



Indigenous Traditional Religions

Introduction

Australia has two distinct Indigenous peoples: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples belong to diverse, contemporary communities, each containing individuals with different perspectives, life experiences and aspirations. While there are many shared interests based on their status as Indigenous Australians, it should be expected that there is a diversity of opinion within communities about all issues, including spirituality and the significance of the land and the sea.

Aboriginal peoples on mainland Australia are the oldest living culture on earth. Aboriginal culture and history covers a vast amount of time and space. Cultural and linguistic diversity was a feature of life for the first Australians, well before European settlement. Aboriginal people take great pride in their personal and group identity and recognise themselves and each other as "one people". Many Indigenous people today maintain a strong affiliation with culture, language and traditional lands.

Spirituality for Indigenous Australians takes many forms. It is not possible to speak of one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander religion, as there were many. Many Indigenous peoples refer to spirituality rather than religion and for most Aboriginal people, religious beliefs are derived from a sense of belonging to the land, the sea and nature. Aboriginal people see themselves as part of the natural world; that they are part of the land and the land is part of them.

The Dreaming is an English word or English name given to the intimately connected but distinct strands of Aboriginal belief and is often misinterpreted to indicate that Aboriginal belief systems are not real, but imagined. Therefore many Aboriginal communities prefer to use other language terms such as Creation stories for the Dreaming stories. A similar concept as the Dreaming with other names stands at the heart of Torres Strait Islander spirituality.

At the time of European settlement, Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples followed their own religions and rich spiritual beliefs, which were based on the forces of nature, a reverence for land and the influence of ancestral spiritual beings. The form and expression of spirituality differs between Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. Aboriginal spirituality mainly derives from the stories of the Dreaming, while Torres Strait Islander spirituality draws upon the stories of the Tagai.

The forms and practices of traditional Indigenous religions have been profoundly influenced by the impact of colonialism, both past and present. Some Indigenous Australians share the religious beliefs and values of religions introduced into Australia from other cultures around the world, particularly Europe. Following European settlement of Australia, many Indigenous Australians converted to Christianity. Some adopted other faiths, including Islam.

The central tenet of traditional Aboriginal society is the belief in the interconnectedness and unity of spiritual, human and natural worlds. In traditional Aboriginal society, there are not sharp distinctions between the sacred and the secular. It is misleading to try to separate Australian Indigenous religious experience from other aspects of their life, culture and history.

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Although Indigenous beliefs and cultural practices vary according to region, all groups share in a common worldview that the land and other natural phenomena possess ancestral spirits and living souls. The stories of creation and the repository of knowledge represented in these stories shapes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customary law and cultural traditions and guides social behaviour.

Background and Origins

Australia's Indigenous peoples have occupied the mainland for at least 60,000 years and the Torres Strait Islands for at least 10,000 years. At the time of the first arrival of the Europeans to this land, there was a population of 300,000 people in about 500 functioning and sustainable Aboriginal Nations, based on language groups. Each of these nations had systems of laws, languages, cultural practices, customs, religions and traditions and defined territories.

Torres Strait Islanders, who are Melanesian by ethnic origin, were seafaring and trading peoples based on the islands between far North Queensland and Papua New Guinea, and their spirituality and customs reflected their dependence on the sea.

The traditional Aboriginal economy has been described as semi-nomadic. For the whole of the subsequent 50,000 years until European settlement, Indigenous people had continuous custodianship and occupation of the land and developed rich cultural traditions and systems of customary law.

The Larrakia Nation is the language group of the original Aboriginal people of the Darwin coastal region. The Larrakia people have traditional custodianship and responsibility for the Darwin Peninsula, Cox Peninsula, Darwin Harbour and adjacent islands and lands west of the Howard River. This traditional estate includes the cities of Darwin and Palmerston. Traditional Larrakia country comprises the sea as well as tropical savanna and the Larrakia people are identified as "saltwater people" even though their country extends to 50 km inland because of the importance of sea resources to the traditional economy.

With European arrival and settlement since the 1870s the Larrakia people witnessed extensive modification to their traditional lifestyles and cultural and economic landscapes. Through various strategies the Larrakia people resisted, negotiated, lived with and finally were excluded from the colonial experience. When Darwin (then known as Palmerston) was first colonised there were 350 Larrakia people; through disease, dispossession and dislocation the population had decreased by 90% within 40 years of European settlement.

Aboriginal language groups such as the Larrakia Nation although autonomous did not function completely in economic and social isolation. Inter-marriage, language familiarity, sharing of country and cultural exchange between adjacent Aboriginal nations facilitated travel, complex trading arrangements, the development of alliances and an extensive knowledge network throughout coastal northern Australia.

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Demographics

From the 2006 Census, the current Indigenous population of Australia was estimated to be 517,200 or 2.5% of the total population and in the Northern Territory the estimated population of 66,600 was 12.9% of the total Indigenous population and 31.6% of the total population. This represented an increase in the Indigenous population of the Northern Territory of 17% since the 2001 Census.

At the 2006 Census, 9002 people or 11.1% of the population of Darwin and Palmerston indicated that they were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin, compared to 9.9% in 2001. Not all of the Aboriginal people residing in Darwin and Palmerston are Larrakia people. Many Aboriginal people from other traditional country reside in through varied historical circumstances.

In the 2006 Census, 5,380 Indigenous people or just over 1% of the Indigenous population across Australia reported an affiliation with an Australian Aboriginal traditional religion and the practice of these religions was much higher in more remote areas of Australia including within the Northern Territory. The majority of people who follow a traditional religion live in the Northern Territory.

In addition 73% of the Indigenous population reported an affiliation with a Christian denomination. Of these, approximately one-third reported Anglican and one-third Catholic.

Key Beliefs

Integral to Aboriginal spirituality and belief systems is the Dreaming (or Creation stories) which derives from stories of the earth's creation and permeates every aspect of traditional Aboriginal life. The 'Dreaming' is a complex network of knowledge, customary law, and belief systems within a spiritual continuum of space and time transcending individual existence. Many aspects of the Creation stories are shared by Aboriginal communities across the continent.

These Creation stories are seen as eternal and a fusion of identity and spiritual connection. Stories of creation and Ancestor Spirits which gave life to the formless landscape and created the flora and fauna have resonated through the generations from the dawn of time and link the past with the present and the future.

Ancestor Spirits emerged from the pre-existing formless and uninhabited earth and were involved in specific events that shaped the creation of human, plant and animal life and the physical features of the landscape. The land, being the creation of the Ancestor Spirits, is regarded as sacred and the Creation stories carry with them the responsibility to preserve and respect the spirit of country and the life forms associated with it (often referred to as "caring for country").

Creation stories record the travels of the Spirit Ancestors which criss-cross across the continent. Sacred sites associated with the travels and activities of the Ancestor Spirits are located along Dreaming tracks. The Ancestor Spirits eventually returned to the earth and merged with the landscapes they created or ascended into the sky.

Within the Creation stories Aborigines are spiritually connected to the land, and language groups have been entrusted with custodianship for the stories and responsibility for the spiritual maintenance of the land through ceremonies and rituals over countless generations. Even though there is no historical Aboriginal literature or scriptures, the link with the Creation stories has been maintained over thousands of years with 'Dreaming stories' being passed through the generations through song, dance, painting and storytelling.

Totemism is also associated with the Creation stories and refers to the mystical association of an individual or social category with certain species of plants or animals or natural phenomena that

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are believed to be ancestrally related to the person. Much of Aboriginal art is associated with the imagery of totems.

Aboriginal spirituality, even among those Aborigines who are closely affiliated with and share the beliefs of organised religions introduced to Australia, is still intrinsically linked to the 'Dreaming' or Creation stories, the relationship with the land and certain sacred sites.

Creation stories are very similar throughout Australia and describe Ancestor Spirits and the creation of local flora, fauna and landscapes. These stories are usually associated with specific defined locations and confirm and validate territorial boundaries.

In a similar manner, spirituality and identity for Torres Strait Islander people is derived from the Creation stories which feature the Tagai or warrior, and are intrinsically linked to the land, sea and sky. As the Torres Strait Islanders are sea-faring people, the stories of the Tagai usually focus on the stars.

A consistent theme of Creation stories of many Aboriginal nations and artistic expression is the *Rainbow Serpent*. As an Ancestor Spirit the *Rainbow Serpent* is perhaps the oldest continuing religious belief in the world. The *Rainbow Serpent* is a large snake-like creature which inhabits deep waterholes whose Dreaming track is always associated with watercourses and is a powerful symbol of the creative and destructive power of nature.

To the Larrakia people, the *Rainbow Serpent* is featured in their Creation stories as a large sea creature which inhabited the coastal estuaries and deep blue sea lanes of traditional country. Sacred sites for the Larrakia people include locations such as *Dariba Nanggalinya* (known as Old Man Rock) off Casuarina Beach in Darwin.

Greeting

The following sensitivities need to be observed on greeting or introduction:

- Initially in social settings it is courteous for men to communicate with men, and for women to communicate with women.
- Many indigenous Australians do not traditionally greet each other in the same manner as non-indigenous Australians; simple non-Indigenous greeting habits such as waving and saying hello may seem superfluous.
- A refusal to speak upon meeting may be misinterpreted as hostility or indifference. The person may not feel it appropriate to speak at that particular time, under those particular circumstances.
- Handshakes are not universally given in all indigenous communities and it is crucial to follow the local lead.
- Engaging in body contact, such as friendly touching or jostling, or touching the upper torso and arm, when greeting people is usually inappropriate.

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Names and Titles

- Many Indigenous people do not use or are introduced by personal names; often instead use the appropriate kin relationship term is used. It may be appropriate to ask a third party for someone's name.
- In communities where traditional culture is practiced, an Indigenous person may be known by many terms and names.
- Indigenous Australian people have diverse ways of naming themselves. This may cause complexities and confusion for service providers when the individual considers that their Indigenous Australian name is valid but is not recorded in formal documentation.

Seating

The following sensitivities need to be observed in seating arrangements for interview purposes or hosting official functions:

- It is appropriate to observe how people are arranged and ask where to be seated when coming into a situation where Indigenous people are gathered.
- In some traditional communities seating arrangements should be avoided where men and women sit directly facing each other.
- Under the kinship system, there are avoidance relationships where certain in-laws and family members are unable to sit in the same room together.

Dress and Appearance

The following general dress codes apply in Indigenous society:

- In traditional remote communities, it is respectful for women to wear long full skirts.
- Scant or inappropriate clothing when around the opposite sex may cause embarrassment.

Body Language and Behaviour

Non-verbal communication has a powerful effect on relationships and effective service provision. Non-verbal signals acceptable in one culture may be completely unacceptable or even offensive in another. Tone of voice, facial expression, eye movement, subtle gestures and posture are all highly significant elements of communication for Indigenous people. Body language which is common to Indigenous people is culturally influenced, is not intended to be impolite, and is often misinterpreted by non-Indigenous people:

- Lowering one's eyes to show respect to older people or persons in authority.
- Direct and prolonged eye contact with Indigenous people is often regarded as intrusive, disturbing, even confrontational and offensive, and should be avoided.
- Silence is an important part of communication between Indigenous people and may indicate to non-Indigenous people, quite erroneously, that communication has broken down.
- Not pointing with one's hands when giving directions (using the hand to point is seen as disrespectful by many Indigenous people). Directions may be sometimes given through a pursing of the lips and a movement of the head.

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Food, Drink and Fasting

- Traditionally, Indigenous people were hunters and gatherers of food, and adjusted their diet to suit the seasons and the availability of foods. Plant foods were the staple of their diet, complemented by meat or fish as often as it was available.
- The types of foods eaten varied around the country depending on what was available, but Indigenous plants, animals, fish and insects have sustained Indigenous people for more than 60,000 years.

Religious Festivals, Observances and Days of Significance

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in traditional communities celebrate events of spiritual and social significance including birth, initiation, death and events that are based on seasons and the supply of resources. For Aboriginal people such as in the traditional communities of northern Australia, there are sacred ceremonies that ensure the continuation of the Dreaming and the spiritual maintenance of the land.

Ceremonies and rituals take on many different forms and are often secret and/or sacred with attendance restricted to certain groups. These conditions should be observed and respected. Most ceremonies practised in Aboriginal communities cannot be discussed fully due to their sensitive and sacred nature. When discussing specific ceremonies it is important to have a local Aboriginal person present.

Song and dramatic dance are intrinsic to ceremonies, and the word “corroboree” is used as a generic term for all Aboriginal ceremonies involving singing and dancing. However this term does not adequately differentiate between sacred and non-sacred ceremonies.

In addition there are a number of annual Aboriginal festivals and cultural events around Australia. Perhaps the most significant of these is the Garma Festival takes place in August each year in north east Arnhem Land.

There are a number of significant dates of cultural and historic significance which are observed and celebrated annually by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people including:

- **Survival Day, 26 January:** on the Australia Day public holiday, the Australian Indigenous community celebrates the survival of Indigenous cultures.
- **National Day of Healing, 26 May:** marking the anniversary of the tabling of the *Bringing Them Home* report to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.
- **National Reconciliation Week, 27 May to 3 June:** this week is timed to coincide with the anniversaries of two significant dates in the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians - the 1967 Referendum and Mabo Day, commemorating the 1992 High Court decision that recognised the existence of native title rights in Australia. This week provides the opportunity for people across Australia to focus on reconciliation.
- **Coming of the Light Festival, 1 June:** marking the introduction of Christianity to the Torres Strait in 1871. This is a significant day for Torres Strait Islanders, who are predominantly of Christian faith, with religious and cultural ceremonies across Torres Strait and in mainland Australia.
- **NAIDOC Week in July:** established by the National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) as a week that celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture. It was established as National Aborigines Day but has since grown to a week-long event. The week is marked with different activities, with each year having a different theme.

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- **National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day, 4 August:** established by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC). Each year, SNAICC has a theme for Children's Day to highlight a significant issue, concern or hope for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- **International Day of the World's Indigenous People, 9 August:** a United Nations date that recognises the history, culture, languages, rights and aspirations of Indigenous peoples throughout the world.
- **Gurindji Freedom Day, 23 August:** the yearly commemoration and celebration of the walk-off from Wave Hill cattle station in 1966 by the community of Kalkaringi and Daguragu located in the Victoria River Region of the Northern Territory on traditional country of the Gurindji people.

Language and Communication

There are often significant cultural principles that inhibit effective communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, even when an Indigenous person appears to understand English. Language and communication issues include:

- Often people from different language groups are often living at one location and it needs to be established who has the authority to speak for a community or for a particular area.
- Conversation should not be rushed, and patience is required. Time and silence need to be provided for responses between questions; Indigenous people often take longer to respond to a question than non-Indigenous people.
- In Indigenous culture, the privacy of individual thoughts and feelings are respected and information is sought through a sensitive two-way exchange. Many Indigenous people have difficulty with answering direct questions.
- Agreement and disagreement can be passive in many Indigenous communities – people often say 'yes' to be polite and to avoid the conflict of saying 'no' directly. Saying 'yes' does not necessarily mean that Indigenous people have understood what has been said.
- Non-Indigenous people often have the mistaken belief that all Indigenous people use English as their first language. English is often a second language for Indigenous people, particularly for those living in remote areas of the Northern Territory. Local Aboriginal languages are spoken in wide areas of the Northern Territory.
- The Northern Territory Government's Aboriginal Interpreter Service addresses language barriers faced by Indigenous people in the Northern Territory and provides language interpreter services for government and non-government agencies that require on-site Aboriginal language interpreters: Darwin Ph: (08) 8999 8353; Alice Springs Ph: (08) 8951 5576.

Family and Marriage

The differing family characteristics of different religious groups should be appreciated. These include:

- Many Indigenous people are group oriented rather than individually orientated. The traditional structure of Indigenous society is based on extended family groups, which follow a kinship system that sets out how all members are related and defines their position to everyone within the community as well as outsiders.

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- The kinship system is an intricate set of social protocols that structure behaviour and binds people together in complex social relationships. It is fundamental importance to physical and emotional survival in traditional Aboriginal society.
- Within the kinship system principles of reciprocity define the rights, obligations and responsibilities between individuals and within communities and underpin most aspects of community life, including ritual, ceremony and protection of sacred sites.
- Sharing of shelter, food and resources is the norm among Aboriginal kin and the purpose and acts of giving and receiving reinforces and displays social relationships.
- In traditional settings, all Indigenous people have a recognised relationship with each other, be it through blood, marriage, language group or clan. Closest relatives are those related by blood or marriage, but a spiritual relationship or a connection with a language group may be acknowledged as part of the kinship structure.
- Traditional family structures and kinship systems and connections with country and culture are still evident in the organisation of modern, urban Indigenous families.
- Elders of a community or language group are the custodians of traditional knowledge and customary law and are recognised and respected as such. The role of Elders is to pass down the traditional knowledge, bridge the past with the present and provide guidance for the future.
- Under the kinship system, it is common for Indigenous Australians to observe avoidance relationships. It is not acceptable in such cases for some people to make contact and/or be alone or in proximity of one another.
- Since European settlement, Indigenous people have married people of non-Indigenous backgrounds but Indigenous beliefs, customs and kinship systems often remain as a strong part of the family's life even if only one parent is Indigenous.
- It is important to note that children are not just the concern of the biological parents, but the entire community. Under the kinship system the raising, care, education and discipline of children are the responsibility of everyone - male, female, young and old.
- Traditional Aboriginal society is divided into two moieties – based on a connection with certain animals, plants and other aspects of their environment. Under the kinship system and traditional law, there are strict rules about who a person can marry; for example a person has to marry someone of the opposite moiety.
- In traditional Aboriginal society marriages are significant to the forging of alliances, and often arranged marriages are planned when the prospective bride is very young. Following traditional practice, marriages that take place outside the strict kinship structure are forbidden and transgressions are dealt with according to customary law.
- Women are often much younger than their husbands and therefore may marry often, because they can outlive their much older husbands. When a man has passed away it is often customary for his widow to marry the man's brother.

Medical Issues

- The current health status of Australian Indigenous health is a complex issue related to changes in lifestyle and community structure with colonisation. In Australia the western health system has been superimposed on traditional holistic systems of health management.
- The current health status of Australian Indigenous people is characterised by unacceptably large disparities between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population in various health

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indicators including life expectancy, and the incidence of heart disease, kidney disease and diabetes.

- Traditional health systems have survived to a large extent and traditional Aboriginal medicine is still widely practised in many parts of the Northern Territory.
- Traditional Aboriginal medicine is a complex knowledge structure closely linked to the culture and beliefs of the people and detailed knowledge of the land, flora and fauna and recognises the social, physical and spiritual dimensions of health and life.
- Where possible medical staff should have the ability to empathise with a diverse range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients and have an adequate knowledge and understanding of their social and cultural context (asking appropriate questions, the priorities of patients and extended family obligations, and a bicultural approach to health care).

Death and Related Issues

Death and the grieving process are particularly significant for all religious communities. According to traditional belief, death is not feared – it is the time when a person's spirit is released to the Dreaming and returned to its sacred place in traditional country. However death is taken seriously and causes immense grief and sorrow to kin.

- Untimely death is not usually simply explained through accident or illness and other reasons beyond scientific causal explanations relating to social relationships, behaviours and consequences are often sought.
- Death, mourning and funeral obligations are taken very seriously in Indigenous communities. Customary law requires that formal acts of mourning and funeral ceremonies must be conducted properly as failure to do so means that the deceased's spirit will be trapped between the life and the spirit world.
- Bereavement, known as "sorry business", is a very important part of Aboriginal culture; in some instances the entire community will shut down for mourning and "sorry business" takes precedence over all other matters. The mourning protocol is subtle and complex and the period for mourning varies between communities – it can be from a week to an indefinite period of time, perhaps years.
- Many communities have a mourning period where the deceased person's name and image cannot be used. In many Indigenous communities asking "who has died" and the depiction or mention of a deceased person can cause a great deal of distress to people and this should be avoided.
- Some communities have a special term known as a 'mourning name' instead of the deceased person's name. It is common across much of the Northern Territory to use of the word *Kumantjay* in place of the first name of a recently deceased Aboriginal person; otherwise deceased people are referred to only by their skin or tribal name. Under these circumstances people with the same name as the deceased need to adopt a new name.
- Each community deals with the death of an individual differently and burial practices vary. Funerals often involve the whole community and attendance at funerals by family, extended family and friends is essential. Expectations of and consequences for the attendance or non-attendance of outsiders varies between communities.

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Counselling/Interviews

For serious and/or sensitive issues, it may be appropriate to identify and speak to and consult recognised community leaders and Elders first. Some Aboriginal communities have their own community consultation protocols.

Consultation should address the communal nature of Indigenous society and cultural expression.

Other Sensitivities

Other cultural and religious sensitivities that need to be acknowledged and respected are as follows:

- In Indigenous society the “Shame Concept” is very influential for individuals and is displayed through a lack of respect, embarrassment, shameful behaviour, feeling uncomfortable and out of place in uncertain and unpleasant situations.
- Direct and particularly personal questions are inappropriate. It may be shameful to ask an Indigenous person a question that they cannot answer in front of others.
- Knowledge is often gender-specific and/or secret/sacred and referred to as “Women’s Business” or “Men’s Business”. There are many areas of social relationships and spiritual matters where children are not privy to information until they have been initiated.
- An “Acknowledgement of Country” is a gesture where a speaker at a public function shows respect for the local Indigenous heritage and culture and of the ongoing relationship of the traditional custodians with the land. This gesture is appropriate and desirable when Indigenous people are in the audience. It can be presented by any individual, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, who is participating in an event of any kind at any time.
- A “Welcome to Country” is where the traditional Aboriginal custodian or Elder welcomes people to their land with a short speech at a public function. The ‘Welcome to Country’ always occurs at the opening of an event and is always the first item on the program.

Further Enquiries

This information sheet has been produced by the Northern Territory Government with the support of the Larrakia people, the traditional owners of the greater Darwin region. For further information please contact:

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