

yinalung yenu women's journey



Women have always had an important place in Indigenous Australian society — as child rearers, educators, food collectors, artists, storytellers, healers and decision-making Elders.

Yinalung yenu: women's journey takes you into the world of Indigenous Australian women, focusing on the areas where women are more influential than men: creating and nurturing, teaching and community, family and health, lore and law, and food gathering and preparation.

Six prominent Koori* women share their stories, revealing how Indigenous traditions are finding new forms of expression today.

* Koori refers to Indigenous people from south-east Australia. It means 'person' in many of the local languages.

Why 'yinalung yenu'?

The words *yinalung yenu* mean 'women's journey' in the language of the Eora, the first people of the Sydney region.

Much of our knowledge of the Eora language comes from the notebooks of William Dawes, Australia's first astronomer, who was actually taught much of what he knew by an Indigenous woman. Her name was Patyegarang and she often admonished Dawes for his bad pronunciation and praised him when he got it right.

Image: *Eora to Alice: the story of a journey*, by Leonie Dennis, 1999. This painted screen tells the story of her 1989 journey from the Eora Centre in Sydney to Alice Springs.

Please note: this exhibition contains images and audiovisual material of Indigenous people who are now deceased.

Creating and nurturing

Most Indigenous people don't say the land belongs to them but that they belong to the land. Connection with the land is the basis of spiritual life through the Dreaming stories, the source of all creativity.

Traditionally Indigenous women were skilled at moving across their country, finding food and making the most of natural resources — fashioning cloaks from animal skins, necklaces from seeds and bones, baskets from leaves and bark. Nothing was wasted.

The knowledge and skills needed then are still being used today, adapted to contemporary forms and materials by Indigenous women artists and designers.

Bronwyn Bancroft

'Having country, knowing country, is essential as an Aboriginal person because when you go home the land looks after you. It regenerates you.'

Bronwyn Bancroft is an artist and descendant of the Bundjalung people from northern NSW, based in Sydney. Her paintings and designs have been exhibited in Australia and overseas.



Teaching and community

Communities based on extended family networks have always been central to Indigenous society.

Traditionally women were vital to keeping their communities strong, as they were the first and foremost educators of children – passing on their knowledge of the land and skills such as food gathering through storytelling, song and dance.

In recent decades women have been active in community organisations promoting Indigenous rights and reconciliation. Today many women are also raising awareness of issues such as domestic violence and diabetes, highlighting the important message that in order to keep their community strong, women must first take care of themselves.

Aunty Sue Blacklock

'There's women here who don't know what to do about domestic violence ... no one has educated them in it, let them know there is help out there for the women.'

Aunty Sue Blacklock is a respected Elder of the Tingha community in northern NSW and a descendant of one of the survivors of the Myall Creek massacre. She works tirelessly in her community to care for children, educate women and achieve reconciliation.



Family and health

Caring for the sick and keeping family together were women's responsibilities in tribal society. Many women were healers; they knew which plants could be used for bush medicine.

Today many Indigenous women are continuing the tradition of healing. The challenges they face are enormous — Indigenous people die younger and are hospitalised at a much greater rate than non-Indigenous Australians.

Providing more culturally friendly medical care is vital to improving Indigenous health, although the number of Indigenous nurses and doctors is still too low.

Dr Marilyn Clarke and Dr Marlene Kong

'I remember mum coming home from work — really cranky, going on about doctors. She'd say, "If you do well at school you become a doctor and you get in there and you change things, make things better."'

Marilyn Clarke (nee Kong), *pictured left*, is Australia's first Indigenous obstetrician and works at the Aboriginal Medical Service in Coffs Harbour. Her twin sister Marlene Kong is a general practitioner based in Newcastle. Their mother, Grace Kinsella, is a Worimi woman from the Port Stephens area who worked as a registered nurse and midwife.



Lore and law

Since colonisation, Indigenous people have lived between two systems of justice: British law and the traditional ways known as the lore. Women Elders play an important role in enforcing the lore, and have long fought for social justice for Indigenous people who are over-represented in Australian jails.

The late Mum Shirl, for example, helped establish the groundbreaking Aboriginal Legal Service in the 1970s. More recently, Gail Wallace set up the first 'circle sentencing' program where Elders participate in sentencing members of their community. The scheme's success has given hope that the law and traditional lore can work together.

Professor Larissa Behrendt

'I often feel like I'm apologising for working within a system that really doesn't do the right thing by my own people ... but unless we really understand Australian institutions like laws ... we're much less able to change them.'

Larissa Behrendt is a barrister and Eualeyai-Kamilaroi woman from north-western NSW, based in Sydney. She combines grass-roots legal practice with her work as Professor of Law and Director of Research at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney.



