

## Traditional Aboriginal Life

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Aboriginal life prior to colonisation had specific features:

- ◆ Strong belief in and connection the Dreaming.
- ◆ Strong belief in and connection to our Ancestral beings who created the lands, hills, mountains, waters, people, plants and animals.
- ◆ Strong spiritual and ceremonial practices including songs, dance, art, language e.g. at times of birth, death, marriage and initiation.
- ◆ Traditions of passing on culture, history, stories oral traditions.
- ◆ Traditional lore and punishment.
- ◆ Unique connection to earth, sky, stars and constellations.
- ◆ Traditional medicines.
- ◆ Sacred sites e.g. men's business, women's business, burial sites, initiations, corroborees and other gatherings.
- ◆ Elders had strong roles within the tribal or clan group.
- ◆ Men, women, children, Elders all knew their role.
- ◆ Tribal groups knew their tribal land boundaries.
- ◆ Strong and sustainable land use for survival, trade and economy.
- ◆ Nurturing of land environment through fire stick farming.
- ◆ Great respect for each other, and their roles within family and community.
- ◆ Community raised the children.
- ◆ Sharing within community.

In this session we start our Journey at the time of Precolonisation, when Aboriginal people were living on this continent alone, and had been doing so for approximately 50,000 years. Our culture, spirituality, customs were of a high order. Our uniqueness included:

We were the custodians of our lands, responsible for protecting and maintaining the land, plants, animals and rivers, on behalf of our creator.

### **Ancestral Beings:**

It has long been our belief that our land, the earth and all upon it, was created by Baiame and our *Ancestral Beings* during the Dreaming.

During this time, our Ancestral Beings traveled across the land creating the geographical features, the animals, plants and all living things. Particular songs and dances retell of the journey's of the Ancestors from one place to another.

**Aboriginal culture cannot be separated from the land because the web of actions, beliefs, and expectations which defines our reality stems from the land and focuses in the land. The land is not simply a visual space, but a living presence, sacred because it belongs to the Creator. We are the custodians of his creation. It is the source of our art, our dance, our ritual, our history, our memory, our spirituality. In that sense, it is the Mother which gives us birth and feeds us, it is the creator's, the inheritance for which we accept responsibility and take care....**

**" Ossie Cruse.**

#### **Dreamtime Essence:**

Our land still holds the Dreamtime Essence, and we hold the power of our Dreamtime close, through our connection to our land, our ancestors, our spirits, and through the sharing of our stories through storytelling, song, dance, and ceremonial celebrations.

#### **Hunting and Gathering:**

In traditionally oriented lifestyle, the hunting and gathering of food is for sustenance only. *Hunting* is never done as a sport and there are rules relating to the taking of plants or animals that exceed the basic requirement.

#### **Tribal Elders:**

Tribal Elders were responsible for monitoring the resources of the area. At the end of each day's hunting and gathering, and in preparation for the next day, there is usually a meeting of Elders with the men and women to assess the state of the area from which food has been collected. If there is an abundance of food they remain until the decision is made to move to another area thus enabling the depleted area to regenerate.

#### **Fire Stick Farming:**

*Fire* was used extensively as an aid to clearing undergrowth and in generating new growth for animal feed. This process would ensure the attraction of animals to the area in readiness for when the hunters were ready to return to the area. This type of management has been described as "*fire stick farming*".

#### **Aboriginal Culture:**

Aboriginal culture is a progressive or staged culture where knowledge is passed on after individuals are judged to have attained readiness for additional knowledge.

Having regard for the historical experience of Aboriginal people, do not expect all Aboriginal people to have detailed cultural knowledge.

Where Aboriginal people do have this knowledge do not assume or expect them to willingly pass this knowledge on to you.

### Aboriginal Astronomers:<sup>∇</sup>

As noted writings such as *Explorers of the Southern Sky* co-authored by Professor Roslyn Haynes, her husband Raymond Haynes, CSIRO astronomer at the Australia Telescope National Facility, David Malins a photographic scientist with the Anglo-Australian Telescope, and Richard McGee, a retired CSIRO radio-physicist, the Australian Aborigines were arguably the first Astronomers, even before the Greek gods, Peruvians, and American Indians.

From the nineteenth century accounts of Aboriginal culture, it is known that star legends and beliefs were located within a holistic social value system, which both developed from, and accounted for, the brilliant nightly spectacle of the southern sky, the daily rebirth of the Sun and the phases of the Moon. Astronomy was in fact an integral part of Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal people's knowledge of the crowded southern sky was brilliant, given the use by the naked eye only, and from this they developed a **complex seasonal calendar** based on the position of the constellations in the sky. Aboriginal people differentiated between the nightly movement of the stars from east to west, and the more gradual annual shift of the constellations.

Aboriginal culture made no measurements of space or time, nor mathematical calculations as did Western Science. They discovered predictive correlations between the position of the stars and other natural events important to the survival of the tribe – that is the availability of particular foods or the onset of weather conditions.

### Predictive Astronomy:

As hunter-gatherers, dependent on their knowledge of climate changes, the Aborigines noted the correlation between star movement and weather patterns, which then impacted on seasonal food supplies.

#### Examples:

- On Groote Eylandt NT, the appearance in the evening sky towards the end of April, of the constellation Scorpio, indicated that the wet season had ended and the dry south-easterly wind was coming.
- At nearby Yirrkala NT, *Scorpio's* appearance in the morning sky, meant the arrival of Malay fishermen who came in their canoes to collect particular supplies that they sold to the Chinese.
- When the constellation Arcturus could be seen in the eastern sky at sunrise, the Arnhem Land people knew that it was time to harvest the *spike-rush*, a reed valuable to making fish traps and baskets for food carrying.
- Amongst tribes of the Mallee district in Victoria, Arcturus was personified as the spirit being *Marpeankurrk*, and was celebrated as the one who helped them find *bittur* the pupa of the wood ant, a food staple during August September.

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<sup>∇</sup> Explorers of the Southern Sky

### **The Sun and Moon:**

The underlying premise of all Aboriginal myths concerning the Sun, Moon and constellations was a belief in the close spiritual unity of human beings with other species, such as plants, animals, stars, constellations, the Sun and the Moon etc.

Astronomy was only one part of Aboriginal people's total philosophy about the natural world, and the legends of the *Dreaming* emphasise the parallels between heavenly bodies and their earthly counterparts, humanising and integrating natural phenomena with tribal customs.

Many Aboriginal peoples around the world hold different variations of the stories of creation, but in most versions, the life-giving forces is associated with the Sun. Amongst tribes of the Murray River, the origin of the sun is linked to *the tossing of a giant emu egg into the sky where it struck a heap of dry wood and burst into flames, bringing light to the dark world. The Great Spirit Baiame, seeing how much the world was improved by sunlight, decided to rekindle the wood pile each day.*

The ancient Greeks, the American Indians, and the Quechua Indians of Peru, all believe that the Sun is male and the Moon is female. Whilst Aboriginal people believe that the Sun is female and the Moon is male. *In most areas, the Sun is regarded as a woman who daily awakes in her camp in the east and lights a fire to prepare the bark torch she will carry across the sky. The fire provides the first light of dawn. She powders herself with ochre powder, then colors the sky with the red ochre in the process.*

*At evening, having traveled across the sky, to the western edge of the world, she renews her powder, spilling red and yellow in the sky again, before beginning her long passage underground back to her camp in the east.*

The Moon being male, afforded greater status, is attributed with the powers of death and fertility.

*In the legends of inland tribes, the Sun goddess fell in love with the Moon and pursued him across the sky. Although he was sometimes eclipsed, he always managed to escape from her - but never permanently.*

Because of the association of the lunar cycle with the menstrual cycle, the Moon was linked with fertility, and young girls were warned against gazing at the Moon unless they wished to become pregnant.

### **Custodians of the Land:**

The connection between people and land was and still is expressed in terms of "*being related to*" rather than "*owning*" the land. Aboriginal people express this relationship as being "*custodians*" rather than land owners, living in harmony with the universe and all that is in it. It is said that: *While people may come and people may go, the land will always exist.*