

Dreaming stories

Aboriginal people's beliefs, like every other aspect of their lives, are founded on the Dreaming. During the Dreaming, spiritual ancestors created the world and then metamorphosed into various natural forms including animals. Dreaming stories are sometimes known as creation stories, because they explain how the world and its laws came into being.

Dreaming stories describe symbolically social structures and rules for social behaviour; they explain how people should live and look after the land. Every Aboriginal group has its own histories and law contained within its country, and its own teachings of the Dreaming through stories and songs.

Torres Strait Islander people have a different spiritual framework based on their connection to the stars, sea and land. Their creation stories are called Tagai stories, and they focus on the origins of the stars.

Tagai is the main character in these stories, usually depicted as an ancestral warrior standing in a canoe with a fishing spear in his left hand and a red fruit in his right hand. Tagai can be seen in the stars, with the Southern Cross representing his spear. Like the rules set down for Aboriginal people, the instructions of the Tagai captured in the stories provide order in the world, ensuring that everything has a place.

In the novel *Super-Nature Stars*, Auntie Yanyi tells Denny that his Aboriginal ancestors were "great at passing on knowledge through stories". Storytelling is an important ritual for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is used to educate children about their world, and to transmit culture from one generation to the next.

Bunyips

Bunyips are mentioned in the novel *Super-Nature Stars*, and these creatures are an important element in Aboriginal culture. Although "bunyip" is a word from the Wemba-Wemba language of north-west Victoria, most groups have stories involving creatures that live in swamps, lagoons or waterholes, waiting to prey on unsuspecting people who wander too close. Other names for the bunyip include "Wawee" (Gamilaroi, north-west New South Wales), "Toorroodun" (Boonwurrung, eastern Victoria) and "Moolgewanke" (Ngarrindjeri, Coorong region, South Australia).

Aboriginal stories are rich with bunyips; there are also accounts of non-Indigenous people actually seeing bunyips. Thomas Hall, an early colonist in the Warwick region of Queensland, published an account of seeing the Mochel Mochel (Gidhabal word for bunyip) as it moved from one waterhole to another. He described it as the size of a large sheepdog, with whiskers, a sleek body and a tail like an otter.

Today, bunyips and yowies (an ape-like human supposed to roam parts of eastern Australia) feature in many tales of the Australian bush. To Aboriginal people, bunyips are spirits that share their landscape as part of their daily lives and cultural beliefs.

Culture camps

In the novel *Super-Nature Stars*, Denny is taken camping on his family's country. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families create their own 'culture camps' in their ancestral homelands. These going-back-to-country experiences provide young people with an opportunity to connect with older family members, learn about living outside the city and understand more about their language, songs and dances.

Some community organisations that focus on cultural development also offer culture camps for young people in their area. In this instance, participants may not return to their ancestral homelands but will learn about cultural practices from a facilitator. These camps offer an opportunity for young people to share aspects of their heritage and enhance each other's cultural identity.

Ceremony and Elders

Ceremonies and other cultural practices still take place today in Aboriginal communities. Law Men and Law Women have responsibility for organising these events and seeing that they are conducted according to the customs and rules of the group. Law Men and Law Women are Elders who have traditional knowledge that has been passed down to them; their role is to pass on that knowledge to the next generation.

Ceremonies are held to bring people together to practice their spirituality through rituals, including singing, dancing and storytelling. Each Aboriginal group practises their own ceremonies, and very occasionally neighbouring groups join for events that take months to organise. A ceremony could be held as a celebration of a people's totems or their connection to the land; for an occasion such as a funeral; or as a gathering to perform a dance and other rituals to ensure a good supply of food or rain.

In earlier times, Aboriginal groups would have several designated roles for Elders. In addition to the Law Men and Law Women, some would look after stories and language, and others would be responsible for painting and singing. Elders would make and enforce laws for the group, punishing those who disobeyed or did not follow traditions.

Elders still play an important role in Aboriginal society but provide more general cultural guidance today. The term "Elder" does not always refer to age; it is a sign of respect for the knowledge and wisdom that a person has acquired.

Bush miracles

In the novel *Reading the Bush*, the eurah tree has several uses. Buddy's nan makes a health tonic from it, while his mother applies it to a rash on his skin. His nan describes it as "a miracle of the bush".

Most plants have several uses for Aboriginal people. Another good example is the grass tree or xanthorrhoea. The base of the green leaves can be chewed for the sweet, nutty flavour, and the stems for their moisture; the seeds can be crushed to make a type of flour for cooking, and the nectar collected from the flowers for drinking; the tall stalks can be used to make spears, as well as firesticks from the softer wood; the dried flowers can help light fires, while the older dry leaves can create a form of bedding; and resin from the grass tree was once used as an adhesive in making tools and weapons.

Traditional astronomy

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been watching the night sky for thousands of years. They believe that the sky, land and sea are interconnected, and changes in the night sky reflect what is happening on the land.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander astronomy is mostly concerned with seasonal changes and survival; it is used for navigation and to determine the availability of food. In the novel *Reading the Bush*, Nan is Gamilaroi and explains how a change in the Milky Way is a sign that emus have nested and it is time to gather their eggs.

Other Aboriginal groups use different constellations to interpret events on the land. For example, the Lyra constellation signifies the mallee fowl season for the Woiwurrung, Wotjobaluk and other groups in parts of Victoria; when two particular stars in the Scorpio constellation, Arcturus and Vega, appear in winter, it indicates the end of the wet season for the Dhuwala and Yolngu people in parts of Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory; Arcturus and Vega also signal the time to look for the pupa of wood ants for the Wotjobaluk in northern Victoria; and when Pleiades appears, people all over the country know that a change in seasons and food is occurring.

Spirituality is also connected with the night sky, and many Aboriginal Dreaming or creation stories relate how things came to be in the sky. The legend of the Seven Sisters is linked to Pleiades. This Dreaming travels the Country, with versions of the story owned and told by different Aboriginal groups. Most stories about the Seven Sisters have them fleeing across the night sky from a man, usually Orion.

For Torres Strait Islander people, stars are an essential part of their spiritual system. The Tagai consists of stories that form the cornerstone of their beliefs and hold their cultural traditions. The stories focus on the origins of the stars and identify Torres Strait Islanders as sea people who share a common way of life. Tagai is also a character in the stories, usually depicted as an ancestral warrior who can be seen in the night sky – linking all Torres Strait Islander people together even today.

The stars tell Torres Strait Islander people when to plant their gardens, when to hunt turtle and dugong, when the monsoon season is arriving, when the winds are changing and many other important aspects of daily life.