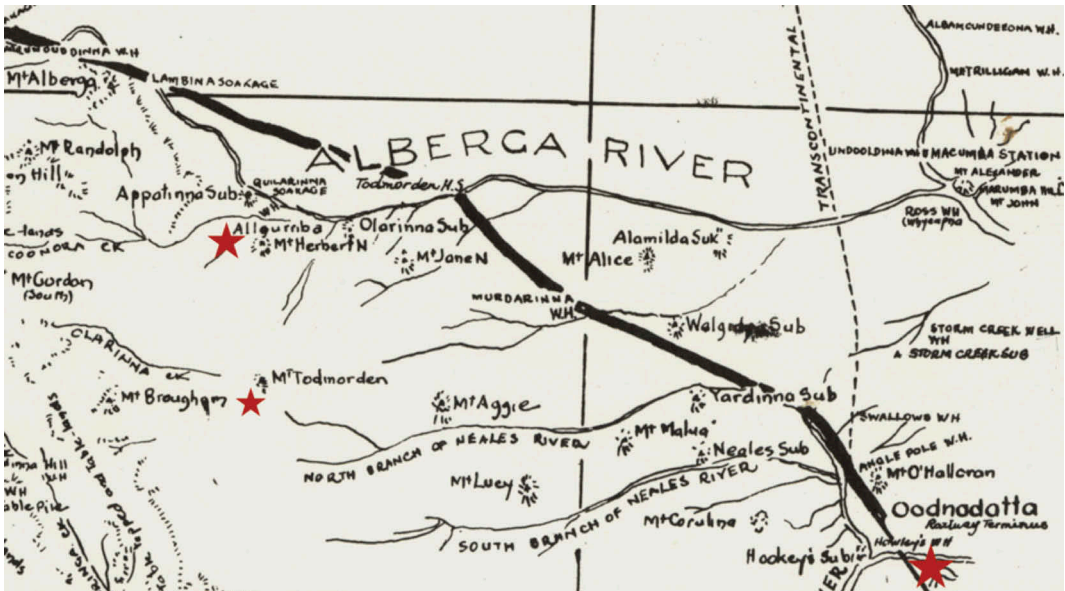
The earliest ethnographic work amongst the Kaytetye people of Central Australia was conducted by the anthropologists Spencer and Gillen, during their yearlong expedition across the Australian continent (south to north) in 1901 (Batty 2018). Spencer and Gillen had pioneered the use of ethnographic film and sound during this expedition but having expended their supplies of cylinders and film before reaching Barrow Creek, deep within Kaytetye country, they were unable to make any recordings here. Basedow's 1926 recordings, are thus the earliest ever made of Kaytetye language or song, although despite a brief mention of them in Moyle's 'Handlist' of Australian Indigenous music recordings (1966), they have been unexamined since. Ken Hale's audio recording of Kaytetye speech in the 1950s and later recordings of Kaytetye speech and singing made by linguists Harold and Grace Koch, and then anthropologist Diane Bell in the 1970/80s, have received more attention (Turpin 2005, 6–7).<sup>1</sup> Recuperation of the Basedow materials from the archive and seeing then returned to expert Kaytetye singers was thus a cause for great excitement amongst scholars and the Kaytetye community.

In 2015 David Kaus, a senior curator at the National Museum of Australia (NMA), alerted me to a large collection of wax cylinder recordings made by the polymath explorer and scientist, Dr Herbert Basedow, in the 1920s. According to Basedow's original annotations, the collection apparently contained numerous song recordings from central Australia, including a suite of recordings of Kaytetye song made during the MacKay Exploring Expedition of 1926; an expedition in search of good grazing land for livestock (Mackay and Basedow 1929). If this information was correct, these would be the earliest audio recordings of Kaytetye ever made, however the

region in which these recordings were made caused some suspicion. The Kaytetye people inhabited lands far from the route of the MacKay expedition, in the western deserts of South Australia. The Kaytetye were from the country surrounding the Barrow Creek Telegraph Station, hundreds of kilometres to the north, and although Basedow briefly visited the region in 1924, there was no evidence that these song recordings came from that time.

By 1926, Basedow was already an experienced explorer, geologist, naturalist and surveyor with a penchant for anthropology. Using his medical qualifications, he also carried out ‘medical relief’ expeditions to assess and treat the various ailments of Aboriginal people in these remote locations (Kaus 2017, 315–19). Through these various journeyings Basedow found ample opportunity to pursue his interests in ethnography and although his observations were often limited and idiosyncratic, his photographic collection is now regarded as an important record of cross-cultural relations on the colonial frontier (Kaus and Basedow 2008). He first started using wax cylinder technology during a visit to Alice Springs in 1920. Like so many of his aforementioned contemporaries however he too failed to document much more than the ‘tribe’ of the singers and a brief descriptive title (2017, 317). As most of the songs he recorded were made with men, it seems that many of the songs he captured may relate to ceremonies and rituals restricted to men only. Aware of the strict gender segregation of knowledge in central Australian society, the NMA have thus adopted the position that ‘until the recordings have been played to the appropriate Traditional Owners, it will not be known if they are all restricted’ (Kaus 2017, 317). The prospect of carrying out collaborative work on the Kaytetye material therefore was eagerly supported.

Establishing how Kaytetye songs were recorded so far from Kaytetye traditional lands however needed further explanation. The answer lay in the composition of the expedition team. Attached to the group were ‘three black boys’ (meaning three Aboriginal men), also noted as ‘Barrow Creek natives’, who had been employed to assist with loading equipment and meeting the day to day practical needs of the expedition party (Mackay and Basedow 1929, 258). The three Kaytetye men had apparently been living and working in Oodnadatta, and it was they who had agreed to sing for Basedow’s phonograph recorder. The diary of the expedition’s assistant, Frank Feast, helps us piece together how the recordings were made. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of August Feast wrote, ‘Dr [Basedow] got several records of our boys’ corrobberie [corroboree] songs’ at Alleumba [Alleurriba] water-hole, to the west of Todmorden station (Map 1).<sup>2</sup> The next day, as the expedition moved further



**Map 1.** Extract from Basedow’s map of the MacKay Exploring Expedition of 1926. Star symbols mark key places referred to in the text (National Library of Australia, MAP G9041.S12).

west, the 'Dr' again recorded more 'corroboree songs' with the 'boys' during the afternoon and again in the evening. Feast's use of 'our boys', a colonial euphemism for Aboriginal male labourers, leaves little doubt that those recorded were the expedition's assistants. The task was now to see how this audio material might be received by contemporary Kaytetye people.

### Social history, local heritage

Basedow's Kaytetye song recordings were made under the guise of an anthropological expedition, but as his subjects were not members of an 'unknown tribe' or a people on the edge of 'civilisation', they do not conform to the expectations that such an 'expedition' might conjure (Thomas and Harris 2018, 5). Instead, the voices we now hear are of men who worked as labourers in an exploitative settler colonial economy. They had moved far from their homelands to what was then a bustling township at the end of the northern railway line, Oodnadatta; an important melting pot of Aboriginal peoples, European settlers, Chinese gardeners and Afghan cameleers (Kimber 1996; Shaw 1995; Simpson, Dallwitz, and Association 1990). Early discussions with Kaytetye people about these recordings quickly elicited oral histories of this time. Highly mobile Aboriginal stockmen would traverse extensive inland stock routes and move up and down, what was then the principal object of colonial infrastructure, the Overland Telegraph Line. Along these newly forming trajectories people experienced an intermixing with Aboriginal people from distant locales and an engagement with settlers which is now part of a distinctive regional heritage.

As a precursor to the work of returning the song recordings to Kaytetye people, I began discussing a photograph that Basedow had taken of the three singers, 'Ratler', 'Sambo' and 'Jack', with various people. Basedow's wonderful photograph of the men (Figure 1) shows three individuals in a relaxed pose, sitting cross-legged and decked out in stockmen attire; broad-brimmed hats, boots, trousers, shirts and coats. In the background are camel boxes and supplies before a flat desert horizon. Most Kaytetye people began their consideration of this image by recalling a time when Kaytetye men and women would travel long distances from their homelands, often as coerced labour, to act as workhands for the cattle economy (Koch and Koch 1993, 38–39). Kaytetye people were known to have taken cattle south to Oodnadatta, at the very edge of the Arandic languages territory. Few dwelt on the exploitative conditions of this employment and instead emphasised the sense of purpose and industry (though with little reward) and relative freedoms that the 'droving days' exemplified. People recalled that some Kaytetye drovers had stayed on in Oodnadatta, having families and later being buried in the local cemetery, while others headed north again, back to Kaytetye country. The photograph elicited a story of economic migration and movement that explained how songs of deep, local cultural and religious import for Kaytetye people could be found amongst recordings made hundreds of kilometres away.

Once given the names of the men, as they had been recorded by Basedow, most older men and women were quick to identify the three individuals depicted. They were known as drovers that took cattle from Neutral Junction Station in the Northern Territory through to the railhead at Oodnadatta. The man recorded as 'Jack' was identified as Arralyalker, a word meaning 'sideways', Kngwarraye from Arnke (Barrow Creek Telegraph Station) and was said to have been employed as a 'police tracker' later in his life.<sup>3</sup> 'Rodler' was remembered as 'Ratler', a man of the Kemarre section and who belonged to Entengele estate and had apparently died 'not that long ago', perhaps in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> 'Sambo', on the other hand was less well remembered. He is likely to be a man of the Ampetyane subsection from the Akwerlpe estate, to the north of Barrow Creek. All eventually returned to Kaytetye country and lived into old age in the Kaytetye region.

Making connections, to what in anthropological parlance is described as an 'estate' or in Aboriginal English is less precisely referred to as one's 'country', served as a critical piece of information. Determining a person's connections to a certain region or parcel of land would be



**Figure 1.** Kaytetye singers, Jack Kngwarraye, Ratler Kemarre and Sambo Ampetyane [L-R], photographed by Herbert Basedow in 1926 (Courtesy of the National Museum of Australia, 1985.0060.2717.001).

indeed critical for the management of the recorded songs. Ascertaining where each of these men's patrilineal 'country' was could help pinpoint a lineage of descendants with the proper rights to speak for these recordings. The ability to sing songs relating to different estates was recognised as a form of evidence when making personal claims to rights in land during the land claims of the 1980s, and this connection between land and song was equally critical to cultural heritage rights. For Kaytetye people, and indeed many Indigenous peoples, separating the tangible forms of heritage (land, sites, ritual objects) and the intangible (songs, mythologies and performances) seems quite artificial and makes little sense (Kurin 2004, 70). *Apmere* (land/home/country) and its tangible physical features is endowed with intangible meanings which are expressed in the form of song, ceremony and ritual.

There are other considerations regarding cultural rights to heritage that I do not have space to discuss here (Michaels 1985; Morton 1997; Myers 2014) but establishing these basic relations between patrilineal estate and intangible heritage was paramount for the Kaytetye and Anmatyerr people (southern neighbours to the Kaytetye) I spoke with. Discussions of more intricate rights, based on other types of filiation, the genre of the songs recorded and their ceremonial context framed our deeper deliberations of the actual song content.

### **Taking the recordings back**

I was able to discuss the Basedow recordings with a range of Kaytetye and Anmatyerr men firstly in May of 2016 and again, with considerable assistance from linguist and ethnomusicologist Myfany Turpin, who has worked extensively in the Kaytetye region in October of 2017. The principle senior person consulted on both occasions was Tommy Thompson Kngwarraye, a well renowned Kaytetye elder whose knowledge of language, local history and cultural practice has informed a number of publications (Koch and Koch 1993; Thompson and Turpin 2003; Turpin and Ross 2012). When I first visited Tommy at his home at Atarre ('Tara') in 2016, I was greatly



assisted by Jimmy Haines Ngwarray, a man from the estate of Akarn, on the fringes of Kaytetye, Anmatyerr and Warlpiri territory and someone with an interest in documenting local heritage. Paddy Kemarr Willis, an Anmatyerr/Warlpiri elder (aged in his 80s) with considerable song knowledge, as well as other numerous Anmatyerr and Kaytetye men from nearby communities, also provided critical feedback and advice.

As I had collaborated with these men on the interpretation of other archival recordings in the past, I understood that they regarded their role in this process was to ensure that any documentation associated with the recordings was 'straight' or 'arraty' (correct or truthful) (Gibson 2017, 172, 255). They demanded that collecting institutions properly understood the contemporary and ongoing cultural significance of their holdings, and although I was reminded not to publicly share certain information associated with the secret-sacred songs (see below), it was regarded as imperative that the documentation for this material was accurate. Well aware of the growing significance of 'the written down story' for proving associations to land (for example in land rights and native title cases) and preserving information for future generations, there was an eagerness to have local expertise speak back to the historical record. As Paddy Kemarr quipped, 'I'm [an] expert. Me and that Tommy Thompson. . . I have no school. I bin to high school, Aboriginal high-school [a high level of ceremonial instruction]. That's how I learned.'<sup>5</sup> With fewer and fewer elderly men in the region with this type of ceremonial education, it was seen as imperative to record their perspectives so that the NMA would know how to handle these recordings into the future.

As a key partner in the larger research project that auspiced this study, the Central Land Council (the peak Indigenous representative body covering the southern half of the Northern Territory) made an application on behalf of Kaytetye people to obtain copies from the National Museum of Australia (NMA).<sup>6</sup> In an effort to obtain the best quality recording the National Film and Sound Archive then reproduced high quality duplications on to Compact Disc for the purposes of the project. The quality of these copies, whilst still containing the inherent machine noise, pops and scratches of the phonograph, were nonetheless clear enough for song words and melodies to be ascertained. The recordings were played from a laptop computer and amplified using a high-quality Bluetooth speaker that could be positioned directly in front of the listening group, which usually consisted of no more than three people. The portability of this gear also meant that playback could occur in any location deemed preferable to the listeners. This was particularly important if the songs were deemed to be so culturally sensitive or restricted that we needed to audition the material in a secluded 'bush' location, away from women and children.

Crucial to this methodology was a staged process of firstly playing this material to the well-known song experts and allowing them to advise on any cultural restrictions. This often involved the senior man, Paddy to Tommy, with one or two younger men also present to oversee the process and provide support to their elders. Once the cultural status and restrictions of the materials had been ascertained however, subsequent listening sessions became more relaxed and the men would begin to call over others in the community, including some women and younger men, to share in the songs deemed safe for public listening. Both of the senior men saw their participation in these listening sessions and having their views documented as being important to not only recognising their status as senior singers but ensuring that future use of the material was grounded in their expert advice.

Listening back to these recordings with people who had both personal interest and cultural rights to these songs, generated a collaborative dialogue about their cultural heritage worth. The deliberations were useful in raising awareness about the newly discovered recordings amongst the Kaytetye community. It also raised interesting historical discussion and generated invaluable insights into song content and meaning. It is worth pausing for a moment though to consider how this mode of sound elicitation worked. Forms of visual elicitation (photographic or filmic) are now a common methodology in anthropology and history (Harper 2002; Hinkson 2014; Lydon 2010) however there is far less research on the processes of using sound elicitation in these

disciplines. Possessing a more ephemeral quality than the visual, sound requires the listener to imagine (perhaps even visualise) memories and events before they can be discussed. When listening to early ethnographic recordings, we need to be reminded that despite their claims to ‘objectivity’, these recordings were often made in contexts divorced from their normal social and cultural settings. Singers had to modify their usual behaviours/practices by singing without the accompaniment of ceremonial performance and having to project their voices directly into the horn of the phonograph. These early recordings made by Basedow also lacked what sound-anthropologist Steven Feld (2004, 463) describes as the sense of ‘adventure and dialogue’ that would have featured in the original sound production, whereby recordist and performer would enter negotiate, interact and plan. The absence of this dialogical element can make them harder to interpret.

Despite often capturing artificial performances these early recordings do nonetheless, as Bendrups argues, stand as ‘powerful forces for heritage’ in the way that they document threatened and changing languages and record equally endangered genres (2015, 168). While the ephemeral quality of the audio, featuring disembodied voices from eighty years ago and the static noise of the phonograph, necessitated a careful listening it almost always resulted in meaningful responses. Song experts listened for song words, melodies and rhythms that gave clues to song meaning. Those that knew little of the song content and lacked the skill of expert Kaytetye singers like Tommy or Paddy, marvelled at these recordings as both rare signifiers of Kaytetye identity and important records of familial and local history, in a region where so little historical/cultural documentation exists. The discussion below however concentrates on how the song words, melodies and rhythms sparked lively discussions about the importance of song to contemporary and past ceremonial practice.

### The contemporary relevance of ritual songs

On the spoken introductions to these recordings a male voice (possibly Basedow’s) can be heard announcing the various titles. The first recording to be considered, was described as the ‘Song sung during the *aherre* or kangaroo ceremony by the Arrernte tribe west of Ryan’s Well, Central Australia’. It was immediately recognised by all the men I played it to. As this song referred to Ryan’s Well, an old station located within the traditional Anmatyerr lands, I first played this recording to Anmatyerr men. Numerous Anmatyerr men, some aged in the thirties, were able to not only identify the song but also explain how it was sung during a certain stage of the initiatory rites. Honouring sensitivities around initiation practices and at the request of these men to keep this information out of the public domain, I have omitted discussion of further details of these ceremonies. All of the men I spoke with however commented that these ‘*tywerreng*’ (sacred) songs continued to be used by men from across the Warlpiri, Kaytetye and Anmatyerr communities during their annual initiation gatherings.

Participation in these initiation events has been growing in recent decades (Peterson 2000; Curran 2011) and as such these specific songs and rituals are reasonably well known by initiated men across a wide region. Aspects of the songs however do refer to specific localities are thus important to local and regional heritage. For example, Paddy Kemarr commented that Basedow was right in noting the association with the Ryan’s Well area. One of the recorded verses, he pointed out, specifically referred to a rockhole in the general vicinity of the ruins of Ryan’s Well station. There were four more songs associated with these initiation ceremonies in the Kaytetye recordings. The first concerned the *apwelh*, a public aspect of the circumcision ceremony, however the remaining three – the songs that Basedow describes as relating to the ‘night bird’ or ‘*arrthwarrthwe*’, ‘the *aherre* of kangaroo ceremony’ and the *alekapere* (collared sparrow hawk, *Accipiter cirrocephalus*) Ancestor – are all traditionally sung whilst men are in seclusion.

Out of respect for the deep sensitivities that continue to surround this material in contemporary Central Australian communities, I have refrained from documenting the content of these

songs here. Acutely aware that the revelation of this content can be deeply upsetting (Kaiser 2004; Thomas 2007) and is entangled in a difficult ‘politics of the secret’ (see Anderson 1995), I have been careful to follow the instructions of senior Kaytetye and Anmatyerr men to avoid any descriptions of song words, specific sacred sites or any ceremonial context. What can be said though, is that these songs are considered secretive today and as such are unlikely to ever feature in any publicly funded cultural heritage maintenance programs or song recording projects. Outside the realm of government support and most contemporary scholarly interest, these practices survive and thrive off grassroots energy, commitment and enthusiasm. Nonetheless, while the retention of this song knowledge is at present being maintained via the process of older singers teaching younger generations, it remains subject to vulnerabilities. Recordings like Basedow’s may therefore take on greater heritage significance into the future. As one scholar has noted, even the public aspects of these ceremonies, which people are ‘deeply proud’ of, are under threat as the older people with the required knowledge pass away and younger generations struggle to attain ‘the same depth of knowledge or detail’ (Curran 2010, 2).

Because of their sensitivity, hearing these songs in a recorded form was not always a comfortable experience. While various men across the region had recorded similar material with various researchers over the past century, people no longer wish to have this restricted material recorded in any form. Aboriginal attitudes to making recordings of these songs has evidently changed over time and the assertive Aboriginal politics of the 1960s and 1970s has also worked to persuade cultural heritage professionals that these traditions are not just ‘heritage’ but part of a ‘living tradition’. Hearing the recordings did nonetheless reinforce the antiquity and continuity of these sacred practices, despite the fact that some were shocked that their kin had allowed such ‘dear’ (precious or valuable) material to be recorded. I distinctly remember playing back recordings made of similar songs by a missionary in the 1960s and noting people’s surprise, but also their disgust. As the songs played back, I could hear the men talking quietly amongst themselves about how these particular songs should never have been recorded. When I asked what should be done with these recordings one of the men replied, ‘Burn them... Give them to a *warlparl* [whitefella] to look after. Aboriginal people in town can’t be trusted with these things. They’re too dangerous.’<sup>7</sup>

The Kaytetye and Anmatyerr men that gathered close to my laptop as I played back these songs had local and regional concerns in mind. The Basedow recordings prompted earnest discussions about the constraints on knowledge in an economy of oral information, where it might be permissible for people in one area to share restricted information with an individual, but they would have to be careful about how this was perceived by others in neighbouring Aboriginal groups (Michaels 1985). In this case, Kaytetye and Anmatyerr people were wary of how men from the Western Desert cultural bloc (thought of as being far more stringent in regards to ceremonial matters), might regard their ancestors for recording this material. They would likely become ‘*mwekenh-irrem*’ (angry upset over matters concerning men’s ‘business’) if these recordings were distributed any further. This general climate of fear and circumspection surrounding these songs thus produced a degree of anxiety about the future distribution of these recordings. It became quickly evident that any use or dissemination of these particular recordings was a matter of regional significance within an Aboriginal domain, and not a matter for one particular cultural-linguistic group. Although the National Museum of Australia was happy to provide copies of these recordings to the relevant people it was clear that responsibility for these traditions was shared widely and that on single group or person wanted the burden of managing this ritually charged material.

### Public repertoires remembered

Leaving the issue of restricted content aside, a far more threatened aspect of Kaytetye song heritage is the preservation of local estate-based repertoires (‘country songs’) as well as ‘open’

or ‘public’ song traditions. In the section below, I discuss two songs that have both deep resonances with specific estates but also connections to other areas via networks of Dreaming associations. Public men’s songs with accompanying dance are generally referred to as *altharte* or more colloquially as ‘corroborees’ by Kaytetye speakers (Koch and Turpin 2008, 167). They are generally performances where men, women and children are present and in the past were often shared between groups in a complex system of trade in intangible heritage, sometimes across large distances (McCarthy 1939; Mulvaney 1976; Hercus 1980; Gibson 2015). Basedow’s Kaytetye cylinders capture a number of examples of these types of song.

The song described by Basedow as ‘the corroboree connected with the *yerrampe* [honey ant, *Camponotus inflatus*] as sung by the Kaytetye tribe west of Barrow Creek, Central Australia’, for example, was quickly recognised. Commenting that this song was indeed ‘*altharte*’ and thus free to be heard publicly, Tommy did nevertheless disagree with the title. ‘[It is] *yerrampe* first but then another song... that’s the western side of Pwerrenarre. Dog Dreaming that one, [associated with the site of] Pwerrenarre [Purrurnarra], west of Tenant Creek’. Demonstrating his knowledge of the tradition, he then began to break into his own rendition, before commenting: ‘That’s that same song; that dog. Old people had trained me for that one!’. Both Tommy and Paddy (in a separate listening session later) disagreed with Basedow’s description of song as primarily about the *yerrampe*. They argued that the principal Ancestors honoured in this song were actually two *aleke* (dingo, *Canus lupus dingo*) that travelled from the far northwest. These dingoes had travelled past an important honey ant site in the Kaytetye areas (within the Arnerre estate), so perhaps Basedow had mistakenly focused on this when he discussed the content with the singers.

Tommy and Paddy’s expert knowledge of this song and its related mythology drew upon years of learning not only about the songs, rituals and ceremonies of their own estates but about Dreamings, like this one, that travelled over large distances and across language and cultural blocs. Both men confidently explained that these two dingoes had travelled from an area hundreds of kilometres away, which they variously described as ‘west of Tennant Creek’, ‘west of the Granites goldmine’ or being from the Victorian River Downs area. More precise location information though could only ever be provided by the people who belonged to that part of the desert. Closer to Paddy and Tommy’s traditional lands however they knew that the dingoes had travelled past a site named Laltiyeng/Latyeng during their ‘visit to Kaytetye country’. The dogs then headed east, past Barrow Creek, and northwards to Alekareng (lit *alek* ‘dog’ -*areng* ‘belonging to’) where they met with the resident dog Ancestor there. From here the dogs went to Wycliffe Well and then returned to the Victoria River Downs area, or what Paddy Kemarr described as a ‘big mountain’ near the Western Australian border.<sup>8</sup> The older men from estates associated with the dingo narrative in the Kaytetye area knew this song and sang it often in the presence of men like Tommy and Paddy in their youth.

Of far greater local significance to Kaytetye people though were the four wax cylinders containing songs sung during a Kaytetye *altharte kwatye* (rainmaking song/dance).<sup>9</sup> Basedow’s notes to these recording refer to ‘quatcha altadu’ and the spoken introductions similarly describe a ‘water ceremony’, ‘dance’ or ‘quatcha al-ta-du’; ‘altadu’ presumably being Basedow’s particular rendering of ‘*altharte*’ (it should also be noted he also uses *kwatye*, the Arrernte word for rain, instead of the Kaytetye word *arntwe*).<sup>10</sup> Hearing these recording for the first time, Tommy Thompson quickly explained their cultural and historical significance for Kaytetye people but added that Warlpiri, Anmatyerr, Alyawarr and Warumungu also participated in these rain traditions. ‘All these people were *akaltye* [knowledgeable] for this *altharte* [public repertoire]’ but it was the Kaytetye men belonging to the Arnerre estate that had a significant stake in it. As early ethnographic enquiries had noted Anerre was the central place in Kaytetye territory associated with the ‘water totem’ (Spencer and Gillen 1904, 187) and ‘rainmakers’ (Stanner 1934).

Those belonging to ‘rainmaking’ estates like Arnerre had a responsibility to work with their *kwertengerle* (ritual assistants or managers) in the performance of song and ceremony to maintain

this critical desert resource. As a senior *kwertengerle* for these traditions, Tommy possessed extensive knowledge of these repertoires and had a right to discuss them but made it clear that he could not provide more comprehensive commentary without approval from the relevant *apmerew-artweye* (patrilineally related owners) of Arnerre (for more on these distinctions see Myers 1982; and Morphy and Morphy 1984). Nevertheless, as the songs recorded by Basedow came from an ‘open’, or public aspect of the rain ceremony they could be, in Tommy’s words, ‘passed around’ within the Kaytetye community.<sup>11</sup> They were also part of a larger collective Kaytetye heritage where people would share responsibility for the land and its law (Bell 1985, 246–72). Though these ceremonies were no longer performed, both Tommy and Paddy, explained that Anmatyerr, Warlpiri and Kaytetye ‘rain makers’ from various estates associated with the *altyerre arntwe* (rain Dreaming) – Paw, Alapanp, and Arnerre – used to come together to enact the rain ceremonies (see also Gibson 2017, 187–88).

The songs committed to cylinder by Jack, Sambo and Ratler were sung as part of a public ‘*kwaty-mparetyart*’, rain-making dance that was performed ‘every year’ in the past. Tommy recalled that in the Kaytetye tradition, the *kwertengerle* (meaning a ‘manager’ or ‘guardian’ as distinct from the ‘owner’ of a rain place) would be sent out, with what he described as a ‘letter’, summoning people together. This ‘letter’ was often the feather of an emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*) and would act as a sign to the various groups visited by the messenger that rain ceremonies were imminent. Once everyone was in attendance at the suggested rain site a series of public ceremonies would be performed. After this, the men would then hive off to carry out more restricted rituals elsewhere. One such public gathering to summon the rain was described to me by senior Anmatyerr man Jack Cook Ngal, on September 13, 2017: ‘When I was a boy... we were sitting there with the women at the back and the boys were in the front... Then the rainmaker would sing the swamp [a nearby rain site] for that rain, to bring up all the rain to come, and us boys were there, singing out “naaaa, naaa, ngang, ngang, ngang, nang” [imitating the sound of frogs that call during rain events]. That’s the story for frog... For two or three days we were there... Oh, think how smart that old man was to bring the rain... In three days we got flooded. Big rain...’<sup>12</sup>

The songs recorded by Ratler, Sambo and Jack however, Tommy explained, were sung as part of a distinctly Kaytetye *kwatye altharte*. Having seen the ceremony performed, Tommy gave a brief description of the associated paraphernalia and body decorations based on his memory. The principal performer would be decorated with two lines of body ‘paint’ (down from various types of birds or portulaca) coloured red with ochre and banded by a white border. The paralleled coloured lines would extend from the thighs, up along the torso and chest, to the shoulders and culminate on the upper arm. In his hand would be a *kwetere* (dancing stick or pole). The dancer’s face would also be covered with red birds down and upon his head was a conical headdress featuring a wooden crosspiece with tassels of hair string and white down representing the falling rain. One of the verses, Tommy pointed out, specially referred to the *mpwelarre* (rainbow) produced by this falling rain. As AP Elkin (in McNiven 2016, 196–97) pointed out some time ago, while these ceremonies have traditionally been referred to in anthropological literature as ‘increase ceremonies’, they might be better understood as ways of co-operating with the forces of nature. The singing and dancing was a communicative and relational event, involving action to bring about change as well as long-term continuity of ecological events.

Once a key part of Kaytetye heritage, these ‘rainmaking’ performances are now only known by a handful of elderly men. Paddy Kemarr, who had grown up working alongside Anmatyerr and Kaytetye men on the cattle stations in this region, remembers seeing this song and dance being performed by Kaytetye men the Warrabri (Alekarenge) Aboriginal Community in the 1960s. Significantly, Paddy remembered one of Basedow’s singers, Ratler (by then ‘Old Ratler’), as being one of the men singing and dancing this *kwatye* tradition at Warrabri. As much as Paddy knew about this tradition though he couldn’t remember the songs well enough to sing them from memory. As previous research into the song knowledge of this region has shown, unlike the songs

sung during initiations, these public traditions are now critically endangered (Gibson [forthcoming](#)). Hearing these rain songs again sparked conversations about some of the other *altharte* that were once danced as a form of communal entertainment. Some remembered seeing the *altharte atetherre* (the budgerigar dance) and the *altharte amakweng* (an emu song and dance) performed at within the camps at Anningie and Ti Tree stations. This genre of song and dance had effectively ceased being performed by Kaytetye and Anmatyerr people by the late 1960s and early 1970s.

## Conclusion

The act of returning significant documents of cultural heritage to Aboriginal communities in Australia is in itself an important symbolic performance on the part scholars and cultural institutions. In the case study presented above, long forgotten recordings were digitised and returned to the few senior song experts with the requisite knowledge to interpret and provide advice on their handling. With the assistance of these people, these recordings can now be understood as significant items of Kaytetye cultural heritage, part of wider regional Aboriginal economy of information and knowledge, and more broadly part of Australia's Indigenous cultural heritage. Curatorial staff at the National Museum of Australia also now have clear instructions regarding the cultural status and sensitivities of these recordings.

This elicitation process described here has been invaluable in producing a fine-grained understanding of song recordings at the level of the individual song. Knowing more about each particular song, its associations to specific estates and sites, its relationship to individuals and family groups and the relevant Dreamings that are represented in them, can enable the collecting institution to better engage with present day and future custodians. Each cylinder can now be dealt with according to the advice of senior song experts that not only knew the three original singers but were also schooled in these song traditions and their related ceremonies.

Collaborative fieldwork processes like this, I argue, should better inform the collection management and curatorial policies and procedures of museums today. As a matter of protocol, museums and other collecting institutions should certainly continue to be mindful of broader regional Aboriginal concerns and interests and engage with representative bodies (such as land councils), but also recognise the importance of local (estate/family) interests and the role of highly-specific cultural expertise. This is particularly important when it comes to interpreting intangible cultural heritage that is thoroughly imbricated in a person/land/myth/ritual interconnection, as in the case of these central Australian songs. The 'open' rain tradition songs, for example, were certainly sung by many different people, associated with various rain Dreaming trajectories but these particular Kaytetye songs were closely related to those people connected to the estate of Arnerre. Future work on these recordings ought to be grounded in continued collaboration and discussion with these people.

The socio-historical dimension of these recordings also emerged as being significant. Memories of the 'droving' time and the little known close association Kaytetye people had with cross-cultural towns like Oodnadatta resurfaced. These recordings, particularly those associated with the *altharte* traditions, have reignited discussions about largely forgotten cultural practices and served as a catalyst for reflection on changed social practice and performance. People also spoke of producing further recordings of *altharte* songs before this heritage is lost forever. The recordings of initiation related songs however elicited quite different responses and there was notable anxiety about the circulation of this material *within* central Australian Aboriginal communities. Either way, song heritage and song performance remain an important aspect of central Australian cultural identity today.

Copies of the 'open' recordings were left in the community on USB sticks and people freely shared these songs amongst their relations. Whilst it is acknowledged that these copies are far from being a sustainable solution to access, those involved in the research project requested that additional digital copies of the 'open' material be held by the Central Land Council (in the closest township of Alice Springs) for ease of future access. The NMA continue to legally possess the

material as part of the Herbert Basedow collection and the NFSA hold the fragile wax cylinders. The Kaytetye continue to assert rights over this material, and although they have stated that the 'open' recordings for anyone to hear, they state that future repurposing or use of the material should not contravene Kaytetye cultural protocols. For example, it is acknowledged that the rain tradition songs continue to be owned by those connected to the rain Dreaming in Kaytetye country and only men can sing these songs. Understanding the ongoing utility and relevancy of some of these songs and keeping up with the fluid and relational ways in which custodianship over song knowledge is conferred in these communities, presents a significant challenge for collecting institutions. Only targeted consultations, involving people related to the specific land or Dreamings at the heart of each song will suffice.

## Notes

1. See Hale collection, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Tapes 004556, 004560–66.
2. Feast's diary, National Museum of Australia. p.6 There are three diaries from this trip. Basedow's diary is kept at the Mitchell Library in MLMSS 161.
3. Arralyalkere is also the bush name of a female Kngwarraye from the Rtwerrpe estate. There is a possibility that Jack also had Rtwerrpe affiliations.
4. The linguist, Harold Koch, remembers meeting 'Ratler' at Murray Downs Station in 1974. Pers comm Tuesday, October 17, 2017. Tommy Thompson suggest that Ratler died at the Alekarenge community.
5. Pers comm. Paddy Kemarr Willis at 6 Mile (Pmara Jutunta), May 19, 2016.
6. Acutely aware of the small numbers of senior Kaytetye men with the requisite knowledge of traditional song David Kaus at the National Museum of Australia, Peter White at the National Film and Sound Archive and Brian Connelly at the Central Land Council worked diligently to see that these recordings could be returned as quickly as possible.
7. Field notes from Napperby Creek November 2, 2016.
8. Paddy worked throughout the Northern Territory, including the Victoria River Downs area, as a stockman in his youth.
9. Basedow uses the Arrernte term for water, 'kwatye', rather than the Kaytetye term 'arntwe'.
10. See cylinder numbers 15, 18, 19 and 20 in the National Museum of Australia Basedow Collection.
11. Pers comm Tommy Thompson, May 18, 2016.
12. The call imitated by Jack sounded similar to that of *Cyclorana maini*.

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