

What was God doing for 45,000 Years?

It is easy for non-indigenous Australians to slip into the view that 'proper' religions only reach 5,000 years back into history. 5,000 years ago is about as far back as modern Hinduism generally traces its roots – the oldest of what are known as 'the world religions.' However, on a conservative estimate, there has been continuous Aboriginal occupation of the Australian continent for at least 50,000 years (some estimates are much greater). Moreover, Aboriginal cultures have become the oldest still continuing cultures on the planet. We need to speak of cultures in the plural, because there are many distinct Aboriginal peoples and language groups. Focusing on religion in these cultures, Catholic philosopher and writer on Aboriginal religions Professor Max Charlesworth (2005), says there are Aboriginal religions plural because, 'although there is a family resemblance between them, there are also important differences.'

So to the question: what was God doing for the 45,000 years when Aboriginal religions were active, but before any of the world religions got going? This is not a question to which I have a ready answer but, as you read, watch for elements you could use to build your own answer.

After outlining reasons for learning about Aboriginal religions, this article draws out key characteristics common to many Aboriginal religions. It finishes by surveying some Catholic responses and calls for engagement with Aboriginal religions. These responses are ones which sister Christian denominations as well as other quite different faiths could also consider. The article does not cover Torres Strait Islander religion, as that is a separate topic.

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Why learn about Aboriginal religions?

We, Australians all, now need to be moving from cultural awareness to cultural competency. The period of simply becoming aware that Australia is home to the world's oldest living cultures is over. The period of becoming competent in our understanding of those cultures and their stories and histories is upon us. Building this cultural competency should not be left to busy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers to impart knowledge to a largely passive Australia. No, reconciliation demands that we all be active in building that competency.

The reconciliation project is summed up in the 2007 *Apology*, in which Prime Minister Rudd urged all Australians to lay claim to a 'future based on mutual respect.' The depth of respect Prime Minister Rudd had in mind requires mutual understanding of histories, aspirations, world-views and religions. This article seeks to contribute to understanding of the latter two. It is written in a spirit of active enquiry to contribute to the widespread effort in Australian schools to deepen the understanding necessary for much needed reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

And so to work! It is incumbent on teachers to deepen our understanding of the new national cross-curriculum priority of indigenous history, culture and stories. Fundamental to this world is religion. To gain the deepest understanding out of what follows, suspend your preferred metaphysical views so you can more easily enter into the unfamiliar, but rich world of Aboriginal religions.

Five characteristics of Aboriginal religions

The five characteristics described below are common across many, if not most, Aboriginal religions. One of the best ways to see each characteristic demonstrated is through art and film, so the reader is very much encouraged to follow up the references to the works cited.

They can all be easily found in a web search or using the links in the endnotes below.

Weaving together these five characteristics is the connecting idea that, for Aboriginal religions, the transcendent realm is the ancestral world and, in the words of ANU anthropologist Professor Howard Morphy (1991, p.138), the practitioner of Aboriginal religions is on a journey to '*becoming an ancestor*.' The characteristics described below flesh out what this means.

(i) Dreaming

The first key characteristic is the idea of the dreaming. This has nothing to do with sleep dreams or daydreams. 'The dreaming' is a term used by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in an attempt to best communicate an important aspect of Aboriginal world-views. Originally, ancestral beings emerged from the earth or water. They travelled across the land. Landscape is a result of ancestral actions and transformation. At the end of their journeys, the ancestral beings moved back into the earth or water where they live forever. Sometimes in that process, ancestral beings transformed into features we see today such as mountains, rocks, islands, waterholes, animals and birds. Essentially, the dreaming is a dimension of reality. It is read through signs. It is place-specific according to the particular routes of the ancestors and subsequent events. However, it is not time-specific. Past, present and future are all here now. It is '*everywhen*,' to use the term coined by that humane giant among Australian anthropologists, W.E.H. Stanner (2010, p.58) who died in 1981.

The dreaming is the source of 'the Law.' This is not a legal notion but rather one of power,

For Aboriginal religions, the transcendent realm is the ancestral world.

meaning and obligation. Treading the path to become an ancestor requires keeping the Law.

An example of an important ancestral creation event is the story of the Djang'kawu sisters, which is fundamental to the world of the Yolgnu (pronounced 'Yoong-ul') people of north-east Arnhem land (see endnote to read this story). A second, from the other end of the country, is the story of Guthega, Barranguba and Najanuga, now a mountain and two islands respectively near Narooma, NSW (see endnote link to see this story told).

A third example features the Rainbow Serpent, which is common to many Aboriginal religion creation stories across the continent. In his painting *Limmen Bight Country – My Mother's Country* (1993), the late Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, a Mara man and stockman from the south-western Gulf of Carpentaria, tells the story of creation. In the painting, Garimala, an incarnation of the rainbow serpent, emerges from inside the earth to create the outside world of landscape, flora, fauna and people. The painting of two serpents representing the one ancestor is a feature of Riley's work. Interestingly, Riley was influenced by Albert Namatjira who he met while away on cattle work as a young

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man. Riley is known to fellow artists as the 'boss of colour,' owing to his bold style. He had authority to paint his mother's country. Ngak Ngak, the sea eagle, is Riley's totem (special ancestor) and appears in many of his paintings.

(ii) Inside/outside

The second key characteristic is the 'inside/outside' distinction. This is a pervasive distinction applying to many things (Morphy 1991, p.78). Aboriginal religions are not open systems of knowledge as are many other religions. Rather, knowledge in Aboriginal religions is only revealed in certain ways to certain people. Some knowledge or meanings are 'outside,' that is, public and open to all. The word for public in the language of the Yolgnu is 'garma.' You may have noticed the Garma festival, a regular cultural event open to anyone. Other meanings are more 'inside' meaning, restricted to the initiated. Inside

knowledge contains the deepest truths of the Law.

There is also another meaning of 'inside/outside.' At birth, Aboriginal people move from inside the earth or water to live on the outside for a while, and then move back inside at death (Rudder 1999, p.13). In this literal sense, for Aboriginal people, 'the land is our mother, we are born from her,' in the translated words of an Anangu woman Elder of the Uluru region in film-maker Melanie Hogan and Anangu Elder Bob Randall's 2006 film, *Kanyini*.

A highly recommended series for entering the world of Aboriginal art, culture and spirituality is the ABC television series *Art + Soul* (2010). The narrator of that series is Hetti Perkins, who was for many years curator of Aboriginal Art at the NSW Art Gallery, and who is the daughter of Charlie Perkins, freedom rider and long-time Aboriginal activist and public servant. In *Art + Soul*, Perkins interviews many Aboriginal artists, displays their work, and indicates its substantial religious and cultural significance.

Illustrations of a dreaming ancestor becoming a rock feature in a waterhole, and of Aboriginal people moving from the inside to the outside at birth, can be seen in *Art + Soul* when Hetti and a colleague meet Rusty and Rammel Peters, Gija men of the Eastern Kimberley. At a waterhole, Rammel Peters gives Perkins and her colleague a 'water welcome.' Rammel Peters then directly addresses the snake ancestor who resides there as a rock-bar feature of the waterhole,

These people belong to the country here and now. Don't fail to recognise them. These people we have properly introduced to the country have come to visit you.

Later in the clip, Perkins displays Rusty Peter's magnificent multi-panel painting *Waterbrain* (2002). Hetti described a part of the painting, 'It's a journey of man from being a spirit in the water right thru to adulthood.'

Ginger Riley Munduwalawala *Limmen Bight River – My Mother's Country* 1993, synthetic polymer paint on cotton duck, 190 x 191 cm

Private collection, Image courtesy of Estate of Ginger Riley Munduwalawala and Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne



A further example of the inside/outside distinction comes from the Canning Stock Route area of Western Australia. Not all ancestors present on the inside are benevolent. Consider Kumpupirntily (Lake Disappointment) on the Stock Route. Inside (or under) this lake lies a current presence and danger – cannibal ancestors! A cannibal ancestor can be seen waiting below the lake in Yunkurra artist Billy Atkins, *Kumpupirntily Cannibal Story* (2008). Davenport et al (2010, p.132) describe the danger,

Martu people will not set foot on the lake's salt-encrusted surface for fear of those who live beneath. According to Yunkurra Billy Atkins, even passing by can be dangerous:

When the wind is blowing we can go there, can go past. If the wind stops you can't go any further, because he is there.

Such places made life difficult for Aboriginal people working with the drovers. As a boy, Frank Gordon travelled the route several times with his parents:

[Cannibal] there, properly. Might kill me fellas. All the devil. We was frightened all the way along.

As they approached the lake, Aboriginal stockmen would muffle their horses' bells so as not to alert the cannibals to their presence. Yunkurra also describes how they sought the aid of local *maparn* (magic men):

Drovers used to get a *maparn* to go front, make a big wind come up so they could go through.

(iii) Custodianship

A third key characteristic is custodianship. Custodianship is clan (extended family) based. A custodian keeps his or her bit of the Law. This means that he or she is responsible for keeping specific places respected, upholding relationships and judiciously passing on the stories and specific knowledge attached to that place. Initiated men are the custodians of the most inside knowledge, however, often women and uninitiated men will have that knowledge, but will not speak about it publically.

Custodianship can be also totem based. A totem may be a specific object or animal ancestor to which one has close relationship

and particular obligation, owing to signs read at, or close to the time of one's birth.

An important example of the custodianship of inside knowledge occurred with the building of the Eicho Island Memorial in 1957 beside the Methodist Christian Church. The memorial was a public display of usually secret objects and paintings. The Elders of the community, custodians of those objects, decided the memorial was needed to communicate to white people that the Yolgnu too have objects of great power. The memorial asserted the continuing identity and high value of Yolgnu culture (Morphy, 1991, p.19).

One of those interviewed by Perkins in *Art + Soul* is Gawirrin Gurama, a 'two-way fella,' being both a Christian pastor and a Yolgnu elder and custodian of knowledge. In 1963, he and other Yolgnu elders painted the *Yirrkala Church Panels*, which were erected on either side of the altar in the Yirrkala Church. The panels tell important Yolgnu stories, but not being custodian of all the stories, Gurama only showed the particular panel to which he himself had contributed.

Another artist interviewed in the series is Yolgnu woman, Gulumbu Yunupingu. In her art, Yunupingu expresses a nurturing custodianship which embraces all life. She chooses to paint the cosmos or 'universe.' In her beautiful work *Garak the Universe* (2005), Yunupingu invents a new perspective – an example of the creativity inherent in the Aboriginal world. The work is both a celebration of all humanity, and a paying of respects to Yolgnu ancestors, whose presence continues in the stars as well as in the waters of her country.

(iv) Singing the country

A fourth key characteristic of Aboriginal religions is the keeping and conveying of knowledge through song, as well as through painting, dance and stories. 'Singing the country' is a key phrase. Often a song recounts ancestral journeys across specific country, and celebrates features of that country. The term 'songline' is a white word coined to describe such a song. Songlines can be broken or torn by unwelcome economic development on a path such as a mine, tourist development or fishing camp. More commonly, a song can be broken because old people died without passing on their knowledge, or people leave their country by choice or force. But a broken song, like an

ancestral spirit, stays in the country dormant, despite there being no-one who remembers the ancestor or the song. An old Yanyuwa man from Borroloola area says,

We hold him half and half – that song (kujika). I can sing him, sing him, follow the road of that song, then I gotta stop. I have to think now, all right I gotta jump – I miss him some song because I don't know... Old people all died when we were young; we didn't get a chance to pick up that song; but that song still there in the country – you can't pull him out.

(Bradley with Yanyuwa Families 2010, ebook)

(v) Aboriginal religion is dynamic

Forget any idea that Aboriginal religions are only about 'traditional' ancient things. They are about those things, but they can also incorporate new ideas and phenomena. So, a final essential characteristic of Aboriginal religions is that they remain dynamic – Aboriginal religion can assimilate the new. Moreover, ancestral power can cause new, important and sometimes catastrophic events in contemporary times. Newly evolving signs must be read. For example, on Christmas Eve 1974, Cyclone Tracy destroyed the city of Darwin. The event was interpreted by Aboriginal elders in the adjacent Kimberley region as a warning from the ancestral Rainbow Serpent incarnated as the cyclone – a warning to Aboriginal people to keep their culture strong. This event is depicted in Rover Thomas' painting *Cyclone Tracy* (1991).

A further new phenomena incorporated into the Dreaming, albeit with a sense of humour, is Australian Rules Football. Ginger Riley Munduwalawala, whose Rainbow Serpent painting we saw earlier, painted football. His *Wul gori-yi-mar (football for all Aboriginal people)* (1996) depicts Aboriginal people playing football, using anthills as goalposts. *Munanga (white fella way)* (1998) shows an AFL match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) watched by a huge crowd. The painting depicts the MCG as a sacred site and meeting place using the concentric circles often used to indicate such places. Ngak Ngak, the sea eagle hunter and Riley's totem, is there as an observer.

The value of Aboriginal Religions

Having been immersed in the foregoing, the reader will see that the rich world of Aboriginal religions is of great value to Aboriginal

Australians. What, however, should it mean to non-Aboriginal Australians and, in particular, Christians? Being a Catholic, my comments are from that perspective, but I think they can be generalised. First of all, let us consider the place of Aboriginal religions amongst other religions. Professor John May (2009) reminds us that all religions are indigenous and primal in the sense that their world views and stories are respectively rooted in particular times, places, cultures and languages. We can observe through history that some religions are universalised and exported. Some worthy ones are not. Aboriginal religions are in the latter group.

Charlesworth (2005) argues that early observers of Aboriginal religions misled us when they assumed that simple technology implied simple naive religions founded on 'primitive' or 'magical' beliefs. When compared with the great 'world religions,' Aboriginal religions are not simple, rudimentary religions. On the contrary, the respected early Australian anthropologists W.E.H. Stanner, T.G.H. Strehlow and Ronald and Catherine Berndt have, in Charlesworth's view, demonstrated that Aboriginal religions are serious, complex and sophisticated systems of belief, though different from other religions in profound ways. Being such, Aboriginal religions beckon those of us of other faiths to sympathetically inform ourselves. They also call us to enter into serious inter-faith dialogue, which will both deepen all our spiritual lives and build the understanding and respect necessary for true reconciliation.

An appropriate closing word on the reverence in which we should all hold Aboriginal religions, and one answer to our opening question comes from Pope John Paul II, addressing an Aboriginal crowd in Alice Springs in 1986,

'... for thousands of years you have lived in this land and fashioned a culture that endures to this day. And during all this time, the Spirit of God has been with you. Your 'Dreaming,' which influences your lives so strongly that, no matter what happens, you remain forever people of your culture, is your only way of touching the mystery of God's Spirit in you and in creation. You must keep your striving for God and hold on to it in your lives.

... Your culture, which shows the lasting genius and dignity of your race, must not be allowed to disappear. Do not think

that your gifts are worth so little that you should no longer bother to maintain them. Share them with each other and teach them to your children. Your songs, your stories, your paintings, your dances, your languages, must never be lost.'

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For discussion

1. *What is meant by 'keeping the Law'?*
2. *Find an example of keeping the Law and explain it to the class.*
3. *In your example of keeping the Law, describe what you imagine the custodian of the story or keeper of the Law might need to do.*
4. *See if you can find a Dreaming story about a modern event.*
5. *See if you can find an Aboriginal song, which sings country. What does it say?*
6. *What do you think God was doing in Australia for the 45,000 years before even Hinduism got going?*
7. *What do you understand by reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians?*

Endnotes:

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Art and Film Links:

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Cyclone Tracy, Rover Thomas (1991) <http://nga.gov.au/federation/Detail.cfm?WorkID=148012>

Djang Kawu Sisters: http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/yalangbaraldjangkawu_ancestors/

Gulaga and Barranguba http://livingknowledge.anu.edu.au/learningsites/kouricoast/10_gulaga_story.htm

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Riley Munduwalawala, Ginger. *Munanga (white fella way)* (1996) http://www.camtas.com.au/catalog/xvgn14_63750_full_1.jpg

Riley Munduwalawala, Ginger. *Wul gori-yi-mar (football for all Aboriginal people)* (1998) http://www.alcastongallery.com.au/artwork/stock_details.cfm?id=4021

Yunupingu, Gulumbu. *Garak the Universe* (2005) <http://cs.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=144812>