



# STUDIES OF RELIGION

**HSC**

SECOND EDITION

**Howard Clark**



**S**

Science Press

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# Introduction

The topics covered in this textbook and the organisation of material follow the NSW Studies of Religion HSC Syllabus for the 2 Unit course.

Certain non-English technical terms are regularly used, such as Dukkha (discontent in Buddhism), puja (worship in Hinduism), Shari'ah (Law in Islam) and Mitzvot (blessing in Judaism). These terms are often accompanied by an English equivalent in brackets.

All important concepts and technical terms are explained in the glossary.

This textbook naturally regards its subject matter as serious and interesting, and views with optimism the ambition of religion to find meaning within and beyond ordinary life. Due to the different characters and emphases of the religious traditions described, there is no single way of presenting them all absolutely equally; yet, every effort has been made to present them all with equal respect and sympathy.

Please note that the author of this book has a biased view of most of these topics (like all people). You, the reader, needs to be aware of that and determine your own responses to questions of faith and the extension of that faith into human behaviour responses, based on all the evidence that you collect. Do not be afraid to critically analyse what you read in this book and also be prepared to disagree with it and your teachers.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Islay Clark for her support and patience. Ideas and critical analysis have been honed over a number of years by discussions with Rev. Geoff Dornan, Rev. Grahame Ellis, Ellen McKenna, Murray Smith and many others including students at Newington College and Pymble Ladies' College who question and think. Rabbi Richard Lampert of North Shore Temple Emanuel is thanked for his patient and educative critique. Thanks also to Jenny Lyle of Pymble Ladies' College for her enthusiastic support and proofreading of the 2 Unit chapters. I also acknowledge with thanks, the photographic expertise and generosity of Islay Clark, Matthew Clark, Pam Ward and Audrey Wybenga.

## 1

# Contemporary Aboriginal Spirituality

Through this chapter you will come to an understanding of:

- Aboriginal Spirituality and the Dreaming
- Aboriginal spiritual relationships expressed in kinship and ceremonial life
- the importance of, and obligations to, the land
- current issues for Aboriginal Spirituality including Land Rights.

## Acknowledgement of Land

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land where I research and write this book. I pay my respect to the traditional people and to elders both past, present and future. I remember that under the concrete and asphalt, this land is, was and always will be sacred to Aboriginal people.

Howard Clark

Across Australia, Aboriginal spiritual beliefs take on many forms. The spiritual belief systems of the Indigenous Peoples are important today and are an important connection with Australia's past. They are also part of the priceless cultural heritage of our land. These beliefs and practices mark Australia as a unique place in the world and are central to how Australia is perceived by Australians and internationally. At the beginning of the 21st century there are many reasons to arrive at a better understanding of the beliefs of Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal culture

and spirituality are largely misunderstood within the wider Australian community. Therefore, Aboriginal Spirituality is underestimated as a belief system and in its importance in Aboriginal culture and contemporary life. It is a rich and complex tradition very different from other cultural systems in existence both within Australia and across the world. One of the most compelling reasons for modern Australians to become better acquainted with this ancient spirituality is to reduce the significant disadvantage the Aboriginal community suffers in an apparently affluent society.

**Table 1.1 Aboriginal peoples** Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

Make up 2.2% of the population	Numbers estimated at 469 000 (2006).
Have a lower life expectancy	Males: 56 years. Lower by 21 years than the Australian average. Females: 63 years. Lower by 20 years.
Have a 3 times higher rate of infant mortality	Infant mortality in Indigenous population 14 per 1000 live births. Non-Indigenous population 5 per 1000 (2000).
Are overrepresented in the nation's prisons	Indigenous Australians make up 20% of the prison population but only 2.2% of the population (2002).
Are educationally disadvantaged	Only 40% remain in formal education after the compulsory years of schooling (2004) and only 28% of Year 7 students complete Year 12 (non-Aboriginal rate is 70%).
Suffer more from unemployment	20% of Indigenous Australians are unemployed compared to a rate of 7.2% for the population generally (2003-04).



In spite of these grim realities, Indigenous Australians are experiencing a significant time of recovery in which they will define what their own future will be for the first time since colonisation.



Figure 1.1 Aboriginal people in prison

## Aboriginal Spirituality and the Dreaming

The belief systems of Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders are significantly different, the former arising from 'the Dreaming', while those of the latter group arise out of the Tagai. It is important to note that while there are many similar qualities between the Dreaming of different groups, this term in fact describes an enormous variety of spiritual beliefs and not a single unified system. In addition, modern Indigenous spirituality has been considerably influenced by contact with various forms of religious beliefs that arrived with European colonisation. As evidence of this, today many Aboriginal Australians practise Christianity.

The Dreaming refers to all that is known and understood by Aboriginal people. It is the central spiritual concept because it determines not only beliefs and values but also relationships with other people and the overall environment. Aboriginal people are able to understand Creation in a continuing and living sense by virtue of the Dreaming.

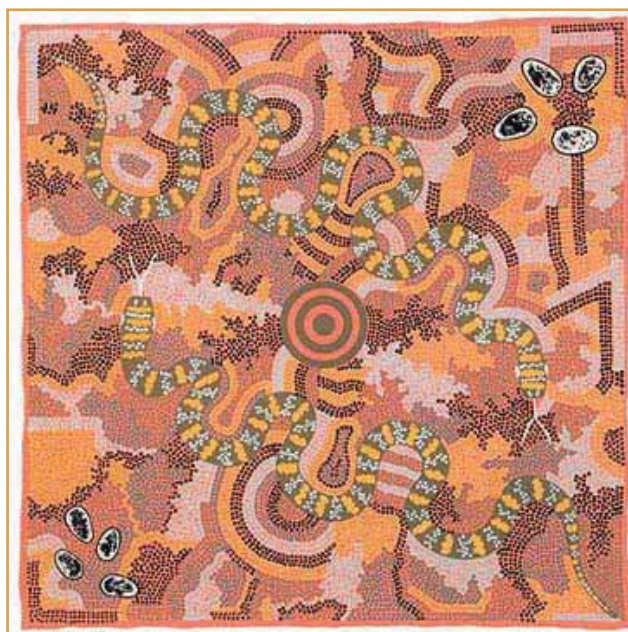


Figure 1.2 The Dreaming

Aboriginal people believe they are related to the natural world and this relationship provides the advantages of life and survival in the environment. It also imposes the responsibilities of preservation and education. Responsibilities include conservation of natural and social environments by providing a law to be obeyed and cultural mores and taboos to be followed and passed on from initiated elders to the next generation.

Traditionally, the beliefs of Indigenous Australians were shaped by a profound understanding of country and their place within it. These beliefs were imbedded in a body of knowledge transmitted through storytelling. These stories provided accounts of Creation and explained the natural order of all living and non-living things.

Everything in the world was established by the Creation ancestors before the time of immobilisation when animals and humans lost the ability to change shape at will. The Dreaming describes the journeys of Creation ancestors over the land, giving it, and the animals that dwelt on it, shape, purpose and character. Human, plant, animal and landscape features were made perfectly by these ancestral beings. All that was required of the human inhabitants was to listen, take care and continue to respect the Earthborn law handed down by the Creation ancestors to guarantee that life, in all its abundance, would continue as was intended.



Figure 1.3 Christianity and Dreaming

Dreaming stories contain a wealth of important information. They explain how to hunt and gather food, how the landscape evolved, how to make tools, where clays and ochres are found and how to use them in ceremonies. These stories explain the location and purpose of sacred places, connect a place with a particular Creation ancestor and set down what knowledge is secret and what may be shared. Dreaming stories establish the actions that are necessary to guarantee continued balance in the natural world. Songs, art, stories and ceremonies brought the people closer to the Creation ancestor by bringing that Creation ancestor to life. The Dreaming is not over, it continues for all time. All these aspects of worship (song, dance, storytelling, art etc) are not just descriptors of the Dreaming, they are the Dreaming.

### Rainbow Serpent

Songlines or Dreaming tracks record the movement, actions and laws set down by Dreaming ancestors as they moved across the landscape. The action of painting or storytelling brings the events of the Dreaming close to those who participate. The story of the Rainbow Serpent is a shared story and many Aboriginal groups accept it as part of the Dreaming tradition. It is also one of the better known Dreaming stories amongst non-Indigenous Australians.



Figure 1.4 The Rainbow Serpent By James Iyuna.

The text below describes the path of the Rainbow Serpent at Boobera Lagoon, northern New South Wales, 1996.

And that ... is the resting place of the Rainbow Serpent, and all of the gullies and all of the lagoon itself was about the Rainbow Serpent, created after he had created the universe, and all the dry gullies is the tracks that he's made looking for a resting place.

Carl McGrady, Aboriginal Education Assistant, Boggabilla

The Rainbow Serpent is usually shown as a large, snakelike creature. Like all Dreaming figures, it has left a track on the earth and the tracks of the Rainbow Serpent are associated with watercourses. Depending on the area, these watercourse tracks may be flowing rivers or creeks or could also be dried riverbeds. Sometimes the tracks are associated with still water in billabongs, lagoons or lakes.

The Rainbow Serpent is respected as it is the protector spirit of the land. From the land its power extends to protect all life including people. The negative side is, that as a force of nature, the Rainbow Serpent can be destructive. This is believed to happen as a result of not being properly respected.





Figure 1.5 Rainbow Serpent cave painting

Diagrams and paintings of the Rainbow Serpent have been found in rock artworks which are almost 6000 years old. It has been a consistent theme in Aboriginal art because it is such a powerful symbol of nature. Again, because of its association with the land, the pictures relate to Creation stories and tell the stories of the Creation of the Earth and the Creation of humanity.

## Kinship

Kinship is a term used by non-Indigenous Australians and anthropologists to explain the complex relationships of blood and spirit that exist between Aboriginal peoples.

Dreaming permeates every aspect of music (both song and dance), storytelling, artwork (examples by paintings and craft or artefact manufacture), food gathering and hunting activities within a complex framework of kinship or family totem relationships.



Figure 1.6 Kinship

In Aboriginal cultures the term kinship describes relationships which are biological and non-biological. Kinship systems are both close and extensive and are central to Aboriginal communities. In particular they ensure that both the old and young are cared for.

Kinship in Aboriginal communities is dynamic and reveals a complex social organisation which continues to be poorly understood. It provides a framework for living which is defined by the Dreaming. Individuals learn to be connected through kinship. They are instructed about obligations, rights and appropriate forms of behaviour. The kinship system is based on small local groups who share economic and ceremonial dealings with other groups. Through kinship and marriage Aboriginal Australians develop a vast network of connections beyond what non-Aboriginal people consider the 'standard' nuclear family.

In practice this system operates in a variety of ways. In Aboriginal communities, the children of your mother's sister are also your brothers and sisters. So it may be said that standard terms like brother and sister etc are greatly expanded. In Aboriginal communities, children will be raised by a variety of individuals, not just their biological parents. It is common for women to share duties of breastfeeding and for children to be left in the care of spiritual (not biological) grandparents for periods of time. If a child's biological parents are killed in a car accident, for example, and the mother had been married before, Aboriginal law dictates that the previous husband will become the father of the children. In addition, if a woman is married to a man but the marriage ends in divorce, that man still has a duty to care for his now ex-wife's family because they promised her to him in the first place. An individual has many mothers and fathers, many grandparents, uncles and aunties who are not necessarily blood relatives.



Figure 1.7 Yothu Yindi A kinship term meaning child and mother.

Indigenous Australians inherit ceremonial and territorial rights and responsibilities through the kinship system. Some responsibilities are inherited from the mother while others are inherited from the father. Males and females inherit different variations of this responsibility to produce gender roles in relation to an area of land.

These gender roles, like any social construction are taught throughout one's lifetime. Traditionally, every Aboriginal child's education would have included the learning of these intricate patterns of kinship. Often known as 'skins', the labelling and classification system includes everybody. Not only are all people included in the web of interrelationships but every person has their own set of specific kinship relationships. Each of these relationships carries with them a range of specific roles in society and has the necessary attached responsibilities.

Kinship influences the basic social interrelationships such as: how one can refer to another person, which relative one could approach and talk to and which not, and even who one could marry. It governs many aspects of everyday behaviour and requires specific behaviour in specific circumstances. A fully trained adult will know how to behave in any circumstance and when dealing with any other specific person. These behavioural traits include what is polite or impolite, what is preferred, accepted or taboo. The behavioural obligations and the associated rights form an important part of Aboriginal Law.

Two important behaviours are: the necessity to use an intermediary if an individual needs to 'talk' to a person, that they are (by kinship rules) not allowed to speak to and secondly, the sharing of food and the giving of gifts to certain types of relatives. Such sharing or gift-giving behaviour happens regularly.

Kinship encompasses the norms, roles, institutions and cognitive processes referring to all the social relationships that people are born into or create later in life.

Laurent Dousset

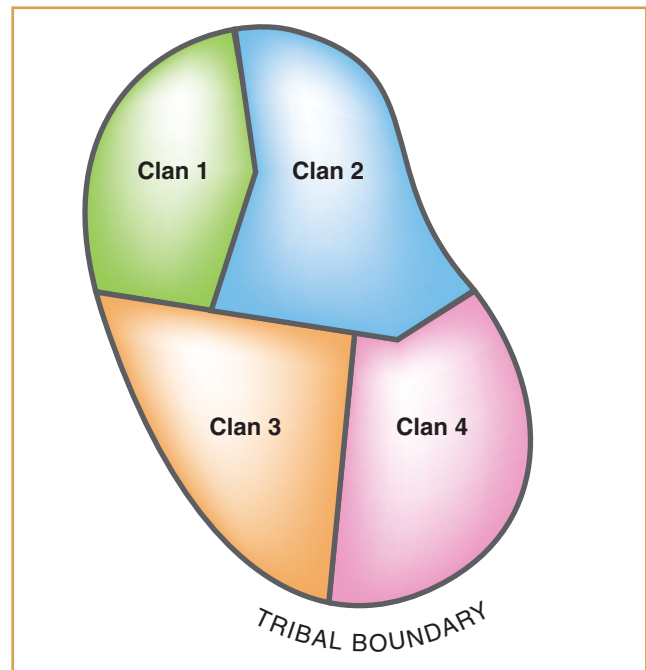


Figure 1.8 Clan organisation

## Ceremonial life

Ceremonial life is important for all people, although often living within a culture means that the importance of ceremony is not recognised until it is absent.



Figure 1.9 Smoking ceremony

Ceremonies were a very large and important part of Aboriginal culture. Unfortunately for all people, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, the loss of both the structure or even aspects of meaning of some of these since 1788 has lessened us all.



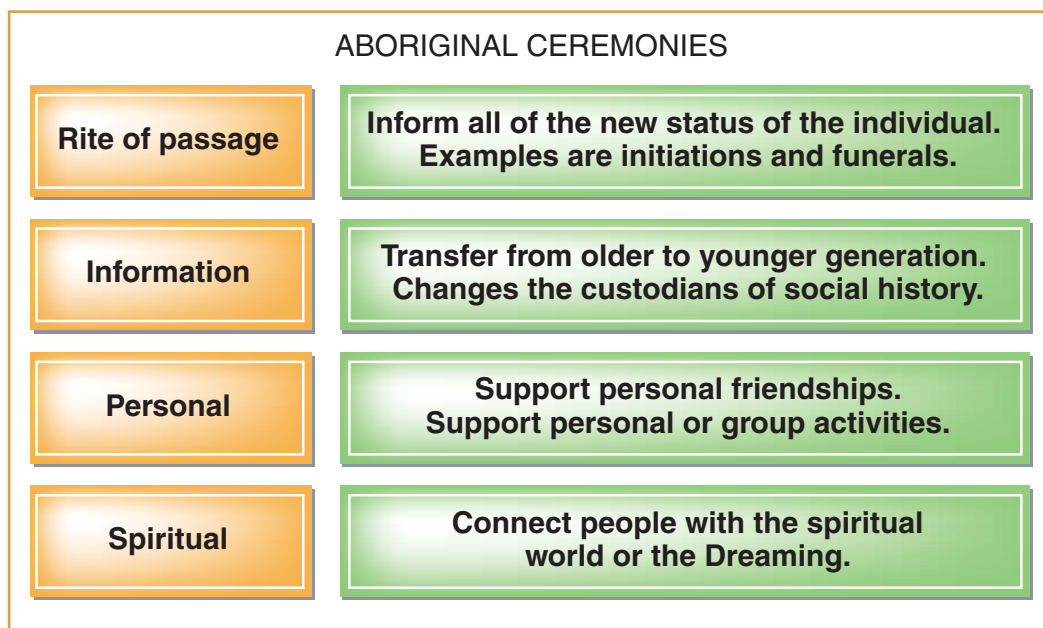


Figure 1.10 Purpose of Aboriginal ceremonies

Ceremonies play four important roles in any society and Indigenous society is no different:

- Rites of passage are marked by ceremonies to inform both the individual and society at large of the new status. Some rites of passage include initiations and funerals.
- Social information is passed from the older to younger generation. Such people are the elders of the future and therefore the custodians of social history.
- Intertribal or totemic group trade or cultural meetings pass on information, goods and traditions or support personal friendships. These meetings use ceremonies to support the activities.
- Ceremonies maintain the link between the real world and spiritual world.

The Dreaming ceremonies are often conducted in the form of song and dance with the use of body art and a spectacle of lights or costumes. Usually the preparation, whether it is the painting of bodies or the production of foods or even the organisation of an appropriate place and time for the ceremony, is part of the celebrations. In many cases the preparation is also associated with ritual, and appropriate age or gender restrictions apply.

Men and women have different ceremonial roles. Like non-Aboriginal society, some pieces or aspects of adult information are passed onto the younger generation according to specific gender roles. While the gender edges and restrictions in Western society are being blurred, particularly in recent years, in Indigenous society the restrictions associated with women's business or men's business are being maintained. This, unfortunately can cause communication problems when information is being passed between cultures.

Such an example of communication difficulty was the political situation that resulted within and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups from a proposal to build the South Australian Hindmarsh Island Bridge a few years ago.

Different regions and cultural groupings of Aboriginals have different ceremonies. They differ in style and content and sometimes in purpose but they are all an important part of the culture. This is more apparent in the country than in the city. In the city, cultural groups face greater barriers to the maintenance of cultural interactions due to the competing demands and difficulties of city life. Some examples of Aboriginal ceremonies are listed in Table 1.2.