

Barwick, Linda, Marett, Allan, Walsh, Michael, Reid, Nicholas, & Ford, Lysbeth. (2005). Communities of interest: issues in establishing a digital resource on Murrinh-patha song at Wadeye (Port Keats), NT. *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, 20(4), 383–397.

This is a postprint version, with page numbers adjusted to match the published version.

**Communities of interest:
issues in establishing a digital resource on Murrinh-patha song
at Wadeye (Port Keats), NT**

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Abstract

Linguistics and musicology, along with other fieldwork-based disciplines, have obligations to facilitate access to research results by the communities whose cultural heritage is recorded and analysed, especially when the languages and musics in question are otherwise little documented, have few speakers or performers, and are threatened by the global dominance of English. This paper presents early results of our planning for establishment of a digital resource to preserve and make accessible recordings and other documentation of Murrinh-patha public dance-songs at Wadeye, a remote Indigenous community in Australia's Northern Territory. With the recent establishment of the Wadeye Knowledge Centre, copies of recordings previously left in the community by researchers have been digitized and made available through computer workstations. Many of these digitized recordings, however, have poor or no documentation and thus are difficult to locate and access. The most urgent task is to work with elderly performers and composers to assemble metadata about the oldest recordings of songs and who composed and performed them. In order to maximise local accessibility and use, both elders and young people will be involved in planning and creation of a bilingual search interface to the collection. Planning must also consider sustainability issues through integration with other local initiatives, appropriate use of open standards and formats, locally sustainable technical platforms, and regular backup and maintenance.

1. Introduction

In a statement emanating from the 2002 Garma Symposium on Indigenous Performance (convened by Marett in conjunction with two senior Aboriginal leaders, Mandawuy Yunupingu and Marcia Langton), senior custodians of Aboriginal knowledge joined with leading academics to identify Aboriginal song, and in particular endangered song traditions, as an area requiring urgent attention:

Performance traditions are the foundation of [Indigenous] social and personal wellbeing. ... The preservation of performance traditions is therefore one of the highest priorities for Indigenous people. ... Indigenous songs should also be a deeply valued part of the Australian cultural heritage. ... Indigenous performances are one of our most rich and beautiful forms of artistic expression, and yet they remain unheard and invisible. (Garma Forum on Indigenous Performance Research, 2002)

Several subsequent initiatives have been taken to implement the Garma statement's priorities. This paper focuses on one such initiative: an Australian Research Council-funded project entitled 'Preserving Australia's endangered heritages: Murrinh-patha song at Wadeye.' The research team includes two musicologists (Barwick and Marett) and four linguists (Walsh, Reid, Ford and postgraduate student Joe Blythe), who are working in collaboration with relevant local Wadeye community members and organizations from 2004-2008.

The project aims to produce authoritative, thorough and archivally sound documentation of one of Australia's most significant indigenous song traditions, the public dance-songs performed and owned by Murrinh-patha people at Wadeye (formerly known as Port Keats), a remote Aboriginal community located in Australia's Northern Territory southwest of Darwin. The principal genres of Murrinh-patha song performed at Wadeye today are Thanpa,¹ Wurlthirri and Malkarrin, all three genres created and performed only by Murrinh-patha people or those authorised by them. It is at the urging of the senior Murrinh-patha elders at Wadeye that we are undertaking this intensive research on their unique repertoires of songs. Many of the Murrinh-patha elders who have promoted this project participated as performers in recordings made in the 1960s and 1970s, but they are now elderly, and it is important to grasp the opportunity to document their performances while they are still able to participate.

The project has four inter-related directions:

1. To document historical recordings and contemporary performance of the three Murrinh-patha song genres at Wadeye;
2. To consider the interrelationships (historical and contemporary) of these Murrinh-patha genres with other genres of public dance-song at Wadeye and neighbouring areas;

¹ Pronounced 'janba' (for information about Murrinh-patha orthography see Street, 1987).

3. To assess the musical and linguistic significance of these genres in the wider Australian and international context; and
4. To develop appropriate models for conserving, documenting, discovering, accessing and using the recordings and other materials within the community and outside, as an exemplar for other cultural documentation projects.

2. Public Dance-songs in Wadeye Community

The corpus of public dance-songs recorded at Wadeye over the past fifty-three years is remarkable for its diversity and quality, as well as the passion with which it has been and continues to be performed and maintained. The community of Wadeye, which lies in the traditional country of Murrinh-patha people, was established in 1935 as a Roman Catholic mission (Pye, 1973 (1980)) and now includes people from more than seven different language groups each with its own distinct language and relationship with a particular musical repertoire (Ward, 1983, Walsh, 1990). The social relations between these groups at Wadeye, and their ongoing interaction in ceremony, have produced an intense flowering of composition and performance of public song and dance, in the Daly language song genres Wangga and Lirrga as well as the Murrinh-patha song genres. Songs in each genre are received in dream from the ancestral Dead or other spirit beings (Marett, 2000), and their texts, composed in the appropriate language, usually deal with the places, people and beings associated with the traditional country of that group. In public ceremonies, the songs are performed and danced by people from that group, usually for the benefit of individuals from one of the other groups: so, for example, Murrinh-patha songs may be performed for the funeral of a person from one of the Wangga-owning or Lirrga-owning groups (Barwick, 2003b, Marett, In press).

The main performance occasions for public dance-songs are: (a) circumcision ceremonies (held within the community, or sometimes Wadeye performers travel to participate in ceremonies held in other communities); and (b) 'rag-burning' ceremonies for disposal of belongings of the deceased (these usually occur one or two years after the death, in the home country of the deceased). Performance of public dance-songs is essential to the efficacy of these ceremonies (Marett, In press). Other performance contexts include funerals (held in the community), church liturgy (held in church services within the community, and occasionally in other communities), and miscellaneous public occasions including graduation ceremonies, book-launches, award ceremonies and, in the 1960s, the occasional eisteddfod. The number of performances varies from year to year depending on the occurrence of the events that they must accompany. While circumcision ceremonies are held relatively infrequently (every two to five years, most recently in 2003), funerals and ragburnings are much more frequent, as would be expected in a community of some 2,500 people, and non-traditional ceremonial occasions such as the visits of politicians and dignitaries occur several times a year.

The community has a number of local repositories of cultural material. The Kanamkek Yile-Ngala Museum was established in 1990 to house a local collection of artefacts, while the Wadeye Aboriginal Languages Centre (WALC), housed in the Museum building, was established shortly afterwards. The Wadeye Aboriginal Sound Archive (WASA) holds recordings produced in the course of WALC projects as well as copies of recordings deposited in the museum by researchers, and recordings located by WALC in other sound archives such as the audiovisual archive of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). The WASA collection, mainly held on cassette, was transferred to audio CD in 2002-3 as part of a Community Heritage Grant administered by the National Library of Australia. In addition to songs, the WASA collection includes language work, oral histories, interviews, stories and genealogies, a rich and diverse record of local cultural heritage. A number of research projects and private collections have contributed to building the WASA collection, including previous research recordings by Walsh, Marett and Barwick, and the Marri languages multimedia dictionary project currently being undertaken by a Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education research team led by Lysbeth Ford and Maree Klesch (Ford and Klesch, 2003). A large proportion of the public songs from the WASA collection have been indexed by Barwick, Marett and Ford in consultation with relevant community members, and are available for local consultation through the Wadeye Knowledge Centre, established in 2003 as a branch of the Northern Territory Library and Information Service (Barwick, 2004). More than 1360 locally recorded songs, in both traditional and popular genres, are organised and made accessible for local users of the library via an iTunes database.

3. Murrinh-patha Public Dance-songs in Previous Anthropological and Linguistic Work

Although researchers who have worked in the community have often recorded songs along with other material, thus creating a rich historical corpus, songs have rarely formed the focus of previous research. In fact, only one previously published work, in religious studies (Stockton, 1985), pays detailed attention to the texts and significance of Murrinh-patha public dance-songs (in this case, the Malkarrin genre). None of the song genres that form the focus of this project (that is, Thanpa, Wurlthirri or Malkarrin) are mentioned in the published work of the prominent anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner (Stanner, 1963 (1989)), although he recorded some Murrinh-patha song material, including Wurlthirri and Malkarrin, in the 1950s. Falkenberg's research conducted at Wadeye in the 1950s stressed broad theoretical issues to do with social structure and kinship, but little consideration was paid

to song (Falkenberg, 1962), and to date no sound recordings made by him have been traced. Alberto Furlan, a doctoral student at the University of Sydney, recorded both contemporary and traditional songs at Wadeye as part of his anthropological fieldwork in 2002-2003 (at the time of writing his thesis is under examination and no publications are yet available).

The following chronological list² of known audiovisual recordings of Murrinh-patha song has been traced through searches of relevant archives, the authors' own collections, and the holdings of WASA:

1. Colin Simpson (broadcaster) and Charles P. Mountford (anthropologist) – Wadeye performers at Belyuen (Delissaville), 1948
2. W.E.H. Stanner (anthropologist) - descriptions from 1930s, recordings 1954, 1957 (Daly River, Port Keats)
3. Alice Moyle (musicologist) - Wadeye performers in Darwin, Kununurra, Mandorah recorded in 1962 and 1968, included on two published recordings (Moyle, 1963, Moyle, 1977)
4. William Hoddinott (linguist) - 1967 (Wadeye performer at Daly River)
5. Michael Walsh (linguist) - 1972, 1974 (Wadeye)
6. Lesley Reilly nee Rourke (community worker) - 1974-1978 (Wadeye)
7. Deborah Bird Rose (anthropologist) – 1981 (Wadeye performers at Yarralin)
8. Allan Marett (musicologist) and Nicholas Reid (linguist) – 1988 (Wadeye performers at Nadirri outstation)
9. Allan Marett – 1988, 1999-2000 (Wadeye and outstations)
10. Allan Marett and Linda Barwick (musicologist) – 1998, 2001 (Wadeye and outstations, Kununurra)
11. Michael Enilane (teacher) - 1990-1992 (Wadeye)
12. Mark Crocombe and other employees of Wadeye Aboriginal Languages Centre - 1990 on (Wadeye)
13. Alberto Furlan (anthropologist) – 2002-2003 (Wadeye)

Not all these recordings are currently available to us, or have been fully indexed, but already we have identified around 530 individual song items. It is worth remarking that because of Wadeye's remoteness and difficulty of access, many early performances by Wadeye performers were recorded in other places.

Within Wadeye community, Murrinh-patha holds a special status because it is the language of the country in which the community is located. It is therefore felt to be somewhat anomalous by elders of all groups that studies of Wangga and Lirrga have been completed before close attention has been paid to Thanpa, Wurlthirri and Malkarrin. This situation arose because Marett's initial research began in other communities where Wangga and Lirrga were the main performance genres. Despite their prominence in the ceremonial life of the community, and although these Murrinh-patha public dance-songs

² Unless otherwise indicated, all recordings are unpublished. Most collections can be located in the audio-visual archives of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

have been recorded by researchers on numerous occasions, this project is the first to pay close musical and linguistic attention to them.

4. Murrinh-patha Song Genres

Our research project concentrates on the three public dance-song genres in Murrinh-patha language. The earliest recordings include a high proportion of Balga songs, a genre originating in the Kimberleys (Barwick, 1998). The Balga series known and performed by Murrinh-patha people is identified by them as coming from Wyndham and is not in Murrinh-patha language. Neither is a significant repertory of songs in the Wangga genre (originating in the Daly region north of Wadeye) composed by one Murrinh-patha performer active 1930-1972. Excluding these two genres, the three Murrinh-patha song genres in Murrinh-patha language to be considered are:

- Wurlthirri, composed in the 1930s and received from Tidha (country-spirits) of Yek Nangu people (Murrinh-patha speaking clan south of Wadeye). In recent years Wurlthirri songs have been relatively frequently performed in circumcision ceremonies and rag-burnings, and while there are few distinct song texts, to date we have identified recordings of some 113 individual song items.
- Malkarrin, a revelatory Christian song series composed pre-1939, received from the spirit of the Virgin Mary by a Yek Nangu man. Malkarrin songs are still occasionally performed for funerals and in church, but there are relatively few recorded performances. The corpus known to us comprises some 34 individual song items. The Malkarrin song texts are linguistically complex, comprising words from a number of different neighbouring languages as well as Murrinh-patha.
- Thanpa, composed from 1961 onwards, received by a number of different individuals from Kardu Kunhpinhi (country-spirits) of Yek Diminin clan, the country in which Wadeye itself is situated. Thanpa songs are performed frequently for circumcisions, funerals, ragburnings and other public occasions. There are approximately 60 song texts, and so far we have identified some 350 song items. Song genres of a similar name have been recorded elsewhere (Meggitt, 1955, Swain, 1993), but as far as we are aware there is no direct relationship to the Murrinh-patha genre.

5. Musicological Significance

This research fills a significant gap in the documentation of public song genres in Northern Australia. Musical characteristics of the three Murrinh-patha genres have never previously been studied in detail. Preliminary assessment based on our own fieldwork and recordings at Wadeye indicates that the three Murrinh-patha genres are quite

musically diverse, reflecting perhaps Wadeye's pivotal location at the junction of three different musical/stylistic areas: Northern Australia, Central Australia and the Kimberleys. Similar to genres practised in the Kimberleys, all three Murrinh-patha public song genres are sung by both men and women. In musical construction Malkarrin is very similar to the Balga genre, consisting of a single melodic descent with cyclically repeated isorhythmic text.

Thanpa and Wurlthirri, by contrast, appear to have musical characteristics found nowhere else in Australia. Thanpa is extraordinarily complex in its textual structure, to an extent unknown elsewhere in Northern, Western or Central Australia. The size of the Thanpa repertory and the large number of recordings of the same songs by known composers offers the possibility of comparative analysis of different performances and different compositional styles. Wurlthirri is didjeridu-accompanied. It is the only didjeridu-accompanied genre of northwestern Australia (Western Arnhem Land, the Daly region and the Kimberleys) known to use the overblown hoot (otherwise confined to central and eastern Arnhem Land) and may also be unique in Australia in being the only didjeridu-accompanied genre in which women lead the singing, frequently without male co-singers.

6. Linguistic Significance

Although threatened, like all Australian languages, by the global dominance of English, Murrinh-patha is relatively healthy, rated in the 1996 census as the sixth-most spoken Aboriginal language, with at least 1200 speakers (Fryer-Smith, 2002). This figure is probably an underestimate, as it is the lingua franca in a sizeable settlement that currently has about 2500 residents (Wadeye Community, 1998, Ford, 2005). Murrinh-patha was documented in the 1970s and 1980s by linguists Walsh and Street (Walsh, 1995, Walsh, 1996, Walsh, 1997, Walsh, 1993a, Walsh and Yallop, 1993, Walsh, 1990, Walsh, 1976, Street, 1987, Street and Kulampurut, 1979, Street and Street, 1993, Walsh, 1993b) and some recent publications (Green, In press, Reid and Green, In press) have re-assessed its relationship with other Daly languages (Tryon, 1974). It is spoken as a first language by people of all ages, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the everyday Murrinh-patha in general use at Wadeye has undergone significant changes in recent years. These changes probably partly reflect normal linguistic change, but additionally, because the community includes a number of older people whose first language is a neighbouring Aboriginal language (mainly speakers of Western Daly languages), these changes are accelerated by Murrinh-patha's role as a lingua franca. The current state of Murrinh-patha has not yet been systematically studied. Zandvoort (a postgraduate student of Reid) assembled some material in the late 1990s, but this study was never analysed or completed because of his untimely death (Zandvoort, 2000), and project postgraduate Joe Blythe plans to pursue this question during linguistic fieldwork at Wadeye in 2004.

Song language has been a relatively neglected area within linguistics. Although special characteristics of the language used in song, including its cryptic quality and its frequent use of archaic words or words from other languages, including ghost languages, have been described by many researchers (Strehlow, 1971, Dixon, 1980, Merlan, 1987, Marett, 2000, Moyle, 1998, Barwick, 2000), only a small collection of Aboriginal song text corpora have been considered from both textual and musical aspects (Dixon and Koch, 1996, Keogh, 1996, Marett et al., 2001, Marett, In press, Marett and Barwick, 2003, Barwick, 2005, Ford, 2005). Through linguistic transcription and analysis of up to 100 Murrinh-patha songs, the linguists on the project aim to document the linguistic characteristics of Murrinh-patha song texts in relation to spoken language, and to assess these characteristics against the general statements derived from other corpora. Questions include the extent to which songs use special linguistic forms and vocabularies, including incorporation of words from other languages, and the use of figurative language in songs.

Our research also offers the opportunity to study the development of Murrinh-patha as a lingua franca in an area of great linguistic diversity, with a wealth of comparative historical material, and drawing on the rich semantic domain of song texts in addition to everyday language. In Australia, where most Aboriginal languages have only been studied very recently, there are very few instances where a single language has been recorded at different time depths to give us perspective on how, and how quickly, Aboriginal languages spoken in small speech communities undergo changes. One particularly neglected area has been the systematic study of the emergence of lingua franca in Aboriginal communities as the result of sedentarization. Amery's 1985 study of baby Gumatj is the most developed example but it was undertaken in an area of little linguistic diversity (Simpson and Nash, 1990, Donaldson, 1985, Urry and Walsh, 1991). As well as transcribing and analysing the song texts themselves, this research will generate a significant body of Murrinh-patha texts about the songs from both elders and young people. Any changes in modern Murrinh-patha may be relevant for the way in which information is presented in the planned local community database.

7. Technological Considerations

This project aims to develop innovative solutions to particular difficulties in information management surrounding the digitisation of intangible cultural heritage. Sound archivists nationally and internationally have been sounding the alarm as to the impending crisis of inaccessibility if twentieth-century analogue sound formats are not soon transferred to the digital domain (Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), 2001, National Library of Australia (NLA), 2000). But it is not simply a matter of finding and using the right technical equipment to create digital clones of analogue originals.

To remain accessible, digital data require sustainability planning, the input of consistent content and rights-management metadata at the time of digitisation and an ongoing programme of maintenance including off-site mirroring, regular backup, checking of the integrity of the resources and migration to new formats when required (Bird and Simons, 2003).

Clearly, preservation and management of highly valued and endangered heritage recordings such as the WASA collection should be a high priority, but there are presently few adequate models for planning and implementing such a programme. This is especially problematic when intangible cultural heritage items such as songs and dances are the primary means of transmission of cultural knowledge, and where the holders and curators of such knowledge are located in remote communities, often speaking English as a second or third language, and with few opportunities for direct experience of the new technologies that will preserve and make accessible their culture for future generations and the wider community. Maintenance of heritage values during the transfer of recordings to the digital realm can only be guaranteed if the bearers of cultural knowledge are centrally involved in planning and carrying out the research.

By bringing the principal Murrinh-patha holders of traditional song knowledge into central roles in the documentation, the project aims to develop an arena of vital importance for cultural continuity while training young people to carry forward their culture in a new technological realm. Many of the existing recordings held at the Wadeye Aboriginal Language Centre are in obsolete formats (for example, poor quality cassette tape copies), have minimal documentation and have been kept in poor conditions. While a programme to digitise these recordings is currently underway, it is crucial for today's knowledgeable elders to participate in the development of metadata in order to allow the discovery and access of these digital files according to culturally appropriate categories for community access and employing the international archival and documentation standards essential for long term management (Barwick, 2003a, Bird and Simons, 2003).

As illustrated in Fig. 1, the project is underpinned by an agreement between the researchers and the Wadeye community. The first step in assembling the database is location of all relevant historical recordings in the WASA collection, in the collections of researchers and in the AIATSIS archives. Any necessary digitisation of sound recordings is carried out to archival standards using the Quadriga audio digitisation facility at AIATSIS or at the University of Sydney's PARADISEC unit. The existing descriptive data for the resulting corpus of recordings is later checked for accuracy with Murrinh-patha elders, who are often able to add important additional information on performers and the performance occasion.

The next step in preparation of the material is preliminary timecode indexation of each sound recording to identify the songs recorded on it

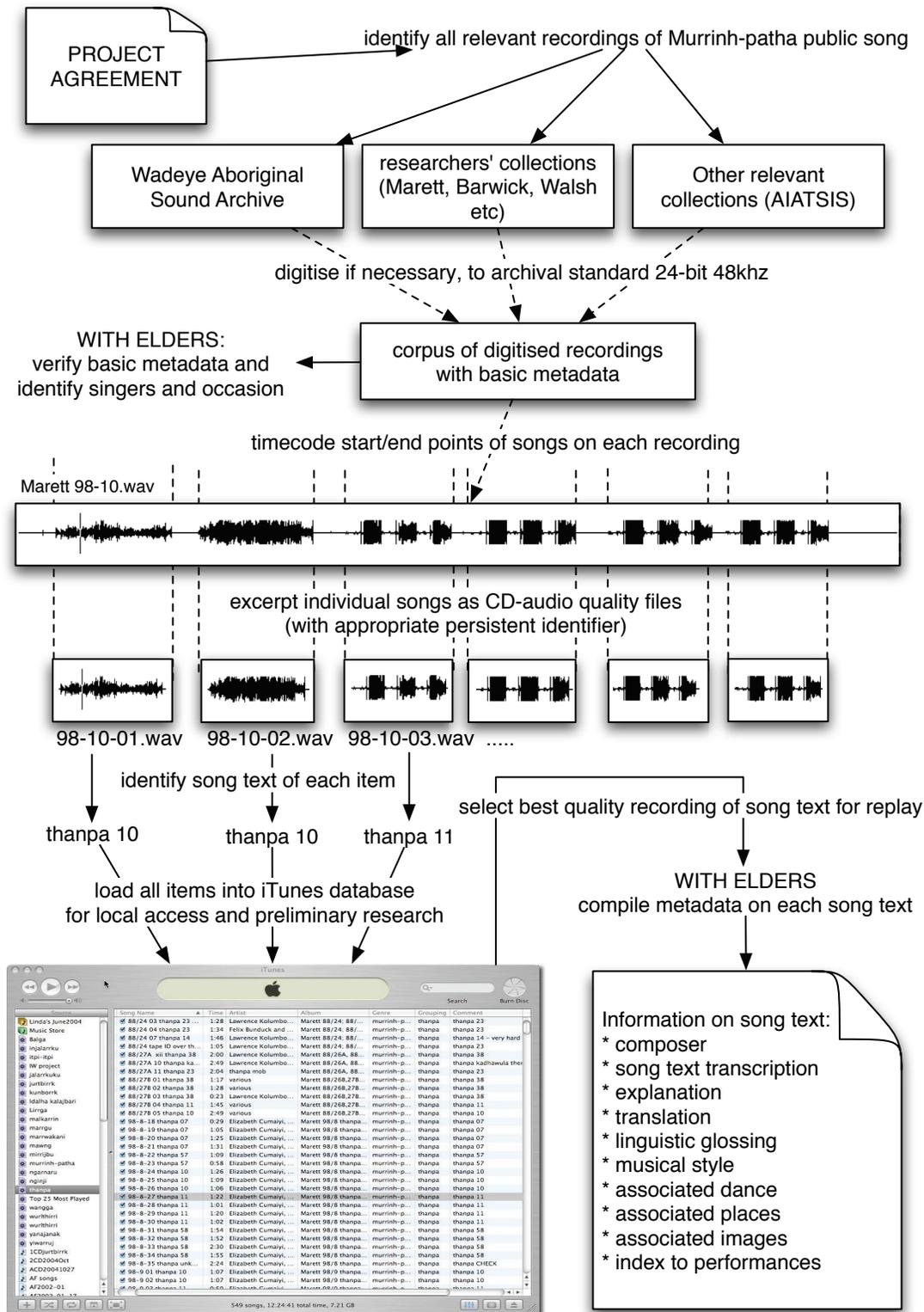


Figure 1: Workflow for assembling audio materials and metadata for the Murrinh-patha song project.

and generate a number of excerpted files containing the songs alone. This prepares the song material for local access via the iTunes songs database on the Wadeye library computer, and for research purposes forms an easily accessible pool of song items as the basis for playback and variant analysis. We track the relation of each excerpt file to the original recording by a unique persistent identifier indicating the sequence of the songs. For example, the file named 98-10-01.wav is the first song item on the recording Marett 98-10.

After preliminary identification of the song text (where possible), the song files are loaded into an iTunes database. Where more than one recording of the same song text exists, the best quality versions are selected for use in the next stage of the process: playing the songs back to a group of knowledgeable elders (who often include composers or performers of the songs in question). This fieldwork procedure has been developed in conjunction with the elders in the course of our previous research at Wadeye. During playback, culturally appropriate categorisation and identification of the items is discussed with the elders and entered directly into the database as the documentation sessions take place. At the end of this phase, we have assembled metadata relevant to each song text, including:

1. composer and occasion of its composition;
2. song text transcription, explanation and translation, with preliminary linguistic glossing;
3. information on its musical style, associated dance, associated places, and suitable images to associate with it
4. rights and access information, and
5. a collated index to the occurrence of this song in performances throughout the corpus.

The third phase (not represented in figure 1) involves musical transcription and analysis, refinement of the transcription and translation of the song texts begun during the documentation sessions, and analysis of linguistic and musical variants and how these relate to performance contexts. Musical transcription and analysis forms the basis for definition of major features of musical style, culturally significant features of the music and any indigenous terminology for musical elements. Similarly, linguistic transcription and analysis contributes to identification and elucidation of any characteristic features of song language.

Past experience has shown that by focussing on the recording of specific songs with a group of knowledgeable elders during playback sessions we are also able to compile considerable information on the question of the role of Murrinh-patha song in ritual exchange with local and neighbouring groups. Information emerging from playback sessions is supplemented by recording and transcribing interviews with each of the knowledgeable elders, by compiling a survey of previous recordings and published literature, and by drawing on our own previous experience of relevant genres. Our work in this area has

benefited from the previous research of Marett's doctoral student Alberto Furlan, who has recently completed his thesis based on fieldwork at Wadeye, who has conducted interviews with elders and younger people about the relationship between traditional genres and newly composed rock songs by local contemporary music groups such as the Nangu Band (Nangu Band, 1998).

We aim to integrate use of both Murrinh-patha and English in the design and access of the database, exploiting the so-far under-utilised capacity of digital technologies to operate effectively across cultures and languages (Gorski, 2001), and creating an important new domain for the maintenance and development of Murrinh-patha language and culture. The research process will also aim to identify materials suitable for potential use in educational materials, publication and outside access, as well as collating information on the principles by which local control can be exercised by the appropriate people. The process and model will be fully documented for maximum utility to other communities and heritage bodies in Australia and overseas.

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