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Australian Aboriginal Spirituality

Student outcomes

This chapter leads to an understanding of Australian Aboriginal spirituality in relation to:

- origins and history of Aboriginal spirituality
- nature of the Dreaming
- origins of the universe
- sacred sites
- stories of the Dreaming
- symbolism and art
- diversity of the Dreaming
- rituals and ceremonies
- importance of the Dreaming
- the Dreaming, the land and identity



Origins

Aboriginal spirituality is founded in the Dreaming stories of creation.

The Dreaming is the central and deepest reality of the Aboriginal world. This spiritual reality has existed from the beginning and exists within and beyond the ordinary world. The Dreaming includes the original reality of the spirit ancestors which was active in the creation time which continues as the source of spiritual life in the present world. The Dreaming also includes the creative activities of the spirit ancestors which produced and continues to sustain the events and places that make up the traditional Aboriginal world. It is not separate from ordinary life; it is part of it.

Historical origins

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is someone who is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, identifies himself or herself with that community and is accepted as such by that community. Aboriginal people often chose to identify themselves either in the

language group to which they belong, e.g. Gamillaroi, or according to a generalised area of Australia, e.g. Koorie (from eastern NSW). Aboriginal spirituality is associated with the Dreaming stories while Torres Strait Islanders traditionally draw their spirituality from the Taiga stories.

The country of Australia is the most ancient land on earth. The rock paintings of the Australian Aboriginals provide the oldest evidence of humanity's religious and cultural life. For tens of thousands of years the indigenous inhabitants of this country have felt that the land itself is Sacred ground.

The first Australians were a hunter-gatherer people with a Stone Age technology. Archaeologists believe they arrived in Australia at least 60 000 years ago from South-East Asia. The Aboriginals themselves, however, generally believe they have been here from the beginning (the Latin expression *ab origine* means 'from the beginning').

The indigenous Australians adapted to the unique food resources and the climatic conditions of their island continent. They gradually spread across the land, filling



every ecological niche and finding ways to survive even in the harshest environment. By the time of European contact the Aborigines spoke 250 different languages, and they may reasonably be regarded as constituting 250 nations on the one continent (the Native American nations see themselves in such a way). There was considerable diversity in culture as well as language but the spirituality of Aboriginal peoples remains constant in its essentials through the connection between the land and nature, Aboriginal identity and the Dreaming.

The number of Aboriginals in Australia before white settlement is not known. Their population may have numbered as high as 750 000. Although the Aboriginal groups who practise the traditional way of life is in the minority, they are significant to the culture of urban Aboriginals as they are often viewed as having a wide knowledge of culture and law.

Each language group comprised numerous 'mobs' and they occupied natural catchment areas that were capable of supporting about 500 people. Groups of people came together for various ceremonies, which were headed by the custodians of the respective ceremonies. People moved about in mobs or extended family groups, with up to about thirty members. Marriages were arranged between people of different degrees of relation, either from within the same language group or from a neighbouring group.

The male and female elders of the group were the custodians of their knowledge. This tribal knowledge was passed on to the group but not distributed equally. Knowledge was acquired progressively but depended upon a person's gender, age and status and their family relationship to certain sites. There are many instances of women's knowledge and men's knowledge which are taboo to the opposite sex. Some knowledge was passed on in general life while other information and learning was available only at ceremonies such as initiation ceremonies and may be accompanied by body markings to indicate that the initiate had moved on to a higher level of understanding.

As hunters and gatherers, the Aboriginals would move systematically within their tribal lands to take advantage of the seasonal availability of things to eat. Their annual travels were coordinated with the migratory habits of the animals they traditionally hunted, and with the maturing of the plant foods they harvested. Through the course of their yearly journeys, the Aboriginal groups would come across special features of the landscape (such as peculiar outcrops of

rocks, hillside formations, rivers, waterholes and trees) which they usually knew by name. These landmarks would be approached in a regular sequence and at more or less the same time from year to year. In this way the land itself would be like a map with signposts that showed the nomads where to travel to locate food resources as they became available.



Aboriginal Flag The Aboriginal flag was designed by Harold Thomas, a Luritja man from central Australia. It was created as a symbol of unity and national identity for Aboriginal people during the land rights movement of the early 1970s. The symbolic meaning of the flag colours are: black for the Aboriginal people; red for the earth, the red ochre and the spiritual relationship to the land; and yellow for the sun which gives life.

Supernatural origin

In traditional Aboriginal society, human culture and the natural environment are intimately linked to one another. By taking its lead from the movements of species and the monuments of geography, the way of life for Aborigines became integrated into the environment itself. The close relationship between society and the environment ensured the survival of traditional culture for many tens of thousands of years. During that time, through their traditional ways, the Aborigines developed a personal relationship with the generative spiritual forces that produced the natural orders and rhythms of the land in the first place.

In Aboriginal experience the natural environment is closely related to the supernatural world. According to traditional beliefs, the universe came into being through the creative activity of primordial spirits. The natural world created by these spirits continues to be filled with signs of their kindly intentions towards their creations. These signs are readily apparent to the Aboriginal people, who see themselves as created by the same productive spirits.



Spirit and reality

The world of Aboriginal culture affirms the sacredness of nature. The natural world and human life have a common spiritual ancestry, for they both belong to one and the same line of descent reaching back to primordial creation. As a result, the Aboriginals do not make a sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular. Because the whole of existence and life is close to its timeless spiritual origin, all things have mysterious properties which give them a sacred quality.

The original creative powers of the universe are neither confined to the ordinary world nor removed to some extraordinary supernatural realm. The creative spirits are present in, throughout and beyond the physical realm they have created. For the Aboriginals, the natural environment is saturated with sacred significance and spiritual life. For that reason, when approached in terms of their traditional ways, more or less anything and anywhere in the natural world offers the Aborigines a point of entry into the deeper spiritual reality within and beyond present human existence. Transcendence is from their life and the environment not from a separate sacred space. By acknowledging the eternal and sacred reality of nature, including human nature, Aboriginal religion has a comprehensive vision of human existence within and beyond the present life.



Outback billabong Billabongs are rich in bird life and plants which can be used by Aboriginal people for food and for raw materials for weaving and body decoration. They also feature in some Dreamings.

The nature of the Dreaming

The Dreaming

The most fundamental idea in Aboriginal religion is the '**Dreaming**'. The phrase is used to translate the Aranda term *altjiranga*, which literally means 'grounded in eternity'. The Dreaming is the central and deepest reality of the Aboriginal world; it is the spiritual dimension of reality which has existed from the beginning and continues to be present in all aspects of life.

The Dreaming is of prime importance to Aboriginal peoples and is a complex idea that may vary according to different Aboriginal groups' traditions. Fundamentally it can be considered as the essence of Aboriginal beliefs about creation and the spiritual and physical existence which give meaning to all aspects of life. The Dreaming establishes the rules that link the relationship between Aboriginal people, the land and all things associated with Aboriginal life. It is not time specific but is the past, present and future. The Dreaming provides the knowledge of all aspects of Aboriginal life including: territorial rights and boundaries, spirit beings and their lives, technology, totem plants and animals, Sacred sites, rituals and ceremony, forms of art, songs and stories and all aspects of intra- and intertribal social organisation as well as the rights and obligations of kinship.

Until recently the English expression 'the Dreamtime' had wide currency. But the Dreaming does not refer to one fixed time, or to a particular event in history. It is not part of a chronological sequence, with events before it and after it. The Dreaming transcends time; it is more like a boundless whole, within which all bounded things have their location and existence.

The Dreaming is not anything vague, dreamlike or less than real; nor is it a mythic 'Golden Age' far removed in the past. To prevent giving these wrong impressions many traditional Aboriginals avoid the terms 'Dreaming' and 'Dreamtime' and prefer to speak of '**the Law**'.

The Dreaming exists within and beyond the ordinary world. To get an approximate perspective, we might say the Dreaming is to real-time what real-time is to cinema-time. When we are looking at a movie,



we cannot locate our real-time anywhere within the timeframe of the movie itself. Instead, our real-time, in the world outside the movie theatre, completely surrounds and contains (indeed, underwrites and sustains) the entire timeframe of the film. In a similar fashion, the whole world of ordinary space and time (that is, everything: past, present and future) is located within the larger single concept of the Dreaming.

The ancestral spirits are natural to the world and the Dreaming includes the original reality of the spirit ancestors which was active in the creation time and which continues as the source of spiritual life in the present world. As well as the ancestors themselves, the Dreaming includes their creative activities which originally produced and continue to sustain the events and places that make up the traditional Aboriginal world.

Each Aboriginal is intimately related to the spirit ancestor and to the totemic animals or plants associated with that spirit. Through this spirit and its creations the particular Aboriginal group has a spiritual relationship with a particular area of land and with defined sites within that land. This land then represents their personal identity and religious belief.

The Dreaming encompasses everything to do with the spirit ancestors, including the first beings themselves, their creative activity in forming the world, the period of this activity, and the continuing relation between the ancestors and the natural environment they created. The Dreaming was, is and continues to be 'every-when'. It has been summed up in this way (Stanner: quoted in Eugene Stockton, 1995, *The Aboriginal Gift*; p. 48):

The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen; and a kind of logos or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man ... It is an account of the begetting of the universe, a study about creation. It is also a cosmology, an account or theory of how what was created became an ordered system. To be more precise, how the universe became a moral system.

Origins of the universe

The various groups of Aboriginals have their own lands, languages and customs. Although many special features of the traditional cultures have passed away in recent times, the broad contour of beliefs, values and attitudes remains and persists into modern Aboriginal spirituality.



Split Rock, Wilson's Promontory Significant landforms throughout Australia are explained by referring to the creative journey of the ancestral spirits in the Dreaming of the people of that area

The foundation of Aboriginal religion is in the Dreaming stories of creation. The stories told about the beginning of the world vary greatly from one language region to another, but the heart of each story consists of a founding drama which follows a certain general pattern.

Before time began, there was only a formless mass of dark and featureless matter. The world was nothing but a bare plain without any physical features at all. Then came the Dreaming, when the first beings, the spirit ancestors, arose from out of their eternal sleep from the earth. The features of the landscape such as waterholes, rock formations and caves from which they emerged are considered Sacred sites. From there, the primordial spirits took on various shapes and appearances, both human and animal; sometimes a spirit would look and act like a particular creature, and at other times it seemed to be more like a person.

These supernatural beings created the natural world. They fixed the design of nature and the order of life into an enduring form. In an intense burst of creative activity, they moved over the featureless earth, shaping the contours and details of the physical landscape as it can now be seen. Indeed, every landmark in the environment has a story from the Dreaming attached to it.

The original spirits also brought into being all living creatures, including people. Each spirit founded a line of descendants comprising a natural species and its corresponding human group, which are linked as a single totem or 'Dreaming'. The social group into which a person is born includes an eternal spirit ancestor and a natural species or totem, such as the emu or wallaby, to which the person is mythologically related.

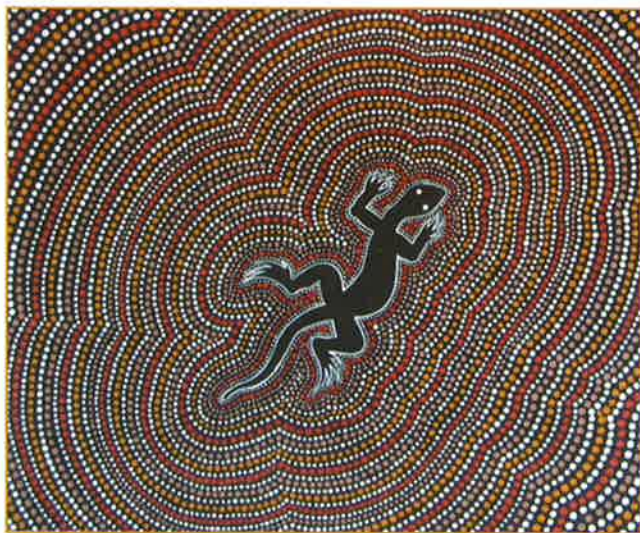


At the start of this original period of intense creativity there was no established law or morality. The primordial spirits travelled about and in the course of their adventures they encountered one another and negotiated the terms of existence. Eventually, when the options were fixed and the boundaries were set, each spirit being had settled on the most appropriate way of life and behaviour for its line of descendants to follow.

Through their creative efforts, the spirit ancestors gave each living species its own law, or design of life, which was set for all time and written on the landscape. Some of these original spirits were cultural heroes; they taught humans all the things that are important for survival, including how to hunt, how to make fire and utensils, and how to perform ceremonies.

After completing their creative tasks, the totem ancestors were once again overcome by weariness and they returned to their original slumber. Some disappeared back into the earth while others changed into physical features of the landscape. All the ancestral spirits left behind trails of their lives, or Dreaming tracks, which are marked out by the monuments of geography in the various tribal lands and recreated in the traditional songs and ceremonies.

The Dreaming tracks of the first beings contain the spirit children who are yet to be born in the form of their ancestor. The children may be born as either a natural species of animal or plant, or as a human person. In either case, they are regarded as incarnations of the totemic ancestor and the ancestor's supernatural offspring.



Dreamings Creation Dreamings are sometimes depicted in modern artwork. Aboriginal creation stories are the oldest in the world.

Although now immobilised in the landscape, the creative spirits continue to live in a powerful and conscious fashion. Their creative activity manifests through the life force which remains in their sacred resting places, in the sites of significance, (Sacred sites), for their stories, and in their various transformations or incarnations. Their transformations include not only specific landmarks, but also tjurunga and other Sacred objects, such as totemic emblems, images, participants in ceremony, and especially their totemic descendants, both human and non-human. Traditional descendants regularly visit the Sacred sites of their ancestors.

Stories of the Dreaming

The Kangaroo-Man is a hero of the Dreaming who rests in his Sacred site, where he has left the seed and the life force of the Kangaroo Dreaming. All the spirit children of future kangaroos, and of human beings belonging to the totem group, abide in this sacred place while awaiting their turn to be born. Sufficient numbers of kangaroos are maintained by the 'increase rituals' that are enacted at this site, during which are recited the secret verses or songs that the totem ancestor first sang during the creation process.

A human spirit child enters the womb of his or her future mother who is pregnant when she crosses the Kangaroo Dreaming trail. At initiation a boy is taught to see himself as an incarnation of the Kangaroo Dreaming spirit; he bears an immortal spark of Kangaroo life. The boy might be handed his tjurunga (traditional totemic symbol) or some other Sacred object, as a particularly concentrated form of his Dreaming. He would then be told: 'This is your own body, from which you have been reborn'. Like the Sacred site itself, the tjurunga is so powerful that mere physical contact with it releases an outflow of the life force of its Dreaming.

There are many creation stories that tell of the Rainbow Serpent, Water Serpent or other totem ancestor and how they created the landforms, animal and bird groups and water sources from the featureless land. Other stories of the Dreaming and more information on the culture of Aboriginal groups may be found on the Australian Museum site of Indigenous Australians at www.dreamtime.net.au/

Sacred sites

The Dreaming creation stories are the origin of important landscape features and some of these places, where important events occurred during a Dreaming, are of special significance to Aboriginals. These places are known as Sacred sites. They may be land, rock formations, parts of rivers or seas. Other Sacred sites are significant because of their different uses, e.g. as burial grounds, ceremonial meeting places, places of danger and significant places such as birthing caves.

Knowledge of Sacred sites is limited. This knowledge is rarely available to the wider community unless the sites are threatened with destruction. Even at such a time, the custodians of that knowledge reveal as little as possible to protect the secret-Sacred nature of the site. As with knowledge, some sites are women's Sacred sites, some are men's and some are for the whole group. Sacred sites are used in ceremony and are connected by Dreaming tracks. These are followed in Walkabout.

Dreaming tracks

Australia is criss-crossed with Dreaming tracks which establish relationships between one place and another. These are the trails of the lives and movements of the ancestral spirits. These tracks connect Sacred sites and are sometimes known as 'Songlines'. They are depicted in sand paintings, paintings, engravings and body painting and re-created in ceremony through traditional song, dance and story. These tracks contain the spirit children of the ancestral spirits who are yet to be born either as a natural species of animal or plant or as a human. Whichever form they take they are regarded as the incarnations of the totemic ancestor.

Dreaming tracks can run for long distances, even thousands of kilometres through all types of landforms and climatic conditions. Dreaming tracks and Sacred sites make up the Sacred geography of Australia. The creation stories and songs relating to Dreaming events along these tracks may be shared by different tribal groups. They also form an important function in defining Aboriginal land 'ownership'. The path of Dreaming tracks can define the extent of a particular group's territory.

Traditional practice requires the following of Dreaming tracks and access to sites is essential to Aboriginal spirituality. This need for access can put it in conflict with the European system of land tenure although there are some Government regulations in place that can



Noosa Heads These sites are sacred to the Dulungbara people. Here the Dulungbara would fish for Nautilus shells, which they referred to as dalung shell. This was said to reflect the colours of the thugine or Rainbow Serpent which is associated with many of the Dreamings and customs of the Dalungbara.

assist with access to Sacred sites. This is complicated by the fact that such sites are supposed to be known only to the relevant community.

Walkabout

Going Walkabout used to be seen by whites as no more than idle wandering around the countryside, for the purpose of avoiding work on the stations. Nowadays it is more widely appreciated as a deliberate pilgrimage along ritual paths which link the Aboriginal Sacred sites.

The difference between a walking-holiday and a pilgrimage is largely in the experience of the participant. For those who participate in the Dreaming, going Walkabout is a moving meditation equivalent to the most prayerful activities in any of the world's developed religions. We may think of Zen monks sweeping the path, or Islamic mystics whirling in dance, or Hare Krishnas chanting in the street. Walkabout, too, is a ritual devotion (albeit more practical than stylised) in which body, life and mind are wholly committed to aligning with and being reaffirmed by the creative powers of the Dreaming.



The spiritual forces of the Dreaming are ceaseless in their life-giving activity. Life flows from them endlessly, whether it is realised or not. The Dreaming gives life just as the sun gives light. Yet the sun cannot always be seen; sometimes it is hidden by clouds or obscured by the bulk of the earth. Similarly, the ever-changing demands and constant distractions of daily living can cause people to forget the eternal source of life. Daily living in the material world can draw the mind down into forgetfulness of the heights of spiritual reality.

As one becomes more involved in temporary concerns, the inner eyes become unaccustomed to seeing the eternal light of the Dreaming. To avoid being blinded, they must be gradually reintroduced to the brightness of the spiritual. For that reason, the moving meditation of Walkabout involves a progression from Sacred sites of lesser importance to those of intermediate and finally of greatest significance. In that way, the totemite (Aboriginal for whom this area is Sacred) gradually acclimatises (as it were) to the spiritual inner world and becomes able to remember and relive the otherwise forgotten extent of the Dreaming.

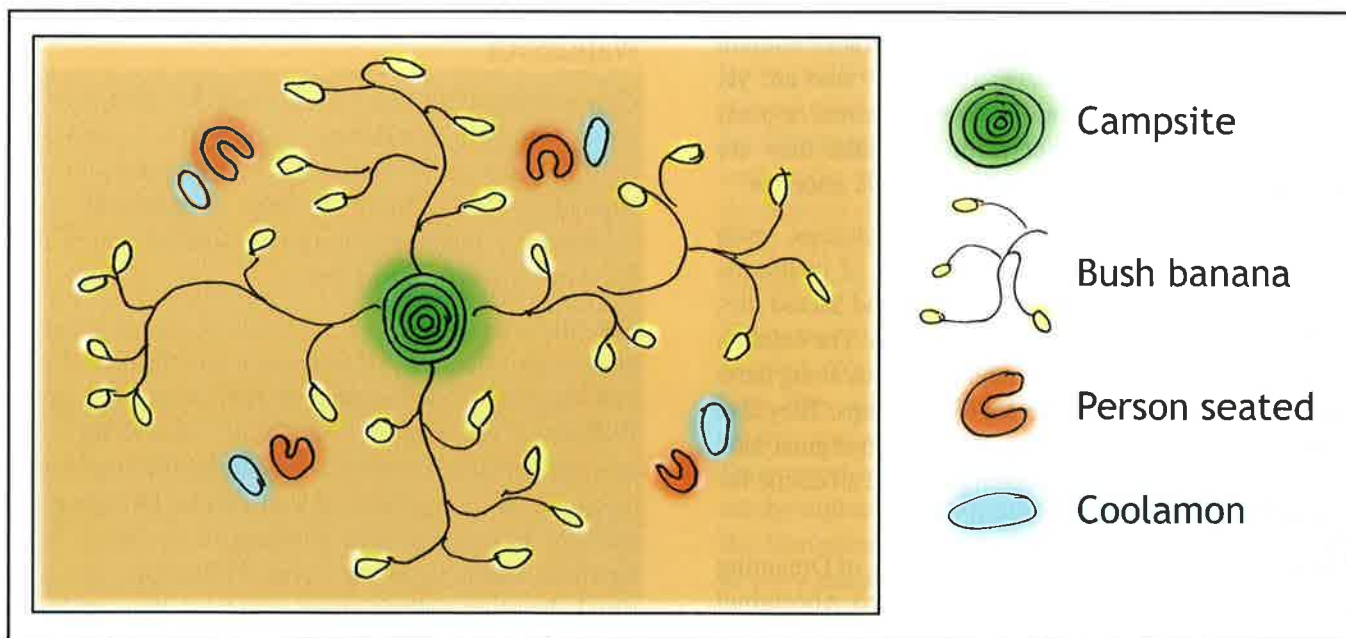
As the journey proceeds through the various locations, individuals become increasingly attuned in life and mind to the spiritual realities of each Sacred place. As they become integrated with the spirits at each site, the vital and psychic pattern of their whole understanding

is altered and improved. They are then able to go on to the next location, where they actually experience realities that are higher still, and which before could hardly even be remembered. Going on Walkabout is thus a spiritual journey which renews and develops the soul by cultivating higher states of consciousness and higher experiences of reality.

Symbolism and art

Aboriginal art prior to European colonisation was related only to the artist's connection with his/her country. It is an essential part of Aboriginal life. Different areas produced different forms of art. These were linked by their strong designs and religious significance. Many from the desert regions tend to be more abstract while other regions may be more representational. There are many symbols used in Aboriginal art which has a wide variety of forms including; body art, and painting, carved trees, rock art, bark painting and funerary poles. The artist was not seen as an artist in the European context or significance but he or she was the custodian of that knowledge and Dreaming. The artwork was temporary and used in the teaching of others and in the renewal of the Dreaming depicted. As such the artist is one with the creative spirit.

We find all elements of the Dreaming incorporated in traditional Aboriginal art. Thus, when a fully initiated



Symbols Some of the symbols used in Aboriginal art



elder 'paints his Dreaming', what he draws is a stylised map of the geography of his country, which simultaneously marks out the travels and exploits of his totem ancestor in the time of creation, and also represents a mental model of the traditional way that life is most appropriately lived in the continuous present.

Art provides knowledge of sites, food types, water, behaviour and beings and which are to be avoided and those that are safe. It may provide a form of map by which the landform and its resources can be understood. It often provides essential bush survival skills and knowledge of the lifecycles of plants and animals. It can be used for rituals or to identify the ownership of Dreamings and to strengthen kinship ties. In ritual ceremonies Sacred designs are reproduced as ground sculptures or sand paintings and, in concert with song and dance, become temporarily filled with the creative power of the Dreaming. The dancers' bodies are decorated with ritual designs and they effectively become the creative or ancestral spirit.

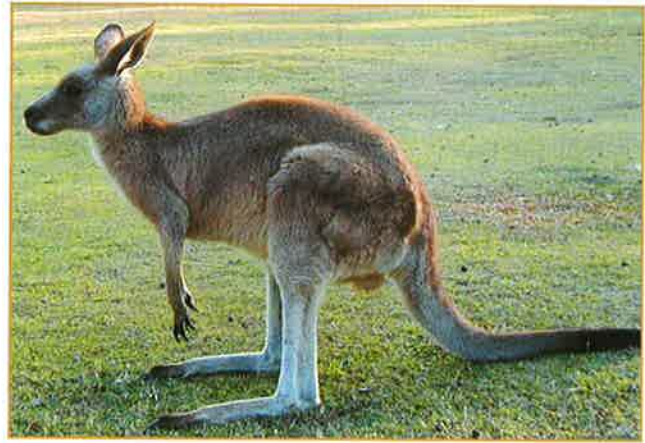
Some art depicts secret Sacred sites and is available only to the select group allowed this knowledge. In others these sites are depicted but hidden.

With the advent of Europeans, Aboriginal people have expanded their Dreamings and the methods by which they depict them. They incorporate the new into the traditional.

Diversity of the Dreaming

Aboriginal spirituality is based on a variety of beliefs. Essential to all tribes is the belief of an ancestral creative spirit who came out of a darkened world and by the process of his travels created the landscape, significant landforms, the people, animals and plants, watercourses and celestial bodies. Particular plants and animals, depending on the area, are associated with this spirit and are the totems for the Aboriginal people of that area. These people have kinship with that spirit and this relationship gives them the spiritual ownership of an area. This encompasses the ownership of the Dreaming tracks and Sacred sites associated with that creative spirit and those Dreamings. It involves a responsibility for those ceremonies, art and rituals that are required for the continuance of those Dreamings in the present. This kinship and responsibility gives

spiritual and temporal identity to the Aboriginal people. The land has immense spiritual importance for the maintenance of the Dreaming and this is renewed and reinforced by the practice of Walkabout.



Totemic animal Native animals (and plants) may be totemic to some tribes but not to others. Their spiritual importance depends on the Dreamings of individual Aboriginal groups.

Rituals and ceremonies

Each group has its own particular Dreaming. The Dreamings are brought into the present through totemic descendants, their songs, Sacred sites and traditional painting. The Dreamings are manifested most thoroughly through special ritual actions. Aboriginal ceremonies do not just commemorate the original creative actions of the spirit ancestors; the ceremonies actually mediate those eternal acts into the present time. The participants in a ceremony enter into immediate contact with their Dreaming ancestor. They become their totem spirit, and the ceremony becomes the primordial creation event. In this way, the eternal lifeforce of the Dreaming is continually released to surge into the present world.

The ground itself is more than simply the backdrop for the ceremony. The totemic emblems inscribed on the tjurunga are reproduced as ground-sculptures or sand paintings in the surrounding earth, so that for the duration of the ceremony the ground itself becomes an enlarged tjurunga fully imbued with the lifeforce of the Dreaming. The dancer, who is also painted with the same totem designs, becomes a living icon, a pure embodiment of the original Dreaming ancestor. For as long as the ceremony lasts, the Dreaming is re-created in, is even identical with, this place and time.



The functions of ceremony

Ceremony is the principal link between primordial creation and the present world. Indeed, the original creation is so close to its continuing effects through ceremony that should ceremony fail then the world will fail too. There is no occupational class of professional priests who have the exclusive role of officiating at Aboriginal ceremony. All members of the totem group share in the task of perpetually renewing the world.

In their respective ways, all the labours of humanity are necessary to keep nature and culture functioning harmoniously.

The religious rituals serve a variety of ends. They are designed to honour the totem ancestors, to introduce the ancestors and their totem objects visually to those who are entitled to see them, to initiate tribal members, to ensure an increase in food, and to regulate the numbers of the non-human totem species. But the chief purpose of ceremony is to participate in the original creative acts of the spirit ancestors, and thereby to ensure their continuation into the present. For the wellbeing of the totem descendants, both human and non-human, depends upon direct contact with their ancestor in the Dreaming.



Kata Tjuta (The Olgas) Kata Tjuta means 'head' and 'many' in the language of the Aboriginals of this area. It is noted for its engravings and its rock piles said to be created by the spirit ancestor.

Rainmaking

The Karamundi people of the Darling River perform a special ceremony to bring the rain. A vein in a man's arm is opened and blood is allowed to drip into a piece of hollow bark until a small pool forms. Some finely ground gypsum is added and the mixture is stirred into

the consistency of a thick paste. Some hairs are pulled from the man's beard and mixed in with the paste, which is then placed between two pieces of bark. The bark is put under the surface of the water in a river or lagoon, and secured there by pointed sticks which are driven into the ground. When the mixture is dissolved away, the totemites say that a great cloud will come and bring rain with it.

Following this ceremony, until the rain arrives, the men are tabooed from their wives so that the charm will not be spoiled; the elders say that if the prohibition were fully respected then rain would come every time the ritual was performed.

In a time of drought, when rain is most badly needed, the entire totem community meets to perform this ceremony.

Initiation

Initiation rituals serve to bring youths into the adult community. Special ceremonies were held separately for young men and women. Through initiations the young people are brought more fully into the collective identity of the totem group. The puberty initiation most especially brings with it the revelation of the Sacred myths and traditions of the totem group. Through the initiation from adolescence to adulthood the young person is introduced to the cultural values of the group and given conscious knowledge of the origin of the spiritual life force of the people as a totem community.

The puberty rites among the male Aboriginals generally follow a number of stages. First, the ground is prepared by being decorated with symbols and motifs of the tribal totem. The men remain in this 'Sacred ground' for the duration of the ritual. The novices are then separated from their mothers, and often from all women. Among the Kurnai people of south-east Australia, for example, the mothers sit behind the novices and the men walk in single file between the two groups and separate them in that symbolic way.

Next, the young boys are taken to a special isolated camp, where they are given instruction in the spiritual traditions of the tribal group. Finally, some physical procedure is performed to mark the young men as initiated adults. The procedure is usually circumcision, the extraction of a tooth, or subincision (cutting the shaft of the penis), but sometimes it involves body scarring or pulling out the hair. In some groups the last two stages are reversed and instruction is given after the procedure.





Boab tree Traditional Aboriginal people use various parts of the tree for food, medicine, water supply, fibre, glue and shelter

Through the course of the initiation, the young boys must behave in ritual ways, undergo various ordeals, and obey certain dietary taboos and other prohibitions. Each part of the complex initiation ceremony has special religious meaning. In the case of circumcision, it is a symbolic sacrifice (as it is in the Jewish and Islamic traditions). On other occasions initiates may be placed under blankets that symbolise the death from which they are about to be reborn.

Importance of the Dreaming

Aboriginal spirituality

Chapter 1 described the deep structure of religion as providing a way of passage from the imperfect world of human experience to the fullness of spiritual reality beyond ordinary human existence (i.e. religion as a form of liberation). What is quite distinctive about the religious world of the traditional Australian Aborigines is that it does not begin with a felt separation between the natural and the supernatural, the temporal and the eternal, or between an incomplete human existence and an encompassing spiritual reality. Creation and life are integrated and complete from the outset. Through the

oneness of the Sacred and the secular, the Dreaming and the everyday, the totemite lives continually in the fullness of reality, meaning and life.

For the totem descendants in touch with their primordial ancestors, present existence is already fulfilled with the highest value, meaning and purpose. The traditional ways create, maintain and complete the harmony of the universe. By the practice of ceremony, especially the ritual of Walkabout, Aboriginal spirituality affirms the highest reality of the Dreaming and maintains daily human life in alignment with that highest reality.

This distinctive feature of Aboriginal spirituality does not represent an exception to the view of religion as consisting in a movement from a state of unease to a solution. Quite the contrary; it supports the general theory. The Aborigines lose their experience of traditional meaning and fulfilment when their relationship with the land is broken, that is, when their spirituality is compromised. Similarly, members of other religions can fall into the darkness and despair of meaninglessness when their faith is extinguished by traumas, e.g. the death of innocents or the Jewish Holocaust.

The fulfilment of life

The totem ancestors are respected and revered, but they are not worshipped. The purpose of ceremony is not to placate or petition the spirits to serve human ends. The spirit ancestors and the human descendants do not live in worlds separated from one another, nor do they have different sets of goals. Present human existence, especially in ceremony, is already fully in tune with the timeless world of the Dreaming. The ancestral spirits are not seen as superior beings in another realm who condescend to have dealings with an inferior human world. Human and spiritual, natural and supernatural, present and eternal, descendants and ancestors are all inseparable parts of one egalitarian reality.

The individual person carries, through incarnation, an immortal spark of eternal life which comes directly from the original ancestors. Simply to be alive is to participate in the life force of the primordial spark; and to follow the traditional ways is to share the fulfilment of eternal creative activity in the continuous present. Through everyday actions, and especially those of ceremony, each and every individual life affirms and maintains the completeness of existence as it is and always has been. This may be illustrated



by the imagery of film projection: just as a person walking within the beam of a projector becomes for the moment a screen for the projected images, so the Dreaming projected through time is implanted on those living within its beam.



X-Ray Man Traditional Aboriginal paintings in caves were often for ceremonial purposes linked with the group's Dreaming

Reverence for life

Traditional Aboriginal religion is an affirmation of the wholeness of creation and life. Aboriginal spirituality magnifies life through a devoted preoccupation with the signs, symbols, means, portents, tokens and evidences of spiritual vitality. The problems of suffering and scarcity are not denied. On the contrary, they are acknowledged, accepted and celebrated as parts of the spiritual wholeness of life. In that respect, Aboriginal religion is one of the most life-affirming and least material-minded of all traditions.

Unlike Christian beliefs, life, as it is now, is not regarded as some falling away from an original state of perfection or primordial golden age. Life as we now encounter it is, as it was, initiated in the Dreaming. The present world is the seamless and undiminished extension of eternal spiritual reality. Just because a realm of human time and geographical space has come into existence, the primary reality of the Dreaming has not ceased to be. In this Aboriginal belief, the world of their present

is, so to speak, layered or projected like a film over the surface of the underlying and eternal background that is the Dreaming.

The stories from the Dreaming tell how the world came to be in its present form. The stories suggest that other choices might have been made, but in fact the ones that were made have set the terms of life ever since. While the Dreaming determines the present conditions of existence and life, the human response to that given situation is neither tragic and fatalistic nor rebellious and complaining. Rather, as the natural world is the materialisation of the Dreaming, traditional human existence is not seen as deficient in any way but already fulfilled and complete just as it is. Hence, in contrast to the themes of salvation, afterlife, Nirvana, Messianism or eschatology that are found in other religions, all such 'life-compensatory themes' are unnecessary in and absent from traditional Aboriginal religious thought and practice.

The whole of life is taken as Sacred, in the sense of having ultimate value: life is a miracle. A fundamental reverence for life pervades every aspect of daily and ceremonial activity. That reverence is extended to the landscape and the earth itself, for the ground is the original mother of all life and a living, conscious being in and of herself. All individual lives also receive the same reverence. Death adds, for example, are controlled but not obliterated. They are respected as having their own law and their own right to exist.

Attitude to life

In Aboriginal religion all of existence and life is continuous with the primordial spirit realm of the Dreaming. The major religions of the West and East, by contrast, distinguish between the Sacred and the profane, the supernatural and the natural. In the Aboriginal world there is no basis for such divisions, for everything is alive, interrelated and Sacred. Standing within the Sacred and being part of the spiritual process, Aboriginal religion has no need of reverent humility, prayer, praise, thanksgiving or sacrifice. There is no need for all the special behaviours that, in other traditions, make religious life different from daily living. In the Aboriginal context, living itself is religion.

Among the Yarralin people of the Northern Territory, yimaruk is one of the words for the continuous nature of life. In this sense, life endures as part of an ongoing process that infuses the whole cosmos.



It is universal in the sense that all living beings share in it, but it is also specific in that it is identified with particular individuals and often bears a close relationship to country. The yimaruk which a person has now was another person or animal before, and will become another person or animal later. (Stockton, p. 79)



Lake Tinaroo, Atherton Tablelands Natural features such as Lake Tinaroo are interwoven with the local aboriginal people's spirituality and Dreaming

The place of death

Although death may be unwelcome, it too is one of life's gifts. Death is seen as an integral and necessary part of life; it is one of the ways in which the lifeforce is transferred and transformed from one state or condition to another. Whatever is born must kill to eat and grow, and then it dies and is reborn. The whole cycle of life is a complete system in which all beings participate according to the laws of their respective Dreamings. Reverence for life allows respect for death; assent to life includes acceptance of death. In the ceaseless cycle of creative spiritual activity, one dies that another may live, each in its own time. Life consumes and transforms the living in order to bring forth new lives.

There are various rituals associated with death. These rites are directed to ensure that the spirit of the deceased has a safe passage on the way back to the spirit world and does not return to trouble the living. Some totem groups have the tradition of erecting a grave post which carries a stylised image of the dead person or a representation of the person's tribal totem. As we would expect, given the harmony between traditional life and the Dreaming, wellbeing in the afterlife is not influenced by the quality of the person's previous life.

Cultural responsibilities

The preservation and enhancement of life is the ultimate criterion of Aboriginal morality, and the ultimate purpose of Aboriginal Law. Law is based on the idea that the whole cosmos is a living and self-reproducing system in which all parts are alive, aware and related to one another and interconnected. Each part of the whole natural system has its own life and traditional ways, according to which it is responsible for maintaining itself, for contributing to the whole, and for respecting all other parts of the whole.

For the life of the cosmos to be preserved as a whole, the relationships between all the self-regulating parts of the cosmos must also be preserved. Each part is independent, neither superior nor inferior to other parts. Nevertheless, sometimes opposition arises, for example in lawful hunting, social disputes and land management. When faced with conflict, the attempt is not to destroy but to contain; each part is kept in balance with the other, and in equilibrium of power.

The Aboriginal universe is an organic whole; it is like one single living creature. Each individual life is self-governing, yet each life depends on every other. The same lifeforce empowers all lives, so that each life acts and reacts in tune with all others. In so doing, each tests the limits of its boundaries and the possibilities of its existence, for the benefit of itself and the whole living world. By way of analogy, we might think of how the various organs and cells in a healthy body all work separately and together for the overall wellbeing of the body. Maintaining this organic harmony calls for discipline to conform to the pattern of traditional ways. When living in tune with the lifeforce of the cosmos, every action, whether ritual or spontaneous, is part of the universal dance of life.

Cooperation or extinction

Traditional Aboriginal attitudes are a challenge to the individualistic thinking of the modern Western mind. For the last 300 years (from Thomas Hobbes (philosopher), through Charles Darwin (theory of evolution), to economic rationalism) we have been taught to believe that conflict is natural, that survival is for the fittest, and that greed is good. Yet environmental naturalists are becoming aware that symbiosis, or mutual cooperation between species, is equally if not more present in the dynamic of nature as a whole. The law in the heavily populated jungle may be 'Kill, or be killed', but 60 000



years or more of living in one of the most sparsely populated and demanding natural environments on earth has taught the Australian Aboriginals another principle of law: 'Cooperate, or die out'.

The traditional Aboriginals have been an integral part of their natural environment for a very long time. Standing behind each totemite is an unbroken line of direct ancestry reaching all the way back to the eternal beings who created the cosmos in the first place. The Aboriginals have had an extended opportunity to observe the natural world at close range, and they have simply articulated in Law what they have discovered themselves to be part of. From this viewpoint, it is in no way fanciful to hold that the Law stems from the creative acts of the Dreaming and is written on the landscape.

Conflict resolution

The traditional Aborigines see themselves linked by kinship ties to every part of the cosmos, and they see the cosmos itself as simply the furthest extension of the family and clan. So the Law found to operate on the cosmic level is naturally seen to apply on the social level. As in the environment, so in the society, relationships are typically marked by a strong sense of sharing and caring, which arises out of an awareness of mutual indebtedness.

Each part of society, whether it is an individual or a group, prizes its autonomy. The combative tendency of human beings is limited in its exercise by a sense of balance and equilibrium. When conflicts come up, as they will, one side sets out not to destroy but to contain the other. No more than sufficient retaliation is exacted. In the face of outside threat, such as that posed by European invasion, there has been a creative accommodation to test the limits of what may be salvaged, in terms of control and advantage, from an overall adverse situation.

The Dreaming, the land and identity

Land

The land is a cornerstone of traditional religion. It is the physical link between living humans and all that is invisible and eternal in their spiritual world. The Dreaming establishes the moral, social and psychological bond and interdependence between humans, ancestral beings and the natural environment.

The land is a Sacred place. It is the arena of creative activity in the Dreaming, which persists into the present. The land continues to be inhabited by the spirit ancestors who gave form to the landscape and its inhabitants, and who now rest at Sacred sites, or special life-centres. In these Sacred places, the dormant ancestors remain conscious and active; they continue releasing the spirit children and life-force of their totem. The world is so much a part of the ancestors that you might say they can maintain it in their sleep.

Songlines

The land is more than simply terrain studded with separate locations known as Sacred sites. The whole landscape is Sacred, to varying degrees. Underlying the physical contours of the land there are spiritual contours, the Dreaming tracks or Songlines, which can be seen by those who know how to look. By way of analogy, we might think of the isobars on a weather map or the contour lines on a survey map.

Those who know how to look, through initiation into traditional ways, have a mental map of their country. The map marks out where all the events of the Dreaming occurred. It is criss-crossed by lines where the totem ancestor travelled the Sacred tracks between camps and places of significant happenings, and highlighted are the ancestor's resting place and life-centres. It is this mental map in stylised form which the old man produces when he 'paints his Dreaming', or which is often reproduced in more or less summary form in designs on the tjurunga or other Sacred objects, on the ground and dancers in ceremonies, and in the meaning of traditional songs.





Songlines map the land Songlines as depicted in this painting are used to spiritually map the land

The land has a story to tell. Since the features of the land are the physical record of Dreaming events, an Aborigine can justifiably call the land 'my Bible'. The totemites can also call it 'my Law', because the spirit ancestor who gave form and life to the land also encoded in it an ethical system which was entrusted to the totem descendants. As they walk about the landscape, they are continually recalling the primordial events associated with each landmark. Back at their campsite they rehearse their memory of the Dreaming in storytelling, songs, ceremony and painting.

The purpose of people

The land calls on Aboriginals to cooperate with the creative cycle. Only that way can the land fulfil its own creative destiny. The country cares for those who belong to it, by sustaining their lives; and those who belong to the country care for it, through ceremony and land management.

The land, sky and stars and natural phenomena are regarded by the Aborigines as a vast sign system. They walk about in a world that is full of signs able to be understood by the totemites. To convey the feeling of the commands embedded in the landscape, we may draw a very modest analogy with a well-established garden in the front yard of a home. To a casual passer-by, the garden looks like a pretty place to be; to the skilled gardener, the yard is crowded with imperatives to 'water here', 'weed there', 'prune this', 'shade that'. The whole landscape of nature speaks with a similar voice to the initiated Aborigine.

Conscientious caring for the land has the quality and status of ceremony. It is a means by which the continuation of the creative acts of the Dreaming is assured. Each totemite, each group, each species is responsible for singing to perpetuate the traditional region; while all parts combine in an orchestrated song for the country as a whole. On a more pragmatic yet nonetheless religious level, care for the country entails keeping it 'clean' (fire management), a cautious use of its resources, observing totemic taboos (for instance leaving reserves for species near their Sacred sites), and educating the young to carry on the tradition of caring.

Identity

The European may readily speak about 'identifying with the land'. But most often it is only a metaphor for affection and solidarity. It is typical of European thought to regard nature as a completely separate entity. The land is something upon which one walks as a superior,



Escarpment The Australian landscape provides physical and spiritual nourishment. Significant landscape features such as this escarpment often have spiritual importance.



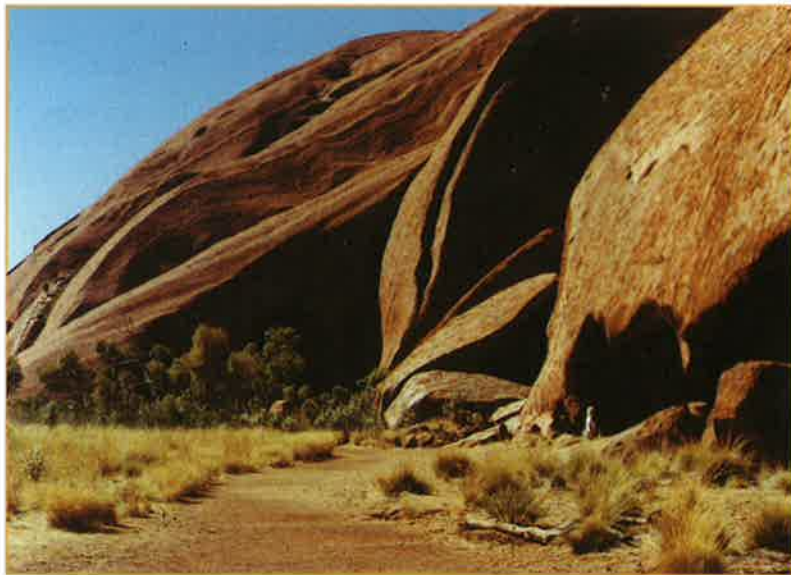
intelligent being, and which one uses as an object for economic gain or personal pleasure. The Aboriginal, in contrast, speaks of real identity: 'I am the Land'. The elders and those initiated into traditional ways feel part of the whole interrelated environment; they are, in fact, part of every other part, just as every other part is part of them.

The tribal Aboriginal is enmeshed with the land in a genuine dynamic of interconnected identity. The land is not just the surface area, but includes the flora, the fauna and even the celestial bodies, in a corporate organic whole which is as alive, aware, intelligent, self-conscious and communicative as any of its parts. The land itself is a living creature with a mind of its own.

Such thinking is absurd to anyone committed to the universe of classical Newtonian science. Yet the idea of a universe 'alive and aware' bears remarkable affinities with trends in both medieval science and the new physics of quantum mechanics.

The spiritual nature of reality

In terms of their general philosophy, the Aboriginals believe that spiritual beings created both the world



Uluru, Red Centre Uluru and Kata Tjuta provide physical evidence of feats performed during the creation period. The Anangu people are the direct descendants of these beings and are responsible for the protection and appropriate management of these ancestral lands. The knowledge necessary to fulfill these responsibilities has been passed down from generation to generation from the Tjukurpa. Uluru is famous for its rock paintings believed to have been created by the spirit ancestor during the Dreaming.

and the Aboriginals themselves. A formal kinship is held to exist between each group and its traditional lands, including the non-human inhabitants, because all are descended from the same creative spirits. These ancestral spirits left the world full of signs that they were, and remain, gracious and well-disposed towards their human and non-human offspring.

The traditional wisdom of the group enables people to understand the meaning of the visible signs left by the ancestors. For example, elders know the correlation between the first appearance of certain berries and the seasonal availability of water in otherwise dry sinks. By reading the signs in the light of traditional wisdom, the Aboriginals see in them the unchanging pattern that human life should follow year by year in relation to the natural environment. They also see that, by following the spiritual pattern of life, people are assured of always receiving protection and care from the ancestral spirits.

Human nature

The human person is believed to be composed of a physical body and several spiritual principles or elements. The individual person is regarded as having value in himself or herself, as well as having value for others; and the spirit ancestors are concerned that people show each other proper respect. Indeed, the aim of the main religious cults among the Aboriginals is to conserve and renew life in all its variety. Cultic traditions include practices to affirm and encourage the creative lifeforces that animate and sustain the world of nature and people, and with which the Aboriginals are bonded in body, soul and spirit.

Spiritual discipline

The physical part of life, and of people themselves, is considered to be under spiritual authority. Accordingly, people do not think or act without knowledge of or regard for the spiritual nature of life, including physical life. Even the souls of the dead share in maintaining the authority and providence of the spiritual world. In fact, the core of religious practice among the first Australians is to bring the life of the individual person under a physical,



moral and spiritual discipline. That discipline involves understanding the Sacred tradition of the group and ensuring that one's life conforms to the pattern ordained by that tradition. In this way, the life of the individual person is given value, meaning and purpose within the life of the group and the environment as a whole.

Affirming the mystery

The whole mood of Aboriginal religion is to accept life as it comes: a mixture of good and bad, of joy and suffering, of hardships and nurture. All aspects of life are celebrated, the bad with the good. Aboriginal rituals and daily life contain objects and activities that are rich with symbolic value. These symbols point towards the spirit ancestors who are revealed in the signs that fill their world. Religion, nature and culture are interdependent.

Recent history

The Anglo-Celtic culture imported into Australia by the First Fleet in 1788 had little regard for the natural environment and no place for its hundreds of thousands of indigenous people. The natural world was regarded as a hostile resource to be conquered and exploited, and the Aboriginals were simply expected to die out. During the 19th century the Aboriginal population was savagely diminished (in many places completely wiped out) by murder, introduced diseases and forcible removal from traditional lands.

Until the 1970s, government assimilation policies forcibly removed thousands of infants and children from their parents, the 'stolen generation', and placed them in institutions or white homes. This sadly misguided affair is poignantly depicted in the film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. These children were forbidden to speak Aboriginal languages and were cut off from their culture for years at a time. But many have reasserted their identity and reclaimed their kin or made new communities in the towns.

In recent times the values and perspectives of the Aboriginal people (along with the people themselves) have begun to re-emerge as a moral and spiritual resource for the whole society. Although much Aboriginal lore and

environmental understanding has been lost over the last two centuries (because the custodians of the Sacred traditions were killed off by European settlement), the Aboriginal spirit is too deeply grounded in the land to be permanently extinguished. Indeed, the Rainbow Serpent myth is the oldest known creation story still in use.

The number of indigenous people is now on the increase. In the 1996 census over 350 000 people identified themselves as Aboriginals or Torres Strait Islanders. That figure represents about two per cent of the total Australian population. Almost one-quarter said they were Anglicans, another quarter identified themselves as Catholics, and a further quarter said they had no religion. Between 1991 and 1996 there was a significant rise in the number of people who described themselves as practising traditional Aboriginal religions. The figure increased by 3027 to a total of 7357, which constitutes about two per cent of the whole indigenous population.

One of the happier developments in recent Australian society is the belated discovery of the spiritual depths of the much older religions of the Aboriginals, together with real appreciation of their Sacred sites, especially Uluru in the Red Centre. In these early years of the 21st century, Aboriginal spirituality is at last beginning to receive its due recognition and proper place in 'Terra Australis del Espiritu Santo', this Great South Land of the Holy Spirit.



Tea tree scrub The tea tree is featured in some Dreamings. The bark is used for shelters and the leaves in medicines. The Bundjalung people of New South Wales use tea tree to treat insect bites, burns and cuts.

