Yugambeh Nation

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AGES 14 AND UP · READING

The One True Name Fallacy

In the realm of human cognition and language, the fallacy of insisting on a single, exclusive name for a concept or entity is known as the "One True Name Fallacy". This fallacy asserts that there is only one correct term to designate something, disregarding any alternative labels or names that may also be valid or culturally significant. Understanding the roots and implications of this fallacy requires a deep dive into its historical context and contemporary manifestations, particularly within the discourse surrounding Aboriginal group names in Australia.

The origins of the One True Name Fallacy can be traced back to the colonial era, where Western explorers and scholars sought to categorise and catalog the diverse Indigenous populations they encountered. One notable figure in this historical narrative is Norman Tindale, an Australian anthropologist renowned for his work in documenting Aboriginal languages, cultures, and geographic distributions. Tindale's efforts, while groundbreaking in many respects, inadvertently contributed to the perpetuation of the One True Name Fallacy within Aboriginal studies.

Tindale's meticulous mapping of Aboriginal tribal boundaries and linguistic classifications aimed to create a comprehensive taxonomy of Indigenous groups. However, his systematisation often prioritised Western scientific principles of classification over the complex, multifaceted identities and naming practices of Aboriginal peoples. This reductionist approach led to the consolidation of diverse groups under single monikers, obscuring the rich tapestry of cultural, linguistic, and territorial distinctions that existed within and between Aboriginal communities. In other cases, alternative names for a single group were erroneously distinguished as separate groups, with their territory arbitrarily divided.

One poignant example of the One True Name Fallacy's impact on Aboriginal group names can be found in the case of the Yugambeh peoples of southeastern Queensland and northeastern New South Wales. Traditionally, Yugambeh, Minyangbal, and Nganduwal are names used to refer to a single cultural group inhabiting the area from the Logan to the Tweed river valleys. However, the imposition of colonial boundaries and the subsequent academic discourse influenced by Tindale's taxonomic framework have often treated Yugambeh and Minyangbal as separate entities rather than alternative names for the same community. In more recent times, the term Bundjalung, which was traditionally used by groups around the Tabulam and Grafton areas, has become a more generalised term for Aboriginal groups within the area, including the Yugambeh/Minyangbal - the legacy of the social influence of the One True Name Fallacy continues to cause social harm in this instance as people falsely assume they need to forgo Yugambeh/Minyangbal if they are to use Bundjalung.

This misrepresentation not only obscures the interconnectedness and fluidity of Aboriginal identities but also perpetuates a Eurocentric narrative that privileges singular, fixed identities over the nuanced realities of Indigenous experiences. By failing to recognise the validity and significance of alternative names and labels within Aboriginal cultures, the One True Name Fallacy perpetuates a form of cultural erasure that undermines the autonomy and self-determination of Indigenous peoples.

In contemporary Australia, efforts to decolonise academic discourse and recognise the plurality of Aboriginal identities have begun to challenge the entrenched biases perpetuated by the One True Name Fallacy. Indigenous scholars and activists advocate for a more inclusive approach to naming and classification that acknowledges the diversity of Aboriginal languages, cultures, and territories. This paradigm shift towards linguistic and cultural revitalisation seeks to empower Aboriginal communities to reclaim their heritage and assert their own narratives on their own terms.

By interrogating and deconstructing this fallacy, we can strive towards a more equitable and respectful engagement with Aboriginal group names and, by extension, the broader cultural heritage of Australia's First Nations peoples.

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THE ONE TRUE NAME FALLACY

Questions

Questions

1. In your own words, what is the One True Name Fallacy?

2. Who was Norman Tindale, and how did his work contribute to the fallacy?

3. Which names does the article say were traditionally used for a single cultural group from the Logan to the Tweed?

4. Where was the name Bundjalung traditionally used, and how has its use changed?

5. What harm does the article say the fallacy causes today?

Think about it

List three different names you are known by (a nickname, a family name, a name used at school). Is one of them the “true” one? What would it feel like if someone insisted only one name was allowed?

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