

Aborigines and European Colonization

The Aborigines are the indigenous people of Australia. The word *aborigine* in Latin means "from the beginning," and refers to the native or first known inhabitants. Aborigines occupied Australia for at least 40,000 years. The Aborigines arrived from Southeast Asia and entered the continent from the north, in which Australia, Tasmania, and New Guinea were one large landmass at that time called Sahul. Before European colonization in the late 18th century, the Aboriginal population was estimated to be between 300,000 and 800,000.

The Aborigines developed efficient ways to adapt to the harsh Australian environment. They built containers for storing water and built wells to collect water underground. The Aborigines were nomadic hunter gatherers. They ate animals, wild nuts, fruits, and berries. Archeologists have found early Aboriginal inventions like rock art, boomerangs, ground axes, and grindstones. The Aborigines had no written records. Instead, they kept their history by telling stories that were passed down from generations to generation.

Before the European invasion, Aboriginal people lived throughout Australia, although most of them lived along the coast. Evidence suggests that these communities managed their environment carefully to ensure a steady supply of food, bringing wild yams into gardens which they irrigated, or building small artificial drainage streams.

Aborigine spiritual beliefs are based on Dreamtime or the time long ago when all things were created. Dreamtime stories explain how animals, plants, water holes, etc., were shaped by spiritual beings. These beings still exist and may appear in many forms. The Aborigines believe the earth is a link to the spiritual world. Aborigines feel a very strong connection to the land and believe that they have been assigned as caretakers. Many sites, such as Uluru, are sacred to the Aborigines.

The first Europeans to sail into Australia waters arrived in 1606. During the next 164 years, ships from several nations reached the continent. In 1770, Captain James Cook claimed the Australian east coast for England when he landed at Botany Bay (near the present-day city of Sydney). Cook named eastern Australia "New South Wales." English sailors then mapped the coast of Australia and Tasmania.

With the loss of the American colonies in the American Revolution, Great Britain could no longer send prisoners to Georgia (used as a penal colony at the time). This meant that Great Britain had to start looking for another place to send its prisoners. Australia seemed like a good choice because there was no chance of escape, and no colonies around it. In 1787, British ships called the "First Fleet" left England with convicts to establish a prison colony. British prisoners settled in Australia in 1788.

Great Britain saw that Australia was a good location to base its navy in the South Pacific Ocean. Its location would make it possible for British ships to make repairs and get supplies. The British also had many opportunities for trade with Asia and the Americans. In addition, the British didn't want the French to get a foothold on the continent.

Once the Europeans arrived, they settled along the coasts, which is where the Aborigines lived. Europeans waged war against the Aborigines in order to take their land. This had an immediate impact on Aboriginal life. The Europeans had guns, soldiers, and diseases, which killed off more than half of the Aborigine population and the entire population in Tasmania. European settlers would often separate Aborigines from society. Some Aborigines were removed from their families and placed in institutions. Others were killed because they were seen as a nuisance.

The Gold Rush of 1851 and the growth of sheep farming brought more and more free settlers to Australia. The colonization of Europeans had a dramatic effect on Aboriginal culture. The settlers viewed the natives as barbarians, seizing tribal land and in many cases, following a policy of peace by force. Many others died of disease, starvation, cultural dislocation and neglect. Today, there are fewer than 230,000 Aborigines in Australia (less than 1% of the population).

The remaining Aborigines were forced to live on reservations in the Outback in the 1830s. They were forbidden from teaching their children about their language and customs. During the 1900s, separation was an official government policy, which lasted for many decades. Today, Aboriginal people do not know their origins. They are considered a lost generation because they do not know much about their own history. In 1967, the federal government began to pass legislation to help the Aborigines.

Today, Aborigines have poor living conditions and a low unemployment rate. The unemployment rate for Aborigines is more than six times the national average, and their average wage is less than half of the national average. Aborigines also make up a disproportionate section of the prison population in Australia. The government has not done much to help Aborigines from reclaiming title over their lands. Aborigines do have some rights though: they can hold a seat in parliament; and have their own schools that teach Aboriginal culture, language, and art. Most Aborigines live modern lives; some are teachers, lawyers, mechanics, nurses, and politicians.