

No More Classifying Cultures

The effectiveness and sophistication of Indigenous Australian resource management, and social organisation, is starting to be more recognised. The less appropriate terms are offensive in that they imply Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies are not as 'advanced' as European societies. The terms are based on the 'progress' model of history which many people now question, and on the idea of evolution from 'lower' to 'higher' (western) forms of social organisation.

Less appropriate	More appropriate
Primitive	Indigenous nations
Simple	Complex and diverse societies
Native	Efficient resource managers
Prehistoric Stone age	Indigenous Australian society

Tribe	Aboriginal people/s
Horde	Aboriginal nations
Band	Aboriginal communities
Clan	Mob/s
Moiety	Language groups Culture groups

'Nation', 'community', 'people', 'mob' or the local language or culture group name is usually preferable to 'tribe'. 'Mob' is an Aboriginal English word and as such may be more appropriate, but community acceptance may be required before using this word. Some Aboriginal people use the term 'tribe' due to mainstream schooling in imposed terminology and such usage needs to be respected.

'Tribe' is a European word that tends to impart western preconceptions developed from colonial experiences in North America and Africa. 'Horde' is a more technical word used by anthropologists, but its common usage also has derogatory connotations.

Anthropologists sometimes use the terms 'band', 'clan' and 'moiety' to convey certain characteristics of cultural groupings. Rather than trying to convey precise structures of Indigenous Australian societies it may be more useful for teachers to convey the essence of Indigenous Australian social organisation.



Belonging to the Land

The rotational or cyclical occupation of land by Aboriginal people was inaccurately portrayed as being 'nomadic' rather than the expression of an intimate knowledge of, and ability to harvest the land. It was and is based on not staying in one place and exhausting all resources, but moving around the territory at particular times when food resources became available. The crucial concept is 'belonging to the land'.

Nomadism has been associated with lack of land tenure or anchorage in land, and this has been coupled with the idea that Aboriginal people did not really occupy the land, but only roamed over it. The extension of the doctrine of terra nullius was based on this kind of distinction. Note that the 1992 Mabo Native Title judgement by the High Court rejected terra nullius as wrong both in fact and in law. For more information, see the Fact Sheet *Mabo and Wik* <http://www.racismnoway.com.au/>

Less appropriate	More appropriate
Nomadic	Seasonal occupation
Nomads	Rotational/cyclical occupation
Nomadism	Looking after the country/the land

Dreaming and Spirituality

'The Dreaming' or 'The Dreamings' are mostly more appropriate as they describe Indigenous beliefs as ongoing today. Many people use 'Dreamtime' to refer to the period of creation.

It is less appropriate to use the word 'Dreamtime' as it tends to indicate a time period, which has finished. In reality, the Dreamings are ongoing all over Australia. However, many Aboriginal people do still use the word 'Dreamtime', and this usage must be respected.

In terms of Indigenous belief systems, 'spirituality' or 'spiritual beliefs' are more appropriate than 'religion'. Indigenous Australian spirituality is localised by definition, it is more a way of life, of connectedness and belonging.

The word 'religion' tends to refer mainly to established, organised 'world' or western religions. It is important to recognise that many Indigenous people are religious in terms of mainstream religions, and often combine these beliefs with Aboriginal spirituality.

It is appropriate to use 'The Legends' when referring to Torres Strait Islander culture. 'Creation Stories' or 'Dreaming Stories' convey more respect for Aboriginal Australian people's beliefs. Capitalising these terms conveys more respect.

Using words such as 'myth' or 'story' conveys the impression that information from the Dreaming is not true or is trivial, or only happened in the distant past. These words can also convey the impression that Dreaming Stories are fairy tales rather than creation stories.

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All staff and students of the University rely heavily on language to exchange information and to communicate ideas. However, language is also a vehicle for the expression of discrimination and prejudice as our cultural values and attitudes are reflected in the structures and meanings of the language we use.

Appropriate Terminology, Indigenous Australian Peoples

Circle the 'More Appropriate' Terminology

Dreaming and Spirituality

Dreamtime	The Dreaming	The Dreamings			
Indigenous spirituality	Indigenous religion				
Indigenous myths	Aboriginal story/stories	Creation Stories	Teachings from the Dreamings	Indigenous legends	Dreaming Stories

Using the right names

The Aborigines	Aboriginals	The Torres Strait Islanders	Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people/s	ATSI people	Aboriginal people/s
Blacks	White	Coloured	Other Australians	Non-Aboriginal/Indigenous people	Yellafellas
		Uluru	Ayers Rock		

No more classifying people

Traditional Aboriginal people	Isolated Aboriginal people	Indigenous Australian people/s	Modern Aboriginal people	Contemporary Aboriginal people	Urban Aboriginal people
Part aborigine	Half caste	Full blood	Aboriginal people/s	Indigenous people/s	Torres Strait Islanders people/s

No more classifying cultures

Nomadic	Seasonal occupation	Rotational/cyclical	Looking after the country/land		
Aboriginal tribe/s	Aboriginal peoples/mobs	Aboriginal communities	Language groups	Hordes	Indigenous nation/s
Primitive	Native Aboriginal people	Prehistoric society	Indigenous Australian society	Complex and diverse societies	Stone age society

Telling the right stories

Pre-history	Indigenous history	Pre-invasion history	Post-invasion history	Indigenous Australian history	Torres Strait Islander history
		Captain Cook 'discovered' Australia	Language groups	Hordes	Indigenous nation/s
Chiefs	Kings	Queens	Elders		
Aboriginal people have lived here:	a) For 40,000 years	b) Since the beginnings of the Dreamings			
		Settlement	Invasion		

Appropriate Terminology, Indigenous Australian Peoples

Information adapted from 'Using the right words: appropriate terminology for Indigenous Australian studies' 1996 in Teaching the Teachers: Indigenous Australian Studies for Primary Pre-Service Teacher Education. School of Teacher Education, University of New South Wales.

All staff and students of the University rely heavily on language to exchange information and to communicate ideas. However, language is also a vehicle for the expression of discrimination and prejudice as our cultural values and attitudes are reflected in the structures and meanings of the language we use. Language cannot be regarded as a neutral or unproblematic medium and can cause or reflect discrimination due to its intricate links with society and culture.

This guide clarifies appropriate language use for the history, society, naming, and cultures of Indigenous Australian and Torres Strait Islander people/s.

Indigenous Australian peoples are people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and are accepted as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person in the community in which they live, or have lived.

Using the Right Names

The 'more appropriate' terms stress the humanity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. 'Aboriginal' which in Latin means 'from the beginning' and other such European words are used because there is no Aboriginal word that refers to all Aboriginal people in Australia.

Using terms such as 'the Aborigines', or 'the Aboriginal people' tends to suggest that Aboriginal people/s are all the same and thus stereotypes Indigenous Australians. The fact is that Indigenous Australia is multicultural. Australia before the invasion was comprised of 200-300 autonomous language groups that were usually referred to as 'tribes', now more often as 'peoples', 'nations' or 'language groups'. The nations of Indigenous Australia were, and are, as separate as the nations of Europe or Africa.

The Aboriginal English words 'blackfella' and 'whitefella' are used by Indigenous Australian people all over the country — some communities also use 'yellafella' and 'coloured'. Although less appropriate, people should respect the acceptance and use of these terms, and consult the local Indigenous community or Indigenous Australian members of staff for further advice.

Less appropriate names	More appropriate names
Aborigines	Indigenous Australian people/s
The Aborigines	Aboriginal people/s
The Aboriginal people	Aboriginal person
Aboriginal, Aborigines	Torres Strait Islander people/s
Blacks Whites Yellafellas Coloured	Torres Strait Islander person

Aboriginal language people terms

Aboriginal language people terms such as 'Koori', 'Murri', 'Nyoongah' are appropriate for the areas where they apply. About 80% of the Torres Strait Island population now resides outside the Torres Strait. There are also local names for particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language groups, for example 'Gamilaroy' (NSW) or 'Pitjantjatjara' (NT/SA). Merriam (Murray Islanders).

Language Group	Geographic Area
Murri	Queensland, North West NSW
Nyoongah	Western Australia
Koori	New South Wales
Goori	North Coast New South Wales
Koorie	Victoria
Yolng	Arnhem Land
Anangu	Central Australia
Palawa	Tasmania
Nunga (not always an appropriate term)	South Australia
Ngarrindjeri	SA – River Murray, Lakes, Coorong people
Torres Strait Islanders or Torres Strait Islander people	Torre Straight

Place Names

Local Indigenous Australian peoples named all of Australia in their languages before the invasion. Part of the process of colonisation has been the European renaming of places and natural features all over Australia. For example, Ayers Rock was a European name imposed on a section of Aboriginal country. Uluru is the Aboriginal name for this significant site in Central Australia which should be respected and recognised. This recognition of Indigenous Australia is fundamental to social justice.

No More Classifying People

Terminology that has been used to classify people can be extremely offensive to many Indigenous Australians. Some commonly used terms imply that there are real differences between Indigenous Australian peoples of different areas. It is critical that they are not used to refer to or to attempt to classify Indigenous peoples.

In ‘long-settled’ areas, the implication that ‘urban’ Indigenous Australians are less Indigenous than ‘traditional’ or ‘transitional’ people and cultures is most offensive. A real issue is the ‘real Aborigine’ syndrome – the idea that the ‘real’ Aboriginal people live in Arnhem Land or the Central desert, and that only ‘traditional’ Aboriginal people and cultures are ‘really Aboriginal’.

It is important to bear in mind that Indigenous Australians have much more in common than the wide use of these categorising terms would suggest. For example, most Aboriginal people who are classified as ‘urban’ in fact have very close links to ‘traditional’ country. Many Indigenous Australians find the term ‘transitional’ offensive as it implies progress upwards towards something better, the idea that assimilation into mainstream is better.

Caution should be used with terms such as ‘rural’, ‘isolated’ and ‘remote’. These words should refer to geographical location and access to services only. Indigenous Australian communities have experienced divisiveness because these categorical terms imply that Aboriginal people living in these communities are less socialised than people living in urban communities.

Less appropriate terms	More appropriate terms
Transitional	Indigenous Australian peoples
Traditional	Aboriginal peoples
Contemporary Modern Urban Rural Isolated or remote Aboriginal people/ Torres Strait Islander people	Torres Strait Islander people or ‘peoples’ may be preferable, depending on the context. Using the more appropriate terms helps to avoid attempting to inaccurately label, categorise and stereotype people.

Part-aborigine Full blood Half caste Quarter caste Octoroon Mulatto Hybrid	Aboriginal people/s Indigenous people/s Torres Strait Islander people/s
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In the past, governments tried to classify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people according to skin colour and parentage using these less appropriate terms. Exemption certificates were issued to Aboriginal people with lighter skin colour to allow them the same basic freedoms that people without Indigenous heritage took for granted as citizens. The assumption was that any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person with any ‘European’ blood was more intelligent, and a fitter member of Australian society.

Until 1972 when the White Australia Policy was abolished, White Australia excluded Indigenous Australian people by definition. Major changes for Indigenous Australian peoples were not introduced until 1967 through the referendum, and by returning land to some groups from 1975.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people understand their own history and identity, and recognise that physical features do not determine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestry.

Telling the Right Stories

Less appropriate	More appropriate
<p>Pre-history</p> <p>‘Pre-history’ is a term used by some archaeologists and historians; it was developed originally to denote the time period before European history was recorded in writing. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people find the term offensive as it suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia did not have a history before European invasion, because it is not written and recorded.</p> <p>Use of this term denies the validity of Indigenous Australian history before what is commonly regarded as written history, and before European contact. It also denies a place for Aboriginal people in history. This is still reflected in those schools today which begin a study of Australian history in 1770 or 1788.</p>	<p>Indigenous (Australian) history</p> <p>Pre-invasion history</p> <p>Invasion history</p> <p>Post-invasion history</p>
<p><i>‘Aboriginal people have lived in Australia for 40,000 years’</i></p> <p>Forty thousand years puts a limit on the occupation of Australia and thus tends to lend support to migration theories and anthropological assumptions. Many Indigenous Australians see this sort of measurement and quantifying as inappropriate.</p>	<p><i>‘... since the beginning of the Dreaming/s’</i></p> <p>‘Since the beginning of the Dreaming/s’ reflects the beliefs of many Indigenous Australians that they have always been in Australia, from the beginning of time, and came from the land.</p>
<p><i>‘Captain Cook ‘discovered’ Australia’</i></p> <p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were in Australia long before Captain Cook arrived; hence it was impossible for Cook to be the first person to ‘discover’ Australia. Most Aboriginal people find the use of the word ‘discovery’ offensive. However, it can be noted that the word ‘discovery’ can mean finding something that one as an individual did not know was there. This meaning should be stressed if the word is to be used. One reason why so much had to be ‘discovered’ is the fact that Indigenous knowledge was discounted and disregarded for so long.</p>	<p><i>‘Captain Cook was the first Englishman to map the east coast of ‘New Holland’</i></p>
<p>Settlement</p> <p>The use of the word <i>‘settlement’</i> ignores the reality of Indigenous Australian peoples’ lands being stolen from them on the basis of the legal fiction of terra nullius and negates the resistance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The fact that most settlers did not see themselves as invading the country, and that convicts were transported against their will is beside the point. The effects were the same for Indigenous Australian peoples.</p>	<p>Invasion</p> <p>Colonisation</p> <p>Occupation</p> <p>Australia was not settled peacefully, it was invaded, occupied and colonised. Describing the arrival of the Europeans as a ‘settlement’ attempts to view Australian history from the shores of England rather than the shores of Australia.</p>
<p><i>‘Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth were the first men to cross the Blue Mountains’</i></p> <p>Statements such as this deny the Indigenous history of Australia, and are examples of the White Australia frame of reference that totally excludes Indigenous Australia.</p>	<p><i>‘Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth were the first European men to cross the Blue Mountains’</i></p> <p>Aboriginal men, women and children had crossed the Blue Mountains for thousands of years before European explorers.</p>
<p>Kings</p> <p>Queens</p> <p>Chiefs</p> <p>Aboriginal people did not, and do not have chiefs, kings and queens. The introduction of ‘kings’ or ‘queens’ was a colonial strategy to raise up individuals for the authorities to deal with. Colonial governments had no experience of dealing with the structures of Indigenous societies, and this was a way of trying to make Aboriginal societies conform to English experience of chiefs in other countries. It was a way of honouring individual status, but there was usually an element of mockery eg such names as ‘King Billy’ or ‘Queen Gooseberry’.</p> <p>Note however that many Aboriginal people who are descended from colonially appointed ‘kings’ and ‘queens’ are proud of this ancestry.</p>	<p>Elders</p> <p>Elders are men and women in Aboriginal communities who are respected for their wisdom and knowledge of their culture, particularly the Lore. Male and female Elders, who have higher levels of knowledge, maintain social order according to the Law. The word ‘Elders’ should be written with a capital letter as a mark of respect.</p>



Reference

Using the right words: appropriate terminology for Indigenous Australian studies’ 1996 in Teaching the Teachers: ***Indigenous Australian Studies for Primary Pre-Service Teacher Education.*** School of Teacher Education, University of New South Wales.

Resource Bibliography and Websites

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James Cook University: School of Indigenous Australian Studies – provides lists and brief descriptions of research projects being undertaken by the School. Accessed March 2004

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Southern Cross University, Northern NSW – Indigenous Australian Peoples Research and Development Centre – lists current research projects and provides contact details. Accessed March 2004

<http://www.faira.org.au/contents.html>

The Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action – provides links to government policies and research projects on issues such as the Stolen Generation – click on ‘Issues’ Accessed March 2004

<http://www.austlit.edu.au/specialistDatasets/aboriginal> Database of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and their works. Accessed March 2004

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