

ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY

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What Is Aboriginal Spirituality?

Aboriginal spirituality is defined as at the core of **Aboriginal** being, their (our) very identity. It gives meaning to all aspects of life including relationships with one another and the environment. All objects are living and share the same soul and spirit as **Aboriginal people**. There is a kinship with the environment. Aboriginal spirituality can be expressed visually, musically and ceremonially (EK Grant)



Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann (Farrelly 2003) Aboriginal Spirituality derives from a philosophy that establishes the wholistic notion of the interconnectedness of the elements of the earth and the universe, animate and inanimate, whereby people, the plants and animals, landforms and celestial bodies are interrelated. These relations and the knowledge of how they are interconnected are expressed, and why it is important to keep all things in healthy interdependence is encoded, in sacred stories or myths.

The creation ancestors thus laid down not only the foundations of all life, but also what people had to do to maintain their part of this interdependence—the Law.

The Law ensures that each person knows his or her connectedness and responsibilities for other people (their kin), for country (including watercourses, landforms, the species and the universe), and for their ongoing relationship with the ancestor spirits themselves.



Spirituality and Well Being

As part of the research for a project on the connections between Aboriginal wellbeing and cultural heritage in 2006, a focus group of members of the Aboriginal community in Redfern identified Spirituality as the foremost factor affecting their wellbeing. This group was representative of perhaps the most urbanised contemporary Aboriginal people in Australia at this time.

The summary of their definition of Spirituality indicates the enduring nature of this belief system, despite more than 200 years of colonial rule in New South Wales that has discouraged Aboriginal Spiritual belief and practice: Spirituality is a feeling, with a base in connectedness to the past, ancestors, and the values that they represent, for example, respect for elders, a moral/ethical path.

It is about being in an Aboriginal cultural space, experiencing community and connectedness with land and nature including proper nutrition and shelter. Feeling good about oneself, proud of being an Aboriginal person. It is a state of being that includes knowledge, calmness, acceptance and tolerance, balance and focus, inner strength, cleansing and inner peace, feeling whole, an understanding of cultural roots and 'deep wellbeing' (Grievies 2006a:52).



Understanding of Creation

Creation—‘originating from eternity’ The common core of Aboriginal Spirituality that exists in groups across the whole of Australia is the philosophy out of which values, ethics, protocols, behaviours and all social, political and economic organisation is developed. The basis of this philosophy is the idea of creation, the time when powerful creator spirits or spirit ancestors made sense out of chaos and produced the life forms and landscapes as we know them, and then sometimes lay down to rest or took to the sky (Johnson 1998; Tripcony 1999; Andrews 2004).

Many non-Aboriginal writers and some Aboriginal people have recorded these creation stories from different parts of the country over time. These stories are often characterised as the Dreaming and, as with Spirituality, the English words are not equivalent to the meaning that exists in Aboriginal languages for the basis of the philosophy, and for the Spirituality that is encompassed within it. Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, a late nineteenth-century anthropologist and an ethnographer respectively, translated the Arrernte words *altijira ngambakala* as ‘dreaming’, and *altjira rama* as meaning ‘to dream’ (Spencer & Gillen 1899).



The linguist T. G. H. Strehlow, who grew up the son of missionaries among Arrernte at Hermannsburg in Central Australia in the early twentieth century, noted that the word *altjira* also means 'eternal', and so the idea of dreaming also includes the 'seeing' of eternal things during sleep. Thus, the more accurate translation would be 'originating from eternity' (Stockton 1995:54).



Further, the English word Dreaming is not equivalent to the meanings that exist in Aboriginal languages to refer to the time and events of creation and the laws laid down at the time, nor to the active and powerful ongoing work of these sustaining spirits. Nevertheless, the term Dreaming has become a gloss used within Australian English.

As the creation stories contain the blueprint for all life, some Aboriginal Elders prefer to use the word Law. The Dreaming or the Law are so much more than either term can convey in English, and so much more than a philosophy confined to religion in the Western understanding. In English there is no equivalent understanding of the word. These English terms carry the burden of communicating what life itself is all about, in every manifestation and meaning, in all time, and as such they are not at all equivalent to the Aboriginal meaning.



The creation stories vary from region to region, in content and emphasis. They contain, however, the same basic elements; for example, the creative beings are responsible for the features of the land and the entire natural world, including the species and plant life. Their creative activity was formative and that which they created—the whole world, animate and inanimate—continues to be imbued with their life force. These creative acts took place over a period of time but the creator spirits pre-existed this work and continue to live an animate all life in their now non-visible forms. Creator spirits, in bringing all things to life, taught the people they created how they were related to the animate and inanimate world around them, and to the spirits themselves



The creation ancestors are numerous and varied, and they interacted as they travelled. Perhaps one of the best known is the Rainbow Serpent. Although found in most parts of Australia, the Rainbow Serpent is of great importance in some areas but a lesser spirit in others. It is associated with watercourses, rivers, creeks and billabongs and is represented in rock art up to 6000 years old.

The following is a short version of the creation story of the Anangu, people whose lands include Uluru: The world was once a featureless place. None of the places we know existed until creator beings, in the forms of people, plants and animals, travelled widely across the land.



Then, in a process of creation and destruction, they formed the landscape as we know it today. Anangu land is still inhabited by the spirits of dozens of these ancestral creator beings, which are referred to as Tjukuritja or Waparitja. The journeys and activities of the creator beings are recorded in the landscape. Sites where significant events in their story took place are linked by what we call, iwara (paths or tracks). Some of the sites are so very significant that they are known as 'sacred sites'. Today our people still know where these sites and these iwara are and where they go although there is no physical road. Our grandmothers and grandfathers teach us this. The iwara link places that are sometimes hundreds of kilometres outside the Park and beyond Yankunytjatjara/ Pitjantjatjara country.





The *Waugal* is a snake or rainbow serpent recognised by Noongar as the giver of life, maintaining all fresh water sources. It was the *Waugal* that made Noongar people custodians of the land.

Noongar spirituality lies in the belief of a cultural landscape and the connection between the human and spiritual realms. Everything in our vast landscape has meaning and purpose. Life is a web of inter-relationships where *maam* and *yok* (men and women) and nature are partners, and where *kura* (long ago, the past) is always connected to *yey* (present). Through our paintings, music and *koroboree/kobori* (dance) we are paying respect to our ancestral creators, and at the same time, strengthening our belief systems. Noongar connection with nature and *boodja* (country) signifies a close relationship with spiritual beings associated with the land. We express this through our caring for *boodja* and observing Noongar lore through an oral tradition of story-telling.

Noongar spirituality is one of many *kaartdijin* systems within Aboriginal Australia, and like other knowledge systems, there is diversity in our Noongar interpretations



Ngarrindjeri Vision for Country: Our Lands, Our Waters, Our People, All Living Things are connected. We implore people to respect our Ruwe (Country) as it was created in the Kaldowinyeri (the Creation). We long for sparkling, clean waters, healthy land and people and all living things. We long for the Yarlularu (Sea Country) of our ancestors. Our vision is all people Caring, Sharing, Knowing and Respecting the lands, the waters and all living things

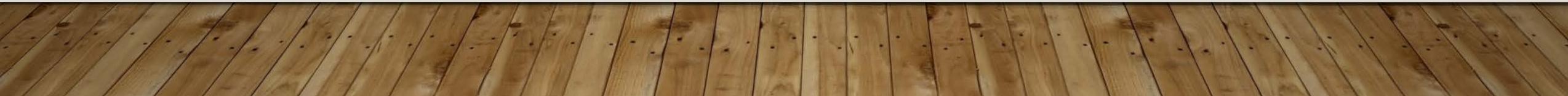


1. Aboriginal spirituality is animistic (Rev Graham Paulson)

In an animistic world every thing is interconnected, people, plants and animals, landforms and celestial bodies are part of a larger reality. In this world, nothing is inanimate, everything is alive; animals, plants, and natural forces, all are energised by a spirit. As such, humans are on an equal footing with nature; are part of nature and are morally obligated to treat animals, plants and landforms with respect.

In this world, the invisible and the visible pulse with the same life and the sacred is not separated from the secular, they are interconnected and interactive. But also in this world, the unseen spiritual forces are stronger and hold sway over all nature.

A healthy respect for the power of spirit forces is learned from early childhood, particularly in relation to religious or social taboos. These spiritual forces are believed to have the power to make rain, foster natural growth, assist in hunting and food gathering and even to the finding of spouses or partners. It is also believed that they have the power to act against the wishes of people if the correct ceremonies and/or rituals are not practised or observed. And it is believed that crossing the boundaries of social taboos will also incur their wrath.



2. Aboriginal spirituality is a cosmogony

Cosmogony is a theory or story of the origin of the universe. Aboriginal cosmogony begins at the 'Dreamtime'. This is the time before the world was shaped the way we know it to be now.

Hidden in the sky, in the sea and under the surface of the earth are dreamtime heroes, also called creation ancestors, who are part human, in terms of their emotions and intellect, part animal bird or reptile, in terms of their physical shape, and part super-human in terms of their power and their creative ability. At some point in the dreaming they emerged from their hidden worlds and as a result of their actions and inter-actions they shaped the world as we have it today.

3. Aboriginal spirituality is earthly

Vicki Grieves (2009) explains:

“These ancestors created order out of chaos, form out of formlessness, life out of lifelessness, and, as they did so, they established the ways in which all things should live in interconnectedness so as to maintain order and sustainability. The creation ancestors thus laid down not only the foundations of all life, but also what people had to do to maintain their part of this interdependence—the Law. The Law ensures that each person knows his or her connectedness and responsibilities for other people (their kin), for cntry (including watercourses, landforms, the species and the universe), and for their ongoing relationship with the ancestor spirits themselves.”



4. Aboriginal spirituality is totemic

A totem is a natural object, plant or animal that is inherited by members of a clan or family as their spiritual emblem. Totems define peoples' roles and responsibilities, and their relationships with each other and creation.

Totems are believed to be the descendants of the Dreamtime heroes, or totemic beings. Dreamtime heroes are linked to space and place. The places from which they emerged and travelled, and inter-acted with other spirit-beings, all become associated with the particular hero or heroes and are valued according to the importance of that part of creation to the local tribal group.

Each clan family belonging to the group is responsible for the stewardship of their totem: the flora and fauna of their area as well as the stewardship of the sacred sites attached to their area. This stewardship consists not only of the management of the physical resources ensuring that they are not plundered to the point of extinction, but also the spiritual management of all the ceremonies necessary to ensure adequate rain and food resources at the change of each season.

A typical boy's story might begin before he is even born. As his mother becomes conscious of his first movement in the womb she immediately has to take note of the area so that the infant will become identified with the spirit of the particular area in which she is located. This is based on the belief that the spirit of that area has energised the infant in the womb and the child becomes inextricably linked with the spirit associated with the dominant creation of that place, as his conception totem.



5. Aboriginal spirituality is oral

At the point of birth the child has allocated to him the appropriate birth totem. He automatically receives a skin totem and a clan totem. His spiritual responsibility in life will be to learn the songs and dances, and how to perform the ceremonies, that are associated with those totems so as to energise the relevant spirit within those parts of creation. As each clan family walks their country the law of averages ensures that different people become associated with different parts and the whole area will ultimately be cared for.

6. Aboriginal spirituality is hierarchical

This aspect of Aboriginality is not very well understood by many people in traditional communities today let alone urban communities. The gaining of power by the acquiring of traditional and ceremonial knowledge is an experience only reserved for the initiated whose personality and character satisfy their traditional elders.

Author: Graham Paulson

