

ancestral beings. Women also have their sphere of influence though this was somewhat late in recognition as most early observers and recorders of custom and beliefs were middle-class British males who transposed their Eurocentric male dominant views on indigenous Australian cultures.

Aboriginal women play a crucial ceremonial role in sustaining the health and well-being of the community and family groups, as well as in other specific fields relating to what is commonly called “women’s business.” Diane Bell’s *Daughters of the Dreaming* (1983) remains one of the most detailed and authoritative accounts of women’s ritual role in indigenous Australia.

Another important focus of ceremonial activity are funerary rites associated with the proper disposal of the dead and ensuring that the transition to the spirit world takes place as smoothly and respectfully as possible so as to ensure a balanced relation between the world of the living and those who have gone before. Since most Aboriginal groups believe in reincarnation in some form (there being no fundamental distinction between human and animal species) it is most important that funeral ceremonies be carried out properly and with due respect. Most burials involve two ceremonies, the first focusing on the immediate disposal of the human remains by whatever customary practices apply locally (e.g., in ground burial, exposure and/or smoking of the body on a wooden platform — obviously no longer practiced nowadays); and the second involving a well publicized and grandiose disposal of the remains (bones, skeleton) associated with guest dancers, carving of funerary posts and/or hollow log coffins and the like. The epitome of this secondary funerary rite is the “opening [read unveiling] of tombstones” by Torres Strait Islanders which reflects a fascinating blend of Christian ritual and traditional islander custom. In other parts of Australia, the secondary ritual may involve the “smoking” of the house and/or burial of possessions of the deceased to ensure that all traces associated with the dead have been effectively erased, thus making the environs safe for the living.

Both men and women are also importantly involved in the transmission of cultural and esoteric knowledge to the next generation and this takes place in mostly segregated initiation ceremonies which may involve several cycles spread over many years of cumulative learning. Indeed, induction into the most secret bodies of knowledge is reserved for those who have proven through their life’s example that they are worthy custodians to