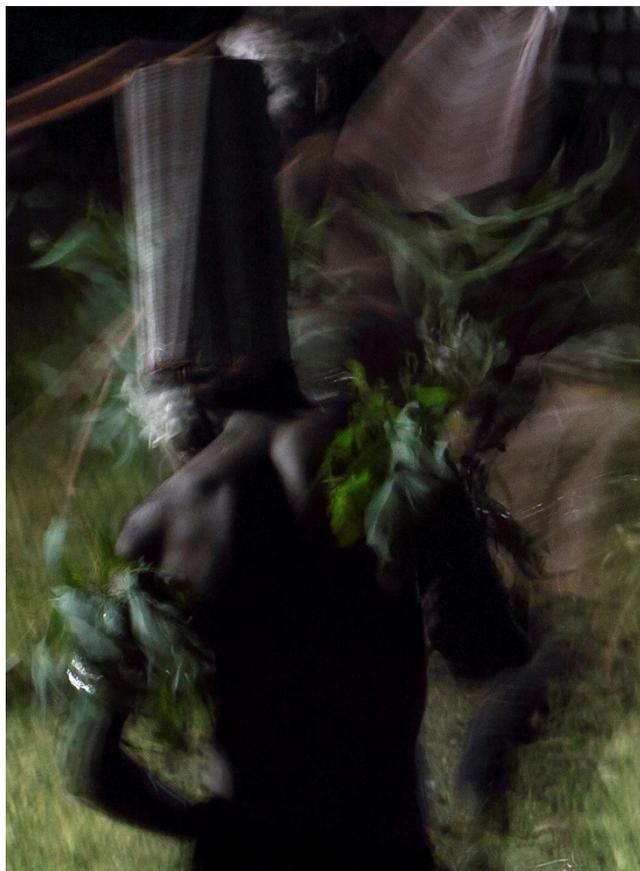


## *Revitalising Traditional Dance*



*Young Arrernte dancer performing at the Mercure Hotel, 2016.  
Photography by Mike Gillam.*

July 2018

**Rosalie (Kumalie) Riley**

Auspiced by Regional Development Australia NT

Funded by Arts NT



## Project summary

This project was about revitalising the traditional Arrernte dances recorded by Spencer and Gillen at the beginning of the 20th century. An important part of this project was the skills development and mentoring of young men and women by Arrernte Elders and transfer of cultural knowledge regarding the dances and objects (tools) that were traditionally used in these performances.

The project resulted in a range of socio-economic benefits, including developing the creative industries in Central Australia through capacity building, career development and creation of new dance works, as well as strengthening the relationship between Elders and the young men.

Over a period of 12 months from August 2016, eleven Elders and Singers trained and mentored 15 young artists in dance, and the production of a range of objects traditionally used during these dances. The group undertook seven major public performances at various events and venues in Alice Springs including NAIDOC week, the National ASTI Media Summit, and Indigenous Family Violence Policing Conference, playing to a combined audience of over 800 people.

The *Revitalising Traditional Dance* project was developed and co-ordinated by Arrernte woman Rosalie (Kumalie) Riley, and auspiced by Regional Development Australia NT. Funding for the project was provided by Arts NT.

## *1. Introduction: Why revitalise traditional dance?*

Revitalising traditional Arrernte dance and associated cultural practices was, and continues to, contribute to the social and economic well-being of Arrernte youth. This pilot project was seen as a way to address several important issues, including:

### *Boosting the self-esteem and confidence of young Arrernte dancers, especially young men.*

The project was seen as a way to help empower the young men, boost their self-esteem and encourage them to be proud of their Indigenous heritage. It also provided them with a healthy activity in a region that had seen cuts to youth programs.

*Lack of access to culturally appropriate professional development programs.* The project would provide them with the critical skills required as dancers and performance artists, as well as important leadership skills to enable them to act as role models for other young Arrernte people. This was (and remains) important to help counter negative stereotypes regarding Indigenous youth and anti-social activity in Alice Springs.

### *Limited employment pathways for young artists in the creative industries and tourism sectors.*

Improving the quality, integrity and authenticity of the dances would boost the artists' confidence to appear more regularly at conferences and other public events. These performances were usually paid and so represented an important source of employment and income. There was (and still is) potential to develop specific performances for the tourism sector which will have positive economic and employment outcomes, not only for the dancers but for tourism in Central Australia. This type of exposure would help raise the profile of Arrernte culture, Alice Springs and NT more generally.

### *Potential loss of knowledge surrounding traditional Arrernte dance and associated cultural practices.*

For Arrernte people dance is not just an artistic activity but connects people to the land, stories, and place through the dance, objects, body design and songs. The project was seen as a way to help ensure that traditional knowledge was not lost, by bringing senior Elders and youth together, and in a way that would contribute to greater community cohesion and well-being. It was the experience of the Project co-ordinator that dance was a successful way to engage young people, particularly in relation to their culturally appropriate kinship roles and responsibilities that are taught in these ceremonies. For the elders, the opportunity to transfer traditional skills and knowledge also allowed them to meet important cultural

obligations and made them proud and happy to see their descendants maintaining Arrernte traditions.

## *2. Project description*

The project included a series of bush workshops held on country at Burt Creek, Sandy Bore and Corkwood Bore during October-November 2016, and May-July 2017, sourcing appropriate bush timber for making different tools, production of different tools used in traditional Arrernte dances such as spears, spear-throwers (woomera), shields, boomerangs, and clapsticks; mentoring by Elders and dance rehearsals and performances in the grounds of the Chifley (now Mercure) Hotel, at conference openings at the Convention Centre and Doubletree, and as part of NAIDOC week, among others. Owing to delays in the project as a result of wet weather and sorry business, a variation to the project was sought and received in December 2016. This allowed for additional workshops, rehearsals and performances and also facilitated the inclusion of a greater number of participants that originally anticipated.



*Young men collecting mulga wood for spears, used in traditional Arrernte dances.  
Photography by Mike Gillam.*

NT Arts funding covered 68% of the project expenses and was used to pay for travel costs (travel allowance, food, fuel, vehicle hire, limited reimbursement for use of personal vehicles) and modest payments to Elders and participants (dancers). The project co-ordinator, Elders and participants all

contributed to the remainder of the project costs through in-kind support through the use of their own equipment, vehicles, and volunteering their free time.

### 3. Outcomes and benefits from the project

A major outcome of the project was that it attracted a lot of interest from neighbouring homelands and families and some of these people participated informally in the project. People became more



*A father and son from Laramba, joined in the 2016 workshops.  
Photography by Mike Gillam.*

motivated and volunteered to help with transporting people to workshops, rehearsals and performances. Additional singers were invited by the others to participate, on an unpaid/volunteer basis, in order to provide back up support in the event that they could not attend owing to unforeseen circumstances such as ill health or sorry business.

As a result of this level of community support, the final number of workshops, rehearsals, paid participants and volunteer hours exceeded that originally estimated at the beginning of the project (Table 1).

**Table 1. Estimated and actual number of workshops, performances, and participation rates.**

<b>Estimated (at project start)</b>	<b>Actual (at project end)</b>
18 participants	32 participants
17 artists paid	26 artists paid
18 volunteers	36 volunteers
150 hours volunteered	221 hours volunteered (minimum)
2 workshops (out bush)	5 workshops (out bush)
3 rehearsal sessions	7 rehearsal sessions
1 public performance	7 public performances

Feedback from the Elders/Singers regarding the project was overwhelmingly positive. More specifically, they said that it created a good feeling to work with young people again and to build up a relationship with each other to overcome the intergenerational gap. The Elders felt that there was a need for them to continue this type of relationship and mentoring with the young people beyond the project.



*Young men making mulga spears under the direction of one of the Elders, watched by younger family members.*

*Photography by Mike Gillam.*

Other community and family members said that it was good that families were getting together like this and that it was good to see the young men doing hands-on activities and learning skills from the Elders, instead of playing computer games and being on their mobile phones. It encouraged the younger kids to want to learn from the Elders how to make their own tools and to learn the dances.



*Young men hard at work making spears. The spear at the right is a little one being made for the kids.*

*Photography by Mike Gillam.*

The dancers said that they wanted to the project to run for longer in order for them all to be able to finish making some of the additional tools such as the headdresses and boomerangs, and to have

more time to practice the dances. The dancers also said that they knew that there were other young people who wanted to participate in the project, but unfortunately the budget did not allow for the inclusion of all these additional dancers and singers.



*Young men making woomeras (spear throwers).  
Photography by Mike Gillam.*

People in Alice Springs heard about the project and thought it was a great idea and wanted to know how long the project was running for, who could get involved, and who would benefit from it. Some other groups also expressed interest in the project activities (e.g. the Amoonguna and Santa Teresa mobs) and would like to participate if there is another opportunity to run this program. A representative of Relationships Australia expressed interest in the project as a way to bring families together.

As a result of the project, event managers and venue hosts such as the Convention Centre and NT Tourism, referred a number of external conference/event organisers to the group, seeking performances at these events, including as part of Welcome to Country.

Other benefits from the project are that the young men (dancers) are much more competent and confident in their public performances. Their self-esteem and motivation has grown throughout the project, especially when they were working with the Elders. The Elders have identified a lead dancer and order in which the other dancers should follow. The improved performances have resulted in requests for additional performances by several organisations and venues, including the Akeyulerre Healing Centre, Convention Centre, and IRCA. The Chifley (now Mercure) Hotel constructed a dedicated performance/rehearsal and workshop space for the dancers and singers.



*Young men and Elders performing in the grounds of the Chifley Hotel, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2016.*

*The Elders are singing and providing instructions to the dancers.*

*Photography by Mike Gillam.*



*One of the Elders begins to collect the dancers' headdresses after the performance at the Chifley Hotel, 2016.*  
*Photography by Mike Gillam.*

### *5. Learnings from the project*

Aspects of the project that worked well included the small participant group size and providing travel allowance primarily in the form of food, with limited cash payments. Participants all enjoyed the bush trips and opportunities to gain knowledge about what sort of trees (timber) are required to make particular tools, and the techniques required to make different objects. The time of year was appropriate in that it was the right season to collect the different timbers (i.e. before they dried out too much in the hot weather).



*Sharpening the end of the mulga spear with a butcher's knife to create the spear point.  
Photography by Mike Gillam.*

However, if the program was repeated it would be necessary to have more equipment available for cutting and shaping the timber, such as tomahawks, rasps, files, different grades of sandpaper, as well as spare chains, sharpeners, extra supplies of fuel and oil for the chainsaws. More time should be allowed to complete the production of all the different tools, including finding the right plant species, and to rehearse specific parts of each dance.



*Using fire to soften the (green) wood before it is straightened by pressing against the knees.  
Photography by Mike Gillam.*



*One of the young men learns from an Elder how to sharpen the chain on a chainsaw.  
Photography by Mike Gillam.*

Sorry business meant some Elders and dancers could not participate in the project at various times. Additionally, a period of wet weather in 2016 meant that some roads were impassable and so the timing of the bush workshops had to be postponed. Bean trees (for making shields) were difficult to find in the immediate vicinity of the workshops, so Elders and other volunteers had to venture further afield to Harts Range and around Ti Tree in order to locate them. Spear wood trees were also difficult to find so mulga was used instead.

## *6. Indigenous consultation and participation*

The entire project was developed and driven by Arrernte people. The Project co-ordinator consulted with the Elders regarding the exact timing and location of bush workshops as well as the manner in which travel allowance was to be paid. Elders and participants agreed that travel allowance should be provided as food, to save some people having to spend money travelling into Alice Springs to buy food and then travelling back out, and to ensure it was not spent on grog or smokes.

The Elders and Project co-ordinator determined that it was the young men who most needed to improve their performances so the project focussed on this group. Additionally, making these particular tools was a task traditionally undertaken by men. In terms of instructing the young men in the tool making and dancing the Project co-ordinator deferred to the male Elders in accordance with Arrernte cultural protocols.



A variation to the project allowed more young men to participate and they also attended bush workshops, rehearsals and performances during the May-early July 2017 period. As noted above, the variation also allowed for a greater number of workshops, rehearsals and performances than originally anticipated.

*One of the young men showing off the finished product (the spears have been painted with ochre) to the Project Co-ordinator, Kumalie Riley.  
Photography by Mike Gillam.*

The project was documented using various media, including taking photographs at different times during the project. Some of these photographs were taken by the participants themselves on their smartphones. Regional Development Australia (NT) also arranged for a male professional photographer to undertake this work, in consultation with the Project co-ordinator and participants. Participants were immediately shown the photographs that were taken and any they didn't like were immediately deleted. From these, a selection were worked up and shown to the individuals involved and asked if they were OK to use in formats which may be seen by the public, such as on websites and in reports. As part of this process, and in accordance with the grant funding agreement, participants also signed talent release forms.

### *7. Where to from here?*

The dancers will continue to perform at various festivals and events and be paid by an Indigenous business enterprise, known as Tinkerbee. The level of interest expressed in the project has indicated that there is a clear demand for a longer-running program of this type and the Project co-ordinator will explore possible funding options to facilitate this mentoring and relationship building between the Elders and young people, and to allow more frequent and intensive traditional dance training. The Project co-ordinator would also like to take the dancers on tour to perform at different events around the region and interstate.

### *More information*

For more information regarding the project, please contact Ms Rosalie (Kumalie) Riley at [kumalie112@yahoo.com.au](mailto:kumalie112@yahoo.com.au) or RDA NT at [alice@rdant.com.au](mailto:alice@rdant.com.au)