

Aboriginal Australian Culture

Aboriginal peoples have lived on the continent now known as **Australia** for more than 50,000 years. Theirs is one of the oldest living **civilizations** in the world. Aboriginal peoples are one of two Indigenous (native) cultural groups in Australia. The other group is the **Torres Strait Islander peoples**. Both groups share a close connection to the land, to waterways, and to living things. However, the Aboriginal peoples have their own distinct cultural practices, languages, and beliefs.

Aboriginal peoples originally lived in all types of areas, including desert, tropical, coastal, bush, mountain, and inland regions. At the time the first British settlers arrived in 1788, there were about 600 different groups of Aboriginal peoples throughout the continent.

Origins and beliefs

Scientists think that the Aboriginal peoples originally came from **Asia**. They would have travelled during a time of lowered sea levels, when there were land bridges between Asia and Australia. Some travelled over water. By about 35,000 years ago, all of the continent of Australia was occupied.

The Aboriginal peoples themselves, however, have their own stories about how they came to be. These stories are part of the Dreaming, or Dreamtime. The Dreaming is very important to the Aboriginal peoples. It is the basis for their history, their relationship with the land, and their laws. Dreaming stories pass on important knowledge, cultural values and belief systems to later generations. These stories are expressed through song, dance, painting and storytelling. Aborigines have maintained a link with the Dreaming from ancient times to today, creating a rich cultural heritage.

Society and Culture

Aboriginal peoples lived in clans that were made up of family groups. Each clan had its own language, cultural practices, and traditional lands. The lands, referred to as **Country**, were divided up using geographic boundaries such as rivers, lakes, and mountains. Each group developed different skills to adapt to the **environment** of its Country. Their traditional homelands were central to the survival and well-being of each clan. The land was a source of food, shelter, medicine, and tools. For this reason each clan had a responsibility to care for its Country. The clan made sure to protect the natural resources and use them wisely so that the resources would be there for future generations. They travelled through the bush, hunting with spears and boomerangs (throwing sticks) and searching for food. They had few possessions and made everything they needed. Below is an image of a boomerang.



Aboriginal peoples were traditionally hunters and gatherers who did not live in one place. They moved around their Country in search of food. Within the clan, all members had specific roles and responsibilities to ensure the survival of their community. Men hunted animals, such as kangaroos, emus, birds, reptiles, and fish. Women collected fruits, honey, insects, eggs, and plants. In desert areas small family groups moved from water hole to water hole.

Exchange and **trade** were essential parts of the Aboriginal society. Items that were traded included kangaroo skin, pearl shells for

decorations, ochre for painting, and stone and timber for making axes and spears.

Shelter

In the north, Aborigines made bark shelters. During heavy rains they used caves and huts on stilts to protect against flooding and insects. In the desert people used windbreaks, or shelters made using saplings covered with brush or bark. When the weather was fine, most Indigenous Australian peoples slept in the open with a windbreak. When it was too cold, dogs helped provide warmth. Fires were kept burning. People carried live fire sticks when they moved from place to place.

Storytelling and Art

Aboriginal peoples passed down knowledge through storytelling. Each generation learned about the landscape and surrounding ecosystem through stories that were told to them. This included information about sources of water and the effects of seasons on plants and animals.

Each cultural area had its own style of art. These included sacred object art, body decoration, elaborate headdresses, and wood sculptures. **Rock art** as old as 20,000 years has been discovered in several parts of Australia. Here is an image of some Aboriginal rock

art. Can you make out what some of the images are?



Music was used for entertainment and relaxation. You may have heard of the didgeridoo, it is a traditional aborigine instrument as you can see in the image.

If you want to hear what the didgeridoo sounds like have a look at this short video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yG9ZX1FS20A>.



Effects of European Invasion

The lives and land of Aboriginal peoples changed dramatically when Europeans arrived in Australia more than 200 years ago. The first Europeans to land in Australia were Dutch sailors in the 1600s. They did not stay, but they came into conflict with some of the Aboriginal people in the area before they left.

In 1788 several ships from Great Britain, carrying about 1,000 people, arrived in Australia. The British established a colony and started to

force the Aboriginal peoples off the land. The colonists cleared land and put up fences. This cut off the native population from their sacred sites and hunting grounds and access to clean water. The British soon expanded further inland, forcing more Aboriginal peoples from their land. The Aboriginal peoples struggled to survive, and a large number died from starvation.

Europeans also brought new diseases to Australia. Aboriginal peoples had never been exposed to bronchitis, smallpox, scarlet fever, chicken pox, measles, or whooping cough. This exposure was disastrous for the Aboriginal population. Thousands died from the diseases and from battles with the colonists.

In 1856 the colonies began to pass laws to "protect" the Aboriginal peoples. Reserves were set up for them to live on, and they were given food and clothing. Those laws, however, kept the Aboriginal people from following their traditional livelihood and led to the near-destruction of their culture.

In the 20th century the Australian government started another program that hurt the Aboriginal peoples. They were forced to abandon their traditional way of life and to adopt European culture. Aboriginal children were taken from their parents and raised by white families or in government institutions. These children later became known as the Stolen Generations.

Aboriginal peoples protested this mistreatment for many years. Finally, in the 1960s, Aboriginal people were given the right to vote and were recognized as Australian citizens. By the late 1990s Australian society had begun to acknowledge the horrible treatment Aboriginal Australians had received. In 1998, the first National Sorry Day was held. The event is celebrated every year from May 26 to June 3. In 2008 the Australian prime minister issued a formal apology for the past mistreatment of Aboriginal peoples.

Today, Aboriginal peoples make up less than 3 percent of the Australian population. However, many more people are learning about their history and about the contributions they have made.

Questions

1. How many years ago did Aboriginals arrive in Australia?
2. What is dreaming or dream time?
3. Why is dream time so important?
4. Do you think aboriginal peoples cared for the environment?
Explain your answer.
5. List three negative effects of the European invasion?
6. List two interesting facts you learned about aboriginal peoples from your reading.