CHAPTER 1

CULTURE, IDENTITY AND INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN PEOPLES

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Learning Objectives:

This chapter should assist you to:

– understand concepts of race

– articulate concepts of culture, identity and social organisation

– understand the diversity of Indigenous cultures and the role of cultural identity and practices

– reflect on the role of cultural practices and identity for Indigenous cultures globally and in Australia

– reflect on the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, cultures and societies.

Key Terms:

Aboriginal Australians	culture	country
Torres Strait Islanders	identity	Dreamings
Indigenous Australians	ethnicity	discrete Indigenous
race	Indigenous cultures	communities

Note: Throughout this book, we will be using different terminology to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We accept that not everyone agrees with the use of these terms, nor with the use of the term 'Indigenous Australians'. We accept that individuals may prefer to be identified by their language/cultural name, for example Jagera, Wiradjuri, Bardi, or Wik Munkan, or by regional group names such as Koories, Murris, Noongahs, Nyoongars, Nungas etc. Where there can be a distinction, appropriate terms may be used, but generally we need to utilise generic terminology. This is in keeping with the adoption by many Aboriginal people of the term 'Dreamings' which was coined by WEH Stanner (1965) to represent the myriad individual names for traditional belief systems.

'Aborigine' is a term seen as unacceptable among Aboriginal people today, but it has been used in this book where it forms part of a direct quote.

Race

When working in cross-cultural situations, it is important to accept and relate to individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, without prejudice or preconceptions based on emotive issues and erroneous ideas. In anthropological terms, **race** is an arbitrary classification formerly based on physical characteristics including skin colour etc., but now is increasingly based on genetic markers, for example blood groups. It can also refer to a human population whose members share a greater degree of physical and genetic similarity with one another than with other humans.

'Race' is often used as an anthropological classification, linked to physical features and characteristics, and is often linked to geographic areas. Research suggests very limited genetic differences between groups despite widely dispersed locations. In sociological terms, 'race' is applied by one group to members of another, with characteristics ascribed on the basis of appearance or descent. A preferable term is **ethnicity**, which identifies people on the basis of social and cultural groups based on common origins and cultural traditions.

> **Race** can define groups of tribes or peoples who form a distinctive ethnic population. It is a term which is often used but poorly understood.

> **Ethnicity** refers to belonging to a social and cultural group based on common regional origins and cultural traditions.

Culture, identity and indigenous people

Culture

Howard describes culture as:

> the customary, learned manner in which human groups organize their behaviour and thought in relation to their environment. … how people act, and especially interact, with one another. … how people perceive, classify, and interpret their world (1996, p. 11).

Our personal cultural lens influences how we interpret others, and how we behave in society. **Culture** is generally accepted to be a learned process while 'race' is associated with perceived inherited characteristics. Relationships between young and old in each culture exist to teach and reinforce culturally appropriate behaviours, attitudes and values, following hierarchical stratification of societies.

Examination of culture requires a consistent emphasis on objectivity and an appreciation that we might not always see things the same way that others do. Miner (1956), in 'Body Ritual among the Nacirema', demonstrated the hidden aspects of culture, the unseen learned values, beliefs and assumptions on which overt behaviour is based.

> **Culture** is the learned patterns of thought, action, understanding and history through which we engage and interact with the world and other people around us. Culture provides a framework in which we develop our understanding of customary behaviours, which may not be apparent to outsiders.

Culture consists of:

– visible (overt) behaviours

– unseen (covert) factors

– underlying (unconscious) issues

– values, beliefs, assumptions.

Understanding behaviour of others is a difficult task, especially as our societies become more complex, although complexity should not necessarily be equated with 'superiority'. Societies change over time, increasing the need to shift social directions to survive. Increasingly, competitive societies marginalise less competitive ones, just as dominant groups marginalise subordinate groups. Societal change promotes adaptation for a suppressed group to become less different from the dominant group, and thus, less threatening to that group.

In colonisation, power relationships are established as the result of domination of another culture. These are most obvious in imposed policies, demonstrated by difference (and hence distance) from the dominant one, for example segregation of housing, education etc.

At first contact with Europeans, Aboriginal peoples were seen as devoid of culture in any form: their lack of material belongings, and 'perceived failure' to use the wheel and till the land were seen as evidence of a most 'primitive' form of humankind. Europeans were incapable of comprehending the complex spiritual and cultural life which Aboriginal cultures encompassed. The British ignored the capacity of the Aboriginal people to survive and coexist in the world's most arid, habitable continent. Aboriginal sustainable patterns of land use had been developed over many generations reflecting longstanding behaviours designed to ensure ongoing resource availability. Varied social structures were adapted to the individual 'country', and cultural patterns maintained group viability even in times of environmental change.

A further explanation of 'country' is outlined in chapter 4.

Identity

Identity describes an individual's self-perception as a discrete, separate entity with specific characteristics.

Individual **identity** relates closely to cultural and social identity, which incorporates roles in a social setting. Identity arises from the adoption of social roles through personal experience. The individual negotiates the meaning of his or her identity with family and society members. Social identity can be seen as the aggregation of group memberships that define the individual and their positions. Each individual in the community identifies and establishes accepted relationships and interactions. Identity provides a sense of belonging to a specific group at family, community or national level.

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Reflection point

Identity is a simple yet complex set of ideas, and you may wonder why we are addressing it. A recent comment by a student who had been visiting First Nations community health services in Canada, and interacting with the local people, found an answer to that question. On reflection, she stated that she had not understood how important identity was to indigenous people. However, she now realised that it was central to how they saw themselves, and who they were. She said 'I'm still not sure about what it is, but I get it! I see why!'

Indigenous identity

> Indigenousness is an identity constructed, shaped and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism. The communities, clans, nations and tribes we call Indigenous peoples are just that: Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe and other centres of empire (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005, p. 597).

Individuals and communities link their Indigenous identity closely with the country on which it emerged. Tradition (lore and law) and cultural mores contribute to the identity of the group, and define the individual identity. Environment, climate, resources and locality impact on lifestyle and cultural responses to challenges. Successful occupation requires different responses to environmental conditions such as cold, altitude or aridity, for example extremely cold-climate cultures develop different social organisations to those in a rainforest area. Geography contributes to cultural diversity as indigenous groups retain links to land as the 'Mother' or 'Life-giver'. Colonial cultures perceived land as an economic asset/possession, a view which has spread globally.

Indigenous cultures

> There is no universally agreed name for the peoples whose lives, conditions and aspirations are [described] … as first peoples, because their ancestors were the original inhabitants of their lands, since colonized by foreigners. … [Many refer to them as] indigenous, a term widely accepted by the peoples themselves, and now adopted by the United Nations (Burger, 1990, p. 16).

Today's indigenous peoples are the descendants of the traditional owners and occupiers of a country or region. They demonstrate diversity in culture, religion and socio-economic organisation, both historically and currently. Many

indigenous people argue that being indigenous is a state of mind and birth; most retain their connection to traditional lands wherever they reside.

In 1990, the global indigenous population was approximately 300 million across more than 70 countries (Burger, 1990). Indigenous groups are spread across all inhabited continents and many islands; representing all regions. They include the indigenous peoples of North and South America, the Inuit, Aleutians and Saami of the circumpolar region, the Māori of New Zealand and many inhabitants of Europe, Asia and the Pacific region. Most groups have been subject to similar colonial experiences, characterised by disadvantage, dispossession of traditional lands, and loss or dilution of culture. Colonialism continues to occur wherever dominant cultures attempt to suppress the traditional cultures within their sphere of influence.

In the 'global society', so-called 'simple' societies are seen to be lacking in technology. Some refuse to be influenced by or accept this, for example New Guinea Highlander groups. Using traditional husbandry of their environment, they contribute to sustainable development in the environment upon which they have depended. Over generations, they have developed understanding and respect for all living things in their world. Concepts of time, competition and resource exploitation are not fundamental to indigenous people. Colonising intruders raise tension or conflict between traditional cultural values and the expectations of the introduced consumer-based, individual-oriented society. Most 'simple' societies had complex kinship and relationship structures which were meticulously handed down over generations to ensure survival. These existed/exist in a spiritual as well as social context, and contain complexities that Western languages lack the capacity to describe. Many indigenous people retain a conscious spirituality within rich and diverse cultures and languages.

Aboriginal Australians refer to traditional lands as **'Country'**, and are central to identity. Aboriginal people relate family to 'country', and acceptance by others often relies on being able to identify ancestral lands. Yami Lester, a Maralinga man who was blinded following the nuclear testing on his homelands, states an Indigenous view of his 'country':

> The country wasn't just hills or creeks or trees. And I didn't feel like it was fairy tales they told me. It was real, our kuuti, the force that gives us life. Somebody created it, and whoever created it did it for us, so we could live and hunt and have a good time. That's how we come to be here because that malu and ngintaka created this image for us to live and breathe: the plants, the language, the people (Lester, 1993, p. 10).

The attitudes of many indigenous people reflect Lester's perceptions of himself and his people as part of the landscape. Yami's identity is inextricably linked to

'Country' is the 'estate' or central lands which are traditionally occupied by distinct cultural groups (Stanner, 1965).

Aboriginal Australian is a person who is a member of the Aboriginal people of Australia, who identifies as an Aboriginal person and is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal person. (Aborigines is not a commonly used term among Aboriginal people today, and can be viewed as offensive.)

'country' (i.e. land which his people historically occupied). Because Aboriginal Australians see 'country' as the central aspect of identity for them, the invasion and occupation of their land did not simply amount to a physical loss of territory and sovereignty. Occupation and colonialism impacted far beyond the physical on **Indigenous Australians** bringing disruption or loss of language, beliefs and social structures which form the underlying basis of culture.

Indigenous Australian is an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. By convention, the 'I' for Indigenous is capitalised when referring to Australia's Indigenous people and topics.

Contemporary issues for indigenous people

Globally, contemporary issues among indigenous people include racial discrimination, poor health and access to health services, levels of employment and education, loss of traditional languages, cultural survival (as minorities) and Indigenous Intellectual Property Rights (IIPR). Traditional indigenous regions experience cultural conflict and suppression, resulting from exploitation of resource-rich traditional areas. These include: degradation and clearing of native forests in South America, leading to the displacement of indigenous tribes, and loss of the traditional lands; for the Inuit and Saami of the Arctic Circle, the impacts of increasing exploitation of oil reserves are seen as threats to traditional lands and lifestyles; in parts of Africa, civil war and ethnic conflicts have resulted in food shortages and displacement; in China's disputed regions of Tibet and Xingjian Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) government policies, together with the imposition of Mandarin as the official teaching language, is reducing traditional cultures, languages and ways of life.

Many of the world's staple foods including potatoes, lentils, peas, sugar cane, garlic, peppers and tomatoes were first cultivated by indigenous people. We have incorporated words, for example, canoe, barbecue, squash, kangaroo from indigenous languages. Approximately 75% of the world's plant-based pharmaceuticals for example aspirin, digitalis and quinine, have been derived from medicinal plants found in tribal areas. 'Traditional' medicines are increasingly accepted both in practice, and as contributions from traditional pharmacopoeia.

Ask Yourself

What do you consider to be the characteristics of your identity, i.e. specific characteristics which typify your own cultural group (nationalities/groups)?

How does your cultural background prejudice your interaction with individuals from other cultures? How would you deal with it in a professional capacity?

Culture consists of: visible (overt) behaviours; unseen (covert) factors; underlying (unconscious) issues; and values, beliefs and assumptions. What do you understand by these categories?

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and the Australian identity

Historic roots of Australia's occupation

Aboriginal Australians have occupied this continent for a period in excess of 60,000 years, and some would suggest more than 100,000 years, before being invaded by the British colonists. Early occupation of this continent and surrounding islands occurred when Aboriginal Australians' ancestors arrived. Archaeological history of Australia's occupation is limited but survives in oral histories among cultural groups and families.

> [An] extraordinary pattern of extra clearing of forests by apparently controlled use of fire is thought to be represented … in the pollen and charcoal profile from Lake George near Canberra where a controlled burning regime may have been introduced by about 120,000 BP and maintained virtually till the present day (Singh, Kershaw, & Clark, 1981, p. 27).

This estimate has since been revised by approximately half. It is still an extraordinary period for occupation of the southern areas of the continent.

Radiocarbon dating is limited to 40,000 years, and beyond that timeframe, reflects the same result. Aboriginal occupation sites are found in southern parts of the continent which also indicate that time frame. Flood (Figure 1. 2004, p. 6) identifies one such site as Allen's Cave on the Nullarbor Plain, indicating that Aboriginal people had occupied the southern lands by then. There are a number of theories relating to the way in which Australia was populated, but all support long-term occupation (Flood, 2004, pp. 79–81). Most theories of occupation identify the north and north-west regions as areas of arrival. Each group adapted to its own environment, and their belief systems ('Dreamings') reflect the ways in which people identify the land, their environment, and their place among all other aspects of their universe.

Torres Strait Islander
is a person/descendant from people from islands of the Torres Strait located to the north of mainland Australia.

Torres Strait Islander Australians are of Melanesian descent. Occupation of the islands by the ancestors of modern Torres Strait Islanders occurred following rises in sea level after the ice age. Recent archaeological evidence suggests that occupation may have occurred as recently as 1500–2500 BP (Barham, 1999), and the linkage between the people of the Torres Strait and indigenous people of Papua New Guinea (PNG) is evident. Family links continue to exist between PNG and Boigu or Saibai, which lie in close proximity (<10 km) to the PNG coast. Beliefs and identity on these islands are closely linked with those of nearby mainland PNG communities.

Contemporary Australians

Australia's multiculturalism is firmly entrenched, as is globalisation, bringing with it the necessity for peaceful coexistence in extremely diverse environments and circumstances. We need to challenge our view of the national identity! If Australian people are to live together harmoniously we must, as a nation, develop an understanding and appreciation of our differences and the benefits that diversity can afford us all. Health professionals need to display harmony and understanding with patients of different cultures, and be well-informed on the social and cultural background of 'others', regardless of personal cultural history. It is essential to examine cultural experiences from others' perspectives.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the original inhabitants of this land, continue to find themselves located in a separate social stratum while maintaining their connection to 'country' and family. As a minority of the population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people retain links to some of the oldest spiritual belief systems in the world. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples retain pride in their heritage while participating in all areas of contemporary life, for example education, employment, industry and community. Australia fails to acknowledge contemporary and historic contributions by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the development of Australia's economy, for example Aboriginal labour was central to development of the nation's pastoral industry.

Other Australians

Most immigrant traditions have bases in exploitation of the land and with the accumulation of possessions and wealth. This leads to divisions (class, social status etc.), and allocates relative positions to groups or individuals based on power and influence. Perceptions of social and economic position are often associated with other characteristics such as race, ethnicity, skin colour and, more recently, with religious affiliation. Ethnocentric views based on British heritage have ignored the contributions of diverse ethnic groups to our emerging nation. In Australia, multiculturalism is a current reality, as is globalisation, bringing with it the necessity for peaceful coexistence in extremely diverse environments and circumstances.

The arrival of the first 'boat people' from Great Britain (the First Fleet) included convicts, soldiers, sailors and officers. This, and subsequent penal fleets were followed by large numbers of immigrants of diverse origins. The influx rapidly increased with the gold rushes of the nineteenth century and many nationalities

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Australia's approach to immigration was the imposition of the **White Australia policy** from federation until the latter part of the twentieth century. Australian governments gradually dismantled the policy from about 1950 until 1973.

The White Australia policy had its roots before federation: white miners attacked Chinese diggers in Victoria and New South Wales; factory workers opposed immigration which might threaten their jobs. Leading NSW and Victorian politicians warned there would be no place for 'Asiatics' or 'coloureds' in the Australia of the future. In 1901, the new federal government passed the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, placing restrictions on immigration. One of the restrictions included a dictation test which was used to exclude certain applicants by requiring them to pass a written test often in a language nominated by an immigration officer, and foreign to the applicant. (Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2009)

came to Australia including large contingents of Irish, Germans, and Chinese. Colonial governments did little to integrate these migrants into the 'Australian' community. The majority of immigrant Australians came to this nation in search of a better life for themselves and their children. They brought attitudes, values and beliefs derived from a wide range of traditions.

The **White Australia policy** was instituted in 1901 as a result of the colonial descendants' desire to maintain their perceived cultural and social superiority. It was devised to ensure that the population of this country would be principally white. Arising from this ideology were inaccurate, idealised Australian identities which focused on the perceived character traits of the 'heroic, sun-burned bushie', and later the 'bronzed sporting hero'. In reality, few Australians reflected these characteristics, which ignored the diversity of our society.

Fact Box 1.1

Approximately 37% of Australians identified themselves as Australian descent in the 2006 census—48% are of British descent, 12% from other European countries, 3% of Chinese descent and 1% of Indian origin (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007a). The 2006 census identified people from 270 nations as residents of this country.

Perceptions of Indigenous Australians' identity

While Australia's population consists of people from a wide variety of cultural sources, the role and place of Indigenous Australians in perceptions of national identity is generally neglected.

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, Australia ignored the existence of, and earlier occupation by, Indigenous Australians in their society and surroundings. Exclusion of Indigenous Australians from society impacted on their place as part of the society, and denied acceptance and recognition of their part in the nation's history. Until the late 1970s, many Indigenous people continued to experience segregation on reserves and 'settlements' located on the outskirts of towns. Reminders of these lines of exclusion for Aboriginal people from the 'white' community exist in many towns e.g. Brisbane.

Fact Box 1.2

Street names which are a reminder of our racist past ... Boundary St, West End. Boundary St, Spring Hill, Boundary Roads in Camp Hill, Bardon, Thornlands, Rocklea and Indooroopilly.

Most of these streets and roads were called Boundary because they represented the former town boundaries that Indigenous people were not permitted to cross at certain times on certain days in 19th-century Brisbane.

… Aboriginal people were exiled beyond the boundary lines after 4 pm six days a week and completely on Sundays. Troopers rode the perimeter cracking stockwhips. (Condon, 2010)

Around cities and towns, Aboriginal people were generally confined to 'reserves' on the outskirts, even after the 1967 Referendum. For many, the cost of straying across the boundaries, of being 'Off the Reserve', was a period in custody. Few members of the broader Australian community had the opportunity to interact and get to know and understand Indigenous individuals and their cultures. The vast majority of the population relied on the images and representations found in the media. In the 1994 *Wentworth Lecture*, Mick Dodson said:

> In all these representations, these supposed 'truths' about us, our voices have been noticeably absent. … as my colleague Marcia Langton so poignantly wrote, the majority of Australians '… do not know how to relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists' (Langton, 1993). So today, even to talk about Aboriginality is to enter a labyrinth full of obscure passages, ambiguous signs and trapdoors. The moment the question is asked, 'who or what is Aboriginal?', you enter a historical landscape full of absolute and timeless truths which have been set in place by self-professed experts and authorities all too ready to tell us, and the world the meaning of Aboriginality (Dodson, 1994).

Issues of identity and knowledge of their culture were often denied to Aboriginal individuals. Their experiences highlight issues of racism and poor self-image. Many Indigenous Australians have similar stories to those of Maree Toombs who faced school-based discrimination, and expectations that she would know about traditional history.

🪨 Personal Story

I am an Aboriginal woman who grew up not knowing much about my Aboriginal heritage. The reason for this is because I was born when it was not safe to say you were Aboriginal for fear of government repercussions. My father would tell my brother and me that we should tell people we came from the Islands. My brother and me would laugh about this and say, 'I wonder what Island we are supposed to have come from?' The irony in all of this being that the whole town knew we were Aboriginal. Our mother was clearly of Aboriginal heritage. We were teased and called such names as 'Abo', 'Boong' and 'Nigger'. Looking back, if I had known more about my

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heritage and felt a pride for it, I would have been less affected by the taunts.

When I was in year five the teacher asked us all to colour in a picture of an Aboriginal man smiling as the 'First Fleet' sailed into Botany Bay. The teacher turned to me and said, 'You're Aboriginal, what do think about this?' I shrugged my shoulders and said, 'I don't know'. I remember being very embarrassed that she had singled me out. I didn't want to be different: I wanted to be like everyone else.

These days, I know who I am and where I come from, I know my identity and am proud to say that I am an Aboriginal woman. As for the teacher and that picture, I could now say that man would have been from the Eora tribe in Sydney. He was part of a complex kinship system and his people had lived that way for over 40,000 years. He would not have been smiling, and he didn't know it yet but his life was about to change forever. (Toombs, 2011)

Australia needs to embrace its diverse origins: we need to acknowledge the history and contributions of all ethno-cultural groups within our nation, and ask what it is to be Australian. Indigenous Australians were first included in the 1971 census, but numbers of Indigenous Australians identifying in the census are increasing.

Fact Box 1.3

– At 30 June 2006, the Indigenous estimated resident population of Australia was 517,200 or 2.5% of the total population. This Indigenous population estimate was 14% higher than the 2006 unadjusted census count (455,028).

– In 2006, 455,028 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were counted in the census, which represents an increase of 11% between the 2001 and 2006 censuses.

– Over the past 20 years, the census count of Indigenous people has doubled from 227,593 in 1986. This high level of growth is a result of natural increase (the excess of births over deaths) and non-demographic factors such as people identifying their Indigenous origin for the first time in the census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007b).

Accurate numbers for Indigenous Australians are difficult to obtain despite efforts of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). In attempting to determine the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, the ABS faces a number of hurdles including a persistent reluctance to identify Indigenous status to officialdom, varying degrees of geographic isolation, and limited levels of literacy linked with unfamiliarity with forms. Reluctance reflects periods when Aboriginal babies were, by law, automatically declared 'neglected' and taken from their mothers (known as the 'Stolen Generations').

Another factor is the stigma which is still associated with being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Many Indigenous Australians have suffered racism in

their lives, which affects their willingness to be identified officially, especially to government agencies. Several generations have experienced severe adverse impacts of government policies, resulting in the separation and breakdown of families, exclusion from traditional country and subsequent loss of rights to claim Native title over the lands of their ancestors. Officialdom is seen, together with the judicial system, as the 'enemy', so even educated and successful Indigenous individuals may fail to identify in the census.

While we often think of Aboriginal communities as remote area situations, a majority of Aboriginal people live in cities and regional centres, while maintaining links to traditional country. The Aboriginal population is increasing at a rate higher than the general population, and youths form a much higher proportion of the Indigenous population. At the same time, deficits in life expectancy among Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders see a smaller proportion in the older age groups. Life expectancy for Indigenous Australians is much lower than for the general population.

Fact Box 1.4

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a much lower life expectancy than the general Australian population. Indigenous Australians born in the period 1996–2001 are estimated to have a life expectancy at birth of 59.4 years for males, and 64.8 years for females. This is approximately 16–17 years less than the overall Australian population born over the same period (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Australia appears to compare poorly with other countries for Indigenous life expectancy at birth. (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations demonstrate significant differences from the wider population. The differences include age, geographic distribution, language and employment. Current ABS data shows significant differences compared to the wider population: age-related distribution profile shows much higher percentages of youth (<19 years); significantly lower proportions among age groups from 30 years upwards. It also identifies lower levels of employment, and differences in language, education and housing, as indicated in Fact Box 1.3—population characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Fact Box 1.5

– Almost 40% of the Indigenous population was under the age of 15 years, compared with 20% for the non-Indigenous population.

– Over one-quarter (27%) of the Indigenous population lived in remote or very remote parts of Australia, compared with 2% of non-Indigenous Australians.

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– More than half (55%) of Indigenous Australians living in very remote areas spoke an Indigenous language at home.

– 42% of Indigenous Australians aged 15 years and over were employed (41% in 1996).

– Indigenous Australians in the labour force were much more likely than non-Indigenous people to be unemployed (20% compared with 7%). (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003)

Aboriginal Australian cultures and history

Early Aboriginal Australians

Aboriginal Australians have the oldest (chromosomal) lineage outside Africa. Dating techniques push back the occupation of Australia beyond 60,000 years to the early period of modern man's emigration from Africa. Flood (2006) mapped the distribution of humans traced through Y-chromosome lineages—the second oldest identified marker (M130) has its greatest concentration (60%) in Aboriginal Australian men which highlights direct Aboriginal links to the earliest emigrants from Africa.

> The first Aboriginal migrants must have undergone a series of inter-island voyages to reach this country, possibly making them the world's earliest ocean voyagers. New finds in Australia suggest that people had reached the necessary technological level to cross substantial open sea and to adapt to a new continent more than 53,000 years ago. The settling of Australia marked the first human expansion beyond the single landmass comprising Africa, Europe and Asia … adaptation to a strange, new continent at such an early date must be counted as a major achievement in the world's human story (Flood, 2004, p. 38).

The last 100,000 years saw major changes in the environment (climate, flora and fauna) which needed massive adjustments by these immigrants. Vegetation changed with diminishing rainforests and expanding eucalypt forests. Over thousands of years Australia became drier and hotter as people expanded across the various environments.

Several theories exist on occupation of the continent by early man (Flood, 2004, pp. 79–82). The most logical is that settlement followed coastal and riverine edges, as these provide the greatest variety and access to foodstuffs. They developed a variety of cultures and diverse survival techniques, making them among the oldest continuous cultures in the world. Despite climatic/ environmental changes, Aboriginal people occupied an ever-widening range of environments from the north to the most southern regions, and the interior.

Tasmanian Aboriginal people have been identified as the world's most southerly early people. Over time, Aboriginal people occupied the entire continent.

Aboriginal Australian cultures

Since initial human occupation, Aboriginal cultural groups lived across Australia in separate societies. When the British claimed possession of the Australian continent, they regarded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as a single race. At this time, there were approximately 200 to 250 Aboriginal language groups and 600 to 700 dialects. Estimates of the Aboriginal population of the Australian continent at the time of British occupation vary from around 300,000 to over a million, with the latter estimate determined by the demographer, Butlin (cited in Bourke, Bourke, & Edwards, 1998, p. 38). Aboriginal cultures and communities were numerous, diverse and dynamic. Many cultural groups have lost all or much of their traditional culture. Some continue to maintain significant aspects of their culture, language and individual cultural practices.

In Aboriginal Australia, cultural groups or nations were based on language groups which occupied clearly-defined country, and were generally limited to between 400 to 1000 individuals. Across their country, they lived in family groups or 'bands' of between 10 and 20, and family bands formed a clan or horde, each speaking their own language and those of surrounding clans. Lifestyle and social organisation was consultative not hierarchical, based on Dreaming Law. Flood suggests that:

> Aboriginal societies were all of the band variety, characterised by small group size and nomadism—regular mobility and the lack of any permanent single base of residence. Aboriginal nomadism, however, was highly restricted geographically, except in the most arid regions. … individuals were extremely mobile and the band's size and membership varied with food resources (2006 p. 17).

Cultural identity was based on language, belief systems, social/kinship structure, social behaviours, and links to land. Discrete bands linked with other bands, connected by marriage, language, and country, into broader social structures inextricably connected to country by **Dreamings** which defined their belief systems. Territorial squabbles were uncommon; there were strict laws regulating inter-tribal interactions and offences against individuals.

'Dreamings' is a term coined by W.E.H. Stanner to encompass the multitude of group names for such systems (Stanner, 1965).

Ask Yourself

Can you identify your personal ancestry in terms of ethnicity and place of origin for four or more generations? What importance might this have for indigenous people or similar groups?

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Can you identify any separate/specific Indigenous Australian groups and explain why sub-sections require more detailed identification?

Aboriginal people linked intimately with the land over millennia. Through experience, they grew to understand the inter-relationships of the environment and worked within its constraints. Sustainable use was integral to traditional lifestyles. Stories exist that link areas rich in uranium to prohibitions on women's access, linking them to reproductive issues (Martin-Stone & Wesley, 2011).

Over the past 70,000 years, at least four ice ages impacted on Australia and its inhabitants, contributing to environmental and vegetative changes. Aboriginal people coped with dramatic environmental change and changing food resources. This is evident in the Willandra Lakes area in New South Wales which experienced massive changes, losing a number of large freshwater lakes and abundant resources, requiring dramatic changes to lifestyle (Flood, 2004, pp. 39–48). Aboriginal land management practices across this era also contributed to changes in vegetation and animal life.

Over time, changes in climate and the environment forced people to adapt their lifestyle to the altering conditions. Following British occupation, rapid changes to social and economic regulation imposed massive disruption on Aboriginal cultures across Australia. The pace of change did not allow Aboriginal groups to adapt: they lost cultural practices, and were excluded from their traditional land and resources.

Traditional Law and social structure

Aboriginal cultures developed their own belief systems over millennia, based on close ties and understanding of their land. Like all societies, they developed beliefs about their creation history. Within these oral histories, they incorporated information on the land and its resources as well as establishing moral and cultural boundaries, often known as 'Law' and each group had its own name for their individual Dreamings or beliefs. Dreaming Law included obligations and responsibilities for ceremony and ritual maintenance which was seen as ensuring continuity of traditional life and resources. Sharing economic and ceremonial dealings with surrounding groups enabled marriage and kinship ties. Relationships carried rights, obligations and appropriate ways of behaving. Responsibility for land and maintenance of Law is shared and maintained through kin obligations, which relate to ceremonial and inheritance issues.

...
Reflection point

Inheritance is central in the granting of ceremonial and territorial rights and responsibilities. A daughter and a son inherit one type of rights through their father, which in Warlpiri and other Central Australian languages classify them as 'Kirda'. Inheritance from the mother's line makes them 'Kurdungurlu'. Thus for any given Dreaming site there is a set of Kirda and a set of Kurdungurlu. If a woman is Kirda for her father's country, for example the children of her mother's brother will be Kurdungurlu for that same area (Jinta Desert Art, 2006).

The acquisition of cultural knowledge or Law began during adolescence as a lifelong quest for both males and females. This knowledge or 'business' was divided along gender-specific lines and continues as Men's Business/Women's Business (Bell, 1998). In many groups, both animate and inanimate elements within the environment were classified under **moieties** where everything is identified.

Moiety: either of two kinship groups based on unilateral descent that together make up a tribe or society.

Through participation in rituals and ceremonies, individuals learned more about their Dreaming stories and associated designs, songs and dances. Some of these ceremonies were secret (closed) and some public (open) and not gender specific. Individuals had a mentor—'Uncle' for males, 'Aunt' for females—who were responsible for passing cultural knowledge to the trainee. Both men and women had their separate spheres of influence with specific religious ceremonies and rituals which held particular segments of mythical information (Bell, 1998).

In Aboriginal society, men and women had both segregated and combined ceremonies. Women's ceremonies include fertility, child raising and herbal knowledge, whereas men were concerned with ritual and ceremony especially around resources, for example food sources. As individuals grew older, and displayed knowledge and understanding, they gained power, prestige and recognition. Both men and women can be considered **elders**: custodians of the law and able jointly to make decisions for the welfare of the group. Such status is not automatic with age, and one may become an elder at a relatively young age.

Elders: custodians of the law and able jointly to make decisions for the welfare of the group.

Social interaction was governed by Dreaming Law, which established patterns of behaviour designed to minimise conflict and to maintain the continuity of the group. Conflict minimisation practices, such as 'mother-in-law avoidance' or limitations on interactions between siblings on gender lines, reduce the opportunity for individuals to come into conflict. The Law also determines marriage lines and eligibility, decreasing the risk of genetic reinforcement by limiting the number of potential marriage partners along clearly defined descent or 'skin' lines. Traditionally, to marry 'wrong-skin' is to court disaster

as recounted by Peasley (1983) and illustrated in the film *The Last of the Nomads* (Kelley, 1997). This is a true story of traditional individuals from the same moiety who transgress the Law, and it highlights the consequences of defying tradition.

Ask Yourself

How would you cope with surviving in the Australian bush over a long period? Would your education and knowledge equip you to survive?

Could you identify and locate a range of traditional foodstuffs from an area, bearing in mind the need for a balanced diet?

Post-colonial Australia

Many Australians have failed to embrace integration of Aboriginal Australians, a hangover from colonial and post-colonial attitudes. They continue to expect Aboriginal people to retain every aspect of their traditional culture, ignoring the diversity of cultures. Aboriginal people have had to cope with the massive changes wrought by invasion and occupation. At the same time, Australia has integrated aspects of migrant cultures into a multicultural mix, accepting cultural diffusion, and changing traditional practices and values, while respecting cultural identification.

In the years following the Second World War, when government was forced to rescind the White Australia policy, migrant intake into Australia increased rapidly. White Australians reacted with derogatory terms and attitudes. Many European migrants did not fit the perceived ideal, and suffered discrimination. Despite this, their lot was much better than the conditions under which Indigenous Australians lived. For most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, segregation and isolation continued to exist (Shackleford, 2010), and leaving the reserve without authority could result in a term in lockup or prison.

Contemporary Aboriginal cultures

> Australian Aborigines are today among the world's most physically varying population, and it now seems that this variability was even greater in the past. (Flood, 2004, p. 75)

Australia has considered Aboriginal people as a single pan-Aboriginal entity, which creates problems as Aboriginal Australia continues to be highly diverse both physically and culturally. Expectations of 'one shoe fits all' solutions to the problems of Aboriginal communities fail, especially in spheres including health and education. Today, the majority of Aboriginal people live in urban settings,

often far from country, but Aboriginal cultures exist in every corner of Australia, from remote areas to cities.

Being part of an Indigenous Australian culture is as much a state of mind as it is of descent and adherence to contemporary beliefs, customs and behaviours. Urban and rural Aboriginal Australians suffer from perceptions that real Aboriginals live in the bush (remote areas), which hinders acceptance of non-remote Aboriginal cultures. Discrimination against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians continues, with Australians more likely to accept and integrate migrant groups than Indigenous Australians.

Ask Yourself

What did being 'Aboriginal' in Australia mean to individuals in the first quarter of twentieth century?

Today?

Torres Strait Islander Australians

Torres Strait Islander peoples have their own distinct identity and cultural traditions based on specific island origins. Culture was transmitted and maintained by storytelling, song and dance. Originally located on the islands of the Torres Strait, the majority of Torres Strait Islanders now live on the mainland. In ABS figures from the 2006 census approximately 33,000 people identified as Torres Strait Islander (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007b, pp. 44, 46).

Since the arrival of Europeans, there has been a gradual movement among the island groups. The first official European settlement of the islands occurred on Waiben (Thursday Island) in 1877, preceded by missionaries of the London Mission Society when Pacific Islander missionaries landed at Erub (Darnley Island) on 1 July 1871, bringing Christianity to the Strait. The 'Coming of the Light' is now a significant day for Torres Strait Islanders and religious and cultural ceremonies are celebrated on 1 July each year.

Torres Strait geography

The cultural importance of the environment is paramount to Torres Strait Islander people. Cultural attachment to the land and sea is a cornerstone for contemporary Islanders, and is exemplified in differing attitudes towards the environment. The islands of the Strait are of three basic geological types, and provide different habitats. Volcanic islands with their fertile volcanic soils and permanent water provided good environments for occupation. Coral atolls of the central strait are low-lying and subject to tidal inundation, with few permanent sources of water.

Mud islands are found in the northern Torres Strait, very close to the mainland of Papua New Guinea. They are also very low and susceptible to tidal fluctuations as well as being swampy. In the top west some islands are less than 10 kilometres from the Papua New Guinea coast.

Origins of Torres Strait Islander Australians

Torres Strait Islander Peoples represent a separate descent lineage from Aboriginal Australians. Their origins align with the M4 chromosome markers (Flood, 2006 p. 174), and they are physically, culturally and socially Melanesian. The Torres Strait contains several island-based cultures with their own history, belief systems and languages, and range of artefacts. Their attitudes to exclusive ownership were more closely aligned to European ideas than Aboriginal concepts of communal ownership and sharing. Like Aboriginal groups, Torres Strait Islanders occupied specific environmental niches by adapting their beliefs and practices. They approach resource utilisation based on agriculture and harvesting ocean resources. Traditional stories convey the experiences of separate groups or societies based on relationships with the natural environment, for example the four recognised seasons are linked to wind changes which closely impact on local conditions. While adopting Christianity, Torres Strait Islanders have retained many customary cultural practices including a belief in magic/sorcery, culturally adoptive practices and cultural beliefs associated with their diverse island cultures.

Personal or family ownership associated with agriculture, constructing canoes and exploiting fishing skills, enabled groups to successfully occupy habitable islands. The material basis of culture is reflected in the variety and complexity of traditional artefacts, many of which are held by European museums and universities. (Calvert, 1997).

Contemporary Torres Strait Islander cultures

Similarities among contemporary Torres Strait Islander cultures allow us to make observations about their culture and identity:

– Most Torres Strait Islander people, in the islands or on the mainland, share a sense of unity and belonging with their island homes, sustained by strong family connections and shared experiences in their cultures.
– Torres Strait Islanders have different and diverse practices across the different island groups. Cultural practices have changed over time, some were discarded and new ones introduced.

– The Islanders are united with the sea and land through spiritual bonds. The world has always been seen as a sacred place of which people are an integral element.

– Certain ceremonies, such as tombstone openings, are central to cultural and social life in the Torres Strait Islander communities.

(Adapted from Synott & Whatman, 1998, pp. 58–62).

Life in the Strait changed rapidly for Torres Strait people following the arrival of Europeans and a new religion. The Islanders adopted Christianity and developed their own model incorporating traditional beliefs and practices. The Second World War brought major changes when many Torres Strait Islander families were moved onto the mainland. After the war, others island-dwellers followed, to work, and raise their families where there was less crowding and competition for resources. A majority of Torres Strait Islander people live in communities on the mainland (such as Townsville, Cairns and Mackay), retaining cultural and family links with their islands and families.

Ask Yourself

Can you identify cultural aspects in which Torres Strait Islander people may differ from Aboriginal Australians?

Why did colonial Australia occupy the islands of the Torres Strait, and what impacts did this have on the traditional people?

Indigenous communities today

Even greater community diversity exists as Indigenous Australians live in most parts of the country. Some Australians continue to hold to the perception that the Indigenous Australians live in rural or remote areas despite the greater proportion living in metropolitan areas. While some suburbs have higher concentrations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households can be found in most suburbs and centres in major towns and cities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are represented in many professions and occupations. Contributions to sporting achievements and the arts are notable. Support from governments and communities assists Indigenous Australians to overcome the disadvantage of historic suppression in education, employment and political activity. Some regional towns and councils are **discrete Indigenous communities** which are dominated by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander residents, but these represent only a small fraction of the Indigenous population.

Discrete Indigenous communities: a geographic location, bounded by physical or cadastral (legal) boundaries, and inhabited or intended to be inhabited by predominantly Indigenous people, with housing or infrastructure that is either owned or managed on a community basis.

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Summary

– For Aboriginal Australians, identity and culture are intertwined with 'Country', which is central to identity.

– The indigenous people of the world are the 'First Peoples'; descendants of the traditional owners and occupiers of a country or region. In 1990, it was estimated that indigenous people numbered approximately 300 million across more than 70 countries.

– Since 1500, European colonial expansion led to dispossession of indigenous people from their lands across most continents.

– In Australia, we have two distinct Indigenous groups—Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

– There are a number of theories relating to the way in which Australia was populated, but all support long-term occupation. Most theories of occupation identify the north and north-west regions as areas of arrival.

– Torres Strait Islander people inhabited the islands of Torres Strait for several thousand years.

– After colonisation, Indigenous Australians were segregated from society and denied acceptance and recognition in the nation's history.

Review and Discuss

Indigenous people experience different effects of colonisation. Identify some major social issues and evaluate the underlying causes within two different indigenous groups.

Compare and contrast specific differences between traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures with reference to spirituality (i.e. belief systems), social organisation and land use.

You are likely to visit an Indigenous community facility as part of your studies. What factors might need to be considered while working/studying in an indigenous community?

Discuss cultural aspects of health with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander individuals? What factors do you need to address in establishing a relationship?

Where are you most likely to be engaging with Indigenous clients? How might the facility/service determine if clients are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

Discuss why cultural background might impact on health.

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