

Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities

Submission on behalf of the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia

The National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia (NRP) is a coalition of concerned Indigenous and non-Indigenous people with interests in protecting and sustaining Australia's highly endangered traditions of Indigenous song, dance and ceremonial performance. It was established at the first Garma Symposium on Indigenous Song and Dance in 2002 and has been active over the past decade in recording traditional song and dance, promoting local digital archives of traditional song and dance and raising awareness of the crisis afflicting Australia's traditions of Indigenous song and dance.

Last month, the General Assembly of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM), a worldwide organization dedicated to the preservation of traditional music and an NGO in Formal Consultative Relations with UNESCO, unanimously endorsed a statement about the highly endangered traditions of Australian Indigenous music and dance (see attached). Among other things, this statement drew attention to the fact that 'recent scholarship reveals that Australia's traditions of Indigenous music and dance are in crisis' and that 'these traditions are among the oldest and most endangered in the world.' It also points out that 'songs, dances and ceremonial performances lie at the centre of Indigenous Australian cultures, playing a vital role in religious beliefs and practices. They are important repositories of cultural knowledge. Through song and dance, Indigenous Australians maintain social and personal wellbeing, sustain their cultures, and maintain Law and their own identity. Performance traditions also serve to strengthen Indigenous languages and provide intergenerational links between families and communities. Indigenous songs and dances are therefore essential to Indigenous culture and society.'

The purpose of this submission is to draw the committee's attention the vital role that traditional languages play in the traditional ceremonial arts. Virtually all the traditional Indigenous performance arts involve singing. The survival of these artistic practices is dependent upon the survival of traditional languages. In order to sing and create songs in traditional genres, one needs competency in the traditional language. Conversely, singing is a powerful tool for language learning. Song is therefore entirely dependent on the survival of traditional languages. In addition, the transmission processes that underpin the survival of these song traditions require competency in traditional languages.

The importance of the teaching of traditional languages for the survival of Australia's traditions of Indigenous song and dance were a major focus of the National Recording Project's 10th Annual Symposium on Indigenous Song and Dance, which was held at the Australian National University's North Australia Research Unit in Darwin from 14-15 August 2011. The symposium, which brought together Indigenous stakeholders from Darwin, East and West Arnhem Land, the Kimberley, Central Australia and New South Wales with academics from the University of Sydney, the Australian National University, the University of Melbourne and the University of Western Australia as well as representatives of AIATSIS and the National Library of Australia, unanimously passed the following resolution.

"This meeting calls on all levels of government to support the teaching of indigenous languages in schools to support the passing on of traditional culture and ceremony." Proposed by Allan Marett. Seconded by Rex Japanagka Granites. Passed unanimously.

We wish to draw this resolution to the attention of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Affairs and to underline the importance of language learning for the survival of Australia's unique traditions of Indigenous song and dance.

Submitted by:

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Associate Professor Aaron Corn, Co-Director, National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia; School of Music, The Australian National University.

Mr David Manmurulu, Co-Chair, Steering Committee, National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia; Senior Traditional Owner and performer of Injarlaku song series, Goulburn Island, NT.

Emeritus Professor Allan Marett, Co-Chair, Steering Committee, National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia; PARADISEC, University of Sydney.