

Part 3: 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 rely heavily on language to exchange information and to communicate ideas. However, language is also a vehicle for the expression of discrimination and prejudice as our cultural values and attitudes are reflected in the structures and meanings of the language we use. This means that language cannot be regarded as a neutral or unproblematic medium, and can cause or reflect discrimination due to its intricate links with society and culture.

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

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/s
- Aboriginal people/s
- Aboriginal person
- Torres Strait Islander people/s
- Torres Strait Islander person

The 'more appropriate' terms stress the humanity 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

- Aborigines
- The Aborigines
- The Aboriginal people
- Aboriginal, Aborigines
- The Torres Strait Islanders
- Blacks
- Whites
- Yellafellas
- Coloured

Using terms such as 'the Aborigines', or 'the Aboriginal people' tends to suggest that Aboriginal people/s are all the same, and thus stereotypes Indigenous Australians. The fact is that Indigenous Australia is multicultural. Australia before the invasion was comprised of 200-300 autonomous language groups that were usually referred to as 'tribes', now more often as 'peoples', 'nations' or 'language groups'. The nations of

Indigenous Australia were, and are, as separate as the nations of Europe or Africa.

The Aboriginal English words ‘blackfella’ and ‘whitefella’ are used by Indigenous Australian people all over the country — some communities also use ‘yellafella’ and ‘coloured’. Although less appropriate, people should respect the acceptance and use of these terms, and consult the local Indigenous community for further advice.

More appropriate

- Murri - Qld, north west NSW
- Nyoongah - WA
- Koori – NSW
- Goori - north coast NSW
- Koorie - Vic
- Yolngu - Arnhem Land
- Anangu - Central Australia
- Palawa - Tasmania
- Nunga (not always a more appropriate term - SA)
- Ngarrindjeri – SA - River Murray, Lakes, Coorong people
- Torres Strait Island Peoples
- Murray Island Peoples
- Mer Island Peoples

Aboriginal language people terms such as ‘Koori’, ‘Murri’, ‘Nyoongah’ are appropriate for the areas where they apply. About 80% of the Torres Strait Island population now resides outside the Torres Strait and as such, local terminology such as Murray Island Peoples and Mer Island Peoples is also used. There are also local names for particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language groups, for example ‘Gamilaroy’ (NSW) or ‘Pitjantjatjara’ (NT/SA).

Some people use ‘Nunga’ in general reference to Indigenous peoples who reside in and around the area of Adelaide. Many Indigenous South Australians prefer people not to presume the right to use their word ‘Nunga’. Local Indigenous Australian people can clarify appropriate use of this and other terms.

More appropriate

- Uluru

Local Indigenous Australian peoples named all of Australia in their languages before the invasion. 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 section of Aboriginal country.

No more classifying people

More appropriate

- Indigenous Australian peoples
- Aboriginal peoples
- ‘Torres Strait Islander people or peoples’ may be preferable, depending on the context

Using the more appropriate terms helps to avoid attempting to inaccurately 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 as they categorise people and assume that there are real differences between Indigenous Australian peoples of different areas. It is critical that they are not used to refer to or to attempt to classify Indigenous peoples.

In ‘long-settled’ areas, the implication that ‘urban’ Indigenous Australians are less Indigenous than ‘traditional’ or ‘transitional’ people and cultures is most 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 cultures are ‘really Aboriginal’.

It is important to bear in mind that Indigenous Australians have much more in common than the wide use of these categorising terms would suggest. For example, most Aboriginal people who are classified as ‘urban’ in fact have very close links to ‘traditional’ country. Many Indigenous Australians find the term ‘transitional’ offensive as it implies progress upwards towards something better, the idea that assimilation into mainstream is better.

Caution 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 divisiveness because these categorical terms imply that Aboriginal people living in these communities are less socialised than people living in urban communities.

More appropriate

- Aboriginal people/s, Indigenous people/s, and Torres Strait Islander people/s
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people understand their own history and identity, and recognise that physical features do not determine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestry.

Less appropriate

- ‘Part-aborigine’, ‘full-blood’, ‘half-caste’, ‘quarter-caste’, ‘octoroon’, ‘mulatto’,

‘hybrid’

In the past, governments tried to classify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people according to skin colour and parentage using these less appropriate terms. Exemption certificates were issued to Aboriginal people with lighter skin colour to allow them the same basic freedoms that people without Indigenous heritage took for granted as citizens. The assumption was that any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person with any ‘European’ blood was more intelligent, and a fitter 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 peoples were not introduced until 1967 through the referendum, and by returning land to some groups from 1975.

No more classifying cultures

More appropriate

- Indigenous nations
- Complex and diverse societies
- Efficient resource managers
- Indigenous Australian society

The effectiveness and sophistication of Indigenous Australian resource management, and social organisation, is starting to be 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 ‘progress’ 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/s
- Aboriginal nations
- Aboriginal communities
- Mob/s
- Language groups
- Culture groups

‘Nation’, ‘community’, ‘people’, ‘mob’ or the local language or culture group name is usually preferable to ‘tribe’. ‘Mob’ is an Aboriginal English word and as such may be more appropriate, but community acceptance may be required before using this word. Some Aboriginal people use the term ‘tribe’ due to mainstream schooling in imposed terminology and such usage needs to be respected.

Less appropriate

- Tribe
- Horde
- Band
- Clan
- Moiety

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

Anthropologists sometimes use the terms ‘band’, ‘clan’ and ‘moiety’ to convey certain characteristics of cultural groupings. Rather than trying to convey precise structures of Indigenous Australian societies it may be more useful for teachers to convey the essence of Indigenous Australian social organisation.

More appropriate

- Seasonal occupation
- Rotational/cyclical occupation
- Looking after the country/the land

The rotational or cyclical occupation of land by Aboriginal people was inaccurately 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 not staying in one place and exhausting all resources, but moving around the territory at 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 judgement by the High Court rejected terra nullius as wrong both in fact and in law.

Dreaming and spirituality

More appropriate

- The Dreaming
- The Dreamings

‘The Dreaming’ or ‘The Dreamings’ are mostly more appropriate as they describe Indigenous beliefs as ongoing today. Many people use ‘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 must be respected.

More appropriate

- Spirituality
- Spiritual beliefs

In terms of Indigenous belief systems, 'spirituality' or 'spiritual beliefs' are more appropriate. Indigenous Australian spirituality is localised by definition, it is more a way of life, of connectedness and belonging.

More appropriate

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

It is appropriate to use 'The Legends' 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

- Myths
- Folklore
- Legends
- Story
- Stories

Using words such as 'myth' or 'story' conveys the impression that information from the Dreaming is not true or is trivial, or only 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; it was 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 this term denies the validity of Indigenous Australian history before what is commonly regarded as written history, and before European contact. It also denies a place for Aboriginal people in history. This is still reflected in those schools today which begin a study of Australian history in 1770 or 1788.

More appropriate

- ‘... since the beginning of the Dreaming/s’

‘Since the beginning of the Dreaming/s’ 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’

Forty thousand years puts a limit on the occupation of Australia and thus tends to lend support to migration theories and anthropological assumptions. Many Indigenous Australians see this sort of measurement and quantifying 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 ‘discovery’ offensive. However, it can be noted that the word ‘discovery’ can mean finding something that one as an individual did not know was there. This meaning should be stressed if the word is to be used. One reason why so much had to be ‘discovered’ is the fact that Indigenous knowledge was discounted and disregarded for so long.

More appropriate

- Invasion
- Colonisation
- Occupation

Australia was not settled peacefully, it was invaded, occupied and colonised. Describing the arrival of the Europeans as a ‘settlement’ attempts to view 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 peoples’ lands being stolen from them on the basis of the legal fiction of terra nullius and negates the resistance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The fact that most settlers did not see themselves as invading the country, and that convicts were transported against their will is beside the point. The effects were the same for Indigenous Australian peoples.

More appropriate

- ‘Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth 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

- ‘Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth were the first men to cross the Blue Mountains’

Statements such as this deny the Indigenous history of Australia, and are examples of the White Australia frame of reference that totally excludes 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

- Chiefs
- Kings
- Queens

Aboriginal people did not, and do not have chiefs, kings and queens. The introduction of ‘kings’ or ‘queens’ was a colonial strategy to raise up individuals for the authorities to deal with. Colonial governments had no experience of dealing with the structures of Indigenous societies, and this was a way of trying to make Aboriginal societies conform to English experience of chiefs in other countries. It was a way of honouring individual status, but there was usually an element of mockery eg such names as ‘King Billy’ or ‘Queen Gooseberry’.

Note however that many Aboriginal people who are descended from colonially appointed ‘kings’ and ‘queens’ are proud of this ancestry.

Reference

‘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.

Resource bibliography and websites

<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/>

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies – click on the ‘Research’ link.

Accessed February 2008

<http://www.faira.org.au/contents.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 February 2008

<http://www.austlit.edu.au/specialistDatasets/aboriginal>

Database of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and their works.

Accessed February 2008

