

# Birth ceremonies, totems and rites in Aboriginal society

In Aboriginal communities there are particular ceremonies associated with the birth of a child. These ceremonies usually involve a feast and gift exchanging. In historical times, “birthdays” (as an annual recognition of birth) were not generally celebrated; however, today many Aboriginal people enjoy birthday celebrations in the same way as other Australians. The particular ceremonies associated with the birth of a child create the tapestry for how a child will live and interact within the world. Ceremonies and birth rights cannot be seen in isolation as they are intrinsically linked to totems, kinship lores, marriage rules, social cohesion and environmental sustainability.

It is important to recognise that there is a diverse range of Aboriginal birth ceremonies throughout Australia. Local cultural practices and lores are unique to each language group. The examples presented below are generalisations only. Specific information on birthing ceremonies should be sought from Aboriginal people.

## Roles and rites associated with totems

Some Aboriginal people may have several totems and these come from animals, plants, landscape features and the weather. People who share the same totem have a special relationship with each other. Knowing a person’s totem means understanding a person’s relationship to the language group and to other people.

The lores laid down by *The Dreaming* (or within creation time) affect the relationships people have with their environment, each other and their totems. The types of food eaten and by whom, who gathered or hunted what type of food, eating habits and the way in which food was prepared or stored are all traditional knowledges passed down from generation to generation.

Rules and lores differ from one language group to another, depending on the environment and *Dreaming* stories or lore stories that belonged to that area. There are many lores and rules associated with totems:

- In many language groups the men and women eat meals separately.
- In some seasons when food is short, some people are given preference over others for various types of foods.
- Heart, liver, kidneys and other animal organs are often saved for the elders and leaders in the language groups.
- Some foods have spiritual significance. These animals and plants need to be protected and are often not eaten or only eaten during ceremonies.



- Pregnant women, boys before initiation and girls before puberty are denied some foods for sacred reasons.
- Certain foods are prepared by women, others by men. Generally, yams, roots, nuts, fruit and shellfish are prepared by women, while men prepare flesh foods such as kangaroo and emu. This rule is not the same in all language groups.
- In some areas men do all the cooking, while in others it is the women's job.
- In some language groups, the food prepared by a man is not eaten by a woman and vice versa.
- At times of sadness (mourning or *sorry business*), or during some ceremonies, only certain people could feed particular people. For example, in some areas a person who is mourning may not touch food until ceremonies for the deceased are finished.

## Birth ceremonies — Gamilaraay perspective

At the time of birth, or just before the birth, the child is given totems. A totem links the person directly with creation time and the spiritual world (sometimes referred to as *The Dreaming*), and with all living creatures and the land of the Gamilaraay peoples. Totems define people's relationships to each other and give them particular rights and roles within the language group.

Generally, the birth totem would come from the mother or father through a spiritual sign linked directly to the spirit of the ancestor that the totem represents. For example, a goanna may cross the mother's path during her pregnancy. The child is then seen to be linked to the *Goanna Dreaming* or the ancestor *Uudinaddalli* and, as such, has a special relationship with the goanna and with the physical location where the mother saw the sign. Other totems are also given during birth ceremonies. These are dependent upon the parent's language group, their totems or kinship ties, the marriage lores and the area in which they belong. Aboriginal people have special responsibilities to their totems and ensure their survival by protecting them in different ways.