

# Understanding Indigenous Australia

## IN THIS CHAPTER

- ✓ Exploring Indigenous traditions and contemporary cultures
- ✓ Examining the effects of colonisation on Indigenous peoples
- ✓ Looking at the Indigenous political movement
- ✓ Identifying challenges and possible solutions for a better future

**The Aboriginal people of** Australia are the caretakers of the world's oldest living culture. Indigenous Australians are Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. Their worldviews focus on the connections between people and their environment, and the bonds people have with each other. Indigenous Australians are also an important part of the Australian story. You can't understand modern Australia without considering the importance of its Indigenous peoples and their cultures in that story.

The colonisation of Australia devastated Indigenous people and cultures. Populations were destroyed, and traditional lands and means of self-support were taken away. Government policies were aimed at assimilation. These policies made official the taking of Indigenous children from their families so they could grow up like 'white' Australians. Even though this was a destructive period, the story of how Indigenous people — and their cultures — survived is inspiring.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of Australia's history through Indigenous eyes. You also see what issues they face

today and some solutions they are using to meet these challenges.



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Understanding these aspects of Indigenous history and cultures lets you gain greater insight into who Indigenous people are and what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are like.

## Indigenous Cultures: Then and Now

More than 500 different Aboriginal nations existed at the time the British colonised Australia. These nations had possibly up to one million people in total. These people had lived on this land for over 65,000 years, adjusting to big changes in the environment and landscape. But the arrival of the British in 1788 fundamentally affected Indigenous cultures. Over the next century, as colonies spread, Aboriginal people were separated from their traditional lands. This separation affected their ability to care for their country, support themselves and their families, and practise traditional ceremonies. But Indigenous cultures were strong. Even in the face of such big change, they still adapted.

Today, Indigenous people live across Australia in urban, rural and remote areas. They were once considered by non-Indigenous Australians to be a dying, inferior race. But their growing populations and continuing cultural practices show that modern Indigenous cultures are vibrant and alive. (Chapter 2 outlines the initial impact and later growth of the Indigenous population since colonisation.)

### Ancient traditions

Indigenous cultures across Australia had strong connections to their traditional land. They depended on it to provide them with everything they needed to survive. This included food, shelter, tools and medicine. And they needed each other as well. Nations were divided into *clans*, which were large extended families, perhaps as small as 30 people in some cases. In such small groups, everyone had to pitch in, and people depended a lot on each other.

Cultural values focused on connection with nature, each other and ancestors. Indigenous peoples believed in respect and responsibility for country. They also valued respect for the wisdom and authority of Elders. Chapter 4 goes into traditional practices and beliefs. Chapter 18 describes some cultural sites that are important for Indigenous peoples today.

## **Diversity, diversity and more diversity**

Indigenous cultures around Australia shared many values and had similar worldviews. But great diversity was also present because of the different environments and climates across Australia. Indigenous communities living by the ocean had different ways of life, technologies and practices from Indigenous communities living in desert areas. But across the country, large gatherings of several clans took place for ceremonies, and trading routes spread across the continent. See Chapter 3 for more on this cultural diversity.



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Indigenous cultures have remained strong and vibrant across Australia. Even in modern forms, they have a strong connection to traditional practices. Indigenous peoples do so by using new technology or including aspects of other cultures. Chapter 20 breaks down some myths about Indigenous people.

## **Contemporary painting, singing and dancing**

Art, song and dance were key aspects of traditional cultural practice. They were mostly used for ceremonial purposes, and they still have a main position in modern cultures:

- ✓ Indigenous art has become a worldwide sensation. Some pieces attract prices in the tens and even hundreds of thousands of dollars. But this industry hasn't turned into wealth for the artists. Chapter 12 looks in detail at the Indigenous art world.
- ✓ Indigenous songs were some of the first things that were lost with colonisation. Today, though, Indigenous people are strongly involved with music — particularly country and western music! Younger Indigenous people have also embraced hip-hop music and rap to express their views and aspirations.

- ✓ Indigenous dance is now a leading contemporary Indigenous art form. It blends traditional dancing with more modern styles. Indigenous dance companies have grown around Australia. See Chapter 13 for some of the best of Indigenous Australia's musicians and dancers.

## Old and new ways of storytelling

Indigenous cultures have a storytelling tradition, and Indigenous people have welcomed new ways of getting their message across. Indigenous playwrights, theatre directors and filmmakers have employed Indigenous actors to tell Indigenous stories. Indigenous people have also set up their own national radio service and television service. The national service works well with the many regional radio and television services set up by Indigenous communities. See Chapter 15 for more on these media.

Indigenous cultures originally had an oral tradition with no written languages. But Indigenous storytellers have now turned to the written word. For a long time, Indigenous people had stories written about them by white *anthropologists* (people who study aspects of humans within past and present societies), *linguists* (people who study different languages), historians and writers. But since the 1970s, Indigenous people have had a growing desire to tell their own stories themselves. Since then, Indigenous writing has crossed over into many genres, including crime novels and women's popular fiction. Chapter 14 covers Indigenous writing and publishing in detail.

## And they can kick a ball!

Australia's Indigenous peoples lived as hunter-gatherers. This meant they spent a lot of time moving and had a nutritious, balanced diet. This way of life kept people strong and healthy. Perhaps because of this traditional way of life, Indigenous people have been excellent athletes. Across many codes — but especially football and athletics — Indigenous people have made a big contribution to Australia's sports.

Sportspeople are good role models for Indigenous young people. They often work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

communities as mentors. They help with building confidence and self-esteem, and they encourage young people to be active, fit and healthy. You can find more information on leading Indigenous sportspeople in Chapter 11.

## **There Goes the Neighbourhood**

Understanding modern Indigenous cultures and worldviews largely depends on understanding how Australia's Indigenous peoples have been treated during the country's rather short European history.

Lieutenant James Cook (later Captain) claimed the eastern coast of Australia for the British in 1770. At the time, the large, powerful colonising countries such as Britain, Spain and France had an agreement. They agreed that lands such as Australia, populated only by 'natives' who were seen to be inferior, could be claimed by the colonial power that found them first. This was known as the *doctrine of discovery*. (Chapter 5 talks about this concept.) Indigenous people could have had no idea that, after 1770, their world would change as it did.

### **The takeover begins**

In 1778, the First Fleet arrived in Sydney Cove from Britain and started a penal colony. The settlement was designed to help with the problem of overcrowding in British prisons. It was also designed to set up a claim to the territory against other colonial powers, especially the French. With the start of the colony, life for Indigenous Australians would never be the same again. Chapter 6 explores the effects of this first colony.

### **The colony spreads**

The colony at Sydney Cove soon spread. It needed agricultural industries such as wheat, sheep and cattle to survive, and for that it needed land. The British eventually set up colonies around the country, including

- ✓ Van Diemen's Land, which became known as Tasmania
- ✓ Port Phillip District, in what is now Victoria
- ✓ Moreton Bay, near what is now Brisbane
- ✓ Adelaide, in South Australia



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One initial problem for Aboriginal people was the effect of the diseases brought by the British. Aboriginal people couldn't fight smallpox, colds, flu and measles because their bodies had never fought them before and so had no immunity to them. Populations were destroyed as these diseases spread. Chapter 7 looks at the impact of this expansion.

## Loss of land

As the colonies were built and spread out from their initial boundaries, Aboriginal people were pushed off their land. They lost their ability to feed and shelter themselves and their families. Cultural practices also were disturbed. This led to often violent conflict as Aboriginal people fought against, as best they could, the attempts to move them from their land. This resistance consisted mostly of setting fire to buildings and infrastructure and killing stock. It did slow down the growth of the frontier in some places. But eventually the colonists, with their greater firepower and growing numbers, gained the upper hand.

In many places, Aboriginal people were pushed to the margins of towns and forced to live on specially designated reserves. In some cases, Aboriginal people could live on their traditional lands on pastoral stations and were given basic rations. They did so in exchange for work for the station owner. See Chapter 7 for more on this uneasy alliance.

## And children taken too

The colonists tried to *assimilate* Aboriginal people into European cultural ways. This meant they wanted Aboriginal people to act more like European people and adopt their values and ways of living. They believed that one effective way to do this was to remove Aboriginal children from their families and bring them up

away from them and their culture. Sometimes they placed the children in institutions. Other times the children were adopted into white families. This also affected Torres Strait Islander people after missions were started in the Torres Strait in the late 1800s. The practice continued as Torres Strait Islanders began to settle on the mainland.

All states and territories had laws that allowed the removal of Indigenous children from their families. Some people carrying out the policy genuinely believed that removing Indigenous children from their families would give them a better life. Despite those good intentions, the practice often had devastating consequences for the children taken away and the families and heritage they left behind. Chapter 8 goes over this painful issue in detail.

## **Fighting Back**

From the start of colonisation, Aboriginal people fought against the attacks on their rights to their lands and the impact on their communities and cultures. Over the years, Aboriginal communities continued to clearly state their rights to their lands and to protest their unequal treatment. Torres Strait Islanders soon joined them.

### **The right to be equal**

When the British started their colony at Sydney Cove, they brought their laws as well as their people. They said the laws and their protections applied equally to Aboriginal people and colonists. But this mostly didn't happen.

Aboriginal people's rights to their lands were denied. They were also rarely offered protection from frontier violence. They had to follow rules about where they could live, who they could marry, and whether and where they could work. They couldn't get the same wages as other workers doing the same jobs. In most places, they couldn't vote.

Aboriginal people challenged these restrictions by appealing to governments and even the British Crown. A key focus was equal treatment. They fought particularly for the rights to own and farm their own land and to have the same rights to citizenship as other Australians. Chapter 9 covers citizenship rights in more detail.

## **Changing the playing field**

By the 1960s, Indigenous communities around Australia were living in developing-world conditions, with lower access to health care, education and housing. Many Australians — black and white — believed that this was unacceptable. Over 90 per cent of Australians voted in 1967 to change the Constitution to let the federal government make laws for Indigenous people. At the time, people genuinely believed that this change would lead to a new era of non-discrimination. People also thought that the federal government would act in a way that would help Indigenous people. This assumption was later proved wrong, but the vote was a big moment in Australia's history. Most Australians believed that the improved treatment of Indigenous people was important for the country. Chapter 9 looks at the referendum in more detail.

## **'We want our land back'**

Land rights have been a key focus for Indigenous political movements ever since 1788. The land rights movement gained steam in the 1960s and 1970s. Several land rights regimes were set up — in the Northern Territory and New South Wales, in particular. But hopes for a national scheme never came about. These schemes were set up by governments under different legislation. They were different in how they set up land councils and the terms they made for the return of land to Indigenous people. Rights to land were also given a boost in 1992. That's when the High Court of Australia recognised that, in some situations, Indigenous people could claim a 'native title' right to their traditional land.

## Reconciliation, practical reconciliation and intervention

Governments still struggle to work out how to address system-wide problems of Indigenous disadvantage. In the early 1990s, a national agenda of reconciliation was set out. This agenda aimed to, over a ten-year period, consult with Indigenous people about the best ways they could work together to overcome Indigenous disadvantage. This aim was replaced by a later government with a program of 'practical reconciliation'. This program said it would focus on the areas of health, housing, education and employment. This approach didn't produce major results, though. In 2007, the federal government began a policy of intervention in the Northern Territory. Using this policy, the government tried to make further changes in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities.



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To date, no major inroads have been made into reducing the difference between the disadvantaged circumstances of the broad Indigenous community and the living standards of other Australians.

### 'Sorry' — and then what?

On 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd gave a historic speech in the federal parliament. He apologised to Indigenous Australians for past wrongs committed by governments against them, particularly for the removal of children from their families. This apology was seen as an act of huge symbolic importance. Since then, the Australian government has also supported the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This declaration supports self-determination for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous people continue to fight for that right in practice by seeking to be centrally involved in the policies and programs that affect their community.

Whether the symbolic changes will bring about actual changes in the lives of Indigenous Australians remains to be seen. Chapter 10 looks at the effects of the apology. Chapter 17 looks at the concept of self-determination.

## New Problems for an Old Culture

The impact of colonisation on Indigenous peoples was huge. Traditional ways of life were completely broken up. Dispossession, segregation and racist policies left an unhappy legacy. Statistics show that Indigenous people are much more disadvantaged in areas of health, education outcomes and employment. These statistics pose a challenge to the goal to create a level playing field for all Australians. Indigenous communities are playing an active and effective role in trying to find solutions. Chapter 19 looks at some of the achievements of Indigenous people.

### Breaking the cycle of poverty

Indigenous life expectancy is lower than that of other Australians. Their health is poorer. Their home ownership levels are lower. Their housing conditions are worse than those of other Australians. Indigenous people also have lower levels of education and higher levels of unemployment than non-Indigenous people. Much has been done to try to fix this situation. Indigenous people have set up their own medical services. They also are training to be nurses and doctors to work on health needs in their communities. Chapter 16 has more information on Indigenous health.

Indigenous disadvantage won't be overcome without improving the education levels of Indigenous people. Literacy levels and school attendance rates are a key focus in this area. Indigenous people have developed special programs that help Indigenous children learn how to read and write. Programs also have been designed to improve the education of Indigenous adults.

Of course, a link exists between education levels and unemployment levels. The remoteness of some communities is also a barrier to some Indigenous people entering the workforce. Chapter 16 explores education and employment.

## **Challenging the rules and regulations**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities had their own laws and government structures. Some of these survive today. But when the British colonised Australia, they brought their rules and governance systems. They didn't recognise the rights of Indigenous Australians.

British law claimed it would keep Indigenous people safe. In practice, British law became a weapon that sped up their dispossession. This law was also used to control Indigenous people. It told Indigenous people where they could live, the conditions of their employment, whether they could vote and sometimes even if they could marry. The laws also legalised theft of Indigenous people's land and removal of their children.

Indigenous people also came into contact with the criminal justice system. They were targeted by the police and charged with offences that non-Indigenous people wouldn't have been charged with. They were more likely to be refused bail (conditions that allow the release of an accused person while they await trial) and given longer sentences compared with non-Indigenous people.

All this led to an overrepresentation of Indigenous people in prisons. It also led to the charge that racism exists right through the criminal justice system. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody confirmed the bias in the legal system and made many recommendations.



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Very few of the recommendations made by the Royal Commission have been put into place. Indigenous Australians are still over-represented in prisons.

## **Setting up Indigenous enterprises**

Indigenous people aren't resting in the face of the problems in their communities. This book describes many instances of Indigenous people developing effective solutions to their own problems. One area in which Indigenous people are trying to find new opportunities is in business and economic development.

These opportunities range from ecotourism and cultural tours to partnerships with mining companies, bush tucker restaurants and Indigenous-owned holiday resorts. This is an important plan in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. You can find more detail about this strategy in Chapters 3 and 16.

## Doing It for Ourselves

Serious disadvantage is seen throughout the history of Indigenous Australia. But communities across the country have also had their successes in finding solutions to tough problems. These solutions are often simple. They include providing drying-out shelters or rehabilitation programs to deal with issues of alcohol abuse and violence, bilingual language models (using Indigenous languages as well as English) that help to improve educational outcomes, and community night patrols that keep the peace in Indigenous communities.



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All along, Indigenous people have said that, if they had the tools to deal with the issues within their own communities, they would do a better job than governments. Lots of evidence shows that this is the case. This is known as *self-determination*. Indigenous claims to the right to self-determination are a main part of their political agenda. Chapter 17 looks at these issues in more depth.



PROJECT

*Find out who the traditional owners of the country you live on are. Learn more about them from local resources such as libraries, land councils and local Indigenous community organisation websites.*