

Gujingga songline

Gunudjarri mardbamardba

Rainbow is resting,
curled up sleeping

Gunudjarri yolbirriar

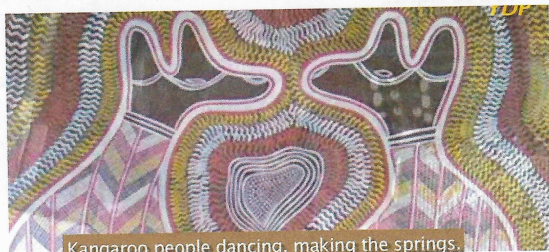
Rainbow now moves,
making the rivers

Dalaman dale laburanjane

Dancing all lined up,
clapping with the boomerang

Australia's Aboriginal people are one of the world's oldest civilizations. They settled on the continent at least 50,000 years ago, making their way from Africa along the coast of India and Asia and then crossing the ocean to reach Australia. Aboriginal people lived from hunting and gathering. They had a deep spiritual relationship with the land and a culture very different from Europeans. There were hundreds of different Aboriginal groups in Australia, each with its own language or dialect.

Aboriginal people had no written languages. They passed on their traditions orally, in songs and legends. A good example is the songline, a kind of chant in which people speak of their deep relationship with the land. Songlines also have a practical use. Imagine you live in open country, with no roads or buildings to help you know where you are. But you need to move around, and sometimes travel long distances, to hunt, find waterholes, gather food, or trade with your neighbours. How can you find the way?



Kangaroo people dancing, making the springs.

The oppression of Aboriginal Australians: A timeline

1788

British colonists settle the area of present-day Sydney – 250 free persons and 750 convicts.

The Aboriginal population is estimated at between 300,000 and 1,000,000.

1790

British colonists take possession of the Australian continent and divide it into six colonies: New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. The colonial economy grows, with wool, minerals and food as the main exports. The colonists build towns in coastal regions, and roads and railways across the country. More and more colonists arrive and the population grows to about four million.

At the same time, the Aboriginal population falls to 90,000. British colonists kill tens of thousands of people, forcing entire communities off their lands. Many more die from diseases which the Europeans brought, like smallpox and measles. Although the Aboriginal people try to resist, their weapons cannot match the colonists' firepower. Without land, the traditional way of life is impossible and most Aboriginal people are forced to become farm workers or live in poverty in the cities.

1900

1901

With a new constitution, the six colonies come together as federal states and Australia becomes a single country. 98% of the people are white. The new parliament passes a law allowing immigration from Europe only. This is the beginning of the "White Australia Policy".

The new constitution does not recognize Aboriginal people as citizens.

Mayu barnay dingurup barnay
Kangaroo People dancing here,
making the springs.

Gattagatta lerrbonbo
We stop dancing now
end of the Songline.

By singing about the land they passed through, Aboriginal people navigated their continent. Songlines are like maps that you sing. The melody and rhythm identify landmarks such as waterholes, rivers or stars. The whole continent is criss-crossed by songlines, some only a few kilometres long, others hundreds of kilometres. Singing the songlines in the right order helped people to travel huge distances without getting lost. Even when they crossed a language border, they could still understand the songlines because the message about the landscape is contained in the melody and rhythm. This knowledge of the landscape is also expressed in the paintings of Aboriginal artists.

a) Imagine there were no signs or street names.

Write a songline for your way home from school.



Read your songline to a partner.

b) Say what you learn about the people of Australia. How and why did their lives change after 1788?

1901

For about 70 years, the "White Australia Policy" is in force. More and more Europeans arrive in Australia, as the government encourages immigration, especially from Britain. At 12 million, the population of Australia in 1971 is three times as large as in 1901.

The Aboriginal population grows too, but only to 115,000 in 1971. The new Australian state continues to discriminate against Australia's native people. Until 1962, they cannot vote in federal elections. Between 1910 and 1970, the government takes some 50,000 Aboriginal and mixed-race children from their families, forcing them to live in institutions where they may not use their own languages. These children are now called the "Stolen Generations".

1971

The Australian parliament passes a law giving Aboriginal communities the right to reclaim land that was once theirs.

1976

1998

A movement of Australian citizens starts a National Sorry Day to remember the suffering of the Stolen Generations.

2008

A decade later, Australia's parliament also apologizes to the Stolen Generations. Government support for Aboriginal culture is now well established.

2016

People from all over the world, many of them from Asia, emigrate to Australia. The total population is 25 million. About 700,000 people identify themselves as Aboriginal.