

FORUM: UNESCO

QUESTION OF: Protecting Indigenous Culture in Oceania

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INTRODUCTION

The existence of Indigenous peoples and cultures in Oceania dates back more than 65.000 years, who thrive in the region. Over the years these populations have faced many difficulties, and in the present day they are in danger of extinction and forced cultural assimilation. To this day, nearly one million aboriginals and people of indigenous cultures inhabit the region of Oceania, representing more than one thousand different cultural groups. These cultural groups mostly inhabit the regions around Australia, Micronesia, Polynesia and Melanesia, and in various smaller countries in the region. These populations have been rapidly declining over the past years, with many cultures getting completely lost in the vast variety of said cultures in Oceania. The international community, and particularly UNESCO, is keen on preserving such cultures, and must do everything in its power to preserve cultural diversity in the twenty-first century. According to UNESCO, “Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration, and they must be preserved”¹.

This topic can be tackled through a series of swift and efficient measures that if applied correctly can truly make a change. Briefly, these would primarily include the formation of specialised UN bodies aiming to preserve these cultures, protection of indigenous sites, and the refreshment and preservation of knowledge on these communities through the creation of schools within these communities. These measures would ensure not only that these cultures do not die, but that their traditions are passed down onto future generations, giving them a long-term lifespan. If all Member States of the United Nations come together and tackle the problem rapidly, solutions can be constructed and the problem can be battled. This topic is connected to this CGSMUN’s overall topic, “Ethos vs Progress: Reassessing our values in a fragile world”, since through its resolution we can take a step back as a whole and reevaluate the importance of long lost ethnicities. Also, through preserving these cultures we

¹Centre, UNESCO World Heritage. “World Heritage.” *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, whc.unesco.org/en/about/. Accessed 19 Sept. 2024.

ensure that fragile and endangered aspects of civilization can be preserved through the years.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Indigenous

The term “Indigenous” is used to refer to, or relating to, the people who originally lived in a place, rather than people who moved there from somewhere else.²

Aboriginal

The term “Aboriginal” is used to refer to, or describe, a member of a race of people who were the first people to live in a country, before any colonists arrived.³

Lapita People

The Lapita people were originally from Taiwan and other regions of East Asia. They were highly mobile seaborne explorers and colonists who had established themselves on the Bismarck Archipelago (northeast of New Guinea) by 2000 bce.⁴

Native

The term “Native” is used to refer to the first people to live in a specific area.⁵

Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage includes artefacts, monuments, sites, and museums that hold symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological values as well as having scientific and social significance.⁶

Hunter-Gatherer

A hunter-gatherer is any person who primarily depends on wild foods for subsistence. Their food-gathering strategies include hunting and trapping bigger animals, fishing and gathering insects or wild plant food.⁷

Cultural Assimilation

²Cambridge Dictionary /English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus, www.dictionary.cambridge.org

³Cambridge Dictionary /English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus, www.dictionary.cambridge.org

⁴ “Lapita Culture.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., www.britannica.com/topic/Lapita-culture . Accessed 14 Sept. 2024.

⁵Cambridge Dictionary /English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus, www.dictionary.cambridge.org .

⁶“Cultural Heritage.” *UNESCO UIS*, 12 Sept. 2023, uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/cultural-heritage .

⁷“Hunter-Gatherer.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 23 Aug. 2024, www.britannica.com/topic/hunter-gatherer .

Cultural assimilation is the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture of a society.



Figure 1: Picture depicting members of an Australian aboriginal tribe⁸

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Historical background

Aboriginal cultures have existed in Oceania for at least 45-50.000 years, originally coming from Southeast Asia (now Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, East Timor, Indonesia, and the Philippines). However, some scientists claim that the first humans arrived considerably earlier, ranging from 65 to 80 thousand years ago. Through the centuries, these populations have maintained a single kind of adaptation, through hunting and gathering, to modern times and they continue to exist in large numbers in multiple areas of the continent of Oceania. By the time of the European Settlement (1788), it is widely believed that aboriginal peoples had occupied and taken advantage of the whole oceanic continent and adapted to the diverse ecological climate, from tropical forests to completely dry deserts. At the time, these populations were estimated to range from 300.000 to more than 1.000.000

Indigenous Cultures

Over the years, more than 200 Aboriginal languages have been spoken throughout the continent of Oceania, with most Aboriginal people being bilingual or multilingual. Different languages and groups of people were associated with stretches of territory, with the largest of those groups being often recognised by the Europeans as “Tribes”. It is believed that through this period, there may have been more than 500 territorially anchored “tribes”

⁸ “Australian Aboriginal Peoples.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 29 Aug. 2024, www.britannica.com/topic/Australian-Aboriginal .

overall inhabiting the oceanic continent. According to traditional scholarship, Aboriginal people were hunter-gatherers. On the other hand, Torres Strait Islanders come from the islands of the Torres Strait between the tip of Cape York in Queensland and Papua New Guinea and share many cultural similarities with the people of Papua New Guinea and the Pacific.⁹ Currently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples represent less than four per cent of Australia's population, so an everyday interaction with Australia's First Peoples is not a given for most visitors. During the early period of colonisation, from 1788, known as the period of "First Contact", there were between 350 and 750 distinct Australian social groupings, and a similar number of languages. Despite the absence of fences or visible borders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups had clear boundaries separating their country from that of other groups. Aboriginal protocol dictates that people are welcomed upon entering a new country. Everywhere, age and sex were the major criteria in differentiating status and roles, and it was in the religious arena that the greatest differentiation occurred. Women were excluded from the core of men's secret-sacred ritual activities, and areas of privilege were further defined by graded acceptance of youths and adult men as they passed through rites of learning. Essentially, however, Aboriginal societies were "open": there were no social barriers to prevent a man from becoming a leader in religious matters by his own efforts. Both men and women acquired prestige through knowledge of ritual performance and expertise in directing or performing ritual. In Great Sandy Desert rituals, for example, leadership roles were situationally determined—that is, the personnel changed as the ritual being performed changed such that most senior men adopted such roles at some stage in the protracted ritual proceedings. Although desert women were far less differentiated, they did have a ritual status hierarchy. In religious affairs everywhere, women took orders from, rather than gave orders to, initiated men.¹⁰

The danger at hand

To this day, the biggest danger posed to Aboriginal cultures is a phenomenon we call cultural assimilation. While these cultures and their corresponding customs, traditions and languages remain undocumented, they will continue to face the everlasting danger of being 'overwritten' by other cultures. This phenomenon occurs due to the huge spread of the Australian Language and the fact that the majority of the continent speaks it, causing new

⁹ "Australian Aboriginal Peoples." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 29 Aug. 2024, www.britannica.com/topic/Australian-Aboriginal .

¹⁰ "Traditional Sociocultural Patterns." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 19 Sept. 2024, www.britannica.com/topic/Australian-Aboriginal/Traditional-sociocultural-patterns .

generations of Aboriginals to grow up speaking Australian and therefore the rapid downfall of the number of people with knowledge on Aboriginal languages. Furthermore, due to the fact that Aboriginal people are minority groups, they often face racism from other Oceanians.



Figure 2: Picture depicting members of an aboriginal tribe¹¹

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

Australia

For thousands of years, Australia has been and still is the country with the largest Aboriginal population in Oceania by a mile. It was the country who first accommodated these peoples and has hugely contributed to their growth for centuries. As of 30 June 2021, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that 984,000 First Nations people were living in Australia, representing 3.8% of the total Australian population. This was an increase of 23% (185,600 people) from the 30 June 2016 estimate of 798,400.¹² This statistic further indicates the contribution of the Australian nation to the development of Aboriginal cultures, as well as its significance as a part of Aboriginal history.

¹¹ Staff, News. "Australian Aboriginal Stories of Ancient Sea-Level Rise Preserved for 13,000 Years." *Sci.News: Breaking Science News*, 24 Sept. 2015, www.sci.news/othersciences/linguistics/science-aboriginal-stories-australia-03272.html

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics, www.abs.gov.au/. Accessed 22 Sept. 2024.

New Zealand

New Zealand has played a huge part in aboriginal history, being home to the Māori peoples, one of the most significant aboriginal cultures around the world. Arriving in New Zealand from nearby Polynesia, the Māori population has inhabited the country for over one thousand years. In 1840, when the population of the tribe signed an agreement with the British Crown, officially recognising their tribe and protecting them from outside threats. The establishment of this treaty meant that the Aboriginal tribes would be allowed to develop freely, without being endangered by third parties.

Samoa

Samoa is home to one of the oldest and richest aboriginal tribes, the Lapita people. As previously mentioned, the Lapita People were originally from Taiwan and other regions of East Asia, and were seaborne explorers and colonists. Beginning at 1600 BCE, the Lapita People began to spread to the Solomon Islands, Fiji, Tonga and into the rest of western Polynesia 500 years later. After another 500 years, the Lapita people completed their final major immigration move to Micronesia.

UNESCO

As an organisation, UNESCO has played a greatly beneficial role in helping Aboriginal cultures develop under safe circumstances, as well as sensitising and informing the world on the impending dangers. Through a series of measures, such as the Establishment of the international decade of indigenous languages, the establishment of the International day of the world's Indigenous Peoples and a number of digital initiatives for indigenous languages, UNESCO have succeeded in indicating the significance of the problem at hand, turning worldwide glances on any possible means to resolve it. Furthermore, UNESCO possesses a very significant role in fighting for Indigenous people's rights, because of the resolutions they have passed defending them.

National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA)

The NIAA is a huge factor in Australia's overall efforts to protect indigenous cultures, due to the vast variety of work they have completed over the past 5 years. As an agency, their main goal is to lead and influence change across government to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a say in the decisions that affect them. Some of their most notable work includes their long efforts to ensure equality between all Australians, the

economical aid they provide for the development of aboriginal culture economies and the passing down of these populations' customs and traditions to newer generations.

International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)

The International Work group for Indigenous Affairs is a global human rights organisation dedicated to promoting and defending Indigenous Peoples' rights. IWGIA was founded in 1968 by anthropologists alarmed about the ongoing genocide on Indigenous Peoples taking place in the Amazon, and is based in Denmark. For more than 50 years, they have been battling the mistreating and exploitation of Indigenous populations, as well as fighting for their rights across many countries of the world, such as but not limited to Bangladesh, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, India, Kenya, Myanmar, Nepal, Peru, the Philippines and Tanzania. Furthermore, the IWGIA has carried out multiple projects in Oceania, empowering indigenous communities and spending hundreds of millions of Danish Krone on preserving and protecting these communities.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

1984	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection act
13 September 2007	Publication of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
21 December 1993	Proclamation of the First International Decade of the World's Indigenous People
December 1994	Establishment of the International day of the world's Indigenous Peoples on the 9th of August every year
1999	Establishment of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act)
1968	Foundation of the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs
29 May 2019	Foundation of the National Indigenous Australians agency

UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

The UN Declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples, signed on the 13th of September 2007, is to this day the most comprehensive instrument detailing the rights of

indigenous peoples in international law and policy, containing minimum standards for the recognition, protection and promotion of these rights. It establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, wellbeing and rights of the world's indigenous peoples.¹³ This declaration is one of (if not the) most important measures taken to preserve these cultures and ensure that their rights remain untouched.

Establishment of the first International decade of the world's Indigenous peoples

The first international decade of the world's indigenous peoples, established on the 21st of december 1993, was proclaimed by the General Assembly with the main objective of strengthening international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by indigenous people in such areas as human rights, the environment, development, education and health.



Figure 4: Picture depicting members of an Australian aboriginal tribe¹⁴

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection act

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection act, established in 1984, also known as the ATSIHP Act, is Commonwealth legislation that can be used by Aboriginal

¹³ *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous ...*, www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf Accessed 22 Sept. 2024.

¹⁴ "Australian Aboriginal Peoples." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 29 Aug. 2024, www.britannica.com/topic/Australian-Aboriginal .

and Torres Strait Islander people to apply for the protection from injury or desecration of sites vital to those populations, that pose particular significance to Aboriginal tradition.¹⁵

The Treaty of Waitangi

The Treaty of Waitangi was signed on 6 February 1840 at Waitangi in the Bay of Islands. It was initially signed by approximately 45 Maori chiefs and by Captain William Hobson and several English residents on behalf of the British Crown. The Treaty was then circulated throughout Northland to obtain more Maori signatures, before being copied and distributed throughout the country. Ultimately, 579 chiefs signed the document. This process took around six months. The Treaty was written in both English and Maori. Translated by the missionary Henry Williams and his sons, it was believed that there was no exact Maori equivalent to some of the English terms. Many believe the Maori understanding of the Treaty was at odds with what they were actually signing, as only 39 of the Maori chiefs signed the English-language version. As a result, there are discrepancies between the meanings of the two versions. These differences have resulted in considerable controversy in the interpretation of the Treaty and the application of the Treaty principles. The purposes of the Treaty were to protect Maori interests, to promote settler interests in acquiring land and to secure the Crown's position in New Zealand. For the Maori people, the Treaty was intended to require the British Crown to preserve law and order between the Maori and Pakeha (European settlers), to protect Maori trade, and to guarantee Maori control of land and other resources. This was clear in the Maori text of the Treaty, which gave limited rights of governorship to the British Crown. In contrast, the English-language version gave full sovereignty to the British Crown.¹⁶

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act)

The Environment protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, (also known as the EPBC Act, established in 1999, serves as Australia's main national environmental legislation to this day. It provides a way for Australia to protect and manage nationally important animals, habitats and sites. The EPBC act helps to protect important Aboriginal sites and

¹⁵ Change, Department of Climate. "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 - General Guide and Application Form." *DCCEEW*, 1 Jan. 1970, www.dcceew.gov.au/parks-heritage/heritage/publications/atsihp-act-guide-and-application-form.

¹⁶ "Treaty of Waitangi: 100% Pure New Zealand." *100% Pure New Zealand*, www.newzealand.com/int/feature/treaty-of-waitangi/. Accessed 22 Sept. 2024.

territories, while also appreciating the role of Indigenous peoples in protecting the environment.¹⁷

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Formation of Specialized UN bodies

Formation of UN supported and funded bodies consisting of volunteers, which would be sent to indigenous communities around Oceania. These bodies would aim to preserve and document dying languages into a newly created UNESCO database.

Creation of a dedicated UNESCO database

In which indigenous traditions will be recorded, with the aim of preserving them. This database would be public online and accessible to everyone around the world, ensuring that customs and traditions of small Aboriginal tribes can be spread and kept alive.

Establishment and protection of indigenous land and sacred sites

Ensuring that these communities are not displaced, that their land is not taken advantage of by third parties, and that vital cultural sites remain undisturbed, through the establishment of these sacred sites in the UNESCO database and the Establishment of relevant legal framework protecting them from harm.

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¹⁷ "Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act)." *DCCEEW*, www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/epbc . Accessed 22 Sept. 2024.

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