

# Learning about Aboriginal astronomy

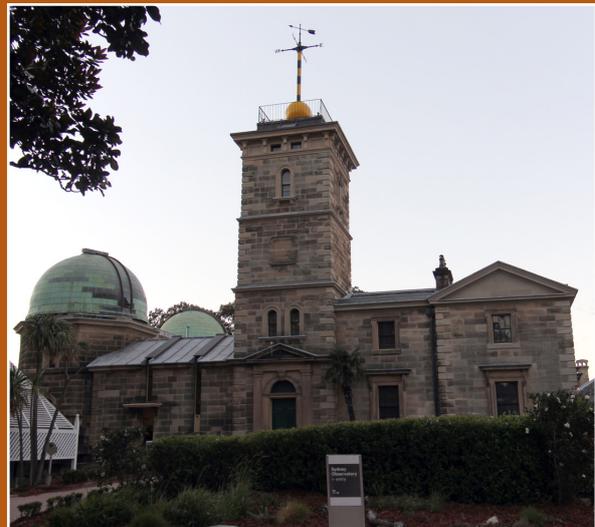


Ngara Yura Program

Long before Captain James Cook navigated to the South Pacific to observe the transit of Venus, the Cadigal people had mapped, through stories, the night sky above Sydney (Warrane). For Aboriginal people, the night sky is a source of ceremony, a navigational aid, a guide for food and water, a way to survey country and keep track of seasonal changes. The darkness within the Milky Way is a giant emu which helps to predict the seasons. The Pleiades star cluster (named for the seven daughters of Atlas) are also the Seven Sisters, a story embedded in many Indigenous cultures around the world.<sup>1</sup>

Judicial officers and their families had the opportunity to experience some of the rich knowledge of Aboriginal astronomy at Sydney Observatory at a Ngara Yura Program education event.<sup>2</sup> The highest natural vantage point in Sydney, the Observatory has been a significant site for the Cadigal people. Naval astronomer William Dawes installed a telescope near the present site and met with Petyegarang, a young Cadigal woman, to share their respective astronomical learning in the early days of the colony. The hill housed a windmill (until 1806), a fort (1804–1806), a signal station (1810–1939) to alert Sydney's inhabitants to the arrival of ships, and then an observatory (1858–1982). Since 1982, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) has administered the site as a museum and public observatory.

The Judicial Commission's Ngara Yura Project Officer, Ms Joanne Selfe, led the evening along with Mr Geoff Wyatt (responsible for the development of the Observatory's Indigenous astronomy programs); Mr Marcus Hughes (Mununjali), Head of Indigenous Engagement & Strategy (MAAS) and MAAS staff.



*The sandstone Observatory, designed by Alexander Dawson, was completed in 1858.*



*Aunty Gail Mabo, centre, with Joanne Selfe, Judicial Commission Ngara Yura Project Officer (l) and Aunty Donna Ingram (r).*

- 1 J Selfe (cultural information shared with community permission); B Pascoe, "Under the night sky" in *The Story of Sydney Observatory*, MAAS media, p 7.
- 2 The Ngara Yura Program is the Judicial Commission's Aboriginal Cultural Awareness program.

The evening also commemorated Mabo Day. In 2015, the Observatory named a star from the Sydney Southern Star Catalogue for Uncle Eddie Koiki Mabo.<sup>3</sup> On 31 May 2018, a second star was dedicated to honour the contribution of Auntie Bonita Mabo.<sup>4</sup> Ms Dolla Merrillees, Director and CEO of MAAS, introduced the special guest for the evening, Auntie Gail Mabo, daughter of Uncle Eddie and Auntie Bonita. Auntie Gail spoke of her parent's unique contribution to the development of Australia's common law and her

mother's gratitude and surprise to be acknowledged in this stellar way. Judicial officers were then able to view both stars through the Observatory's telescope and view an installation commemorating Uncle's life, curated in 2017, to mark the 25th anniversary of the High Court's Mabo decision.

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3 The Koiki star is a hot blue "B" star 4800 light years away. Source: Sydney Southern Star Catalogue (SSSC) 803504.

4 The Bonita star is a hot blue "B" star 1630 light years away. Source: SSSC 803544.



Youth Koori Court

## Expansion of the NSW Youth Koori Court program

### Her Honour Magistrate Sue Duncombe

On 31 May 2018, Attorney General Mark Speakman and Treasurer Dominic Perrottet announced that the NSW budget will include \$2.7 million over three years to fund the expansion of the Youth Koori Court to include sittings once per week in both Parramatta and Surry Hills Children's Courts. This funding will be utilised in large part to provide direct case work and cultural support to the young people admitted to the program. Since its first sitting at Parramatta on 6 February 2015, 92 young people have been referred to the Youth Koori Court. Those young people have been and are currently being supported culturally and in other ways, including referrals to drug and alcohol counselling, rehabilitation, housing support, employment and educational opportunities.

Operating under a deferred sentence model (s 33(1)(c2) *Children (Criminal Proceedings) Act 1987*), the young people are assisted to develop and implement an Action and Support Plan upon which the young person can focus over 6 to 12 months prior to sentence. Each plan is individually targeted to the particular needs of the young person. The young person will have his or her efforts taken into account on sentence as they directly affect the assessment of their prospects of rehabilitation.

The Youth Koori Court works with young people who are facing at least a supervised order. Many face the strong possibility of a custodial sentence. They are often repeat and persistent offenders who have committed serious crimes. In many cases they have been in and out of detention and yet their offending has continued. It is apparent that the most severe punishment available to the Children's Court (detention) has not deterred some of these young people. The Youth Koori Court program seeks to address the reasons why they have offended, by providing support and cultural connections which have often been missing in their lives. Many of these young people have risen to the challenge. Many now have stable housing as a result of effective advocacy from lawyers from Legal Aid Children's Civil Law Service and/or Daramu (a specialist Aboriginal youth justice program run by Marist 180). Others have found employment or have returned to school or TAFE, largely through support and advocacy from Daramu case workers. Some have successfully completed drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Six young people who became parents during the program have worked with their advocates and FaCS and have been able to keep their babies safe. While there are promising signs of real change, there is more work to be done. The support from the NSW government will allow the Youth Koori Court to increase the support offered as well as the number of young people who can be given this opportunity to effect real change in their lives. In so doing, we are working to ensure safer communities.



Pictured l-r at the Government's announcement are his Honour Judge Peter Johnstone, President of the Children's Court; Dominic Perrottet MP, NSW Treasurer; Mark Speakman SC MP, Attorney General; her Honour Magistrate Sue Duncombe; Rosemary Davidson, Children's Court Executive Officer; Joanne Selfe, Ngara Yura Project Officer, Judicial Commission; Brendan Thomas, Chief Executive Officer, Legal Aid NSW; and Uncle Bert Gordon.