

# READINGS IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

-The History you were never taught

## **THEME 3                    ABORIGINAL SOCIETY**

Building on the discussions of Aboriginal thought systems in second theme, the eight articles in the third theme of 'Aboriginal Society', show how these concepts and principles apply in practice.

As is warned in the first article of this section, students may be put at risk of brain hemorrhage when reading these articles. This is particularly so in the second and third articles on totemic kinship. This is partly because the cyclical Aboriginal systems are so different to the linear systems of western thought.

However gaining even a faint grasp of these concepts will hopefully enrich your practical understanding of the Aboriginal mindset, as outlined in the five final articles of this section.

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## **THEME 3 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. Are your granddaughters only girls and your nephews only boys?
2. If you are group C and your marital partner is D, to what group would your children belong?
3. Is war part of human nature or just a product of economics?
4. Is the level of a civilization measured by the degree of technological advancement or by the degree of civil cohesion?
5. Have the assumptions of Terra Nullius affected your own knowledge of Australian history?

## THE COMPLEX WORLD OF ABORIGINAL KINSHIP

Some years ago a woman said to me that she had been 'adopted' into a tribe, and the Aboriginal man concerned said that she was now his nephew. She did not understand how, as a woman, she could be a nephew, so I tried to explain it to her along the following lines.

Titles like niece, nephew, grandson, and granddaughter, are not decided by the gender of the person concerned, but by their filial or lineal relationship. If I point to a girl and say '*This is my grandson*' it simply means that she is the child of my son. If I point to a boy and say '*This is my granddaughter*' it simply means that he is the child of my daughter. Grandsons can therefore be either boys or girls, as can granddaughters.

The designation of uncles and aunts is similarly different to European conventions. The sisters of your mother are not your aunts as in the European definition. Your mother's sisters are your '*other mothers*', because somebody has to take up maternal responsibilities if something untoward happened to your birth mother. Similarly, your father's brothers are not your uncles they are your '*other fathers*.'

You aunties therefore are your father's sisters and your uncles are your mother's brothers. This is where it starts to get into brain haemorrhage territory. The children of both your mother's sisters and your father's brothers are therefore not your cousins, as in the European definitions, they are your '*other brothers and sisters*'. Their parents are therefore by definition not your uncle and aunt, they are your '*other mother and father*'.

To get back to my confused female nephew, her title of nephew means she must have been adopted as if she were the child of his wife's brother. This is the normal process of familial adoption in traditional Aboriginal society.

The terminology arises from the fact that a man does not have any nephews until he gets married and inherits them from his wife's side of the family. Similarly, a woman does not have nieces until she gets married and inherits them from her husband's side of the family.

This is one of the reasons that the terms '*Uncle*' and '*Aunty*' still retain special significance in Aboriginal society. They were originally titles that gained an additional dimension with marriage, but now survive more as honorific terms in the Aboriginal community.

In traditional society however, the terms were quite specific. If I am a man, the children of my brother are my '*other children*'. On the other hand, the children of my sisters, both boys and girls, are my nieces. Similarly, if I am a woman, the children of my sisters are my '*other children*' and the children of my brothers are my nephews. Did I mention brain haemorrhage?

A few years ago I had a most satisfying experience. My wife and I were on a caravan holiday in the Northern Territory. We had stopped at Kakadu National park and I was chatting to some Aboriginal Park Rangers outside the visitors' centre. The Ranger introduced me to the young man opposite him and said '*This is my nephew*'. I immediately said '*Oh you mean he is the son of your wife's brother?*' His eyebrows shot up in amazement and he smiled saying '*Oh you know this stuff?*' I smiled back and said '*A little bit.*'

Europeans have always had trouble understanding Aboriginal relationships, but ultimately it is only a trick of thinking. Rather than remembering relationship terms you only know the totemic structure of relationships. Tribal Aboriginal people carry this structure in their heads and can immediately locate a person according to the skin totem structure. However I have already ventured far enough into brain haemorrhage territory and won't go any further, save for one final note.

Within the totemic Skin Group system there were four primary groups. Your father belongs to group one, your mother belongs to group two, you belong to group three and your marital partner belongs to group four. All your brothers and sisters as well as your other brothers and other sisters (that is the children of your mother's sisters and your fathers' brothers) belong to the same Skin Group as you.

However your cousins (the children of your father's sisters and your mother's brothers) belong in the same group that your marital partner comes from. In other words your husband or wife is classed as a type of cousin, but are of no filial relationship to you.

When Aboriginal people tried to explain the structure of this relationship to settlers or anthropologists, as soon as the word 'cousin' was mentioned, the listener usually jumped to the conclusion that Aboriginal people practiced incest. The reality is that Aboriginal society had more degrees of safety against incest than any other society on Earth.

# UNDERSTANDING TOTEMIC KINSHIP

All Aboriginal tribes across Australia were originally organised in the same way, sharing the same basic totemic structure and processes that determined kinship. These same principles still apply in many northern Australian communities that have retained their traditional culture.

The first point to understand is that all tribes were divided into two halves called 'Moieties' which were complementary opposites, like the Taoist concepts of Yin and Yang. These two halves were then divided into half again to form four quarters, called Skin Groups. Each of these Moieties and Skin Groups are symbolised by an animal, bird or reptile, and for instance the most common Moiety totems across Australia were Black Cockatoo and White Cockatoo. In southeast Australia the Moiety totems were usually Eagle and Crow. Cross-moiety relationships between similar types of Skin totem, were also represented by a similar animal, bird or reptile totem. These cross-moiety Flesh Totems had regional variations as well as the totems representing the four individual Skin Groups also varying. In some northern Australian areas the four Skin Groups were further subdivided into eight. However the original four-groups are still embedded in this structure as Sub-Moiety totems.

Changes to an eight-group system and other anomalies to the original four-group system occurred as an adaption to the massive depopulation caused by the 1789 smallpox plague which started in Sydney Cove one year after British occupation. This plague is estimated to have killed up to 90% of the Aboriginal population of Australia, resulting in 2 ½ million deaths.

Understanding the workings of the Skin Group system is difficult for non-Aboriginal people as it operates as a binary matrix. In reality it was the world's first computer system. To begin understanding the system it is helpful to visualise the four Skin Groups as a square divided by horizontal and vertical lines, thus forming four squares. If these four squares are labelled A, B, C and D as shown, their relationships can be explored. Each of these four Skin Groups has a special relationship with the other three Skin Groups. If you follow the model A can form three pairs AB AD and AC, B has BA BC and BD, C has CD CB and CA, whilst D has DC DA and DB. If we remove the duplications from these twelve pairings, we end up with six pairs, AC and BD as vertical pairs, AD and BC as diagonal pairs and AB and CD as horizontal pairs.

|          |          |
|----------|----------|
| <b>A</b> | <b>B</b> |
| <b>C</b> | <b>D</b> |

Each of these vertical, diagonal and horizontal pairs are called Classes, with the concepts of Spirit, Flesh and Skin separately defining each class. The two vertical classes AC and BD are Spirit Classes and represent the father-child relationship. The two diagonal classes AD and BC are Flesh Classes, representing the mother-child relationship. The two horizontal classes AB and CD are Skin Classes, representing the marital relationship. Both the Spirit (father-child) and Flesh (mother-child) classes have generational cycles, where children must be in a different Skin Group to both parents, but be in the same Spirit Class of their father and Flesh Class of their mother. However who can marry who is fixed and does not vary between generations. Nevertheless, girls always stay in their mother's Flesh Class, whilst boys stay in their father's Spirit Class.

Anthropologists and Ethnologists commonly use terms such as patrilineal and matrilineal to describe the generational Spirit and Flesh cycles, but such terms are complete misnomers. This is because Aboriginal descent is defined by circular, not linear systems. This is evidenced by the fact that each child shares the same Skin totems as both their mother's mother and their father's father. This will be readily seen when you follow through the Spirit and Flesh cycles shown on the accompanying display model.

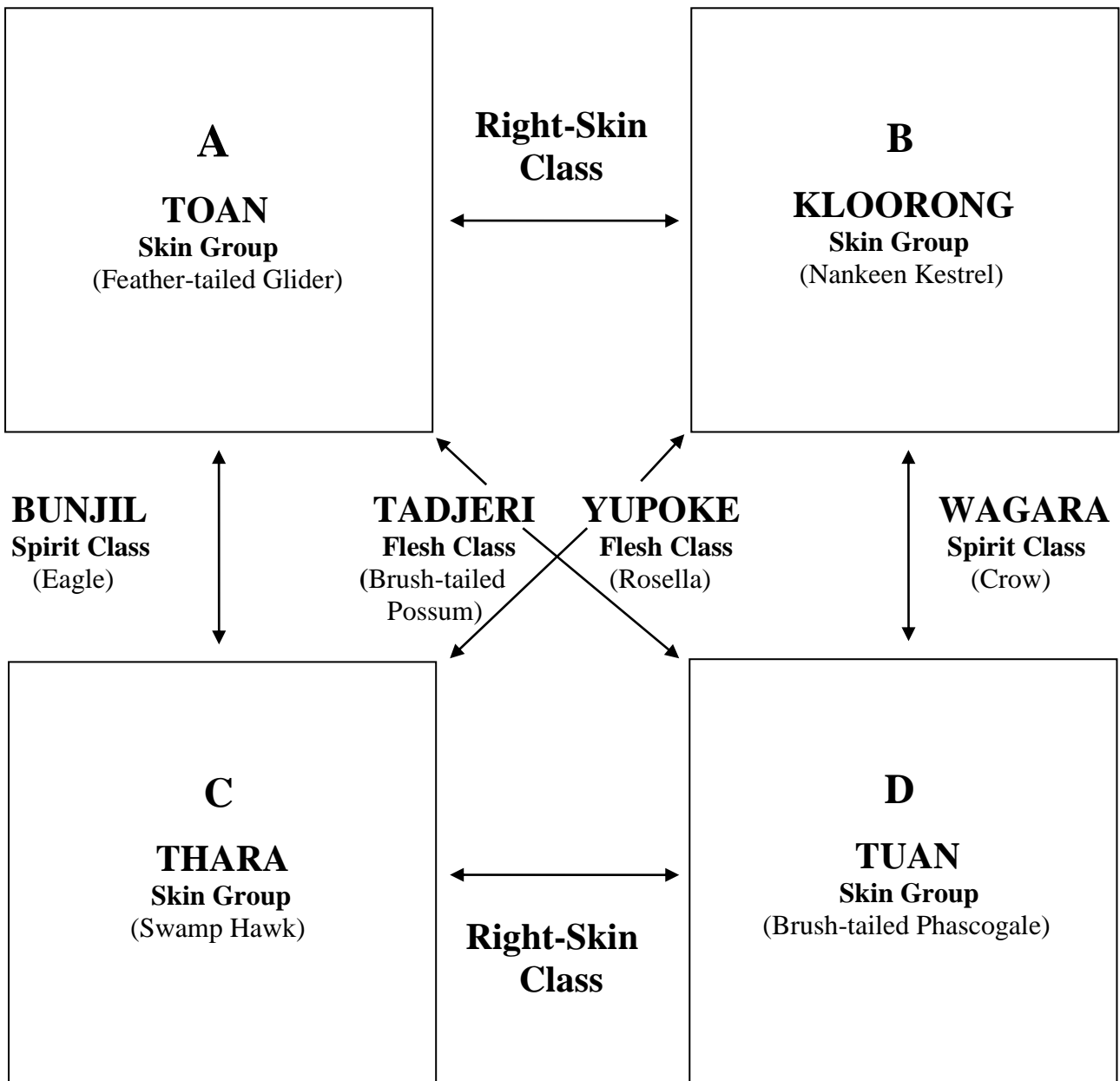
Both the Spirit and Flesh cycles will produce exactly the same result in showing what Skin Group your children will belong to, so you can use either the Spirit Cycle or the Flesh Cycle to map your family's Skin Group relationships. The only rider to this is for the Spirit and Flesh cycles to be in unison, the parental marriage has to be 'right-skin', in other words marriages must only be AB or CD. If a wrong-skin marriage has occurred (i.e. AD AC BC or BD) then the Flesh cycle will give the correct answer as to which Skin Group the children of such a union belong. Therefore, presuming a right-skin marriage every child must end up in the same Skin Group as both their maternal grandmother and paternal grandfather, so it is quite misleading to describe such a system as matrilineal or patrilineal, when it is simultaneously neither and both.

To understand how the system works one must first understand the religious basis to the concepts of Spirit, Flesh and Skin. Briefly, traditional Aboriginal belief is that the spirits of all children pre-exist, having been created as part of the original Creation Dreaming and seeded into the Dreaming where they must wait until it is their turn to be born. This is achieved when the father of the spirit-child finds them in a dream and directs the spirit-child to the body of their mother, who makes their flesh. When the child is born, their skin is the package that keeps spirit and flesh together in the real world. Spirit therefore represents the father-child relationship because it is he who found your spirit. Flesh represents the mother-child relationship because it is she who made your flesh. Skin represents the husband-wife relationship because it is they who brought you into the real world and gave you both individuality and family.

How the Spirit and Flesh Class cycles interact with the static Skin Classes to produce the same result each time, is shown in the accompanying display model. The Skin Group totems and the Spirit and Flesh Class totems shown in the model are that of the Kulin Nation of Central Victoria. The Skin Group system was thought to be lost but was actually embedded into the rules of the traditional Aboriginal football game of Marngrook and decoded by Jim Poulter in consultation with northern Australian tribal people. However it should be noted that there were some regional variations in the skin totems used and some dialect differences in the names of the same totems, or in the spelling of the same totem name. Nonetheless, the totems used in the model were generally those used across the whole Kulin Nation, and the system itself certainly was the same. In fact the same system as shown in this model applied across the whole of Australia and still does in those areas that have retained their traditional culture.

In the display model the four Skin totems used are as follows: Toan the Feather-tailed Glider, commonly known as the flying mouse; Kloorong the Nankeen Kestrel; Thara the Swamp Hawk and Tuan the Brush-tailed Phascogale. The two Spirit Classes (Moieties) are represented by the totems of Bunjil the Wedge-tailed Eagle for Toan and Thara, and Wagara the Crow for Kloorong and Tuan. The Flesh Classes are represented by the totems of Tadjeri the Brush-tailed Possum for Toan and Tuan, and Yupoke the Rosella for Kloorong and Thara. The display model was devised by Jim Poulter, based on a similar model at the Warradjan Cultural Centre at Kakadu.

# Kulin Nation Spirit, Flesh and Skin Relationships



**Horizontal is husband-wife Skin Class: A must marry B and C must marry D.**

**Vertical is father-child Spirit Class: Father A's children must be C, Father C's children must be A, Father B's children must be D, and Father D's children must be B**

**Diagonal is mother-child Flesh Class: Mother A's children must be D, Mother D's children must be A, Mother B's children are C and Mother C's children are B**

**This means for instance a man A must marry a woman B and their children must be C, so by both the spirit and flesh rules the answer is always the same**

## THE TRAINING OF ELDERS

Eldership in traditional Aboriginal society was of two types, Elders with a capital 'E' and elders with a small 'e'. All older people were due respect simply because of their age, but age alone did not give you a position of authority in clan or inter-clan decision making.

The older people in this situation with little specific formal authority I therefore I refer to as elders with a small 'e'. To be an Elder with a capital 'E' required a lifetime of training and grooming, with potential Elders being identified early in childhood.

The dual term 'training and grooming' is used advisedly because the acquisition of specific knowledge and skill was by itself not sufficient for high Eldership. The twin tests for the high formal Eldership were Knowledge and Character. This meant that not only must Elders have mastery of a particular field of art, science, diplomacy or law, but they must also possess and display character traits of patience, humility and inclusion.

As Aboriginal society did not have a written language, everything had to be memorised. So over the millennia a range of memory techniques were developed around story, song, dance, ritual and environmental coding. That is, the landscape itself and the rituals of daily life became agents for the transmission of knowledge. In a very real sense the most important and the most powerful people in Aboriginal society were those that knew the most songs and stories.

With this requirement for structured learning, it is scarcely surprising that those children displaying the best memory for detail were those chosen to be mentored into future leadership. Regardless of this, each child received close tuition in both individual and group situations, with their individual abilities, leanings and interests given every encouragement and opportunity for expression. After being exposed to a learning experience children were asked to recall detail or demonstrate the skills they had been shown. The lesson was simply repeated until mastery was gained by each child.

Children were therefore **not** given instructions in age cohort groups like in present day school classes. Nor were they instructed in mixed gender groups. They were instead grouped by gender and also according to learning speed and level of functioning. The most precocious children were progressed in their group contexts quickly and also given additional individual instruction by their male or female Elders.

For instance locally, by the time Batman met the Wurundjeri on the Plenty River at Greensborough in 1835, people like Simon Wonga and William Barak, had been identified for future leadership roles. Wonga was at that time aged almost fourteen and Barak almost twelve.

Wonga had already been initiated into adulthood by the time of the meeting with Batman and it is most likely that Barak was initiated five months later in November 1835, after turning twelve. Some historians have opined that Barak was not formally initiated because of the interruption caused by colonisation, but this is demonstrably wrong. Barak in his later years was seen to have keloid initiation scars on his chest and when asked if it had hurt, he replied *'I was a man.'*

The confusion actually comes from an initiation ceremony that Barak underwent at the Botanic Gardens in late 1839 when he was age sixteen. At that time his cousin Wonga was an 'Elder in Training' who had been seriously injured on an initiation trial at Mount Dandenong. It was feared at the time that Wonga might die. The ceremony that Barak underwent was therefore to formally elevate him to 'Elder in Training' so that in the event of Wonga's death he would take his place.

Wonga recovered and on the death of Billibelleri in 1846, Billibelleri's brother Berberry was asked to assume leadership. However Berberry proved ineffective, so by the end of 1850 at age twenty-nine Wonga was asked by the Elders to assume tribal leadership. Barak later became 'number two man' to Wonga in 1860 and then succeeded him as leader when Wonga died in 1874.

Had this been traditional tribal times rather than the colonial period, both Wonga and Barak would have had to wait patiently for much longer before assuming their destined roles. First, a senior Elder would have retired, appointing his (or her) successor to *'Speak with my voice'*. Then when the retired Elder finally died their nominated successor would then be able to speak with their own voice.

By that time the new Elder would have completed the equivalent to two PhD's, one in Divinity and one in Arts, Law or Science. We only know about Wonga and Barak because of the advent of the colonial period, so how many iconic Elders preceded them? We know nothing about these people, only that they had for untold millennia maintained a society free of war, pestilence, poverty and inherited privilege.

## THE ABORIGINAL SENSE OF HUMOUR

The Aboriginal sense of humour was on display right from the time of British colonisation in 1788, but the story actually began with Captain Cook's landing at present day Cooktown in 1770. Aboriginal people came down to the beach to investigate the reports of dead people wandering around.

The arriving people were white, the colour of death and it was not known if they were men or women. You couldn't really tell, because they had no beards and wore clothes.

Captain Cook's artist was sketching the animals, including a huge hopping animal, so Cook signalled toward the animal and asked the locals what they called it. The response was duly given '*Gangaroo*'. The artist then duly inscribed the word '*Cangaroo*' under his drawing. When Cook arrived back in England the stories and drawings of the Australian birds and animals were the sensation of the day.

When the First Fleet finally arrived eighteen years later, the only Aboriginal word that the colonists knew was '*Kangaroo*'. When Aboriginal people arrived to find out what was going on, the colonists pointed at the nearby hopping animals called Patagorang in the Sydney language and said '*Kangaroo*'. Unbeknown to the colonists, this meant '*I don't understand*' in the local language. So it was of course seen as quite reasonable that they didn't understand the animal, because they had only just arrived.

A Marine officer, Captain Watkin Tench, then saw two of the natives looking at some sheep in a pen. The natives were laughing, pointing, and saying '*Kangaroo*'. Tench then showed them some horses and cows. The natives again laughed and exclaimed '*Kangaroo*' and wandered off killing themselves laughing. Tench duly noted in his diary '*I think Kangaroo must mean any large animal*'.

The colonists quickly became a source of great amusement to the local Aboriginals, who enjoyed copying their plethora of different accents. The lilting Irish, the Scottish burr, the pirate sounding Cornish, the broad Cockney and the upper-class English accents were all quickly mastered.

This was a considerable feat, because the strangers used a number of sounds that were not in Australian languages. The 'H' sound for instance had to be practiced as if you were short of breath, as did the 'S'. It was also difficult to tell the difference between 'B' and 'P' and between 'C' and 'G' so practicing these strange sounds and copying the stiff body language and strange manners of the colonists became a new performance art by Aboriginal campfires at night.

Everybody is well aware from countless tales by early settlers just how amazing Aboriginal people were at mimicking the sounds of various animals, but it is not an innate ability. It comes from a lifetime of trained observation and constantly practiced replication. In tribal times some of the very best mimics maintained a life role as stand-up comedians. They travelled on schedule from camp to camp with comedic hairdos to give their hilarious impressions to sell-out crowds.

Locally, Simon Wonga was in his youth lauded for his comedic impressions, sometimes at the expense of the Aboriginal Protector, William Thomas. On one occasion in 1840 Thomas recorded that he and Wonga had camped for the night at Bolin-Bolin in Bulleen. At about 11pm Wonga asked Thomas if he wanted to hear him wake up all the roosters of the nearby settlers. Wonga then began crowing like a rooster at dawn. Within minutes the entire district was reverberating with an extremely early dawn chorus. Thomas laughed so much he had trouble getting to sleep.

I could regale you with many stories of joke names Aboriginal people have given to various places when asked by settlers, but many of them are not really suitable for a family newspaper. So I will content myself with telling how the Moomba Festival of Melbourne got its name. This was told to me by Eric Onus, the brother of Bill Onus, who gave the festival its name. So it is in effect straight from the horse's mouth.

Bill was a highly respected Elder who had a souvenir shop in the Dandenongs. In the early 1950's he was invited by the Lord Mayor onto a committee to plan a new festival for Melbourne. At the start of the meeting Bill was told that they wanted to have an Aboriginal name that meant something like '*Let's get together and have fun*'.

Bill then put to them that instead of just having an Aboriginal name, why not make the whole festival a celebration of our unique Aboriginal culture? The answer then came back, '*No, we want it to be like Mardi Gras in Rio de Janeiro*'.

Bill in disgust muttered '*Moomba*' and was greeted with the happy response that it sounded like a great name. They assumed it meant having fun together, but 'moom' is your backside and 'moomba' means you are talking out of it.

## JUST IMAGINE –A SOCIETY WITHOUT WAR

Throughout the written history of the world, a period of 5,000 or so years, there have been innumerable wars of conquest and invasion. Empires in Europe, Asia and Africa have risen and fallen over this period, but there were no wars of invasion and conquest in Australia before 1788.

Often when I have put this proposition, people have argued vigorously that it cannot possibly be true. The problem is that war has been such an endemic part of recorded history we are led to believe it is actually an element of human nature, and therefore part of all societies.

The reality is however that all wars of conquest and invasion are economic wars, even if they are sometimes dressed up in religious or other justificatory clothing. If people are living sustainably in an area of land, with a stable population matched to the carrying capacity of the land, then there is no survival need that would see them seek land belonging to others.

As far as I can see, all wars of invasion and conquest arise from this basic economic imperative. Even when climate change might have caused mass migration in the past, this is still an economic imperative.

In rebuttal of the idea that there were no real wars in Aboriginal society, one eminent historian counted up the intertribal killings that had been observed and recorded by settlers in frontier times. It was then announced that these intertribal killings surpassed the number of Australian soldiers killed in the First World War.

What a ridiculous exercise to undertake. All it did is prove the point I am making. Aboriginal people were dispossessed, forced off their land and onto the lands of other tribes. The intertribal frontier conflict observed was not 'normal', but was created by the new economic reality.

This however does not mean that Aboriginal society was without conflict. Like any other society there were issues of law and order and tensions between tribes. However these tensions were subject to very close ritual control and agreed protocols, right across Australia.

We are all aware of tribal 'payback' where a real or imagined grievance might lead to an act of vengeance. This then leads to retaliation and the escalation of payback to involve more people or families. Ultimately it escalates to hostilities between tribes.

At the point where one tribe decides that the matter can only now be determined by pitched battle, they cannot sneak up and massacre their opponents in a surprise attack. They must instead give 28 days notice and cannot turn up with more warriors than the other side can muster.

On the appointed day the Elders meet prior to hostilities commencing. They check that the numbers on each side match and agree on what outcome will resolve the hostilities. For instance it might be when the first blood is spilt on the ground.

The battle then commences whilst other onlookers yell derisive comments at the opposing side. However the respective Elders watch dispassionately. As soon as one warrior falls to the ground bleeding, the Elders call a halt and declare the argument has now been resolved. Everyone from both tribes then join in a celebratory corroboree marking the resumption of friendly relations.

Anyone daring to continue the payback after this formal resolution incurs an automatic death penalty. The tribal executioner, known as the Kidney-Fat Man, is delegated to carry out the task. You only get this job if you are the best hunter and greatest fighter in the tribe.

When he finally tracks you down, he strangles you with a garrotting cord, then surgically removes one kidney, whether you are still alive or not. He then takes it back to the Elders and it is ritually burned. If the victim is not dead already they die of infection with no help or succour from anyone, because that too is a death penalty.

The nature of Aboriginal law and economy therefore acted against the possibility of wars of conquest, but there were also religious reasons for its absence. Aboriginal people universally believed that to die outside your own land meant your spirit could never be at peace, until your body was returned and buried in your own Country. It was therefore quite impossible to remain in another Country, even if you had just successfully invaded it.

Some people have said to me that because Aboriginal people had no written history, it cannot be proven there were no wars. Not so. A culture is readily understood by its myths and legends and there are plenty of these available from Aboriginal Australia.

I challenge anyone to find any myth, legend, story or song from anywhere in Aboriginal Australia which talks about a Warrior King, the overthrow of an evil despot, or the conquest and enslavement of others. Clear proof that it just never happened.

## UNDERSTANDING A DIFFERENT MINDSET

My great-great grandfather's John Chivers first arrived in Port Phillip with his wife and baby son in September 1840. They settled into a bark hut by the Yarra and quickly established a strong ongoing relationship with the local Woiwurrung. John would often trade butter, tea, sugar or flour for a possum, bandicoot or kangaroo. This would give him the opportunity to sit and talk with his new friends.

As far as I know John Chivers was one of only two local settlers who bothered to learn the Woiwurrung language. The other was Jimmy Dawson who settled at Warrandyte in May 1840.

As language is the window into culture, settlers like John and Jimmy showed they were willing to try and understand Aboriginal concepts and culture. This embrace of the Aboriginal mindset is readily demonstrated in the many stories handed down my family, containing insights into Aboriginal culture.

This interest in and respect for their culture is also readily demonstrated in the fact that although John was a lay preacher in the Primitive Methodist Church, he did not evangelise to the Aboriginal people. For all his life and well in to his eighties John preached on Sundays from the pulpit of various local churches. He walked to places as far away as Greensborough to preach, because he refused to work his horse on a Sunday. However despite his strong Christian faith he thought that Aboriginal people already led Christian lives without the need for them to embrace the faith.

One of the first things of which John became aware, was how Aboriginal people regarded white people as being appallingly ignorant on environmental matters. All Aboriginal knowledge is integrated through the totem system to ultimately serve ecological purposes, but they thought that white people and their animals were unbelievably ignorant and destructive.

For instance he was asked why whitefellas kept cutting down all the trees, didn't they know that the more trees you cut down, the less rain you get? The explanation given was that *'The trees talked to the sky'* and this is quite true in the sense that trees draw up groundwater and transpiration from the trees attracts rain.

John was also told they thought it was unbelievable how much the new animals ate, drank and excreted. Australian animals barely drank, only excreted little pills and nuggets, and never fouled their own drinking water. Sheep, cows and horses however, continually ate and continually excreted mountains of waste, even while they were eating and drinking.

What was worse, all these animals had hard hooves and were wrecking the countryside. John's new friends complained that all these thousand of sheep had come in and eaten all the grass. When there was no grass left, the sheep then dug up the roots of the grass with their hard hooves and ate that, so the grass couldn't grow back. John's friends shook their heads in disbelief saying that because the sheep had eaten all the grass, the kangaroos had all left. So even though they were now sharing the land with the white man, when they went to share a sheep, they were shot and told they were stealing.

This little story about the effect of sheep is underlined by the historical fact that three years after Port Phillip Colony was established, a livestock census was taken in 1838. It showed that there were now an unbelievable 311,000 sheep in the colony. They not only ate all the grass, but they also ate all the myrnong (native parsnip) which was a staple food source for Aboriginal people. With all the other hard hoofed animals the soil became so badly compacted that absorption was decreased and run-off increased, thus causing an increase in both drought and flood.

Aboriginal people also could not understand why white people seemed to think that the indiscriminate killing of animals was some sort of sport. John was asked why white people would shoot dozens of ducks or as many as two hundred kangaroos at a time and leave their corpses to rot. They wouldn't even bother to eat any of the animals or skin them for clothing.

Aboriginal people therefore thought that white people were quite uncivilized and this was demonstrated by their very questionable personal habits. For instance white people loved the green stuff that came out of their nose so much, that they saved it up in bits of rag and kept it in their pockets. Now how filthy is that? Worse than that though, John was quizzed on why white people loved their bodily waste so much that they built little houses and saved it up in tins. Then when the tin was full they would go and tip it in the creek. Not even the smallest Aboriginal child would behave like that.

As an ironic counterpoint to this story, when the Coranderrk Aboriginal station was established in 1863, Wonga and Barak sought official permission to hunt game in the forest to supplement their food. The official reply came back from the Aborigines Protection Board agreeing, but with the proviso that *'...as long as they do not kill wantonly'*. The comment showed how abysmally little the supposed experts really knew about the Aboriginal mindset.



## THE LINGERING INFECTION OF TERRA NULLIUS

Everybody is familiar with the term 'Terra Nullius'. Australia was purportedly owned by no-one and the British used the term to justify colonisation. Nowadays, almost everyone rejects the validity of this notion, but very few of us really understand its full implications. We remain essentially unaware of how Terra Nullius still insidiously and unconsciously influences our thinking.

Aboriginal people hate the term Terra Nullius with a passion, and rightly so, because it strongly implies that Aboriginal people had a vacuous culture and achieved nothing. After all, they were just a primitive bunch of people wandering around bumping into trees. They did not use the land, had not even invented the wheel, and their only technological achievement was a bent stick that came back when you threw it.

Aboriginal people did of course cultivate the land, but not in the intensive, exploitative and unsustainable way that most other world cultures did. All Aboriginal knowledge was integrated through the totem system to ultimately serve ecological purposes. So whether it was knowledge related to science, art or religion, it was all focussed on ecological outcomes. Even the nursery rhymes sung to little children had an ecological message.

Think of all the descriptors usually applied to traditional Aboriginal society. Words like simple, primitive, pagan, uncivilized, nomadic, stone-age, hunter-gatherers. These are all pejorative terms that put western civilisation at the highest level and Aboriginal society at the lowest level. Never mind that western society has over the last 3000 years had a history of internecine war, conquest, rolling plagues, overpopulation, social inequality, gross disparities of wealth and poverty, plus religious and political persecution.

Aboriginal society had none of this, but ironically the sustained warfare of European and Asian history created the spur for technological achievement. This technological advancement is then taken a sign of a 'higher' civilization. Darwin put forward the idea of natural selection and this was immediately seen as a justification for western conquest and colonisation of others. It was simply '*Survival of the Fittest*' in action.

Many world cultures are so inured by their histories of warfare, that it is regarded as part of human nature. Many people therefore flatly refuse to believe there were never any wars of conquest or invasion in Aboriginal Australia. The proof that there were no wars of conquest is simple. Show me one myth, story, legend, dance or song from anywhere in Australia that depicts either the victories of a warrior king, the subjugation and enslavement of others, or an uprising against a despotic ruler. It just never happened.

The real problem is that spurious notions like this have seeped into our consciousness and we do not know how to challenge these received wisdoms. This is the foundation of ***Institutional Racism***, the process by which prejudicial ideas are ingrained into present day social perceptions. However this should not be interpreted as meaning that Australians are racist. Australians are overwhelmingly fair minded people who meet and greet people as equals. This is the cornerstone of our national culture. But what we fail to understand is how the prejudices of our forefathers continue to unwittingly shape our thinking.

The idea of Terra Nullius is in fact behind our inability to recognise a road or highway we are travelling on as an ancient Songline. It is behind our inability to recognise a river rapids area, like at Warrandyte township, as an original site for fish traps or a mussel farm. It is also the reason why many historians make blatant errors when they try to interpret Aboriginal behaviours. Their assumptions are often unconsciously based on ideas of European superiority.

Before giving a classic example of this fallacious thinking I will cite two facts. First, Aboriginal people had ingrained cultural habits of listening and sound replication that made them gifted linguists. All Aboriginal children were brought up multilingual. Second, Aboriginal people travelled extensively and safely through other tribal areas as long as you stuck to the designated Songline and observed proper protocol.

However, when Aboriginal people tried to communicate these protocols to early colonists, it was wrongly assumed that Aboriginal people were frightened to leave their own country. In 2008 the AFL historian dismissed the possibility of any connection between Marngrook and Australian Football with the comment: '*Aborigines...lived within quite clearly defined tribal areas, speaking a language different from those of other tribal areas. Aboriginal tribal strangers were regarded with suspicion and did not trespass without being killed.*'

This comment clearly painted Aboriginal people as a simple, primitive, xenophobic and violent bunch. Its roots were clearly embedded in the notion of Terra Nullius. The comment is a glowing example of ***institutional racism*** by an historian who claims for herself the highest standards of academic scholarship. Unfortunately it is just one of many examples of the lingering infection of Terra Nullius.