

The Eastern Islanders were able to grow yams, bananas and other crops. In the Western Island there were wild yams and other edible roots, as well as mangrove pods. The Central Islanders were less well off but they traded with other islands. Throughout the islands, our protein came from the sea: in particular, molluscs, fish, turtle and dugong.

Changes to traditional lifestyles

For Aboriginal people, the fencing of land by the colonists restricted our access to fresh water. When the colonists let their animals out to graze on the land or drained swamps to make more pasture, many staple vegetable foods disappeared, reducing variety in our diet and increasing the risk of deficiencies and disease.

For instance, sheep cropped the basal leaves of the yam daisy (murrnong) so closely that it disappeared completely from most districts of south-eastern Australia. We lost access to some of the basic components of our diet, and came to prefer the colonisers' less nutritious white flour, tea and sugar. The impact of the disappearance or restricted access to food cannot be underestimated (see p. 91).

By the 1820s and 1830s, some Torres Strait Island communities were in contact with passing European ships. They traded fresh food and other items for iron. Trepangers, those seeking *bêche-de-mer* or sea cucumber (considered an aphrodisiac by Chinese people), were working in the Torres Strait from the 1860s for long periods, sometimes in great numbers. They were equipped with guns, and the Islanders were at a disadvantage against these better-armed invaders. Between the London Missionary Society and the government, the Torres Strait was transformed during the last quarter of the nineteenth century; however, except for the Kuarareg, most Torres Strait Islanders were able to stay on their island lands.

Languages

More than 200 distinct languages, and countless dialects of them, were in use when European settlement began. The ancestral creative beings were said to have left languages on the country, along with the first

humans and their culture. It was usual for people to speak at least one or more neighbouring languages besides their own. In some areas, like Arnhem Land, many different languages were spoken over a small area, whereas at the other extreme, in the huge Western Desert, which covers about one sixth of the continent, dialects of only one language are spoken.

Sadly, only a small number of our languages are spoken fluently today. While people in some communities continue to speak their own languages, many others are seeking to record and revive threatened ones.



Aboriginal Australia language map



Culture and Sport

Our traditions have been assaulted by the cultures of the waves of people who have come to our country. However, many have survived even in those parts of southern and eastern Australia where colonial impacts were longest and strongest. They continue to evolve in defiance of the expectation that we would simply merge with the dominant culture.

Traditional stories, regional differences

In the north of the country, our traditional stories, generally speaking, are strong and are retold in ceremony for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. There are many Dreamings and stories for all regions, but on the Larapinta Trail near Alice Springs, for example, visitors can't help but be aware of the Caterpillar Dreaming. In Arnhem Land the Yolngu record their interaction with Macassan traders with the Red Flag dance. The Titjikala community, south of Alice Springs, tell the story of the evil Itikiwarra, the knob-tailed gecko spirit ancestor, while the Anangu of northern South Australia have the Kuniya songline, where the woman python lays her eggs on a slab of rock, leaving landmarks across the country.

It is important to remember that southern Indigenous people have retained significant elements of their culture and are reclaiming more. At Gariwerd (in The Grampians) in Victoria, the traditional story of the stars of the Southern Cross is told in both traditional dance and contemporary film. Further north, Torres Strait Islanders give a rich meaning to the constellation when they talk about the story of the warrior Tagai (see p. 13).

While cultures and traditions across the country have much in common there are distinct regional differences. In the Torres Strait, many of our dances and songs refer to the local environment, while others reveal contact and influences from as far away as the South Sea Islands.

Dancers of all ages participate in the daily bunggul at the annual Garma Festival of Traditional Culture.



Gail Mabo, The Mabo Dance Company director, with dancer, Albert David.



Internationally renowned artist, John Mawundjul, painting at Milmilngkan near Maningrida, Northern Territory, © Luke Taylor.

Art

We have always been artists. We paint in rock shelters and caves, on our bodies for ceremony and in some regions we construct vast artworks on the ground as vital components of ritual. Rock painting from the Kimberley's Carpenter's Gap has been dated to 40 000 years ago and the concentric circle art of central Australia is thought to be the oldest continuing art tradition in the world. We also paint on tools, shields and musical instruments.

Our artists make art for sale and the styles are as diverse as the cultures and histories of the artists. They draw on ceremonial arts in order to teach outsiders about our religion. The Aboriginal art movement at Papunya Tula grew out of ceremonial designs made on the ground but now the artists paint huge canvasses for museums and galleries around the world. In Arnhem Land, intricate body-art ochre designs are now also painted on large pieces of flat bark, which are offered for sale, and many of which now hang in art galleries.