

# AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

## INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS

<http://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/aboriginals>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7241965.stm>

<http://www.whitehat.com.au/australia/inventions/Aboriginal.asp>

There are about 500 different Aboriginal peoples in Australia, each with their own language and territory and usually made up of a large number of separate clans.



*An Aboriginal child is being painted for a dance festival in Northern Queensland, Australia.*

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Archaeologists believe that the Aboriginals first came to the Australian continent around **45,000 years ago**.

Aboriginals themselves, however, trace their creation back to **the Dreamtime**, an era long past when the earth was first formed. One Aboriginal man explained it thus:

*'By Dreaming we mean the belief that long ago these creatures started human society, they made all natural things and put them in a special place.*

*'These Dreaming creatures were connected to special places and special roads or tracks or paths. In many places the great creatures changed themselves into sites where their spirits stayed.*

*'Aboriginals have a special connection with everything that is natural. Aboriginals see themselves as part of nature ... All things on earth we see as part human. It is true that people who belong to a particular area are really part of that area and if that area is destroyed they are also destroyed.'*

Aboriginals' land was invaded from the end of the 18th century onwards, with catastrophic consequences for them.

## How do they live?

Before the invasion, Aboriginal people lived throughout Australia, although the highest population density was along the coast. Here, people seem to have moved seasonally between permanent settlements near the sea and others at the headwaters of the coast rivers.



*Aboriginal boy, Australia.*

*© Helen Ross/Survival*

Evidence suggests that these communities managed their environment carefully to ensure a steady supply of food, bringing wild yams into gardens which they irrigated, for example, or building artificial dykes to extend the range of eels.

Those Aboriginal tribes who lived inland in the bush and the desert lived by hunting and gathering, burning the undergrowth to encourage the growth of plants favoured by the game they hunted. They were experts in seeking out water.

Today more than half of all Aboriginals live in towns, often on the outskirts in terrible conditions. Many others work as labourers on cattle ranches that have taken over their land.

Many, particularly in the northern half of the continent, have managed to cling on to their land and still hunt and gather 'bush tucker'.

## What problems do they face?

Ever since the British first invaded, Aboriginal peoples have had their land stolen from them or destroyed. Until 1992, when it was finally overturned, the legal principle governing British and then Australian law regarding Aboriginal land was that of 'terra nullius' – that the land was empty before the British arrived, belonged to no-one, and could legitimately be taken over.

Most has still to be returned today, and the loss of their land has had a devastating social and physical impact on Aboriginal peoples.

The initial invasions also sparked huge waves of disease that killed thousands – many others were massacred. In just over one hundred years from the first invasion of their land, their numbers were reduced from up to an estimated one million to only 60,000.



*Aboriginal cave art, Australia.*

*© John Miles/Survival*

During much of the 20th century, outright killings were replaced with a policy of removing Aboriginal children from their parents and giving them to white families or placing them in mission schools, to eradicate traces of Aboriginal culture and language.

Today they still face racist attitudes, and there are periodic incidents of violence towards them, particularly affecting those in police custody. Their generally poor living conditions mean that Aboriginal people have a far higher infant mortality rate and suicide rate and a lower life expectancy than the rest of the population, and they make up a disproportionate section of the prison population.

A landmark High Court judgment in 1992, known as the Mabo case after the lead plaintiff, threw out the racist 'terra nullius' principle on which Australian legal attitudes to Aboriginal land rights had been based. The decision recognized for the first time the existence of Aboriginal 'native title' over large parts of rural Australia. Many Aboriginal groups, such as the Martu of western Australia, have used the ruling to have their ownership of their ancestral lands recognized in law. Others, however, have failed to overcome the many legal hurdles placed in their way by the government's land rights legislation.

In February 2008, The Australian government has made a formal apology for the past wrongs caused by successive governments on the indigenous Aboriginal population. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised in parliament to all Aborigines for laws and policies that "inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss". He said he apologised especially to "the Stolen Generations" of young Aboriginal children who were taken from their parents in a policy of assimilation which lasted from the 19th Century to the late 1960s. The apology, beamed live around the country on TV, was met with cheers, but some Aborigines said it should have been accompanied with compensation for their suffering.

Australia's 460,000 Aborigines make up 2% of the population and are the most disadvantaged group. They have higher rates of infant mortality, drug abuse, alcoholism and unemployment than the rest of the population.

## Aboriginal inventions

- **Stone tools** - Aboriginal people are thought to be the first to use ground edges on stone cutting tools and the first to use stone tools to grind seeds.
- **Boomerang** - a throwing stick used for many purposes whose design allows it to return to the (skilled) thrower.



- **Woomera** - a spear throwing holder that acts as an extension of the arm thus allowing greater power and range for the spear. "Woomera" was adopted as an appropriate name for the rocket launching range and associated settlement in outback South Australia.



- **Didgeridoo** - a musical instrument whose sound is immediately recognisable. It first appeared 2,000 or more years ago and at the time of European arrival was used in the north western corner of Australia.

