The words yiwarruj, inyman, radbihi and mali refer to four key concepts of knowledge in Iwaidja culture. Yiwarruj is ‘teachings’ – all the stories and songs which keep a culture going. Inyman is ‘language’ – here, the indigenous languages of the region. Radbihi are ‘customs’, traditions and ways, including ceremonies and song-cycles, which act as templates for social behaviour, so helping to hold society together. And mali represents ‘thought and ideas’ – your capacity to think, consider, and understand.

People of the Cobourg region see all four ingredients as vital in maintaining their language and culture. Our project recorded these through rich multi-media documentation as well as through the creation of dictionaries and written text collections. It had the dual aim of presenting them to the outside world of scholarship, and of helping the younger generations of the Cobourg region to hold onto their linguistic and cultural heritage in the face of the encroachment of (European, or more generally ‘foreign’) culture.

Iwaidja, the main language of the project, is still the vehicle of a living culture, and here we concentrated on documenting the full gamut of traditional contexts within which the language is used, including hunting, fishing, butchering, plant use, the gathering, preparation and cooking of ‘bush tucker’ such as wild yams, geographical and ecological knowledge, terms for kinship and social categories such as clans, and language associated with the manufacture of traditional stone and wooden implements. Traditional place names and myths associated with the ‘dreaming tracks’ laid down by founding ancestral figures such as Wamba the shark were also recorded in detail. Often renditions of these stories involve several different languages according to which character is speaking and which country they are passing through.

Another focus of the project was on recording and transcribing traditional songs. Every language group has its own distinctive song style, such as the Jurtbirrk style sung in the Iwaidja language (see score), or the Yanajakan style associated with the Amurdak people of the inland ‘stone country’.

In addition to linguists Nick Evans (Canberra), Hans-Jürgen Sasse (Köln), and Bruce Birch (Canberra), our team included musicologist Linda Barwick (Sydney), anthropologist Murray Garde (Canberra) and material culture specialist and museum curator Kim Akerman (Hobart).

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