

2

An Introduction to Indigenous Australia

The invasion of Australia by the British in 1788 is often portrayed as the beginning of the end of Indigenous cultures, but such colonial misconceptions should be seriously rethought. Today, it is clear that these cultures have survived. While they have undergone radical change in many parts of the country, Indigenous Australians have drawn upon the flexibility and strengths inherent in their cultures to ensure their on-going survival. The outcome has taken different shapes in different parts of the country, in the same way that Indigenous cultures had different shapes prior to contact with Europeans. The result is a diversity of Aboriginal Australian cultures in the present, as there was a diversity of these cultures in the past.

Australia's Indigenous population can be divided into two groups: Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. Taken together, they comprise around two per cent of the total Australian population. There are about 360,000 Aboriginal people and approximately 35,000 Torres Strait Islanders. Aboriginal people inhabit the mainland and many offshore islands, while Torres Strait Islanders come from the chain of islands between the tip of Cape York in Queensland and Papua New Guinea. The sovereignty of these two groups of Indigenous Australians is represented in their flags, both officially recognized by the Federal Government. Designed by Harold Thomas, the Aboriginal flag uses a pallet of three traditional colors: black, yellow and red. The people are symbolized by the black upper band, the land by the lower red band, while the life-giving sun shines on both. Attributed to the late Bernard Namok of Thursday Island, the central motif of the Torres Strait flag is a white head-dress, known as *dhari*. The five main island groups and the navigational importance of stars to these seafaring peoples are depicted by a white five-pointed star, the land and the sea are represented by green and blue bands, while black dividing stripes symbolize the people. These flags symbolize both the diversity and unity of Indigenous Australian cultures (see Figure 2.1).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have distinct cultures and different, though inter-locking, histories. A common misconception held by the British at contact and long afterwards, is that all Indigenous Australians were a unified, relatively homogeneous group of people. Throughout the world European world-views consistently incorporated the diversity of individual Indigenous populations

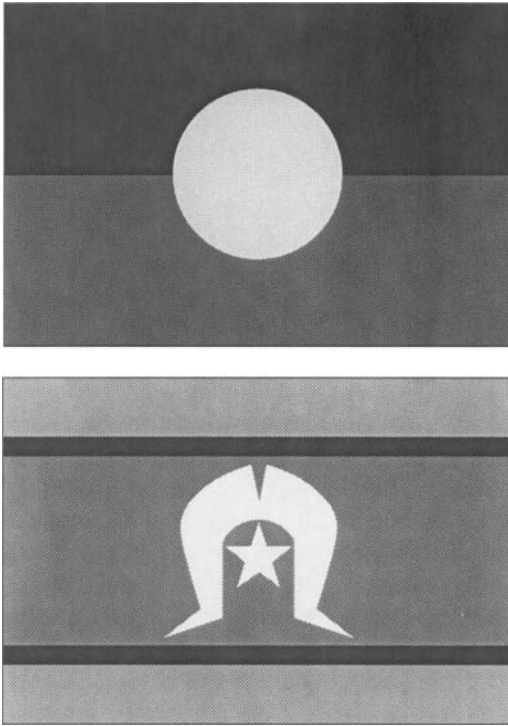


FIGURE 2.1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags.

into a single category, such as “Indian”, or “Aboriginal”. This arose from, and reinforced, the colonial notion of Indigenous peoples as “other”—a notion used to justify different treatment of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (for more information, see Preface).

In reality, at the time of British invasion there were around 200–250 different languages and 600 dialects spoken throughout Australia (Horton, 1994; Figure 2.2). Aboriginal people are born into a language group, acquiring this identity through a mixture of parentage and geographic location, in much the same way as others are born “Australian”, “American” or “Greek”. Membership of a language group affiliates people not only to each other but also to traditional tracts of land or “country”. If the parents come from more than one language group, the children are identified with both groups. When they are adults, they may chose to affiliate primarily to their mother’s language group, or to their father’s, or to both. For archaeologists or anthropologists dealing with land rights, this is an important issue, since it has direct bearing on the strength of people’s rights to land. The other point for archaeologists to note is that, since membership of a language group is acquired as a birthright, people affiliated with any particular language group are necessarily the direct descendants of forebears who also belonged to that language group.