

House of Reps Standing Committee  
Inquiry on Indigenous Languages

Dear Committee:

I have had a long-term research association with the area of Katherine, N.T., from the Roper River into southern Arnhem Land.

I have recorded material on a sizeable number of languages of the region, and archived all the material with AIATSIS. There has been some request over the years for repatriation of some of this material to various communities and families.

There was for some years a functional language centre in Katherine. By a process I did not follow closely, there seems to have been considerable misappropriation and misuse of funds in that Centre, to the point that it was closed down. Much recorded material, much experience, and many associations with local Aboriginal people and communities have been attenuated and lost in the process.

A cultural precinct building is to be opened in Katherine, but such a facility will not be able to replicate the kind of material and expertise that the language centre had.

It is important to restore the language centre and its functions to this high-diversity Territory centre, and to ensure that it is administered effectively. Most of the people who worked in the language centre, both indigenous and non-indigenous, were highly motivated and public-spirited and were concerned with preserving the language legacy of the region.

Dysfunctional management and inadequate oversight were allowed to destroy an institution that did a great deal of useful public work, collaborated closely and with benefit to Aboriginal people and communities, and should have been an asset for the entire community.

Sincerely yours,

(Professor) Francesca Merlan  
School of Archaeology and Anthropology  
Australian National University  
Canberra ACT 0200  
61-(0)2-6125-8228