



Minutes of Evidence Curriculum & TRP

Topic 1: *Aboriginal society and culture in the Port Phillip District and how European settlement impacted upon it.*

Theme(s): Ownership; tradition; community; identity

Victorian Curriculum link:

Causes of population movements and settlement patterns during this period and the significant changes to the way of life of groups of people ([VCHHK130](#))

Key social, cultural, economic, and political features of one society at the start of the period ([VCHHK133](#))

Intended and unintended causes and effects of contact and extension of settlement of European power(s), including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples ([VCHHK134](#))

If the above hyperlinks do not work in PDF – visit the curriculum via:

<http://tinyurl.com/j85w2pg>

Part 1: Aborigines and land in the Port Phillip District

At the time of European settlement in what was called the Port Phillip District, and for many thousands of years before, Indigenous people occupied all of the many environments that made up the area. Like all human cultures, Aboriginal society comprised a variety of social units.

The most important group was the clan. This was the level that was ‘the land-owning, land-renewing and land-sustaining unit in Aboriginal Society’ (Clark 1990: 4). Members of a clan were born within the specific tract of land associated with that clan. As Rose has pointed out (1996:38), ‘people are

situated within their own country emotionally, psychologically and metaphysically.’ Such strong connections bound the individual to their estate and determined an individual’s life-long responsibilities, associated with the caring for their country, as well as for the creatures with which they share land (Maddock 1975).

Where a number of clans spoke the same language and their estates shared common borders, this larger group can be called a tribe or (more correctly) a language group. Language groups, in turn, formed cultural confederations, called nations, on the basis of their members speaking closely related languages. Across the Port Phillip District there were at least four such nations: the Kulin in central Victoria, the GunaiKurnai in Gippsland, the Mara in south western Victoria, and the Wotojoballuk in the north west. [See Map 1] The names of each of these nations meant ‘human being’ in the language groups that made up the respective nations. The Kulin, whose territory took in an area on both sides of Port Phillip Bay, can serve as an example of such cultural blocs (Presland 2010).

The Kulin comprised six language groups, whose collective territory stretched from the Murray River at Echuca to Bass Strait. The languages spoken by the people of this nation were closely related and the people themselves were also connected by common spiritual beliefs, as well as by alliances formed through marriage (Barwick 1998).

Marriage connections were particularly important; they were essential for the continuity of each clan, but they also created a means of extending the economic range of a group. Kulin clans were exogamous, that is, when a man sought a marriage partner he always looked to another clan, preferably one from as far away as practical. When a woman was given in marriage she would leave the clan into which she was born, and move to live with her husband in his clan’s estate. If the woman subsequently had children, through their mother they inherited a connection with her clan. In this way bonds were forged between clans that lived in widely separated parts of the Kulin world. In Aboriginal society, these bonds brought with them responsibilities and obligations (Barwick 1985; Presland 2010).