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Harnessing the Intangible: a Greek-Australian Experience

Preface

As the final paper of the UMAC Conference for 2004, we consider that it is more than appropriate to conclude the formal proceedings by returning to the main theme – ‘Traditional Culture and Intangible Heritage in University Museums’.

Introduction: an object-lesson

Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here.

Sue Monk Kidd, 2004¹

In Australia, a museum is popularly defined, and consequently publicly perceived, as „a building or place for the keeping, exhibition, and study of *objects* of scientific, artistic, and historical interest”². Countless university socio-cultural history museums – and indeed their state and national counterparts – are not only characterised, but are actively promoted for both public and peer recognition, through their collections of material culture. For the most part, the major focus of an institution’s exhibitions, research, and public interaction are tangible objects³. But documents or the objects and physical constructs of daily life are certainly not the limits or only evidence of human

¹ S. Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*, Headline Book Publishing, London 2004, p. 133.

² A. Delbridge (ed. in chief), ‘museum’, *The Macquarie Encyclopedic Dictionary: The National Dictionary*, The Macquarie Library Pty Ltd., Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia 1990, p. 621 (authors’ italics).

³ The authors do recognise however, that despite the popular definition and object focused attention of museums in Australia, their executives and staff do embrace broader philosophical parameters for what museums are and what they should be doing. Putting those broader parameters, into actual, ongoing and wide practice, is the issue here, particularly for university socio-cultural history museums.

experience in any society's history⁴. The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills of communities, groups and individuals also evidence human connection and presence. These 'intangible' elements of culture find expressive form in areas such as, language, performance, music, dance, song, culinary techniques, sport, games, crafts, rituals, memory, and oral narrative tradition, across generations⁵. Moreover, as a 'living' element they adapt and are recreated over time. Given the traditional object focused milieu of socio-cultural history museums, could intangible elements be successfully harnessed as a key driving force in exhibition development? After all, this would mean a shift from the traditional concentration on the innate object, to directing attention upon living communities and cultures. New knowledge, skills and methodologies would undoubtedly be required⁶.

Macquarie embraces the intangible: the catalyst

The forging of a new and ongoing partnership in 2001 between Macquarie University's Australian History Museum in Sydney, and the 'In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians' National Project, provided the much needed catalyst for the former to vigorously take-on the challenges of embracing intangible cultural heritage as a key aspect of its mission. As the facilitators of the partnering project, both Effy Alexakis and myself brought considerable experience, skills and knowledge in investigating one of Australia's most prominent and evolving ethnic communities, together with a nationally significant archive and an extensive record in both exhibition and publication output. Most importantly however, we possessed the methodological insights required to develop exhibitions dealing with intangible culture⁷.

Significantly, the partnership broadly reflected the 'New Museology' approach that has been promoted by Hugues de Varine and other museum theorists. The partnership grew in response to the need from a marginalised ethnic group – Greek-Australians – to acquire mainstream representation as part of Australia's past. The engagement with this group is ongoing and this facilitates not only the collection of material but co-operation in regard to the selection of themes and content for exhibitions. Moreover, the Australian History Museum, by entering into partnership with our Project, also acquired the collaboration of the wide network of colleagues – in a variety of disciplines – with who we engage to assist in researching, interpreting, developing and designing exhibitions: sociologists, social anthropologists, demographers, linguists, social

⁴ J. Winternitz, *Australia's Hidden Heritage*, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia 1990, p. vii.

⁵ UNESCO: *Safeguarding the Intangible Heritage*, „ICOM News”, vol. 56, no. 4, 2003, p. 4–5.

⁶ N. van Huy, *Intangible Cultural Heritage at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology*, „ICOM News”, vol. 56, no. 4, 2003, p. 5.

⁷ The authors established the 'In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians' National Project in 1982. Effy Alexakis is a documentary photographer and Leonard Janiszewski a social and cultural historian. The Project's archive is one of the largest and most diverse on Greek-Australians, nationally. It encompasses, visual, oral and literary material (the latter two in both the Modern Greek and English languages) and has collected material on Greek-Australians from within Australia and internationally.

commentators, cultural activists, political theorists, journalists, archivists, museum administrators, artists, writers, film-makers and exhibition curators and designers⁸.

It was decided by the partnership that two touring photographic exhibitions, highlighting intangible heritage as their pre-eminent focus, would be developed over a period of four years. These would become the first touring exhibitions undertaken by the Australian History Museum – an important step given Macquarie University’s firm embrace of ‘Community Outreach’ as one of the three core areas of its academic strategic directions platform⁹. Moreover, funding for both shows was secured from sources outside the University: the Migration Museum in Adelaide, South Australia, and the Greek Festival of Sydney Organising Committee.

The exhibitions, ‘Generations’ and ‘In Her Own Image: Greek-Australian Women – a historical and contemporary insight’ would express as their broad concern, the diverse complexity of Greek-Australian cultural identity, as manifested in a wide array of beliefs, practices and institutions (Il. 1). No socio-cultural objects were to be utilised in either display. Rather, each would contain just over fifty photographic historical and contemporary images, and use a strong interplay with oral histories (supplemented by archival and library held documentation), provided through extended captions.

Research for both exhibitions was jointly embarked upon by Museum and Project staff from three main sources:

- i) images, oral history interviews and literary based material from the ‘In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians’ National Project archives
- ii) new interviews, images and guiding insights were gathered from individuals and organisations within the Greek community
- iii) supporting material from the Australian History Museum collection together with information sourced from outside library and archival institutions.

Some original literary and oral-based information had to undergo translation from Modern Greek into English – exhibition text panels and captions would be provided in English, bilingual texts were deemed to be well out of reach of the strict budgets for both shows. Fortunately, the University’s Department of Modern Greek generously engaged the task of translating – from Greek to English – the limited amount of material that required it.

The exhibitions in tight and broad focus

‘Generations’ opened at the Migration Museum in Adelaide, South Australia, in early 2001, before returning to Sydney for display at Macquarie University, in early

⁸ For Hugues de Varine a community museum is defined as „one which grows from below, rather than being imposed from above. It arises in response to the needs and wishes of people living and working in the area and it actively involves them at every stage while it is being planned and created and afterwards when it is open and functioning. It makes use of experts, but it is essentially a co-operative venture, in which professionals are no more than partners in a total community effort”. See: P. van Mensch, *Museology and management: enemies or friends? Current tendencies in theoretical museology and museum management in Europe*, viewed 11 August 2005, http://www.ahk.nl/ahk_upload/ahk_documenten/rwa_publ_pvm_2004_1.pdf.

⁹ Macquarie University, *Quality Portfolio: Academic Directions Statement, 2002*, Macquarie University, Sydney 2002, p. 1 and 4.

2002. 'In Her Own Image: Greek-Australian Women' was launched at Macquarie University at the start of 2004 as part of the Greek Festival of Sydney, and then travelled to The Legislative Assembly Gallery in Canberra (Australia's capital) at mid-year.

In tight focus, 'Generations' (Il. I), investigated the „continuities and discontinuities of Greek-Australians over the last 200 years”¹⁰ by presenting a number of Greek-Australians, or those of Greek descent, reflecting upon their forebears, and/or their succeeding generations, as well as upon themselves. Their stories and portraits provided personal, diverse and often moving insights into their family's generational development – the opportunities, the hopes, the challenges, the inspiration, the courage, the failures, the regrets, the sorrows and the achievements. Similarly, in tight focus, 'In Her Own Image' (Il. II) featured the images and statements of Greek-Australian women, both past and present – their successes, failures, hopes and dreams – revealing an Australia of challenges, a Greece of memory, and a faith in the unfolding of an unlimited future.

These exhibitions exposed significant generational developments within both the Greek-Australian community and Australian society overall, but most importantly, offered audiences numerous expressive forms of intangible cultural heritage in regard to Greek-Australians. These included: religious practices, gender roles, Greek-community celebrations and festivals, family life, Greek Orthodox day schools, language maintenance and development, dual citizenship, Greek secular socio-cultural organisations and institutions, craft and folk orientated activities, artistic and literary pursuits, cuisine, mixed marriages, and hybrid socio-cultural practises. Collectively, these elements illuminated the broad concern of both exhibitions, the powerful dynamic of Greek-Australian cultural identity – the 'distinctiveness' of this particular ethnic group.

Also revealed, was that extensive diversity and multi-layered hybridism were salient characteristics of this 'distinctiveness'. Greek-Australian identity, as exposed through manifestations of its intangible culture, could certainly not be contained by simple, isolative parameters¹¹. It confirmed that although cultural identity provides 'distinctiveness', paradoxically, it is an „elusive thing”¹² – it is the core subject, object and enigma of a community's intangible cultural heritage.

How the intangible was harnessed

Principal images (40 x 50 cm) of both exhibitions were essentially individual or group portraits, with most being contemporary. Some were given supplementary supporting images (20 x 25 cm), which were primarily historical. All photographs were black and white to ensured a visual unity and documentary stylistic effect. Captions were placed upon A4 size panels, and professionally designed mural panels, featuring introductory texts upon background images, prefaced both shows. Each display co-

¹⁰ *Exhibition for generations*, „Neos Kosmos English Weekly”, 12 March, 2001, p. 3.

¹¹ E. Alexakis, L. Janiszewski, *In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia 1998, p. 147.

¹² J. Martin, *Images of Home*, „Public History Review”, vol. 4, 1995, p. 182.

vered a historical time frame from the early nineteenth century through to the present. In 'Generations', a balance was struck between the number of males and females depicted, guaranteeing that the latter's voice was well heard; the stories of Greek-Australian women have traditionally been swamped by those of the men. Geographically, all Australian states were represented in both exhibitions, as well as select areas of Greece to which Greek-Australian re-migration has occurred. A diversity of occupations was also enforced and by selecting interviewees across different generations, age groups, and different periods of migration/re-migration and settlement, the sociological was married to the historical.

In selecting interview segments to accompany images for the displays, emphasis was placed upon collectively ensuring a diversity of insights in regard to expressions of intangible culture. The limitations of oral history – a research tool that attracted regular debate in Australia's professional historical circles during the 1980s and 1990s¹³ – acquired conscious consideration. To minimise the arguably „more partial, fallible and biased”¹⁴ nature of oral testimony over written documentation, supportive archival/library research was undertaken and detailed checks conducted with available interviewees. Of course, care was also employed when shaping the transcribed accounts for exhibition display to guarantee (as best as one could) that the intended meaning of the interviewee's statement was accurately conveyed and not taken out of context. This responsibility was compounded when translation had to be conducted from Modern Greek to English, and the interviewee's style and manner of articulation, mimicked.

In effect, transcribed voices provided convictions, practices and experiences to faces that had been photographically fixed in time. This working relationship was pivotal in giving body to expressions of intangible culture in the exhibitions. Substance and meaning were not to be found or conveyed to the audience through an object, but by sensitively constructing an almost personal relationship between the viewer and the photographs through the transcribed, spoken word – the portraits were speaking directly to the viewer. Furthermore, communication was not simply one way. A 'conversation' had been invoked through the viewer's unavoidable reflections comparing the interviewee's experiences to their own – an exchange dominated by the co-existing and interdependent subjects of cultural identity and intangible culture.

The chosen layout of the exhibitions accentuated the breadth and depth of the intangible. Images – accompanied by their caption texts – did not follow the linear-time (sequential) narrative of a traditional historical exhibition. Rather, different historical times, age groups, gender, occupations, landscapes, countries (Greece and Australia), experiences, outlooks, and practices, were randomly scattered. The viewer was invited to simply 'wander' through the shows – to „migrate and remigrate from one story to another at will”¹⁵. Such an unconventional display structure of 'sharp, jarring contrasts' rather than 'steady, progressive developments', quickly brought to the fore the extensive diversity and complex hybridism of Greek-Australian cultural identity and intangible heritage.

¹³ J. Rich, *Profiting from the Pitfalls of Oral History: the Case of Sir Laurence Hartnett*, „Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society”, vol. 80, parts 1 & 2, June, 1994, p. 117.

¹⁴ P. O'Farrell, *Reply (1)* (to Geoffrey Bolton), „Oral History Association of Australia Journal”, no. 5, 1982–1983, p. 15.

¹⁵ E. Alexakis, L. Janiszewski, *Images of Home*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia 1995, p. 12. This display technique had been successfully trialled in two of our earlier exhibitions.

Meaningful dialogue: audience responses

Public reaction to the exhibitions was primarily gauged through comment books¹⁶ that accompanied each show. However, it should be noted that both shows attracted considerable media coverage at all venues and other exhibiting institutions have enquired about booking the displays. Furthermore, audiences came from a diverse cross-section of community. Host venues ensured that school groups, tertiary students (particularly of modern history, art and social and cultural studies), senior citizens groups, ethno-specific cultural bodies (including Greek-Australian organisations) and multi-cultural groups, were specifically targeted and drawn to the exhibitions.

Generally, audiences responded to Greek-Australian identity and intangible heritage in four ways:

- i) diversity and complexity were firmly recognised
- ii) new personal insights and supporting material for future exhibitions were offered by both Greek and non-Greek Australians to the Australian History Museum and its partnering Project
- iii) the Australian History Museum and its partnering Project were generously applauded for creating such innovative exhibitions
- iv) a number of enquires have been made by a variety of ethno-specific groups and organisations as to how such exhibitions on identity and intangible heritage could be staged based upon their own ethnic community (the partnership will be pursuing dialogue with these groups).

Furthermore, in regard to the exhibitions as vehicles for public communication and promotion, representatives from other Departments and Centres within Macquarie University have approached the Museum and Project partnership to create touring exhibitions about their areas of interest and research. Indeed, exhibition partnerships have now been established with Macquarie's Australian Centre for Egyptology (ACE), which operates within the Department of Ancient History, the University's Centre for Flexible Learning (CFL), and the Macquarie University Art Gallery. With such exciting and wide ranging success, it is hoped that the Museum and Project partnership could possibly stimulate other university socio-cultural history museums in Australia to innovatively establish similar working relationships, particular in regard to exhibitions which embrace the intangible.

Of all the statement's provided in the comment books of both exhibitions, one in particular best summed up public reaction: „Congratulations! Simply fantastic! An amazing revelation, over generations, of the hidden cultural soul and spirit of a people I knew little about. Humanity is more complex than we realise. Such an insightful and moving exhibition can only bring back audiences to museums”¹⁷.

The last remark in this statement offers engagement with today's conference sub-theme – ‘University Museums through the Eyes of Others’. In the light of this remark, and the sentiments of the statement overall – together with the weight of numerous

¹⁶ The comment books are housed in the archive of the ‘In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians’ National Project at Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

¹⁷ Comment author only identified as ‘C.S., South Australia’. From the ‘Generations’ exhibition comment book. Book held in the archive of the ‘In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians’ National Project at Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

other generous public appraisals – further exhibitions are now planned in the near future by the Macquarie partnership, where the tangible is hidden, and the intangible, seen.

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STRESZCZENIE

Okiełznanie niewidzialnego: grecko-australijskie doświadczenie

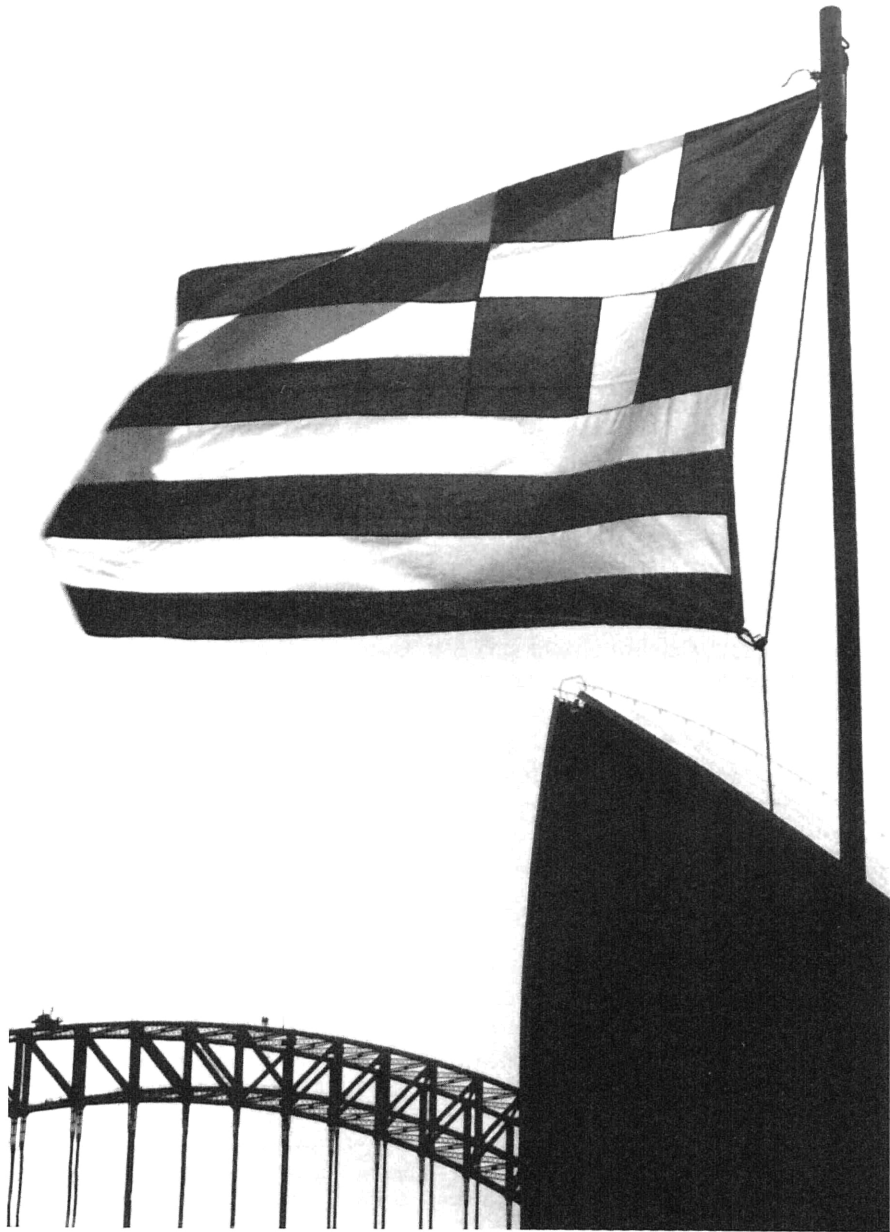
Historia ludzkiego życia w jakimkolwiek społeczeństwie nie może być ograniczona wyłącznie do ewidencjonowania dokumentów pisanych lub też do zbierania przedmiotów i materialnych pozostałości życia codziennego. Jednakże pewne zawężenie jest charakterystyczne dla licznych socjokulturowych muzeów historycznych. Bogate w przedmioty dotykalne, w większości organizują wystawy i badania oraz nawiązują interakcję z publicznością. Czy elementy nietrwałe, nieuchwytny, mogą być siłą napędową wspomagającą rozwój ekspozycji muzealnych?

Powstanie dwóch objazdowych wystaw na temat Australijczyków greckiego pochodzenia w Muzeum Historycznym Uniwersytetu Macquarie świadczy o tym, że „tak”. W wystawach pt. „Pokolenia” oraz „Jej własny wizerunek: Australijki greckiego pochodzenia”, nieuchwytny dziedzictwo staje się ważnym wątkiem. Bogata złożoność grecko-australijskiej identyfikacji kulturowej jest ukazana poprzez szeroki wachlarz wierzeń i praktyk oraz silną, wzajemną zależność podań ustnych z badaniami archiwalnymi, które dopełnione zostały historycznymi i współczesnymi fotografiami. Socjologia z historią zostały połączone poprzez selektywny wybór osób udzielających wywiadów – wywiadów pochodzących z różnych generacji i różnych okresów migracji oraz osadnictwa. Głosy, wygłaszane poglądy, doświadczenia i twarze tworzą to, co niedotykalne.

Planowane są dalsze wystawy, gdzie to, co namacalne, ukryte jest w nieuchwytnym.

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Il. 1. Greek flag, Opera House and Harbour Bridge, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, 1984. A union of symbols suggesting the complex cross-cultural identity of Greek-Australians. Photo by Effy Alexakis, from the 'In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians' National Project archive



II. I. A view of the exhibition, 'Generations', Exhibition Space, Macquarie University Library, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, 25 March–28 April 2002. Photo by Effy Alexakis, from the 'In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians', National Project Archive



II. II. A view of the exhibition, 'In Her Own Image: Greek-Australian Women', Legislative Assembly Gallery, Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia, 7–29 June 2004. Photo by Effy Alexakis, from the 'In Their Own Image: Greek-Australians', National Project Archive