

acknowledged that dreams are a recognized way of tapping into ancient wisdom; and the latter with its erroneous temporal connotation, though it could be argued that the irrelevance and transgression of formal time in the act of dreaming captures the elusive temporal attributes of The Dreaming. Neither term is, strictly speaking, correct, and to that extent the use of either term has to be qualified. Indigenous Australians themselves use the terms interchangeably since vernacular terms can only be properly applied when referring to their specific areas of origin.

The well-known anthropologist Bill Stanner popularized the concept of The Dreaming as the cornerstone of Aboriginal spirituality: "Clearly, The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen; and a kind of logos or principle of order transcending everything significant for aboriginal man" (Stanner, p. 255). Stanner favored the use of capitals for the two words on the grounds that they form an indissoluble whole. Popular usage, however, tends to have capitals only for Dreaming, thus distinguishing this term from the act of dreaming. It nevertheless remains true that common usage (and ignorance) have muddied our understanding of these concepts. In the absence of a better English word, however, The Dreaming remains the most useful term. Edwards (1988) presents a comprehensive and very readable overview and interpretation of the concept of The Dreaming.

In its broadest application, The Dreaming refers to genesis or creation, but as an ongoing reality untrammelled by the constraints of time. With local variants, the interpretation of The Dreaming goes roughly as follows:

In the beginning the land was flat, featureless and enveloped in darkness, yet encompassed within it latent spiritual forms and attributes.

Progressively these forces emerged from the land in the shape of heroic beings: ancestral figures, some human, some animal, some a combination of both sharing attributes of either or both. Starting from their various places of origin, these ancestral beings undertook major journeys of varying length and eventfulness creating all the physical and animated features that constitute the modern Australian landscape: mountain ranges, rivers, claypans, outcrops, plants, bird and animal species, as well as human groups distinguished by different languages, beliefs and practices.