**The Dreaming**

*Warning. Australian Stories may contain the names and images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people now deceased.*

The Dreaming, or 'Tjukurrpa', also means to 'see and understand the law' as it is translated from the Arrernte language (Frank Gillen with Baldwin Spencer, translating an Arrernte word *Altyerrenge*).

Dreaming stories pass on important knowledge, cultural values and belief systems to later generations. Through song, dance, painting and storytelling which express the dreaming stories, Aborigines have maintained a link with the Dreaming from ancient times to today, creating a rich cultural heritage.

Aborigines have the longest continuous cultural history of any group of people on Earth. Estimates date this history between 50,000 and 65,000 years. Before European settlement of Australia, there were around 600 different Aboriginal nations, based on language groups.

**The relationships between land, animals and people**

In most stories of the Dreaming, the Ancestor Spirits came to the earth in human form and as they moved through the land, they created the animals, plants, rocks and other forms of the land that we know today. 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, the stars, rocks, watering holes or other objects. These are the sacred places of Aboriginal culture and 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.

The Creation or Dreaming stories, which describe the travels of the spiritual ancestors, are integral to Aboriginal spirituality. In many areas there are separate spheres of men's and women's stories. Knowledge of the law and of the Dreaming stories is acquired progressively as people proceed through life. Ceremonies, such as initiation ceremonies, are avenues for the passing on of knowledge.

Traditional knowledge, law and religion relies heavily on the Dreaming stories with its rich explanations of land formations, animal behaviour and plant remedies.

**Responsibilities**

The protocols for social behaviour and consequences, including punishments and disciplines learnt, are also evident in Dreaming stories. 'Virtue in Aboriginal religion lies in the obligation to follow ancestral precedent', which involves keeping the Dreaming stories alive. This takes the forms of painting, song, dancing or ceremony – all of which are therefore necessarily inextricably linked. This is part of a living tradition based on ritual practices. Traditions and practices also merge with economic and ecological responsibilities for 'looking after country'. Looking after country means to continue to express these ritual forms of the Dreaming. Clan groups have the right to use the land regarded as their 'territory' and any of its products, based on their duties to tend the land through the performance of ceremonies.

**Ceremonies**

The travels and adventures of the ancestral heroes are sometimes told in a sequence of ceremonies, performed by individual clan groups across a large geographic area. For example, the story of the Wagilag Sisters is told by clan groups from across most of Arnhem Land. Individual clan groups have knowledge of the different stories which make up this songline. Ceremonies linked with the initiation of young boys will be performed in sequence from one part of Arnhem Land to the next, following the travels of the Wagilag Sisters.

**Creation stories**

An example of a Dreaming story is that of the fertility mother of the Gagudju people of Northern Australia:

Life started when a creator woman called Warramurrungundjui came out of the sea and gave birth to the first people and gave them the languages. She carried with her a digging stick and a dilly bag holding yams, waterlilies and other important plants. She planted the food and created waterholes with her digging stick on the ground. Other creator beings appeared...After completing her creative act, Warramurrungundj turned herself into a rock.  
S. Breeden and B. Wright, *Kakadu, Looking After the Country - the Gagadju Way*

**The Rainbow Serpent**

The serpent as a Creation Being is perhaps the oldest continuing religious belief in the world, dating back several thousands of years. The Rainbow Serpent features in the Dreaming stories of many mainland Aboriginal nations and is always associated with watercourses, such as billabongs, rivers, creeks and lagoons. The Rainbow Serpent 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 most common version of the Rainbow Serpent story tells that in the Dreaming, 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. She made the sun, the fire and all the colours.

To the Gagudju people, the Rainbow Serpent was called Almudj and was a major creator being. It forced passages through rocks and created more waterholes. Today, Almudj is still a great creator, bringing the wet season each year, which causes all forms of life to multiply, and appearing in the sky as a rainbow. But Almudj is also to be feared as he can punish anyone who has broken a law by drowning them in floods. Almudj still lives in a pool under a waterfall in Kakadu.

The Jawoyn people, of the Katherine Gorge area in the Northern Territory, tell how the Rainbow Serpent slept under the ground until she awoke in the Dreaming and pushed her way to the surface. She then traveled the land, sleeping when she tired, and left behind her winding tracks and the imprint of her sleeping body. When she 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.

**Stories of the stars and sky**

To the peoples of the Torres Strait Islands, the Tagai, or warrior, features in most of their dreamtime stories. As the Torres Strait Islanders are sea-faring people, the stories of the Tagai usually focus on stars.

**Seas and stars**

One Tagai story depicts the Tagai as a man standing in a canoe. In his left hand, he holds a fishing spear, representing the Southern Cross. In his right hand, he holds a sorbi (a red fruit). In this story, the Tagai and his crew of 12 are preparing for a journey. But before the journey begins, the crew consume all the food and drink they planned to take. So the Tagai strung the crew together in two groups of six and cast them into the sea, where their images became star patterns in the sky. These patterns can be seen in the star constellations of Pleiades and Orion.

Other Aboriginal peoples also had Dreaming stories relating to the sky – stars, sun and moon. A Dreaming story from the Flinders Ranges area in South Australia tells how the pointer stars (part of the Southern Cross) came to be. Two young brothers had been hunting and decided to make a campfire when a strong wind blew up. Soon the entire mountain was on fire and the brothers ran to the top of the peak to escape the flames, but the fire caught up to them. Just as they started to burn, the ancestor beings took pity on them and gave them the gift of flight. They flew high up into the night sky, where their camp fires can still be seen today.

**Lightning Brothers in the sky**

Knowledge of the stars helped people in navigation across the land as well as the seas. Constellations of stars depict figures familiar in the Aboriginal environment like crocodiles and eagles as well as heroic figures like the Lightning Brothers from a Wardaman story.

The Lightning Brothers travelled from the Warlpiri lands of the Northern Territory, stopping at Yirindale Springs before coming to camp at their site known as Yiwalalay. During their travels, the younger brother, Yabiringi, began lusting for Kanayanda (or Gulidang), wife of his older brother, Yagjabula, which ended in a fight between the two brothers. In the Dreamtime story, the older brother is claimed to have decapitated the other with a swing from his special stone axe. Other variations of the legend say that the fight ended when the headdress was knocked off. The Lightning Brothers live in the sky-world, the dwelling place of many ancestral spirits. The brothers are depicted in rock art and paintings.

**Stars and family relationships**

Knowledge of the constellations or star formations also reflect the patterns for social relationships in some areas. Arrernte and Luritja 'skin groupings', which determine people's relationships to one another, are based on the constellations of the Southern Cross. The stars represent a man and a woman ideally suited in marriage, with their parents, children and other relations all marked out in the night sky.

For Warlpiri people, the ancestors broke the Milky Way (called Yiwarra) into individual stars that we see today. Some fragments fell to earth, creating sacred places. This story is re-told in paintings, song and dance as well as re-enacted in contemporary initiation ceremonies, where men wear white down on their bodies to represent the stars (Dianne Johnson, *Macquarie Atlas of Indigenous Australia*).

Thus, connections are made on a daily basis between ancestors, people, stars and land. The telling of the Dreaming stories reinforces knowledge about the constellations, social behaviour, land formations and sacred places.