



## General Information Folio 5:

# 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 read headlines on language to exchange information and to communicate ideas. However, language is also a vehicle for the expression of discrimination and prejudice and racial, racial and anti-racism are reflected in the structure and meaning of the language we use. This means that language cannot be regarded as a neutral or non-problematic medium, and can cause or reflect discrimination and racial discrimination links with social and culture.

This guide clarifies appropriate language use for the history, society, culture and classification of Indigenous Australian and Torres Strait Islander people.

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

#### More appropriate

- Indigenous Australian people/people
- Aboriginal people/people
- Aboriginal person
- Torres Strait Islander people/people
- Torres Strait Islander person

The 'more appropriate' terms refer to the history 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.

#### Less appropriate

- Aborigine
- The Aborigine
- The Aboriginal people
- Aboriginal, Aborigine
- The Torres Strait Islander
- Black
- White
- Yellafella
- Coloured

Using terms such as 'the Aborigine', or 'the Aboriginal people' tends to suggest that the Aboriginal people are all the same, and that there are people Indigenous Australian. The fact is that Indigenous Australia is a multicultural Australia before the immigration comprised of 200-300 autonomous language groups that were all referred to as 'tribes', now more often

as 'people', 'nation' or 'language groups'. The nation of Indigenous Australia were, and are, a separate nation of Europe or Africa.

The Aboriginal English words 'blackfella' and 'whitefella' are used to Indigenous Australian people all over the country. Some communities also use 'ellafella' and 'coloured'. Although less appropriate, people should respect the acceptance and use of these terms, and consider the local Indigenous community or Ynggorendi for further advice.



#### More appropriate

- Murrumbidgee - Qld, north west NSW
- Noolbargah - WA
- Koori - NSW
- Goorib - north coast NSW
- Koorie - Vic
- Yolngu - Arnhem Land
- Anangu - Central Australia
- Palawa - Tasmania
- Nunga (no. alwa) - a more appropriate term - SA
- Ngarrindjeri - SA - River Murray, Lakes, Coorong people
- Torres Strait Island People
- Murray Island People
- Mer Island People

Aboriginal language people terms such as 'Koori', 'Murrumbidgee', 'Noolbargah' are appropriate for the areas where they apply. About 80% of the Torres Strait Island population now reside on the Torres Strait and although, local terminology such as Murray Island People and Mer Island People is also used. There are also local names for particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island language groups, for example 'Gamilara' (NSW) or 'Pitjantjatjara' (NT/SA).

Some people use 'Nunga' in general reference to Indigenous people who reside in and around the area of Adelaide. Many Indigenous South Australian prefer people not to pre-empt the right to use their word 'Nunga'. Local Indigenous Australian people (eg Ynggorendi staff at Flinders) can clarify appropriate use of this and other terms.



## More appropriate

Uluru

Local Indigenous Australian people named all of Australia in their languages before the admission. 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.

## Less appropriate

Ayers Rock

Part of the process of colonisation has been the European renaming of places and natural features all over Australia. Ayers Rock was a European name imposed on a decision of Aboriginal country.

## No more classifying people

### More appropriate

Indigenous Australian people

Aboriginal people

'Torres Strait Islander people or people' may be preferable, depending on the context.

Using the more appropriate terms helps to avoid employing an inaccurate label, categorise and stereotype people.

### Less appropriate

Transitional

Traditional

Contemporary

Modern

Urban

Rural

Isolated or remote Aboriginal people/Torres Strait

Islander people

The less appropriate terms can be extremely offensive to many Indigenous Australians who categorise people and themselves. There are real differences between Indigenous Australian people of different areas. It is critical that there are no need to refer to or to employ a classification Indigenous people.

In 'long settled' areas, the implication that 'rural' Indigenous Australians are less Indigenous than 'traditional' or 'transitional' people and classification is 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 classification are 'real Aboriginal'.

It is important to bear in mind that Indigenous Australians have much more in common than the stereotype of these categories. Terms would suggest. For example, many Aboriginal people who are classified as 'rural' in fact have very close links to 'traditional' country. Many Indigenous Australians find the term 'transitional' offensive as it implies progress, backward or something better, the idea has a similarity in our mainstream better.

Categories 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 discrimination because these categorical terms imply that Aboriginal people living in these communities are less socialised than people living in rural communities.

### More appropriate

Aboriginal people, Indigenous people, and Torres Strait Islander people

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their own history and identity, and recognise the political features of the modern Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestors.

## Less appropriate

'Part-aborigine', 'half-blood', 'half-caste', 'quarter-caste', 'occasional', 'mixture', 'half-breed'

In the past, governments tried to classify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people according to skin colour and parentage using these less appropriate terms. Example certificates were issued to Aboriginal people with lighter skin colour to allow them the same basic freedoms as people with darker Indigenous heritage look for granted activities. The assimilation was an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person with an 'European' blood was more intelligent, and a finer 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 people were introduced in 1967 through the referendum, and returning land to some groups from 1975.



## No more classifying cultures

### More appropriate

Indigenous nation

Complex and diverse societies

Efficient resource managers

Indigenous Australian society

The efficiency and sophistication of Indigenous Australian resource management, and social organisation, is being more recognised.

### Less appropriate

Primitive

Simple

Native

Prehistoric

Stone age

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 'progressive' model of history which many people now question, and on the idea of evolution from 'lower' to 'higher' (western) forms of social organisation.

### More appropriate

Aboriginal people

Aboriginal nation

Aboriginal communities

Mob

Language groups

Cultural groups

'Nation', 'community', 'people', 'mob' or the local language or

collective group name is always preferable to 'tribe'. 'Mob' is an Aboriginal English word and although may be more appropriate, but community acceptance may be required before using this word. Some Aboriginal people see the term 'tribe' devalued mainstream schooling in imposed terminology and although usage needs to be respected.

### Less appropriate

- Tribe
- Horde
- Band
- Clan
- Moie

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

Anthropologists sometimes use the terms 'band', 'clan' and 'moie' to convey certain characteristics of cultural grouping. Rather than using a precise term, researchers of Indigenous Australian societies may be more useful for each other to convey the essence of Indigenous Australian social organisation.

### More appropriate

- Seasonal occupation
- Roam/roaming/circular occupation
- Looking after the country/the land

The roam or circular occupation of land by Aboriginal people was inaccurate 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 no staying in one place and evha being all resources, but moving around the entire area. particular times when food resources became available. The crucial concept is 'belonging to the land'.

### Less appropriate

- Nomadic, nomads, nomadism

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 Judgment by the High Court rejected terra nullius as wrong both in fact and in law. For more information, see <http://www.racismnov.com.au/classroom/Facsheet/10.h.ml>

## Dreaming and spirituality

### More appropriate

- The Dreaming
- The Dreaming

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

### Less appropriate

- Dreamtime

The word 'Dreamtime' 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 may be respected.

### More appropriate

- Spiritual

### Spiritual beliefs

Indigenous of Indigenous beliefs are more appropriate. Indigenous Australian spiritual beliefs are more appropriate. Indigenous Australian spiritual beliefs are more appropriate. Indigenous Australian spiritual beliefs are more appropriate.

### Less appropriate

- Religion

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 spiritual beliefs.

### More appropriate

- Creation/Dreaming Stories
- Teachings from the Dreaming
- Legends (Torres Strait Islander people only)

It is appropriate to use 'The Legend' 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.

### Less appropriate

- Mitsh
- Folklore
- Legend
- Story
- Stories

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

## Telling the right stories

### More appropriate

- Indigenous (Australian) history
- Pre-invasion history
- Invasion history
- Post-invasion history

### Less appropriate

- Pre-history

'Pre-history' is a term used by some archaeologists and historians, but 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.

Use of history denies the validity of Indigenous Australian history before war. It is commonly regarded as a written history, and before European contact. It also denies a place for Aboriginal people in history. This is well reflected in how schools teach history which begin a study of Australian history in 1770 or 1788.

### More appropriate

- Since the beginning of the Dreaming

'Since the beginning of the Dreaming' reflects the beliefs of many Indigenous Australians that they have always been in Australia, from the beginning of time, and came from the land.

### Less appropriate

'Aboriginal people have lived in Australia for 40,000 years'

For the word 'years' to be a limitation on the occupation of Australia and the word 'lived' to lend support to migration theories and anthropological assumptions. Many Indigenous Australians see this sort of measurement and quantification as inappropriate.

### More appropriate

Captain Cook was the first Englishman to map the east coast of 'New Holland'

### Less appropriate

Captain Cook 'discovered' Australia

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 'discovered' offensive. However, it can be noted that the word 'discovered' can mean finding something that one as an individual did not know was there. This meaning should be respected if the word is to be used. One reason why some might have to be 'discovered' is the fact that Indigenous knowledge was discovered and disregarded for so long.

### More appropriate

Invasion  
Colonisation  
Occupation

Australia was not peacefully invaded, occupied and colonised. Describing the arrival of the Europeans as a 'settlement' attempts to give Australian history from the shores of England rather than the shores of Australia.

### Less appropriate

Settlement

The use of the word 'settlement' ignores the reality of Indigenous Australian people's land being stolen from them on the basis of the legal fiction of terra nullius and negates the resistance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The fact that most settlers did not see themselves as invading the country, and that they consequently were transported against their will is beside the point. The effect was the same for Indigenous Australian people.

### More appropriate

'Blawland, Lawson and Wenlock were the first European men to cross the Blue Mountains'

Aboriginal men, women and children had crossed the Blue Mountains for thousands of years before European explorers.

### Less appropriate

'Blawland, Lawson and Wenlock were the first men to cross the Blue Mountains'



Some of the children of the Indigenous children of Australia, and are examples of the White Australia frame of reference that would exclude Indigenous Australia.

### More appropriate

Elders

Elders are men and women in Aboriginal communities who are respected for their wisdom and knowledge of their culture, particularly the Law. 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.

### Less appropriate

Chief  
King  
Queen

Aboriginal people did not, and do not, have chiefs, kings and queens. The introduction of 'king' or 'queen' was a colonial strategy to raise political authority for the authorities to deal with. Colonial governments had no experience of dealing with the structure of Indigenous societies, and this was a way of trying to make Aboriginal societies conform to English experience of chiefs in other countries. In a way of honoring individual names, but here was a way of mocking egotistical names such as 'King Bill' or 'Queen Goodenough'.

None however has many Aboriginal people who are descended from colonial appointed 'king' and 'queen' are proud of their ancestors.

### Reference

'Using the right words: appropriate terminology for Indigenous Australian' died 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

<http://www.aia.gov.au/>  
Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies click on the 'Research' link.  
Accessed March 2004

[http://www.fae.gov.au/ia/research/indigenous\\_research\\_a\\_jc.html](http://www.fae.gov.au/ia/research/indigenous_research_a_jc.html)  
James Cook University: School of Indigenous Australian Studies provides links and brief descriptions of research projects being undertaken at the School.  
Accessed March 2004

[http://www.crc.gov.au/school/ciap/index.php?page\\_id=129men=2\\_20](http://www.crc.gov.au/school/ciap/index.php?page_id=129men=2_20)  
Southern Cross University, Northern NSW Indigenous Australian People's Research and Development Centre provides research projects and project descriptions.  
Accessed March 2004

<http://www.faira.org.au/conference.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.aali.gov.au/special/Daba/aboriginal>  
Database of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans and their work.  
Accessed March 2004

<http://www.cclire.org/raining/over/central/abmen.html>  
List of central competence literature

# Appropriate Terminology, Indigenous Australian Peoples

## Circle the 'More Appropriate' Terminology

### Dreaming and spirituality

Dreamtime	The Dreaming	The Dreaming			
Indigenous spirituality	Indigenous religion				
Indigenous mythology	Aboriginal stories	Creation Stories	Teaching from the Dreaming	Indigenous legends	Dreaming Stories

### Using the right names

The Aborigine	Aboriginal	The Torres Strait Islander	Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people	ATSI people	Aboriginal people
Black	White	Coloured	Other Australian	Non-Aboriginal/Indigenous people	Yellafella
		Uluru	Ayers Rock		

### No more classifying people

Traditional Aboriginal people	Isolated Aboriginal people	Indigenous Australian people	Modern Aboriginal people	Contemporary Aboriginal people	Urban Aboriginal people
Part-Aborigine	Half-caste	Full blood	Aboriginal people	Indigenous people	Torres Strait Islander people

### No more classifying cultures

Nomadic	Seasonal occupation	Roadside/casual	Looking after the country/land		
Aboriginal tribe	Aboriginal people/mob	Aboriginal community	Language groups	Horde	Indigenous nation
Primitive	Native Aboriginal people	Prehistoric societies	Indigenous Australian societies	Complex and diverse societies	Stone age societies

### Telling the right stories

Pre-historic	Indigenous history	Pre-invasion history	Post-invasion history	Indigenous Australian history	Torres Strait Islander history
		Captain Cook 'discovered' Australia	Captain Cook was the first Englishman to map New Holland		
Chief	King	Queen	Elder		
Aboriginal people have lived here:	a) For 40,000 years	b) Since the beginning of the Dreaming			
		Seafarers	Invasion		

