



DANCE




Spirituality

There is extensive evidence that dance was an integral part of Aboriginal life, deeply connected to spirituality and beliefs. The following article provides further information on this.





CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

-  Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures
-  Sustainability

CONTENT AREAS

-  History
-  The Arts (Dance)
-  Civics and Citizenship

GENERAL CAPABILITIES

-  Intercultural Understanding
-  Ethical Understanding
-  Critical and Creative Thinking
-  Personal and Social Capability

KEY CONCEPT

Aboriginal spirituality is defined as at the core of Aboriginal being, their very identity. It gives meaning to all aspects of life including relationships with one another and the environment. All objects are living and share the same soul and spirit as Aboriginals. There is a kinship with the environment. Aboriginal spirituality can be expressed visually, musically and ceremonially.

Grant E K, 2004

SUPPORTING CONCEPTS

- › ritual
- › celebration
- › ceremony
- › ancestral spirits
- › stories
- › totems
- › spirits

GUIDING QUESTION

How is Tasmanian Aboriginal spirituality expressed through dance?

This printed material is **to be used with Dance – a Living Cultures multimedia curriculum resource** that can be found at www.theorb.tas.gov.au

The Living Cultures Dance resource and this supplementary printed material have been designed to foster culturally responsive practice when learning about Tasmanian Aboriginal Histories and Cultures.

Introduction

Dance is to storytell ... and [it's] connection, not just to Country but to the animals.

Craig Everett

Ritual, Celebration and Ceremony

There is extensive evidence that dance has been an integral part of Aboriginal life, deeply connected to spirituality and beliefs. Tasmanian Aboriginal people have danced in ritual, celebration and ceremony for thousands of years. According to Aboriginal belief, ancestral spirits or creation ancestors usually took the form of stars or living creatures such as animals, reptiles and insects who journeyed across a flat featureless landscape creating all that is. Stories that recorded these events are known now in many parts of Australia as the dreaming, and were like a set of instructions for people to live by.



John Glover | A corroboree of natives in Mills Plains, 1832 | Art Gallery of South Australia

Ceremonies that enacted creation stories kept people connected to their origins, ensured that totemic ancestors continued to provide for human sustenance, encouraged a powerful sense of community, and provided opportunities for creative expression and the exercise of status. It was believed that key totems, especially the kangaroo and almost certainly the emu, connected humans to the spirit world of the creation ancestors and hence were the subject of key ceremonial events.

Breen S, 2017

DISCUSSION QUESTION

- › How do narratives such as these creation stories maintain Tasmanian Aboriginal people's connection to country/place, culture and identity?

Dance, Storytelling and Spirituality

The selection of sources below provides evidence of the interconnections between dance, storytelling and spirituality. George Augustus Robinson, while undertaking the so-called Friendly Mission (1829-1834), wrote prolifically in his journals about dance. Researchers continue to draw on historical sources such as Robinson's journals in attempts to understand the past.

Of the three most commonly observed dances, the kangaroo dance and the thunder and lightning clearly had spiritual significance. The kangaroo was involved in creation activities, almost certainly was a totemic ancestor, and may have represented one of two moieties for some clans. Several of Robinson's informants from different parts of the island told him that Thunder and Lightning was the 'devil', the hostile spirit who had the power to punish humans. Nothing was recorded of any ceremonial significance attached to the emu, only that the emu dance was one of the three major dances. Given the significance of the other two dances, it would be surprising if the emu dance did not have a deeper significance.

Breen S, 2017

Craig Everett also talks about a connection with the animals and paying respect:

You're dancing for animals that are on country, it's either our spirits, they were our food, they were our life source ... it's about paying respect and homage ... to that animal for what they do for us throughout all our thousands of years of being able to be alive on this country.

Craig Everett, 2017

Aboriginal people consider country to include not just the land, sea, sky and waterways but all animals and objects on and in the land.

People do not see themselves as separate from country, but consider themselves to be in a state of spiritual unity with it.

Breen S, 2017

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What might Craig mean when he says the animals are his spirits, food or life source?
- › What does Craig's offer of respect to the animal through dance tell us about Tasmanian Aboriginal people's holistic belief systems, and their spiritual and intellectual connection with country?

Totems

In many places Aboriginal spirituality is totemic – a totem is a natural object, plant or animal that is inherited by members of a family.

Totems define people's roles and responsibilities, and their relationships with each other and creation. Each clan family belonging to the group is responsible for the stewardship of their totem: the flora and fauna of their area as well as the stewardship of the sacred sites attached to their area. This stewardship consists not only of the management of the physical resources ensuring that they are not plundered to the point of extinction, but also the spiritual management of all the ceremonies necessary to ensure adequate rain and food resources at the change of each season.

Uncle Graham Paulson

While much of the information we know about totemism in Aboriginal Australia is in relation to groups on the mainland, there is some evidence of similar thought in Tasmania. In *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, Bill Gammage writes:

Oyster Bay people called gum trees 'countrymen', and other groups claimed other trees, and people told Robinson, 'Moinee was hurled from heaven and dwelt on the earth, and died and was turned into a stone and is at Coxes Bight, which was his own country ... Laller a small ant first made the natives.' In what records survive of Tasmanian practice, in their links and duties of care with named animals and places, in their taking plant and animal names, in their belief in the transmigrations of souls, in their kangaroo, emu, fire, wind and horse dances, and in their

ancestral paths apparently like the songlines which mesh the mainland, Tasmanians thought like mainlanders.

Gammage, 2011: 125

Shayne Breen, another contemporary historian, provides an argument that the Tasmanians had totemic ancestors.

Some ceremonies, especially those involving creation activities and the all-powerful spirit beings, often included ceremonial song and dance. Of the three most commonly observed dances, the kangaroo dance and the thunder and lightning clearly had spiritual significance. The kangaroo was involved in creation activities, almost certainly was a totemic ancestor, and may have represented one of two moieties for some clans.

Breen S, 2017

DISCUSSION QUESTION

- › How do Tasmanian Aboriginal people continue to demonstrate their responsibility and care for country and cultural resources?

Good and Bad Spirits

We usually go the cleansing first, and that's to cleanse the area, and the spirit out of the area, and then we'll go do the welcome and that's to welcome everyone in, and ... the good spirits.

Mitchem Everett, 2017



Craig Everett conducting a smoking ceremony *larapuna*, 2017 | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

Robinson's journals tell us that Tasmanians believed in good and bad spirits and used dance and ceremony to appease and pay homage to them. Good spirits were often present in creation stories, while bad spirits created problems.

7 June 1829 [Sunday] Conversed with the natives on religious subjects. Learnt that they had some idea of a good spirit whom they called PARLLERDE, and that he stopped in the sky [WARRANGGELLY].

21 November 1830: Tonight all the men practised in a little hilarity. One of the dances consisted in a continued jumping for at least a quarter of an hour. The natives appeared quite contented. Spent some time in conversation with MAN.NER.LE.LAR.GEN.NE and WORE.TER.LET.TE.LARN.NEN.NE, and these two chiefs asked them the name of the good spirit; said TYE.RE.NO.YER.PAN.NER good

[Ben Lomond], PLUCK.ER.TEE.BUR.RER good [Little Swanport]; WY.ER.KAR.TEN.NER bad spirit or devil.

Robinson cited in Breen S, 2017

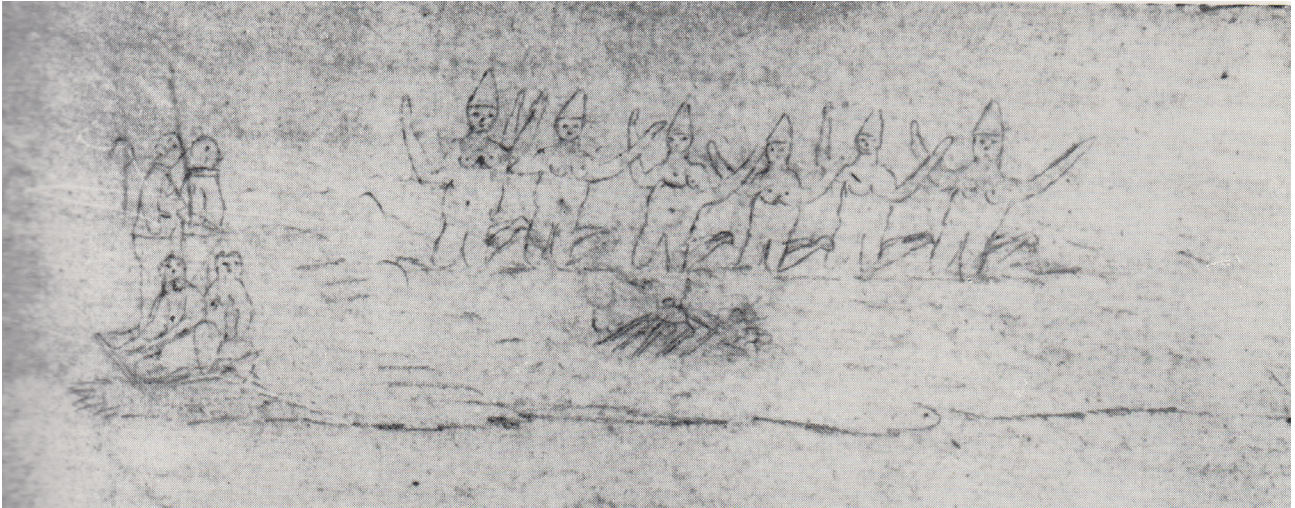
Breen makes further comment:

Observers seemed more likely to record information about bad spirits, most notably 'the devil', perhaps because they, the observers, were more inclined to associate devils with what they regarded as a primitive form of religion. Some Tasmanians believed a spirit called *rageowrapper* [which also meant thunder and lightning] caused

all their afflictions. Milligan made similar observations, although both he and Robinson used biblical terms to translate some words. Milligan claimed the Tasmanians believed in a host of malevolent spirits including goblins in caverns, in clefts of rock, in recesses in dark forests, on top of mountains. In 1834, Robinson was unable to convince a group

of *Pallitorre* to explore a cave near the *Toolumbunner* ochre pits. 'They would proceed about a yard or two and then rush out in greatest terror shouting vociferously and crying out that the devil was coming, that it was the *devil's leebrunner*'.

Breen S, 2017



Dance of the native women at the sealers' camp | 21 June 1830 Robinson cited in Plomley, 1966

DISCUSSION QUESTION

- › What do these accounts tell us about the interconnectedness of dance and the spirit world?

www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures/dance/teacher-drawer

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