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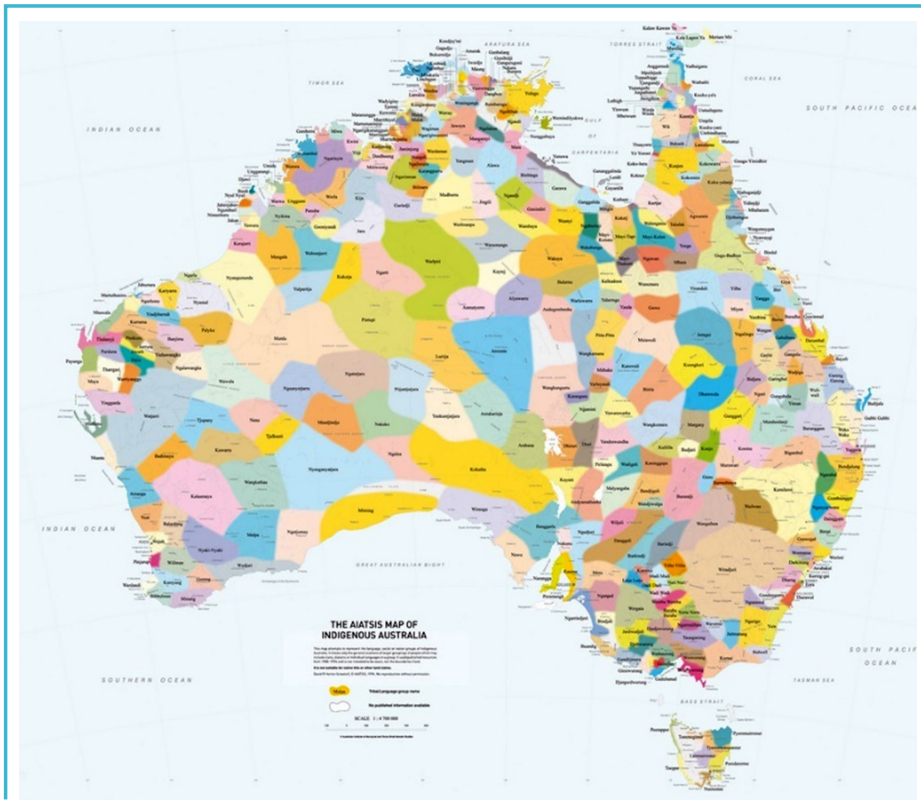
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Written by Alice Tamang

Overview

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the First Peoples (Indigenous peoples) of Australia and the world's oldest continuous culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are two distinct cultural groups, and within these groups there are more than 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations, each with distinct languages, culture, traditions, songs, dances, art and stories. Whilst some Nations share many similarities, each Nation is unique.

The [AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia](#), provides a general representation of larger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations across Australia, which may include clan groups and individual languages within them. Please note that boundaries are not exact.



The AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia, David R Horton (creator), © AIATSIS, 1996

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 3.2% of Australia's total population¹. A common misconception is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people only live in remote communities or rural areas, when in fact over one third live in urban, capital city areas. The median age for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 24 years.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census





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Impacts of colonisation

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lived peacefully on their lands for more than 65,000 years. In 1770, explorer Captain James Cook sailed across the Pacific and claimed possession of the east Coast of Australia for the British Crown, despite the fact that the land was already inhabited. In 1788, the British arrived in what is now known as Sydney Cove, with 11 ships containing 1500 marines, civilians and convicts to establish a penal colony.

In the 10 years that followed it is estimated that 90% of the Indigenous population were killed due to violence inflicted by settlers, the introduction of disease and the theft of First Nations lands.

Over the past 200+ years, colonisation has had a devastating and wide-ranging impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the impacts of which are still strongly felt today. Many massacres were carried out, often in the form of mass shootings or poisonings and people were driven from their lands and forced to live on [reserves or missions](#). People were separated from their traditional lands and banned from practicing culture and speaking their languages.

The Australian Government perpetrated many wrongs against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including the forced removal of generations of children. Thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were taken from their families and placed into Government or religious institutions and with non-Indigenous families. This took place from the mid 1800's right up until the 1970's, and the children taken from their families are now known as [The Stolen Generations](#). These children, their families and communities suffered irreparable trauma and face lasting impacts.

It is important to acknowledge the impact colonisation has had on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and that many injustices continue today. Many factors, both past and present, have contributed to significantly lower health outcomes, a large life expectancy gap, high rates of incarceration and lower levels of educational attainment. The combinations of these factors has led to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people facing barriers to engagement and participation, and therefore missing out on opportunities that non-Indigenous Australians have access to.

Strengths

Despite the incredible challenges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have endured, and continue to face, they are strong, proud and resilient people, who have many strengths that all people living in Australia should value and recognise.

Family, culture and connection to the land are central to First Nations communities, and provide a strong sense of strength and pride. Against all odds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have fought hard to ensure

their knowledge, language, art, stories and spirituality have continued to be passed down through generations, and lives strong to this day. Proudly, 167 Indigenous languages are still spoken across the country.

In addition to holding a diverse range of professional and informal experience and expertise across many sectors, Indigenous Australians can also offer specialised skills in key areas. Over the decades, many strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people controlled organisations and businesses have been established, providing services to their communities and the broader Australian population. An example of this is Indigenous health services, which operate across the country, providing culturally appropriate care to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, addressing complex health challenges at a local level, contributing to lasting health and wellbeing outcomes.

Reconciliation

The complex and troubled history of Australia's treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, has left deep scars in this country that need to be healed. "Reconciliation is about strengthening relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous peoples, for the benefit of all Australians"[Reconciliation Australia: <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation/>] and the concept of reconciliation is both practical and symbolic.

Reconciliation Australia, the peak body for reconciliation, define the concept as having five dimensions: historical acceptance; race relations; equality and equity; institutional integrity and unity.

Over the last few decades, many significant steps have been taken towards reconciliation, yet it is an ongoing journey. Governments, organisations, communities and individuals all have a part to play. Some steps towards reconciliation can be small, such as individuals making an effort to learn and acknowledge the true history of Australia; and some steps can be big, such as the Australian Government offering a [National Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008](#). Every action is important.

Individuals can contribute to reconciliation by:

- Learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and cultures
- Ensuring all of your communications with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are open, honest and respectful
- Learning which Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Nation you are living, studying or working on and paying respect to the traditional owners
- Conducting an [Acknowledgement of Country](#) at formal meetings
- Celebrating and commemorating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander days of significance





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Dates of significance

There are many dates throughout the year that hold significant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as the broader Australian community. Recognition of these dates is important and key dates include:

26 January	Australia Day This is Australia's National holiday, but is also the anniversary of when the British landed in 1788, and colonisation began. For many people in the Indigenous community, it is not a day of celebration and is instead referred to as Invasion Day or Survival Day.
13 February	Anniversary of the National Apology This day commemorates the anniversary of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations.
17 March	Close the Gap Day A National day encouraging awareness and action to reduce the life expectancy gap between Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians.
26 May	National Sorry Day A day to remember acknowledge the strength of Stolen Generations Survivors and reflect on the past injustices inflicted upon them, their families and communities.
27 May – 3 June	Reconciliation Week A week for all people living in Australia to learn about our shared history and explore how each of us can contribute to healing and reconciliation.
First Sunday in July, until the following Sunday	NAIDOC Week A week full of celebrations, held across Australia to celebrate the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
4 August	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Day A day to celebrate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities to celebrate the strength and culture of their children.

Resources for further learning

Acknowledging and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples history and culture is an ongoing process everybody in Australia is encouraged to learn more. If you would like to broaden your knowledge, the following websites may be of interest:

- The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: www.aiatsis.gov.au
- The Koori Mail: www.koorimail.com
- National Indigenous Television (NITV): www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/channels/nitv
- Common Ground: www.commonground.org.au
- Australians Together: www.australianstogether.org.au
- Reconciliation Australia: www.reconciliation.org.au
- Uluru statement from the Heart: <https://ulurustatement.org/>



About the author:

Alice Tamang is a proud Dharug woman living and working on Wurundjeri Country in Naarm (Melbourne). Alice currently leads First Nations inclusion programs, for the Australian Volunteers Program and has extensive experience working with Aboriginal communities across regional and remote locations across Australia. Throughout her career, Alice's work has focused on equitable inclusion, community development and cultural revival, across the arts, education and international development sectors.

