

walking in the Dreamtime

Australian Aboriginal Ways of the Sacred

The Dreaming, for Australia's Indigenous people, has different meanings for the many different Aboriginal groups who live there. It is a complex network of knowledge, faith and ceremonial practices that originate from the people's stories of their creation, and it dominates all spiritual and physical aspects of Aboriginal life.

The Dreaming sets out the structures of society, the rules for social behaviour and the ceremonies performed in order to maintain the life of the land and the people. The Dreaming also governs the way people live and how they should behave: traditionally, those who do not follow the rules are punished - sometimes by death.

The term also often used to describe the time when the earth and humans and animals were created and is also used by individuals to refer

to their own or their community's dreaming.

During the Dreaming, ancestral spirits came to earth and created the landforms, the animals and plants, and the Dreamtime stories tell how the ancestral spirits moved through the land creating rivers, lakes and mountains. In essence, the Dreaming comes from the land and did not end with the arrival of Europeans, but simply entered a new phase. It is a powerful living force that must be maintained and cared for.

Dreaming stories pass on important knowledge, cultural values and belief systems to later generations. Through song, dance, painting and stories Aborigines maintain their link with the Dreaming, from ancient times to today. Aborigines have the longest continuous culture of any people on Earth, estimated to be between 50,000 and 65,000 years old.

In most Dreaming stories the ancestor spirits came

to earth in human form, and as they moved through the land, created the animals, plants and rocks. They also created the relationships between groups and individuals to the land, the animals and other people.

Once the ancestor spirits had created the world, they changed into trees, stars, rocks, watering holes or other objects. These are the sacred places of Aboriginal culture and all have special properties.

Because the ancestors did not disappear at the end of the Dreaming, but remained in these sacred sites, the Dreaming is never-ending, linking the past and the present, the people and the land.

Dreaming stories which describe the travels of the ancestors are integral to Aboriginal spirituality, and the stories are acquired progressively as a person proceeds through their life. Ceremonies, such as initiations are ways this knowledge is passed on.

THE RAINBOW SERPENT

Perhaps the oldest sacred story in the world is the Rainbow Serpent, which features in Dreaming stories of many mainland Aboriginal nations. The Serpent is represented as a large, snake-like creature, whose Dreaming track is always associated with watercourses, such as billabongs, rivers, creeks and lagoons. It is the protector of the land, its people, and the source of all life. However, the Rainbow Serpent can also be a destructive force if it is not properly respected.

The Rainbow Serpent is a consistent theme in Aboriginal painting, and has been found in rock art up to 6,000 years old. It is a powerful symbol of the creative and destructive power of nature. Most



images of the Rainbow Serpent tell the story of the creation of the landscape around the artist's birthplace, and although some aspects of the stories are restricted to initiated persons, generally the image has become a very well-known public one.

The commonest Rainbow Serpent story tells that in the beginning the world was flat, bare and cold. The Rainbow Serpent slept under the ground with all the animal tribes in her belly waiting to be born. When it was time, she pushed up, calling to the animals to come from their sleep. She threw the land out, making mountains and hills and spilled water over the land, making rivers and lakes. As she traveled - sleeping when she tired - she left behind her winding tracks and the imprint of her sleeping body. She also made the sun, the fire and all the colours.

The Jawoyn people, of the Katherine Gorge area in the Northern Territory, tell how when the Rainbow Serpent had travelled the earth, she returned and called to the frogs to come out, but they were very slow because their bellies were full of water. The Rainbow Serpent tickled their stomachs, and when the frogs laughed, the water flowed out of



their mouths and filled the tracks and hollows left by the Rainbow Serpent, creating the rivers and lakes. This woke all of the animals and plants, who then followed the Rainbow Serpent across the land.

THE SPIRIT TRACKS OF LIFE

The journeys of all the spirit ancestors, including the Rainbow Serpent, are still seen in physical form across all the Australian landscape, and each is recorded in a Dreaming track.

A Dreaming track joins a number of sacred sites which trace the path of one of the ancestral beings as it moved through the landscape, forming its features, creating its flora and fauna and

laying down the laws.

Many ancestral spirit beings created these tracks, but perhaps the ones who are most well known are the Mimi spirits who are said to be tall, thin beings that live in the rocky escarpment of northern Australia. Before the coming of Aboriginal people they were said to have had human forms and when Aboriginal people first came to northern Australia, the Mimi taught them how to hunt and cook kangaroos and other animals. The Mimi also did the first rock paintings and taught Aboriginal people how to paint.

Generally Mimi spirits are considered to be harmless, but on occasions they can be mischievous,

Left: Namarrgon the Lightning Man, an ancestor spirit who created the landscape of Kakadu southeast of Darwin

Opposite: The Devils Marbles in Australia's Northern Territory. Known as Karlu Karlu in the local native language, the stones have great spiritual significance.

One of the main Dreaming stories which can be told to the public are of a mythic being called 'Arrange' who travelled through the area. Whilst walking he made a hair-string belt, and as he twirled the hair to make strings, dropped some, which turned into the boulders. On his way back to his hill, Arrange spat on the ground and his spit turned into other granite boulders found in close by. Arrange finally returned to his starting place, a hill known as Ayleparrantenhe, where he is still alive, hiding in the earth today

Left: a small sacred body of water called Gunlom Pool, on top of the Gunlom Falls, at Kakadu in Australia's Northern Territory

