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## Who Are Australian Aborigines and Where Are They at Today?

George J. Toepfer

History is gauged by significant events, timelines, and dates. Two such dates in Australian history are 1788 and 1967.

The 1788 date was the arrival of the First Fleet which heralded significant change to the new “Is-

land–Continent–Terra–Nullius” and/or the First People, the Aborigines, who roamed the land. Not noticing any permanent structures it was, therefore, assumed by these early settlers that the original inhabitants were both uncivilised and too primitive to form the basis of any productive society. The traditions and culture of these peoples were foreign to the newcomers and were ignored, deeming them insignificant to pursuer or to incorporate in any useful way.

The other date of significance was the 1967 referendum which after years of process, albeit a very, very slow process, Aborigines were finally recognised as people and were removed from under the Flora and Fauna Act where they were treated as less than human. The process, in some ways, is still ongoing and many realise that a font of information has been neglected for too long. The new settlers, in general, did not seek the knowledge nor show and understanding of a culture that is drawn from over 40,000 years of tradition, experience, and observation and care of a land that was their nurturing home.

It has been discovered that in the last 50 years, just how vast was this Aborigines knowledge. As more information is gleaned and published, *we* are slowly understanding the lifestyle, traditional practices, cultural values, religious beliefs, and time-worn land experience of these First Peoples of Australia.

So what do we know about these people who roamed this land before White settlement in 1788?

Researchers do not all agree but it is believed by most that there are three categories of Australian Aborigines:

1. The Torres Strait Islands are located in Torres Strait, which separates mainland Australia from New Guinea. The Torres Strait Islanders are of “Melanesian” extraction, so they are not related to the Australian Aborigines. They are, however, categorised as Australian “Aborigines” and Australian citizens.
2. The biggest group of Aborigines occupying various parts of the *mainland* came to Australia from the north, probably more than 40,000 to 50,000 years ago. They migrated during the last Ice Age, when the spreading polar ice caps took up so much water that the general sea level fell and exposing more land. Scientists say that Aboriginal people came to Australia when the climate was very cold and the sea level was much lower. Around that time, Tasmania in the south and Papua New Guinea in the north were joined to the mainland of Australia. They crossed at least two stretches of water in canoes or on rafts. (Unlike our Polynesian neighbours, this part of Aboriginal history has not been “passed