

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, Indigenous Australian advocate and actor, dies aged 85

The Arrernte Anmatjere woman was the first Aboriginal female lead actor in 1955 film Jedda, and dedicated her life to social and political activism



Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, who shot to fame as a teenager in the 1955 film Jedda before a long career in social work and political activism, has died.

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Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, the Arrernte Anmatjere advocate for Aboriginal rights who shot to fame as a teenager when she became the first ever Indigenous Australian female lead actor in the 1955 film *Jedda*, has died aged 85.

She died in Alice Springs hospital on Wednesday, after having several strokes. Her family has given permission to use her image.

The film-maker John Pilger, who featured Kunoth-Monks in his 2013 documentary *Utopia*, paid tribute to her on Wednesday, writing on Twitter: "The best of Australians are Indigenous. Among the most inspiring was Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, the Arrernte/Ammatjere warrior, who has died."

Amnesty International Australia Indigenous rights advisor Rodney Dillon called her "a staunch warrior for our people - her depth of knowledge of her

country as well as the political arena was remarkable and her legacy is profound.

“I have known and worked with Rosalie for years and I would like to give my condolences to her family. We have lost a great champion of justice for First Nations people,” he said.

Kunoth-Monks was born in Urapuntja (Utopia Station) in the Northern Territory in 1937. Her parents were of the Anmatjere people and her paternal grandfather was German.

When she was 14, the film-makers Charles and Elsa Chauvel spotted her in Alice Springs and recruited her to play Jedda, a girl who is raised by the wife of a white cattle station boss after her mother dies, and who is later forbidden from learning about her culture.



Rosalie Kunoth-Monks in 1955 – the same year she played the lead role in Australian film Jedda.

Jedda was the first ever Australian feature film to be shot in colour, and was a success in the country but not overseas. The Chauvels credited Kunoth-Monks as Ngarla Kunoth in the film, as they wanted her to have a distinctively Indigenous name. They chose her mother's skin title, which Kunoth-Monks found distressing. She later described the experience of filming Jedda as “traumatising”.

The film premiered at Darwin's Star Theatre in 1955; as it was a segregated cinema at the time, Kunoth-Monks was given special dispensation to sit with the white audience.

In 1960, Kunoth-Monks became the first Indigenous Australian Anglican nun, working in Victoria, then left the order after 10 years to work more with her community. She got married and began working with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, setting up the first home for Indigenous Australian children in Victoria. She returned to Alice Springs in 1977 and continued in social work, including at the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. She was appointed as an adviser on Indigenous affairs to Paul Everingham, the chief minister of the Northern Territory.

In 1993 she was awarded a medal of the Order of Australia for her services to Indigenous Australia. In 2015 she was named Northern Territorian of the Year, was a finalist for Australian of the Year, and was awarded Naidoc Person of the Year during the Naidoc Week celebrations.

She stood unsuccessfully for election twice, for the Northern Territory legislative assembly in 1980 and for the Senate on behalf of the First Nations Political party in 2013, when she was 76.

In 2008 she returned to Utopia and became president of the Barkly region. She spoke out against the federal government intervention in the Northern Territory. "It's not that they're coming here with bulldozers or getting the army to move us. It's that they're trying to starve us out of our home," she said months later, adding: "They won't support us becoming sustainable in our own right. If you're made to feel a second-class humanity, if it's not ethnic cleansing, please let me know what is."

Kunoth-Monks featured heavily in Pilger's film *Utopia*, a documentary focused on her homelands that denounces the treatment of Indigenous Australians by white Australians, politicians and corporations. After the documentary, she made headlines for an impassioned speech made on the ABC's Q&A program, in which she addressed fellow panellist and politician Peter Coleman's call for the "assimilation" of Indigenous Australians.

"I didn't come from overseas. I came from here," she said, weaving in Arrernte language. "My language, in spite of whiteness trying to penetrate into my brain by assimilationists, I am alive. I am here and now. I speak my language. I practice my culture. Don't try and suppress me, and don't call me a problem. I am not the problem. I have never left my country, nor have I ever ceded any part of it."

Kunoth-Monks is survived by her daughter, Ngarla, and her granddaughters, Amelia and Ruby.