

OUR ELDERS ARE OUR LIVING LIBRARIES

Culture is central to Aboriginal identity. This has been stated and restated by many Aboriginal organisations, including the Kimberley Aboriginal Law & Cultural Centre (KALACC):

Culture is an intrinsic part of our identity as Aboriginal people – it is the foundation of who we are and how we make sense of the world. This is why Aboriginal organisations across a spectrum of service areas in the Kimberley embed culture within everything from governance structures to programs. Simply put, culture drives us¹.

Djambawa Marawili AM, Chairperson of the Arnhem, Northern and Kimberley Artists Aboriginal Corporation (ANKA) adds the following insights when discussing Indigenous cultural heritage:

This ceremony, with its rich and complex song and dance cycles, and inherited patterns, designs and objects, passed down from our ancestors, is **Australia's first high culture. Our opera as well as our law.**

It is time that Australia recognises that caring for this high culture in remote Australia is every bit as important as looking after mainstream high culture in the cities.

[...]

To continue the important work of looking after Australia's first high culture, we need more respect and understanding. We need wider Australia to properly understand that in the homelands, in our communities on country, we are caring for the oldest living culture on earth; and we are the only people qualified to look after this global inheritance. These are not just words about a distant imagined past; this is reality. We need support for our self-determination to care for the seeds of a shared future for all Australians².

In turn, our Elders are central to our culture. They are our cultural custodians – living libraries who tether the present moment to 60,000 years of tradition. They are in the best position to determine our cultural priorities. In the words of Professor Pat Dudgeon, Director of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP) and the Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention:

In my time, I have been privileged to witness what I see as a cultural renaissance of Aboriginal Australia. Culture has become life-giving medicine for our people, closing the wounds of the past and standing us strong to face the future.

Our Elders have been fundamental in this process. They are our wisdom keepers. They have seen the changes, so dramatically incurred in their lifetime. They are the vital bridge between the modern world and Aboriginal culture. They are the leaders of our communities, to whom we continue to rely on for guidance and counselling. There is no more urgent time to sit down and listen to our Elders than now. For any solution to be effective, their guidance must form the foundation of how Governments and service providers work with Aboriginal people³.

¹ *Kimberley Aboriginal Caring for Culture Consultation Report, 2020, p6*

² *ANKA Arts Backbone Magazine: Cultural Legacy Edition, August 2018 (Volume 17), p2 [new emphasis]*

³ *Introduction to The Elders' Report into Preventing Indigenous Self-harm and Youth Suicide, 2014, p6–7*

NIACA & THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF OUR ELDERS

Since 2007 it has been envisaged that interdisciplinary delegates from all over Australia, including representatives from KALACC, will come together for a national summit on First Nations arts and culture. Such a gathering has not occurred since 1973. It is long overdue.

Senior cultural men and women have long advocated for a united voice – a cultural authority – to ensure meaningful outcomes for Indigenous people. This long – overdue national summit must proceed in a timely manner, but mindful of broad community engagement and bringing the sector along on the journey.

This significant undertaking could help develop a peak body – the National Indigenous Arts and Cultural Authority (NIACA). Governments are at present engaging meaningfully with the Coalition of Peaks. Without a peak body for Indigenous Arts and Culture we are left out of these important national discussions.

What is cultural authority?

It is important to distinguish here the idea of Aboriginal ‘cultural authority’, which is very different from Western understandings of an ‘authority’. As explained by Lydia Miller, the Australia Council’s former Executive Director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts:

...the term ‘cultural authority’ pertains to the body of knowledge exercised by Senior Lawmen and Lawwomen, Cultural Custodians, Traditional Owners and Knowledge Keepers in the context of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property (ICIP), intangible cultural heritage (ICH), traditional knowledge (TK) and traditional cultural expression (TCE), it is knowledge that is in direct reference to song, dance, story, music, symbols, iconography, ceremony and creation narratives. It does not reference the notion of an administrative structure such as a ‘statutory authority’, brought into effect by statute.

This could be what First Nations self-determination, agency and leadership could look like. And the National Summit obviously will have the room to discuss these concepts and aspirations⁴.

Who puts the authority in NIACA if not our Elders?

The authority for culture is founded on the authority of our Elders. Every time one of our Elders passes away, we lose a whole living library of knowledge and heritage that spans over 60,000 years.

It is crucial that our Elders are central to the process of forming NIACA, based on the leadership and governance of our cultural custodians. They are the key to preserving our cultural heritage for future generations. They are foundational to our culture, and must be foundational to the governance of NIACA.

In order to undertake this important work, we must ask ourselves:

- How do we put senior cultural authority – our Elders – at the centre of NIACA?
- How can we be guided by our Elders?
- How can we empower our Elders and provide the necessary platform and voice to safeguard the world’s longest continuing living culture?

⁴ Posted to the National Summit on First Nations Art and Culture Facebook Group by Lydia Miller on 13 March 2021

CULTIVATING CULTURAL AUTHORITY: KALACC'S TRADE ROUTES PROJECT

The Trade Routes Cultural Governance Project is a great example of the ways in which KALACC is empowering our Elders and providing them with a vital platform to safeguard Aboriginal culture.

Before colonisation, both secret-sacred and mundane items were freely traded throughout Australia via vibrant, complex networks that crossed Aboriginal nation states, traversing many songlines. The practice of trading included not only physical materials but also a rich tapestry of songs, dances, art, stories, rituals and ceremonies from diverse language groups.

The Trade Routes Cultural Governance Project aims to reinvigorate these traditional trade routes across Western Australia (WA), the Northern Territory (NT) and South Australia (SA). Rather than seeking to replicate them, this collaborative multi-year project will rekindle and rejuvenate the social and cultural significance of these systems of interconnection.

Travelling between communities throughout the three states, Indigenous researchers and cultural custodians – in partnership with other scholars – will digitally record local oral histories, stories and contemporary practices. Creating new connections between the living and archival knowledge of Indigenous trade within the Kimberley and Desert regions, the material will form the basis for a podcast and a major exhibition at the South Australian Museum.

This project seeks to fill knowledge gaps and revive fundamental and foundational cultural governance systems. Central to this, Elders will attend a series of bush camp workshops in Central Australia for the intergenerational transfer of important cultural knowledge and heritage.

Ultimately, for the first time, the Trade Routes Governance Project will unite and empower the current and emerging Elders from WA, NT and SA – recognising their crucial standing as living libraries who tether the present moment to 60,000 years of tradition. It will strengthen Indigenous cultural authority, with a strong cohort of men and women being developed as the next generation of senior cultural custodians for the world's oldest living culture into the future.



Cultural leaders Gordon Marshall and Moogy Sumner standing together on Ngarrindjeri country at the Coorong, March 2021



One of our new generation of Indigenous leaders and cultural custodians