

# WHO WE ARE: BRAVE NEW CLAN SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

This section contains supplementary information for teachers and students relating to the main themes of *Who We Are: Brave New Clan*. This information is intended to support and extend teacher and student knowledge of the organising ideas contained in the Australian Curriculum's cross-curriculum priority of [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures](#).



## IDENTITY

There are two distinct Indigenous groups in Australia: Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is important to note that there is significant diversity within these groups, and that there is no single 'Aboriginal' or 'Torres Strait Islander' identity.

An Aboriginal person is someone who is of Aboriginal descent, who identifies as an Aboriginal person, and is accepted as such by the community in which they live, or are connected to. The traditional lands of Aboriginal peoples are mainland Australia and most of the islands, including Tasmania, Fraser Island, Palm Island, Mornington Island, Groote Eylandt, Bathurst and Melville Islands.

Torres Strait Islander people are Melanesian in origin and part of the Pacific Islander group of kinship-based societies. A Torres Strait Islander is someone who is of Torres Strait Islander descent, who identifies as a Torres Strait Islander, and is accepted as such by the community in which they live, or are connected to. The Torres Strait Islands comprise at least 274 small islands that lie between the northern tip of Cape York in Queensland and the south-west coast of Papua New Guinea. Today, many Torres Strait Islanders live on the Australian mainland. There are also two Torres Strait Islander communities on the nearby coast of the mainland at Bamaga and Seisia.

A common myth is that if you have fair skin or live in a city you can't be an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. Skin colour and location have nothing to do with defining whether a person is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. For a long time, governments deliberately tried to 'breed out' Aboriginality by dictating who Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples could and could not marry, and where they could live. Therefore, terms like 'half-caste', 'part Aboriginal' or 'mixed blood' are deeply offensive. It is important to recognise the diversity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples contribute to our national identity and to Australia's shared history. It is important that the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are acknowledged locally, nationally and globally.

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## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have complex systems of family relations, or kinship systems, that can vary between communities, but that are consistently central to the way in which culture and identity is passed on, and society is organised.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kinship systems can differ quite significantly from non-Indigenous understandings of family. They determine the formation, management and communication of relationships. Kinship systems also delineate the roles, rights, and responsibilities within relationships. For example, kinship systems may govern who marries who, as well as behaviour patterns in both ceremonial and everyday contexts.



Skin systems are an example of a corresponding system that exists within many Aboriginal groups and interacts with kinship to govern one's knowledge of where they fit into their wider family, and how they should relate to one another. This can transcend biological relations; for example, two women born into the same skin name may be considered 'sisters' even if they do not share the same biological mother and father.

Given the significance of family to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and to the passing on of their cultures and identities, Australia's history of separating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families has had devastating impacts that continue today.

## CONNECTION TO COUNTRY

"COUNTRY IN ABORIGINAL ENGLISH IS NOT ONLY A COMMON NOUN BUT ALSO A PROPER NOUN. PEOPLE TALK ABOUT COUNTRY IN THE SAME WAY THAT THEY WOULD TALK ABOUT A PERSON: THEY SPEAK TO COUNTRY, SING TO COUNTRY, VISIT COUNTRY, WORRY ABOUT COUNTRY, FEEL SORRY FOR COUNTRY, AND LONG FOR COUNTRY. PEOPLE SAY THAT COUNTRY KNOWS, HEARS, SMELLS, TAKES NOTICE, TAKES CARE, IS SORRY OR HAPPY. COUNTRY IS NOT A GENERALISED OR UNDIFFERENTIATED TYPE OF PLACE, SUCH AS ONE MIGHT INDICATE WITH TERMS LIKE 'SPENDING A DAY IN THE COUNTRY' OR 'GOING UP THE COUNTRY'. RATHER, COUNTRY IS A LIVING ENTITY WITH A YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW, WITH A CONSCIOUSNESS, AND A WILL TOWARD LIFE." – DEBORAH BIRD ROSE, NOURISHING TERRAINS

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities maintain a special connection to Country. Connection to Country is important whether a person lives in a city or in a rural area. This connection has been the core of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander existence in Australia since time immemorial, and continues to be integral in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; influencing spiritual, physical, cultural, social and emotional wellbeing.



Connection to Country is complex, multilayered and can be difficult for non-Indigenous people to understand. Connection to Country is unable to be separated from identity, and holds physical, spiritual and familial connections, knowledge, and responsibilities. One's Country or language group provides a person with their identity by defining who they are, where they come from, and the places they are responsible for (these include the land, the waterways and the seas). Other core elements of identity such as skin names and totems come from Country, and Country links a person directly to family, ancestors and their creation and Dreaming stories. All of this is inter-connected and brought to life with songlines being sung, and giving Country a voice through art, dance, rituals and music.

The important relationship between Country and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples means that Country is a proper noun and is therefore capitalised in all written material.

"APMEREYANHE, OUR LANGUAGE—LAND, IS LIKE A ROOT OR A TIE TO US. IT HOLDS ALL OF US. THE ONLY WAY THAT WE CAN TRANSLATE INTO ENGLISH HOW WE SEE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LAND IS WITH THE WORDS 'HOLD', AND 'CONNECT'. THE ROOTS OF THE COUNTRY AND ITS PEOPLE ARE TWINED TOGETHER. WE ARE A PART OF THE LAND. THE LAND IS US, AND WE ARE THE LAND. THAT'S HOW WE HOLD OUR LAND." — MARGARET KEMARRE TURNER, IWENHE TYERRTYE — WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN ABORIGINAL PERSON.

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## CARING FOR COUNTRY

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have always held a responsibility for caring for Country throughout Australia. There are many cultural protocols and practices still in use today to protect, care for, and maintain the health, strength and wellbeing of the land.

Today, traditional knowledge is used in conjunction with modern technologies and scientific research to develop innovative approaches to land and sea management that are receiving national and international recognition.



The [National Museum of Australia's On Country exhibition](#) and [Cool Australia's Cool Burning unit](#) are great resources for expanding teacher and student knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land and sea management practices.

## CULTURE

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are among the richest and oldest continuing cultures in the world. It is important to understand that 'culture' is referred to in the plural here, as Australia is home to not one but many distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities. Although there are some shared features, there is also significant variation in the specific customs, protocols and traditions of each unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ways of life are uniquely expressed through distinct ways of being, thinking and doing, passed on from generation to generation, and still used to this day. The beliefs, customs, and social behaviour – that is, the cultural identity of a group of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples – incorporates language, dance, song, stories, art and kinship systems.

As with all cultures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are not static, and have evolved over time due to internal influences and exchanges with other cultures. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have also adapted dramatically to accommodate a great deal of what has been introduced into Australia since 1788.

Colonisation and past government policies of assimilation have severely affected the practice and capacity for continuation of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Nevertheless, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have demonstrated a strong ability to adapt dramatically and prove their richness and resilience.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities continue to keep culture alive by passing their knowledge, languages, beliefs, arts, rituals and practices from one generation to another. Even where the capacity to transmit culture has been compromised by the damaging effects of colonisation, people have shown resilience by finding innovative yet continually relevant and meaningful ways to express culture.



## CULTURAL EXPRESSION AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

In many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities connections to ancestors and natural phenomena are often represented, shared and communicated verbally through stories. The knowledge in these stories shapes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law, both its history and future.

Storytelling is an important way of holding, maintaining, and passing on important knowledge. There are often sophisticated protocols around who owns and can tell these stories, and with whom they can be shared.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories are designed to explain some facet of the environment. This can be weather, geography, animal behavior or any other information that is often relayed through scientific means, by many contemporary Western societies.

Songlines are important Aboriginal systems of knowledge maintenance and transfer. Songlines are an English word for Dreaming tracks that trace the journeys of ancestral spirits as they created the land, animals and laws, and sang the land to life. Songlines are recorded in songs, stories, dance and art. They carry significant spiritual, ecological, economic and cultural connection to the knowledge, customs, ceremony and laws of many language groups, including travel and trade routes, the location of waterholes and the presence of food. In many cases, songlines on the earth are mirrored by sky songlines, which allowed people to navigate the land and seas.

It is important that songlines, Dreaming, Dreamtime and creation stories are respected properly in the classroom and not likened to fairytales and myths.

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## LANGUAGE

For tens of thousands of years, hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages have been spoken across Australia, with at least 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait languages being spoken in Australia at the time Europeans arrived. These were distinct languages (not dialects), each with its own extensive vocabulary and complex grammatical conventions.



Colonisation and policies of segregation and assimilation severely affected the continuation and practice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Policies that resulted in forced, physical separation of people from one's family and speaker community also contributed to loss of language across Australia. Today, about 120 of the original 250+ languages are still spoken in Australia, however it is estimated that 110 of these are endangered, meaning that they are at serious risk of becoming no longer spoken, or 'sleeping'.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are important as they reinforce culture, identity and connection to Country and ancestors. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are actively working to maintain, revitalise or revive their languages. About 30 of the severely or critically endangered languages have seen recent increases in levels of use as a result of language programs.

For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their first language may be:

- **Aboriginal English:** dialects of English spoken by many Aboriginal people, especially children, throughout the whole of Australia. The form and structure of this language exhibit some speech patterns of standard English as well as speech characteristics and words originating from Aboriginal languages.
- **Creole languages:** new languages that have formed since colonisation. There are different creole languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia. Distinct from pidgin languages or dialects of English, creole languages are considered languages in their own right, with complex and consistent grammar rules.

There are a number of languages maps you can use in your classroom when teaching and learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Two popular maps are the [AIATSIS Indigenous Languages Map](#) and the [First Languages Australia Gumbay Languages Map](#). The First Languages Australia Gumbay Languages Map has some accompanying audiovisual media and [teacher's notes](#) that may also be useful.

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## SPIRITUALITY

While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples share a spiritual connection arising from belonging to the land, seas, skies, waterways, people, and to one's culture, the form and expression of spirituality differs between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups across Australia. Aboriginal spirituality mainly derives from the stories of the Dreaming, while Torres Strait Islander spirituality draws upon the stories of the Tagai.



### *The Dreaming and Dreamtime*

The Dreaming or Dreamtime describes the complex network of knowledge, faith and practices that derive from stories of creation and is the foundation of all spiritual, socio-cultural and physical ways of knowing, being and doing. It sets out the structures of society, the rules for social behaviour and the ceremonies performed in order to respect and maintain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

The Dreaming or Dreamtime is more than a mythical past; it describes a connection with the spiritual essence of everything around and beyond people. Dreaming stories are not exclusive to the past, they exist outside of time – always present and giving meaning to all aspects of life. Accordingly, it is important to appreciate that the terms Dreaming or Dreamtime are in many ways an imperfect or inadequate English translation of an exceptionally intricate knowledge system. Some Aboriginal people express concerns that the term may indicate only a fabled or illusionary idea, rather than a very real and ongoing aspect of their lived identities and experiences.

Many Aboriginal people prefer the use of the word Dreaming over Dreamtime as Dreamtime suggests that it is a time-limited phenomenon; relegated to the past rather than having continued contemporary presence and relevance.

Each language group has its own word to identify or describe the complexity of the Dreaming. Examples include Tjukurpa in central Australia, Bugari in Broome, and Wongar in north-east Arnhem Land.

Dreaming knowledge is passed from generation to generation through stories, song, dance and art. Custodians of Dreaming knowledge have a special responsibility, and this is seen as a great honour. Dreaming can also be used by individuals to refer to either their own Dreaming or their community's Dreaming, sometime manifested in the form of a totem. A totem is a natural object, plant or animal that is inherited by members of a clan or family as their spiritual emblem. Totems define peoples' roles and responsibilities, and their relationships with each other and creation. Totems are believed to be the descendants of the Dreamtime heroes, or totemic beings.

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These three articles are a good resource to extend your understanding of Aboriginal spirituality:

- [Dreamtime and the Dreaming: an introduction](#)
- [Dreamtime and the Dreaming: who dreamed up these terms?](#)
- [‘Dreamings’ and dreaming narratives: what’s the relationship?](#)

## *Tagai*

In Torres Strait Islander cultures, people are united by their connection to the Tagai, which consists of stories, often featuring a warrior figure, which are the cornerstone of Torres Strait Islanders’ spiritual beliefs. Many of these stories focus on the stars and distinctly identify Torres Strait Islanders as sea people who share a common way of life.

Torres Strait Islander cultural practices define who they are. They are the means by which the people pay homage to and keep faith with their spiritual beings and their ancestors.

