

of those we love. Religious belief can offer a community great comfort in a **cosmos** that seems vast and uncaring. The comfort and security of a religion is nevertheless subject to time and change. Religion represents tradition and constancy, but if it is too constant, too rigid, it may become irrelevant to people. This is what makes the study of religion so exciting: examining how a religion can offer stability and certainty and how it reacts to the challenge of an ever-changing world.

INVESTIGATE

Can you think of a time when religion offered comfort and stability at a time of change or threat? Can you think of another example where religion sought to bring significant change and challenged society's views?

**Cosmos** The universe viewed as an ordered system

EXERCISE 1.5

- 1 Construct one question that religions may seek to answer.
2 Recall, based on your knowledge at this time, whether all religions believe in the concept of 'God'.
3 Predict whether all religions suggest there is life after death.

ACTIVITY 1.5

- 1 Choose one of the big questions of life such as, 'Why are we here?' Investigate the answer given by one of the religious traditions. Does

the answer given by that religious tradition satisfy you? Why or why not?

- 2 John Milton's Paradise Lost, published in 1667, is considered a classic discussion of evil. Investigate it on the internet and discuss whether it contributes to your understanding of good and evil.

- 3 Construct an outline for a talk on the following subject: 'Religion has made a great contribution to the lives of individuals as well as the community'.

Australian Aboriginal beliefs and spiritualities – the Dreaming

The second part of the Nature of Religion syllabus refers students to an Australian example of a belief system that encompasses many of the aspects of religion discussed above. As an essentially animistic religion, Aboriginal spirituality reflects the essential characteristics of religions. Having said that, Aboriginal spiritualities are not simple but are complex areas of belief

and practices that only those who are initiated into their complexities can fully understand. Nevertheless, the Dreaming is an appropriate subject to study to try to obtain a deeper understanding of the nature of religion.

The nature of the Dreaming

The Indigenous Australian world view is a distinctive religious system. Theirs is a religion very strongly linked to the land; the land remains alive with religious

### The Dreaming

The belief system of the Australian Aboriginal peoples

significance, and the form and shapes of the land prove the truth of the myths told about it.

The Dreaming is not chronologically distinct from now – it is a different order of events from ‘now’. The basic outline of all the Dreaming stories is that something exists – the land, a site, some rocks, a waterhole; a story is then invoked that explains how an ancestor transformed this land. In the time of the Dreaming, the environment was shaped and humanised by mythic beings, many of whom took animal or human form. These beings are eternal, although they may have travelled beyond the lands of the people who still sing about them. These stories are essential to Indigenous cultures because they explain why things are the way they are. They explain why the landscape looks as it does, why certain animals cannot be eaten and others can, how people should behave and what rituals should occur. Dreaming stories contain all the information needed to live in a place, prosper and understand the story of the land.

### INVESTIGATE

Access the Cambridge Studies of Religion website and follow the links for the Dreaming. Note that, when reading or hearing Dreaming stories, there are several layers of meaning in each story. Often there is the creation of a physical feature, but also moral, tribal and cultural aspects. There are also deeper meanings that are only accessible to Indigenous peoples, or initiated members or elders.

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### *Origins of the universe*

Indigenous Australians do have stories about how certain parts of the land came to be the way they are. Many stories tell of ancestors who are lying in a state of sleep.

The stories tell about them waking and doing things, but there is no general theory regarding where everything (including the ‘universe’ – a Western scientific and theological idea) came from. The universe already existed in some form in most Dreaming stories. Indigenous Australians do not have a universal story that explains the creation of everything.

In fact, this is the first interesting challenge: the issue of time. Scientists have discovered that Australian Indigenous civilisation extends back as far as 70 000 years or more, but Indigenous Australians did not have a formal or written calendar. Yet they did follow events and changes, for example, the Arrernte people of central Australia could name thirty changes in the course of 24 hours which included:

- the Milky Way stretches out across the centre of the sky
- bandicoots return to their burrows
- the shadows are variegated
- the sky is aflame with red and yellow.

Recognising these patterns throughout the day and across the year helped establish when rituals would take place. Each day repeats these patterns in differing forms, and they are not cyclical, but more rhythmic or parallel. It is for this reason that speaking of a Dreamtime is incorrect, and reference to a Dreaming is more appropriate. The Dreaming is not a concept of time, but a class of events. The term ‘the Dreaming’ is variously translated into Indigenous languages and is used to refer to two things – events which are embodied in the stories told about various parts of the landscape, and actual features of that landscape. During one ceremony, elders were singing a great creator-snake through the landscape; night fell and the elders stopped. An observer, the academic Tony Swain, asked what happened to the snake; the reply was simply, ‘We leave him there until tomorrow when we sing him on again’.

The cosmology of Indigenous Australian religion does not appear as some great

theory, but rather as a code of rules, assumptions and manners that are illustrated throughout a series of stories relating to a particular cultural group.

The story told by Aunty Beryl shows that the Darling River, as a sacred site, comes with its own sacred story which can be explained in the following way.

### *Stories of the Dreaming*

At the start of this tale something exists – the landscape and the ancestor spirits are

already there. Next, something becomes active – an inactive ancestor comes to life, and then brings others into the story. Finally, because of that awakening and movement, a new awareness is brought to the people in the ritual so they can understand the land and their relation to it.

The main plot of the story is about the creation of the land, in particular, the creation of the Darling River in western New South Wales. The creation involved several ancestor spirits. Guthi-guthi is the creator spirit who releases Weowie, the

#### **THE CREATION OF THE DARLING RIVER – A DREAMING STORY AS TOLD BY AUNTY BERYL CARMICHAEL**

This is the creation story of Ngijaampaa country, as well as the land belonging to Eaglehawk and Crow.

Long, long time ago, in the beginning, when there was no people, no trees, no plants whatever on this land, Guthi-guthi, the spirit of our ancestral being, he lived up in the sky.

So he came down and he wanted to create the special land for people and animals and birds to live in.

So Guthi-guthi came down and he went on creating the land for the people. After he'd set the borders in place and the sacred sights, the birthing places of all the Dreamings, where all our Dreamings were to come out of, Guthi-guthi put one foot on Gunderbooka Mountain and another one at Mount Grenfell.

And he looked out over the land and he could see that

the land was bare. There was no water in sight, there was nothing growing. So Guthi-guthi knew that, trapped in a mountain – Mount Minara – the water serpent, Weowie, he was trapped in the mountain. So Guthi-guthi called out to him, 'Weowie, Weowie', but because Weowie was trapped right in the middle of the mountain, he couldn't hear him.

Guthi-guthi went back up into the sky and he called out once more, 'Weowie', but once again Weowie didn't respond. So Guthi-guthi came down with a roar like thunder and banged on the mountain and the mountain split open. Weowie the water serpent came out. And where the water serpent travelled he made waterholes and streams and depressions in the land.

So once all that was finished, of course, Weowie went back into the mountain to live and that's where Weowie lives now, in Mount Minara. But then after that, they wanted another lot of water to come down from the north, throughout our country.

Old Pundu the Cod, it was his duty to drag and create the river known as the Darling River today. So Cod came out with Mudlark, his little mate, and they set off from the north and they created the big river. Flows right down, water flows right throughout our country, right into the sea now.

And of course, this country was also created; the first two tribes put in our country were Eaglehawk and Crow. And from these two tribes came many tribal people, many tribes, and we call them sub-groups today. So my people, the Ngijaampaa people, and the Barkandji further down are all sub-groups of Eaglehawk and Crow.

So what I'm telling you – the stories that were handed down to me all come from within this country.



**Figure 1.10**  
The Darling River,  
near Bourke, NSW

water serpent, who first creates the water features of the landscape. Old Pundu the Cod and Mudlark are also involved in this creative process, making the Darling River.

The story also tells of the creation of the two groups, Eaglehawk and Crow, which include the Ngiyaampaa and Barkandji people. From this story, an ongoing link between these two groups can be drawn and there are implications regarding their relationships. There is an underlying layer of meaning in this story that relates to the relationships between these groups and also to their **totems**. So there are other dimensions – practical and ethical ones – to the story, for example, do not eat certain species of fish or do not marry people who are taboo or forbidden. This story has implications relating to the use of the river and, in particular, to the fish that can be eaten.

Other stories leave hints regarding such things as where food is to be found and how it is to be prepared, what areas are forbidden to men or to women, and other aspects of life, including practical aspects of daily life as well as ethical, moral and tribal issues. As well as telling of creation and the development of groups, these Dreaming stories function as the law, an ethical reinforcement system, and the rituals themselves are a way of marking the rhythmic progression of events, including the growth of each generation of children into adulthood.

#### FURTHERMORE |||||

The strength of the links to subclans or subsections of the cultural groups is seen played out in the documentary that relates to Rolf de Heer's film *Ten Canoes* (2006). 'Making of the Ten Canoes' shows how the director becomes increasingly frustrated because only people in certain clans can play the role of particular ancestors. The documentary shows how complex this Indigenous classification of tribal members can be.

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**Totem** Object, such as an animal, plant or particular landmark, through which an Australian indigenous person is linked to the ancestral being responsible for his or her existence

**Symbology** The study of symbols

In this way, the Dreaming creates a reality that ensures people can inhabit the land and be at one with the ancestors. Acknowledging these rights and responsibilities ensures that you will be well and that you can rely on the Darling River to provide for your needs.

This creation story is also brought to life through ritual. At the site of the river, in particular, this story becomes the centre of the action. The story of creation may be sung right through. While it is being sung, the actions of the singers or dancers may have particular significance. Through this **symbology** they re-enact the story. They follow the action of the story as it moves around the site. Woven into it are a whole range of laws and ideas. To remember the story is to remember how to live life as tradition has decreed.



#### DID YOU KNOW?

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)

- made a long and detailed study of the belief systems of Indigenous Australians. His book *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* was very influential. Durkheim examined the totems Aboriginal people used to identify themselves. These totems were sacred. For example, a tribe that identified as 'kangaroo people' could not eat kangaroos and held the kangaroo as their sacred symbol or totem. Durkheim (himself an atheist) believed that these totems were sacred because they represented the unity of the tribe. Look about – you will notice that most groups, even corporations depend on totemic symbols, logos and coats of arms to represent the unity of the group. Sometimes these totemic symbols are held sacred.

### *Symbolism and art*

The art of story telling in Ngiyaampaa country is backed up by other arts. Body painting in Indigenous ritual reflects the symbols of the ancestors. Similarly, the story of creation can be drawn on the sand or painted on various surfaces. As if looking down from above the site, the ancestors and other elements can be brought alive in a map. These maps, when done in colours on canvas or bark or in a particular style, can sometimes be sold to art collectors for large sums of money.

### *The diversity of the Dreaming*

The Darling River creation story would make little sense if it was told at some other site, because at the Darling River are the river, the rocks, the waterholes and the trees that make the story real. We can also say that the site does not make sense without the story either. So the story becomes a passport to this part of the land. The whole of Australia is divided into particular 'countries' for cultural groups. Each group has its own domain or 'country'. To pass through someone's country, you should know the Dreaming story attached to it.

#### **EXERCISE 1.6**

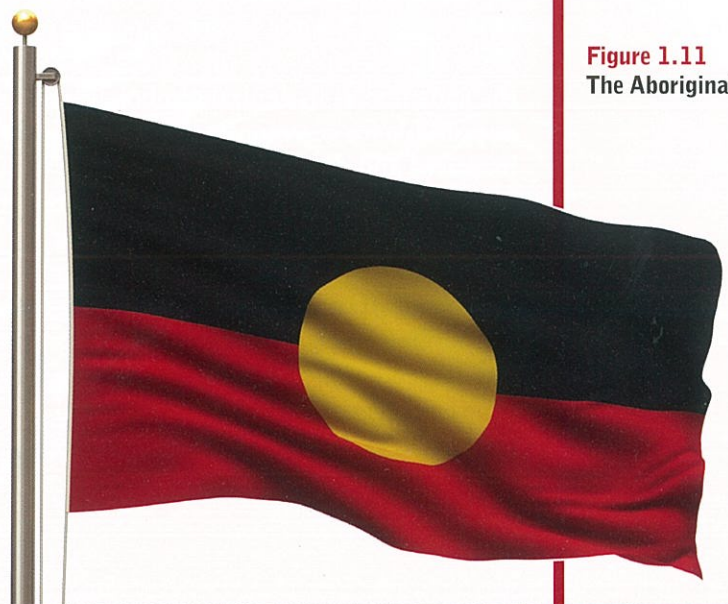
- 1 Explain what 'the Dreaming' is.
  - 2 Identify some of the features of Dreaming stories, using examples from some stories you have read or heard.
  - 3 Define what 'layers of meaning' may include.
- 2 Investigate another Dreaming story, perhaps from your area, and discuss whether it could be difficult for Westerners to understand the concepts contained in the Dreaming stories.
  - 3 Construct a table with these four headings: Origins of the universe, Sacred sites, Stories of the Dreaming, and Symbolism and art. Outline how the Dreaming relates to each.

#### **ACTIVITY 1.6**

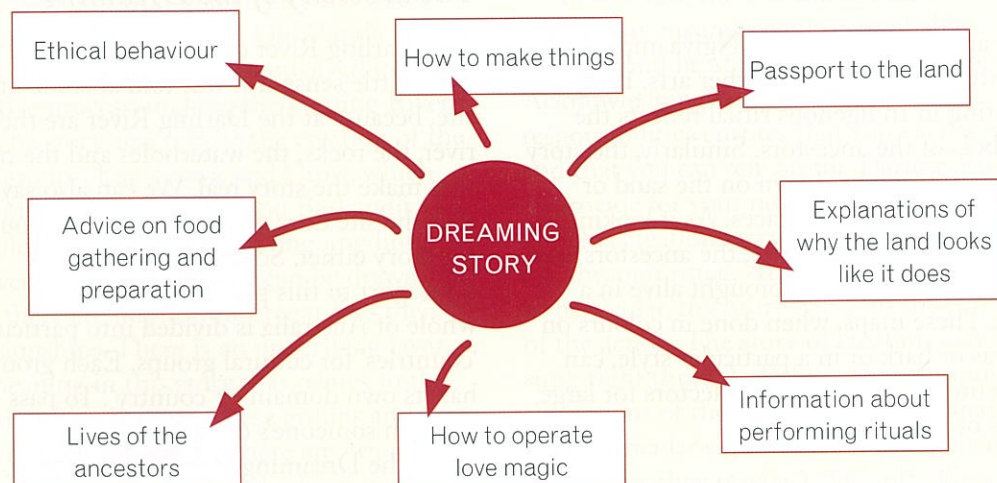
- 1 Investigate another Dreaming story and present it to the class as a story.

#### **INVESTIGATE**

Here is a picture of the Aboriginal flag. Look at the colours. What do they symbolise? One explanation is that the black represents the Aboriginal peoples, the yellow circle represents the sun and the red represents the earth. If this is accurate, how does this relate to the Dreaming and the land? Research via the internet what the meanings of the colours are and see if the explanation given above is correct.



**Figure 1.11**  
The Aboriginal flag



**Figure 1.12**  
Dreaming stories  
present an entire  
world view for  
Indigenous people

### *Importance of the dreaming for the life of Indigenous peoples*

The mind map above illustrates how Dreaming stories present an entire world view for Indigenous people from ethics, to ways of hunting for food, the creation of art, how to make things, and how to perform magic such as 'love magic'.

### *The connection of the Dreaming, the land and identity*

There are other connections between people and land. The tribe that inhabited a particular area was responsible for a particular animal which was the totem of the tribe. Thus the kangaroo people, those that came from a tribe that held the kangaroo as its central symbol, were responsible for ceremonies that symbolically increased and decreased the population of kangaroos as they were needed for eating. But the kangaroo people never ate their totem. They ate other foods which were the totems of other tribes. This helped the development of a system of tribal interdependence, and there seems to be very little evidence of large-scale inter-tribal warfare, as each tribe considered its food

supply to be dependent on the totems of other tribes, who controlled the supply of that food source through their rituals.

These sorts of increase ceremonies are conducted continuously. They generally involve specific individuals, sometimes only one person, performing many different rites to ensure the maintenance of several different sites. It needs to be emphasised that those who conduct such increase rituals are rarely allowed to partake in the results of their ritual. So they are in fact performing these ceremonies for other groups.

Another way we can stress the Indigenous connection to the land is by looking at connections between the land and people. Indigenous people often say that they are born from the land, and not at particular sites.

Another example of an Indigenous traditional ritual is how, when a kangaroo is hunted and its body brought for cooking, a series of specific steps take place. Cuts are made on the animal to allow its blood to drain, the belly is cut open to remove the viscera, and the front left paw is broken. The details of this process have to be carried out correctly, just as the dietary proscriptions in the Jewish Book of Leviticus are carried out by devout Jews. When it comes to increase

ceremonies, or singing ancestors through the landscape, these things are done because of tradition. It is these traditions that hold society together. It is, we might argue, the way societies bring into being a map for understanding and making their own views of reality work.

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### EXERCISE 1.7

- ✓ 1 Investigate whether the Dreaming is the same across Australia.
  - ✓ 2 What does the Dreaming teach?
  - ✓ 3 Explain the Aboriginal concept of the land.
- 2 Investigate some Indigenous art and write a report on a particular work that you feel demonstrates the Dreaming.
  - 3 Construct a table and list three headings: the Dreaming, the land, and Aboriginal identity. Investigate two different Dreaming stories and summarise these elements in your table.

### ACTIVITY 1.7

- ✗ 1 Discuss the following topic: 'There is not one Dreaming, there are many'.
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