Australian Aboriginal religions

There is no one Aboriginal religion in Australia; rather, there are many religions, albeit with many common features. Aboriginal religions are based on the creative activities of ancestral spirit beings who shaped a particular piece of land, placed the ancestors of the people there and laid down the way of life – the Law, as it is often called in Aboriginal English. Each area of Australia had its own such beings. They are not creators in the strict sense, since they come into an already existent world, but they make the features of the landscape and either produce the people who will live there by human-like means or find them and give them to the land. As Ronald Berndt says, they ‘humanise’ the land, relating it forever to the people of the land.

The spirit beings are sometimes in human form, sometimes animal, bird or fish. They are more than human but they have many human traits. Although they lay down the Law to be followed, often they do not follow it themselves. In this respect they are like the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece. There is often a Father (or Mother) figure in the background, who is too remote to be contacted, and is not usually celebrated.

The basic beliefs of each group (tribe is a misleading label since they did not have ‘chiefs’ but operate largely by consensus) are expressed in stories, sung and danced and told in pictures. Technically these are myths, not history. This does not mean that they are not thought to be true; simply that they express beliefs in story and symbolic form. They serve both to explain the world as it is and to lay down a pattern for living. Most, if not all, aspects of Aboriginal life can be found in these stories.

The stories are reinforced by rituals in which the actions of the spirit beings are re-enacted to remind people who they are and what life is about. They are also occasions for socialising within the group and with others. They involve painting the bodies of the participants with sacred designs that transform them into the beings represented. Special sacred objects are often used in Aboriginal rituals similar to the way sacraments are used in Christian rituals. They are often held at special sacred sites where the spirit beings performed their deeds, in some cases where the spirit beings transformed themselves into features of the landscape. The paintings that depict these places and the journeys between them are, as the National Gallery of Victoria Art Curator Judith Ryan says, ‘mythscapes’.

Leadership in traditional Aboriginal society resides in ritual leaders – senior men (or women in the case of women’s rituals), who determine when rituals will be held, who often lead the singing and dancing, and control the initiation of younger members of the group into their adult responsibilities.
There are rituals for major individual life crises (especially attaining adulthood and death), to celebrate the great spirit beings and to heal and harm (sorcery).

Women have their own rituals, often separate (and even kept secret) from men. Just as there is a division of labor between the sexes in daily life, so there is in religion. The secrecy of women's rituals has meant that until recently, when women anthropologists have worked with Aboriginal women, they were not observed or recorded. The old idea that Aboriginal men were sacred and women profane has been abandoned. In fact, since procreative powers are most important in Aboriginal society, women are, as it were, naturally sacred, while men have to acquire sacredness through an elaborate and prolonged ritual process.

**THINKING PROMPT**

Imagine some of the misunderstandings which might have arisen during early encounters between Aboriginal people and early European settlers.

The best way to understand Aboriginal religions is to listen to Aborigines telling stories of their origins, their Law and their rituals. Jennifer Isaacs has given many of these in their own words, and even more importantly, in their art, in her book *Australian Dreaming: 40,000 Years of Aboriginal History* (Sydney: Lansdowne Press, 1980). But remember that in traditional Aboriginal societies these stories were not told; they were sung and danced. In ritual, the people celebrated their spirit ancestors, identified with them, reaffirmed their values and their social cohesion. These stories have some similar features, but also variations, that correspond in many ways to the varied environments and lifestyle of the regions of Australia.

In coastal regions the spirit beings are thought to come from across the sea and often to have departed the same way. In the centre of Australia, on the other hand, they come out of the earth itself and usually return to it. In the South-east there is a strong emphasis on sky beings.

A typical Northern story is that of the Yolgnu, of North-eastern Arnhem Land. Wandjuk Marika, a well-known ritual leader and painter, told his story to Jennifer Isaacs before he died and it is found, together with some of his paintings and photographs of his country, in *Wandjuk Marika: Life Story*, as told to Jennifer Isaacs (University of Queensland Press, 1995). He tells why Yalangbara (which we call Port Bradshaw), his clan place, is so important. It was here that the two sisters and their brother Djangkawu, the ancestors of all the Yolgnu people, first landed after crossing the sea from Burralku, the land of the Morning Star, which is also the land of the spirits of the dead.

Central Australian religions have been sympathetically described and the stories translated by T. G. H. Strehlow who, as a missionary's son, was brought up with Arrernte people and spent his life trying to preserve their traditions in his books, such as *Aranda Traditions and Songs of Central Australia*. He wrote a good summary of these beliefs in *Central Australian religions* (Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1978). They involve spirit beings emerging from the earth, travelling vast distances across the desert and eventually becoming the sacred sites – the rocks, waterholes, etc. – where they are celebrated in ritual to this day.

In South-eastern Australia the living tradition was almost lost before it could be recorded. However, Alfred Howitt, after long experience with the Aborigines of Gippsland in 1904, put together what he was told in a very interesting collection called *The Native Tribes of South-east Australia*, which has been recently reprinted (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1996).

There are also some very interesting films and videos of Aboriginal rituals. Many, however, relate to 'secret-sacred' matters and so may not be shown to general audiences.