

Kapululangu's Circles of Cultural Learning Project



The Women Elders at the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre
Maude Mandigalli, Dora Rockman, Sarah Daniels, Ruby Darkie
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REVITALISING WOMEN'S CULTURE - CARING FOR WOMEN & COMMUNITY

Kapululangu Aboriginal Women's Association
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via Halls Creek, WA 6770, Australia
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Kapululangu & its Circles of Cultural Learning

The Kapululangu Aboriginal Women's Association (KAWA) is inviting partnerships from organisations and individuals who support its "Circles of Cultural Learning" (CCL) program.

Located in Balgo in the south-eastern Kimberley, Kapululangu is one of Australia's most remote women's centres and has a focus on Revitalising Women's Law (philosophy/cosmology) and Culture (customary practice) and on Caring for Women and Community.

The "Circles of Cultural Learning" (CCL) is an intergenerational cultural healing and education program designed by Kapululangu's elders with the purpose of protecting, improving and enhancing the lives of Indigenous women and children in one of Australia's most isolated Aboriginal communities.

Kapululangu was formed by the Balgo women elders in 1999 to assist the women elders in their roles as teachers, guardians, healers and Law (traditional religious) leaders of their community. The Kapululangu women elders grew up in the desert before the arrival of White people in their lands and are the last generation of Balgo's custodians of the old knowledge.

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The Balgo Socio-Economic Context

- In terms of socioeconomic indicators, Balgo is the lowest ranked Indigenous area in the Kimberley, and almost the worst performed having dropped from ranked 515 in 2001 to 520 in 2006 in a list of 531 Indigenous areas across Australia.
- In 2008, WA Coroner Hope described the “appallingly bad” living conditions in Balgo as a “disaster of Aboriginal health” which no government was successfully managing to improve.
- Indigenous Australians suffer a burden of disease that is two-and-a-half times greater than the burden of disease in the total Australian population.
- Life expectancy for Aboriginal people living in Halls Creek, of which Balgo is the largest satellite settlement, is 52 years. This is 28 years shorter than for non-Indigenous Australians, compared to the 20 years gap nationally.
- Sixty percent of Balgo’s population are aged under 25 years.
- Of 14 deaths of young men by suicide in the past 12 months for Kimberley area, 4 suicides were in Balgo. In 2006-07 there were 21 Aboriginal deaths by self-harm in the Kimberley, an increase of 100% over the previous years.
- In July 2007 an 11 year old Balgo boy had sex with two pre-school girls (4 and 6 years) and gave them a sexually transmitted disease.
- In Halls Creek (including Balgo), 80 to 90 per cent of pregnant mothers drink alcohol, around a third of children suffer fetal alcohol syndrome, and girls as young as 13, who are victims of fetal alcohol syndrome themselves, are giving birth to infants with the same condition.
- Petrol sniffing continues to be a significant problem in Balgo, with regular outbreaks – most recently in August 2009.
- Domestic Violence and Family Feuding continues, particularly impacting women.
- Mental Health is a significant concern in Balgo. 27% of Indigenous Australians experience high or very high levels of distress compared to 13% for non-Indigenous Australians.

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The Circles of Cultural Learning Framework

The Circles of Cultural Learning is the landmark project of the Kapululangu Aboriginal Women's Association.

As an Indigenous-initiated, community-based program led by the women elders, CCL draws on local strengths to deal with locally-identified social problems. A whole-of-community, whole-of-life therapeutic program, CCL re-centralises the women elders as cultural healers and teachers and strengthens leadership among younger women.

CCL aims to engage every sector of the community in a spectrum of activities which advance connectedness with self, kin, country and *Tjukurrpa* (cosmos). The program is built upon both traditional and contemporary methods of teaching and learning under the guidance of the elders. While particularly focusing on young women and children (including prepubescent boys) CCL also supports the male elders' work with older boys.

CCL consists of Four Culture Rivers (streams):

- Cultural Education
- Cultural Healing
- Cultural Safety and
- Cultural Community Development.

Each stream consists of a series of different focuses and activities. For example,

- Cultural Education includes teaching "Law and Culture" (Indigenous philosophy and customary practices);
- Cultural Healing includes providing a traditional healing service by women healers;
- Cultural Safety is about building respect for women, elders, and children; and
- Cultural Community Development circle provides a residential Learning House of Women and ultimately aims towards developing cultural eco-tourism ventures which advantage the local community.

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Kapululangu's *Tjarrtjurra* Women Healers

Kapululangu has a strong focus on physical, psychological and spiritual healing.

The Kapululangu elders believe that their young ones are suffering from a diminished self-esteem and a loss of pride in their cultural identity. From the elders' perspective, this disaffection is caused by rapid externally-introduced social and cultural change which has forced the derogation of the Indigenous Law and cultural practices and a rupture in their connection to their land-based traditions.

As *tjarrtjurra* (traditional women healers) the Kapululangu elders perceive themselves to be responsible for the wellbeing of their families, kin, and the wider community. They want to offer their youth and children increased opportunities to learn their own peoples' philosophies (Law) and customs (Culture).

By "mending" their young relatives' connection with their cultural heritage, the elders hope to foster resilience among their younger family members, and by this means to enhance their physical and emotional safety and well being.

The Kapululangu elders believe that all attempts to solve the problems currently plaguing Balgo will be impotent unless they are grounded in a strong cultural base and nurture a sense of pride in one's Aboriginality. They know that unless the foundation of Law and culture is strong all of the bricks of education, health and housing will continue to fall down. A wall is only as strong as its foundation, and that foundation is, for Balgo's people, their own Law and culture, their own cultural knowledge.

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Aims of the Circles of Cultural Learning

Kapululangu's vision is a vibrant and cohesive community which honours its elders, protects its women and children, and empowers all its residents to live fulfilling and productive lives immersed in respect for self, kin, land and *Tjukurrpa/Dreaming*.

Kapululangu seeks to achieve this through fostering individual and collective resilience through pride in the local Indigenous culture so as to empower individuals, enhance community cohesion, foster creative citizenship, and build sustainable Indigenous-driven governance.

Through its Circles of Cultural Learning program Kapululangu aims to contribute towards:

- augmenting the resilience of Balgo residents, particularly young people, by strengthening pride in cultural identity and encouraging positive life skills through providing an innovative learning program based on Indigenous philosophies and practices;
- improving health and wellbeing, diminishing preventable illnesses, and increasing the life expectancy of Balgo's residents by assisting the community to provide a culturally-safe holistic health service by offering a traditional healing environment and service to all women, men and children;
- eradicating all forms of violence against women and children, including sexual violence, by providing a culturally-appropriate safe environment for women and children, improving self-protective skills held by women and children, and changing men's attitudes and behaviours regarding their relationships with women and children;
- building a sustainable and conflict-free community by re-centralising women, particularly women elders, as leaders and mentors for younger women, by reinforcing women's capacity as active citizens, and by promoting a socio-political context where Indigenous organisational processes may contribute to local governance as recognised and respected assets.

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Kapululangu's Achievements

Formed in April 1999, Kapululangu has provided a vibrant and successful cultural program which has included:

- a women's residential house for Kapululangu's elders;
- ceremonies and dancing at the women's culture centre for all women;
- weekly culture classes for girls (with the local primary school);
- culture camps for girls and boys (with local Catholic parish);
- hunting excursions and trips to country for young women;
- formation and touring of a women's dancing troupe – regionally, nationally, internationally;
- women's ceremonial leadership in Law Time ceremonies and mourning rituals;
- traditional healing for females and males of all ages, including babies;
- a safe refuge for women and children experiencing family violence and sexual abuse;
- a night watch scheme patrolling the community;
- craft workshops to develop skills with the aim of developing income scheme for women;
- support for the male elders with their cultural work with young men and post-pubescent boys; and
- program management, logistical support and advocacy re individual and community concerns.

Recent highlights have included:

- Balgo Women's Law Camp 2007
- Young Women's Culture Camp 2008
- Balgo Women's Law Camp 2009
- Nakkarra Nakkarra Ceremonial Dreaming Track Tour 2009

In 2008/09 Kapululangu provided 85 cultural activities, and had a participation rate of 2524 client-incidences. This is a remarkable achievement in a population of 401 Indigenous residents, and 201 female residents. Kapululangu provides activities and support to Balgo women and girls, supports the Balgo men's side, and invites women and girls from communities throughout the Kutjungka/Tjurabalan. It also invites Indigenous and non-Indigenous female participants from across the Kimberley and throughout Australia.

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Kapululangu's Elders and Directors

Yintjuru Margaret Anjule (Bumblebee) Napurrula. Kapululangu's Founder and a long-time Chairwoman, Margaret is recognised in Balgo as one of the most important Senior Law Women and a powerful Song Woman. She was acknowledged for her contribution to maintaining and revitalising Aboriginal Law and Culture by being named Elder of the Year by the East Kimberley Aboriginal Achievement Award 2008. She is a world-renowned artist.

Ruby Darkie Nangala. Ruby is Kapululangu's ~~current~~ second Chairwoman. ~~And a~~ A prominent Elder, she holds major relationship to Balgo land.

Manaya Sarah Daniels Napanangka. A Song Woman and Dancer, Sarah Manaya is recognised and respected as one of the most powerful Senior Law Woman of Balgo. She is a Luritja woman who had first contact with White society in the mid 1960s. She is a world-renowned artist.

Mungkina Dora Rockman Napaltjarri. A very powerful Law woman and tjarrtjurra healer, Mungkina is a Founding Caretaker of the Kapululangu Tjilimi Women's House of Learning.

Maudie Mandigalli Napanangka. Maudie is a Founding Caretaker of the Kapululangu Tjilimi Women's House of Learning. She is an important Law woman.

Payi Payi Sunfly Napangarti. Kapululangu's Secretary, Payi Payi is an important Song Woman, teacher and an important woman healer (*tjarrtjurra*). She is a world-renowned artist.

Marie "Nakarra" Mudgedell Nakamarra. A Vice-Chair, Marie is following in the footsteps of her deceased mother a leading Senior Law Woman instrumental in founding Kapululangu. She is an apprentice to the women healers, and a teacher in her own right.

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Kapululangu's Staff

Coordinator: Dr Zohl dé Ishtar is Kapululangu's founding and current coordinator. Zohl was nominated to the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 in recognition of her advocacy work with Indigenous Australian and Pacific women. She has been involved with Balgo since 1993, and has spent seven of the past fifteen years living with the elders.

Administrator: Maggie Gleeson, Kapululangu's administrator, has extensive experience in small business management. She is a qualified counsellor. She also cares for the women elders and manages the Kapululangu Tjilimi Women's Residential House.

Project Manager: Joah Peter Gleeson is a licensed builder with a background in working with young men. He is a vital link in providing support to the Kapululangu women elders. He supports the male elders in their work with the young men.

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Kapululangu Invites Partners

The Kapululangu Elders and Directors are inviting partnerships from organisations and individuals who support its "Circles of Cultural Learning" (CCL) program. Total funds being sought are \$A423,600 over two years. This consists of A\$274,461 in the first year, and A\$207,361 in the second year. Any contribution to the women elders' project, whether financially or in kind, would be greatly appreciated. Anyone wishing to support the Kapululangu elders in any way is invited to contact our coordinator Dr Zohl dé Ishtar at ceo@kapululangu.org for more detailed information.

Donors Welcome

If you would like to make a donation to Kapululangu could you please deposit directly into our bank account. Please email ceo@kapululangu.org to tell us that you have deposited, how much you deposited, your full contact details and whether you require a receipt. All donations are tax deductible. Our Bank Details are:

Kapululangu Aboriginal Women's Association.
Bank: Commonwealth Bank. Branch: Kununurra.
BSB: 066 530. ACN: 1010 7707.

Kapululangu Seeking Caretakers

Kapululangu is inviting women to spend one month living with the women elders as a Caretaker of the Kapululangu Tjilimi (Women's House), supporting the women elders in their cultural work and their daily activities, and gifting a project around your special skills to our community. If you are interested please send an email to ceo@kapululangu.org for more information.

More Information about Kapululangu

- Go to our blogsite at <http://kapululangu.org>.
- Read Zohl dé Ishtar's book *Holding Yawulyu: White Culture and Black Women's Law* (Spinifex Press, 2005) which can be ordered at www.spinifexpress.com.au

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