This paper pursues another transnational course extending the paper I presented at the Eighth International Conference on Greek Research, where the influence of cultural aspects of Aboriginal Australians upon a variety of first generation Greek Australians’ artistic expression was examined.

Exploring both direct and indirect influence of elements of Greek and Aboriginal Australian cultures evident in artistic works (including theatre arts, painting, photography, music and dance), my current research focuses on how this blending has transcended through the filter of second generation Australians of Greek and Koori parentage, as well as of Aborigines, Anglo-Australians and members of other immigrant groups, and how this has been transformed and exhibited by them, thus being “recreated” artistically.

Introduction

My research for the paper I delivered at the Eighth International Conference on Greek Research had focused on the influence of aspects of Aboriginal Australian culture on the literary and artistic work of first-generation Greeks in Australia. The results from conducting that research also revealed cases of another direction in the cross-cultural journey where elements of both Greek and Aboriginal Australian culture were blended in a variety of artistic works by a diverse range of artists and writers. They included second generation persons of blended Greek and Koori parentage, Aborigines, Anglo-Australians, and members of other immigrant groups.

This blending of Greek and Aboriginal cultural elements reflects the wider multicultural Australian reality. The cases presented in this paper are all different and worthy
of consideration, and illustrate not only the talent and ingenuity of their creators but also the direct or indirect impact they have had on each other.

Converging points

Comparing the Aboriginal people of Greater Australia with Greek Australians, despite the multifaceted differences (historical, social, linguistic, etc.) between these two populations, we also notice that, interestingly, there are converging points between them, and although coincidental, worth noting. Among others, three seem to be most evident:

First, their similar demographic profile.

According to the 2006 Census the self-identified Aboriginal Australians comprised 409,525 persons (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008:6) and the self-reported Greek Australians, according to the 2008 Yearbook of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 365,200 (ABS, 2008:8), possibly about 400,000 considering those of Greek origin born in areas other than Greece. This quantitative proximity means that their percentage, in comparison with the number of the total population of the country of 19,855,288 at that time (ABS, 2007:1), is almost equal. In other words, it is 2% for Aboriginal Australians and 1.8% for Australians of Greek origin or 2% for an estimated 400,000.

Second, there is their point of convergence resulting from their ancient past and heritage.

Both the Aboriginal people and the Greeks belong to societies whose origins have long since disappeared. Nevertheless, these two ancient societies in their geographical areas exhibited cultural continuity and developed complex languages — on the one hand, the earliest in Australia, and on the other in Europe and in all of Western civilisation, respectively — with specialised forms being used in different contexts: cultural patterns and values, early rituals and beliefs, mythology, etc., and both struggling to maintain their language and ethnocultural identity.

Third, their minority social status.

Aboriginal Australians and Greek Australians (as well as other “ethnic” groups) have experienced the status of a minority community (although differing in that the former is not an ethnic group) under the imposed Australian linguistic, cultural and political dominance. Consequently, this caused psychological and social problems on the one hand for the Greeks, as well as other immigrants, until the advent of the multicultural policy of the 1970s, and on the other hand for the Indigenous Australians who 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). The legal recognition of native title land rights occurred in 1992 with the abolition of the concept of Terra Nullius, and, in general they were not regarded as relevant until 1989 (Jupp, 2003:84, 99–101), making both groups’ adaptation to the Australian social reality difficult.
The blending of the two cultures in artistic expression

Regarding the blending of Hellenic culture (ancient and modern), as well as of Australian Hellenism, with that of Aboriginal Australian culture as a source of inspiration for artistic creativity, we are impressed by the broad spectrum of interpretation. As a matter of fact, we notice that the more the years pass the more dynamic and multifaceted is the influence of the two cultures on each other. This influence derives from the Greek and Aboriginal environments, the two peoples, their culture and mythology, but also their theatre, music, dance, visual arts, etc.

This intercultural impact and the blending is mostly a post-World War II phenomenon, directly related to how detached from their tribal life the Aborigines had become and, therefore, how adjusted they became to Australia's new multicultural reality. In parallel, regarding the Greek Australian immigrants, it depended on how truly multicultural they had developed in Australia, meaning how tolerant they were of the very different Aboriginal culture and life and, therefore, how appreciative of their artistic expression. The contact and links between Greek Australians and Aboriginal Australians are much older, evidenced by a number of cases of relationships and intermarriages resulting in children of blended Greek and Koori parentage.

As a further result, the more mental and emotional these changes occur in the consciousness, the more, even critically, this cross-cultural impact and blending are encountered, moving gradually further away from mere descriptive mirroring. Of course, the degree and variety of these elements differ from artist to artist depending on a range of factors (psychological, social, cultural, etc.) and how they affected each of them.

Direct impact and blending

It is interesting that intercultural impact in artistic expression of the above mentioned categories of artists and writers appears quite distinct and in various fields, recreating Greek and Aboriginal concepts and myths, blending them meaningfully with each other.

One such area is the theatre. The theatre, after all, as a cultural element, combining logos and praxis, has the ability not only to further enrich the culture and life of a particular people but also to bring into contact and blend the cultures of different peoples with mutual benefits.

One representative case of direct impact, that is on works by Aborigines and persons of Greek and Aboriginal heritage, is where a “Greek tragedy meets black Australia” in the play Black Medea by the Aboriginal playwright and successful director Wesley Enoch (Nuccual Nuugi) who grew up in Brisbane. Enoch's focal point is Aboriginal issues which he pursues with ability and innovation. He gained prominence with the production of The Seven Stages of Grieving (co-written with Deborah Mailman) and later with Jane Harrison's Stolen, which went on to tour nationally and internationally.
His writing also includes *The Sunshine Club* and *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie’s Table* which won the 2005 Patrick White Playwrights’ Award. In addition to his contribution to numerous committees, Enoch is a Resident Director with the Sydney Theatre Company and in June 2010 became the new artistic director of the Queensland Theatre Company, a trustee of the Sydney Opera House, and a member of the New South Wales Government Advisory Council (see also Australia Council for the Arts, 2009; RGM Artist Group, 2009).

*Black Medea* is an extremely bold play difficult to stage, and Enoch fuses into it an Aboriginal perspective and places it in an Australian setting. He successfully combines the power of the Greek tragedy with the story of an Aboriginal woman from the desert, who abandons her family and culture to follow her lover to the city where she cannot cope with a loveless marriage. Encouraged by the Chorus to take revenge on the drunken and violent Jason, she follows the path of the Greek Medea and gives into her despair and kills their son (see also Doyle, 2005).

Enoch, while Resident Director with the Sydney Theatre Company, staged and directed *Black Medea* in both Sydney and Melbourne in 2005 and with other of his productions toured the United Kingdom. In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he stated that in general he sees his work as “about making good drama, be it about violence, alcoholism, sexual abuse or whatever, as long as it’s not didactic or locked into the past. As an artist [he points out] I want to embrace ideas and change, and create unique and different stories” (Hallett, 2009:16). Enoch’s works and productions are confronting, intending to stimulate broader multicultural awareness.

Another area of interest is poetry, although not frequently served in this cross-cultural context. One indicative example, however, is the original verse writer (since the age of 17), rapper and successful hip hop performer from Melbourne, Georgina Chrisanthopoulos, also known as “Little G”. One of the first Indigenous female hip hop artists in Australia, she is also an energetic actor and ardent community activist with political aspirations. Apart from her success in music and stage performance, in her poetry (frequently infused with political commentary) she draws on her Aboriginal and Greek heritage for inspiration. Despite the racial abuse she experienced from an early age in her native Victorian town of Mildura, sometimes tagged “wog” and sometimes “abo”, Chrisanthopoulos has comfortably blended her two parental cultures and has called herself, in her own words, “a proud wogarigine” (see also theage.com.au, 2004a; SBS, 2009 [interview]; Trakakis, 2011:30).

In the field of visual arts two very indicative cases are those regarding the internationally acclaimed Aboriginal painter Wesley Willika and Kalliope (Kelly) Koumalatsos, a Melbourne painter, sculptor and photographer of Greek and Aboriginal descent.

Willika’s usual subjects are derived from the natural environment, such as the echidna, kangaroo, fish and water monitor. One example is his painting, entitled *Echidna*, depicting the totem of the Jawyon people of the Northern Territory and based on the Greek mythical monster of the same name. Having the torso of a woman (mammal) and the tail of a serpent (reptile), and having mothered all monsters in
Greek myths, she was known as the “Mother of all Monsters”, including Cerberus, the hundred-headed Hydra, the Sphinx and others.

The modern day echidna (spiny anteater), a monotreme mammal, native to Australia and New Guinea, strangely not giving birth to young but laying eggs, like the platypus (also a monotreme mammal found in Tasmania and East Australia), is named after this mythical Greek monster.¹

Similarly, Koumalatsos, in her painting, sculpture, as well as in her photography expresses, in her personal, impressive way the blending of her two heritages. Characteristically she has stated in an interview: “I love the two worlds in me because they have made me what I am today. [They have given me] the ability... embraced with the same pathos and power of two very ancient civilisations, to express their beauty and greatness. I can, through the richness of these two civilisations which I had the good luck to meet and get to love, say all those [things through my art] that it would be difficult to express with words”. Koumalatsos admits that her experience of her two ancestral worlds, Greece (she spent three months on her father’s native island of Samos) and Indigenous Australia, proved a “real revelation” for her (Morris, 2002:1, 15).

Significantly, Koumalatsos also participated in the reciprocal and first exhibition of indigenous Australian art in Greece at the Benaki Museum in Athens on the occasion of the 2004 Olympic Games. The program (exhibition and delegation) constituted Australia’s gift, as host of the 2000 Olympics, to the Greek Government, and served to raise awareness about Indigenous art and culture and the shared stories of the two cultures. Koumalatsos presented her family tree artwork as part of the exhibit, including images on the one hand of her maternal Aboriginal Lutheran grandmother, and on the other hand, a photo of her paternal grandmother that she had taken on a visit twenty years earlier to Samos, her father’s birthplace (theage.com.au, 2004b). In this work she demonstrated the connection she experienced and the parallels she realised in her upbringing with the two very strong cultural traditions whose legacies continue to have an impact on her into the present.

Greek and Aboriginal culture and the arts, apart from their marked inter-impact and blending on the theatre and visual works of artists of Aboriginal and of blended Greek and Aboriginal heritage, as shown by the examples presented, are not limited in other fields of this cross-cultural journey. Though not large in number, they are still noteworthy. Two additional areas are music and dance.

One eye-opening case illustrates how creative Aboriginal performers are. I am referring to the recent and highly publicised example of the Chooky Dancers — a group of ten young Aboriginal dancers from Elcho Island, a remote island off the coast of Arnhem Land, 550 kilometres northeast of Darwin — who became well known when they performed “Zorba the Greek” in Yolngu style at the Northern

¹ Etymologically, the Greek word ἐχιδνα (already used in the eighth century BC in Hesiod) derives from ἐχις (serpent), possibly of the same root as the ancient Greek word ἔχινος (the spine-covered hedgehog) which eats insects, snakes, small mammals, birds, and birds’ eggs.
Territory’s Ramingining Festival in September 2007 and later on the television program “Australia’s Got Talent”. Many have seen the video or youtube presentation of this Aboriginal rendition of the classic Zorba dance, fusing both traditions with the past and the present in dance movement. It became a surprise hit and the Chooky Dancers became instant international celebrities, especially as soon as the video clip was posted on the web. The video had 44,000 views in the first two months and the total now exceeds three million. The video was even shown in the village square of Kastellorizo where, according to the groups’ Aboriginal manager, the crowd went wild. Mikis Theodorakis also invited the teenage dancers to Greece in 2007 after viewing the video. On 4 February 2011 they performed in China’s Spring Festival which was broadcast by Beijing Television and seen by millions (theaustralian.news.com.au, November 2007; Epsilon, 2008:13; O Kosmos, 2011:22).

Indirect impact and blending

Despite the direct impact, we also encounter occasional indirect influence, in other words the convergence of Greek and Aboriginal cultures. This does not occur, however, in works of Aboriginal artists or those of Greek and Koori parentage, but in that of Anglo-Australians or other immigrant Australians. Quite indicative examples, among others, are the following which I have selected: one in painting and two in theatre.

In painting, the respected English immigrant artist John Glover who settled in Tasmania in 1831 at the age of 64 and continued to paint, was so fascinated by the Australian natural environment that, according to Dr Gerard Vaughan, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, “he invented Australian landscape painting”. Glover’s work also reveals his deep interest in painting Aborigines and capturing their culture on canvas — dance, corroborees, etc., even depicting them as the spirits of a particular place. Wishing to illustrate this latter point, and, according to David Hansen, Curator of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Glover knowing well how expert Aboriginal women were in the water, while the men used dogs after White settlement to help them hunt, he used Aborigines in his painting The Bath of Diana. Although a somewhat bizarre cross-cultural blend, this painting was based on the Greek myth of Artemis and Actaeon in which she turns him (the hunter) into a stag that is torn to pieces by his own hounds because he saw the goddess bathing (theage.com.au, 2004c).

Of two theatre examples I have in mind, the first, written in verse and directed by Voya Rajic is entitled War Diaries – Australia’s Vietnam. It is both thought-provoking and humane in its approach, for in this war and peace drama, Rajic illustrates the harsh conditions of tribal Aboriginal life and the plight of the stolen generation — an experience shared by so many indigenous Australian families. The drama intertwines the Aboriginal themes with those of Greek immigrant life in Australia by also focusing on a Greek family settled in outback Australia in 1947 and running a café. The convergence of the two cultures occurs when the Greek family’s son, who represents the immigrant settlers, falls in love with an Aboriginal girl, who with her grandmother
represents the last members of their vanishing tribe, as well as the original indigenous occupants of this land. The tragedy which ensues consists of the Greek family losing their only son in the Vietnam War followed by the fact that his child by the Aboriginal girl becomes part of the stolen generation. The blending of these varied yet connected themes is remarkable and the play was staged successfully by the Hellenic Art Theatre as part of the Greek Festival of Sydney in 2006, an initiative of the Greek Orthodox Community of New South Wales (see also the program of the Greek Festival of Sydney, 2006:5).

The second theatre piece I have selected as a relevant case is the short play *Wangi Maaia* (A meeting place) devised and directed by the young Anglo-Australian artist Narelle Hurley. In *Wangi Maaia*, at this meeting place, two ancient cultures and histories — the Greek and the Aboriginal Australian — intersect to give us a contemporary drama. Hurley’s inspiration derives from a work by Arthur Kalamaras, son of the Kalamaras family of writers and artists and a successful sculptor in his own right. The work is a sculpture of two monumental stones, the *Woggle* and *Athene*, located at the front of Arthur Head Bay Studio.

In this play Hurley achieves a harmonious blending of the two cultures, on the one hand, with the introduction of three Noongan elders and Aboriginal music, and on the other hand, with Homeric hymns set to appropriate music and a chorus contributing with equal eloquence. Finally, the music is accompanied by dance and appropriate costumes to create a dream-like atmosphere where the two ancient cultures meet with inspiring mythologies (personal correspondence with the author Vasso Kalamaras, 2009).

**Hellenism and Aboriginal Australia Beyond**

Despite the quite long cross-cultural blending between Aboriginal and Greek cultures, life and art, and the impacts they have had on each other, it is noted that at the beginning of the 21st century better understanding and deeper appreciation of this phenomenon took on added dimensions. This occurred in the form of not just theoretical but also active support for each other as well as of Aboriginal activities in Greece, the national centre of Hellenism itself.

Regarding the former, in December 2004 a Victorian Aboriginal group called on the Greek community to support their battle to have the British Museum return three priceless and unique Aboriginal cultural artifacts (two bark etchings and one ceremonial emu headdress), the only ones in the world from Dja Dja Wurrung Country, northwest of Victoria. The Greeks quickly responded favourably and the President of the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne and Victoria of the time, Mr George Fountas with a small delegation from the tribe, led by their spokesperson Mr Gary Murray, visited the offices of the Greek newspaper *Neos Kosmos*, the largest newspaper of the Greek diaspora in circulation, and on the 13th of December the English edition of the newspaper published a comprehensive article, entitled “Greek and Aboriginal Communities Unite Against British Museum”.

427

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During their visit, Mr Murray emphasised that “to his people these three cultural artifacts were as important as the Parthenon sculptures are to the Greek people”, and he concluded by saying that “there has been a long and positive informal association between members of the Melbourne Greek and Aborigine communities, and this issue was one that could help strengthen and develop this historic relationship” (kooriweb.org, 2004).

In the latter case, a few months earlier, in July 2004, as mentioned before, as a reciprocal gesture for Greece’s exhibit in Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum during the 2000 Olympic Games, the Powerhouse Museum and the Museum of Victoria jointly organised the first indigenous Australian exhibition at the Benaki Museum in Athens for the 2004 Olympic Games. Under the title 60,000 Years in the Making: Indigenous Australia Now, 250 pieces by some of Australia’s leading Aboriginal artists were displayed. The intention was to provide insight into Aboriginal art, culture and history. As a further contribution to the Games the exhibition was accompanied by a publication entitled Our Place: Indigenous Australia Now (Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing, 2004) edited by Steve Miller. Some of the exhibits had special relevance for Greece (see also theage.com.au, 2004b; Kyriakopoulos, 2004).

Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, it has been established that Aboriginal and Greek life, culture and art, which are widely accepted today as an integral part of the wider multicultural Australian national identity, have not left untouched (through direct and indirect contact) each other, particularly in the arts. Of course, for them to reach this point in the 21st century, they have struggled for many years against social injustice and complexities of Australian race and ethnic relations, while, especially for the Aborigines, striving for what might be called the three Rs: recognition, respect and reconciliation. This impact and cross-cultural blending which is noticeable especially since World War II, reveals how two ancient cultures and traditions (the oldest in Europe and the oldest of the Australian 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.

Finally, I acknowledge the debt we all owe to these writers and artists who have enhanced our awareness and appreciation of Hellenism and Aboriginal Australia — its people, culture and the issues which have been confronting them. In closing I hope that this paper stimulates further research into this interesting and worthy area of learning.
BLENDING GREEK WITH ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIAN CULTURAL ELEMENTS

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