# Chapter 4.18
# Ara Irititja:
## Towards Culturally Appropriate IT Best Practice in Remote Indigenous Australia

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## ABSTRACT

*The creation of a digital archive database system for the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people in Central Australia has been a challenging information technology (IT) project requiring unique thinking about database design, implementation and deployment. What might seem like sound, standards-based IT practice in a typical urban or academic location becomes unworkable in the physical realities of remote Australia and in the context of indigenous Australian cultural sensitivities. Based on the experience of the Ara Irititja Project, this chapter outlines the central issues facing the development of archive databases for indigenous peoples in remote Australia and points towards the need for a new approach to IT best practices in this context.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1991, Anangu (Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara peoples of Central Australia) celebrated the 10th anniversary of the granting of the *Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act 1981* (South Australia). As part of the celebrations, John Dallwitz was engaged by the Pitjantjatjara Council to create a display of historically significant photographs.

During the research for this display, it became clear that there was a vast amount of historic and culturally significant material (not only photographs but also films, videos, sound recordings, documents and artefacts), held in private and public collections completely inaccessible to Anangu. However, the 3,000 Anangu on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (referred to in this chapter as "the Lands"), in
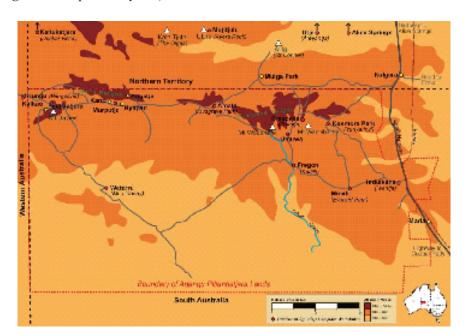
*Figure 1. Map of the A<u>n</u>angu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara lands (Printed with permission from A<u>r</u>a Irititja and Rightside Response Pty Ltd)*



northwestern South Australia, live in communities and homelands spread over more than 102,630 square kilometres of spectacularly beautiful and challenging country (see Figure 1). In this harsh environment, it would be very difficult to provide Anangu access to the physical materials whilst ensuring each item's longevity for future generations.

In 1994, A<u>r</u>a Irititja was established to develop a response to this dilemma when John Dallwitz, along with anthropologist Ushma Scales and Anangu Schools teacher Ron Lister, received the first funding from Pitjantjatjara Council Inc. This chapter outlines the central issues facing the design, implementation and deployment of archive databases for indigenous peoples in remote Australia and points towards the need for new thinking around information technology (IT) best practices in this context.

## THE A<u>R</u>A IRITITJA PROJECT

A<u>r</u>a Irititja encompasses five main activities:

1. tracking down and negotiating for the retrieval of materials significant to A<u>n</u>angu;
2. attending to the storage of materials to archival standards;
3. creating digital copies of these materials;
4. returning the digital versions of the materials to A<u>n</u>angu, via an interactive digital archive developed specifically for this purpose (the A<u>r</u>a Irititja software); and
5. collecting information about these materials, from donors and Anangu working with the A<u>r</u>a Irititja software.

It is the last two points that make A<u>r</u>a Irititja unique as an archive. The fundamental intention of

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