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KOORI

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Great confusion and sometimes offence has been caused as the result of not knowing what term to use for the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. Let me define these terms.

There are general terms used in the major cities of Australia. I tend to say major cities on the basis that this is where they are usually expressed. Rural and traditional communities across Australia generally maintain their original term, ie Arantu (Central Australia). The term 'Koori' is probably the most renowned term as it is widely expressed in the South East region of Australia (New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and Southern Queensland) Koori derives from the Awabakal people from the NSW Coast, now known as Lake Macquarie – Koori meaning people or man.

Over the past decade Australia has become slightly more aware of Aboriginal issues and there seems to be an appreciation of our culture. However to understand the terms I must first explain the history.

The 1967 Referendum granted full citizenship rights to Aboriginal people. This gave rise to a new sense of dignity, identity and pride. Then came the 70s and our sense of self esteem was further heightened, we had a voice and for the first time the Government was listening to us.

A ten embassy was erected on the lawns of parliament in Canberra, where our flag flew high. The whole world was watching Australia and was shocked by the way they were treating 'their aborigines'.

Proud of ourselves and with this new self respect we united as a people, asking to be recognised as culturally different, with an agenda that urgently needed to be addressed. No longer did we want to be called Aboriginal or Aborigine, for that was white man's terminology and of course it had connotations of that derogatory term 'Abo'.

The word, 'Koori' was bantered around and it stuck. It is a term not found in the Oxford dictionary. 'Koori' was our word, something we could relate to and identify with immediately. Other common terms all with similar meanings are 'Nunga' (Adelaide), 'Nyungar' (Perth) and 'Murri' (Brisbane).

As part of a cultural repatriation, Aboriginal people have formed an even stronger sense of identity through their culture, today traditional terms are more commonplace.

(Note: some 260 languages were practiced pre-colonisation.) Many Aboriginal communities throughout Australia are going back to, or have always retained their original term. Various terms are appropriate to the region, to provide us with a sense of belonging and unity.

Arising from this is whether we identify as a Koori, Nunga, Nyungar, Murri, etc. Aboriginal people have had their land stolen, their children taken away, their pride and identity stripped through assimilation. As an oral culture, language is very important, in that, in most cases it is the only piece of thread that ties us with the land.

Suffice to say that Aboriginal people do not appreciate the burden that accompanies white Australia's confusion as to what term to use. Generally, Aboriginal people do not mind explaining their background, it is whether the listener is judgemental, patronising or not listening that may cause offence. Traditional language might have all but disappeared in urban areas around Australia, therefore it is imperative that something, however so slight, reinforce a sense of identity and pride.