

Ngarrindjeri

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Ngarrindjeri Flag



Ngarrindjeri culture is centred around the lower lakes of the [Murray River](#).

The **Ngarrindjeri** people are the traditional [Aboriginal Australian](#) people of the lower [Murray River](#), eastern [Fleurieu Peninsula](#), and [the Coorong](#) of the southern-central area of the state of [South Australia](#). The term *Ngarrindjeri* means "belonging to men",^[1] and refers to a "tribal constellation". The Ngarrindjeri actually comprised several distinct if closely related tribal groups, including the [Jarildekald](#), [Tanganekald](#), [Meintangk](#) and [Ramindjeri](#),^[2] who began to form a unified [cultural bloc](#) after remnants of each separate community congregated at [Raukkan, South Australia](#) (formerly Point McLeay Mission).

A descendant of these peoples, Irene Watson, has argued that the notion of Ngarrindjeri identity is a cultural construct imposed by settler colonialists, who bundled together and conflated a variety of distinct Aboriginal cultural and kinship groups into one homogenised pattern, now known as Ngarrindjeri.^[3]

Historical designation and usage[[edit](#)]

Sources disagree as to who the Ngarrindjeri were.^[4] The missionary [George Taplin](#) chose the term, spelling it as *Narrinyeri*,^[5] as a generic [ethnonym](#) to designate a unified constellation of several distinct tribes, and bearing the meaning of "belonging to people", as opposed to *kringgari* (whites).^[6] Etymologically, it is thought to be an abbreviation of *kornarinyeri* ("belonging to men/human beings", formed *narr* (linguistically plain or intelligible) and *inyeri*, a suffix indicating belongingness.^[7] It implied that those outside the group

were not quite human.^[6] Other terms were available, for example, *Kukabrak*,^[a] but Taplin's authority popularised the other term.^[8]

Later ethnographers and anthropologists have disagreed with Taplin's construction of the tribal federation of 18 *lakinyeri* (clans).^{[7][9]} Ian D. Clark has called it a "reinvention of tradition". Norman Tindale and Ronald Murray Berndt in particular were critical both of Taplin and of each other's reevaluation of the evidence.^[4] According to Tindale, a close evaluation of his material suggests that his data pertains basically to the Jarildekald/Yaralde culture,^[10] and he limited their borders to Cape Jervis, whereas Berndt and his wife Catherine Berndt argued that the Ramindjeri component lived in proximity to Adelaide.^[4] The Berndts argued that, despite cultural links, there was no political unity to warrant the "nation" or "confederacy".^[11]

Country[edit]

According to David Horton's map "Aboriginal Australia", the Ngarrindjeri lands lie along the Coorong coastline, from Victor Harbor on the southern Fleurieu Peninsula in the north, to Cape Jaffa in the south.^[12] According to the map, the lands extend inland just north of Murray Bridge, receding to a 15-to-20 km (9.3-to-12.4 mi) wide coastal strip west of the Murray River lower lakes, but extending further inland in the south to a point near the state border at Coonawarra. The lands include both of the Murray lower lakes, Lake Alexandrina and Lake Albert.

History[edit]



Approximate historical extent of Ngarrindjeri territory.

Pre-contact history[edit]

Archaeology, particularly in excavations conducted at Roonka Flat, which affords one of the most outstanding sites for investigating "pre-European contact Aboriginal burial populations in Australia," has revealed that the traditional territory of the Ngarrindjeri has been inhabited since the Holocene period, beginning around 8,000 BCE down to around 1840 CE.^[13]

History after contact[edit]

[Whalers](#) and [sealers](#) had been visiting the South Australian coast since 1802 and by 1819 there was a permanent camp on Karta, [Kangaroo Island](#). Many of these men were escaped convicts, sealers, and whalers who had brought Tasmanian Aboriginal women with them but they also raided the mainland for women, particularly [Ramindjeri](#). Originally the most heavily populated area in Australia, a [smallpox](#) epidemic had travelled down the River Murray before [colonisation by Britain](#), possibly killing a majority of the Ngarrindjeri. Funeral rites and cultural practices were disrupted, family groups merged and land use became altered. Songs from the time tell of the smallpox that came out of the [Southern Cross](#) in the east with a loud noise like a bright flash. In 1830 the first exploratory expedition reached the Ngarrindjeri lands and [Charles Sturt](#) noted that the people were already familiar with firearms.^[14]

Numbering only 6000 at the time of colonisation in 1836 due to the epidemic, they are the only Aboriginal cultural group in Australia whose land lay within 100 km (62 mi) of a capital city to have survived as a distinct people with a population still living on the former mission at Raukkan (formerly Point McLeay).^[citation needed] *Pomberuk* (Ngarrindjeri for crossing place), on the banks of the Murray in [Murray Bridge](#) was the most significant Ngarrindjeri site. All 18 lakinyeri (tribes) would meet there for [corroborees](#). Around 22 km (14 mi) further down the river was *Tagalang* ([Tailem Bend](#)), a traditional trading camp where lakinyeri would gather to trade [ochre](#), weapons and clothing. In the 1900s, Tailem Bend was assigned as a government ration depot supplying the Ngarrindjeri.

European settlement^[edit]

The Ngarrindjeri were the first [South Australian Aboriginal people](#) to work with Europeans in large-scale economic operations, working as farmers, whalers and labourers.^[15] As early as 1836 it was reliably reported that Aboriginal crews were working at the whaling station at [Encounter Bay](#), and that some boats were worked by entirely Aboriginal crews, and the Ngarrindjeri were employed in the processing of whale oil in exchange for meat, gin and tobacco, and reportedly treated as equals.^[16]

[George Taplin](#) created the [Raukkan](#) mission on behalf of the [Aborigines' Friends' Association](#) (whose stated object was "the moral, spiritual, and physical well-being of the natives of [this Province](#)"^[17]) in 1859. This established a settlement of the Ngarrindjeri people of the [Coorong region](#) at the mission, with some escaping the [frontier wars](#) that had decimated their population. The land was small,^[b] but the Ngarrindjeri people thrived for a generation by the use of commerce. They mastered a series of trades, such as [saddlery](#), [blacksmithing](#), carpentry, [stonemasonry](#), and baking, and also established a fishing enterprise and a wool-washing plant. Many Aboriginal people became Christians during their settlement.^[18] They also survived by working seasonally in pastoral properties and received donations.^[19] The community eventually struggled to survive due the subdivision of pastoral properties for farms, which resulted in a shortage of seasonal work, and the refusal of the [South Australian Government](#) to acknowledge their ownership of the land and to raise the size of their reserve. In 1890, the wool-washing plant closed due a new [irrigation](#) scheme built on the upper [Murray River](#), that reduced the river's downstream flow.^[19]

Following the [colonisation of South Australia](#) and the encroachment of Europeans into Ngarrindjeri lands, *Pomberuk* remained until the 1940s, the last traditional campsite with the remaining Aboriginal occupants forced to leave in 1943 by the new land owners, the [Hume Pipe Company](#), and resettled by the local council and South Australian government.