A Festival of the Arts

Performance

Tradition

What role can the maintenance of artistic traditions play?

The title of this poster - Music for Living - gives an indication of the importance of music, dance, and other forms of artistic expression to many cultures, not just as a weekend outing, but as a daily part of life. And as the artist and ethnomusicologist, Adelaide based Demeter Tsounis writes about her poster, these are traditions which help migrants with the difficulties of adjusting to a new land: “Music is a rallying point for coping with, and resolving, contradictions that people face in their everyday social life.”

For many new arrivals the maintenance of their traditions provides a supportive link to their past as they face a very different future. It also brings them into contact with others of similar background and gives them a feeling of community and belonging within those groups until they feel accepted or comfortable within the wider society.

As Tsounis writes: “...music and dance are embedded with a history of sedimened meanings and symbolic associations signifying particular evaluations of expression, emotion, cultural authenticity, and community”. (Tsounis, 1995, pp 90-91)

Maintaining traditions provides groups as a whole with a sense of identity within a perhaps alien wider society, and as a response to a feeling of exclusion that many feel. Professor Mary Kalantzis writes that “...the strength of these communities comes not simply from the intrinsic value of their traditions and desire to maintain them, but the response of these communities to marginalisation”. (Kalantzis, 1995, p 1-2)

Indeed what are defined as common traditions here, may blur distinctions of region and social class that were evident in the country of origin, as migrants are brought together by what's similar between them as opposed to what's different.

While traditions inevitably undergo some evolution in a new context, the desire of communities to hold together in a minority situation means some traditions are more faithfully maintained within the diaspora than in the country of origin. There, to maintain them as a way of asserting identity is not seen as important, so new traditions and expressions of national identity move in to replace older versions. So ironically, those still in their countries of origin and seeking out their cultural roots, may sometimes find more echoes of them in Australia and other immigrant nations than in their own countries.

Maintenance of similar traditions in migrant groups of the same background in various countries can lead to strong international links in other ways. These links among the many sections of any diaspora (or ethnic community spread across the world) mean an interchange of cultural expression, ideas, inspiration and practitioners which benefits all Australians.

Often too, traditions of a particular culture attract people of other cultures to participate, so the attempt to hold onto forms that may be seen to be very ethno-specific is pursued by people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. This may mean increasing the exposure of a
tradition to the wider community, and it may even help retain that tradition into the future. But it also raises debates about authenticity and hybridisation. You can read about these in the Debates section of this arts festival.

For some groups, a means of passing traditions on to their children and for being able to express themselves in community celebration is the most important consideration. Others apply training to their performances, for eg in dance or music, in an effort to bring their traditions into the professional sphere.

Whatever the case, traditional forms of artistic expression can bring minority communities empowerment and recognition, whatever country they’re in. According to British ethnomusicologist John Baily: “Its (music’s) effectiveness may be twofold; not only does it act as a ready means for the identification of different social or ethnic groups, but it has potent emotional connotations and can be used to assert and negotiate identity in a particularly powerful manner.” (Baily, 1994, p 48)

Have a look at the selection of traditions on show on this screen. If it whets your appetite, there are dozens, maybe hundreds of different expressions of tradition happening all over Australia at this very moment, providing us all with endless opportunities for discovery.

Further reference:


Kalantzis, Mary “Hybrid Culture: Greek Australian/Australian Greek”, Artitude (Multicultural Arts Alliance), Part One - (8), 1995, pp 1-3; Part Two - (9), 1995, pp 5-7.

Tsounis, Demeter “Kefi and Meraki in Rebetika Music of Adelaide: Cultural Constructions of Passion and Expression and their Link with the Homeland”, Yearbook for Traditional Music,