

# The Dieri People of the Lake Eyre Basin

Aboriginal people have been on the Australian continent for at least 65,000 years. They explored and eventually occupied all areas, developing an intricate connection to the land, even in its most inhospitable regions. They adapted and survived major climatic and environmental changes over that time.



Four decades of archaeological field work has placed Aboriginal occupation of the Lake Eyre Basin at around 40,000 years ago.

There were 250 distinct language groups and over 700 dialects in this vibrant, diverse mosaic of lifestyles, practices and beliefs. There were around 72 distinct Aboriginal language groups spread over the one million square kilometers of the Lake Eyre Basin.

The dunefields and gibber plains, waterholes, floodplains and lakes along Cooper Creek from south-west of the Coongie Lakes to Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre is Dieri country and an area continually associated with Dieri the people. They are neighbours with, among others, Arabunna, Wangkangurru, Yandruwandha, Yawarrawarrka, Kuyani and Adnyamathanha – a group of peoples who share similar (but distinct) languages and culture. They are linked through kinship, trade and ceremonial connections.

The eco-systems in the Lake Eyre Basin comprise salt lakes, claypans, gibber plains, rivers, sand dunes, and a chain of mound springs, fed from the deep artesian basin. Those living here, estimated to have been between 1,000 and 3,000 people, contended with one of the hottest and driest landscapes on the continent. Yet despite this and the extreme fluctuations between flood and drought, Dieri knowledge and management of their country ensured them rich and sustainable lives.

Anthropologists, Jones and Sutton state:

*... the relative simplicity of traditional material culture in the region is in startling contrast with the complexity of Aboriginal culture and social organization. Understandably, it was this 'invisible' culture which was so seldom grasped in any depth by the Europeans with whom the Lake Eyre people came into early contact.*

*(Art and Land: Aboriginal Sculptures of the Lake Eyre Region. South Australian Museum and Wakefield Press. 1986:23)*

Comprehensive knowledge of the locations of water and food resources was transmitted through recounting the deeds of Ancestral Beings, Dieri mura mura, in ceremonies, stories and songs. The mura mura emerged from the ground, creating the landscape as they travelled, organising and naming all life, both natural and cultural, into complex systems of relatedness before sinking back into the earth or inhabiting, for example, rocks, trees and waterholes.

Relatedness between people and between people and country was defined by their inheritance of a murdu (totem) from their mother and their rights to particular country by descent from a mura mura from their father (pinthara). An individual, therefore, would inherit their Dieri identity from their mother and their country from their father. Both demanded social, ceremonial and ritual obligations, which were inter-dependent.

Six Dieri performing corroboree, Killalpaninna



Lake Killalpaninna



In traditional Dieri society, people lived for most of the year in local groups centred around permanent water supplies (such as wells/soaks and waterholes). Such sites are often marked by large items of material culture (such as grindstones) as well as fireplaces, stone tools such as pirri points and middens. In wetter times small family groups would disperse from these camps, obtaining food and water across the dune fields. Winter was also when the five Dieri local groups contacted each other (as well as other tribes) for the purpose of ceremony and trade.

Stone axe heads



Grinding stones

Kopperamanna adjacent to Killalpaninna was a major centre of trade. Dieri were known as important traders. At Kopperamanna, pitjuri (native tobacco) from Birdsville, grinding stones from Innamincka and the Flinders Ranges, baler and pearl shells from the Gulf of Carpentaria and Arnhem Land as well as greenstone axe heads from Mt Isa and Cloncurry, and red ochre from Parachilna, were traded.

Today, Dieri people retain strong links to their country and take an active interest in its management.