

1.2 Australian Aboriginal beliefs and spiritualities – Dreaming

Glossary

aboriginal From the Latin *ab origine*, meaning ‘from the beginning’. It is always capitalised when used in reference to Australian Aboriginal peoples.

indigenous Those people who are the original inhabitants of any country. It is always capitalised when referring to the Indigenous peoples of Australia.



Figure 1.2.1 *Wagilag Sisters, with child*, 2007, by Philip Gudthaykudthay (b. 1923/1927), Central Arnhem Land, natural earth pigments on canvas, 172 x 120 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

This painting represents a component of the Wagilag Sisters epic creation story. The upper-left corner of the work shows Witiij the sacred python emerging from its home, Mirarrmina waterhole.

Aboriginal peoples have been in Australia for more than 40 000 years. Where they came from is uncertain, but in the relatively isolated situation in which they remained for so long, they developed their culture and way of living on the land. In 1770, when James Cook entered Australia’s history, the Aboriginal way of life was nomadic or semi-nomadic—they were living by hunting and gathering. This apparently simple lifestyle resulted in two misconceptions—that Aboriginal peoples all shared the same culture, and that they had little attachment to, and made little use of, the land. Because of this, Cook described the continent as *terra nullius* (empty land).

Diversity has always been a feature of Aboriginal society—there are several hundred distinct languages (two-thirds of which are now extinct), and songs, stories, dances, ceremonies, Dreamings and paintings that are all owned in different ways depending on complex laws. In spite of this diversity, it is possible to speak of common features of Australian Aboriginal cultures—highly developed, deeply religious, and closely associated with nature and the land.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is the most precise and inclusive reference for **Indigenous** Australians.

Today many Aboriginal groups prefer to identify themselves in local terms drawn from the language or territory group to which they belong. Some of the most widely used local terms are:

- Anagu—Central Australia
- Koori(e)—south-eastern Australia
- Murri—Queensland
- Nunga—South Australia
- Nyooogah or Nyungar—south-west Western Australia
- Yolngu—Arnhem Land region, Northern Territory.

Within these areas they may identify with a more specific language or territory group, for example, Wiradhuri, Gamillaroi, Arrente (Aranda), Warlpiri and Pitjantjatjara.

Torres Strait Islanders are the Indigenous peoples of the Torres Strait Islands. Torres Strait Islanders use the names of their island community—Badu, Murray, Yam, Boigu and the Meriam-speaking people of the eastern Torres Strait Islands.

Note: It is important to remember that these terms apply to specific groups and should not be misapplied. For example, ‘Koori’ is not a synonym for ‘Aboriginal’ and should not be applied to groups from various parts of Australia.

Extension



Identify the language group of the Indigenous Australians in your area using the internet or another resource such as David Horton (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, 1994, Aboriginal Studies Press.

Nature of Dreaming

Glossary

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| Ancestral Beings | Those spirits who moved about forming the landscape and creating the plants, animals and peoples of the known world. They also founded the ceremonies, marriage laws and other laws of human society. They continue to inhere (to exist permanently and inseparably) in the living generations. |
| Dreaming | A complex concept of fundamental importance to Aboriginal culture that embraces the long-ago creative era of the Ancestral Beings as well as the present and the future. Shark Dreaming, Honey Ant Dreaming, Yam Dreaming, and the hundreds of other Dreamings known across Australia are part of the spiritual identities of those Aboriginal peoples who claim them as their Ancestral Beings or totems . To falsely claim the Dreaming of another group is a serious infringement of Aboriginal law. |
| totem | An object such as an animal, a plant or a particular landmark through which a person is linked to the Ancestral Being responsible for his or her existence. |

Dreaming is the centre of Aboriginal religion and life; it is the closest translation of the Aboriginal concept of how the world works. Dreaming is the past, the present and the future.

The term itself translates as different words in different languages of the Aboriginal peoples—the Arrernte call it *alcheringa ngambukala*, literally meaning ‘that springing from its own eternity’; the Pitjantjatjara people call it *tjukurpa*; in north-east Arnhem Land it is called *wongar*.

This section will concentrate on Dreaming in relation to how the sacred sites, stories, art and symbolism of Aboriginal society are the living expression of Dreaming.

Chapter 9 discusses those aspects of Dreaming—kinship, ceremonial life and obligations to the land and people—that most affect contemporary Aboriginal spiritualities.

What is Dreaming?

Dreaming is the beginning of all things. It is when all the things we know in the world today were formed.

- *Dreaming* refers to events and places, rather than what Westerners would call time. The Aboriginal sacred stories are stories about events of Dreaming and how Ancestral (Spirit) Beings formed the land, and founded life on the land.
- *Dreaming* is the unseen spirit world. This spirit world is not obscure and in the past. It is what gives life and reality to the visible world.
- *Dreaming* affects all of life. The performance of ceremonies that were first performed by Ancestors in Dreaming brings to life the power of Dreaming. Dreaming is experienced in the songs, stories, rituals and symbols.
- *Dreaming* is both personal and communal. A particular Aboriginal group may speak of ‘the’ Dreaming, with which it has been linked from the beginning, but each person may also speak of ‘my’ Dreaming. ‘My’ Dreaming may include a story about a form of life with which ‘I’ am connected, for example, the black swan, the dolphin, the eagle. As an Aboriginal person, ‘my’ Dreaming connects me all the way back to ‘the’ Dreaming. Symbols of ‘my’ Dreaming would be depicted in the sacred art and objects used in the rituals about it.
- *Dreaming* is reflected in a special way in the land. To Aboriginal peoples the land is not just soil or rock or minerals, but the whole environment ... all related and linked by Dreaming. Humans are not separate from their environment, but indivisibly united with it. Aboriginal peoples reflect a constant awareness that they are in the presence of Dreaming wherever they travel, hunt, gather food or reside. Aboriginal peoples are part of the land and it is part of them.

Adapted from W. E. H. Stanner, *Oceania Monograph*, n. 11, 1966

In traditional Aboriginal Australia, world order comes from all those events in which the **Ancestral Beings** travel and transform themselves into sites. There is no sense of creation or of a first creator. Aboriginal myths begin from the assumption that the life-giving power of the Ancestors simply exists and the issue of who made the Ancestors or the world does not arise.

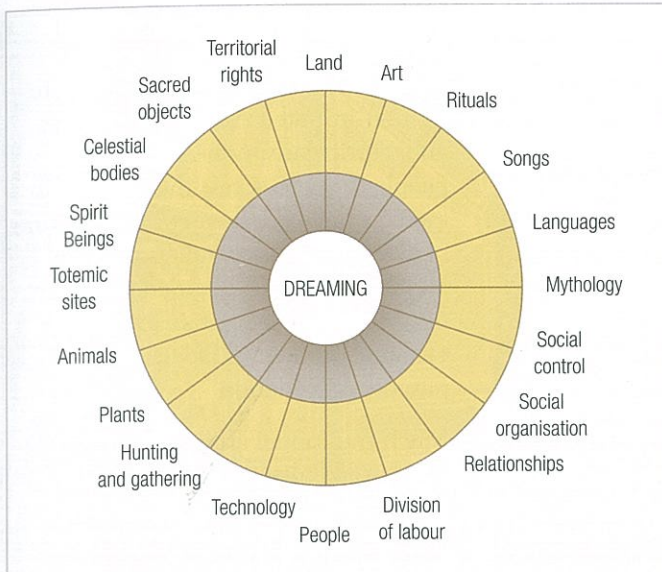


Figure 1.2.2 Dreaming as the basis of all aspects of life in traditional Aboriginal society. (Based on W. H. Edwards, *An Introduction to Aboriginal Societies*, 1988, p. 13.)

The stories, songs, art and ceremonies recall the journeys of the Ancestral Beings and their interaction with people and their bestowal (gifting) of land upon particular language groups. Aboriginal art and ritual objects play an important role in the telling of stories and in preserving the sacred laws handed down from the past. All this underlines the fact that Aboriginal spiritualities are not so much a series of complex 'religious' practices as they are a way of life. The whole way of life of traditional Aboriginal society is grounded in direct links to the land. Their stories, art and ceremonies recall the way the Ancestral Beings shaped the environment as it is now known, laid down the law and established the relationships and responsibilities by which Aboriginal peoples live out their lives.

Review

- 1 In your own words, **explain** the meaning and significance of Dreaming.
- 2 What is a 'sacred site'?
- 3 In small groups, **discuss** what is meant by the statement: 'Dreaming is the past, the present and the future.' Write a brief report of your discussion.
- 4 **Construct** a two-column chart to **distinguish** the differences between the Western concept of how the world works and the Aboriginal concept of how the world works.

Extension



Investigate three Dreaming stories, each from a different location in Australia. Use the web destinations for page 11 as a starting point. Write a report on your research under the following headings:

- a name of language or territory group to which it belongs
- b Ancestral Being(s) in the story
- c **outline** of the main features of the story.

Layers of meaning

Glossary

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| Elders | Key persons and keepers of various knowledge within Aboriginal communities. They are chosen and accepted by their own communities as Elders in respect of: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a kinship and as overseers of many Dreaming tracks; that is, they are 'Boss over country' b being leaders of large extended family networks c knowledge acquired and services given within the community. |
| initiation | Formal admission into a society; the ceremony of admission. |
| mythological symbolism | The representation of the stories about supernatural beings and events. |
| rituals | Established or prescribed procedures and actions for a rite—a formal or ceremonial act or procedure that is prescribed or is customary in a religious or other solemn use. |

There are many layers of meaning in all Aboriginal **rituals** and ceremonies—their art, stories and ceremonies are full of **mythological symbolism**. The first layer is the most obvious and open and accessible to all. The second and further layers are not so obvious and require some degree of experience of, or relationship with, Aboriginal peoples or culture in order to understand them. The deepest layers are secret/sacred and as such are only available to **Elders** and initiated Aboriginal peoples—these layers give the full story, with all details, meanings and significance.



Figure 1.2.3 *Sugarleaf Dreaming at Ngarlu*, 1986, by Lucy, Hilda and Ruth Napaljarri, Walpiri, Yuendumu, Central Australia, acrylic on canvas.

In this painting, Ancestral Beings and real people are presented as one. It shows mythical women gathering sugarleaf and dancing a *yawulyu*, a women's ceremony involving the story of a man who took as his wife a woman whom he was not supposed to marry. At the same time, it depicts the birth (to the man's sisters) of two babies who are actual men living today.

Source: Peter Sutton (ed.), *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, 1988, p. 121

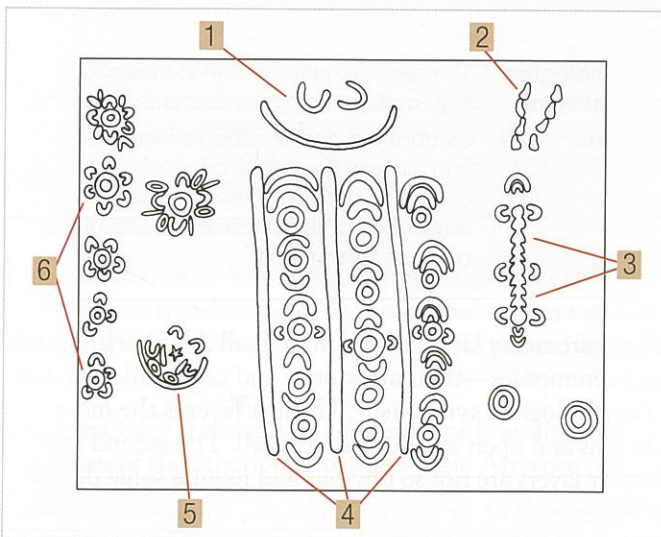


Figure 1.2.4 The 'map' of *Sugarleaf Dreaming at Ngarlu*

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| 1 Napangardi's camp | 4 Ceremonial poles |
| 2 Jungarrayi's footprints | 5 Windbreak (birthplace of two Jampijinpa boys) |
| 3 Women dancing | 6 Women gathering Yanyirilingi |

Many of the ceremonies are a combination of public and secret/sacred ceremonies. It is inappropriate for non-initiated Aboriginal peoples and, particularly, non-Aboriginal people to try to access the secret/sacred rituals. The secret/sacred nature of ceremonies has parallels through all Aboriginal life—certain sites may only be visited by certain groups, for example, women or Elders, for the purpose of **initiation**.

Much traditional art was 'temporary' and lasted only for the duration of particular ceremonies such as initiations and funerals. Today most Aboriginal art called 'traditional', as well as the so-called transitional works, such as Western Desert acrylic paintings on canvas and board, represent the places, events and Dreaming Ancestors depicted earlier in the 'temporary' art, but also incorporate actual events (see *Sugarleaf Dreaming at Ngarlu* in Figure 1.2.3). The boundaries between the mythical past and the actual present as non-Aboriginal people understand them are blurred—but then Dreaming is 'the past, the present and the future'.

All Aboriginal art has a religious theme, but some has particular secret/sacred significance, such as the carved boards, incised stones, carved trees and totem images of the inner circle of initiation grounds.

Aboriginal art and its symbolism communicates the intimate relationship between the Ancestral Beings and the Law, values, customs, ceremonies and obligations of Aboriginal peoples. It enables the passage of knowledge within Aboriginal society and, in limited ways, to the outside world.

Dr David Malangi's *Sacred Places at Milmindjarr'* (Figure 1.2.5) is a powerful illustration of how Dreaming determines the cultural responsibilities and the rituals and ceremonies. It also demonstrates the difficulties experienced in trying to understand the spiritualities and beliefs of Aboriginal peoples under separate headings. *Sacred Places at Milmindjarr'* is a partial representation of the mythical geography of his 'country'.



Figure 1.2.5 *Sacred Places at Milmindjarr*, 1982, by Dr David Malangi (1927–1999), Central Arnhem Land, ochre on bark, 107 x 79 cm

The story concerns the travels of the founding ancestral figures known over much of Arnhem Land as the Djan'kawu Sisters. As they travelled from place to place, paddling their canoe and walking overland, they created the clans (landowning groups) and their languages, naming natural phenomena and creating spring waters by plunging their digging sticks into the ground. In Manharrngu clan country they created the well Milmindjarr' and had a ceremony there. They were looking for fish, and caught a small Catfish, which is represented in the painting. They gave birth to the peoples of the area. When asked about the significance of a certain motif, Malangi replied, 'I know. You don't know.'

In Peter Sutton (ed.), *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, 1988, p. 53

Review

- 1 From the text and artwork in this chapter, **identify** four specific examples to **demonstrate** the diversity of Dreaming for Aboriginal peoples.
- 2 **Clarify** what is meant by 'layers of meaning'.
- 3 **Discuss** how the bark painting *Sacred Places at Milmindjarr*' could help **clarify** your understanding of Dreaming and its importance for the lives of Aboriginal peoples.
- 4 In three concise paragraphs, show that you **recognise** the importance of Dreaming to Aboriginal peoples.

Dreaming, land and identity

I feel with my body, with my blood. Feeling all these trees, all this country. When this wind blow you can feel it. Same for country ... you feel it, you can look, but feeling ... that make you.

Big Bill Neidjie, Gagudju Elder, Kakadu

For Indigenous Australians, the land is the core of all spirituality—the land is not dead, it is alive with power and the Ancestral Beings who live in it. The land is the Ancestors and as long as the land lives, so do the Ancestors. The land is not just soil or rocks or minerals, but a whole environment, and is sustained by people and culture.

Places on earth share in the sacredness of Dreaming as they were formed in their present shape by the journeys of the Ancestral Beings.

For the Pitjantjatjara people of the Western Desert of Central Australia, a high mountain peak may represent a place where one of the Ancestors reared up and looked over the surrounding country, and the ridge along a range may be an Ancestral track. The usually dry claypans that dot the plains are often viewed as camping places of the Beings. Some Ancestral Beings are said to have ascended to the sky after their wanderings and various star groups are their final resting places. The Seven Sisters, or Kungkarangkalpa, were chased over a vast area by a man named Niyunya and left the earth to become the Pleiades constellation (Taurus).



Figure 1.2.6 *Kuru Ala*, 2007, by Maringka Baker (b. 1951/1953), synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 153.5 x 200 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

This is Kuru Ala. These are creeks and rock holes everywhere, and many trees. There is *puli* (rocks) and *apu* (rocky hills). This is *Minyma Tjuta Tjukurrpa* (Seven Sisters Creation Story). This area is close to Tjuntjuntjarra [in Western Australia, near the South Australian border].
Maringka Baker, 2007

For the Wiradhuri people of New South Wales, the black streak in the Milky Way, towards the Southern Cross, is one of the Ancestors of the Wawi, a serpent-like creature that lives in deep waterholes on the Darling River and burrows into the bank.

It is impossible to discuss the beliefs and spiritualities of Indigenous Australians without talking about the land. It is the land that gives them their identity—‘the Land is my mother’. The journeys of the Ancestral Beings shaped the landscape and gave birth to its people—journeys that are re-enacted in the rituals and ceremonies of the people and expressed in their art.

Review

- 1 In your own words, **clarify** what is meant by ‘the Land is my mother’. Why do you think ‘Land’ has a capital letter?
- 2 Give three reasons why the land provides identity for Aboriginal peoples.
- 3 In a graphic form of your choice, prepare a presentation to **examine** the connection between Dreaming, the land and identity for Aboriginal peoples. In your presentation, refer to Dreaming stories, sacred sites, and symbolism and art.
- 4 In groups, **discuss** the statement: ‘There is not one Dreaming, there are many.’ Share the points your group raises with another group.

Extension

Construct your own Dreaming mind map.

Conclusion

So what is the 'nature of religion and beliefs'? The characteristics of religion have been defined (pages 5–6) but what do they really tell you? Is it possible to understand a religion by putting it into categories? Do Australian Aboriginal Dreamings fit there? This chapter has probably raised more questions than it has given answers—and, no doubt, the rest of your investigations into religious traditions and how they are lived out by their adherents will continue to raise questions. Throughout your studies you will continue to refine your definition of religion. The search for meaning and what human life is all about, and how we come up with answers to the seemingly answerable questions, will always exercise our imaginations—the answers will be different for everyone.

Review

- 1 Survey how members of your class **define** 'religion'. Is it possible to arrive at a definition that satisfies everyone in the class? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 2 What is your definition of 'religion'? Has it changed from what it was before you started this course? Do you think it might further change during the course?

Extension

- 1 Check your list of key terms, concepts and ideas from this chapter and ensure that it is clear and complete.
- 2 What about your media file? Have you been able to easily **classify** it into categories under the following two headings:
 - a The nature of religion and beliefs
 - b Australian Aboriginal beliefs and spiritualities.

Where and why is there any overlap? **Analyse** the contents and prepare a report on your findings. Do your findings add to what you have studied in this chapter or complicate it?

Summarise

For each chapter outcome, build your own summary notes that draw from:

- work in class and at home
- this student book
- other print and media sources
- the internet
- additional resources at Pearson Places.

