

Religion and Ceremony

Aboriginal Religion

Aboriginal religion, like many other religions, is characterised by having a god or gods who created people and the surrounding environment during a particular creation period at the beginning of time. Aboriginal people are very religious and spiritual, but rather than praying to a single god they cannot see, each group generally believes in a number of different deities, whose image is often depicted in some tangible, recognisable form. This form may be that of a particular landscape feature, an image in a rock art shelter, or in a plant or animal form.

Aboriginal Ceremony



Wandjina bring the Wet Season rains to the people of the Kimberley.

Landscape features may be the embodiment of the deity itself, such as a particular rock representing a specific figure, or they may be the result of something the deity did or that happened to the deity in the Creation Period, such as a river having formed when the Rainbow Serpent passed through the area in the Creation Period, or a depression in a rock or in the ground representing the footprint or sitting place of an Ancestral Being.

Aboriginal people do not believe in animism. This is the belief that all natural objects possess a soul. They do not believe that a rock possesses a soul, but they might believe that a particular rock outcrop was created by a particular deity in the creation period, or that it represents a deity from the Creation Period. They believe that many animals and plants are interchangeable with human life through re-incarnation of the spirit or soul, and that this relates back to the Creation Period when these animals and plants were once people.

There is no one deity covering all of Australia. Each tribe has its own deities with an overlap of beliefs, just as there is an overlap of words between language groups. Thus, for example, the *Wandjina* spirits in the northern Kimberley of Western Australia belong to the *Ngarinyin*, *Worora* and *Wunambal* tribes. These *Wandjina* are responsible for bringing the Wet Season rains, as well as laying down many of the laws for the people. As one travels east, this function is taken over by *Yagjagbula* and *Jabirringgi*, The Lightning Brothers of the *Wardaman* tribe in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory, then by *Nargorkun*, also known as *Bula*, in the upper Katherine River area, and by *Namarrgun*, the Lightning Man in the Kakadu and western Arnhem Land regions.

The Lightning Brothers in the Victoria River District, Northern Territory



Aboriginal deities have many roles and no single description or term can describe all of these. Based on their primary role, they fall into three main categories, and any one deity may belong to one, two, or all three of these categories:

(a) **Creation Beings** (also: Creation Figure). Many are involved with the creation of people, the landscape, and aspects of the environment, such as the creation of red, yellow or white pigments, so can be called “Creation Figures” or “Creation Beings”.

(b) **Ancestral Beings**. In many examples, these deities are regarded as the direct ancestors of the people living today and so they are “Ancestral Figures”, “Ancestral Beings”, “Ancestral Heroes”, or “Dreamtime Ancestors”. Here, the one term “Ancestral Being” is used to describe these deities.

Ancestral Beings have taught the first people how to make tools and weapons, hunt animals and collect food, they have laid down the laws that govern their society, and the correct way to conduct ceremonies.

Even though regarded as ancestors of the people, such deities may not appear in a human form, but may be plant or animal, for example. In Aboriginal religious belief, a person’s spirit may return in human, animal or plant form after death. So an Ancestral Being may have the appearance of a plant or animal, but have done deeds similar to a human in the past.

(c) **Totemic Beings**. / Totemic ancestors. A Totemic Being represents the original form of an animal, plant or other object (totem), as it was in the Creation Period. The concept of a Totemic Being overlaps with that of a Creation Being and an Ancestral Being because the Totemic Being may create the abundance of species, and people see themselves as being derived from the different Totemic Beings.

Society is divided into two groups, called moieties, each with specific Totemic Beings belonging to it. Every person belongs to one or the other moiety. These moieties are further divided into sections or subsections, sometimes based on totemic beings. Every individual has come from at least one Totemic Being, and these help define a person’s origins and connections with the world, their relationships with the past, present and future.

For example, a person connected with a yam (native potato) totem might believe that he was a yam in a previous life, that some yams are his relatives, and that a particularly prominent rock feature in his clan estate represents the embodiment of his yam ancestor. This, or another area nearby, might also be an “increase centre” where rituals are performed to ensure the maintenance of this food supply. Each clan will have several totems, so this person will have a close human relative living on the same clan estate who is not of the yam totem. That person might belong to the kangaroo totem and similarly be related to kangaroos and have another feature of the landscape representing their kangaroo totem.

Ancestral Beings

In order to keep the terminology manageable, the term “Ancestral Being” is used here to describe all Aboriginal deities, rather than including the terms “Creation Being” and “Totemic Being”. There are hundreds of Ancestral Beings throughout Australia, recorded by Aborigines in their stories, songs, body paintings and art. This includes recordings in the rock paintings and petroglyphs (rock carvings) dating back thousands of years.

Some Aboriginal stories relating to Ancestral Beings were recorded by early Europeans and published as children’s story books.

Ancestral Beings are an intrinsic part of Aboriginal belief and everyday thought. As one moves through the day, walking past a particular rock or creek, spearing a particular animal, catching a goanna (large lizard), or collecting other bush foods, the Ancestral Beings who created these places and things come to mind. Even making tools and weapons will bring to mind the myths and legends of the Ancestral Beings who taught the Aborigines these skills.

Each Ancestral Being has its own creation story, has performed specific activities in the Creation Period, and has played a specific role in relation to laying down the laws for people to follow or in creating the landscape. This information is contained in the body of songs, dances, stories and paintings for each clan or tribe and is revered during certain ceremonies.

The Creation Period – The Dreamtime

Similar to other religions, there was a time in Aboriginal belief when things were created. This “Creation Period” was the time when the Ancestral Beings created landforms, such as certain animals digging, creating lagoons or pushing up mountain ranges, or the first animals or plants being made. The Aboriginal word for this Creation Period varies throughout Australia and each linguistic region has its own beliefs pertaining to that particular area. For example, it is known as *Alcheringa (Aldjuringa)* amongst the Aranda of Central Australia, as *Lalai* in the Kimberley, and as *Nayuhyungki* amongst the Kunwinjku (Gunwinggu) east of Kakadu National Park.

Aboriginal people often interpret dreams as being the memory of things that happened during this Creation Period. Dreams are also important because they can be a time when we are transformed back into that ancestral time. This linking of dreams to the Creation Period has led people to adopt the general term “The Dreamtime” in order to describe the time of creation in their religion. The term “Dreamtime” in Aboriginal mythology is not really about a person having a dream, but rather, a reference to this Creation Period.

All aspects of Aboriginal culture are full of legends and beings associated with this Creation Period, or Dreamtime. Each tribe has many stories, often with a lesson to be learned or a moral tale, about the Creation Period deities, animals, plants, and other beings. These stories are told to children, discussed around campfires, and are sung and acted out in plays and dances during the times of ceremony. When an adolescent progresses through their phases of initiation, they learn the more important, senior and secret parts of these stories, and this knowledge is reinforced by the acting-out of more secret-sacred rituals, songs and dances



Men dancing, holding a boomerang in one hand and a club in the other. Cobar, New South Wales.

Images relating to the Creation Period are a feature in art forms on weapons, utensils, body painting, ground designs, bark paintings, and rock art. The stories of The Dreamtime form the basis of Aboriginal religion, behaviour, law and order in society.

How long ago was the Creation Period in the minds of Aboriginal people? What is their concept of its timing, since they had no written chronicle of time?

Archaeological studies currently show that Aboriginal people have been in Australia at least 60,000 years. In the 1970s that figure was thought to be 40,000 years, which is the limit of how far back carbon dating can go. This latter figure was widely publicised at the time and many Australian people, including Aborigines, know the 40,000 year figure. So, if you ask an Aboriginal person today, they will tell you the Creation Period / Dreamtime goes back before 40,000 years.



Ceremony

But what was their concept before this knowledge? This question was put to people in the past, and the answer was about five or six generations of people previous to the existing time. In other words, a person would have a knowledge of their father, grandfather, great grandfather, and great-great grandfather, but the next generation or a few more before that was when their relatives lived in the Creation Period and were kangaroo people, plant people, or took on some other form.

This shortened concept of time may be universal within the origin of religions. For example, in the religions of Judaism and Christianity, the Bible's Old Testament tells how God created the entire universe, including the four major rivers local to Babylon (now Iraq and Iran), in 6 days. It then goes to great lengths to describe many of the people who lived following Adam and Eve, the first people. The earliest bible stories may have only been in oral form, later becoming written in Aramaic and Hebrew possibly around 1700 B.C.. and read as though the time of creation was about 4,000 B.C.. However, since modern dating techniques have placed the earth's age at about 3,600 million years, many people embracing those religions today

Information sourced from: www.aboriginalculture.com.au March 2011

still believe that God created mankind and the universe, but imagine this happening over a different time scale to that described in the bible. For all of us, the concept of a million years of humanity and thousands of millions of years of existence for our planet is beyond our comprehension.

Ceremonial Life



Men decorated for ceremony, holding an object representing an important totem

To this day, ceremonies play an important part in Aboriginal life. Small ceremonies, or **rituals**, are still practised in some remote parts of Australia, such as in Arnhem Land and Central Australia, in order **to ensure a supply** of plant and animal foods. These take the form of chanting, singing, dancing or ritual action to invoke the Ancestral Beings to ensure a good supply of food or rain.

The most important ceremonies are connected with the **initiation of boys and girls** into adulthood. Such ceremonies sometimes last for weeks, with nightly singing and dancing, story telling, and the display of body decoration and ceremonial objects. During these ceremonies, the songs and stories connected to each of the Ancestral Beings are told and retold, some being “open” for women and children to see and hear, others being restricted or “secret-sacred”, only for the initiates to learn.

Ceremony

Funeral ceremonies. Another important time for ceremonies is on the death of a person, when people often paint themselves white, cut their own bodies to show their remorse for the loss of their loved one, and conduct a series of rituals, songs and dances to ensure the person’s spirit leaves the area and returns to its birth place, from where it can later be reborn.



Men covered in white clay, preparing the bones of two deceased, which will be placed in the two decorated hollow logs. Yirrkala, Arnhem Land. 1947.

Burial practices vary throughout Australia, people being buried in parts of southern and central Australia, but having quite a different burial in the north. Across much of northern Australia, a person’s burial has two stages, each accompanied by ritual and ceremony.

The **primary burial** is when the corpse is layed out on an elevated wooden platform, covered in leaves and branches, and left several months for the flesh to rot away from the bones. The **secondary burial** is when the bones are collected from the platform, painted with red ochre, and then dispersed in different ways. Sometimes a relative will carry a portion of the bones with them for a year or more.

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Sometimes they are wrapped in paperbark and deposited in a cave shelter, where they are left to disintegrate with time. In parts of Arnhem Land the bones are placed into a large hollow log and left at a designated area of bushland. The hollow log is a dead tree trunk which has been naturally hollowed out by the action of termites.

Aboriginal rock art records ceremonies dating back tens of thousands of years, yet still continued to this day. A man dances a pose with his arms outstretched, holding a short stick in each hand, this photo being taken in Darwin in about the 1920s. Early Kimberley rock art records the same pose with a person holding short sticks in each hand.



Conical and “bucket” headdresses are worn during a public performance ceremony in Alice Springs. Two boomerangs are used as clap sticks to beat time for the singing. The conical headdress and knees bent in a dancing pose appear in the early rock art of the Kimberley.