

# Aboriginal ceremonies

Ceremonies across Australia reflect the diversity and complexity of cultural and spiritual practices that exist within Aboriginal communities. They provide a testament to the continuing survival of *The Dreaming* and the interrelationships of Aboriginal existence.

In this document, the term *The Dreaming* is used to describe spiritual, cultural and religious beliefs, practices and lore of Aboriginal Australians. Each Aboriginal group has a particular name for *The Dreaming* and, in some communities, this term has been used to describe the complexity of Aboriginal cultural, spiritual and religious beliefs, practices and lore to non-Indigenous Australians.

## The role of ceremony

There are many reasons for ceremonies in Aboriginal society. All have a firm place in the spiritual beliefs and cultural practices of Aboriginal communities.

During Creation time (the time when all life and landforms were created), various ancestral spirits formed and ordered the earth by creating land, sea, sky and water formations, people, animals, plants and birds, and putting these in their respective places according to the environment and spirits surrounding them. These ancestral spirits made rules and created the lore to govern the land, the waterways, and their people, animal and plant life. Each lore connected all elements of life on earth and, if life on earth was to continue, the lores would need to be followed. Ceremonies ensure that vital components of the lores and *The Dreaming* stay intact. They provide a time and place where all people in a language group and community work together to maintain and ensure the ongoing survival of spiritual and cultural beliefs.

Beliefs, stories and lores of *The Dreaming* are individually *owned* and kept secure by specific members of a language group. Some individuals and families protect particular knowledge (e.g. specific dances), while others protect other types of knowledge, such as body design or symbolism. These members of the language group had, and continue to have, the responsibility of ensuring that these stories and knowledges are correctly remembered and passed on, and that rituals and ceremonies are correctly performed to do this.

Personal and family roles and relationships to this knowledge were laid out during Creation time and have been passed down within the community through practices and protocols associated with *The Dreaming*. Passing on specific lores and knowledges through ceremonies has ensured their protection for all people within the community.

Many Aboriginal ceremonies are concerned with describing aspects of *The Dreaming*, the lores and stories from creation time to current day. Men and women have different roles in the ceremonies, and these roles vary from



language group to language group. In many areas, men and women were given roles as guardians of special spiritual sites (*sacred sites*) where specific ceremonies were performed. Guardians and traditional custodians care for the site so that particular spirits continue to live there, and the stories associated with that country are protected and maintained. Most of these sites are restricted to one gender only, depending on the site. Sites are generally marked by carved trees, artefacts, stone carvings, significant landforms or other artwork. These designations differ from region to region.

Roles in Aboriginal ceremonies vary considerably, depending on why the ceremony is being held. Some ceremonies and dances are for men only; others for women only, with each group having their own particular spiritual and sacred objects. Sometimes this is known as “men’s business” and “women’s business”. Neither men nor women possess greater spiritual needs or responsibilities than the other; they co-exist in different ways to ensure that sacred elements of *The Dreaming* are practised and passed on. Although men are often on record as being the conductors of ceremonial practices within Aboriginal societies, women are also guardians of special knowledge, holding great religious and spiritual power within a language group, and conducting ceremonies accordingly.

Restrictions to sacred sites, with protocols that restrict male anthropologists and archaeologists from working with women, have resulted in protecting women’s ceremonial practices from a wider audience, particularly in literature. This has had some benefits in Aboriginal communities where such practices have been able to remain the property of the community. In comparison, at times, men’s ceremonial practices, and ultimately men’s business, have been inappropriately recorded in print and photographs.

Participation in ceremonies may also be limited by age. Children may be involved in some ceremonies while other ceremonies are restricted to adolescents and adults. Certain ceremonies are specifically for older community members.

Ceremonies take on many different forms. Some are very private and involve only certain families within a language group, while others involve all people belonging to the language group, even children. Some ceremonies are open to members of other language groups, while others are open to any community that can participate. The purpose of the ceremonies and the practices involved in each varies accordingly, and these have changed over time to reflect current beliefs and practices.

## Ceremonial practices

Ceremonies can involve people from different Aboriginal language groups who bring gifts such as food, special objects or raw materials for trade. One well-documented ceremony for Queensland is the Bunya feast held in the hinterland of the Sunshine Coast. *Bonyi* is the Kabi Kabi name of the Bunya tree, which produces large seed pods and nuts full of protein and much-needed nutrition. Traditionally at this feast, representatives from many different language groups from across southern Queensland and northern



New South Wales met to discuss important issues relating to the environment, politics, social relationships and the lore of *The Dreaming*.

During the feast, the finest foods, bush animals, plants and berries were prepared and eaten. As this was the nut season, many bunya or Bonyi nuts were consumed. After the feast and shared dance ceremonies, elders and lore people of the respective language groups would meet and discuss lore and consequences for breaches. These discussions helped to ensure the survival of *The Dreaming* and ultimately the survival of Aboriginal people. Many inter-language group conflicts were resolved at this feast and at similar ceremonies and festivals across Australia.

Aboriginal people today continue to meet socially, sharing songs and dances to celebrate daily activities and significant events in their communities. Some contemporary events, such as the *Laura festival* of north Queensland and the *Dreaming festival* of southern Queensland, create opportunities for ceremonies and sharing across language groups.

### *Ceremonial objects*

Sometimes special and sacred objects are especially created for certain ceremonies, for example, drawings and mounds in sand and/or earth (sand painting/ground sculpture); moulding and carving of spirit figures in clay or wood; bark paintings; scarring of trees; making specific body ornaments and using painted or sacred body design. Often the objects or drawings are placed in the area or near the site where the ceremony is to be held, and then used and destroyed during or after the ceremony.

Although sacred sites have been labelled *bora rings*, this is only one name given to a particular sacred site. The word *bora* (a word from eastern Australia) is often associated with men's ceremonies and men's ceremonial sites, particularly coming-of-age practices and rites of passage. Each language group has their own names for the ceremonial grounds and ceremonies found within their country. Each name of a site or place differs according to the purpose of the ceremony conducted at the site, the ancestors present at this site and the rites associated with access to the site. Today we find many scarred trees or artworks in the landscape, marking the sites where sacred ceremonies were once held or continue to be held. These serve as signposts to understanding the use and restrictions of the area.

### *Ceremonial song, music and dance*

Songs and dances that are special and sacred are performed and created for different ceremonies. Because these are associated with *The Dreaming*, and connect stories and lores to specific areas of country and ancestors across Australia, there is a wide diversity of song, dance and music. As for the ceremonies themselves, some songs and dances may be shared outside the community, while others are never to be shared publicly. The right of access to these songs and dances belongs with each individual language group.

Specific types of ceremonial dress and ornamentation are worn when dance and song form key elements within ceremonies. These adornments help



Aboriginal people connect the physical body to the spiritual world. Through the sacred objects, the body displays the significant symbols and stories that are associated with the ceremony, song, dance and/or ancestor spirit.

Ceremonial dress across Australia is extremely diverse. In some areas, wrist and ankle bands are made of woven string and animal skins; women wear skirts made from emu, cockatoo or other bird feathers; and the men might wear kangaroo skins or other animal furs. In the past, natural materials formed the basis of traditional dress, but today, there are influences of European culture in the clothing, symbolism and body adornments.

In some areas for particular ceremonies, body symbols are intricate — whereas in other areas, body stories are aesthetically quite simple. Each language group has their own types of ceremonial dress and body adornment, and these differ from ceremony to ceremony, as well as from group to group. Loos around dance, music and song ensure that particular symbols and practices remain the rite of a language group. Such practices have helped to sustain Aboriginal identity and community connections to country, place and family.

There are many different types of instruments used in ceremonies. The didgeridoo, which originated from north Queensland, is now played in many communities around Australia. The percussion instruments of clap sticks and seed rattles are also popular, along with flat rocks and lengths of wood. In some areas, shells and leaves are tied together and secured around the ankles to produce percussive sounds when dancing. Less familiar is the ceremonial drum, used mainly by women. Made from goanna, snake, kangaroo and emu skins, drums give percussion to melodic song in areas that do not use the didgeridoo as a traditional musical accompaniment.

Regardless of country, all instruments used in ceremonies maintain a story and relationship to the language group. This relationship is understood by the protocols involved in the use of the instruments and the creation of the stories for the ceremonies.