

The Arrilla Circle



A quarterly communicate exclusive to Arrilla Digital, where authors of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent share their life experiences in order for us to walk in the shoes of another.

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Generosity and kindness: why *do* we welcome and acknowledge people?

In this edition of The Arrilla Circle, Shelley Reys AO, a Djiribul woman of far north Queensland, CEO of Arrilla Indigenous Consulting and a KPMG Partner, explains why Welcomes to Country and Acknowledgements of Country are part of First Nations cultures – and Australian culture.

In recent years, I've noticed people questioning the custom of an Acknowledgement of Country. More recently, over the Anzac Day long weekend and in the lead-up to the federal election, I noticed a definite push-back on Acknowledgements and Welcomes to Country alongside some very hurtful commentary. I suggest this push-back has been because some people may not have understood the origin of these customs and their meaning.

What is a Welcome to Country?

To understand what a Welcome to Country – or smoking ceremony or water ceremony – actually *is*, let me start by explaining what it is *not*. Firstly, it is not a political statement. I congratulate those politicians who have addressed the push-back by showing their support for Welcomes, but it's important to recognise that Welcomes are not in themselves political statements.

A Welcome to Country is also not in any way about exclusion. Consider the meaning of 'welcome': to show friendship or hospitality; to be received; to be receptive about somebody's presence, suggestion, decision or opinion. In essence, when you are welcomed by someone you are included not excluded – as antonyms from 'unacceptable' and 'unwelcome' to 'abhorred' and 'execrated' make clear. So when a Traditional Owner delivers a Welcome to Country, when they invite us to join them on the land on which their ancestors walked, when they wish us safe passage on their sacred land, this is a gesture to include us, not exclude us.

I suggest that the vast majority of Australians would argue that inclusive practices make us not less but more connected to Australia, not less but more connected as Australians.

Fundamentally, welcoming us is what Traditional Owners choose to do simply because it's what generous and kind people do. It's also because a Welcome to Country is an opportunity to pause and reflect and give thanks for the land and waters to which they belong – and on which the non-Indigenous Australians they are welcoming also live. Welcoming non-Indigenous Australians to the land to which Traditional Owners belong is an exceptional act of generosity and kindness. Welcoming people is a 70,000 year-old custom that is basically good manners.

What is an Acknowledgement of Country?

Acknowledgements of Country are a beautiful, respectful pause of thanks: thanks to those who have cared for the land and water for more than 70,000 years on your behalf. I'm referring to the land and water that you work on, play on, live on, have raised your babies on.

Acknowledging Country is also something First Nations people have done for millennia. Why? Because an Acknowledgement of Country is a way for a First Nations person to show respect when they go from their Country into the Country of their neighbours. Acknowledgement is like knocking on a neighbour's door rather than just barging in. Acknowledgement in essence is a custom to respectfully seek permission not only to step into the Country of other First Nations people but to join with those First Nations people. To proceed without doing so would be incredibly disrespectful and likely to invite a hostile reception.

The practice of delivering an Acknowledgement of Country in mainstream Australia emerged in the 1990s. Yawuru man and Labor senator Pat Dodson, when Chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, played a crucial role in this emergence. Since that time, Acknowledgements of Country – typically delivered to begin formal events or meetings – have given all Australians an opportunity to show respect in the same way.

To encourage non-Indigenous people to join with First Nations people by delivering an Acknowledgement of Country is, again, a very generous and kind invitation.

What is the best way to deliver an Acknowledgement of Country?

The best Acknowledgement of Country is one that you make your own, one that is in your own words, one that uses language that you are comfortable with, one that is meaningful for you and, as a result, that is authentic. The best Acknowledgement of Country is also one in which you as a non-Indigenous Australian show respect for and allyship with your First Nations neighbours, colleagues, friends, family – as a way of stepping into reconciliation.

When you hear a Welcome to Country or an Acknowledgement of Country I really encourage you to listen, listen deeply, lean in and – when you're ready – identify a situation where you will feel safe in yourself to share your respect and allyship by delivering an Acknowledgement of Country that really means something to you – and I can guarantee you that, if you do this and keep doing this, there will come a day when a First Nations person in the event or meeting will hear you, and that may be an experience that makes all the difference for them.

Please, be generous and kind. ■

Watch a TEDx masterclass by Shelley Reys AO on how to deliver an Acknowledgement of Country that really means something [here](#).

Watch Shelley Reys AO on the value of Welcomes to Country and kindness [here](#).

