Indigenous Myths, Legends and Religions

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are rich in mythology. Myths and legends were made to explain how the world was created. They also explained where everything in the world came from. They explain the cycle of life: from birth through childhood, coming of age into adulthood, old age, and death.

Myths about death and dying are very important. They help people cope with the deaths of loved ones. They also help people to cope with knowing that one day each of us will die.

By shaping their view of the world, myths and legends play a key role in the lives of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. It helps bond peoples together. It helps them feel a sense of belonging to their culture. Even today, myths are an important part of Indigenous culture. Their myths and legends are a treasure of ideas and stories.

It is very important to understand why myths and legends occur. One way to understand them is to ask:

- Who made them?
- When were they made?
- What are they about?
- Where did the myths occur?
- How did they change Indigenous lifestyles and societies?
- Why is it so important for Indigenous people to have them in their lives?

These are some of the key questions that will be explored in this book.
Myths and legends are used to explain the world. They are a special part of community life. In ancient times, there was no television or Internet. Story-telling brought people together!

Aboriginal elders pass the tribe’s stories on to their children and grandchildren. This helps to make sure the wisdom of these myths is kept safe for a long time to come. Sharing myths can help to bring understanding and friendship between different groups. It strengthens ties between the people. It gives them a common view of the world and meaning. People are bonded and do not feel so lonely.

Everyone wonders how we ended up here. We live in a world of mystery, and it is natural for us to wonder where it all came from. Science helps us understand the world, but it is not enough to satisfy the creative mind. Our imaginations want something more!

For the Aboriginal people of Australia, the Dreaming connects most of their myths and legends. During the Dreaming, totems worked together or battled each other to create the natural world. Totems are usually animals, birds, fish, and plants. Each of the hundreds of Aboriginal tribes and sub-groups have their own totems.
Scientists have shown that Australia’s climate and land has changed. Great floods occurred. The land was covered with water as the Ice Age came to an end. Rivers changed their paths and bays filled with water suddenly. Aboriginal stories talk of the cold lands, land flooding and rivers moving. These myths and legends aren’t just stories – they are about things that, in many cases, can be shown to have happened. At one stage you could have walked to Tasmania during the Ice Age. Stories of large animals and bright objects falling to Earth have been shown to have occurred. These stories have been told continuously and accurately for thousands of years.

Direct contact with Indigenous people is the best way to get a clear understanding of their stories. Students and teachers are encouraged to meet with their local Indigenous communities, if and where the people are happy to share their stories. It is important that you hear and search for stories from Elders who may give you these stories.
Activity

Map Study

Study the map of Australia and Papua New Guinea. The map shows where the old coastlines were located during the last Ice Age. Would it have been colder and drier? Write a story to describe the land of cold deserts and icy mountains during the Ice Age.
Understanding Why Myths and Legends Occur

Who developed the myths and legends?

The elder members of a tribe are the caretakers of their stories. Before European settlement, there were about 600 Indigenous ‘nations’ or peoples. Each of these groups had its own unique stories of creation. Some themes are shared by many different tribes, but each tribe also has its own stories that shape its view of the world. The Dreaming is central to the beliefs of all Aboriginal societies. Each new generation of Aboriginal people benefits from the wisdom that is passed on to them.

When were the Stories developed?

The different myths of each Indigenous tribe were not created all at once. They grew and changed over many generations. The tribes had no written records. Instead stories were passed down as oral traditions. When wise members of the group became inspired, they may have changed or added to a story. As time went on, the build-up of knowledge and wisdom led to more complexity in the belief systems.
These are some of the events that inspired stories:

- Massive geological events – like volcanoes and earthquakes;
- Climate changes – from a warm country to a freezing desert and glaciers on mountains;
- Massive floods in the Spencer Gulf of South Australia and elsewhere;
- Huge meteorites crashing into the Earth and causing a Winter that lasted for a number of years;
- The arrival of Portuguese or Dutch sailing ships from the 16th Century.

All these events became stories which have remained until today. The stories are most likely based on truth as they match what scientists, archaeologists and historians know about the past.

Aboriginal legends can change over time. This is different to written texts like the Bible or the Koran. These can be found in different forms and translations.

The meaning of a section of the text can change, depending on who is interpreting it. In many cases, they are interpreted in a way that suits the senior members of the religion. In the case of the mythology of Indigenous Australians, the stories may evolve, but the beliefs remain the same.
What are they about?

The simple answer is: everything! In ancient times, people were fascinated by the sky above, the world around them and their own existence. Legends were made about all of these things. Aboriginal legends feature elements of nature, like local animals, birds, fish, and plants. These are called ‘totems’. Each Aboriginal group has its own set of totems. There are also legends of the first time fire was used, and stories of language. More recently, myths came about that told the story of the arrival of the Europeans. There are also stories from the north of Australia telling about trading with Macassan fishermen.

Activity

In your local area, search for information on myths and legends of the First People. For example, if you live in Sydney the Eora people chiselled images of whales, animals and human figures into the sandstone. How do you think these carvings could be part of a story?
An example of a widespread legend is the Rainbow Serpent. A British scientist, Professor Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, found differences in the stories about the Rainbow Serpent from tribes in different parts of Australia. The Rainbow Serpent was a very powerful creature. Sometimes it was creative. Other times it was dangerous. In some stories it is enormous in size. As its name shows, it is usually connected to rainbows. It can also be connected with rain, rivers, and deep waterholes. There are dozens of unique names for this mythological being, each belonging to a different tribe. For example, the Rainbow Serpent is called:

- Arkaroo (Flinders Ranges, South Australia)
- Wanamangura (Laverton, Western Australia)
- Numereji (Kakadu, Northern Territory).

**Where did the myths occur?**

If you marked all of the stories of Aboriginal mythology on a map of Australia, it would cover the entire continent! The stories feature thousands of characters that are all connected to the Earth in some way. Some stories tell of characters that came up in one place and travelled to other areas. They carried their story to other places and other tribes. (David Horton, 1994)
How did they influence Indigenous lifestyles and societies?

Indigenous mythology is a form of animism. It gives human abilities and creative powers to animals, birds, fish, and other parts of the physical world. This means the Indigenous way of life is closely linked to the Earth.
Sustainable Living

Nature provides food and water. The earth is the source of life, and is very important. So, Indigenous people live in harmony with the Earth. There are rituals around the hunting of animals to give thanks to the Earth. Food is gathered in a sustainable manner. It is not farmed in a way that damages nature. Aboriginal people have been in Australia for at least 50,000 years. In all this time they did not exhaust the land. Colonial Australia has exhausted for less than 250 years, and already a lot of minerals and lands have been used up. It is hard to maintain this traditional way of life. A lot of the skills needed to live off the land have been lost. Traditional hunting grounds have also been lost over the years to cattle and sheep farms.
Why is it so important for Indigenous people to have myths and legends in their lives?

Many Indigenous people feel a huge split from their ancestral heritage. Since European colonisation, many things have happened that have damaged the Indigenous connection to the land. The Europeans moved Indigenous people from their lands. The Europeans knocked down trees and built fences for farmland, meaning the Aboriginal people could not move across the land as they once did. Many Indigenous children were taken from their families as part of the ‘Stolen Generations’. All of these things, and many others, have disconnected Indigenous people today from the beliefs of their ancestors.

A major step towards improving their circumstances is for the next generation of Aboriginal Australians to begin to understand their culture and history. Reviving Indigenous myths and legends is a potential means of contributing to the process.

‘The Stolen Generations’ are how we describe the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. This was done by the Federal and State governments. It took place between 1909 and 1969.
Aboriginal people may identify with a specific Dreaming story. A Dreaming story can help them figure out who they are. It can help them figure out their own spirituality. It can also help them to know who their close relations are, as they may share the same Dreaming with these people.

During ceremonies a person may enter a Dreaming state similar to a trance. In these states, an Aboriginal person is taken by the Dreaming. They can connect with their ancestral spirits and with mythological beings.

Mundara Koorang is a descendent of the Gamilaroi people of the Moree area. He is a major figure among Aboriginal Australians. He preserves stories through his writing and paintings. He recently had one of his Dreamtime Stories, “The Little Platypus and the Fire Spirit”, published by Indigenous Press in Canberra.
Activities

You might need access to a library or use the Internet to answer these questions.

1. What are some of the different names for the Rainbow Serpent?
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

2. What are some of the things that could become a totem for an Aboriginal tribe?
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

3. How many Indigenous nations were there in Australia before European settlement?
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

4. What do we mean when we talk about the ‘Stolen Generations’?
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
5. Word Maze

Find these words in the Word Maze above:

DREAMING
ABORIGINAL
MYTHS
LEGENDS
STORIES
ANCIENT
TOTEMS
CARETAKER
WISDOM
BELIEF
EUROPEANS
RAINBOW
SERPENT
TRADITIONAL
CONNECTED
STOLEN
GENERATIONS
Importance of Myths and Legends in Indigenous Societies

Aboriginal mythology defined how the people viewed the world around them. Nature was the source of these legends and the stories were connected to the earth. This appreciation of the earth as creator and provider meant the people had a great respect for the environment. The traditional ways were explained and honoured in the myths and legends. When Europeans colonised Australia, this interfered with the passing down of these stories.

Lessons for Surviving and Thriving

The Indigenous people of Australia have lived on the land for hundreds of generations. Over this time, they have gathered more and more knowledge about the land. As early people moved around the continent, the way they lived changed to match the region they were in. The local knowledge of each area was passed on by example, and also in their stories.
How would Aboriginal hunters know the best way to capture a type of animal? How would gatherers know which plants, nuts, and herbs were safe to eat? How would each generation know which pathways and waterways to travel down? How would a healer know which herbs would work for different illnesses? All of these important questions could be answered through the stories of the tribe.

There are stories passed down that explain how the Aboriginal ancestors first came to Australia. There are stories that tell of the links between the different nations of the Australian mainland. There are stories about how Indigenous people first learned to speak their languages. There are stories about the origins of their dances. There are also stories about how they learned to make fire. These stories aren’t just myths, but can be used to teach the next generation these same skills.

The Dreaming is a complex collection of beliefs, knowledge, and traditional practices. It has different meanings for different Aboriginal tribes and people. When Europeans arrived and began to colonise Australia, the Dreaming did not end. It just went into a new phase.
Responsibilities to their Society

The Dreaming is what defines the society’s structure, rules, and ceremonies. Each tribe’s Dreaming stories can contain lessons to teach the members of the tribe how to behave. The stories can also detail the penalties for not following these rules. Integrity in Aboriginal society is linked to following the rules set out in the Dreaming stories and passing these stories on to the next generation.

Dreaming stories are kept alive through song, dance, painting and ceremony. And all of these artistic elements are linked in Aboriginal society. Artistic traditions are also linked to trade, and the responsibilities in ‘looking after country’.

Aboriginal storytelling uses song, dance, painting, body decoration, and music to tell the Dreaming stories. These stories contain important cultural knowledge. The telling of these stories passes this information on to the next generation. This way the Aboriginal people have kept a link to their ancient cultural traditions up until today. Theirs is a very rich cultural heritage! It is the longest continuous cultural history on Earth. This means that even though there may be evidence of cultures older than the Aboriginal nations, those cultures did not survive.
Aboriginal culture has been passed down for between 50,000 and 65,000 years. It has grown and changed as needed. It is a rich culture in terms of how many different nations there were with their own stories, beliefs, and traditions. Before European settlement there were about 600 Aboriginal nations, based on language groups.

As an Aboriginal person grows older, they will learn more about the laws of their society. As they learn more and more of their tribe’s Dreaming their wisdom becomes recognised by the tribe. The stories aren’t just passed on through normal storytelling. Dreaming stories are also an important part of the sacred ceremonies, such as initiation ceremonies.

The tribe’s laws, beliefs and knowledge need the Dreaming stories. These stories can explain the history of the tribe, the history of the land, the way animals behave, and information on plants that can be used for food and medicine.

**Spiritual Meaning**

All over the world, the search for the meaning of life is the core of many religions, belief systems, and spiritual traditions. It is natural for humans to feel a need to connect to something powerful, something bigger than themselves – it is part of the faith of most peoples. The creation stories of the Dreaming are very important in Aboriginal spirituality, and there are different stories for men and women that cover different parts of Indigenous life.
Community

A sense of family and communities was offered by storytelling. It was a chance for people to gather together. It could help them to forget about the harsh conditions they had to endure. Just as people today enjoy sitting around a campfire and telling stories or singing songs, Aboriginal Australians would spend time sharing Dreaming stories. The common themes that exist in Aboriginal mythology, like the Rainbow Serpent, may have helped the different tribes to get along with one another.

Appreciation of the Environment

Indigenous people gave human features to elements of nature. This showed respect for the living things and landscapes that were so important in their lives. Hunting animals was not for sport, but for food. Indigenous people understood the importance of not hunting animals to extinction. Without water for drinking, transport, and cleaning, life could not go on. So keeping water free of pollution was important for survival. Gathering food was done in a sustainable manner. This is in contrast to modern farming that strips the soil of nutrients and uses pesticides and chemical fertilisers.
Land

Land is very important to all people. It is where we build our houses. It is where farmers grow our food. It is a financial investment and something to pass on to our children. For Australia’s Indigenous people, land is more than this – it is something they are connected to on a spiritual level.

When discussing how strong a person’s connection to their home land is, the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson said:

To understand our law, our culture and our relationship to the physical and spiritual world, you must begin with land. Everything about aboriginal society is inextricably woven with, and connected to, land. Culture is the land, the land and spirituality of aboriginal people, our cultural beliefs or reason for existence is the land. You take that away and you take away our reason for existence. We have grown that land up. We are dancing, singing, and painting for the land. We are celebrating the land. Removed from our lands, we are literally removed from ourselves.

Aboriginal people also refer to their land as ‘country’, and may talk about their country as if it were a living thing.

In the creation stories of the Dreaming, ancestor spirits created animals, plants and landmarks as they travelled across the land. Once the Ancestor Spirits had made the world, some of them turned into rocks, trees, watering holes, or even stars. These features of the land and the sky that were once spirits of the ancestors, become sacred places.

Seeing as the ancestor spirits did not disappear, but are still in these sacred sites, it means the Dreaming has not ended. It is still ongoing, linking the past to the present day. It also links the people to the land.