



**Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander  
Collections Commitments**



## Preamble

These Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections Commitments develop upon Protocols published by State Library of Queensland in 2006. They align with state, national and international frameworks around First Nations cultural heritage and provide a foundation for State Library to enable greater access and use of these unique collections.

## Introduction

### **State Library is a key custodian of cultural heritage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.**

Over time, State Library has developed collections, including photographs, oral histories, publications, manuscripts and video recordings that represent the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland. These collections enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to connect with their history and to strengthen their culture. They also provide a deeper understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences, which are crucial to building a holistic understanding of Queensland's history.

## Legislative and Policy Framework

State Library recognises the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to their own cultural heritage.

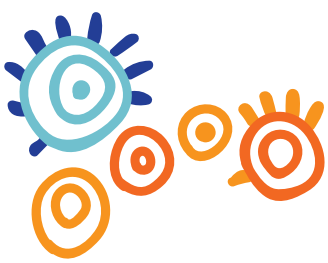
State, national and international recognition of the rights of First Nations people to their cultural heritage underpins how State Library collects, manages and makes accessible its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections.

Article 31 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to which Australia is a signatory, affirms that:

***Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions ... They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.***

The Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act (Qld) (2003) and the Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage Act (Qld) (2003) provide recognition that Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders are the primary guardians, keepers, and knowledge holders of their cultural heritage.

These Commitments outline State Library's approach to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections within local, state and international contexts.



## Challenges

### **How does State Library continue to grow and make accessible collections while ensuring it is done in an appropriate manner?**

The way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people perceive collection items may differ from how cultural institutions perceive them. The knowledge systems underpinning an institution like State Library, built upon a Western tradition, can be very different from those in an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community. Historical and traditional knowledge can complement collections to provide deeper meaning. It is clear that while State Library may be a physical and digital repository of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander documentary heritage, a shared approach must be adopted to fully realise the value of these collections.

The rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to their cultural heritage are perpetual and must be carefully considered in the management of collections. In a rapidly changing technological environment, State Library must ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content is made accessible readily and appropriately.

It is acknowledged that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are developing libraries, resource centres and keeping places which may be suitable for the storage of, and provision of, access to this material and information. As this process evolves, State Library will liaise closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives regarding physical custody of collections and the use of digitisation as a primary means of repatriation of relevant cultural material to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

## Collections

### **State Library's collection includes a diversity of content relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.**

A thorough understanding of collections is crucial to ensuring appropriate public access, use and reuse. This includes gaining an understanding of the circumstances around how material has been created, what it depicts and how it may be perceived. Some of State Library's collections may include expressions of traditional knowledge, while other collections may simply be a record of a person's experience at a particular point in time. From a clear understanding of our collections and their context, State Library is able to work with community to ensure broad and appropriate access.

Our collections have predominantly featured material created about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Papers of European missionaries, government reports, photograph albums kept by schoolteachers; all provide valuable information about but not from the perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. State Library must address this imbalance to ensure our collections reflect a diversity of experiences and perspectives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

## Secret or sacred material

**State Library holds a small amount of material that is secret or sacred in nature.**

The Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act (Qld) (2003) and the Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage Act (Qld) (2003) define secret and sacred material as that which is secret or sacred according to Aboriginal tradition or Island custom.

Terri Janke and Maiko Sentina expand upon this definition in the Intellectual Property Australia Discussion Paper Indigenous Knowledge: Issues for Protection and Management, where “secret sacred refers to information that, under customary laws, is made available only to the initiated; or information that can only be seen by men or women or particular people within the culture.”

## Offensive material

**State Library’s collections contain materials that may be offensive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.**

References to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in collection material may be derogatory, inaccurate and inappropriate. This material is often historical, but may include contemporary collections. It is important to note that secret and sacred material is different from offensive material and needs to be managed separately. In collecting and preserving a trusted record of Queensland, State Library endeavours to capture a complete record of experiences in Queensland, which may include aspects now understood to be offensive and inappropriate.

## State Library’s commitments

We make the following commitments to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections:

### Collecting

- Actively collect material by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to ensure the collection reflects the diversity and uniqueness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences.
- Gain a clearer understanding of the breadth and representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences to inform strategic and targeted collection building.
- Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to identify, contextualise and prioritise material to collect.

## Description

- Retain clear records that demonstrate the context of collections and decisions made in relation to them.
- Use national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander description tools and classification systems which describe items by their geographic, language and cultural identifiers.
- Provide opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to describe and annotate material that relates to themselves and their communities.

## Access and usage

- Make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections as broadly accessible as possible.
- Promote collections to increase understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's diverse experiences, history and cultural heritage.
- Adopt a tiered approach to assessing collections and making them accessible, based on collection knowledge, context, community input and risk.
- Respond to requests to remove material from public access, utilising established procedures.
- Provide context and appropriate cultural care messages for potentially offensive material made publicly accessible.
- Work with communities to identify secret, sacred and offensive material.

## Custodianship

- Respond cooperatively to requests from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for copies of material and information of relevance.
- Respond to requests for repatriation of original material to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in planning, developing and managing keeping places for repatriated material.

## Capability

- Empower communities to access and manage their own cultural heritage at a local level.
- Ensure high levels of cultural competency and collection knowledge among State Library staff.





### Artwork Story

State Library of Queensland, over time, has developed collections that represent the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland. These relationships with community cannot exist without mutual respect and trust at the centre of all communication and connection.

By building strong and respectful relationships with communities, State Library is able to support communities to create equitable access of culture and history. Through a past, present and future lens, these relationships and partnerships help to empower, educate, preserve and celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

Gilimbaa Artist, Rachael Sarra (Goreng Goreng)