

Defining Aboriginal stories

This resource is based on information from the following three publications:

Barwick, D, Mace, M & Stannage, R (Eds) 1979, *Handbook for Aboriginal and Islander History*, Aboriginal History Inc, Canberra.

Canberra. "Aboriginal Histories: Source problems in methodology", in *Black Voices*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Loos, N & McDonald, H (Eds) (1987) James Cook University, Townsville.

Draft P-12 Guidelines and Framework, A Teachers Handbook designed to be used with the Trial Syllabus in Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Queensland Education Department, 1995.

Oral exchange is the primary form of communication in Aboriginal cultures. Concepts and beliefs about the Dreaming have been passed on from generation to generation. Specific cultural practices, histories, languages, laws and family relationships have been passed on through the oral traditions of instruction, storytelling, direction, song, dance, art and craft making.

Oral traditions substantiate Aboriginal perspectives about the past, present and the future.

Oral communications and histories have been translated via various mediums such as message sticks, rock and sand art, body painting, song, dance and carvings. More contemporary histories and events are expressed through the visual and performing arts, songs, multimedia and literary expositions including prose, poetry, plays and other means of scriptwriting.

There are many different types of oral histories. All of these relate to the Dreaming in different ways. These oral histories or "stories" fall into four categories:

1. **collective histories** — group stories which usually relate to the history of early contact with colonists
2. **spiritual narratives** — which talk about law, family relationships, relationships to the land and sea, food gathering, etc.
3. **cultural practices** — which have been handed down
4. **life histories** — biographical stories of individuals.

We must note that there are some stories written by Aboriginal people which do not fit into any of these categories (e.g. fiction stories).

Some Aboriginal people separate spiritual narratives into two categories:

1. **Creation stories**
2. **Dreaming stories.**

Creation stories are Dreaming stories that deal with creation and oral histories that discuss the creation of new life, landforms and people. These are not



necessarily related just to the time of our ancestors but are also relevant today. Any stories dealing with the Creation of life on earth are in this category.

Dreaming stories are those oral histories that are concerned with codes of behaviour, law, etc. Although both categories are Dreaming stories, some are specifically concerned with Creation. Any other stories written by Aboriginal people would be classified as Aboriginal stories.

A particular Dreaming story, for example, may have been passed down through storytelling through the combination of a specific artwork, a dance and a song. This combination ensured the survival of a particular story and that all its associated lores were taught. This combination process also enables the learner of the story to acquire different skills of observation, listening, mimicking, copying and translating.

Oral traditions continue to be passed down from generation to generation in various forms.

Australia's Living Heritage: Arts of the Dreaming by Jennifer Isaacs provides many examples of Dreaming stories retold through various art forms, bark, sand and cave paintings, as well as modern acrylics.

We have provided two ways of classifying Dreaming stories; however, it is imperative that local Aboriginal people are asked their opinions of the classification and terminology associated with oral histories.

There are also many videos available that recount Dreaming stories through dance and song.

This topic, studied within an educational context, provides great opportunities for Aboriginal visual artists and/or Aboriginal dance and drama groups to perform. Students could summarise the types of oral traditions presented by performers and discuss the lessons taught in the stories.