

Busting Myths

you might believe about
Aboriginal Australia



CREATIVE SPIRITS

Myth 1

We should all be celebrating Australia Day

Shift your perspective: Non-Aboriginal people celebrate Australia Day for the arrival of the British. For Aboriginal people the day marks the loss of their land, their children, their wages, many aspects of their culture, and their freedom.

In short, it celebrates a day of widespread loss, death and dispossession. How can you expect a race of people to celebrate that?

Imagine if on April 25, Anzac Day, the Turkish community in Australia held a 'Defeated Australia Day', replete with a national holiday and people draping themselves in the Turkish flag, celebrating everything Turkish.

Truth: We can find a better day to celebrate being Australian than the day of the invasion.

Myth 2

Australia was colonised, not invaded

The Wikipedia defines 'colonisation' as an act where a species "populates an area". It is a term derived from the Latin *colere*, "to inhabit, cultivate, frequent practice, tend, guard, respect".

It defines an 'invasion' as "a military offensive" which "aggressively enter[s] territory controlled by another... entity, generally with the objective of either conquering, liberating or re-establishing control or authority over a territory".

Looking at Australia's history we find at least 5 National Aboriginal wars ('Frontier Wars') starting shortly after the landing and lasting until the 1930s,

spanning a total of 146 years.

Add to that fierce resistance fighters such as Jandamarra, Windradyne or Yagan, the deliberate poisoning, shooting and massacring of Aboriginal families with the intention of wiping them out, and you have all the ingredients of a civil war and genocide.

Truth: Australia was invaded.



Myth 3

There is one Aboriginal culture in Australia

Many people assume that there is just one Aboriginal culture in Australia. Truth is, there were more than 250 language groups with hundreds of dialects, and many had their own regional customs, diet, tools and spirituality.

Think of it: Aboriginal nations in the tropical, seasonally wet north must have had a different culture than those in the cold and dry south, saltwater people a different one than freshwater people.

Often people ask for "an Aboriginal word" for something, when there once were in fact probably more than 250 words for the same English word.

Many authors fail to acknowledge or celebrate this diversity. They write about "an Aboriginal woman" rather than "a Nyoongar woman" (i.e. a woman from a Western Australian Aboriginal nation).

Truth: There are many different Aboriginal cultures, customs and languages in Australia.

Myth 4

Land rights compensated Aboriginal people

Some Aboriginal people in some jurisdictions of Australia do have some land rights. But those rights are always under threat, and they almost always have to give way to non-Aboriginal economic or political interests if there is a conflict.

Initially Aboriginal people owned 100% of Australia. In New South Wales they now own less than 0.01%. Is this a fair compensation for what they lost?

Look at maps showing Aboriginal land and you'll notice it is almost always in areas that non-Aboriginal people have no interest in.

"If Aboriginal people in this country think we got justice from Native Title they are fooled," knows Wiradjuri woman Jenny Munro. "They are legally extinguishing our title to the land, giving precedence to white title that has only existed for a blink of an eye compared to our culture and our law over the land."

Aboriginal people have a very special connection to the land. Destroying that connection means destroying the people.

Truth: Land rights have failed to deliver, and might never really do.

Myth 5

Aboriginal children were taken away for their own good

This is one of the great myths of Australian history. It is still perpetuated by journalists and prime ministers.

The children of the Stolen Generations are forever traumatised by what happened to them. There was little, if any, 'good' that happened to them.

Denied the same basic rights as everyone else, the majority was forced to work and physically, emotionally and sexually abused.

And governments continue to take away Aboriginal children, more than ever, pretending they are 'neglected' and need to be cared for. They don't understand the cultural differences in raising children.

Governments are on track to create a new Stolen Generation.

Truth: Aboriginal children were enslaved to be assimilated and scarred for life.



Myth 6

Saying 'sorry' once should be enough

There is a difference between the representative of a nation apologising and a whole nation acknowledging injustice.

When prime minister Kevin Rudd said sorry to the Stolen Generations it was a necessary symbolic act because for too long governments had refused to recognise this history.

But we still need to acknowledge this history, not bury it. Every new class at school needs to learn about it to better understand Aboriginal people.

If you think we have said 'sorry' enough, look at Anzac celebrations: Aren't we continuously saying 'thanks' to the war veterans? Shouldn't we stop that then as well?

Truth: Aboriginal people are not asking you to say 'sorry', they are asking you to respect and acknowledge history.





Myth 7

The British built Australia from the ground up

Did you know Australia has a history of slavery? Most don't.

While the USA made slavery illegal with the 13th Amendment at the end of 1865, it was still well entrenched in Australia well into the 1960s. Aboriginal people were forced on to pearling luggers and South Sea islanders kidnapped ("blackbirded") to sugar cane farming.

In a bi-partisan report handed down in Federal Parliament in 2008, both major parties acknowledged that Aboriginal peoples' wages were stolen.

Young black men and women were forced to work, and then had their wages and savings controlled by government which then spent that money elsewhere.

For example, the Queensland government used Aboriginal wages and savings to build infrastructure like hospitals, which Aboriginal people were then prevented from accessing.

Truth: Aboriginal people contributed significantly to building Australia, mostly without compensation.

Myth 8

All the bad things happened in the past

It wasn't so long ago that legislation to the detriment of Aboriginal people was still in force:

'White Australia Policy' wasn't formally abolished until 1976. Aboriginal government workers in Queensland were paid less than non-Aboriginal workers for the same duties until 1986.

Australia's jailing rate of Aboriginal people in 1991, at the height of the Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths In Custody, was one of the worst on earth. Today, it is much, much worse. There is no state or territory in Australia that jails black males at a rate less than Apartheid South Africa.

Governments are shutting down and bulldozing Aboriginal communities. Taking away children. Compulsorily acquiring Aboriginal land to mine its resources.

Truth: Much trauma happened in the past, but bad things are still happening.



Myth 9

I had nothing to do with it

Former prime minister John Howard used this argument to stubbornly refuse to apologise to the Stolen Generations.

Many Germans used it to refuse to acknowledge the atrocities of the Third Reich.

You might not have a personal responsibility, but a moral one. You wouldn't be where you are today without Aboriginal people working as slaves, governments spending Aboriginal money and exploiting Aboriginal land. Just think resources.

You might not have 'done it', but you sure have benefitted from it. If you are the beneficiary of something terrible done to other people, do you owe those people, at the very least, an acknowledgement of the truth of what occurred?

Truth: We have a moral responsibility to acknowledge and not let these things happen again.

Myth 10

Time to move on. Aboriginal people should get over it

In 2012, while the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was celebrating its 40th anniversary, then-opposition leader Tony Abbott suggested that things had improved, and it was "time to move on".

He forgot that everything the Tent Embassy stood for had not yet been delivered: a treaty, sovereignty and national land rights.

So why should Embassy activists move on? Why should Aboriginal people more generally move on?

"Get over it?" asks Aboriginal music legend Archie Roach. "I can't get over stuff like that. It's the history of this country, and if you can't own all of the bad stuff and the good stuff, too, then

what's the point? Just understand that what we enjoy today came at a cost – a terrible cost – to the First People of this country."

Here is another angle: In Australia we commemorate past wars on several occasions: ANZAC Day, Remembrance Day, etc. Why don't we 'move on' from this?



Truth: It is time to roll up the sleeves and do something.

Myth 11

Aboriginal people live in the outback

Figures of the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that almost 80% of Aboriginal people live in major cities or regional Australia, yet most representations of "Aboriginal people" incorporate some form of remoteness or outback.

Such images refer to a minority – less than 14% of Aboriginal people live in very remote areas.

It is much more likely that you meet an Aboriginal person while you go shopping than when visiting places in remote Australia. You just need to see them.

Truth: Most Aboriginal people live in cities or rural areas.



Myth 12

All Aboriginal people have dark skin

Before invasion Aboriginal people had dark skin that protected them from the sun. Children of mixed descent were first the result of sexual abuse by white men on stations, missions and in foster homes.

Later mixed romantic relationships increased the numbers of Aboriginal people with fair skin.

This myth stipulates that you need to have dark skin to identify as Aboriginal. But it is up to the individual to make that decision, not you. If someone has Aboriginal grandparents and strongly identifies with this side of their culture they call themselves "Aboriginal". And we should accept that.

Truth: Aboriginal people, like all of mankind, come in many different shades.



Myth 13

Aboriginal people are only good at arts or sport

Many people accept that Aboriginal people are good at arts and sport. They know dot paintings and AFL or NRL players. But there is more.

Aboriginal people are also successful in science, law and medicine, among other areas.

For example, Dr John Moriarty is a successful businessman and chairman of the Jumbana Group. Bob Bellear was the first Aboriginal Australian judge and Dr Kelvin Kong is an accomplished surgeon. Neville Bonner became the first Aboriginal parliamentarian. Samantha Harris is a successful fashion model.

Linda Jean Burney is an Australian politician and was a member of the NSW Legislative Assembly. Aboriginal feminist Celeste Liddle is also the National Indigenous Organiser for the National Tertiary Education Union. Aileen Moreton-Robinson is an academic, feminist, author and activist for Aboriginal rights.

There are hundreds of successful small Aboriginal businesses nobody knows about. Writer Bruce Pascoe documented many examples of Aboriginal ingenuity in his best-selling book *Dark Emu*.

Truth: Aboriginal people can be successful in all areas in life, just like you and me.

Myth 14

There are no Aboriginal people left in Tasmania

The myth of Aboriginal extinction in Tasmania is grounded in the story of Truganini, a woman from Bruny Island, who died in 1876 after being the sole returnee from the Flinders Island mission where Tasmanian Aboriginals were sent for resettlement.

Assuming Tasmanian Aboriginal people died out because their last person passed away, however, ignores their descendants.

Aboriginal Tasmanians of mixed descent are in a constant struggle to remind the larger population of their existence, history and culture. While traditions and languages were severely affected by the loss of lives, Tasmanian Aboriginal people have adapted and continue to practice cultural traditions.



Truth: Tasmanian Aboriginal people are very much alive.

Myth 15

Violence against women and children is normal

It is true that there used to be physical punishment in traditional law, such as spearing, when people broke the law.

But physical or sexual violence, against women or children, never formed part of traditional cultural practices. In fact, more non-Aboriginal children are physically or sexually abused than Aboriginal children.

Violence is learnt and abusers have often been victims of abuse themselves. For them it is often a cry for help or the only way they know that helps reduce their pain.

The *Little Children Are Sacred* report on abuse in the Northern Territory, released in June 2007, concludes:

"Sexual abuse of children is not restricted to those of Aboriginal descent, nor committed only by those of Aboriginal descent. The phenomenon knows no racial, age or gender borders. It is a national and international problem."

Truth: Trauma leads to violence. It is a worldwide problem.



Myth 16

Native title can claim my backyard

This myth is the result of a massive media campaign after the 1992 Mabo decision.

In 1992, when the High Court handed down its Mabo decision, for the first time Australian law recognised Aboriginal people's connection with, and rights over, land. This is known legally as native title.

The decision overturned the concept of an empty continent belonging to no-one ('terra nullius').

Following the Mabo verdict, opponents and media spread a lot of misinformation, declaring that 'Australians were going to lose their backyards'. Sadly, despite dozens of Native Title decisions proving otherwise, this myth still lingers today.

Native title cannot affect existing property rights. Native title claimants can only assert their title over publicly owned land, called Crown land. Any house (including its backyard) is considered private property and therefore extinguishes native title.

Truth: Your backyard is safe. Native title only affects public land.

Myth 17

A lot of Aboriginal people drink alcohol

This myth is based on the high visibility of Aboriginal drinkers. But it is false.

Only 36% of Aboriginal people in the 'low risk' group drink while 55% of non-Aboriginal people do.

In the 'risky' group proportions are about the same.

This is also true for the 'high risk' group, except for people between 35 to 54 years of age. Here, almost twice as many Aboriginal people drink.

Aboriginal people are 1.4 times more likely to abstain from alcohol than non-Aboriginal people.

More than 43% of teenage Australians and 36% of adults drink to "get drunk". 20% of them can't stop drinking once they started.

Truth: Australia as a nation has a drinking problem. Fewer Aboriginal than non-Aboriginal people drink alcohol.



Myth 18

Aboriginal people are lazy

This is another persistent myth. About 33% of Australians aged 25 to 44 believe this is true (60% in Western Australia).

The Aboriginal unemployment rate is 3 times the national average. In South Australia, for example, the 2006 Census recorded a rate of 20.3% for Aboriginal people, compared to 7.5% for the state's non-Aboriginal population.

These rates are higher not because Aboriginal people don't want to work or learn, but because they encounter difficulties and discrimination. Other factors are education, training and skill levels, poorer health, limited market opportunities, and lower job retention.

More and more Aboriginal youth want to go to university. Between 2001 and 2011 the number of Aboriginal students in higher education grew by 20%.



Truth: Aboriginal people want to learn and work but are hampered by discrimination.

Myth 19

Aboriginal people receive millions of dollars

It is easy to believe this myth especially with papers reporting millions and billions of dollars spent on Aboriginal politics.

There is surely no shortage of money: In 2013/14 the government supported 150 Aboriginal programmes and activities with a total of \$2.4 billion dollars. The total expenditure on Aboriginal affairs in 2013 was more than \$25 billion.

Independent research in 2011 found the returns on this investment "dismally poor", the Finance Department "disappointing at best and appalling at worst".

A journalist's investigation showed that of the \$25 billion much less than one billion dollars actually reached Aboriginal people. And the Commonwealth government confirmed that he was correct. Further analysis found that the government spent more on *reacting* to Aboriginal disadvantage than on *reducing* it.

"Around a third of Government funding for Indigenous programs doesn't even make it past the front doors of office buildings," says the Chair of the Indigenous Advisory Council, Warren Mundine.

Truth: A lot of money is spent in Aboriginal affairs, but very little trickles through to where it is needed.



Myth 20

Aboriginal people get special treatment, financial benefits, and free cars

This myth stipulates that Aboriginal people get a range of benefits and privileges not available to non-Aboriginal people.

But Aboriginal people are subject to the same laws and entitled to no more (and no less) government sponsorship than any other Australian. There has never been a government program that distributed free houses or cars, and Aboriginal students have to pay for university like everyone else.

Research suggests the myth exists because people don't know about the Aboriginal history of dispossession, colonisation and ongoing discrimination.

If you look at special treatment from a discriminatory perspective you could argue that Aboriginal people indeed received "special" treatment: They were not paid the same wages for the same work, not allowed in bars and theatres and punished for speaking their mother tongue.

Truth: The government has no freebies for anyone. Programmes need to be tailored to people – especially those facing hardship.



Myth 21

We need to raise the aspirations of Aboriginal children

This myth assumes that Aboriginal children are only interested in lower-paying jobs in trade, hospitality or sales and we need to encourage them to 'aspire high' for the top-paying jobs.

Not true. A large study found that "from an early age, Indigenous children share the same aspirations as non-Indigenous children. This

includes the desire to become doctors, teachers, vets and artists".

"The one thing I know is Aboriginal children are very aspirational," knows a case worker. "They tell me stories of their dreams: One wants to work as an archaeologist in Greece... A young [girl] told me [about] her ambition is to study astronomy and physics."

Truth: We need to nurture the strong aspirations Aboriginal children already have.



Myth 22

Aboriginal people didn't use numbers beyond 3 or 4

Even anthropologists, linguists and other researchers get this wrong.

According to the myth, Aboriginal people only had number words up to 3 or 4, used the word 'hand' for 5, or compounded larger numbers with words for smaller ones.

But Aboriginal languages have words for larger numbers and even systems for numbers that went on indefinitely based on 5.

The Torres Strait Islanders, for example, had words for one hundred ('mauru') and one thousand ('kai gasa').



Truth: Aboriginal people's mathematical skills go far beyond counting to four.

The background of the page is a close-up photograph of a yellow-green leaf. The leaf is slightly curved and has a prominent vein structure. A small, dark ant is visible on the surface of the leaf, positioned near the center. The lighting is bright, highlighting the texture of the leaf and the details of the ant.

Myth 23

Aboriginal people were classified under a flora and fauna act until the 1967 referendum

The myth states that Aboriginal people were covered by a flora and fauna act, which did not classify them as human beings, and that this only changed when the constitution was amended following the 1967 referendum.

But Aboriginal people in Australia have never been covered by a flora and fauna act, either under federal or state law.

The myth most likely emerged because government departments and historical reports brought together the words "flora", "fauna" and "Aboriginal", for example in the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974 which gave the NSW government control over places of social value, places of historic, architectural or scientific significance, but also "places, objects and features of significance to Aboriginal people". If you look at all the Australian coins you might get the same impression.

"The myth that the constitution included a reference to Aboriginal people under the 'flora and fauna' section is entirely erroneous," says Professor Helen Irving, an expert on Australia's constitution.

Truth: Aboriginal people were never classified as 'flora' or 'fauna'.

Acknowledgements

Myth Image

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Yet another myth

It's too difficult to find a good resource...

Like you I originally just wanted to know more and started asking questions.

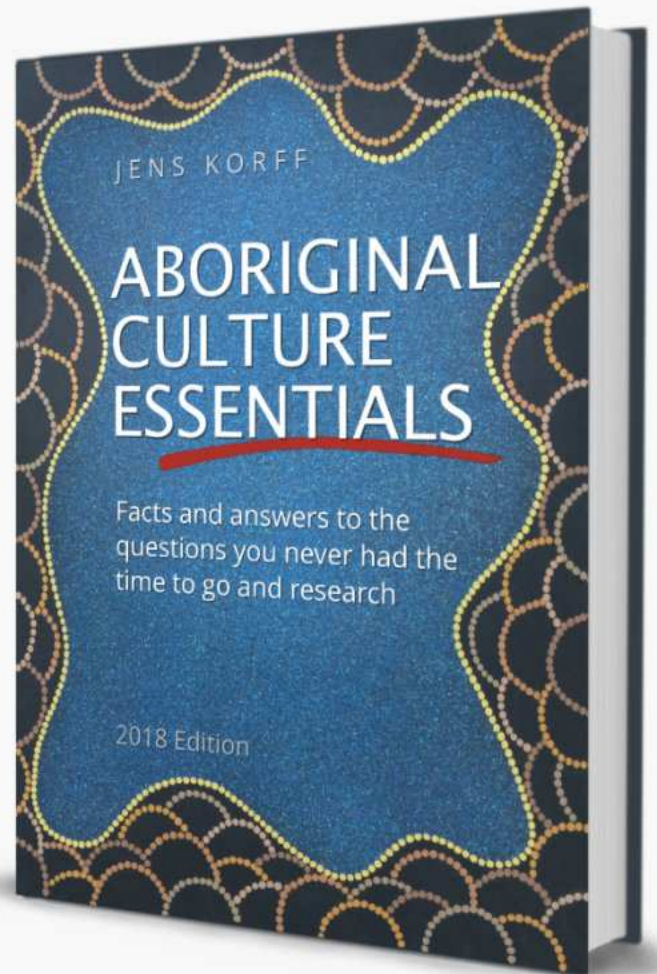
From there I built in-depth articles that I publish on my website, CreativeSpirits.info.

But sometimes all you need is a short introduction into what's important.

Aboriginal Culture Essentials is exactly that: An ebook that condenses my articles into manageable bits of information that are easy to digest.

It has easy-to-follow chapters, contemporary answers to your questions, is engaging and fun to read and aligned to the Australian Curriculum.

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