



# Arrernte country singer Warren H Williams questions skin names given to non-Indigenous people

ABC Radio Darwin By Emilia Terzon and Mikaela Simpson

Posted Thu 12 Jan 2017, 12:36pm



PHOTO: Warren H Williams has questioned non-Indigenous people receiving skin names. (ABC Darwin: Clare Rawlinson)

**For some Indigenous Australians, the kinship system is the foundation for determining family obligations, ceremonial roles, the relationship to the environment, and even who you can and cannot marry.**

**RELATED STORY:** Different world: understanding Indigenous justice

**MAP:** Darwin 0800

One of three concepts central to many kinship systems is skin names, a form of societal organisation that indicates how generations are linked and how different people should interact.

"Skin names is about making sure that people who have bloodlines that are too close don't marry," academic expert Dr Lynette Riley explained.

"From the moment you're conceived, you have your identity."

And for prominent country singer and Arrernte man Warren H Williams, the ancient concept of skin is "a way of life".

"It's a culture. A skin name you're actually born with it. You don't get given it."

Yet since colonisation and first contact, non-Indigenous people have often been documented being given skin names by different nations and clan groups across the country.

The Central Land Council's website states that this might have initially happened to help place outsiders into Indigenous societies, although it did not automatically mean they were accepted at face value.

Today, Mr Williams is of the belief that things have gone too far.

Aboriginal Kinship Presentation: ...



**YOUTUBE:** Dr Lynette Riley explains the concept of skin names

"It seems like everybody is given skin names as soon as they go to a community," he said.

## Should non-Indigenous people accept a skin name today?

The country singer shook up the internet when he posted a social media status addressing this topic, saying that he did not recognise people who are given a skin name by an individual rather than through a whole-of-community decision.

"That skin name you got ... was given to you by someone who wanted money from you ... so they can be your friend or brother or sister," he wrote.

"They give you the same skin name as them ... you wasn't born with it ... my people didn't give it to you."



Cookie policy

**SOUNDCLOUD:** Warren H Williams explains his stance on skin names

Speaking about his comments to ABC Radio Darwin, Mr Williams said he had been to community meetings where non-Indigenous people too readily claimed to belong.

"They don't realise that that skin name was given to them by another tribe," he said.

Mr Williams said one of his issues with non-Indigenous people being allocated a skin name was that this could denigrate the cultural belonging of people affected by the Stolen Generations, who might not have skin names of their own.

Some people did not understand the gravity of the kinship system they had been entered into, he added.

"You can't use the skin name and use what you want and not obey the laws of the community," he said.

## Non-Indigenous people 'ignorant' about skin names

For ABC Radio Darwin listeners, the response to Mr Williams' comments was mixed.

"You better ask more people than just Warren. He is but one man. My boy's got a name from [Indigenous people] and they all call him by it," one wrote via text.

Talkback caller Ian, who has spent years working in Arnhem Land, argued that being given a skin name helped working relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people in remote communities.

"Well, it does if the person from the outside takes it seriously and begins to learn what it really means to be a part of that system," he said.

Dr Riley, a Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi woman, agreed with Mr Williams' comments to an extent.

"I do get concerned that the giving and receiving of skin names is taken very lightly," she said.

"It becomes romanticised and [people] think they now have a skin name and they're just accepted. They think in some ways they're Aboriginal and they're not.

"They just think by getting a skin name they're now 'in' with Aboriginal societies. No, they're not. They're only in with that nation or clan group or family group they've been named from.



**PHOTO:** The use of skin names in 2017 could highlight a changing reality in Indigenous communities. (Sarah Hawke)

"I still find it extraordinary that people have lived in this country for 200 years and don't even know the basics of kinship systems. It's just so complex and complicated that it leaves Western systems in the dust."

Dr Riley said the lack of understanding extended to the legal system, citing a recent example of an archaeologist who had been given a skin name.

"He was given artefacts as part of his responsibility [of having that skin name]. When he died, his wife became legally, under British law, the owner of that property.

"Under our system that's not the case. Those items should have been passed back to the next person within the appropriate skin name and totem.

"There's still a lot of contention and dissention."

Dr Riley said that despite complications there was a place for the allocation of skin names, especially due to the common occurrence of marriage between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people.

She said the onus was on Indigenous people to educate outsiders and on non-Indigenous people with skin names to learn about "the honour of what you've received".

"It doesn't matter where you're living or where you go. It stays with you forever."

**Topics:** indigenous-culture, indigenous-protocols, indigenous-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander, darwin-0800, nt