



We Are Australian

THE FIRST AUSTRALIANS

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WARNING: Indigenous Australian readers are warned that this publication may contain images of deceased persons.

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

We are Australian

Australia's identity has developed over time. People, historical events and the natural environment have contributed to the unique characteristics of this nation.

Australian is a proud and **patriotic** nation made up of many cultures, people and beliefs. The **diversity** and unity of its people are central to its identity as a nation.



Australian people celebrate their diversity.

The first Australians

Indigenous Australians are the first Australians. They have lived on this ancient land for thousands of years. Their connection with the land has been passed down from one generation to the next, through painting, dancing, songs, ceremonies and stories of the **Dreaming**.

aussie fact

A group of Australians from various backgrounds was asked, 'What does it mean to be an Australian?'. Some of the common ideas in their answers were:

- being willing to help others
- respecting other cultures
- loving Australia and having pride in the country
- being friendly and easygoing
- valuing mateship, having strong friendships and being loyal to friends and family.

Some Indigenous Australian stories are told through dance.



Indigenous Australian peoples

Australia's first inhabitants are called Indigenous Australians. They are Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders.

Scientists disagree about how long people have lived on the Australian continent. Evidence shows humans have existed for more than 130 000 years old. Some scientists think Indigenous Australians have been in Australia for 40 000 years, but others think it could be 65 000 years or more.

Thousands of years ago, during an **ice age**, sea levels became lower as more and more seawater froze and became ice. Land that had been under water was exposed. The Australian continent was joined to islands in the north, including New Guinea, and to Tasmania in the south.

Slowly, the ice began to melt and the sea levels rose again. Australia became an island. Around 5000 years ago, it took the shape it is today.

New Guinea was attached to the Australian continent thousands of years ago.



The island of Mer, also called Murray Island, is in the Torres Strait.

Aboriginal Australians

Scientists believe the first people to come to Australia walked across land bridges that were exposed by the ice age. They **migrated** from Asia to north-western Australia. These people were Aboriginal Australians.

Torres Strait Islanders

Torres Strait Islanders are people from islands in the Torres Strait, the body of water that lies between Australia and New Guinea. They migrated to these islands when the islands were joined to both New Guinea and the Australian continent.

Torres Strait Islanders became seafarers. They moved between islands and travelled long distances in boats. They used the stars to **navigate**.

Traditional beliefs

Indigenous Australians have strong beliefs that involve a deep sense of belonging to the land. Their relationships with the land, plants and animals come from these beliefs.

Aboriginal Australian beliefs

Aboriginal Australians believe in the Dreaming. The Dreaming is the story of the Ancestral Beings. It is also an understanding of their Law, how people live and how they should behave. Dreaming stories involve the Creation Time, when Ancestral Beings travelled the land and created the plants, animals and features of the land.

The Ancestral Beings passed down lessons about how to live in harmony with the land. Passing on the Dreaming means passing down this knowledge to the next generation, through song, storytelling, painting, dancing and ceremony. This continues today and is part of the living traditions of Aboriginal Australians.



A group of men act out the story of a wallaby hunt during a traditional dance.

Land features, such as the rock formation in Wilkawillina Gorge, South Australia, are believed to have been formed during the Creation Time.



Torres Strait Islanders perform a traditional dance at a flag-raising ceremony.

Torres Strait Islander beliefs

Torres Strait Islanders have their own beliefs about creation. Their stories relate mostly to the Tagai, a mythical warrior, and usually feature the stars.

One story that is common to all Torres Strait Islander people is about the Tagai. He and his crew of twelve men prepared for a canoe journey. Before they set off, the crew ate all the food and drink they were meant to take with them. The Tagai became angry. He held a fishing spear in his left hand and a red fruit, called a *sorbi*, in his right hand. He strung the crew together in two groups of six and threw them all into the sea. They became star patterns in the sky. The spear in the Tagai's left hand became the Southern Cross.

aussie fact

The Torres Strait Islanders are seafaring people. They use the stars to help them navigate their boats, and the stars and their patterns feature in many of their important stories.

Traditional lands and languages

Indigenous Australians are Australia’s traditional landowners. The land is essential to their lives, their wellbeing and their spirituality. They have a special relationship with the land, based on respect.

Traditional lands and boundaries

Traditionally, different family groups of Aboriginal Australians lived in different areas. The environments they lived in ranged from wooded areas to desert environments to the coast.

Traditional lands are recognised by boundaries that are known to each group. This knowledge is passed down by **Elders** to the younger generations. Aboriginal Australians call their area of land their ‘Country’. Neighbouring groups ask for permission if they want to pass through another group’s Country.

This is a map of the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia, which is the traditional home of many Indigenous Australian groups.



This is a map of the Great Sandy Desert, called the Ngurrara Canvas, painted by the traditional landowners of the area.



Children in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, learn the Yolngu Mather language.

Languages

In the past, around 250 Indigenous Australian languages were spoken. About 600 different language groups spoke their own **dialects**. Some of these languages still survive today and are spoken as a first language, which means the language that a person learns first.

Indigenous Australians have oral language traditions. This means that they pass on information through songs and spoken stories. Many Indigenous Australians are able to speak more than one language and understand the languages of other groups, as well as their own.

aussie fact

Indigenous Australians from different areas of Australia use different words for ‘white man’.

Word for ‘white man’	Area
<i>balanda</i>	Arnhem Land, Northern Territory
<i>gubba</i> or <i>gub</i>	south-eastern Australia
<i>migaloo</i>	Queensland
<i>wajala</i>	Western Australia
<i>walypala</i>	parts of northern Australia and the Central Desert

aussie fact

The Torres Strait Islands are grouped into four areas: the Eastern Islands, the Central Islands, the Northern Islands and the Western Islands. The people of the Torres Strait Islands have their own languages that are specific to their group of islands.

Society and culture

Aboriginal Australian society is governed by the Elders of a group. They make important decisions, give advice and resolve arguments. The Elders are responsible for their people and the land, and for upholding the Law.

An important way of passing down knowledge is through storytelling. Other important cultural traditions are **initiation** and **mourning**.

aussie fact

Male and female Elders have separate, but linked, responsibilities. Male Elders deal with matters for men, called 'men's business'. Female Elders have their own rights and responsibilities, called 'women's business'.

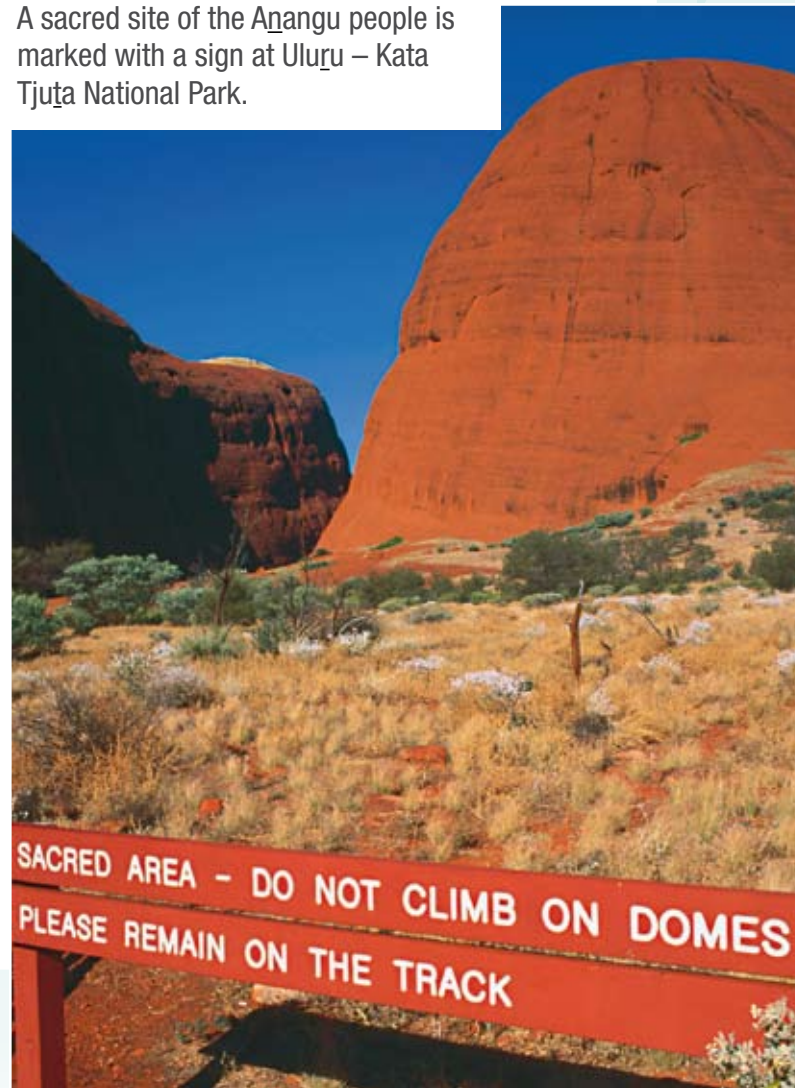
Sacred sites

Sacred sites are places of great importance to Aboriginal Australians. A sacred site is usually connected to an Ancestral Being. Only certain initiated people are allowed access to a sacred site.



An Aboriginal Elder is highly respected and honoured.

A sacred site of the Anangu people is marked with a sign at Uluru – Kata Tjuta National Park.



Initiation ceremonies

Initiation ceremonies are usually secret ceremonies. These ceremonies allow people to join a particular group, move up in **status** or gain knowledge.

Different initiation ceremonies are carried out for men and for women. In certain groups, a man might have a front tooth removed as part of his initiation. Sometimes, people are scarred to show they have gained knowledge.

Mourning customs

Mourning customs are followed after an Indigenous Australian's death. It can take up to one year for final mourning ceremonies to be completed.

Beliefs associated with death differ between groups, so ceremonies differ too. The deceased person's name and image are avoided during the time of mourning in many Indigenous Australian communities.

aussie fact

Many Aboriginal Australian groups pass on tradition and knowledge of the Law to their young people through initiation. They call this process of initiation 'putting them through the Law'.



Some Indigenous Australian peoples put up burial poles during mourning periods.

Traditional ways of life

Indigenous Australian cultures value their traditional ways of life. Some Indigenous Australians still carry out traditional practices such as hunting and gathering food. They may live in homeland communities and teach their children the 'old ways'. They look for a balance between traditional customs and modern life.



A Tiwi man spears a mud crab in the Tiwi Islands, Northern Territory.

Hunting and gathering food

Traditionally, Aboriginal Australian men hunted large animals, such as kangaroos and emus. Women and children gathered berries, fruits and other plants and hunted smaller animals. Every part of the animal or plant was eaten or used to make clothing, baskets, tools or weapons. In coastal areas and near rivers, Aboriginal people caught fish and collected mussels, oysters and shellfish.

Torres Strait Islanders fished, grew fruit and vegetables, and hunted for dugongs and turtles. They took only enough food to feed the number of people in the area.

Harvesting with the seasons

Aboriginal Australians moved with the seasons. They moved to areas where plants were ripening and where animals could be hunted. Areas were not over-harvested, over-hunted or over-fished. This helped maintain the **biodiversity** of the environment.

Natural bush medicine

Aboriginal Australians use natural bush medicine to treat illnesses and injuries. They know which leaves to rub on insect bites to relieve them. They know which barks and leaves to boil into a brew to help a cold.

aussie fact

Bush foods, or bush tucker, are wild plants, insects and animals that can be taken directly from the bush and eaten, such as:

- the bush banana
- the mulga apple
- the honey ant
- the witchetty grub
- the bush turkey
- the wild fig.

Green ant nests and crushed leaves are inhaled to clear a cold.



Relationships

Traditionally, relationships between individual Indigenous Australians and between Indigenous Australian groups are controlled by kinship laws. The Law also tells people the importance of sharing.

Kinship laws

Kinship is the complex network of relationships between individual people and groups. Roles and responsibilities are part of kinship relationships. Kinship laws are part of Aboriginal Law. Indigenous Australians believe that kinship:

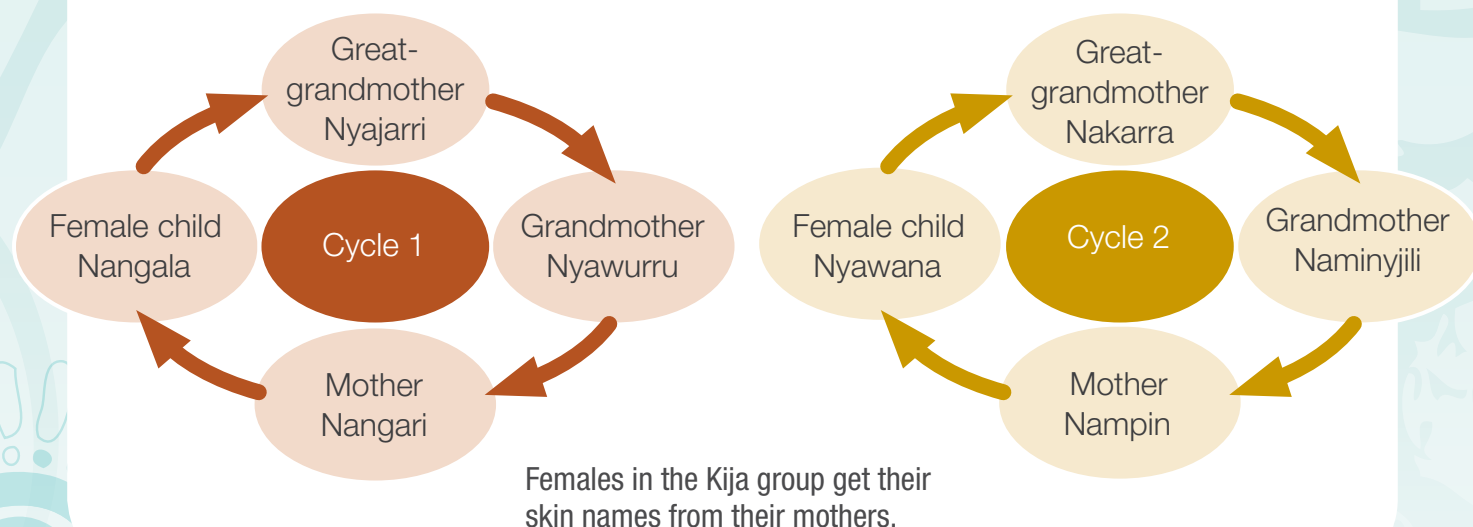
- applies to the extended family, such as aunts, cousins and grandparents, not just the immediate family
- affects the way people should behave towards other people in their group
- links and divides people through their skin groups.

Skin groups, or skin names, are inherited from either the father or mother. There are complicated rules about which skin groups can marry each other.

aussie fact

According to the Law of the Tiwi group:

- people in the Wantarringui skin group cannot marry people in the Marntimapila skin group
- people in the Takaringuwi skin group cannot marry people in the Miyartiwi skin group.



Food was shared among groups, such as the Notallwotall family group that lived in northern Queensland around 1900.

A culture of sharing

An important part of Indigenous Australian culture is sharing. In the past, Aboriginal communities shared food, according to their Law. Sharing was necessary because many groups relied on seasonal harvesting and natural resources that were sometimes hard to come by.

People in poor health, the elderly, mothers with babies, pregnant women and young children always received the share they needed. The custom of sharing is still an important feature of Indigenous Australian life.

Ceremonies

Ceremonies are important to Indigenous Australian cultures. According to Aboriginal beliefs, ceremonies are part of the Law. They are held to celebrate special events. A ceremony may be held to:

- honour the Creation journeys of the Ancestral Beings
- celebrate a young person's entry into adulthood
- honour the dead.

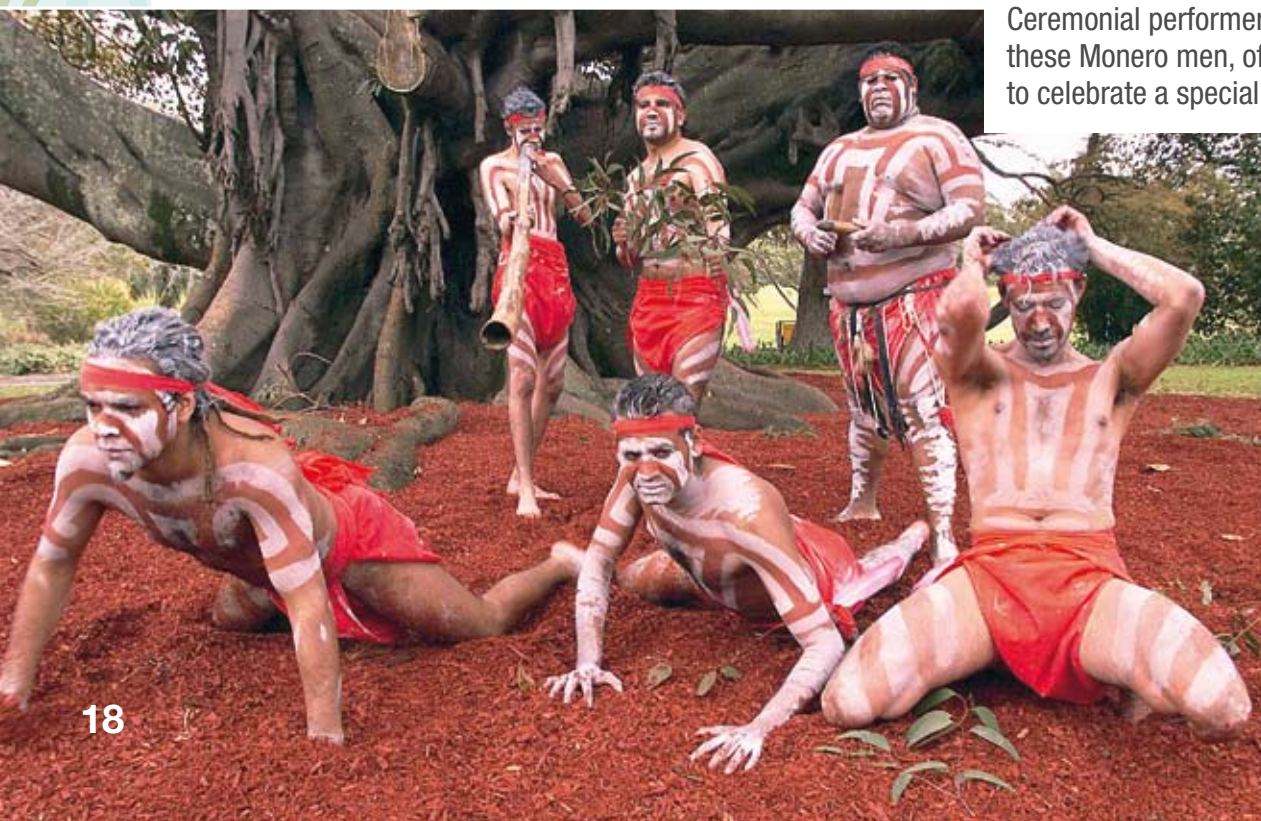
Other ceremonies might be held for healing and burials.

aussie fact

Aboriginal groups store significant items in 'keeping places'. These items might be historical **artefacts**, ceremonial art or crafts, or documents relating to a group's history and culture. Sacred or secret objects are also stored in keeping places.

Secret ceremonies

Only initiated men can attend a secret, sacred ceremony for men. Similarly, women's secret sacred ceremonies are for women only. Other ceremonies are open performances where everyone can join in or watch.



Ceremonial performers, such as these Monero men, often use dance to celebrate a special event.

Body decoration

Aboriginal Australians use body decoration to show their social status, their personality or their role in a ceremony. They paint their bodies and faces with **ochre** or charcoal. Feathers, armlets and necklaces are also used for decoration.



aussie fact

The patterns painted on canvas by Indigenous Australian artists today are often the same as the patterns used as body decoration in the past.

A man plays a warup, a traditional decorated drum, at a festival in the Torres Strait Islands.

Music

Music is a significant part of Indigenous Australian cultures. Groups from different areas use different musical instruments. Some clap boomerangs together and some use clap sticks. The didjeridu is most commonly used in north-eastern Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory.

Some Aboriginal ceremonies involve the singing of song cycles, which are groups of songs sung in a particular order. Torres Strait Islanders use harmony in their singing. They use rattles, clappers of split bamboo, and drums in their ceremonies.



A didjeridu is a musical instrument made from a termite-hollowed tree trunk or a branch of a tree.

Trading between groups

Long before outsiders came to Australia, Indigenous Australians traded with each other across the continent. They set up trade routes. These trade routes were up to 900 kilometres long and criss-crossed the land. People would ask for permission to travel through the Country of other groups, along these trade routes. These journeys took months.

Gathering to trade goods

Hundreds of people from different groups would gather at meeting points to **barter** goods. These gatherings allowed them to obtain goods not found in their own area.

A person might want to barter a boomerang for dried pituri, which is a plant used for chewing or smoking. If the person who had the pituri agreed, an exchange would be made. If not, other items might be offered until an agreement was reached.

aussie fact

Torres Strait Islanders are traditionally seafaring people. They traded goods with people who lived in other areas of Torres Strait and along the coast of New Guinea.



Goods such as stone axes, baskets and wooden swords were exchanged between groups.

Trading across the land

Goods obtained at one meeting point were sometimes taken to another meeting point further along a trade route. People did not usually have to travel the entire trade route to get the goods they wanted. Some goods, such as ochre, were available hundreds of kilometres from where they originally came from. People from southern Australia were able to get carved pearl shells from the north-western coast because of the trade routes.



Pearl shells were often traded between groups who lived by the coast and those who lived inland.

aussie fact

When they gathered to trade, people also swapped songs, dances, language, art and stories. In this way, people from the southern and western areas of Australia learned the ceremonies of people from Arnhem Land in the north.

Early contact with outside cultures

The first visitors to mainland Australia were Torres Strait Islanders and people from New Guinea. They traded goods with local Aboriginal Australians and they shared their songs and ceremonies. From the 1500s onwards, other visitors arrived.

The Macassans

From the 1500s onwards, Macassan fishermen from Indonesia visited the northern shores of Australia to fish for trepang, or sea cucumber. The Macassans traded tobacco, metal and glass with the people of northern Australia.

European explorers

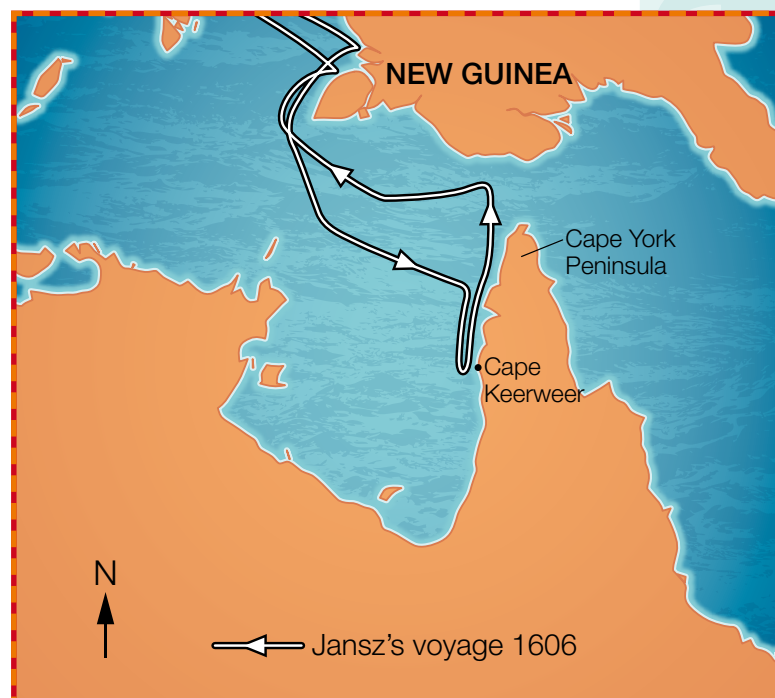
European explorers believed that there was an unknown *Terra Australis*, meaning 'southern land'. They began to explore the oceans around Australia looking for land.

Willem Jansz

In 1606, Dutch sea captain Willem Jansz, also called Janszoon, sailed south-east from New Guinea. He reached land at Pennefather River on the Cape York Peninsula of Australia.

Jansz sailed south to Cape Keerweer before retracing his course to the Pennefather River. Jansz rowed up the river with his crew. When local people came to the shore, Jansz's crew shot at them. The people threw spears, killing one of Jansz's crew.

In 1606, Jansz became the first European to see Australia.



Dirk Hartog

In 1616, Dutch sea captain Dirk Hartog landed on what is now known as Dirk Hartog Island, off the western coast of Australia. He is the first known European to land on Australian soil.

Abel Tasman

In 1642, Dutch sea captain Abel Tasman sailed from the Dutch port of Batavia, in modern-day Indonesia, with two ships. He found land and called it Van Diemen's Land. This land is now known as Tasmania. In 1644, Tasman mapped Australia's northern coastline from Cape York to the North West Cape.



Hartog left a metal plate on Dirk Hartog Island recording his visit.



In 1642, Tasman's two ships came across the western coast of Van Diemen's Land.

The arrival of Captain Cook

In 1768, Captain James Cook sailed from England aboard his ship the *Endeavour*. He was on a scientific voyage to the South Pacific, but he extended his trip to search for *Terra Australis*.

Landing at Botany Bay

In April 1770, Cook landed at Botany Bay on the eastern coast of Australia. It was here that Cook first made contact with the Eora people, the local people of the area.

aussie fact

Cook called the bay he found Stingray Bay. Joseph Banks, a **botanist** travelling with Cook, collected hundreds of samples of native plants and animals. They renamed the bay Botany Bay.



In 1770, Cook sailed up the coast of Australia and landed at Botany Bay.

Meeting the Guugu-Yimidhirr people

Cook continued north along Australia's eastern coast, mapping the coastline. One night, the ship hit the Great Barrier Reef. Cook beached the ship on land to make repairs to the ship's hull.

aussie fact

The Guugu-Yimidhirr called their river the Wahalumbaal, but Cook named it the Endeavour River.

The local Guugu-Yimidhirr people watched the strangers for weeks before they made contact. The contact was mostly friendly and Cook recorded many Guugu-Yimidhirr words.

Claiming the land for Britain

Cook soon sailed further north to Cape York. At Possession Island, he claimed the eastern coast for the British, naming it New South Wales.

On 21 August 1770, at Possession Island, Cook claimed the land for the British.



Sailors, soldiers and convicts arrive

On 13 May 1787, the eleven ships of the First Fleet sailed from England to Australia to establish the first European **colony** in Australia. The ships carried more than 1000 crew, soldiers and convicts. Captain Arthur Phillip was in command of the fleet.

The First Fleet reached Botany Bay on 18 January 1788. The area did not have good soil nor fresh water and was not suitable to settle.

Phillip explored the coast to the north and found a large harbour, which he called Port Jackson. The harbour had a small cove with fresh water. The first European settlement was started here and the cove was named Sydney Cove.

On 26 January 1788, Phillip took formal possession of the colony of New South Wales and became its first Governor.

The First Fleet brought British sailors, soldiers and convicts to Australia.



The Eora people

The Eora people had lived in the area around Sydney Cove for at least 40 000 years before Europeans arrived. They were coastal people who fished from bark canoes, as well as along the rocks and shallow waters of the harbour.

The Eora are the traditional inhabitants of the area around Sydney Cove.



Terra nullius

On his return to England, Cook had reported that the land of Australia was *terra nullius*, meaning 'nobody's land'. Britain ignored the Indigenous communities already living in Australia. Indigenous Australians were not seen to be farming the land, so the British saw Australia as an empty land.

In 1788, around 300 000 Indigenous Australians lived in Australia. Their existence and their ways of life were changed forever following British settlement.

aussie fact

Every year, 26 January is celebrated as a public holiday in Australia. It is called Australia Day. This date, however, is also recognised as a Day of Mourning for Indigenous Australians who became **dispossessed** on this day.

Continuing Indigenous Australian traditions

European settlement of the Australian continent had a significant impact on Indigenous Australians. Their strong connection with the land and their environment was threatened. Their ways of life were changed.

Today, many descendants of the first Australians continue their ancestors' traditions. Through the tradition of storytelling, Indigenous Australian culture and customs are passed down through the generations.



MY STORY

George Jabarlgarri Huddlestone, known as Jabarl, belongs to the Wagiman language group. George has spent much of his life as a **jackeroo** on cattle stations in the Northern Territory. He continues many of his people's traditional ways. He hunts bush turkey and passes on traditional culture to the younger generation. 'I teach my grandchild "jekban". That means bush turkey', George says. George has helped to compile a book of words in the Wagiman language, called *The Wagiman Plants and Animals Guide*. George is also part of a group of people setting up a cattle station on the Wagiman people's traditional land. One of their first tasks was to fly over the area to identify sacred sites.

Modern life and traditional ways

Many people living in Indigenous Australian communities today combine modern life with traditional ways. They buy food and other goods from a store, but they also carry out the traditions of hunting and gathering food.

Some smaller groups live outside larger Aboriginal communities. These people often hunt and gather their food. They may drive a vehicle and use rifles and spears for hunting.



Traditions such as song, dance, art and ceremony are also continued in many communities. In Arnhem Land and Central Australia, various ceremonies are performed to ask the Ancestral Beings to provide a good supply of food or rain. These ceremonies involve chanting, singing and dancing.

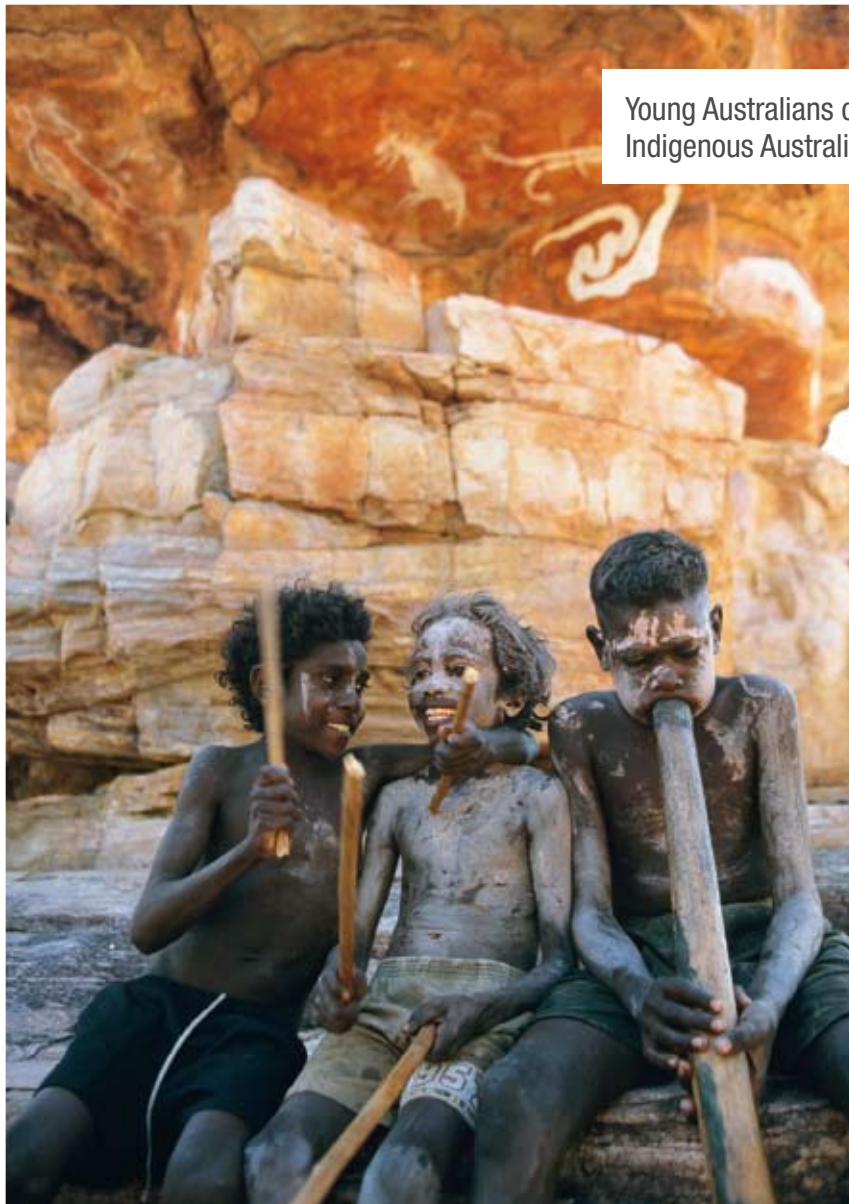
aussie fact

Indigenous Australians who live in cities may continue traditions, too. The Welcome to Country ceremony is a tradition by which traditional landowners give blessings for an event to be held on their land.

Teaching traditions to young people is important to many Indigenous Australians.

We are all Australian

The Indigenous cultures of Australia are the oldest living cultures in the world. Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders have passed their history, culture and traditions down through the generations. These first Australians are an important part of Australian society today.



Young Australians continue many Indigenous Australian traditions.

Glossary

artefacts

objects made by humans that show evidence of how people once lived

barter

swap goods without using money

biodiversity

variety of life present in a natural environment or system

botanist

scientist who studies plants

colony

settlement that is under the control of another country, such as Britain

dialects

forms of a language spoken by different groups

dispossessed

to have had something taken away, especially land

diversity

wide range of different types of people or things

Dreaming

Aboriginal Australian belief system, which includes the stories of Creation Time as well as the Law

Elders

leaders and senior people in a group

ice age

time in Earth's history when ice sheets covered much of the Earth

initiation

ritual or ceremony that allows someone into a group

jackeroo

trainee stockman

migrated

moved from one country to live in a new country

mourning

showing sorrow for someone's death

navigate

explore by ship, using maps or stars in the sky

ochre

hardened white, yellow or red clay

patriotic

expressing pride in one's country

status

social position of someone in a group

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