

## A Context for Australian Indigenous Use of the Word *Country*

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### Abstract

The word *Country* is now the standard usage by Australian Aborigines to refer to their specific traditional tribal land. This article outlines that use and puts it in the context of the broader community uses of the word *country*. Using linguistic and social detail, it finds some overlap in a shared meaning of closeness to the land, arising from multiple generations of occupants. A source for the Aboriginal use of *Country* is suggested in the early contact of traditional groups with frontier settlers from rural regions of the United Kingdom.

Aboriginal Australians use the word *country* with distinctive and powerful meanings. Their national research body, The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATIS), captures the complexity in this way:

What is Country?

“Country is everything. It’s family, it’s life, it’s connection”. – Jude Barlow, Ngunnawal Elder

Country is the term often used by Aboriginal peoples to describe the lands, waterways and seas to which they are connected. The term contains complex ideas about law, place, custom, language, spiritual belief, cultural practice, material sustenance, family, and identity.<sup>1</sup>

The specific *Country* referred to can be seen from the AIATIS map where each language group is indicated.<sup>2</sup> These groups are many times smaller than Australia’s governing States, but even those Aboriginal language groups cover a number of subgroups. For example, Bundjalung at the most eastern point of Australia comprises six separate dialect areas, each of which is *Country* to a different group.<sup>3</sup> While these smaller areas are typically a little larger than the official Local Government Area (LGA), the complexity of meaning invested in such small space means that there is a most forceful connection. Recently an Aboriginal writer explained the need for a capital for the word:

“My [non-Indigenous] editor who was applying conventional Western perspectives and grammatical rules not equipped to convey the philosophical and spiritual cosmology, and time-space continuum of First Nation’s people’s notions of Country, was stumped. Yeah, it’s pretty heavy. That’s why we capitalise it. Same as you probably do with God.”<sup>4</sup>

Mainstream Australians mostly see the Aboriginal use of the word in two expressions: the *Acknowledgment of Country*, used to begin formal meetings (much as formerly Loyalty to the King/Queen was expressed); and *Welcome to Country*, an introductory presentation made by a local Aboriginal Elder in order to begin longer events such as a parliament or a conference. More generally, Australians may frequently hear or read Aboriginal Australians using the

phrases *caring for Country* or *on Country*. These phrases are distinctive to those speakers/writers in that *Country* is capitalised while the short phrase also omits the standard usage's definite article. These two variations defamiliarise the seemingly standard word and so give some sense of the very different concept and values involved. Yet a 2008 attempt to further defamiliarise the word—by a spelling change to *Kuntri*—has proved to be shortlived, suggesting that the previous two small changes had been sufficient.<sup>5</sup>

The word *country* has long been used by Aboriginal Australians for this meaning. The *Australian National Dictionary* cites its earliest example as from 1826, with a fuller definition from 1843 of “each tribe having its own district of country or hunting ground”. A parallel usage from one tribe, Gamilaraay, was their word *towri*, cited from 1872, but now largely lapsed for use outside of that location.<sup>6</sup> However, in the text of European recorders their distinctive usage of the word *country* was easily overlooked. It is not until 1931 that A. P. Elkin marked it out with inverted commas “The spirit-home aspect of a man's ‘country’ also explains the ... frequent refusals of old people to leave it.” Subsequently it takes a more extended recorder of an Aboriginal speaker, Douglas Lockwood, to add the capital for “tribal ground which he calls ‘My Country’ ” (1962). That the current usage is fairly recent in broad acceptance across the Aboriginal community can be seen from the occurrence of the phrase *on country* (the capital is not insisted upon) in articles in the authoritative scholarly journal *Australian Aboriginal Studies*. Up to 2000 there was merely one usage in article text. From 2001 to 2010 there were twenty five uses, from 2011 to 2021 there were forty four uses. However, for the broader community the usage was too recent to be included in the 2008 work of leading lexicographer, Bruce Moore, which merely notes “country ‘the traditional territory of an Aboriginal people’.”<sup>7</sup>

Needless to say, this new usage does unsettle some. It represents an appropriation of a word which has long had multiple meanings around belonging, loyalty, and ownership, several of which are invested with powerful meaning – sufficient, for example, to be used as the name for Australia's major socially conservative political organisation, the Country Party (founded in 1920, it changed its name to the National Party in 1975 to gain more urban popularity).<sup>8</sup> The predominant meaning used here was of *country* as “rural or regional”, as opposed to the city (as with Raymond Williams's distinction between *The Country and the City*, 1973). This meaning is also prominent for Australians in the name of the *Country Women's Association* (*C.W.A.*), formed in 1920 and a non-party advocacy, skills, and support group.<sup>9</sup> Other familiar expressions for this meaning of non-urban are *country house*, *country kitchen* and *country holiday*.

The broader meaning of the word *country* is for “nation” and while both words have some affective power, neither has the power of the name *Australia*. For example, a traveller might claim to be *homesick for Australia* but not for *the country* or for *the nation*. An exception is the expression that one *would fight for one's country*, i.e. volunteer to defend Australia. The Country Party's name also drew upon this national sense – as if to imply that what was of benefit to the regional/rural Australia was automatically of benefit to the whole nation (which was also an element in the 1975 name change to the National Party). Some roots of this sense

of rural primacy can be seen in the Bush Tradition, a literary movement featuring A. B. Patterson and Henry Lawson, which stressed that the essence of Australianness was to be found in life in the non-urban areas, the bush or country. Ironically this tradition reached its peak in the 1890s, at the same time from which city dwellers began to comprise the majority of all Australians. Much of this imaginary country survives, even amongst migrant groups, despite where a whole generation of a family might rarely venture out of the capital city where they live.

Farmers in particular are considered to be amongst the most socially conservative groups. Of both large and small landholdings, they have a usage of the word *land* which comes a little closer to the Aboriginal usage of *Country*. The main rural newspaper has long been titled *The Land*.<sup>10</sup> Farmers' working of the land can cover several generations (up to eight) and their ongoing commitment to it is undoubted. One indicator of their close feeling for the land is their visible anguish when they must *lose their land*, whether due to corporate take-overs, "get-big-or-get-out" economics, or simply as a result of bank foreclosures. In an ongoing way they may say that they are *on land* (occasionally omitting *the*), that they *have land*, or if their landholding is large and distant, that part of it is *up country* (also omitting *the*). But this talk is only if they think they have a sympathetic listener. Those with the largest of such landholdings are particularly targeted with accusations of class pretensions (*bunyip aristocracy* was coined to deflate political aims in the 1800s but is still occasionally used for squatter *pater familia*). Sadly the rural attachment to *land* is in recent times a shy feeling, rarely articulated and often misunderstood, and so opportunities for connection between Aboriginal and White Australians have been missed.<sup>11</sup>

Another use of *country* is to describe broad geographical similarity, such as *High Country* (the Australian Alps), *Channel Country* (broad river systems around south-west Queensland and northern South Australia) or *Gulf Country* (that around the Gulf of Carpentaria). Where the United Kingdom has *Hardy Country* or *Brontë Country*, based upon people, Australia has only *Kelly Country* (around the sites of Ned Kelly the outlaw). Also there are examples which indicate actual land use, such as *sheep country*, *cattle country*, or *dairy country*. While phrases have been coined for narrowly practised uses of land, for small acreages (such as *wine country*), here the effect is of marketing excess, or of an over-eager local boosterism, rather than part of local tradition. Perhaps part of the resistance to wider adoption of such terms was the still lingering memory of the exhortation *Come to where the flavour is, come to Marlborough Country* (capital used consistently) with its triumphalism of international cigarette marketing.<sup>12</sup> However, one example which seems to cautiously probe the possibility of marketing linked to local industry as well as feeling is that of *Norco Country* (often in block capitals). Norco is a co-operative of farmers founded in 1895, based on the broad acres of dairying country of the Northern Rivers of New South Wales.<sup>13</sup> Its dairy products are so recognised nationally that S. J. Baker, the language scholar, claimed that the Australian slang term *nork* (woman's breast) is derived from *Norco*,<sup>14</sup> arguably from the image of a cow with large udder on the wrappings of their butter. In their selection for recent marketing of the expression *Norco Country* there is a conjunction of a common land use across broad acres and

several generations, as well as drawing upon the wider community’s recognition and local loyalty.<sup>15</sup> While the phrase is too new to be spoken naturally, it does signal strong elements of place attachment.



Bus advertising NORCO COUNTRY. Note that the block capitals lightly nod to the now familiar capitalised use of Country by Aboriginal Australians.



Across this range of meanings and usages of the word *country* it is intriguing to consider the source and rise of those uses which indicate close attachment to local areas. For settlers, the long time is likely to be the key factor in its rise, as multiple generations successively engage with the land, its use, and community with increasing awareness of its nature. For its source, one must consider that many of the convicts and settler arrivals were from rural regions of the United Kingdom, bringing with them their language and concepts to the New World. For their Old World rural use of the word *country*, we have the benefit of David Hey’s work.<sup>16</sup> What he found was that right up until the mid 1800s, the use of the word *country* was for the local area largely bounded by the surrounding market towns. They spoke of *countries* not regions. Their own was a small area, providing the locus for productive activity, skills, trade, and through religion the structure of spiritual life. While there was some travel out of this area – Hey quotes one: “I came out of my country, crossed the river” – they generally found their marriage partners within their same area, and so lived their lives informed by the compounded knowledge of many generations within their *country*. This surprisingly narrow scope –

combined with the intensity of meaning – of their *country* sounds several steps closer to the current Australian Aboriginal use of *Country* than it does to the more generalised, comparatively “thin” usage of the word by most of mainstream Australia.



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***“A life-affirming work in which the women emerge from a dark night to take their place in the sun.”***

- [The Sydney Morning Herald](#)

**★★★★ *“Out of darkness, light blooms on country.”***

- [Audrey Journal](#)

E-mail announcement from Belvoir St. Theatre, Sydney, May 11th, 2019

Within Australia's colonial society of the late eighteenth century and then the nineteenth, it is intriguing to consider how this concept and the word may have been applied and sustained in the new land. One wonders just how much of this meaning the new arrivals brought with them and so to applying the word in its narrow sense to their new locations. As much of the early contact and communication was between convict shepherds and largely traditional Aborigines, it is intriguing to think that the word *country* was offered/adopted as

their best approximation towards shared understanding. Their concepts had some similarities, but also had in common their being ignored as irrelevant by the major power-brokers, such as those making land grants. Now, in asserting its difference and its importance, the contemporary use of *Country* may provide space for more Australians to express their own attachment to land. If that word was originally offered by the powerless of the Old World then there is now additional cause for wider celebration of the adoption and use of *Country* in powerful ways which now cannot be ignored.

## Notes

1. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATIS], Welcome to Country, September 6th, 2021. <<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/welcome-country>>
2. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATIS], The AIATIS Map of Indigenous Australia, September 6th, 2021. <<https://www.nrmandcoastalconference.org.au/map-of-aboriginal-australia/>>
3. Jennifer Hoff, *Bundjalung Jugun: Bundjalung Country*, Lismore, New South Wales, Richmond River Historical Society, 2006.
4. Jack Latimore, "Language is Important, but it can be Tricky", *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 31st, 2021, 11.
5. Southern Cross University, SOY00419 Caring for Kuntri: Indigenous Environmental Management, September 6th, 2021. <<https://handbook.scu.edu.au/unit/soy00419>>
6. Bruce Moore, ed., *Australian National Dictionary: Australian Words and Their Origins*, 2nd edn, 2 vols, South Melbourne, Victoria, Oxford University Press, 2016.
7. Bruce Moore, *Speaking Our Language: The Story of Australian English*, South Melbourne, Victoria, Oxford University Press, 2008.
8. National Museum of Australia, "Country Party", September 6th, 2021. <<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/country-party>>
9. Country Women's Association of Australia, September 6th, 2021. <<https://www.cwaa.org.au>>
10. See *The Land*, September 6th, 2021. <<https://www.theland.com.au>>
11. See Peter Read, "Sharing the Country", *Aboriginal History*, 22 (1998), 94-104.
12. Paul Rutherford, *The New Icons: The Art of Television Advertising*, Toronto, Ontario, University of Toronto Press, 1994.
13. Maurice Ryan, *Norco 100: A Centenary History of Norco, 1895-1995*, Lismore, New South Wales, Norco Co-op, 1995.
14. Sidney J. Baker, *The Australian Language*, 2nd edn, Milsons Point, New South Wales, Currawong Press, 1966.
15. Welcome to Norco Country, September 6th, 2021. <<https://norcofoods.com.au/welcome-norco-country/>>. The phrasing here comes close to the Aboriginal formal expression.
16. David Hey, *The Grass Roots of English History*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016.

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