

Abstract

This thesis re-assesses Norman Tindale's concept of 'tribe' in the context of his competitors and imitators, and also his own publications, notes and references cited in support of this concept. A review of the process of Aboriginal 'tribal' mapping, both before and after Tindale, suggests that the idea of the tribe as an 'outline group without overlap', drawn from Western history and experience, finds ready acceptance among non-Aboriginal Australians. An historical review of the mapping of Aboriginal groups demonstrates that Tindale was out of step with many of his learned contemporaries. After 1940, with the publication of Tindale's first continental map and list of tribes, most non-anthropologists have simply copied Tindale's groups, outlines and names. Anthropologists regard Tindale's construct of tribes as having been disproved and discarded, but most other researchers (such as archaeologists, local historians and Native Title lawyers) are unaware of this. A re-assessment of Tindale's 'authorised identities' reveals many mis-classified groups and group types, with much complexity subsumed under one convenient title. Field data collected by observers over the last 200 years describes a multiplicity of forms referred to by a variety of terms. The Tindale 'tribe' of 300-500 people is usually a result of the generalization of field data. Tindale, who had great success as a classifier of categories as various as butterflies and Japanese aeroplanes, oversimplified the classification of Aboriginal identity (and of human group identity in general). In Native Title claims, the requirement that people present their rights and obligations to land within a non-overlapping outline has favoured the Tindale tribe concept at the expense of the reality of a multiplicity of Aboriginal groups and affiliation. His influence is such that, because of the widespread acceptance of his "outline without overlap" concept, many contemporary Aboriginal groups have adopted Tindale's 'authorised identities' as the only way to gain recognition as legitimate 'people of Country'. This thesis urges a re-consideration of Tindale's published works, while finding that his record keeping and unpublished ethnographic notes are of a high quality. Past records and their maps are assessed to reveal different types of groups identified by such things as 'location', 'us', 'them', 'area', 'feature of country', 'feature of language', 'unity through Dreaming precedent', and all the constantly changing complexity generated by long term, geographically broad social networks.