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Anangu express deep joy at Uluru climb closure: 'We are going to be dancing for the children'

Senior women prepare for Sunday's official ceremony, when they will celebrate the culture of an ancient past - and share it with the next generation

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Rene Kulitja and Elsie Taylor are braiding headbands - dozens of them - in red, black and yellow wool when we arrive to visit them at Mutitjulu, the small Anangu community on the eastern side of Uluru.

The headbands are for the *inma* (dance) that they and dozens of other Anangu people will perform for the assembled dignitaries at the official ceremony on Sunday evening marking the closure of the Uluru climb.

People have travelled for thousands of kilometres across the APY (Anangu-Pitjantjatjara-Yankunytjatjara) lands, including Amata and Docker River, to come to dance.

Rene Kulitja is a Pitjantjatjara woman and artist born at Ernabella, who has lived in Mutitjulu since 1985 and “raised all my children” here. She is probably best known for Yananyi Dreaming, the design that covers a Qantas Boeing 737. She has also been on the board of management of Uluru-Kata Tjuta national park.

She talks about the importance of the *inma* - not to show the visiting VIPs that their culture is strong - but to show Anangu children.

“The dances they will be doing as small children today are the ones that they will carry with them and continue to dance throughout their lives,” Kulitja says. “These are the *inma* that our grandfathers and grandmothers entrusted to us to hold and pass on.

“We hold this *inma* in our minds and in our spirit, so that we can sing, we can dance, we can give them to the children of the future. So it is for our children that we are most excited. We are going to be dancing for them, for the children.”



The night sky over Uluru after the first full day of the climbing ban on Saturday. Photograph: Mike Bowers/The Guardian

After sunset on Saturday, the rock was again aglow with the lights of television crews.

The mood is lighter today. Anangu feel a deep happiness at the closing, Kulitja says, and the chance to practise culture and law for the occasion is exciting.

“What I feel is the strength of the *inma* that my grandfathers and grandmothers held and passed on,” she says. “It’s something from an ancient past that’s still really important into the present. I’ll never abandon my traditions and my culture, it’s something that I hold very firmly in my spirit, and I’m feeling very, very happy at the moment.”

At Mutitjulu on Saturday night, Anangu celebrated with a big barbecue and dance-off.



'It's sinking into people and they're never going to forget this,' Elsie Taylor says. Photograph: Mike Bowers/The Guardian

"I can't say how happy an occasion it is," Elsie Taylor says. "And for all those children to be joining in this excitement and taking it in.

"Pitjantjatjara always says the spirit - it might be your soul or your whole being - the children are actually absorbing it into themselves, feeling the excitement of this big number of people coming together to celebrate culture and country and it's sinking into people and they're never going to forget this.

"Because what the grandfathers and grandmothers have always said, 'This is yours, children, take this. We are giving to to you, it's yours to hold and pass on in turn now.'"

At sunset on Sunday, Australia's environment minister, Sussan Ley, the Labor senators Pat Dodson and Malarndirri McCarthy, and the Labor MP Linda Burney, as well as the Northern Territory's chief minister, Michael Gunner, will attend the official ceremony.

The Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir will also sing. An impromptu rehearsal on Saturday evening delighted onlookers in the foyer of one of the Yulara resort hotels.

And then the crowds will leave.

"This [Anangu culture] is something that can never end," Kulitja says. "It's going to always be here, for ever and ever and ever.

"And once our time has come and we have passed away, those we have passed it on will continue to hold it and practise it and pass it on.

"So we are going to be really happy when we start singing and dancing this afternoon."

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