

# Significant People

in AUSTRALIA'S HISTORY



Volume 1

## Indigenous Australia

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### Glossary words

When a word is written in **bold**, click on it to find its meaning.



# History makers

*Significant People in Australia's History* is about those men and women who have contributed remarkably to Australia's identity and **heritage**. They are significant because they were **pioneers** in their field or because their knowledge, actions or achievements brought about important events or changes in Australian society. They represent the wide range of people who have contributed to the story of Australia.

This series describes the history of Australia, from Indigenous beginnings to modern-day Australia, through the life stories of these significant people. Each volume consists of biographies of people from a particular period in Australia's history or descriptions of Indigenous Australian cultural groups.



# Indigenous Australia

*Volume 1: Indigenous Australia* describes the Dreamings, traditions and continuing cultures of Indigenous Australian peoples. Indigenous Australians have maintained rich and diverse cultures from at least 50 000 years ago to today. These are the oldest continuing cultures in the world. All of these cultures are significant to Australia's history, present and future. Some of these significant cultural groups are described in this volume.

## Spiritual cultures

Indigenous Australians are descended from those who lived on this continent more than 50 000 years ago. They are the original **inhabitants** and **traditional custodians** of Australia.

Indigenous Australians are diverse peoples with many different cultures and languages. Indigenous Australian cultural groups, however, share some things in common, such as a **spiritual** connection to the land and a very long history of **sustainable** living in Australia's natural environments.

◀ Australia's first peoples have maintained the oldest living cultures in the world.



# A snapshot of history

People migrated from Asia to Australia at least 50 000 years ago. Around 60 000 BCE, the sea level was 30 metres lower than it is today due to an ice age. A lot more of the Earth's seawater was frozen in ice caps, making the sea level low. The islands of Indonesia and New Guinea and the area that is now called Australia were part of one large landmass. People were able to make short sea crossings and walk across the landmass to Australia.

Over many generations, these people moved southwards across the land. Gradually, the climate got warmer, the ice caps began to melt and the sea rose again. Coastal hills that were once part of the mainland became islands. About 10 000 BCE, the rising seas started to separate Tasmania from the mainland of Australia. About 6500 BCE, New Guinea and the Torres Strait Islands were separated from Australia. The shape of Australia as we know it today was formed by 4000 BCE.



## At least 50 000 BCE – 1788

**At least 50 000 BCE** First peoples in Australia

**16 000 BCE** Sea level is 130 metres lower than it is today

**10 000 BCE** Tasmania is cut off from the Australian mainland by rising sea level

**6500 BCE** New Guinea is cut off by rising sea level

**4000 BCE** Sea level is same as it is today

**1500 BCE** Dingo brought to Australia by Asian seafarers

**1600s** Dutch Empire controls trade in the East Indies, the area including South-East Asia and India. Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch navigators search for *Terra Australis*, the southern land.

**1606** First encounter between Indigenous Australians and European explorers is recorded when a Tjungundji man spears and kills a Dutch sailor attempting to land at Cape York, Queensland

**Around 1720s** First contact between Indonesian Australians and Macassan fishermen from Indonesia is recorded

**Late 1700s** Britain and France compete to explore the coast of Australia

**1788** Indigenous Australians are confronted with European invasion when British settlers arrive at Sydney Cove



# The Dreaming

*The Dreaming, or Dreamtime, is the name given to the creation period when the Ancestral Beings travelled across the land, shaping its features and forming people, plants and animals, and the relationships between them.*

The paths that the Ancestral Beings, also called Creation Spirits, took as they travelled across the land are called Dreaming tracks. These tracks often pass through the Countries of many different Aboriginal Australian groups. Each group has its own Ancestral Beings and Dreaming stories. The Ancestral Beings took many different forms, including human and animal forms. The rainbow serpent is one Ancestral Being that is known by many groups.

The Ancestral Beings made the features of the land, the animals and the people. They created the relationships between people, animals and the land. They also created the relationships between groups of peoples and individuals, called **kinship**.

The Ancestral Beings gave the people the stories of the Dreaming, the Law and ceremonies. Once the Ancestral Beings had created the world, they turned into rocks, trees, waterholes and other parts of the land and sky.

## More about...

### The rainbow serpent

The rainbow serpent is a snake-like Ancestral Being that is common to many Aboriginal groups. As it travelled across the land, the rainbow serpent created rivers and hills. It stopped along the way at very **sacred** places and sang the names of everything it made along its path. The rainbow serpent was given different names by different groups, such as Ngalyod by the Gunwinggu people of Arnhem Land and Waugal by the **Nyungar nation** of south-western Australia.

## Passing on the Dreaming

Ancestral law, values and beliefs that are passed down within a group are also part of the Dreaming. Time in the Dreaming is not measured. It is the past, present and future all rolled into one. A group may have one particular Dreaming, such as Wallaby Dreaming or Shark Dreaming, or a mixture of Dreamings. The animals and plants of their Dreamings are **totems**.

The continuing relationships between the people, the land and the animals are told through Dreaming stories that are passed down from one generation to the next. These stories are told orally and through ceremony, dance, music and painting.

## Sacred sites

The places where Ancestral Beings are still present in their Country, in the forms that they changed into during the Dreaming, are one type of sacred site. Special places connected with these Ancestral Beings have spiritual importance to Indigenous Australians, too. These places are also called sacred sites. Only certain people are allowed to visit these places. They always approach these special places carefully and respectfully. Individuals of a group are often given responsibility to look after these sites.



▶ A rock painting of a rainbow serpent, in the Northern Territory, shows its snake-like body.



# Ancient and sacred sites

*Around Australia, there are many sites that provide evidence of Indigenous Australian occupation long ago. Over many generations, these sites have been cared for and protected by the traditional owners of the land.*

**Archaeologists** have found evidence that Aboriginal people have been living on the land for more than 50 000 years. They have found used pieces of **ochre**, stone tools and charcoal from cooking fires. Sometimes, **middens** are found containing shells, bones and other items left behind from meals eaten thousands of years ago. In some places, drawings and carvings have been found on the walls of caves and rock shelters.

Many ancient and sacred sites were destroyed as land was cleared or mined after British settlement. This distressed the individuals and groups responsible for the sites. Today, many sacred sites are protected under Australian law.

► This map shows some of Australia's ancient and sacred sites.

**Location:** Burrup Peninsula, Western Australia  
**Sites:** Middens and thousands of ancient rock engravings on the Burrup Peninsula, also called Murujuga, show occupation from at least 30 000 BCE. The Jaburara Aboriginal Group co-manage the site with the Western Australian Government.

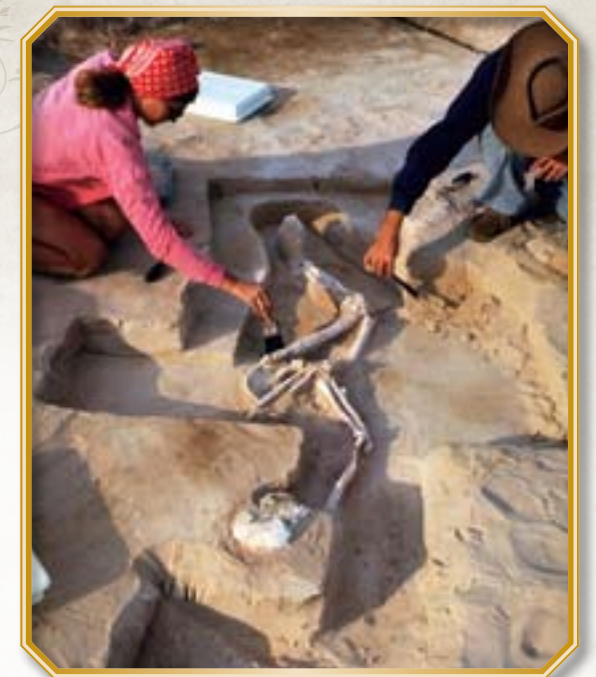
**Location:** South-western Western Australia  
**Sites:** Ancient camp sites found near the Swan River, just north of Perth, and in limestone caves such as Devil's Lair, near Cape Leeuwin, indicate occupation of the area since at least 43 000 BCE. Bones of extinct animals have also been found at Devil's Lair.

**Location:** Kimberley, Western Australia  
**Sites:** Ancient sites that have been studied show that Indigenous Australians have occupied the area continuously since at least 37 000 BCE.

**Location:** Nullarbor Plain, South Australia  
**Sites:** Koonalda Cave is the most famous of several ancient sites on the Nullarbor Plain. It was a **quarry** for flint tools over 22 000 years ago. Rock engravings were made on the cave walls deep underground.

**Location:** Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory  
**Sites:** The World Heritage Site Kakadu National Park has numerous ancient sites, such as rock art sites, that show that Indigenous Australians have occupied this area continuously for over 50 000 years. The traditional owners, called Bininj/Mungguy, co-manage the National Park.

**Location:** Tasmanian Wilderness  
**Sites:** Sites such as caves, rock shelters and coastal middens provide evidence of occupation in 34 000 BCE. The most famous site is Kutikina Cave, in which bone tools have been found. This area is included on the World Heritage List. Descendants of the Lairmairrener people are involved in managing these sites.



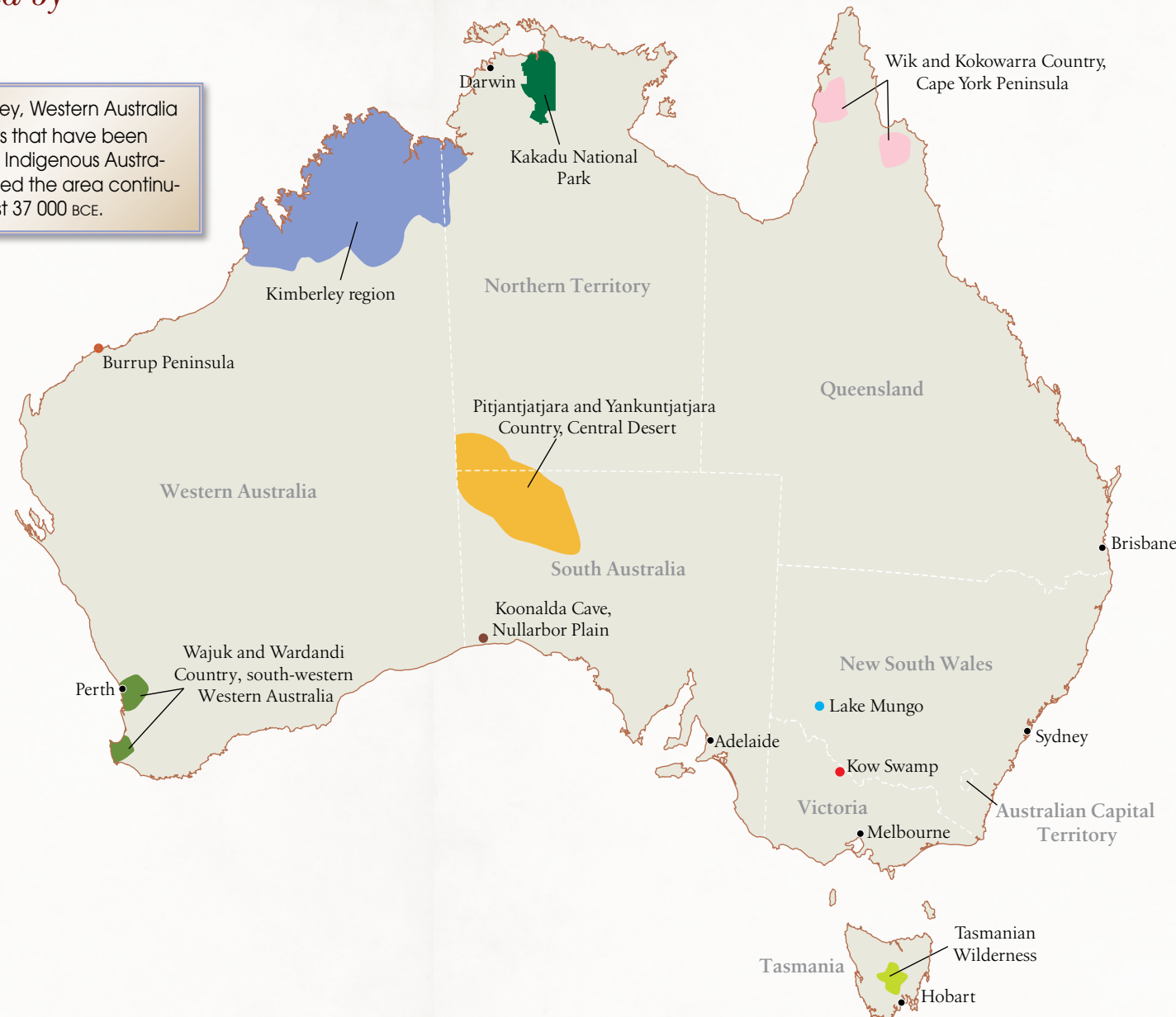
▲ Two archaeologists uncover a body, known as Mungo Man, at an ancient site at Lake Mungo.

**Location:** Cape York Peninsula, Queensland  
**Sites:** Famous sites are middens at Weipa, in the Country of the Wik people, and cave paintings near Laura, in the Country of the Kokowarra people. These sites provide evidence of occupation over the last 37 000 years.

**Location:** Central Desert, Northern Territory  
**Sites:** Sites in the World Heritage listed Uluru – Kata Tjuta National Park show occupation from at least 20 000 BCE. Evidence of human occupation from over 35 000 years ago has been found at Puritjarra rock shelter in the Cleland Hills, west of Alice Springs.

**Location:** Lake Mungo, New South Wales  
**Sites:** Lake Mungo is the site of the world's oldest **cremation** burial, which is at least 40 000 years old. The site is included on the World Heritage List and is co-managed by its traditional owners.

**Location:** Kow Swamp, Victoria  
**Sites:** Grave sites of the Baraba Baraba people at Kow Swamp, near Cohuna in central northern Victoria, provide evidence of occupation 15 000 years ago. Other ancient sites are located along the Murray River valley.



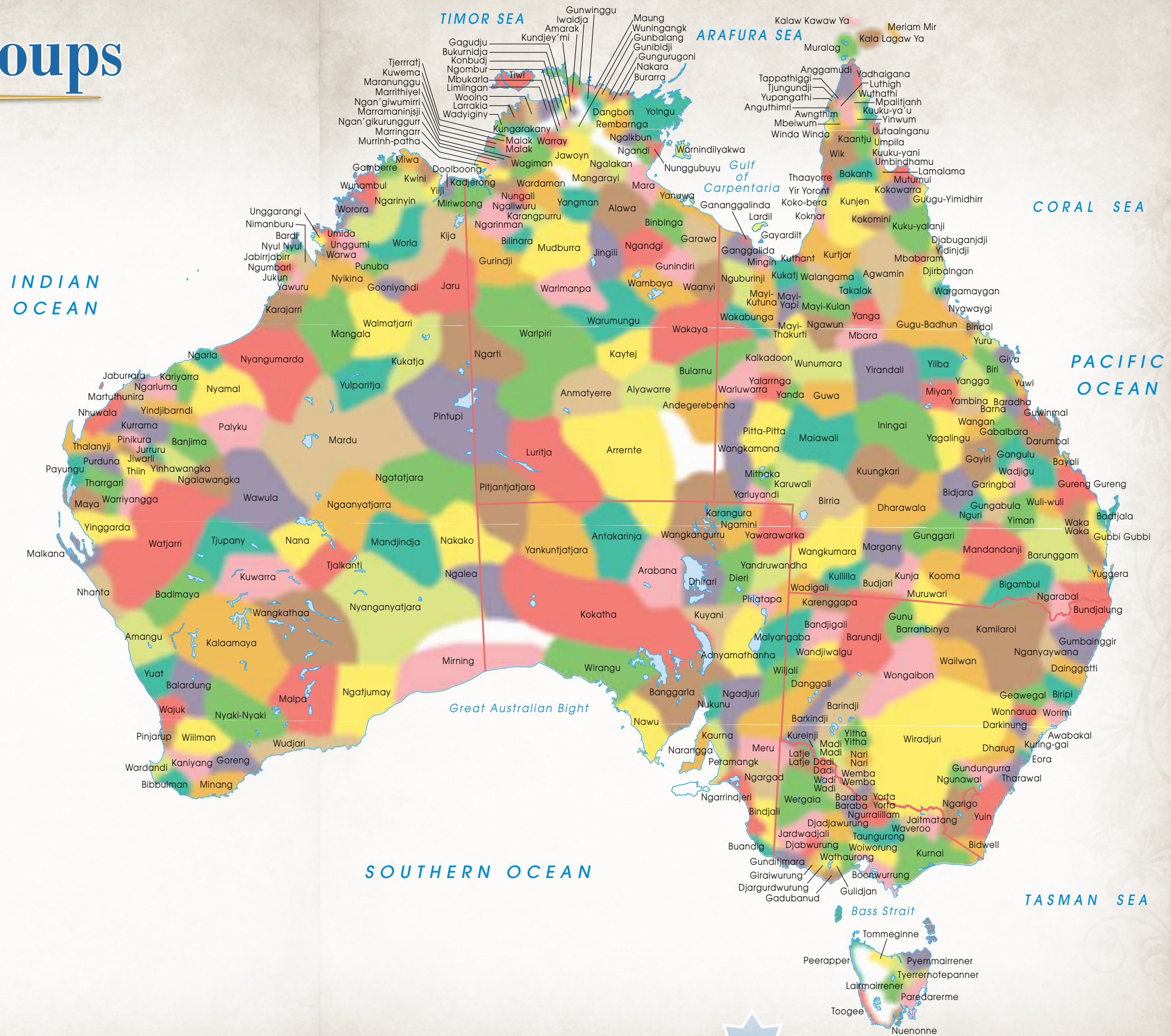


# Language groups

*It is estimated that there were between 250 000 and 500 000 Indigenous Australians belonging to nearly 600 language groups when British settlers arrived in Australia in 1788. The descendants of these peoples maintain the oldest living cultures in the world.*



► This map shows the general locations of Indigenous Australian language groups.





# The Dreaming and the Law

*Traditionally, the Dreaming plays a central part in the lives of Indigenous Australians. It provides a spiritual connection with the land and connections between people, groups, land, animals and plants. It also provides people with the Law, which tells people how to look after the land and the rules for social behaviour.*

## Elders and the Law

Respected people, called Elders, are the keepers of the Law. Elders are men and women who have learned the Law over many years. They are respected for their knowledge. Elders pass on the Law to others in the group. The Law is never written down. It is passed on verbally and through song, dance and painting and to those who are **initiated**.



Traditionally, Indigenous initiation ceremonies mark the change from childhood to adulthood. People are ‘put through the Law’ and learn their responsibilities. They are then seen as adults. People continue to be initiated and learn more of the Law throughout their lives. Under the guidance of Elders, they learn about the rules that govern social structure, behaviour, the life cycles of animals and plants, and skills for hunting and gathering food.

## Totems

The connection between an individual or group and their Ancestral Being, the Dreaming and their Country can be seen through totems. Totems are animals, plants or features of the land that have a special significance or relationship to a person or group. They are the spiritual identity of the person or group.

A person may have many totems, such as an ancestral totem, a family group totem and a birth totem. All members of a group have the same Ancestral Being totem. A birth totem may be chosen after a special sign occurs. If an eagle swoops past a pregnant mother, her child may be seen as linked to Eagle Dreaming.

A person holds special relationships with their totem birds, animals, plants or land features. Caring for their totems is an important responsibility. A person will not usually harm, kill or eat their totem.

A person’s totem defines their relationships with other people and their totems. It also gives them particular responsibilities. There are special ceremonies related to totems.

## More about...

### Totems of the Meriam people

The Meriam people come from the Murray Islands, a small group of islands in the Torres Strait. The Meriam people often have totems that relate to the sea or to the stars in the sky. Totems of different groups from the Torres Strait Islands are the seagull, tiger shark, whale, manta ray, mangrove, turtle and the Tagai **constellation**, which relates to an important Dreaming story.

◀ Caring for and repainting ancient rock art, such as these Wandjina figures in the Kimberley, Western Australia, may be part of Dreaming Law.

### See also

[The Dreaming](#), Volume 1

[Ceremony](#) (initiation ceremonies), Volume 1

[Meriam people](#) (Tagai), Volume 1



# Country

*Aboriginal people belong to the land of their **ancestors**, which they call their **Country** or their 'Belonging Place'. Their **Country**, and everything in it, is part of their spiritual identity.*

## Looking after Country

Indigenous Australians believe that the Ancestral Beings created their Country during the Dreaming and that the Ancestral Beings continue to inhabit it. The people have a responsibility to manage the land and its resources. Dreaming stories teach people the best ways to do this. This is called 'looking after Country'.

For more than 50 000 years, Indigenous Australians lived in harmony with their Country. They understood and managed it closely. They took only the resources they needed from the land. They ensured that the land and the environment would not be damaged. Rivers, waterholes and springs were also carefully managed to ensure they were not damaged for future generations.

Aboriginal people deliberately lit fires in order to manage the environment. This is called fire-stick farming. They burned **undergrowth** regularly to reduce the risk of uncontrolled bushfires and to encourage the growth of plants.

## Traditional bush tucker and bush medicine

Indigenous Australians depended on the land for their food and water. They hunted animals and gathered plants for food. Today, this food is often called bush tucker.

Food supply for Indigenous groups was seasonal. Usually men hunted large animals, such as kangaroos and bush turkeys, in more arid parts of Australia. Women and children gathered plants and smaller animals. Groups would share the food they gathered with each other.

## Hunting and fishing

Indigenous Australians did not hunt or fish too much in one area and animals were not hunted in their breeding season. The Nyungar people of south-western Australia traditionally avoided hunting in the Kambarang season, from October to November, when many animals were rearing their young. This ensured that there were enough animals left to breed and continue the species.

People who lived on the coast and rivers managed fish-breeding so that there was a permanent supply. Long ago, the Karuwali people of the Lake Eyre region built stone walls across flooded rivers to trap fish. They used reeds to make fish pens where they kept the fish until they grew large enough to eat.

### More about...

#### Travelling with the seasons

Indigenous groups often moved around their Country to take advantage of seasonal food supplies. In spring, local groups of people travelled to the eastern highlands, near where Canberra now stands, to eat the highly nutritious bogong moths. Further north, near where Brisbane now stands, people would gather when the energy-rich nuts of the bunya pine trees were plentiful, which was usually once every three years during summer. In desert areas, where conditions are harsher, people had to move around more to find food and water.



▲ Women from the Luritja language group cook goannas in a campfire in their Country near Mount Liebig, Northern Territory.

## Living in Country today

Many Indigenous people continue traditional hunting, gathering and land-care practices today. The Yolngu people of Arnhem Land still follow rules for gathering turtle eggs and yams. They always leave some turtle eggs in the nest and leave the tops of yam plants in the ground so that they will grow again.

Many Indigenous Australians living in their Country continue to hunt and gather traditional foods as well as buying food from shops. Some use modern fishing equipment or other modern tools, but they often use them in a traditional way. They make sure their children continue to learn the Dreaming knowledge of their Country and learn the skills required for looking after Country.

Today, traditional custodians of Country often take part in 'Welcome to Country' ceremonies. One Nyungar welcome is translated as:

*'We are pleased to welcome you to our Nyungar Country  
This is our ancestors' land from the Dreamtime  
This is our homeland of history  
And as one we are proud people of our land  
Through history til today, we stand together  
black and white  
We are, we are one.'*

### See also

[The Dreaming](#), Volume 1



# Kinship

*Kinship is the relationship between relatives, such as brother, sister, mother, father and grandmother. Traditional Indigenous Law has strict rules about kinship, such as whom a person can marry and how people should behave towards other people in the group.*

Traditionally, Indigenous Australians belonged to a number of social groups, such as a family group, skin group and cultural group. There are many rules that guide the relationships within and between people in different groups. In many areas, there are laws that forbid a man from talking directly to his mother-in-law. Kinship rules have helped to maintain the social order over thousands of years. They let people know whom they are related to and how they should behave towards another person. Kinship rules vary between different cultural groups.



Wadjularbinna Doomadgee, a Gangalidda leader, described growing up in a skin group:

*'All people with the same skin grouping as my mother are my mothers ... They have the right, same as my mother, to watch over me, to control what I'm doing, to make sure that I do the right thing. It's an extended family thing ... it's a wonderful secure system.'*

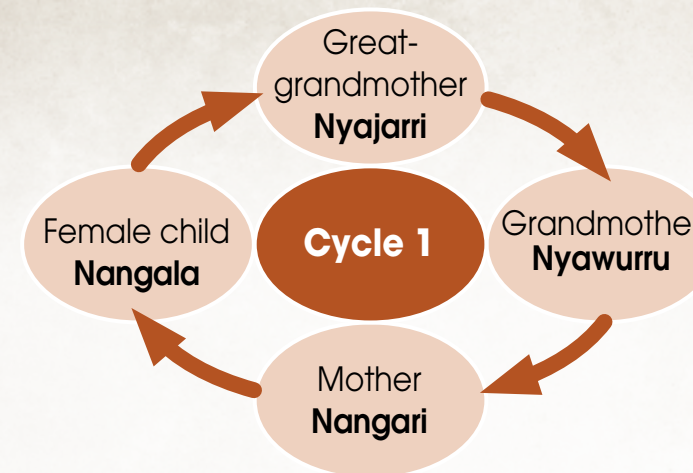
◀ Relationships between Indigenous Australians are defined by the kinship rules.

Today, many Indigenous Australians continue to observe kinship laws. For others, these rules may not be as strict as they once were. For all Indigenous Australians, kinship connections continue to be a very important part of their culture and identity.

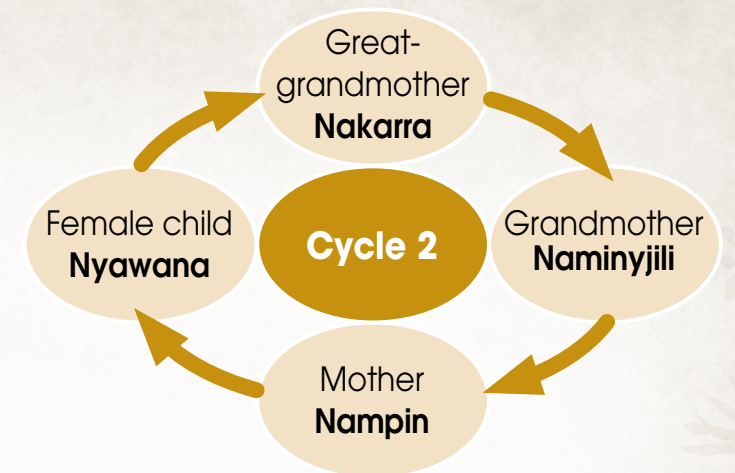
## Families and groups

Traditionally, Indigenous Australians lived in groups that were mainly made up of family members and extended kin relations. Often, these family groups joined up for periods of time, especially around times of seasonal food gathering and ceremonies.

In different parts of Australia, the size of Indigenous groups would depend on the availability of resources. In areas that were rich in resources, groups were often large or many groups lived side by side. Arid regions, such as deserts, were occupied by smaller and fewer groups.



▲ In the Kija cultural group, children get their skin names from their mothers. The two cycles of female names are shown here. If a woman's skin name is Nangari, her daughter's skin name will be Nangala.



## Skin groups

Traditionally, one of the social laws passed on through the Dreaming was the system of skin names. Many Indigenous groups were governed by the skin system, where a person's skin name is passed down from one or both parents. There are strict rules about which skin groups can marry each other. The skin system is related closely to how kinship relations operate.

The Kija cultural group of the eastern Kimberley, like many others, continues its traditional skin group rules today. There are 16 skin names, which are separated into two groups called cycles. The skin name given to a child depends on his or her mother's skin name. Traditionally, a Kija person can only marry someone from the other skin cycle.

## Cultural groups

A number of groups that spoke the same language formed a language group or cultural group. The larger language or cultural group consisted mostly of small kin groups, but everyone in the group would meet together for special occasions. There could be several hundred people at these gatherings.

Cultural groups are sometimes called the same name as the language used by the group. The Yolngu cultural group has that name because *yolngu* means 'person' in the Yolngu language.

A cultural group, such as the Bibbulman of south-western Australia, may also be part of a larger group, made up of neighbouring groups who speak similar languages. These larger groups are often called nations. The Bibbulman people and its neighbouring language groups are also known as the Nyungar nation.

## More about...

### Belonging to many groups

William Barak was an Indigenous Australian leader who fought for Indigenous rights during the 1800s. He was from the Wurundjeri-willam group, which was based around the Yarra River in Victoria. The Wurundjeri-willam is part of the Woiworung cultural group. The people who speak the Woiworung language call themselves the Wurundjeri people. Along with four other cultural groups, the Wurundjeri make up the Kulin nation.

### See also

Language groups, Volume 1  
William Barak, Volume 4



# Ceremonies

*Ceremonies are an important part of cultural practice for Indigenous Australians. Through ceremonies, people carry out their responsibilities to pass on important information. All Indigenous Australian groups perform ceremonies.*

Ceremonies often involve storytelling, song, dance and body decoration. The structure of ceremonies varies between groups, but the reasons for them are common. Ceremonies pass Dreaming knowledge, rules for behaviour and the Law from one generation to the next. Some ceremonies are secret and some ceremonies are open to all.

## Secret ceremonies

Secret ceremonies are held separately for men or women. These ceremonies reveal sacred information. Elder men lead ceremonies that pass on 'men's business' for men and boys. Elder women lead the secret 'women's business'. Traditional sacred ceremonies continue to be an important part of life for many Indigenous Australians today.

## Initiation ceremonies

Elders are usually responsible for initiation ceremonies. Traditionally, Aboriginal people went through several initiation ceremonies throughout their lives. The first ceremony marked the move from childhood to adulthood.

In an initiation ceremony, a person receives secret knowledge and responsibilities. Often these ceremonies take place over a long period of time. Some parts of the ceremony are secret and only certain people can attend.

## Festive ceremonies

Sometimes ceremonies celebrate a creation story from the Dreaming. Others are performed when food is ripe and all the groups in a wider cultural group meet, such as at the bogong moth festival in southern New South Wales. Several hundred people may attend and the celebration may last several days.

## Smoking ceremonies

Many cultural groups use the smoking ceremony to drive away evil spirits or to cleanse people or places. Green leaves are held over fire to produce smoke. People used their hands to 'bathe' themselves with the smoke.

## Telling Dreaming stories through song and music

Songs that pass on Dreaming stories are an important part of many ceremonies. There are special songs for occasions such as a birth, healing or death, as well as for cultural group gatherings. Songs are part of the oral traditions of Indigenous Australian cultures.

Instruments that accompany singing vary across different cultural groups. Music is made by:

- ☞ clapping together carved pieces of wood, called clap sticks, or the tips of two boomerangs
- ☞ playing drums made from skins, such as those played by peoples on the Cape York Peninsula
- ☞ playing the **didjeridu**, which is used in northern Australia and played by men only
- ☞ body percussion, such as clapping hands together.

Many Indigenous and some non-Indigenous Australians play these instruments today.

## Telling Dreaming stories through dance

Dreaming stories are also told through dance. Sometimes performers are seen as messengers of the Ancestral Beings. The dances have complicated steps and movements that need to be learned and practised. Often, dances are based on the movements of animals such as kangaroos and emus.

### More about...

#### Oral traditions

In oral traditions, information and stories are passed on by word of mouth. This means information and stories are passed on through spoken stories or song. Some groups, such as the Arrernte people of the Central Desert, sing a whole Dreaming song over a week, singing one verse each night. It can take several months before all the sacred songs are sung. The stories in the songs are learned by the younger generations as they hear and sing the songs with the group.



▲ An initiation ceremony is held in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

Continued on page 22 ►



## Telling Dreaming stories through art

Dreaming stories are often told visually. Some symbols of the Dreaming are sacred, with strict rules about their use. Others are not sacred and can be used openly.

The styles and materials used to depict Dreaming stories vary among cultural groups. Some groups used rock art painting or engraving and some used dot and line paintings.

Traditionally, natural materials were gathered to paint Dreaming symbols. Often these 'bush materials' were also considered sacred. Many groups used ochres, which are iron-stained clays that are red, yellow or orange. Chalky material and ash are used to make white pigments. Charcoal is used for black.

### Rock art

Many groups painted or engraved sacred images of Ancestral Beings on rock walls of caves and shelters. This rock art has been protected and maintained over many generations. Today, Australia has some of the oldest rock art in the world. Some famous examples are:

- Wandjina figures, which were painted by the Worora, Unggumi, Ngarinyin and Wunambul peoples of the Kimberley region. Wandjina figures are human-type forms surrounded by cloud and lightning. They are the powerful spirit beings that control the **monsoons**. To paint them, the artist prepares a white background and then applies ochres using hand, finger and brush. Wandjina figures are still painted by modern-day artists of the Kimberley region.

- Quinkan figures, which were painted by the Kokowarra people of the Cape York region. They have a human-type form with long heads and long, skinny bodies. They are evil spirits.
- Mimi, which were painted by many different peoples in northern Australia, including around Kakadu and the Cape York Peninsula. Mimis are mischievous spirits. They are usually shown as human-type forms, hunting, dancing or running.
- Ancestral Beings often take the form of animals or birds. Many cultural groups in Arnhem Land used X-ray art, which shows the **anatomy** of an animal. Fine brushwork is used to paint the skeletons and internal organs of animals such as wallabies, turtles and fish.

### Dot and line paintings

In Indigenous desert cultures, Law and other information were often communicated through dot and line painting. These symbols are used in sand drawing, body decoration for ceremonies and rock art. Traditionally, this was done using ochre, sand or crushed seeds.

In the 1970s, Indigenous artists at Papunya in central Australia were introduced to brightly coloured acrylic paints by Geoffrey Bardon, a non-Indigenous art teacher. He encouraged local men to tell their stories on the wall of the school and on boards. Today, these paintings are often painted on canvas. They have become a world-famous style of modern art. This is an example of traditional Indigenous Australian art developing through the use of modern materials.



### Other art forms

Dreaming symbols and spiritual identity are also represented through many other art forms, such as:

- stones that are arranged in special patterns and used for religious ceremonies, such as the stone circles that were created by the Kalaamaya people near Paynes Find, Western Australia
- clothing and ornaments that are made from skins, furs, shells and feathers, such as kangaroo skin cloaks and possum fur belts made by the Wajuk people of south-western Australia
- wood-carved poles made for funerals, such as the distinctive poles carved by the Tiwi people
- turtle-shell masks, made by the Meriam people of the Torres Strait Islands, which are used in ceremonies.

◀ An X-ray painting of a turtle in Kakadu shows its spine and the parts beneath its shell.

### See also

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (dot paintings), Volume 9



# Communication and trade

*Traditionally, there were many forms of communication and trade between different groups of Indigenous Australians. Resources and ideas were exchanged, resulting in changes in **technology** and **culture**.*

## Communicating over long distances

Indigenous Australians came up with ways of communicating over long distances, such as by using smoke signals and message sticks.

Smoke signals were used to send short messages to another group, such as 'We are coming to visit you'. The group lit a fire that cast out smoke that could be seen by other groups. Different woods made smoke of different colours.

Message sticks were pieces of carved or painted wood that were carried by messengers. They were used to invite other groups to a ceremony or to a fight to settle a dispute. The message sticks were coated with symbols. The messenger who carried the stick also gave a spoken message.

## Group gatherings

People from different groups travelled long distances to attend major meetings, to perform ceremonies and to settle disputes. In some areas, festivals were held when a special resource or food became available. These gatherings provided opportunities to exchange ideas and trade goods.



▲ A large sculpture of a message stick, with symbols carved into it, stands at Birrarung Marr park in Melbourne.

## Trade

People regularly walked long distances along established trade routes that criss-crossed Australia. They passed through Country that belonged to other groups, with their permission. They carefully observed the other groups' rules. They exchanged goods that were plentiful in their Country for goods they did not have. Some goods that were traded widely across Australia were pituri, ochre, greenstone and shell.

## Pituri

Pituri is a drug with a high concentration of nicotine. It is made from native tobacco plants. The leaves are dried and crumbled and mixed with the ashes of a tree, such as an acacia tree. Pituri was chewed on long-distance journeys to help relieve tiredness and hunger, and during ceremonies. The Dieri people, from north of Lake Eyre, traded pituri with groups up to 1300 kilometres away. Pituri is still used today by Western Desert groups.

## Ochre

Ochre is hardened white, yellow or red clay. It was widely used in ceremonies, for painting and in healing. Major quarries, such as the ones at Parachilna in South Australia and Wilgie Mia in the Western Desert, were developed for mining and trading ochre.

## Greenstone

Greenstone was highly valued for making **hatchet** heads. It was mined in central Victoria and traded along the Murray and Darling river valleys. Evidence of this trade has been found as far east as Broken Hill, New South Wales, and as far south as the mouth of the Murray River, South Australia.

## Shell

Shell ornaments, such as necklaces, have been found in places far from the sea or rivers. Shell pendants made by people living on the Gulf of Carpentaria have been found as far away as South Australia. Pearl shell from the Kimberley region has been found 1700 kilometres away.

## More about...

### Trade with island peoples

Since at least the early 1700s, Macassan fishermen from Indonesia visited mainland Australia and traded with the Yolngu people, who lived along the coast of Arnhem Land. Torres Strait Islanders were sea-faring peoples and traded with the people of New Guinea, to the north, and Aboriginal Australians, to the south.

## See also

**Meriam people** (trade between Torres Strait Islanders and New Guineans), Volume 1  
**Macassan visitors** (trade between Yolngu and Macassan fishermen), Volume 2



# Impact of invasion

*In 1788, the British arrived, bringing a new set of laws and beliefs. By this time, the Australian continent had already been home to more than 2000 generations of Indigenous Australians.*

## Early encounters

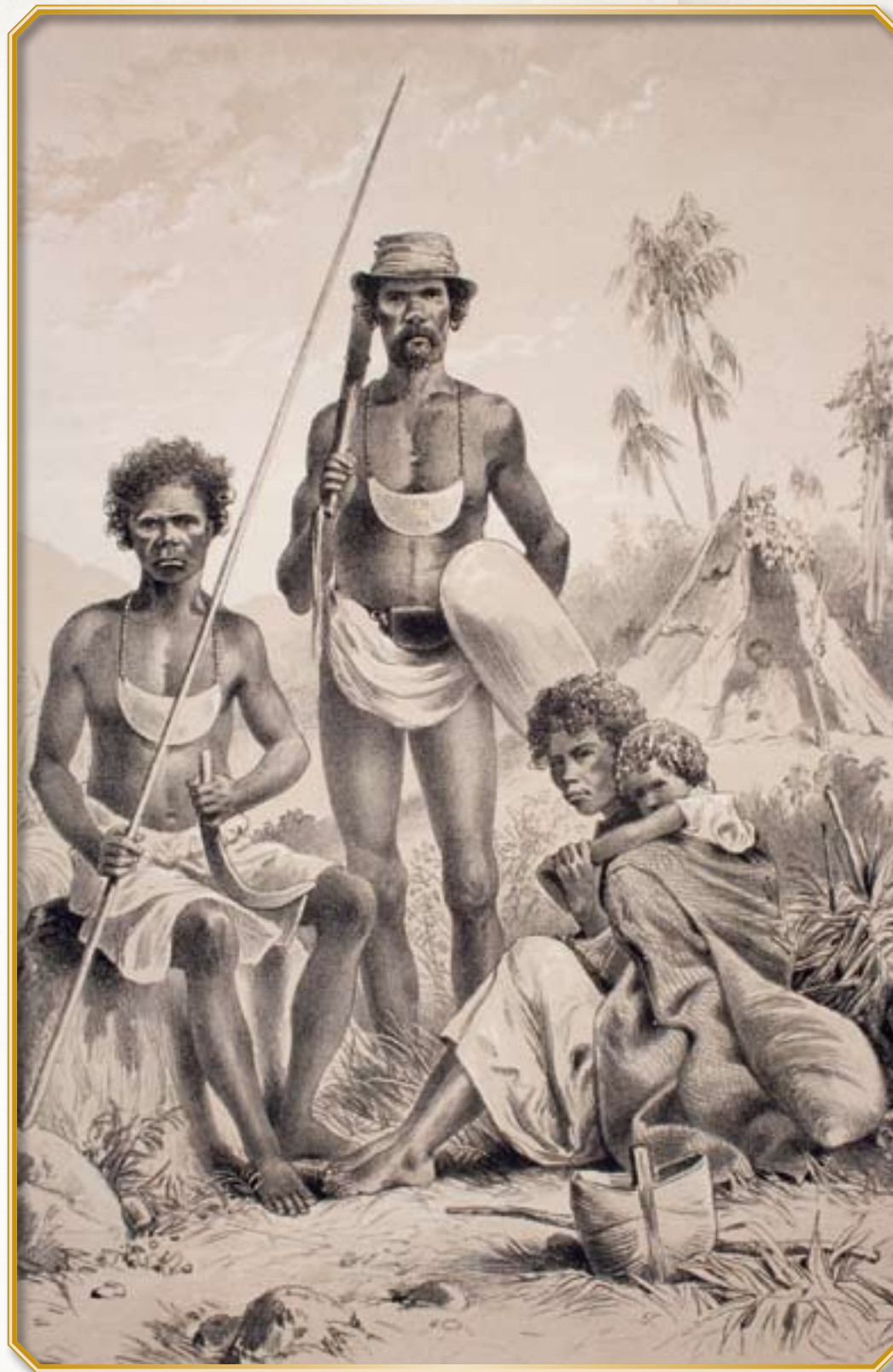
In 1606, the first recorded encounter between Indigenous Australian and European cultures took place on the western side of Cape York. A Tjungundji man speared and killed a Dutch sailor who attempted to land in his Country. More encounters followed as Europeans explored the coastline of the land they called 'New Holland'.

In 1770, on a small island off the tip of Cape York, Captain Cook 'took possession' of the eastern coast of the land for Britain.

## Invasion by British settlers

British **colonisation** of Australia began when the First Fleet landed at Sydney Cove in 1788. Many Indigenous Australians were killed as the British began to occupy more and more of the land. Some Indigenous people and British settlers were killed due to misunderstandings. Many were murdered in disagreements over land and livestock. European diseases such as **smallpox** and measles also killed tens of thousands of Indigenous Australians.

Indigenous Australians responded to the British settlers in different ways. Leaders such as Bungaree, Arabanoo and Bennelong cooperated with the settlers. Others, such as Pemulwuy, Yagan and Jandamarra, resisted occupation and died fighting during the late 1700s through to the late 1800s.



## After the invasion

Many Indigenous Australians were 'rounded up' and taken to new settlements. George Robinson, one British religious leader, wanted Indigenous Australians to learn about **Christianity** and to act and dress like Europeans. Few of the people he took to his settlements survived. They died from disease and homesickness.

## Reserves and missions

In the late 1800s, the colonies created new laws and made Indigenous Australians move onto government reserves or church missions. They were called 'wards of the state' and their lives were ruled by government-run Protection Boards. Often, people were taken far away from their own Country. It became very difficult for people to maintain their traditional cultures.

Many white Australians believed Indigenous Australian children would have a brighter future if they were taught British culture and were absorbed into white Australian society. From 1910 to the early 1970s, government agencies removed an estimated 100 000 children of **mixed racial descent** from their families. These people became known as the Stolen Generations.

◀ Some Indigenous Australians were given 'king plates' to wear around their necks, marking them as leaders or people who might cooperate with the British.

On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered a national apology to the Stolen Generations. This was an important milestone in the process of **reconciliation**. The national apology began:

*'Today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history. We reflect on their past mistreatment. We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations – this blemished chapter in our nation's history. The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.'*

## See also

[William Jansz](#) (Cape York encounter), Volume 2  
[Bungaree](#), Volume 2  
[Arabanoo](#), Volume 3  
[Bennelong](#), Volume 3  
[Pemulwuy](#), Volume 3  
[Yagan](#), Volume 3  
[George Robinson](#), Volume 3  
[Unaarrimin](#) (Indigenous reserves), Volume 4  
[Jandamarra](#), Volume 4



# Traditional custodians

## of Australia's capital cities

*The traditional custodians of Australia's capital cities are very significant. Their significance is recognised through cultural heritage centres, as well as through Welcome to Country ceremonies performed by Elders and Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians ceremonies performed at public gatherings.*

### Wajuk people

**Significance:** The Wajuk people, part of the Nyungar nation, are traditional custodians of the Perth area.

**Traditional culture:** The Wajuk lived on the coastal plains and along the Swan River. They were known for their beautiful clothing and ornaments. In winter, they wore kangaroo skins sewn together.

**Continuing culture:** Some of the descendants of the Nyungar have formed the Warrdong group, which is a Nyungar dance group that teaches the history of the people and the language.

► This map shows some of the traditional custodians of Australia's capital cities.

### Kaurna people

**Significance:** The Kaurna people are traditional custodians of much of the Adelaide area.

**Traditional culture:** Kaurna Country lay along the coastal plains on the eastern side of Gulf St Vincent. Nature provided a bountiful food supply. In addition to seafood, kangaroo and emu were plentiful. Kaurna men set fire to the scrub to encourage grass growth and attract animals.

**Continuing culture:** Descendants of the Kaurna people established the Living Kaurna Cultural Centre. People can learn about the culture, Dreaming and living history of the Kaurna.

### Wurundjeri people

**Significance:** The Wurundjeri people are the people of the Woiworing language group. They belong to the Kulin nation, which is made up of five language groups. The Kulin nation are the traditional custodians of the Melbourne area.

**Traditional culture:** The Wurundjeri enjoyed plentiful food supplies from the Yarra River and their Country around Port Phillip Bay and the Yarra Valley. They used fire to attract animals for hunting. In winter, they joined possum skins together to make cloaks.

**Continuing culture:** Descendants of the Wurundjeri people welcome others to the land of the Wurundjeri. Elder Joy Murphy-Wandin performed the Welcome to Country ceremony at the Melbourne Commonwealth Games in 2006.

### Larrakia people

**Significance:** The Larrakia people are traditional custodians of much of the Darwin area.

**Traditional culture:** Often referred to as 'saltwater people', the Larrakia lived by hunting, gathering and fishing in their coastal Country on the Timor Sea.

**Continuing culture:** Descendants of the Larrakia people formed the Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation in 1997. The corporation helps teach the Larrakia language, Law and culture.

### Yuggera people

**Significance:** The Yuggera people are traditional custodians of a large part of the Brisbane area. The Turrbal group of the Yuggera lived in the Brisbane area.

**Traditional culture:** Yuggera Country lies around the waters of the Brisbane River and Moreton Bay. The Yuggera used heavy nets to harvest fish and other seafood. Each year, when pine nuts were ready for harvest, the Yuggera joined other groups travelling to the nearby Bunya Mountains. They celebrated together and feasted on the nuts.

**Continuing culture:** Today, some of the descendants of the Yuggera are involved with the Nunukuk Yuggera Aboriginal Dancers. They perform Welcome to Country ceremonies, cultural performances and educational talks.

### Eora people

**Significance:** The Eora people are the traditional custodians of a large part of central Sydney and the surrounding coastal area. Custodians of the greater Sydney area are Dharug, Kuring-gai and Tharawal peoples.

**Traditional culture:** The Eora way of life was based around the coastal waters and inlets of the Pacific Ocean. Men fished from the rocks with multi-pronged spears. Women fished from bark canoes with fishing lines made from hair and plant fibres. Seafood was plentiful so the people moved little. Sacred sites such as caves with ancient paintings and engravings celebrated the sea.

**Continuing culture:** Today, some of the descendants of Eora live in Redfern, the oldest urban Indigenous Australian community in Australia. The Eora College in Sydney teaches visual and performing arts to Indigenous Australians.

### Ngunnawal people

**Significance:** The Ngunnawal people are traditional custodians of much of the Canberra area.

**Traditional culture:** Ngunnawal country is a land of river valleys and rugged mountain ranges. The Ngunnawal kept warm in the cold winters by wearing possum skins and living in bark huts. Eels, fish and yabbies were an important part of their diet. In springtime, they gathered with neighbouring groups for the bogong moth season.

**Continuing culture:** Descendants of the Ngunnawal have created many artworks that appear around the city of Canberra. Many sites of cultural heritage are protected in Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

### Mouheneener people

**Significance:** The Mouheneener people are the traditional custodians of much of the Hobart area.

**Traditional culture:** The Mouheneener lived along the edges of the Derwent River, which they called Teemtoomele Menennye. They were part of the Nuennone group.

**Continuing culture:** The Mouheneener were moved from the Hobart area to reserves on islands in Bass Strait. A lot of their language and culture was lost. Descendants of the Mouheneener people have revived some of the language from records made by European explorers in the late 1700s.



# Barkindji people

## of the Willandra Lakes

*The Barkindji people come from Country that includes the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Site. Recent archaeological discoveries there have provided insight into the lives of Indigenous Australians long ago.*

Language: Barkindji



### Traditional culture

The Barkindji are river people who lived in the Willandra Lakes region of New South Wales at least 32 000 years ago. At this time, the lakes were filled with water and connected by a large river that flowed from the Snowy Mountains.

Barkindji men used their nets and stone traps to catch cod, perch and yabbies in the lake. They hunted kangaroo and wallaby. Women and children gathered mussels along the shoreline. Plants, seeds, emu eggs and reptiles were collected from the surrounding grasslands.

### Sacred remains

In recent times, sacred remains have been discovered at Lake Mungo. It is considered one of the world's most significant cremation sites.

Mungo Woman was found in 1969. She was cremated more than 20 000 years ago. Descendants now protect her in a **keeping place** in Mungo National Park.



▲ For more than 30 000 years, the Barkindji people lived, hunted and fished in the Willandra Lakes region.

The skeleton of Mungo Man was found in 1975. He is more than 40 000 years old. He was buried in a pit and covered with red ochre. The way that Mungo Woman and Mungo Man were found suggests that they were buried according to some kind of cultural tradition and ceremony.

Other burial remains have been located in the area. Footprints of adults and children from more than 20 000 years ago were also discovered recently.

### More about...

#### Bookamurra, the giant kangaroo

One of the Barkindji Dreaming stories is about Bookamurra, the giant kangaroo. The Barkindji men tracked and hunted the giant kangaroo for days. They killed him at the southern end of the lakes. The lakes and the area around them are the remains of Bookamurra.

### Barkindji people today

The Barkindji people today proudly maintain their cultural heritage. They are represented on the Willandra Lakes Three Traditional Tribal Groups Elders Council. It plays an important role in the co-management of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Site.

### Willandra Lakes World Heritage Site

Today, there are 17 dry lakes in the Willandra Lakes region, including Lake Mungo. The area has a stark, desert landscape. It became a World Heritage Site in 1981. The area covered by the World Heritage Site includes the country of the Barkindji, Mutthi Mutthi and Nyiampaa peoples.

Part of the area is Mungo National Park. Those employed in Mungo National Park include descendants of the traditional owners.

The Barkindji Elders co-manage the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Site. They have said:

*'The Barkindji people now feel that they have a great chance to show the European descendants some of their land-management skills. It is a good place to educate students from schools and universities as well as the general public, and shows that we are a thriving and ongoing culture.'*



► Members of the Three Traditional Tribal Groups Elders Council examine 20 000-year-old footprints at Lake Mungo.

### See also

[The Dreaming](#), Volume 1  
[Ancient and sacred sites](#) (Lake Mungo), Volume 1  
[Language groups](#), Volume 1



# Yorta Yorta people

## of the Murray River

*Yorta Yorta people are one of many cultural groups that lived along the Dhungala, also called the Murray River. They lived around the area where Echuca now stands.*

Language: Yorta Yorta



### Traditional culture

Through their Dreaming and the Law, Yorta Yorta people are the custodians of the Country around the area where Echuca now stands. The river is sacred to the Yorta Yorta. It gave them food and water. They settled densely along the river for many thousands of years.

### Managing the land and the river

The river was the centre of life for Yorta Yorta people. There was plenty of food and water, but they were careful not to take more than they needed. They were able to build permanent villages along the river. Large huts held up to 15 people. Huts were made of tree branches covered with tea-tree bark.

Rich plant and animal life along the river provided many food sources. Women gathered food from up to 40 different plant species. In summer, grasses were harvested and placed in large piles to dry. The grass seeds were then collected and pounded between stones to make flour.

The Yorta Yorta people were expert swimmers and fishers. Fishing nets were made from flax, a plant that grew on the riverbanks. Canoes were made from slabs of bark cut from river gumtrees.

Nets were also used to trap birds. The nets were expertly made. They were up to 90 metres long and 2 metres high. They were stretched across the river between trees on each riverbank.

A Yorta Yorta man, Colin Walker, tells one of the Dreaming stories of how Dhungala was created by Biamia:

*'... the old woman who came down through the hills dragging a stick. An old snake was following her and he kept following where she dragged her yam stick and then when she got to end of the river system ... down in this land it rained and rained and rained and that's how the river came down through here.'*



▲ Yorta Yorta dancers perform in a traditional ceremony.



▲ Young Yorta Yorta people prepare to celebrate the signing of a land rights agreement in 2004.

### Yorta Yorta people today

British invasion of Yorta Yorta Country began in the 1840s. Soon after, an estimated 85 per cent of the Yorta Yorta people had died. Survivors were rounded up and taken to Cummeragunja mission. They began a long struggle to keep their culture alive and to gain fair treatment.

The Yorta Yorta Co-operative Management Agreement was made between the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation and the Victorian Government in 2004. It was signed on the banks of the Murray River. It formally involves the Yorta Yorta people in the management of their traditional lands and waters. It covers about 50 000 hectares of **Crown land**, including Kow Swamp.

### More about...

#### Dharnya Centre

Dharnya Centre is a cultural centre located in the Barmah State Park, near Echuca. It is on the site of a traditional Indigenous meeting area. The Dharnya Centre was started in 1985. It gives Yorta Yorta people a place to get together and it also builds awareness in the wider community about Yorta Yorta culture.

#### See also

[The Dreaming](#), Volume 1  
[Ancient and sacred sites](#) (Kow Swamp), Volume 1  
[Language groups](#), Volume 1



# Nuenonne people

of south-eastern Tasmania

*The Nuenonne people are acknowledged as the traditional custodians of south-eastern Tasmania. They were the first Indigenous Tasmanians to meet Dutch, British and French explorers.*

Language: Nuenonne



## Traditional culture

Before colonisation, the Nuenonne lived on the coast in the area around Bruny Island, Tasmania. They lived in huts made of bush timber, thatched together with reeds and bark.



Men hunted kangaroos and wallabies. In dry weather, they used fire to burn the undergrowth of thick forests, making it easier to find their prey.

The women were excellent divers and swimmers. They gathered oysters, mussels, abalone and scallops. After meals, the shells from their food were placed on middens that had been started by earlier ancestors.

Women wore their hair closely shaved. Some people wore necklaces made of shell or cord. Men applied a mixture of red ochre and animal fat to their hair to make a very distinctive hairstyle. Ochre was obtained through trade with people from the north of the island. The men ground it to make paint. It was used on their body, as well as in their hair and beards.

▼ *The Nuenonne People lived in Country in south-eastern Tasmania (shown here in Robert Dowling's painting Group of Natives of Tasmania).*

## Seasonal living

During summer, people paddled to the surrounding islands to catch mutton-birds and seals. They used a unique raft that was shaped like a canoe and made of three bundles of paper bark tied together at the ends. After a few hours at sea, the bark became heavy with water. The raft had to be dried before it could be used again.

In the colder weather, the Nuenonne wore animal skins thrown over their shoulders. They smeared animal fat on their bodies to keep warm.



▲ *A traditional custodian of Nuenonne Country passes on stories at Oyster Cove Sacred Site.*

## More about...

### Nuenonne Dreaming

Elders taught Dreaming stories that told how the ancestors of the Nuenonne came to the southern land they called Trowerner. It was much colder then and ice covered the mountains. The ancestors lived in caves. They made sacred paintings and engravings on cave walls.

## Nuenonne people today

Following British settlement in 1803, many Nuenonne people died from European diseases. Others were killed when they resisted the invasion of their Country. Some women were kidnapped by sealers and taken away from their Country. In 1835, the government decided to 'round up' the survivors and take them to islands in Bass Strait. Many more died from disease and homesickness.

Today, descendants of the Nuenonne people and other Tasmanian cultural groups are proud that they have survived to continue their cultures.

There are now two groups of Indigenous Tasmanians. The Palawa are descended from Indigenous Tasmanians who were taken to live on islands in Bass Strait. The Lia Pootah are descended from unrecorded Indigenous Tasmanian women who remained in Tasmania and partnered with non-Indigenous settlers, soldiers and convicts.

Wallantanaliny Lydidder, the Lia Pootah Council of Elders, describe their history:

*'Lia Pootah people have continuous unbroken ties to Trowerner the land of our ancestors, including continuous unbroken Totemic and Dreamtime ties to the land of our birth. Our history flows unbroken from the present to beyond the beginning of time, when our Storytellers tell us the sun was born.'*

### See also

[The Dreaming](#), Volume 1

[Language groups](#), Volume 1

[Truganini](#) (Indigenous Tasmanians), Volume 4



# Wajuk people

of south-western Australia

*The Wajuk people are acknowledged as the traditional custodians of much of the area where the city of Perth stands. Early Dutch navigator Willem de Vlamingh sailed up Derbal Yaragan, also called the Swan River, and into Wajuk country in 1627.*

Language: Wajuk



▼ *The Wajuk people have many traditional uses for the grass tree, called balga.*



## Traditional culture

The Wajuk people have lived on the coastal plains for at least 40 000 years. Traditionally, they were known for their beautiful clothing and ornaments. In winter, they wore kangaroo skins sewn together using bone needles. On special occasions, they painted their bodies with red ochre and patterns of white ochre lines.

## Managing the land

Traditionally, Wajuk men hunted kangaroos, possums and wallabies, but only once the animals had matured. They fished the rivers and coastal wetlands using spears and fish traps. They made *kodj* hatchets and *taap* knives, which were tools that were found nowhere else. Women and children gathered a range of plant food, making sure to take only what they needed.

## Dreaming stories

One Wajuk story is about the creation of three islands that used to be part of the mainland.

Long ago, the land between them was covered with trees. A huge fire started. It burned so fiercely that the ground split open. The sea rushed in to make the islands.

## More about...

### Waugul, the rainbow serpent

Dreaming stories are told about Waugul, the rainbow serpent. It made the Derbal Yaragan, also called the Swan River. Waugul's body became the ridge that runs along the edge of the coastal plain. This is now called the Darling Range.



◀ *These two women are part of the Nyungar theatre company Yirra Yaakin.*

## Wajuk people today

Following British settlement, the Country of the Wajuk people was cleared for farming and they lost their traditional sources of food. The Wajuk people resisted settlement. Many Wajuk people died. Eventually survivors were moved onto reserves, where they struggled to maintain their traditional ways. Strong family ties helped them proudly maintain their cultural heritage.

Today, Wajuk people are part of the broader Nyungar nation. They live mainly in towns and cities throughout south-western Australia. Many continue to gather bush tucker and teach their children about the land. Some continue their cultural traditions through the arts.

## Yirra Yaakin theatre company

Yirra Yaakin Aboriginal Corporation is an Indigenous theatre company based in Perth. *Yirra yaakin* is Nyungar for 'stand tall'. Through its productions, Yirra Yaakin helps build respect for traditional Nyungar culture as well as awareness of the issues Nyungar people face.

Shirley Michael is one of a many Nyungar artists keeping their culture alive through painting:

*'Art is my way of expressing my spiritual beliefs as well as the beliefs of my ancestors. Aboriginal people have a special connection to this land (Australia). We are the true custodians of this place and I believe we were chosen to look after it.'*

## See also

[The Dreaming](#) (the rainbow serpent), Volume 1  
[Ancient and sacred sites](#) (south-western Australia), Volume 1  
[Language groups](#), Volume 1  
[Country](#) (Welcome to Country), Volume 1  
[Traditional custodians](#) (Wajuk people), Volume 1



# Yolngu people

## of Arnhem Land

*The Yolngu people of Arnhem Land established good relations with Macassan fishermen from the islands of Indonesia sometime before the early 1700s.*

Language: Yolngu



### Traditional culture

The Yolngu people are a language group in eastern Arnhem Land. They are part of a larger group made up of twelve groups that speak similar languages, called dialects. *Yolngu* means 'person' in each of these dialects. The main language is called Yolngu Matha.

► Traditionally, Yolngu ceremonies bring together music, dance and symbolic body painting.



### The Dreaming

Yolngu Dreaming stories tell how Ancestral Beings made the land and people, such as:

- ☞ Waramurungundji, the Great Mother, who came across the sea from the north at the time of creation
- ☞ Namarrkon, the ancestor responsible for thunder, lightning and violent storms
- ☞ Gunbulabula, the ancestor who created the didgeridu.

Traditionally, sacred symbols were painted on logs and bark and in body decoration. The Yolngu ancestors made some of the world's oldest narrative art, which is art that tells stories about events such as ceremonies, hunts and battles.

Yolngu Law divides people into the skin groups of Dhuwa and Yirritja. Traditionally, a person from one group can only marry someone from the other group.



▲ Yolngu man Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu is a very successful singer and musician.

### Yolngu people today

Today, the Yolngu proudly maintain their traditional culture. They blend it with the ways of the *balanda*, the Yolngu word for 'whitefella', so that they gain from both worlds. Yolngu have become leaders in the struggle for land rights and sharing cultures. They have also made Indigenous Australian art and music famous across the world through bands such as Yothu Yindi.

### Garma Festival

The annual Garma Festival is a celebration of Yolngu culture. It brings together people with different ideas so that they can learn from each other. Garma attracts people from all over Australia. The festival features ceremonies and traditional bark painting. People go on land and sea expeditions to collect bush tucker, bush medicine and materials for weaving and spear-making.

There are also demonstrations of how to throw spears to hunt fish, turtle, dugong, wallaby and goanna.

### Yothu Yindi

Yothu Yindi is a world-famous Indigenous musical group. Several members of the group are Yolngu. They blend traditional and modern musical instruments and styles. *Yothu yindi* means 'child and mother' and refers to the kinship connections between the Yolngu people.

### See also

[The Dreaming](#), Volume 1  
[Language groups](#), Volume 1  
[Country](#) (Yolngu people), Volume 1  
[Kinship](#) (Yolngu people), Volume 1  
[Macassan visitors](#), Volume 2



# Pitjantjatjara people

of the Uluru – Kata Tjuta area

*The Pitjantjatjara, along with many other language groups, have occupied the fragile desert lands of Australia's red centre over thousands of years. World Heritage status of the Uluru – Kata Tjuta National Park has increased global understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures.*

Language: Pitjantjatjara



▼ Kata Tjuta is a sacred site for the Pitjantjatjara people.

## Traditional culture

Ancestral Beings formed Pitjantjatjara Country during the Dreaming. They travelled across the unformed land, creating the landforms and living things that can be seen today. Ancestral Beings such as Kuniya, the woma python, still inhabit the land in sacred sites. Kuniya lives in the rocks at Uluru where she fought Liru, the poisonous snake.

## Tjukurrpa

Pitjantjatjara and most other desert peoples use the word Tjukurrpa for the Dreaming. It is their past, present and future told through stories. It provides the Law for understanding the land and everything in it. It shows how the connections between the land, plants, animals and people must be maintained in daily life and ceremonies.

The Lungkata (blue-tongued lizard) Tjukurrpa teaches Pitjantjatjara people how to patch-burn their country. During the cool season, they

light small fires in selected areas and make a patchwork of burned and unburned areas for hunting and food gathering.

Tjukurrpa is passed across generations through songs, stories about sacred sites, ritual dances, and art such as rock drawings, sand paintings and body decoration. Some stories are sacred and can only be painted by certain people.

## Pitjantjatjara people today

During the 1870s, European explorers 'discovered' Pitjantjatjara Country and opened it up to **pastoralists**. They called Kata Tjuta 'The Olgas' and Uluru 'Ayers Rock'.

In 1920, the area around Uluru and Kata Tjuta was made into an Aboriginal reserve by the government. Tourists began to visit the area in the 1940s. At an important ceremony in 1985, native title was returned to the traditional owners, both the Pitjantjatjara people and the Yankuntjatjara people.

Today, the Pitjantjatjara people are often known as Anangu. *Anangu* means 'people' in the language of the Pitjantjatjara, Yankuntjatjara and other related language groups. *Anangu* refers to Indigenous people only.

The Pitjantjatjara and Yankuntjatjara co-manage the Uluru – Kata Tjuta National Park, which was listed as a World Heritage Site in 1987. They own the park and lease it to Parks Australia. People from all over the world visit the park and share its significance. The park contains many sacred sites and Dreaming tracks protected by the Anangu.

The Anangu welcome people to visit the National Park:

*'Pukulngalya yanama, Ananguku Ngurakutu'*  
(welcome greeting in Yankuntjatjara)

*'Pukulpa Pitjama, Ananguku Ngurakutu'*  
(welcome greeting in Pitjantjatjara)

*We, the traditional land owners of Uluru – Kata Tjuta National Park, are direct descendants of the beings who created our lands during the Tjukurrpa (Creation Time). We have always been here. We call ourselves Anangu, and would like you to use that term for us.'*



◀ Uluru and Kata Tjuta were handed back to the Pitjantjatjara and Yankuntjatjara peoples in 1985.

## See also

[Ancient and sacred sites](#) (Central Desert), Volume 1  
[Language groups](#), Volume 1  
[The Dreaming](#), Volume 1



# Kuku-yalanji people

## of the Daintree

*The Kuku-yalanji people are the traditional custodians of the Daintree rainforest area in northern Queensland.*

Language: Kuku-Yalanji



### Traditional culture

Before colonisation, the Kuku-yalanji people lived in the tropical rainforest on the north-eastern coast of Australia, across the area where Cooktown, Port Douglas and Chillagoe now stand. They lived in semi-permanent huts and made weapons such as wooden shields and swords. They gathered food from the forests, rivers, ocean and reefs, taking only what they needed so that there would be plenty for the future.

### Dreaming

In the ancient times that the Kuku-yalanji Elders call Nujakura, the land was created by Ancestral Beings. One Ancestral Being was Kurriyala, the rainbow serpent. The Kuku-yalanji people believe their Ancestral Beings live in the rainforest. They watch over the living and ensure that the Law is kept.

One of the ways in which the Law is kept is through painting. Wuba, or ochre, was ground into fine powder and mixed with a little water. It was used for cave painting. In some sandstone caves, the wuba soaked into the rock and made the paintings permanent.

The Kuku-yalanji people say:

*'We are true rainforest people who live in harmony with our environment. We are part of it and it is part of us. Our culture has always involved a deep respect for nature and an intimate knowledge of its cycles. What we know about the plants of the rainforest we learnt from our elders ... What we know belongs to them, to our culture and our traditions.'*

▼ The Kuku-yalanji people made cave paintings in Mossman Gorge, Queensland.



▲ A Kuku-yalanji dance group takes part in a cultural festival.

### Kuku-yalanji people today

Following British settlement in the 1870s, many Kuku-yalanji people died. Some survivors were moved by the government to other parts of Queensland. Some were moved to Mossman Gorge Reserve and to the northern banks of the Daintree River.

In 2007, the eastern Kuku-yalanji people were granted native title to 2300 square kilometres of land between Mossman and Cooktown. This grant gave the Kuku-yalanji ownership of some parts of the land and joint management of other parts. Most of the land is part of the Wet Tropics World Heritage Site. It includes places such as Cape Tribulation and the Daintree River.

Most of the land was turned into national parks, which are managed jointly by the Kuku-yalanji and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service.

Elder Hazel Douglas said about the land rights grant in 2007:

*'We see this as a new beginning, and a chance for the Yalanji and European peoples to live in peace ... Now we have control we can look at ways to bring jobs and prosperity to this area.'*

### See also

Language groups, Volume 1  
The Dreaming, Volume 1



# Meriam people

## of the Torres Strait

*Meriam people are seafarers. They are one of four Torres Strait Islander groups who have languages and cultures that are distinctly different from Aboriginal Australians. Torres Strait Islanders were among the first Indigenous Australians to encounter Europeans, when Luis de Torres sailed through the Torres Strait in 1606.*

Language: Meriam Mir



### Traditional culture

Meriam people have lived on the three small Murray Islands, called Mer, Dauar and Waier, for about 3000 years. Their culture has strong links with Papua New Guinea. Their religious beliefs provide strong connections with the land and sea.

### Tagai

Tagai provides the spiritual beliefs that unite Meriam people and other Torres Strait Islanders. The rules of the Tagai provide order in the world and give everything and everyone its place. Many Tagai stories focus on the sea.

The story of the Tagai belongs to all Torres Strait Islander peoples. It tells how the islands of the Torres Strait were formed by sea creatures. The Meriam believe that one of the sea creatures, called Gelam, travelled in the form of a dugong. Gelam made the rich red soil on Mer and brought coconut palms, yams and other food plants to the island. He spat out two bean seeds and these became the two smaller islands of Dauar and Waier.

Another story describes how a god named Malo crossed the Torres Strait. He started as a whale but took the form of an octopus when he arrived at the island of Mer. He gave laws to the people that told them how to care for their land and sea.

Mer, or Murray Island, is surrounded by a reef and has two smaller islands, Dauar and Waier, close by.



Meriam dancers wear dharis during a ceremony.

### Land and sea ownership

Meriam people inherited land and coastal waters from their ancestors. A father would tell his son the area that he had inherited. Mounds of plants and fish traps on reefs often marked boundaries. A man owned the land on behalf of his living family, his ancestors and future generations. People grew yams, sweet potatoes, coconuts and fruit in the rich volcanic soil.

The sea was important for food and trade. Coral reefs were rich in fish, dugongs, turtles and shellfish. Food and cultural objects were traded for ochre and spears from the Aboriginal people of Cape York, on the Australian mainland. Dried fish and turtles were traded for food and canoes from people on the coast of New Guinea.

The sea was central to Meriam culture. People had great knowledge of the tides, reefs and winds.

They used double-outrigger canoes. These were dugout canoes, crafted from logs, that had floats attached to each side. The floats helped keep the canoe stable.

### Ceremony

The Meriam perform sacred songs in their ceremonies. Songs could also be sung when warriors were preparing for battle to defend their territory. Ceremonial dances copy the movements of waves, sea creatures and birds.

The Meriam used musical instruments such as bell-shaped drums, pipes and flutes. People decorated their bodies with ochre and feathers. Meriam people were also great weavers. They made a headdress used in ceremonies and battles, called a *dhari*.

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# Meriam people

of the Torres Strait

## Meriam people today

Like many other Indigenous Australians today, Meriam people maintain their traditional culture blended with modern ways. People use modern technology, such as motorised sea craft, but they also make sure that traditional fishing and farming skills are maintained.

## Mabo judgement

Meriam people have been leaders in the struggle for Indigenous Australian land rights. Eddie Mabo was a Meriam man who changed the course of Australian history. Under Australian law, Mabo did not own his traditional lands. The Government owned his land. Mabo was shocked when he learned this and with four others, he decided to take a case to court. After a ten-year legal battle, Mabo won the case and the High Court of Australia awarded the Meriam people legal title to their family land. Eddie Mabo died before the case ended.

This landmark judgement became known as the Mabo judgement. It led to the recognition of the land rights of other Indigenous Australians. The Mabo judgement recognised the intense cultural connection between Indigenous Australians and their ancestral lands.

Flo Kennedy was one of the Meriam people involved in the Mabo case. She said:

*'Our lands were given to us by our ancestors and to us they are still alive. Their spirit still lives and to the white man he's dead. He's finished. To us we still have a responsibility to them. Now they've told us that the land is ours and we know it's ours because they've told us that and their fathers before them have told them that.'*

## See also

[The Dreaming and the Law](#) (totems of the Meriam people), Volume 1

[Eddie Mabo](#) (Mabo judgement), Volume 9



◀ Eddie Mabo and his legal team fought an important land rights case during the 1980s and early 1990s.



# Glossary

**anatomy** body parts and structure of plants or animals

**ancestors** people from whom others are descended

**archaeologists** people who learn about human history by studying remains and other things dug from the earth

**Christianity** religion based on the teachings of Jesus Christ

**colonisation** settlement of a group of people in a place in order to take control of the land

**constellation** grouping of stars seen from Earth

**cremation** burning of a dead body, usually after a ceremony

**Crown land** land owned by the State or Federal Governments

**didjeridu** long, hollow wooden tube that is blown to make a rhythmic droning sound

**hatchet** small axe with a short handle

**heritage** traditions and objects that have been passed down from previous generations

**inhabitants** people who live in or occupy a place

**initiated** allowed into a group, usually after a ritual or ceremony

**keeping place** place where important heritage items and sacred objects are stored

**kinship** relationships between groups of peoples and individuals, based on blood relations and marriage

**middens** mounds of empty shells, bones and other items from meals of shellfish, which mark sites where humans have lived

**mixed racial descent** coming from a family background of different races

**monsoons** seasonal winds that bring the dry season or the rainy season

**Nyungar nation** large group made up of Indigenous Australian language groups who live in the south-western part of Western Australia and who speak similar languages

**ochre** hardened white, yellow or red clay

**pastoralists** sheep or cattle farmers

**pioneers** people who lead the way forward for others

**quarry** deep pit where stone is taken from the earth

**reconciliation** bringing back a friendly and respectful relationship between people, especially Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians

**sacred** worthy of deep respect

**smallpox** disease, caused by a virus, that can kill people

**spiritual** related to the spirit or soul

**sustainable** able to be maintained at a balance and without using up the natural resources

**technology** application of scientific knowledge to practical purposes, such as tool making

**totems** animals, plants or features of the land that have a special significance or relationship to a person or group

**traditional custodians** people who have originally looked after something

**undergrowth** thick cover of plants close to the ground



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