Indigenous Myths, Legends and Religions

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are rich in mythology. Myths and legends developed to explain how the world was created and 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 especially important. They help people come to terms 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 worldview, myths and legends play a key role in the lives of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. It helps bond people together, and help them feel a sense of belonging to their culture. Even today, myths are an important part of Indigenous culture.

It is very important to understand why myths and legends occur. One way to examine the meaning of myths and legends is to ask:

- Who developed them?
- When were they developed?
- What are they about?
- Where did the myths occur?
- How did they influence 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 try to explain the world and the meaning of life. They are a special part of community life. In ancient times, there was no television or Internet, so storytelling brought people together.

Aboriginal elders pass the tribe’s stories on to their children and grandchildren, ensuring that the tribe’s accumulated wisdom is kept safe for a long time to come. Sharing myths promotes understanding and friendship between different groups.

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. The imaginative spirit yearns for something more apparent to the senses; something that can be pictured in the mind’s eye.

For the Aboriginal people of Australia, the Dreaming is a central concept which connects most of their myths and legends. During the Dreaming, totems worked together or battled each other to produce the elements of nature. Totems are usually animals, birds, fish, plants, and inanimate objects. 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 receive a clear and thorough understanding of their stories. Therefore, students and teachers are encouraged to consult with their local Indigenous communities and hear their stories first-hand, if and where the people are happy to share their 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 clan groups or ‘nations’, and each of these groups had its own unique account of creation. While some themes are shared by many different tribes, each tribe also has its own stories that shape its worldview. The Dreaming is central to the beliefs of all Aboriginal societies, but the particulars vary from tribe to tribe. Successive generations of Aboriginal people benefit from the wisdom that is passed on to them.

When were the Stories developed?

The various myths of each Indigenous tribe were not created all at once. They grew and changed over the course of 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 accumulation of knowledge and wisdom led to more complexity and comprehensiveness 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 in contrast to written texts like the Bible or the Koran. These can be found in different forms and are subject to interpretation. In many cases, they are interpreted in a way that suits the wishes of 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. Naturally, legends developed that considered all of these elements. Aboriginal legends feature elements of nature, like local animals, birds, fish, and plants. These are called ‘totems’ and each Aboriginal group has its own unique 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, and stories from the north of Australia 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 pervasive legend is the Rainbow Serpent. British anthropologist, Professor Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, found variations of the theme in the oral traditions of tribes in different regions of Australia. The Rainbow Serpent was a very powerful creature, which was creative in some traditions and dangerous in others. As its name implies, it is usually connected to rainbows, but it may also be associated with rain, rivers, and deep waterholes. There are dozens of unique names for the Rainbow Serpent. For example:

- **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 mythic characters that arose in one place and travelled to others, carrying their story to other territories and 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. As a result, the Indigenous way of life is closely connected to the Earth.
Sustainable Living

Nature provides vital resources like food and water. 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 not grown through intensive agriculture, but is farmed in a way that does not damage 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.

However, 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 tremendous 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, 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 a person define their identity, and can define how they view 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 and 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?
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2. What are some of the things that could become a totem for an Aboriginal tribe?
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3. How many Indigenous nations were there in Australia before European settlement?
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4. What do we mean when we talk about the ‘Stolen Generations’?
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Importance of Myths and Legends in Indigenous Societies

Aboriginal mythology was the foundation of the worldview of the Aboriginal people. Nature was the source of these legends and the stories were intimately connected with the earth. This appreciation of the earth as creator and provider entailed a deep respect for the environment. The traditional lifestyle was explained and honoured through myths and legends. The transmission of the stories that shaped their worldview was interrupted when Europeans colonised the Australian mainland.

Lessons for Surviving and Thriving

Over the hundreds of generations during which Indigenous people inhabited Australia, knowledge about the earth accumulated. As early people migrated into and around the continent, they mastered a lifestyle to match the regions in which they found themselves. This mastery was transmitted by example but also preserved in their stories. How would Aboriginal hunters know the best way to capture a particular animal? How would gatherers know which plants, nuts, and herbs were nutritious and safe to eat? How would successive generations know which routes and waterways would facilitate migration consistent with their semi-nomadic lifestyle? How would a traditional Aboriginal healer know which herbs would remedy certain ailments? All of these vital questions could be learned and retained through the stories of the tribe.
There are stories passed down that explain how the Aboriginal ancestors first came to Australia, and stories that tell of the links and relationships between different nations within the Australian mainland.

There are stories about how Indigenous people first learned to speak their languages, the origins of their dances, and even 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 belief, learned 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. Rather, it 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 also contain lessons to teach the members of the tribe the correct ways to behave within their society, as well as the consequences and punishments 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 all linked in Aboriginal society. Artistic practices and traditions are also linked to trade, and the environmental responsibilities related to ‘looking after country’.

Aboriginal storytelling uses song, dance, painting, body decoration, and music to tell the Dreaming stories, and these stories contain important cultural knowledge. The telling of these stories passes this information on to the next generation, and 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 is still alive, and has been passed down from one generation to the next – growing and changing as needed – for between 50,000 and 65,000 years. It is also 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. The stories aren’t just passed on through informal storytelling. Dreaming stories are also a way that important knowledge is passed on through ceremonies, such as initiation ceremonies.

The tribe’s laws, beliefs and knowledge depend on the Dreaming stories, and the way these stories 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 an opportunity to gather together in a communal atmosphere, and a diversion from the harsh conditions in which Indigenous people often found themselves. Just as people today enjoy sitting around a campfire and telling stories or singing songs, Aboriginal Australians would spend time sharing experiences through Dreaming stories. The common themes that exist in Aboriginal mythology, such as the Rainbow Serpent, may have contributed to harmony among different tribes.

Appreciation of the Environment

By ascribing human characteristics to elements of nature, Indigenous people 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 critical for survival. Gathering food was done in a sustainable manner, which is in contrast to modern, intensive agriculture which strips the soil of valuable nutrients and uses pesticides and chemical fertilisers.
Land

Land is obviously 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, and also linking the people to the land.
The Link Between Art and Myth

Art takes many forms, and in Indigenous culture all of these forms are linked. Painting, body painting, dance and song are all used to tell the stories of the tribe – both the sacred, secret stories, and the stories they are happy to share with others.

Mussolini Harvey, a Yanyuwa man, has talked about how body painting is linked to the stories of the Dreaming:

In our ceremonies we wear marks on our bodies, they come from the dreaming too, we carry the design that the Dreamings gave to us. When we wear that Dreaming mark we are carrying the country, we are keeping the Dreaming held up, we are keeping the country and the Dreaming alive.

Indigenous Art, much like their spirituality, is linked to the land, showing features of the landscape shown in a mythical rather than literal way.