Abstract: Since colonization of Australia, images and arts associated with Aboriginal culture have been used for political and for aesthetic purposes. They have been used in the search for national symbols and by non Aboriginal artist and designers for the creation of visual and performing artworks in search of national style. More recently Aboriginal people themselves have regained profile in the presentation of Aboriginal cultural material. This paper will argue that presentation and performance of cultural material at community and public events acts both for maintenance and growth of Aboriginal culture, and for increasing cultural understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia.

Key-Words: Aboriginals, festivals, Australia, cultural heritage

1 Introduction

The landmass we know today as the continent and country of Australia existed in Classical and European consciousness and imagination before its colonization as part of the British Empire in the late 1700s. A search for a unified national identity is, however, ongoing.

Concerns about identity are coloured by Australia’s status as a settler nation and the memory of the implicit dispossession of native peoples. For Australia, as with many settler nations of the ‘new world,’ there are cultural dilemmas in conceptualization of the nation [1]. There are ‘incommensurable differences’ between a ‘sense of belonging, home and place’ and between descendants of the original inhabitants and descendants of the ‘colonizer/migrant’[2]. The differences manifest, not the least, in the expression and maintenance of national iconography embedded in cultural heritage practices.

Australian nationalism and identity often includes references to native flora and fauna emblems and heroic stereotypes of sportsmen, soldiers and bush-rangers. These images are invariably male, and exclude Aboriginality and other non-white identities [1]. In many artworks the presence of Aboriginal characters, if they do exist, act as part of the threat and danger of the environment rather than providing their own narratives or being protagonists. In more recent decades, there has been a move towards a way of thinking that promotes multiculturalism and, significantly, avocation for a special place for Aboriginality and Aboriginal traditions [1].

2 Problem Formulation

This paper will outline how performance presentations by Aboriginal Australians in community festivals and public events can...
act as a means to maintain and retain elements of Aboriginal identity and to develop a shared national identity. The paper will compare the experience of participants of the Awakenings segment of the Opening Ceremony, of the XXVII Olympiad, Sydney, held 15th September 2000, with that of the Melbourne based One Fire Dance Group, particularly their presentation at Williamstown Festival, Victoria, held 12th April 2008. Although the Olympiad was a large-scale, large budget event with an international and national focus, and Williamstown Festival is a small-scale, community-based festival aimed at a local audience, both provide social and political contexts for exploration of community identity and of belonging. The performances were located within a broader program: to provide opportunities for the Aboriginal performers to present cultural material to a predominately non-Aboriginal audience. Discussion of the two performances will consider the performance opportunities as being a catalyst for performers’ exploration of their own cultural background, and the potential of such performances to enhance the Reconciliation process between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia.

2.1 Awakenings
The Awakenings segment in the Opening Ceremony began with a guide and songman character calling together the Aboriginal peoples of Australia to welcome the world to the Olympic Stadium, on the ancestral lands of the Bidjigal people [3]. The segment ended with the lawmaker and ancestral spirit, a ‘Wandjina’, throwing down a lightning bolt for cleansing and regeneration of the earth, symbolised by a burst of fireworks.

Developed over approximately four months, Awakenings involved more than a thousand people from communities across the continent and the Torres Strait. It included people living on tribal lands and in urban settings, and younger as well as older individuals. Artistic direction was provided by Rhoda Roberts and Stephen Page, two high profile Aboriginal artists. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities contributed to the overall production, with ideas for the segment, music and choreography. Some communities presented individual components within the segment, while other components different were mixed. Some communities presented adaptation of ceremonial song and dance. For some of the young people, who may have had very little if any contact with their own Aboriginal heritage, choreographies were created that included a variety of traditionally-styled movements with elements of contemporary dance [4].

Theatrical elements were based on adaptations of traditional elements. The performance layout was based on a ceremonial design, and costuming was traditionally based. Dancers wore costuming including body paint and ornamentation associated with their communities, while metallic finish ochre was used for the more contemporarily-styled dance sequences. Mischievous Mimi spirits from Arnhem Land (the top end of Australia) were adapted into stylized stilt-walking figures, and a depiction of a Wandjina spirit from the Kimberley area of north-west Australia figured on a back-drop which dominated the performance area. The Wandjina’s roles, of bringing the life-giving monsoon rains and bringing people together, were reflected in the dominance of the Wandjina backdrop.
Awakenings benefited from the networks and infrastructure of Bangarra Dance Theatre, with many of its company members providing artistic, technical and logistical support. Experience, contacts and discretion was needed in the development and presentation of Awakenings especially in the use and adaptations of material, and negotiation of protocols.

2.2 One Fire Dance Group
The One Fire Dance Group operates on a much smaller scale than either Bangarra Dance Theatre or the International Olympic Committee but faces similar issues in the development of its performances.

One Fire began in a suburban backyard in Melbourne in 1995 with a group of young people from the Koorie Open Door Education (KODE) School in which Koorie\(^3\) culture was a central component of the curriculum and included the usual mainstream subjects. Initial impetus for One Fire was to give the young people an insight into their culture ‘to give them something to work with and to steer them away from some of the problems and issues they were experiencing’ [5]. Artists and Elders,\(^4\) local and from other areas, developed the students’ cultural knowledge, the songs and dances and their meanings and the making of instruments for use in the performances. The group’s first performance was at the KODE School where many of the members and their families were students.

Over the years One Fire has developed a core repertoire and core group of performers. Of assistance in this development were family connections within the group; many members are Yorta Yorta from central and northwest Victoria, and many members had grown-up together. The repertoire is based on input from members from other tribes, including Gunditjmara from western Victoria and Wiradjuri from the border area of Victoria and New South Wales. This process enables the group to develop their own performance pieces based on common themes across tribal groups and also to have guidance regarding protocols for performing this material.

One Fire performs at festivals and corporate events as well as conducting cultural information sessions, particularly for schools. Their presentation at Williamstown Festival included contextualisation of individual dances, notably who would have performed them and for what purpose.

Following the performance by One Fire a ‘Welcome to Country’ was made by Joy Murphy Wandin, an Elder of the Wurundjeri people, one of the five groups which make up the Kulin Nation, on whose land the Festival was held.

3 Discussion
Commentaries on the Opening Ceremony focused on it merits as a theatrical production, analyzed its appropriateness as a symbolic representation of Australia, and read significance into each of the segments and the apparent hierarchy of national symbolisms, stereotypes and clichés. Acknowledgment should also be made, however, of the value of Awakenings as a tool for cultural heritage, principally to the development and process of the segment and resultant outcomes.

Producers of the Opening Ceremony used Awakenings to showcase Aboriginal performing arts as part of a unique cultural element and also to flag the continued

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\(^3\) ‘Koorie’ is a name used by many Aboriginal people Eastern and South Eastern areas of Australia, in the states of New South Wales and Victoria, for themselves.

\(^4\) The term ‘Elder’ is a used as a mark of respect for individuals recognized within their community for having specialist cultural information.
existence, continuance and breadth of Aboriginal cultural heritage for international and national audiences and for Aboriginal people themselves. However, contextual demands of the event itself guided many aspects of Awakenings, from timing allocation for individual component to spatial orientation of elements and adaptations of traditional components. As a result, concerns could be raised regarding the impact this had on the authenticity of material presented, and potential for breach of protocols for presentation of certain material. On a purely practical level there were issues around the time needed for songs and dance that are usually done in ‘ceremonial time’ yet had to be adapted to the tight timing demands of the event. Similarly, dances which might be very self-contained and conducted in a small spatial area needed to travel across the distance of the arena. Documented observations from the artistic designers and the performers indicate that the performers themselves made changes to their material. Adaptation of the Wandjina and Mimi spirit figures was done in consultation with the custodians of the spirits and with the designers and engineers overseeing their fabrication.

This was not however without criticism.

One of the main criticisms were claims that the Opening Ceremony and Awakenings reiterated a belief that ‘real’ Aboriginal people were, and are, located only in the ‘outback’, where they eschew material culture in the pursuit of rare and higher things’ [6]. These criticisms suggests a limited understanding of the process of its production and of the role of the Opening Ceremony.

Roberts and Page, the Artistic Directors, saw Awakenings as an invaluable opportunity for different clans to learn about each other, to come together, and to mix and blend together traditional and contemporary Aboriginal cultures [4]. For Page, the Opening Ceremony itself and the development stage of Awakenings were like a big ‘corroboree’, a ceremonial gathering within which individuals and nations bring and share their stories. Participant communities used Awakenings as a chance to show and to share their culture with others; individuals commented on being able to meet others and opportunities to show others in the group what they do at home, and to take back home what they had learned.

Central to these discussion and criticisms is an understanding of ‘traditional’ in relation to cultural material and the featuring of so called ‘traditional’ material in these events. In this paper I have used the word to refer to actions and understandings which draw on connections to lifestyle, beliefs and practices. Many of these relate to familial rights and responsibilities, and a relationship with the environment based on sustainability. As described by John Tye, a foundation member of One Fire, traditional lifestyle is not about the types of clothes that are worn or the dwellings lived in but provide foundations on which decisions are made and actions taken. Within these parameters, the performances used for this paper are described as being ‘traditional’. The designation ‘traditional’ neither preclude use of technologies in the performances nor suggests that the performance material has no current meaning or function; in fact, the reverse seems to be true. In the development of

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5 It is generally understood that a concept of ‘Aboriginal’ culture was created post-colonisation and resulted as a process of colonisation and includes practices directly related to specific language groups.

6 Use of the two specific case studies for this research is not intended to under-estimate or undervalue the performance work of Aboriginal performers have made their name in many forms and styles, from opera to hip-hop to country and western.
Awakenings and in presentation and development of performances by One Fire, individuals and communities with custodial access and responsibilities for song and dance spoke of the connections that the material made between them and their lives. Additionally, getting to know the traditional material can be seen, as with the impetus of One Fire, as establishing a platform from which other things can be explored and, especially for youth who are ‘at risk’, it can assist in making meaningful connections in their lives. For example, in the preparation for Awakenings individuals who were disruptive to the rehearsals were under threat of being sent home so, as one child remarked, ‘we are all real good’. However, at one of the coordination meetings, Page remarked that there were some who were pulled out but kept re-appearing next morning. Roberts believed they were the ones who would benefit most from a project such as this.

4 Conclusion

For much of the twentieth century Australia’s population was managed under a combination of policies, restrictions and prohibitions which were known collectively as the ‘White Australia’ policy. ‘White Australia’ enabled being white European, English-speaking and British to become the benchmark against which desirability could be measured. It also ignored the social and lived realities of the continent’s Aboriginal peoples and the lives of their descendents, and gave credence to a British legal understanding that the continent was ‘terra nullius’, an ‘empty land’. Tye identifies the process of continuing One Fire and the presentation of cultural material as being part of an ongoing message about pride in self and in one’s Aboriginality, and as a reminder that Aborigines and Aboriginal culture haven’t disappeared. Tye also sees a direct connection between understanding of one’s self and one’s background, participation in the community, love for the physical and the cultural heritage of a location, with one’s sense of belonging to that place [5].

Tye’s sentiments are reflected in the literature that link feelings of ‘belonging’ to an historical connectedness as part of a past and future continuum, and of feeling social connectedness to others [7] [8]. An individual’s sense of ‘community’ and group identity is considered to have a basis in ongoing relationships best understood through action, shared interests, and personal sense of attachment to an identified physical location [9]. It can be argued that an individual’s sense of belonging felt, no matter how temporarily, following a successful festival experience, creates ‘communitas’, fostering social capital, strengthens the social fabric and can be an on-going source of social imagination [10]. Here, a “community of feeling” and collective belonging is created by performing and re-performing rituals and activities which give “symbolic expression to a ‘we’” within a defined physical space [11] such as a festival.

Public events and community festivals provide culturally and physically defined spaces, where communities can celebrate themselves and their activities, and position themselves for the gaze of their own members and the gaze of the outsider. They operate as sites for self-identity and of shared belonging by ‘shoring up’ commitment to one shared (“common”) set of beliefs and practices’ [12] and provide opportunities for people to connect to their ‘history and glories’ as a means to envisage their future [13]. In this definition, public events and community festivals provide sites of understandings of physical place, individuals’ relationship to that place and their sense of belonging and connection to others. In Australia they provide opportunities for re-profiling Aboriginal people within the national social landscape, to operate as a catalyst.
for maintenance and growth of Aboriginal culture, and an opportunity for increasing cultural understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia. Aboriginal performances in public events and community festivals safeguards against destruction and disappearance of cultural practices and foster opportunities to raise awareness of the ‘deep-seated interdependence between intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage’ [14]. They have the potential for connecting differing understanding of what it means to be an Australian, within the constructed and imagined Australian identity, and creating a shared sense of belonging based on understanding of experience.

Australia is a settler nation negotiating separation from its colonial origins and into a globalised world. Preparing for performance and presentation of Aboriginal culture provide mechanisms to negotiate individual and belongings and relationships with other individuals. Compellingly, preparation and performance at public events and community festivals positions and repositions Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal experiences to facilitate a common future.

References


