

## Aboriginal Spirituality.

### \*The Nature of Aboriginal Spirituality:

- an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person:
  - of Aboriginal descent
  - who identifies self as an Aboriginal
  - accepted by the Indigenous community by which he/she lives
  - physical appearance and lifestyle are irrelevant in this definition
- pre-European arrival: pop. 650,000 (600 groups)
- current pop.: 250,000
- groups:
  - traditional
  - urban (just under half of present population)
- there are similarities in the beliefs of different tribes
- spiritual dimension of the land
- present life is continuous with the Dreaming
- totemistic: animals/plants have associated symbols
- naturalistic: living off the land
- tied to the land: each group has a particular relationship with a particular piece of land

### - The Dreaming as being fundamental to Aboriginal Culture and Societies

- 5 distinct features of Aboriginal Spirituality:

*Spiritual* – spirits are natural to the world

- each person has an inviolable spirit which is intimately related to the spirit ancestor

*Historical* – life today is historically continuous with the Dreaming

- spiritual links with spiritual ancestors tied to definite sites in the land

*Totemic* – religious life is arranged through definite religious groups

- each group has a natural plant or animal species as its name symbol or totem
- each group is derived from a spirit ancestor who is symbolic of the group's totem

*Naturalistic* – religion concerned with life revolving around living off the land

- social relationships between people

*Tied to the Land* – totemic groups are tied to certain tracts of land and sacred sites

- land represents personal identity and religious belief
- The Dreaming:
  - refers to all that is known and understood by Aboriginal people
  - central to the existence of traditional Aboriginal lifestyle and culture
  - determines values and beliefs
  - determines relationship with every living creature and feature of the land
  - explains creation
  - tells the journeys of the Spirit Ancestors who made the world and whose spirits inhabit the features of the natural world today
  - influences every aspect of daily life
  - permeates song, dance, storytelling, painting, artifact making, hunting, food gathering, social (kinship) system
  - provides a framework within Aborigines live
- traditionally, Aborigines maintained contact with the Dreaming through their dreams
- concept of time does not apply to the Dreaming
- Dreaming is seen as a 'whole'; where past, present and future can merge
- when a story from the Dreaming is ceremonially re-lived, it is being spiritually lived
- Dreaming beliefs passed on to young people by a network of stories and ceremonies
- Dreaming stories tell of all aspects of Aboriginal lifestyle, how they should behave and the history of their environment
- Aboriginal children taught stories; when that was understood, they were given more information
- initiation training and ceremonies part of the learning process-elders had the most knowledge and treated with respect
- Dreaming stories cover male and female roles
- stories cover sacred and public activities
- often not gender-specific until translated into English
- different versions of the same story common
- stories provide children with a detailed map of their country
- Aboriginal Spirituality and its inextricable (can not be separated) Connection to the Land
- natural world provides a link between the people and the Dreaming
- Aboriginal people see themselves as being related to, and a part of, the natural world
- relationship to the natural world carries responsibilities for ensuring its survival
- each person has a special obligation to protect and preserve the spirit of the land and the life forms that are a part of it
- Aborigines believe that rights to land were part of the design of the world

- as links to the land are spiritual, time or absence does not break link
- urban Aborigines can still maintain a strong spiritual connection with the land and land rights
- removal from land creates an instable base of life
  
- The Diversity of Expression of Aboriginal Belief Systems and Spirituality Today
- Aboriginal Spirituality has been influenced by Christianity
- Aboriginal Christian Church
- Aboriginal art forms dominate the more European style
- 1985, Australia's first Aboriginal Bishop, Arthur Malcolm was consecrated
- 1996, Australia's first Aboriginal female priest
- recognition of link between the gospel and Dreaming Stories
- urban Aborigines
- expression through politics, native title claims
- traditional
  
- The integration of Christianity and Aboriginal belief systems by Many Aboriginal People
- for some Aborigines, it is possible to reconcile Aboriginal religion and Christianity
- eg, Donga Mununguritj- a Christian leader from the Yirrkala community NT: "many laws and customs are similar, but there are differences....you can not chose whether or not you are an Aboriginal, but you can chose your way of life"
- Aboriginal spirituality viewed as 'culture,' not as religion, therefore, Christianity becomes 'religion' and 'cultural' Aboriginal ceremonies are still performed
- "I have not come to abolish, I have come to complete"

**The Differences Between Aboriginal Beliefs and Spirituality and Non-aboriginal Religious beliefs and Practices:**

- Aboriginal land ownership is based on:
  - shared custody of ritual estate
  - depended on for continuity
  - 'ownership' since the Dreaming
- European land ownership based on:
  - belief that land can be purchased
  - contract between two parties, usually involving a written document
  - purchasing for money, eg Abraham purchased land
- the significance of lore to land to Aborigines:
  - land is shared property

- contains story of land
  - oral tradition
  - spirit of ancestors responsible for formation of land
- the significance of spirituality to land to Europeans
  - land is a place to raise a family
  - one can move, is not tied to the land
- Aboriginal beliefs about land rights
  - land given by ancestors
  - religious custody
  - natural symbol of spirituality
  - give identity
- European beliefs about land rights
  - spiritual life of people is not generally connected to certain land because belief that G-d is universal
  - land can be purchased, not spiritual rights
- Aboriginal sense of identity
  - part of a community
- European sense of identity
  - Christian identity is tied to belief in Jesus
  - Christianity is universal
- Aboriginal effect of movement from the land
  - claim land rights
  - try to combine 2 cultures
  - damage of sites
  - loss of identity
- issues involved in mining development on Aboriginal land
  - Aborigines want payment for resources taken from their land
  - damage to sites
  - clash between economic and spiritual
- The Impact of European Colonisation on Aboriginal Belief Systems and Society
- white settlement brought warfare, disease, other religion, European education and economic exploitation
- destroyed Aboriginal culture and language
- many tribal groups destroyed within a generation of the first white settlement
- by the 1850s, many tribes were on the point of extinction, others were already extinct
- Aboriginal identity and self- esteem difficult to maintain
- complex religious and cultural practises broke down
- tribal law and authority break down

- eg, Kevin Gilbert in his book Living Black, “Aboriginal Australia underwent a rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues in the minds of most blacks today...and is repeated down the generations”
- today, just under half of the Aboriginal population are urban dwellers, following extensive movement to cities since 1960s
- different form of expression in cities
  
- Rainbow Spirit Theology:
  - assumes that G-d, the creator of the Spirit, has been speaking through Aboriginal culture from the beginning
  - Rainbow Spirit is symbol because it represent life and rebirth
  - Rainbow Spirit known in Christian times as Father G-d
  - the Creator Spirit entrusted Australia to the Aboriginal people
  - mystery of the creator Spirit was partially revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures and Aboriginal culture
  - full revelation found in Christian Scriptures
  - for Aboriginals, Christ is Aboriginal
  
- The Effect of Missions and Missionary Activity on Aboriginal Belief Systems from the Original Contact period through to More Recent Times
- second half of the 19th century, many Aborigines were rounded up and kept on Reserves
- reserves often run by Christian missionaries
- attempted to assimilate Aborigines into a European-type lifestyle
- lives heavily regulated and controlled by white ‘protectors’
- needed permits to move
- children could be removed from their parents at the discretion of white authorities
- some reserves still existed in the 1980s in Queensland
- government policy depended on Christian missions to carry out its work
- Wesleyans, Catholics, the future Uniting church, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans and Baptists covered Australia
- opinion over the effect of missions is divided
- some see missions as having disastrous effects on the Aborigines
- some see missions as being responsible for the survival of Aborigines
- many Aborigines believe in Christianity whilst still maintaining their traditional beliefs
- missions driven by Christian cause and “a better tomorrow for these ‘pagan Aborigines’”
- Christian ignorance: Pastor Albrecht of Hermannsburg mission in central Australia, “When we first came here we thought we had found the only people in the world without religion. Now we have learnt that they are among the most religious people in the world”
- Contemporary mission: serves as a buffer against the culture clash

- bilingual education and written forms of language have helped preserve and aid Aboriginal cultural identity
- Aboriginal translation of the Bible used (still Christian presence)
- today, non-denominational missions where Aborigines are trained as pastors to serve on these missions, The Aborigines Inland Mission and Nungalinga College (established by the Anglican and Uniting Churches)

**\*The Land Rights Movement:**

- Why do Aborigines want land?
- it is central to their spiritual life
  - it is alive with the spirit of their Ancestors
  - the land IS their Ancestors
  - source of their Dreaming
  - contains sacred sites for which they are responsible
- it is central to their cultural life
  - tribal boundaries are defined by the land
  - tribal structure is linked to a specific area of land
  - social relationships defined by land
  - ritual actions have their source in the land
- it is the basis of their economic life
  - a hunter/gatherer, dependent on the land
  - mutual dependence: tribe cares for land, land cares for tribe
  - ownership linked to ritual responsibility
- control over land is means of gaining control over their lives
  - allows for the existence of spiritual dimension
  - allows for an economic dimension
  - allows contemporary Aborigines to integrate Traditional life with Western
  - empowers Aborigines to negotiate with groups who wish to use their land
- ownership of land by Western methods is sometimes compensation for loss of land in the past
- clash with mining companies

Native Title – a term used by the Australian high court to describe the common law rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples of land in regards to their traditional land, laws and customs

– Major Changes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

1946 – Pilbara strike, Aboriginal people walked off pastoral stations in WA Pilbara area

1962 – voting rights (federal election)

1965 and 1967-equal pay

- recognition in census
- equality within the Commonwealth Constitution ('yes vote')

1969-end of policy of taking Indigenous children away from their parents

1970s – government promised to introduce policy to create opportunities for increasing self-determination for Indigenous people

- revoking of discriminant laws and policies
- various states began to consider Land Rights Legislation

1990s – inquiries into and recognition of past injustices

- eg, Mabo overturned lies of the past

Today – some form of reconciliation, not achieved yet

- still problems with housing, land rights, health, and within the legal system

- The Gove Land Rights Case (1971)

- court case between Yirrkala people and Nabala Co Limited
- Yirrkala people didn't want bauxite to be mined
- Judge: Judge Blackburn
- Judge Blackburn acknowledged Aboriginal occupation of the land, and Aboriginal law, but said that it had been legally replaced by British law
- the case drew attention to land rights and Aboriginal affinity with the land
- lead to the establishment of the Woodward commission

- The tent Embassy (1971)

- claim for land rights and compensation
- Involved: Aboriginal Advancement League, United nations, PM William McMahon (Liberal Party)
- Aborigines went to the UN with a petition (1971)
- Aborigines established a 'Tent embassy' on the Lawn of parliament house(1972)
- Tent Embassy was dismantled by police, but re-established
- Aborigines gained attention
- Aborigines began to achieve recognition of culture and rights
- Aboriginal flag made an appearance

- Woodward Royal Commission (established in 1973-->)

- Federal Territories, (didn't want conflict with state)
- aimed to establish recognition and traditional rights of Aborigines
- land rights: to recognise Aboriginal people as lawful owners of the NT land
- requested that crown land be opened to land right claims
- recommendation to restore land rights to Aboriginal peoples

- 1995, progress affected by the dismissal of the Whitlam government
- Aboriginal Land Rights Act in the Northern Territory (1976)
- provides some recognition of individual people's claim of land
- Uluru (1985)
- Uluru given back to traditional owners
- Difficult Issues Still Unresolved
- mining
- pastoralist claims
- political issues such as the consideration of support from voters in the election
- Bicentenary Celebrations (1988)
- Response from Burnum Burnum: reenacted 'invasion day'
- major march by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people made clear that "White Australia has a Black History"
- day of mourning for Aboriginal people
- Bob Hawke called for a treaty recognising that Aborigines lived in Australia before 1788
- Barunga Statement, list of rights and laws calling for a treaty
- there is still no treaty
- Mabo
- 1982-1999
- Eddie Mabo, high court
- Mabo wanted legal recognition of ownership rights to land on Murray Island
- 1992, the high court ruled that:
  - Australia wasn't Terra Nullius
  - native title existed before 1788
  - native title still exists if land was previously occupied by Aboriginal people
  - land legally granted/sold by the government, native title ceases to exist
- Native Title Act, Dec 1993
- Senate passed a Native Title Act
- Indigenous people could apply for recognition of native title
- had to show that their link with the land claimed was traditional and ongoing

- extinguished native title in public works and free hold land
- native title can only be revived after mining and leases expire
  
- Wik
- decision- Dec 1996
- Wik people of Cape York sought to claim an area of land occupied by a pastoral lease, but had been occupied by Wik people on a continuous basis
- argued that native title rights continued on crown land which had been leased to pastoralists
- Dec 1996, the High Court ruled that pastoralists could not claim exclusive title to land and that native title and pastoral leases could co-exist
- The Wik decision paves the way for Indigenous people to access pastoral land for the purpose of visiting sacred sites and ceremonies
- Wik celebrate
- pastoralists angered, demanded federal government act to extinguish native title completely
- Queensland issued title and leases without following native title provision
  
- issue not sorted out by a Mabo/native title Act:
- John Howard sought to modify the Wik Decision by a ten point plan:
  - Howard 10 point plan which claimed to be a compromise
  - concerned Aborigines had been given too much and planned to return the issue to the centre
  - lease holders had precedence to use of land
  - allowed approval of Queensland government's actions
  - some leases give lease holders exclusive use of land
  - local/state governments put electricity/power services on land as a way of extinguishing native title
  - native title extinguished after lease expired
  
- The Ways in Which Aboriginal Spirituality has Influenced Some Christian Denominations
- Rainbow Spirit Theology
- Church more sensitive of Aboriginal issues
- Church uses Aborigines to missionise
- Aboriginal Christian Church
- Aboriginal art forms dominate the more European style
- 1985, Australia's first Aboriginal Bishop, Arthur Malcolm was consecrated
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