Across cultural boundaries:  
Greek and Aboriginal Australians in contact

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The Greeks and the Indigenous people of Australia represent two cultures of ancient origins within the dominant Australian society. Opposing discrimination on the basis of ethnic and minority distinctions, both support the oneness of all people.

This is the first paper, to my knowledge, which attempts to provide a comprehensive picture of the two cultures in contact. It examines both direct and indirect influences and the impact of Aboriginal Australian cultural aspects on a variety of first generation Greek Australians' artistic expression, including literature (poetry, prose, drama), music and visual arts (painting and sculpture).

Introduction

Since the 1970s, Greek scholarship in Australia has been attracted to a cross-cultural journey, to a comparative analysis of the intellectual tradition and creation of Australian Hellenism with that of mainstream Australia. In this article the cross-cultural journey takes the opposite direction, that is, how Australian Hellenism has been impacted upon by the culture of another Australian minority, that of Aboriginal Australians.

Demographics

According to the most recent census (2006), the self-identified indigenous peoples of Australia numbered 455,028 persons (409,525 Aboriginals, 27,302 Torres Strait Islanders and 18,201 identified as both) (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008:6), comprising 2.3% of the total Australian population of 21,522,662 (ABS, 2008b:1)

1 The name "Aborigine" was given to the original Australians by the British colonists (from 1788), while the Aboriginals used, and still use, regional names of the country applicable to their own groups (Eora in the area of Sydney, Woiworung in Melbourne, Kaurna in Adelaide, etc.) or general terms, such as Koori, Murri, Nunga.
speaking about 145 indigenous languages, many of which are dialects (almost 110 of them critically endangered).

Indigenous Australians acquired the right to vote (abolition of Section 25 of the Constitution) and were included in the national censuses (abolition of Section 51 [26]) as late as the end of 1967 (1967 Referendum); in 1990 the Labour Government enacted the legislation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the first substantial Indigenous organisation to protect their rights, while in 1992 the High Court abolished the concept of Terra Nullius, opening the way for the recognition of native title land rights (Mabo Decision).

Comparatively, in the same census the self-reported persons of Greek origin consisted of 365,200 (1.8% of the total population) (ABS, 2008a:6, 8). Realistically, however, their numbers may have reached 400,000, considering those of Greek ancestry born in areas other than Greece (Cyprus, Turkey, Egypt, etc.), who may have identified themselves on the basis of country of birth. Despite the dramatic increase in Greek emigration to Australia after World War II, especially after the 1952 agreement between the two governments, with a total of almost 250,000 Greek arrivals between 1947 and 1982, the 2006 census revealed that the number of Greek-speaking individuals had decreased from 269,775 in 1996 to 263,075 in 2001 to 252,222 in 2006 (ABS, 2007:n.p.). Yet Greek has remained the second most popular language other than English spoken at home in Australia.

Although Greek emigration has declined unprecedentedly since the 1990s to about 100, or even fewer, persons annually (Kanarakis, 2003:72 fn. 31; Neos Kosmos, 2004:1) and many have repatriated, the Greeks still constitute the fourth largest ethnic group of non-English speaking origin after the Italians, Germans and Chinese (ABS, 2007:n.p).

The impact of Aboriginal Australian life and culture upon Australian Hellenism

Within the Australian context the impact of the culture and life of Aboriginal Australians upon Australian Hellenism, particularly upon first generation Greek immigrant artists in literary writing, theatre, music, painting and sculpture, has become more dynamic and multifaceted as the years have passed. This impact is directly related to how detached the artists have become from their early immigrant life and experiences and how adjusted they have become to their new life as members of Australian society.

Literary expression (prose and poetry)

My research reveals the earliest such writer to be Alekos Doukas who emigrated to Melbourne in 1927. Doukas, in his Greek-language semi-autobiographical narrative Under Foreign Skies, written in 1953–1958 and published posthumously in
Melbourne (1963), points out that the Aborigines were persecuted by the colonial British authorities of the time, deprived of their traditional lifestyle, displaced from their native lands, and even exterminated (pp. 13, 61, 90, 136). He portrays them as simple and unpretentious people of the bush (p. 122), known for certain abilities and qualities unattainable by the Whites, such as the prediction of periodical droughts (p. 122) and being “more ethical and fair than us the Whites”, although applied “with primitive toughness” (p. 90). However, he also believed that their racial and cultural development “stopped at the stage of the wandering ‘human hunter’ without even rudimentary settlement” (p. 12).

Doukas reflected the ideas of Social Darwinism of the 19th century, and in accordance with these ideas, the Aborigines appear in Doukas’ *Under Foreign Skies* not as developed full-fledged characters, such as his white co-workers and bosses — Australians, Jews and others from different countries of Europe. They pass through the pages of the book like shadows in the forest where they lived and hunted.

As a true internationalist, though, Doukas expressed his opposition to the “White Australia” policy (p. 84) which consolidated understanding of “race” in terms of a dichotomy of white and non-white people across the world as being unjust, putting him ahead of his time. He stands out as an advocate for the abolition of the “White Australia” policy and for recognition of Aborigines as a relevant part of Australian society.

In the 1950s, in Western Australia another significant poet, short story writer and playwright, Vasso Kalamaras, was making her appearance. Kalamaras emigrated in 1951, settling in the rural town of Manjimup, south of Perth, where she worked on her father-in-law’s tobacco farm and came into contact with the Indigenous people of the area. This would later be reflected in her writing. In her poem “Corroboree” she reveals the magnitude of the Aboriginal tragedy — mental and physical:

[...]
The pain which came from afar,  
as though deep in the forest of your soul,  
was heard without a movement  
of your thick white moustache.  
We were there,  
more pitiful than the state you have been reduced to,  
as we listened to  
every despairing voice

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2 After his visit to the National Museum in Melbourne, Alekos wrote to his brother Stratis in a letter (29 July 1928) that the Aborigines were “on the lowest level of development” (Alexiou, 2008:207).

3 The “White Australia” policy, which can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century, described Australia’s approach from federation (*Immigration Protection Act 1901*) until March 1966 (government abolition of the “White Australia” policy) and 1973 (removal of race as a factor in Australia’s immigration policies enacted by the Whitlam Labour government) favouring applicants only from certain countries.
that told of your gods
who were dying with you, inside you.

[...]

*(Landscape and Soul, Perth [bilingual edition], 1980:47)*

Kalamaras is a most sympathetic observer of this collective human drama. The Aborigines’ social problems and mistreatment resulted in a radical decline of their population from an estimated 750,000 (pre-1788) to approximately 93,000 by 1900 (ABS, 2002:n.p.) as well as the loss of many of their languages and traditions.

A close examination of the works of first generation Greek immigrant writers reveals that their knowledge derives either from personal study of Aboriginal society and lifestyle (indirect influence) or from first hand experiences and interpersonal communication with the Indigenous people themselves (direct influence), as with Doukas and Kalamaras.

The first category includes the poet, novelist and playwright Theodore Patrikareas who emigrated in 1958 and repatriated in 1973. His Greek-language poem “Hawkesbury River”, though set in the colonial period, is quite timely and illustrates the geographically small but socially significant difference between the dominant European society and that of the indigenous people.

[...]
Palaces of Aborigines
vanished long ago
in the bush.
A mere thirty paces
from the blue house of the Makenzies,
where now the bagpipes sound.
And red-faced Scots
flirt playfully.

*(The Southern Cross in Kanarakis, 1991:250)*

Some representative cases of the latter category of writers are the poet Adrianos Kazas, the poet and short story writer Kostas Rorris and the bilingual poet and playwright Yota Krili — all of Sydney, as well as the Melbourne poets, Dimitris Tsaloumas and Nikos Ninolakis. These writers were affected by the conditions of life, the local environments, Aboriginal spirituality and folklore, and the individuals they encountered, transforming their memorable experiences into poetic and prose pieces, distinguished by powerful images of Aboriginal life and pristine landscape.

Some of them went on the road and into the dramatic bush or outback to see “Aboriginal Australia” and developed a deeper understanding. Rorris, for example, was invited in 1961 by an Aborigine to visit her extended family living in the bush. Others travelled as tourists, like Kazas, to popular places such as Coober Pedy in
South Australia, Uluru [Ayers Rock] and Alice Springs in the central Northern Territory, whereas Ninolakis, Tsaloumas and Krili were all enquiring travellers. Krili, for example, driven by her life-long commitment to social justice issues, went backpacking for three months in 1999 in South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, as a social explorer.

It is noteworthy that multiple themes have attracted the interest and empathy of a number of writers to varying degrees. They include the gradual erosion of traditional Aboriginal lifestyle due to the new social order imposed by European society that included the separation of children from families by forced removal and the prohibition of the use of their own languages and rituals.

Yota Krili delineates this with sensitivity:

Their dark presence
always conspicuous
in the fringes of towns.
They carry no spears, no coolamons
only plastic bags from the supermarkets.

Depression, a bird of prey
picking at the marrowbone.
[...]
(“Dead Finish” [Unpublished])

Another theme is the exploitation and destruction of the local Aboriginal ecosystem by mining and logging companies, forcing them out of their ancient and familiar environments to the social periphery. In his poem “The Green Ants” Dimitris Tsaloumas points the finger at the unethical exploiters of uranium mining in Aboriginal land, with impressive irony:

Down in the Antipodes
in the vast deserts, embraced
by such inhospitable seas
that death lurks
in multicoloured shells and octopuses
smaller than a baby’s hand,
in distant Arnhem Land
where time still sleeps
and wizened men
with rusty skins
moan their dirges
[...]
there the enlightened ones
went to search and found
the mineral of salvation
Uranus’ gift
wealth
to clothe the vanquished race
and reward the labours of the just.

[...]
Ants or no ants, let the mining
and the exporting begin at once.

[...]
(The Observatory, St Lucia: University of
Queensland Press, 1983:33, 35, 37, 39)

The occupation and desecration of their sacred places (such as Uluru), transformed
into tourist sites, and the lack of understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal culture
as well as of the deep spiritual interconnectedness between the Aborigines and their
environment comprise a third theme.

Krili reflects on the sad fate of one such sacred site — the internationally recognised
Uluru, the largest monolith on the planet — in her poem “Rosie”, which also features
in Kazas’ poem “Red Heart (Uluru–Ayers Rock)”.

[...]
O Rosie
where is your home?
Where have you been?
I expected you to collect
the entry fee to Uluru-Kata Tjuta
but the hand that took the money was white.
Fleeting tourists replenish
themselves at your ancestral Edens.
Dreamtime stories and your handprints
are fading on rock galleries.
White dealers trade your art.

[...]
(“Rosie” [Triptych, Melbourne: Owl
Publishing (bilingual edition), 2003:24])

And Kazas:

[...]
In the sunlight it stands out like a king
wearing deep purple robes,
eliciting the tourists’ admiration,
all of them trapped
in the rat race
stress their relentless enemy
with their motto ‘Time is money’,
ceaselessly photographing Uluru’s changing shades.

[...


Furthermore, there are moments of appreciation of Aboriginal culture and spirituality intermingled with feelings of regret. Writers come to realise that Aboriginal culture is not inferior, but different, replete with ancient myths, traditions and beliefs, and that the Indigenous people, in general, have knowledge and understanding of their environment and thus an almost religious affinity with it.

Relevant examples of this “awakening” and sense of regret are found in the poem “Further on from Moulamein...”¹ written in 1969 by Nikos Ninolakis in which he relates his personal spiritual awakening as he made his way, guided by an Aboriginal spirit, through the depths of a powerful and overwhelming thick forest around Moulamein in southern New South Wales, north of the Murray River. The spirit revealed to him that this forest had been inhabited by Aborigines (now vanished) from ancient times.

[...]
Over in that wilderness
Further on from Moulamein
Where the wasteland ended
Rose like a castle wall

The silent bushland
A Namatjira painting,⁵
And my thought was terrified
For it looked all impregnable.

And yet its guiding spirit
Unto a secret Path
Nod-callingly did rustle
To me the uninvited.

[...]

(Antipodes [Melbourne], Year A’, No. 1, 1974:42)

¹ This poem was translated into English by Ninolakis’ mentor Constantine Malaxos-Alexander.

⁵ Apart from Nikos Ninolakis’ reference to Albert (Eela) Namatjira (1902–1959), an Aboriginal painter of international acclaim known for his water-colour landscapes, other Greek writers and artists have been inspired by him as well, like the poets Stathis Raftopoulos (Ships, Ports and Seas..., Melbourne: Greek-Australian Publications, RMIT University, 1996:34). The well-known Sydney caricaturist and journalist Tony Rafty (Anthony Raftopoulos) drew a famous portrait in Namatjira’s honour, included in Raftopoulos’ poetry collection Ships, Ports and Seas..., 1996:34).
In a similar vein, Kostas Rorris describes in his Greek-language short story “As Long As There Are People...”\(^6\) his personal spiritual experience in the western Queensland bush when an Aboriginal elder surprised him with his wisdom. Rorris had approached the elder in his “fervent socialist” manner ready to indoctrinate the old man, only to realize at the end of their discussion that the Aborigines practice their own form of socialism, without the weaknesses evident in the socialism of the White society.

[...]
— Son of the white race, how little you understand our culture!
How can a White understand the way we live? ... We have a system of common ownership which means that whatever we have is for everybody... And we do not violate nature; we do not cut the trees; we do not kill the animals more than what we need to live! Do you, White people, do the same thing? No, tell me!
[...]

(‘As Long As There Are ‘People’...’ [Unpublished])

It is interesting to note that aspects of Aboriginal culture have left their mark on children's literature as well, though comparatively recently. An example is the Sydney poet and prose writer Beth Georgellis whose prose work *Zeus the Koala and the Magic Egg*, published in Sydney in 1999 in separate Greek and English versions, blends with affection and sensitivity, themes such as the Ancient Greek origin of the Olympic Games and references to Aboriginal culture — the sacred site of Uluru, the wise Aboriginal elder, cave paintings, the harmony of the elder, and of Aborigines in general, with the animals of the bush, promoting peace and harmony.

**Theatre**

Although the Aboriginal impact on the literature of the Greek Australians is quite rich, it is very recent on the Greek immigrant theatre play-writing. The most recent example is Sophia Ralli-Catharios’ play *Crossroads*.\(^7\) Apart from the issues of gender, race and ethnicity, and cultural and social differences, the playwright explores the spirituality of two cultures of ancient origins: the Greek and the Aboriginal, breaking down ethnic distinctions. The playwright sets the appropriate mood by incorporating an Aborigine playing the didgeridoo at certain key points of the production.

There is also a similar contribution to children's theatre. In this area Vasso Kalamaras has written two bilingual children's plays, *Little Eros* (for little children) and *Olympus*

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\(^6\) Rorris’ short story received a commendation in the 1998 centenary competition of the Greek Community of Sydney.

\(^7\) It was staged in 1991 in English and in 2008 in Greek at the Canberra National Multicultural Festival by the (Hellenic) Art Theatre and repeated the same year by the (Hellenic) Art Theatre at the Greek Festival of Sydney.
on the Porongorups, both produced in English, in Perth, in 1982. The first play refers to a celebration involving the little Greek god Eros and Aboriginal children, animals and trees, all teaching friendship and brotherly love within the Australian landscape. The second captures the atmosphere of a symposium of the Greek gods on the Aboriginal mountain Porongorups, bringing together the two ancient religions and their mystical wisdom within the natural environment, as well as combining the theme of the human need to survive.

Music

Although Aboriginal music, in its artistic combination of vocal and instrumental sounds, differs from the Greek, a cross-cultural encounter was realised, although only as late as the last decades of the twentieth century. The most well-known example is the inspiring Melbournian singer, guitarist and songwriter, Costas Tsicaderis. Tsicaderis and his Ensemble gave a recital on 6 October 1985 in Melbourne with a special guest, the Aborigine Gnarnajarrah Waitarre, playing the didgeridoo for a composition based on Nikos Ninolakis’ poem “Further on from Mulamein”\(^8\). The text accompanying a tribute CD of his own original compositions entitled “The Mighty and the Humble” states that in “Beyond Mulamein” “Costas fuses the traditional instruments of the Aborigine (didgeridoo), the white settler (flute) and the immigrant (bouzouki)”.

Painting

As far as it can be ascertained, the earliest and first full time professional Greek painter in Australia was the Castelorizian Vlassis (Vlase) Zanalis (1902–1973) (Kanarakis, 1997:138–154). With a keen interest in the Australian landscape and Aboriginal culture and life, he sought inspiration from direct contact with Aborigines in their tribal setting and the outback. In the decades after World War II (late 1948 until 1968) he set out on several extended outback journeys, living for months with northern Aboriginal tribes of Western Australia (the Dadaway, who initiated him into their tribe at the Forrest River Mission which he visited three times, and also the Wunnumbal, Wororra and Ngarinyin in the Kimberleys). These stays enabled him to portray the Aboriginal people and their sacred sites and ceremonies, as well as black madonnas, making him the first white painter to work among them at a time when white people, other than missionaries and government officials, rarely visited them. From 1968 until his death in Perth, together with other subjects, he continued painting Aboriginal figures and ceremonies (88 in all), from memory. He intended

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\(^8\) Apart from Ninolakis, Tsicaderis was influenced by Mikis Theodorakis’ compositions based on the poetry of Seferis and Ritsos, and he also set to his own music the works of other Greek-Australian poets such as Dimitris Tsaloumas.

Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
these paintings to be his memorial to the Aboriginal people, who were, in his own words “the fine people of a proud race”.

Another first generation visual artist is the contemporary painter Nikos Soulakis. Like Zanalis, Soulakis has been inspired through personal contact with Aboriginal culture and life, but they differ in that Zanalis’ work derives from his experience of Aborigines in their natural physical environment, whereas Soulakis’ paintings resulted from his observation of the low socioeconomic conditions of urban Aborigines in Melbourne in the 1960s. Comparing them with his own early immigrant situation, Soulakis empathised with them because they appeared to be deprived immigrants in their own ancestral land.

Soulakis’ 45 years of work in Australia reveal that although his main inspiration flows from the folk, Byzantine and ancient Greek classical tradition and art, he has been quite productive with Aboriginal themes, especially their art, in combination with the uniquely harsh yet beautiful vast red and ochre expanse of the Australian landscape and the way it appears to a non-Aboriginal, that is, a Greek immigrant's eyes. In 1991 he organised a personal exhibition at the Victorian Artists’ Society Galleries, in Melbourne, with a total of 28 works, all on this Aboriginal–Greek theme, entitled “Between Two Cultures”. Soulakis, with the blending of symbols and colours of the ancient Greek and Aboriginal cultures, tries to present their cultural richness and also to emphasise the need for co-existence without racial discrimination.

As already noted, Aboriginal impact is also observed indirectly, and one such case is the work of Nikos Nomikos. His representative painting, entitled “The Dancer of the Red Sand Desert” (1993), presents an Aborigine in a dancing position holding his spear on the fire-like red sand. The unusual point, according to the painter, is that he was inspired by his own poem written about the Aboriginal activist and poet Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal) almost three years earlier.

**Sculpture**

Athanasiou (Arthur) Kalamaras, described as West Australia’s finest figurative sculptor, is a member of the well-known family of artists and writers. Born in Greece and emigrating with his parents to Australia, at the age of one, he later followed in his father Leonidas’ steps, becoming a prominent sculptor as well as painter, deeply influenced by the Hellenistic tradition.

With reference to Aboriginal themes, in 1979 he completed his large stone relief “Minmarra – Gun Gun”, a place where the spirits of women rest. This memorial, incorporating Aboriginal symbols and beliefs, combines them with honouring the pioneer women of Western Australia. Commissioned by the Women’s Committee of the Sesquicentenary celebrations, it is situated in King’s Park Botanical Gardens in Perth.
Conclusion

This discussion has established that Aboriginal culture, art and history, which are accepted today as an integral part of the wider multicultural Australian national identity, have not left untouched (through both direct and indirect contact) first generation Australian Hellenism, particularly in the arts. This impact, noticeable especially since World War II, reveals how two ancient cultures (the oldest of Europe and the oldest of this continent) have come into contact in this country, acknowledging their historical legacies and highlighting that they have survived and continue to grow in this land.

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