



Too obvious to see: Explaining the basis of Aboriginal spirituality

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Introduction

In 1798 — just ten years after the first fleet arrived at Sydney Cove — another English visitor, David Collins, recorded in a diary his observations of our land and people. With particular reference to “religion” or systems of beliefs held by Aboriginal people he encountered, he noted the following:

It has been asserted ... that no country has been discovered where some traces of religion was not to be found. From every observation and inquiry that could be made among these people, they appear to be an exception to this opinion. (Collins, 1798)

This view conforms with the concept of *terra nullius*, or “uninhabited land”, that was the basis upon which possession of this land was taken in 1770 and, until 1992, of the introduced laws and practices since British settlement. Initially, Europeans making contact with Aboriginal groups had no notion of the significance of place or “country” to Indigenous groups. They neither saw nor understood the complexity of Aboriginal society, organised into moieties, clans and intricate kinship systems based on strictly applied laws and observances. Because there appeared to be no recognisable formal government, Europeans did not acknowledge the existence of a system of authority based on physical and spiritual knowledge and experience — a system in which control was maintained by way of rights and responsibilities towards other people and towards “country”.

Almost two hundred years after David Collins wrote in his diary, a national report on recommendations by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody confirmed his comment:



The official record keepers saw all, recorded all, and rarely knew well or at all the people they wrote about. (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, National Report, 1994.)

In some sections of contemporary Australian society, there is no awareness of, or interest in, the wealth of Aboriginal traditions and knowledge; and in other sections, although there is acknowledgment of Aboriginal (and Torres Strait Islander) spiritual beliefs, there is little understanding of these beliefs or how they impact on lifestyles and behaviours. Through this presentation, it is hoped to redress this situation.

Before doing so, however, it should be noted that it is neither the place of the presenter, nor of any one Aboriginal person, to provide details of the spiritual beliefs of any group unless so authorised by the holders of Law for those groups. It is important, however, to know that:

- spirituality continues to permeate all aspects of Aboriginal life
- it has been the basis of Law and practices of the many Aboriginal groups of this country, both before and since the introduction of Christianity
- the beliefs of all groups are based on a common framework which is provided in this presentation.

Before European invasion

Aboriginal people have occupied this continent for much longer than recorded history — at least 50 000 years.

Edwards (1994, p. 65) refers to this long-term biological isolation which has meant that Aborigines are neither racially nor culturally closely related to other people. He writes that:

The roots of contemporary Aboriginal spirituality lie in a variety of traditions and experiences. First and foremost are the various stories, ceremonies, values and structures which sustained Aboriginal peoples throughout their long period of relatively unchallenged occupation of the continent.

It is important here to acknowledge that at the time of contact it is estimated that the Aboriginal population was approximately 250 000 to 300 000, separated into around 250 language groups each with its own sub-groups and specific dialects (around 600 different language groups overall). Because of the dynamic nature of Aboriginal cultures, there were and continue to be differences between the groups. There are, however, shared cultural traits, economic and ceremonial dealings, and a customary system of land-tenure law.

Land was and is central to spiritual/religious life, as is clearly demonstrated within the concept of The Dreaming. Land is also the primary basis of economic survival.

The Dreaming

The concept that encompasses Aboriginal spirituality is what has become known as “The Dreaming”, by which all components of the Australian landscape are significant, and through which the spiritual and political identities of groups and individuals are formed.



The Dreaming is most readily described as: the organising logic of so much of the symbolism of Aboriginal life and (in the Western sense) art.

There is no one word in any Aboriginal language for the term “art”. Art forms are viewed as an integral part of life and the celebration of life. The ongoing nature of The Dreaming is thus demonstrated by Sutton (1988) who refers to Aboriginal art, dance, music and ceremony (including ceremonial paraphernalia) as manifestations of The Dreaming, related to:

the wider symbolism of daily life and belief. Together these symbolisms constitute a complex code of interaction that continually remodels, and at the same time reflects, Aboriginal cosmology, sociality, and notions of the person. Reproducing the culture, in this sense, is also in Aboriginal eyes, reproducing or “following up” the Dreaming ... (p. 14)

the Law, which encompasses all things in the environment, including land, seas, waterways, flora, fauna, humans, sun, moon, constellations, etc. The realm of Spiritual existence is not divorced from the material world, but embedded in it. People and nature are one, whereas in Western thought these are separated.

the generative principle of the present, the logical prior dimension of the now; although it is sometimes described as the beginning of the world, it is all things past, present and future; therefore ever-present and ongoing.

This notion relates to Aboriginal concepts of cyclic time governed by seasons and phases of the moon, sun and stars; rather than the Western notion of linear time. In an attempt to convey this, Stanner (1987, p. 225) wrote:

One cannot “fix” The Dreaming in time: it was and is everywhen.

The Dreaming does not assume the creation of the world from nothing; however, landscape is conceived of as having been formed from and through the activities of Spirit Beings. (Edwards, 1994, p. 68).

The animate beings of The Dreaming are Ancestral Beings who are born, sometimes die, but are eternally present. Their spirits are passed on to their descendants, e.g. Shark, Kangaroo, Honey Ant, Snake, Yam ... and hundreds of others which have become totems within the diverse groups across the continent.

More recently, things which have impacted upon Aboriginal cultural and social frameworks have been incorporated into The Dreaming, so that in some parts of the country there are Dreamings which are named “Cough” (after the introduction of diseases such as tuberculosis, the common cold, influenza and whooping cough); “Itchiness” (from smallpox, chicken pox, etc.); “Diarrhoea”; “Toyota” (these four-wheel drive vehicles altered ways of life and contact with places and other groups); etc.

Ancestral Beings

- came before, and continue to inhere in, the living generations
- exhibit all the faces of human virtue, vice, pleasure and suffering
- sometimes broke/break the Law (traditionally, the role of Dreaming stories — now often published in the form of colourful children’s books — was to teach about norms, behaviours, social rules, etc.)



- founded religious ceremonies, marriage rules, food taboos, and other laws of human society, particularly the most important law of reciprocity (Within Aboriginal societies it was considered impolite to ask directly for something. Those who have something are taught their obligation to share with others and to “read” when another person wishes to avail themselves of that — whether it be a tool, a utensil, accommodation, food, car, boat, etc. This obligation, of course, has implications (many of which are perceived by others to be negative) for Aboriginal people living within mainstream society. What belongs to one, belongs to all (particularly with reference to members of extended families). Sharing what I have today means that I will receive something from someone else on another occasion, and so on. That is the Law. Aboriginal languages therefore do not have equivalent words for “please” and “thank you”.)
- are claimed by groups of Aboriginal people as Ancestral Beings or totems (Hence the terms “animism” and “totemism” used by anthropologists. “Animism” because of the attribution of possession of spirit to a wide range of inanimate objects; and “totemism” to describe the association between a local descent group of people and the animal or plant species with which descent is shared.)
- provide much of the spiritual underpinning of traditional communal title to land.

The continued existence of Ancestral Beings is evidenced in Aboriginal concerns about disturbing particular sites, for example mining at Noonkanbah and Coronation Hill (Kakadu); or development at places such as Hindmarsh Island.

Sacred sites are not monuments to a bygone era, they are an integral part of life ... (Bell, 1983, p. 290).

In communities throughout Australia, whether these are in remote, rural or urban locations, many Aboriginal people continue to acknowledge the presence of Ancestral Beings by “calling out” or by throwing a stone into lakes or rivers, etc. In tradition-oriented communities, of course, more complex rituals and ceremonies continue to take place.

Problems associated with the term The Dreaming

The term “The Dreaming” has come to mean the religion/spirituality of Aboriginal groups. Problems associated with this term are:

- It is not a word that Aboriginal groups have used; it is a non-Aboriginal anthropological term that does not acknowledge the diversity amongst Aboriginal groups. Local groups may have different corresponding terms and concepts, for example:

<i>Ungud</i>	Ngarinyin people, north-Western Australia
<i>Aldjerinya</i>	Arrente people, central Australia
<i>Tjukurpa</i>	Pitjantjatjara people, north-western South Australia
<i>Wongar</i>	North-eastern Arnhem Land
<i>Bugari</i>	Broome, north-Western Australia

(Edwards, 1994, p. 67)



- To confine the term “The Dreaming” to “religion” in the Western sense diminishes its complexity and the fact that The Dreaming permeates every aspect of Aboriginal cultures and societies.
- Western concentration on the Dreaming events has diverted attention from the significance of place.
- The term has become debased. It has gained currency amongst non-Indigenous Australia and is being used in contexts that have no relationship to the complexity of Aboriginal spirituality. The Dreaming is not the product of human dreams (is not referred to in Aboriginal languages for dreams or the act of dreaming. The use of the English word “dreaming” is more of a matter of analogy than translation.)

The imposition of Christianity

Into this environment where all aspects of life were enveloped in a specific spirituality, came Europeans with certain ideas about religion, based on their understanding of religion, God, the church and ministers or priests.

Aboriginal people were perceived to be “primitive”, atheistic, pagan, immoral — “wretches” who required “saving”. The first school in the colony of New South Wales was established for the purpose of “civilising and Christianising” Aborigines. This objective was later instituted by the establishment of missions of various denominations.

Towards the latter part of the nineteenth century, in compliance with British imperial directions, the various states/colonies legislated for the “protection” of Aboriginal people within their jurisdiction. (Within Queensland, for example, *The Aborigines Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* was introduced.) These Acts directed that Aboriginal people be moved to certain areas of land, or reserves, with managers to oversee their conversion to English lifestyles and values systems.

On the reserves and missions, Aborigines from various areas were forced to leave their own country, and to live in close proximity with a number of groups. Neither the practice of traditional ceremonies nor the use of traditional languages was permitted. The only explanation for the inappropriateness of these official actions is that they were based on the perception that all Aborigines comprised one homogeneous group; the ceremonies were pagan rituals; and that traditional languages were not “legitimate” forms of communication. The importance of “country” or specific areas of land was not taken into consideration.

Overall, because of the ethnocentric notions of the colonisers, social and cultural structures were ignored. Aboriginal people, their rich cultures, and the wealth of knowledge about survival in this land, were not valued.

Historical texts, whether books, reports, or other documents — usually by non-Aboriginal authors — provide accounts of practices on the missions and reserves. To gain Aboriginal perspectives on these events, reference can be made to the increasing number of autobiographical works available.



With the practice of traditional customs and ceremonies forbidden, a void was created which the introduction of Christian beliefs readily filled. Although, in retrospect, it has become obvious that in many instances the new beliefs were accommodated into a spiritual framework that encompassed all things, in a process known to anthropologists as “syncretism”, whereby ... *the merging of elements from different, even seemingly irreconcilable, world views, is a feature of all religious systems as they seek to adapt to their environments.* (Edwards, 1994, p. 77)

Cultural survival and revival

Following the “protectionist” era of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, and the ensuing “assimilationist” era, government policies concerning Aborigines began to change. There had been several movements initiated by both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people since the 1920s which had drawn attention to Aborigines’ lack of rights and privileges. These, together with the post–World War II international focus on the United Nations’ Declaration on Human Rights, no doubt influenced the drafting of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act* 1962, which bestowed federal voting rights on Aborigines. Then in 1967 a federal referendum enabled Aborigines to be included in the national census. A new government direction of self-determination for Aborigines was introduced in the early 1970s.

The self-determination policy paved the way for Aborigines to assert their rights, identities and cultures. It brought certain freedoms and expressions of rights to traditional lands; both of which strengthened the revival and survival of cultures and languages.

Gradually it became evident that despite the imposition of Christian doctrines, and despite the bans placed on customary practices and use of traditional languages, much of the “old ways” had been preserved. Aboriginal spirituality — that is, the concept of The Dreaming incorporating Ancestral Beings — had not disappeared completely. During the last 20 years or so, Aboriginal people have been free to openly demonstrate and discuss aspects of spirituality.

Some examples of surviving Aboriginal spirituality, taken from autobiographical and biographical works, are:

- *Glenyse Ward* (1991) in *Wandering Girl* learns of the spiritual beings in the caves near Wandering Station and she and the other girls know that they risk being taken if they venture out at night.
- *Alice Nannup* (1992) returns to make peace with her country and with the snake who lives in the waterhole at Mallina by performing water-based rituals.
- *Ruby Langford* (1988) in *Don't take your love to town* receives a sign of bad news when late at night there are three knocks at her door, but no one is in sight. Next day she learns of a death.
- *Ella Simon* tells of the stories given to her by her grandmother which were “to make us keep the law or just be better people” (1978, p. 106). The story of the *Muckarung* (lizard) was once a young Aboriginal woman who disobeyed the law by going near the



men's bora ground. She was punished by being turned into the muckarung which sits on a log waving its front legs as if to signal "go back, go back"... also, the *goi-on* (a "bad" spirit) was used to stop Aboriginal children from wandering off and getting lost.

- *Sally Morgan* (1988) tells us that her grandmother and mother hear the corroboree in the swamp when Sally's father is ill, and understand this as the spirit's recognition of the father's mental turmoil. The corroboree is no longer heard after his death. When Daisy Corunna dies it is the call of the bird that tells Sally about the end of her grandmother's life.

Through these and other autobiographies, written by and about Aboriginal people removed from their families at an early age and brought up on missions or reserves where customary practices were forbidden, informed readers can see that elements of traditional spiritual beliefs and practices were maintained and passed on to the next generation.

The essence of *The Dreaming* — the spirituality and cosmology of Aboriginal people — is all encompassing and as such, survives.

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