

Culture vital for INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

BY STEPHANIE THOMAS

Despite decades of policy interventions by Australian governments, Indigenous Australians continue to suffer extreme disadvantage and poverty. But in one of Australia's most isolated Indigenous communities, a group of Aboriginal women elders believe they have the answer.

Balgo, or Wirrimanu as it is traditionally known, is a remote Indigenous community in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, in the Great Sandy Desert, close to the Northern Territory border. Balgo's remoteness means that access to secondary education, healthcare, employment and recreation services is difficult. The community of about 400 people, which has a significantly high youth population, also suffers from severe social and health problems.

According to Dr Zohl dé Ishtar, a sociologist who has lived and worked with the Balgo community for ten years, these social and health problems are "a direct result of introduced social and cultural structures".

Although introduced by "wonderful well-meaning people who were there for all the right reasons", she says that Western structures have overshadowed the rich cultural traditions and practices which have sustained Indigenous people for thousands of years.

"Aboriginal people had their own administration, their own religion, their own education and socialisation long before Western structures were introduced from the outside."

She adds, "It is amazing that people have maintained the strength of their culture underneath the weight of that. It just goes to show how resilient Aboriginal culture actually is."

Zohl is also CEO of the Kapululangu Aboriginal Women's Association, a body established by Balgo's women elders over ten years ago, to assist them to teach their traditional and contemporary cultural practices, including rituals (songs, dances, painting-up), customary Law (philosophies and values) and land relationships, to younger generations.

Zohl says Kapululangu's focus on maintaining and revitalising their culture is the women elders' answer to the ongoing social and health problems faced by their families in Balgo every day. "The elders want their young people to grow up strong and resilient, secure in their peoples' Law and culture knowledge, so that they can better cope with the changing world," explains Zohl.

The vision of Kapululangu is of "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* (or Dreaming)".

Kapululangu tries to achieve this vision through an inter-generational cultural education and healing programme called the "Circles of Cultural Learning". Zohl describes this programme, which includes four components or pathways – cultural education, cultural healing, cultural safety and cultural community development – as a "whole-of-life, whole-of-community programme" whereby the women elders are the central cultural teachers and healers.

In 2010, Mercy Works Inc. is supporting Kapululangu to implement its cultural healing pathway which aims to foster the spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical well-being of women, particularly at-risk young women and girls, through traditional healing





Clockwise from far left: Kapululangu women and girls winnowing bush food; Balgo is one of Australia's most isolated Indigenous communities; telling stories by drawing in the sand.

ceremonies and trips to traditional lands to gather healthy bush foods and medicines.

For Zohl, Kapululangu's unique contribution lies in it being an Indigenous response to locally identified problems. She says it is the only Law (ceremony) and culture association in Balgo and surrounding areas, and one of only a few Indigenous women's Law and culture centres in Australia.

Zohl believes this foundation in Law and culture is crucial, because without it, Western support structures such as education, health, housing and employment will continue to be ineffective.

"Unless people are proud of who they are, you'll always keep on having social problems," she says.

But Zohl is quick to point out that this approach does not negate the need for Western support agencies. "It's not that one is against the other; it's about working together." She says that Kapululangu works with other agencies in the Balgo community.

"Everyone is doing their best to make Balgo a good place for us all to live together.

One of the strengths of Balgo is [that] we are all working together... There's still a distance to go, but it's changing; Balgo is a very exciting place right now."

Zohl acknowledges the contribution of the Sisters of Mercy to Balgo over the years. "The Mercies stepped in in 1987 when the Western Australian Government was unable to provide a health service in Balgo and they maintained it until 1999.

"Mercy will always be a big part of Balgo because of that. They showed that they really cared about the people, and everybody in Balgo really appreciates what Mercy has brought.

"I see this current relationship between Kapululangu and Mercy Works Inc. as being a continuation of that history." ■

For more information about Kapululangu visit www.kapululangu.org

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