

Dreams in aboriginal beliefs



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Like other religions, Aboriginal belief includes when things were created. They believe that their Ancestral Beings created land forms and animals & plants. The Aboriginal word for this Creation Period varies according to each linguistic region throughout Australia. Aboriginal people often interpret dreams as being the memory of things that happened in this Creation Period. Dreams are important to Aboriginal people as it is a time when they are transformed back to their ancestral time. This connection of dreams to the Creation Period has led to the commonly used term "The Dreamtime" to describe the time of creation in Aboriginal religion. The Dreamtime does not mean that a person is dreaming but it is a reference to the Creation Period.

Definition of Dreaming

The Dreamtime, or the Dreaming as it is sometimes referred to as, has no beginning or end but links the past with the present to determine the future. Dreaming stories explain the truth from the past together with a Code of Law for the present. The Dreaming or 'Tjukurrpa' also means 'to see and understand the law' as translated from the Arrernte language. Dreaming stories pass on important knowledge, cultural values and belief systems to later generations. Aborigines have maintained a link with the Dreaming from ancient times by expressing dreaming stories through song, dance, painting and story telling.

Every part of Aboriginal culture is full of legends and beings associated with the Dreamtime. Each tribe has many stories, often containing a moral or a lesson to be learned, about duties, animals, plants and other beings. These

stories are told to children, talked about campfires, and are sung and acted out during ceremonies.

“ The Dreaming means our identity as people. The cultural teaching and everything that’s part of our lives here you know? it’s the understanding of what we have around us.” (Merv Penrith Elder, Wallaga Lake, 1996)

Today we know where the Ancestral Beings have been and where they came to rest. The Dreaming explains how people came to Australia and the links between the groups throughout Australia.

Connection between Dreaming, Land and Identity

In essence, the Dreaming comes from the land. In Aboriginal society people do not own land but rather the land is part of them and it is their duty to respect and look after the land. The Dreaming did not cease when the Europeans arrived in Australia but just entered a different phase.

Dreaming stories connect theories of occupation to the Aborigines close relationship with the land. This is often described by Aboriginal people when they talk about the land as “ my Mother”. Aboriginal people believe that the same spirits who created the land, sea, waterways and life are involved with the conception and birth of a child. There is a direct link between Ancestral Beings and life.

Land is fundamental to the well-being of Aboriginal people. For Aborigines the land is not just rocks or soil or minerals but it is the whole environment that sustains the people and is sustained by the people and culture. For Aboriginal people the land is the centre of all spirituality. This relationship

between the land and the people continues to be central to the issues that are important to Aboriginal people today.

Australian Aborigines were originally hunters and gathers with each clan or tribe having its own territory from which they gathered all they needed to live. These territories or ' traditional lands' were contained by geographic boundaries such as rivers, lakes and mountains. Aboriginal people understood and cared for the different environments and adapted to them.

Example of a Dreaming Creation story and significance to Aboriginal people

Once the Ancestor Beings had created the world they changed the stars, rocks, watering holes and other objects into sacred places. These sacred places have special properties. The Ancestral Beings did not disappear at the end of the Dreaming but, according to Aboriginal belief, they remained in these sacred places. This concept of the presence of the Ancestral Beings with the land reinforces the idea that the Dreaming is never ending and links the past and the present, the people and the land.

“ Our story is in the land it is written in those sacred places My children will look after those places. That’s the law.” (Bill Neidjie, Kakadu Elder)

The Creation or Dreaming stories, which relate the travels of the spiritual ancestors, are integral to Aboriginal spirituality. Men’s and women’s stories are often separated in Aboriginal culture. Knowledge of the law and Dreaming stories is passed on at different periods of life for Aboriginal people. The serpent as a Creation Being is perhaps the oldest continuing

religious belief in the world. It dates back several thousand years. The Rainbow Serpent is part of Dreamtime stories of many Aboriginal nations and is always linked with watercourses such as billabongs, rivers, creeks and lagoons. The Rainbow Serpent is the protector of the land, its people and the source of all life. However, the Rainbow Serpent can also be a force that destroys if it is not respected.

The most common version of the Rainbow Serpent story relates that during the Dreaming the world was flat, bare and cold. The Rainbow Serpent slept under the ground with all the animals tribes in her belly waiting to be born. When the time came she pushed up and called all the animals to come from their sleep. She pushed the land out, making rivers and lakes. She made the sun, the fire and all the colours.

The Gagudju people believe the Rainbow Serpent was called Almudji and was a major creature being. It made passages through rocks and created waterholes. Today they believe, Almudji is still a creator as it brings the wet season each year. This causes all forms of life to multiply and it appears in the sky as a rainbow. However, they also believe that Almudji is also to be feared as he can punish anyone who breaks the law by drowning them in floods. The Gagudju people still believe that Almudji lives in a pool under a waterfall.

The Jowoyyn people of the Katherine Gorge area of the Northern Territory relate how the Rainbow Serpent slept under the ground until she awoke in the Dreaming. She pushed her way to the surface and travelled the land, sleeping when she was tired. She left behind her winding tracks and the

imprint of her sleeping body on the ground. When she had finished travelling the earth she returned and called all the frogs to come out but they were slow because their bellies were full of water. The Rainbow Serpent tickled their bellies and when they laughed, water flowed out their mouths and filled the tracks and hollows left by the Rainbow Serpent, so creating rivers and lakes. This woke all the animals and plants who then followed the Rainbow Serpent across the land.

Traditional Aboriginal rituals and significance of these to Aboriginal people

Ceremonial ceremonies are seen as the core of cultural life for Aboriginal people. Small ceremonies, or rituals, are still practised in some remote areas of Australia. These rituals take the form of chanting, singing, dancing or ritual action to ask the Ancestral Beings to ensure a good supply of food or rain.

The most important ceremonies are connected to initiation of boys and girls into adulthood. These ceremonies can last for weeks with nightly singing and dancing, story telling and use of body decorations and ceremonial objects. During the ceremonies, songs and dances about Ancestral Beings are told. Some of these are for women and children to see and hear while others are restricted just to initiates to learn.

Another important ritual is on the death of a person. Aboriginal people cover their bodies with white paint, cut themselves to show sorrow for the loss of their loved one and take part in a number of rituals, songs and dances to help the person's spirit leave and return to its birth place where it can be

reborn. Burial rites differ throughout Australia. People are buried in parts of southern and central Australia but have a different burial in northern Australia. In northern Australia a burial has two stages with each accompanied by ritual and ceremony. The primary burial takes place when the body is placed on a raised wooden platform, covered with leaves and branches and left for several months so the flesh rots from the bones. The secondary burial occurs when the bones are collected, painted with red ochre and then scattered in different ways. Sometimes a relative will carry some of the bones with them for a year or more. Sometimes they are wrapped in paperbark and placed in a cave. In parts of Arnhem Land the bones are placed in a large hollow log and left in the bush.

Conclusion

All parts of Aboriginal culture contain many legends and beings associated with the Creation Period or Dreamtime. Each tribe has its own stories, often with a lesson to be learned from the story, about the Creation Period spirits, animals, plants and other beings. These stories are told to children and at different ceremonies throughout the life of an Aborigine to ensure that the Dreamtime is passed on to each generation.