

# East Kimberley Language and Culture

**For Aboriginal peoples across the East Kimberley, indigenous languages and Aboriginal culture are the foundations of history, spirituality and identity. However, in a modern and Western society, languages are becoming critically endangered and elements of culture are being weakened. It is vital that a focus on languages and culture is embedded into programs and social change reforms to support the continuation and revitalisation of Aboriginal language and culture.**

This evidence brief will guide and shape discussion about strengthening and supporting language and culture in the East Kimberley. The East Kimberley has many distinct cultural groups with distinct cultures and languages. This evidence brief (and Empowered Communities) is not a specialist view on language and culture but aims to highlight the importance of recognising and measuring the value that Indigenous culture and language brings to development and empowerment outcomes.

“We know that our best chance of preserving our heritage is through obtaining the strength that successful development provides. By taking this path, we strive for a future in which our people retain their languages and succeed in the broader Australian culture—moving with confidence between both worlds.”

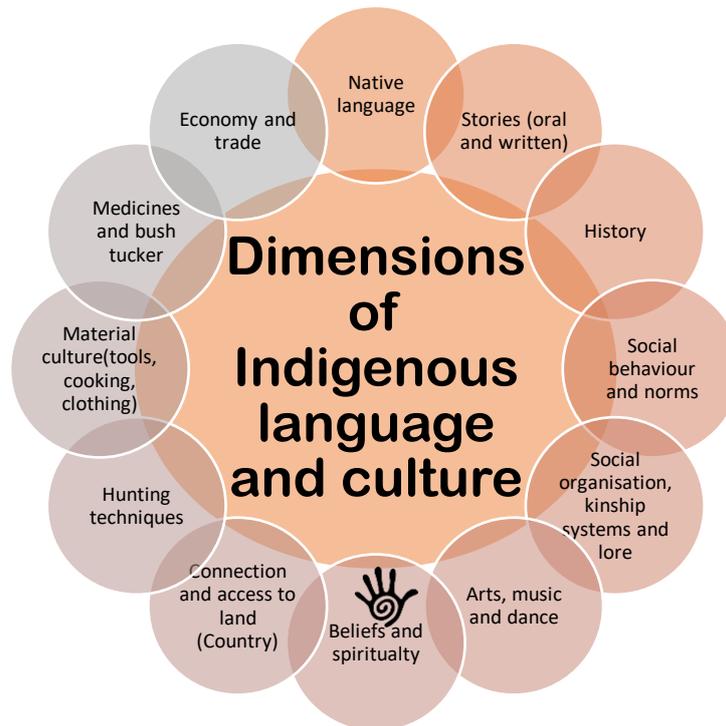
- Empowered Communities designers,  
Design report 2014

## Key Messages:

- Language and culture are of critical importance to Aboriginal people in the East Kimberley and contribute directly to a range of personal and social necessities, including sense of belonging, purpose and identity.
- Strong language and culture contribute to increased social and emotional wellbeing, improved educational engagement, better physical health and positive community functioning [1] [2].
- Language and culture in the East Kimberley are under threat – the number of fluent Indigenous language speakers is declining as is the knowledge of traditional stories, art, dance and music [23]. Significant preservation, protection and restoration activities are being undertaken by Elders, organisations, and communities [22] [23] [15] [5].
- Building and sustaining cultural capital requires ongoing effort and investment. In order to strengthen the vitality of language and culture in the East Kimberley, we need to work collectively to understand what is needed, and what programs and services will deliver the most impact. A shared way of measuring and communicating impact will be important to best direct investment and effort, as well as demonstrate results in years to come.

## What is meant by language and culture?

Aboriginal language and culture are multi-faceted and diverse, often incorporating a holistic worldview quite different to Western cultures. Cultural practices and language groups are different between Aboriginal peoples, even between tribes that are geographically similar. The dimensions of culture and language shown below are indications of how expansive language and culture are for Indigenous Australians.



## What types of value do Language and Culture have? [7]

- **Intrinsic value:** The intergenerational continuation of culture, as a history and source of connection, and long-term benefits to the people belonging to that culture.
- **Extrinsic value:** The more visible aspects of a culture which can be measured which enables other outcomes to be successfully achieved (e.g. strong language and culture leading to strong sense of identity, improved emotional wellbeing, etc.).
- **Instrumental value:** Where culture is used as a tool or instrument to accomplish some other aim - such as economic regeneration, or better patient recovery times. These are the 'knock-on effects' of culture.
- **Institutional value:** The way that cultural organisations act, as a part of the community and *how* they do things creates value as much as what they do. In interactions with the community, cultural organisations are in a position to increase - or decrease - such things as our trust in each other, our idea of social belonging and connectedness, provide safe places for healing etc.

## The Cultural Competence Continuum

The *Cultural Competence Continuum* attempts to portray the level of understanding and experience required for individuals, organisations and systems to become truly responsive and inclusive of Aboriginal culture, language, wellbeing and worldviews [1] [2]. To be culturally responsive in policy and decision making, behaviors, attitudes and policies must include Aboriginal people (or better yet be led by) in a comprehensive and empowering way.

Destruction

Blindness

Knowledge

Awareness

Sensitivity  
(Safety)

Competent

Responsive (Reflexivity)

## Local voices: What's needed

A review of East Kimberley local reports and consultation notes (KALACC, 2010 [16]; KRLC, 2010 [25]; Enzyme, 2015 [14], RSRU, 2017 [17] Boab Consulting 2014 [13]; KALACC, 2019 [5]; Binarrri-binyja yarrowoo, 2019 [22]) evidence the call by Aboriginal people for stronger **recognition and protection of Aboriginal culture and languages**.

In local reports 'language and culture' are often raised as being interrelated to other aspects of Aboriginal development - such as access to land, self-determination and empowerment. In reviewing the consultation evidence, it becomes clear that Aboriginal people in the East Kimberley are concerned for the protection, development and continuation of their histories, sites, practices and traditions, and how languages and culture can endure the influence of Western culture over future generations.

There is a call for Aboriginal community involvement in the design and implementation of social and economic development approaches to ensure that language and cultural elements are appropriately **recognised, prioritized, and embedded** in policy responses, service offerings, development activities and empowerment opportunities.

To assist this reform the following is identified as important:

- ✓ Procedures and rules for **prevention of exploitation** and erosion of Aboriginal culture by non-Aboriginal experts.
- ✓ Develop and support processes to protect and enhance cultural knowledge and ensure that it is passed to **future generations**
- ✓ Develop and support processes (involving elders) to facilitate the teaching of Indigenous culture, knowledge and **language in schools**, other training places and workplaces
- ✓ **Access to country** for Aboriginal people to undertake cultural practices, ritual and ceremony
- ✓ Promotion of **cross-cultural awareness** and revitalization/ incorporation of cultural practices in everyday life
- ✓ A stronger focus and more resourcing for return to country camps / **cultural programs** where tangible outcomes addressing other identified issues (e.g. mental health, youth justice) can be addressed
- ✓ Supporting culture-based business ventures such as cultural tourism and bush tucker co-operatives to support Aboriginal **economic empowerment** and **self-determination**

## What we don't know yet: Measurement (Indicators)

Empowered Communities East Kimberley, along with key partners and local experts have designed indicators to measure Language and Culture in the East Kimberley [22]. To date, there has been limited focus on measuring the language and cultural components of social assistance programs and community development approaches, so it is not fully understood how exactly language and culture impacts outcomes on social development. While national surveys (such as the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey* [24]) attempt to measure cultural strength and belonging, the data does not look close enough at communities in the East Kimberley or demonstrate the larger benefit of language and culture on individuals and communities.

Indicators are required to measure vitality and value of language and culture to demonstrate its importance. As funders move towards outcomes focused contracting, we will need to develop the capabilities to demonstrate the impact that programs and services are having on the desired outcome of strengthening language and culture in the region.

Evidence strongly suggests that culturally appropriate programs are more effective, but it is important to understand *why* and *how* they are effective. Through developing specific **indicator frameworks** - which are now being tested in the East Kimberley, these indicator frameworks will also allow leaders in the region to make informed decisions about which services and advocate for the strength of the region.

A copy of the proposed indicators can be found at [bby.org.au](http://bby.org.au)

## Literature Review: What Works

While indicator frameworks and measurements are still emerging for the East Kimberley, there is strong evidence that the inclusion of language and culture in programs have positive effects on individuals as well as wider social and economic outcomes.

### Personal (Empowerment)

For Aboriginal people, cultural practices such as speaking languages, practicing rituals, and teaching the young are essential to ongoing, living culture and associated identity [3]. Language and culture are integral in creating, affirming and maintaining a **strong sense of identity**. It is also widely held to be a protective factor for social and emotional wellbeing [1] [2]. There are some typical areas where Aboriginal communities maintain a greater connectedness to traditional culture, land and ways of life [4] [3]. Evidence from overseas also strongly suggests that a secure sense of person and cultural identity is a necessary protective factor against the threat of self-harm [3]. It is critically important that service providers understand the importance of the **cultural healing** process, and under adequate cultural supervision, are able to provide people with the opportunity to discuss whether issues of cultural loss, identity and belonging are linked to any other difficult life outcomes they are experiencing [3].

### Social (Development)

Social teaching of language and culture, particularly **intergenerational transmission** must primarily come from Elders, family and community. Services and organisations must provide adequate time, resources and investment to maximize the opportunities available for this transfer of knowledge to occur in a mix of organic and structured ways. Integration of language and culture into program delivery has had positive effects on the outcomes of that program (i.e. language and culture have extrinsic value in these programs) [3] [4]. A commitment by individuals and organisations to **cultural reflexivity** is needed, particularly from mainstream organisations. This means a lot more than being culturally aware or practicing tolerance. It is the ability to identify and challenge one's own cultural assumptions and develop the connected knowledge to view the world through a different cultural lens [2] [5].

Language and culture are not homogenous, and things that are important in one area of the East Kimberley may not necessarily be important to a different group of Aboriginal people in another region of the East Kimberley. For this reason, it will be important to assist in building capacity and creating **placed-based, locally led solutions** for language and culture revitalization efforts [5] [6].

### Economic (Productivity)

There are many facets of language and culture in the economic space. The strengths in this area can be summarized as: a) culturally aware workplaces are more likely to retain Aboriginal staff (reducing turnover) [1], b) cultural activities can provide a meaningful source of employment, income and **economic opportunity** while also protecting and revitalizing culture [7] [8], c) economic opportunity from traditional lands and cultural land management [9] [3], d) strong social and emotional wellbeing and physical health places less economic demand on local primary services, and the 'burden of disease' and associated costs significantly decrease [10].

To ignore culture and language can also be costly to organisations and government investment. There is an economic burden by agencies and services providing culturally inappropriate services, which reduces impact (and sometimes does harm), leading to lengthening the time a service is required and therefore increasing the investment needed to continue the service [10] [8]. Secondary to this, ignoring the importance of language and culture (and associated activities) may decrease economic activity at an individual level through decreased **engagement at workplaces** and educational centers by Aboriginal people, lack of participation by Aboriginal people in economic activity in businesses and development [8], and may in turn increase demand on welfare, social benefits and government run services [11].

It is up to development agencies, service providers, policy writers and funding providers to ensure that language and culture are **intertwined into all areas of empowerment, development and productivity**- including economic development- and not sitting on the sidelines as a 'benefit'.

**“Culture has to exist in modern life...it is a reason for being”**

*(BBY Language and Culture co-design workshop participant, 2019)*

## International Rights to Language and Culture:

### *The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)*

In 2007 the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* was created and endorsed by Australia in 2009. The Declaration makes statements on the cultural rights of Indigenous peoples:

#### Article 8

Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture.

#### Article 11

Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.

#### Article 12

Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains.

#### Article 13

Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

#### Article 15

Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.

For more information on the Declaration visit: [humanrights.gov.au](http://humanrights.gov.au)

## Culture and Language Organisations in the East Kimberley

Kimberley Aboriginal Language and Culture Centre: [kalacc.org](http://kalacc.org)

Kimberley Language Resource Centre: [klrc.org.au](http://klrc.org.au)

Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring: [mirima.org.au](http://mirima.org.au)

Waringarri Arts: [waringarriarts.com.au](http://waringarriarts.com.au)

Yarliyil Arts Centre: [yarliyil.com.au](http://yarliyil.com.au)

Warmun Arts: [warmunart.com.au](http://warmunart.com.au)

Kalumburu Strong Women's Centre: [kalumburustrongwomensartcollective.org](http://kalumburustrongwomensartcollective.org)

Traditional Owner Corporations- to find your nearest Corporation please contact [Kimberley Land Council](http://Kimberley Land Council)

### Call for Action:

1. Investment in the development of cultural outcome indicators and measures that Aboriginal people define, which would relate to such things as types of cultural participation and opportunities to connect with Country and family, and language maintenance and revival;
2. Increase, whether through re-direction or new funds, investment for culturally-based initiatives and programs that align with the shared agenda for Aboriginal development;
3. Prioritize investment and support for East Kimberley Aboriginal organisations to provide regular regional and local forums for the sharing of cultural knowledge and practice, keeping culture strong in the region.

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