‘An edifying spectacle’: A history of ‘tourist corroborees’ in Victoria, Australia, 1835-1870

ABSTRACT

Parsons (2002) has persuasively argued that nineteenth century corroborees performed for non-Indigenous audiences may be considered to be Australia’s pre-eminent prototypical Indigenous cultural tourism product. This paper extends Parsons’ (1997, 2002) analyses of ‘tourist corroborees’ in nineteenth century South Australia to corroborees staged in Victoria during the pastoral period and the gold rushes of the 1850s to 1870s. It argues that an Aboriginal-grown ‘business acumen’ developed rapidly in the economic climate of the Victorian goldfields. It also provides an historical context to this commodification.

Introduction

Michael Parsons (1997, p.46), writing on the tourist corroboree in nineteenth century South Australia persuasively argued that corroborees staged by Aboriginal people for a non-Indigenous audience emerged as a 'cultural product jointly negotiated between two cultures' and a 'touristic framing' of the corroboree quickly emerged. As such corroborees staged for non-indigenous audiences conform to Hinch's and Butler's (1996, p. 9) definition of Indigenous tourism as 'tourism activity in which indigenous people are directly involved either through control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction'. Judging from the frequency with which touristic-styled corroboree events were held on the Victorian goldfields, it is clear that monetary considerations became an underpinning feature in the performance of corroborees for non-Indigenous audiences particularly after the 1850s. This is further confirmed by the substantial turn out of paying non-Indigenous viewers, and how well organized the dance troupes were. Arguably, this adaptation was a direct consequence of the environmental and social dislocation brought about by the gold rushes which in effect represented a second wave of dispossession; the first being that of the pastoral invasion which began in the 1830s (Clark 2003; Cahir 2006).

The word 'corroboree' is from the Dharuk language of the people who lived west of Sydney that referred to an open performance of song and dance – its usage spread across Australia with white settlers, with the earliest written usage dating from 1793 (Stubington 2007, p. 228). William Thomas (1858) stated: 'Corroberry is not an Aboriginal word of Victoria, a barbarism [of] its real term Ngargee, the old Doctors state that many many generations past Blacks were very very many that the Chiefs used to make the young blacks dance before them, which I have no doubt was the case, more so when the name of Chief or King is Ngar-gate. The Blacks have various kinds of Ngar-gees (or Corroberry 's) [including a 'ceremony in burying their dogs'] the common Corroberry generally seen and exhibited before Europeans at night'. Thomas is using the eastern Kulin word; other Victorian Aboriginal languages used other terms.

Jill Stubington (2007, p. 87) has defined 'ceremony' (which includes corroborees) to refer to a particular named ritual which usually includes singing and dancing, and often mimetic and ritual acts' with music 'provided by singers'. Dancers often represent ancestral heroes and decorate their bodies with paint and other adornments. Ceremonies 'may last for days, weeks, even months'. Stubington (2007) has identified several categories of ceremony including 'mortuary ceremonies' that aim to provide appropriate commemorative and grieving rituals following a death; 'increase ceremonies' that commemorate the activities of ancestral heroes to urge the regrowth of plants and the reappearance of animals which have been hunted for food; 'age-grading or initiation ceremonies'; 'reconciliation ceremonies' that aim to settle community problems; and 'diplomacy ceremonies' that seek to establish or reaffirm friendly relations between different communities (Stubington 2007, p. 88).

There is a considerable corpus of evidence demonstrating the gold period, was a catalyst for corroboree performances to morph, probably aided by the movement of Aboriginal people across the continent becoming more common. As an example JD Mereweather was informed that the corroboree he witnessed in central New South Wales 'had come from the coast of South Australia' (Mereweather 1859, pp.181-2).

Similarly, Lawrence Struillby witnessed corroborees that had been passed on with greater rapidity since the gold period had opened up communications in the interior (Graham 1863). In May 1860, 'an extraordinary exhibition' was given by the Djadjawurrung at Lamplough mining community. One scene involved two men decorated with white chalk killing a third man, in red paint, and burying him under one of the stage's trapdoors, whereupon he reappeared from another trapdoor smothered with white chalk, having 'jumped up whitefellow' (*Mount Ararat & Pleasant Creek Advertiser* 22 May 1860, n.p.). For further discussion of corroboree songs indicating Aboriginal responses to the non-Indigenous invaders see Parker (2006); McDonald (1996).

Richard Broome (1995, p. 171) has contended that Europeans attended corroborees out of 'curiosity or boredom at the lack of frontier entertainments' yet there is strong evidence that some of the European observers at some of the earliest corroborees performed in colonial Victoria perceived them not only as a form of 'savage' exotica to marvel at but also as a powerful conciliatory tool. William Todd, an overseer for the first syndicate of settlers in the Melbourne-Geelong region, and his party, which included five Aboriginal people from the Sydney region, were almost daily entertained by singing and corroborees by local Wathawurrung clans at Indented Head. Todd (1835, p. 2) recorded many diary entries relating to their 'singing most of the evening for us' and how performances were especially orchestrated for their benefit by senior elders. Todd recorded that 'after they had consulted together' for some time 'The King and his wife beat the drum (a kangaroo knapsack) while 16 of his men coorobboreed' (Todd 1835, p. 2). In addition, the peace keeping-exchange aspects of the singing and corroborees were not lost on Todd as he observed that on more than one occasion 'Pidgeon' and the other Sydney Aboriginals were able to defuse tense situations with Todd's party by sharing out large quantities of food and goods and performing a 'corroboree' for the Wathawurrung hosts. Todd was relieved that the Sydney corroboree 'astonished' and 'pleased them much & all retired to their huts for the night' (Todd 1835, p. 4). Indeed it is possible that what Todd considered was a diplomacy ceremony between two different indigenous groups attempting to establish friendly relations was in fact also a means of economic trade or what Micha (1970) has termed 'commercium'. Victorian Aboriginal informants averred that spiritual knowledge of language groups increased when learning a new corroboree of a neighbouring group (Curr 1886), and the 'originator transfers ownership of his dance and song to members of his group in exchange for natural products, or, in the present day, also for money' (Micha 1970, pp.301-2).

This Indigenous Sydney-Geelong exchange of music and song for peace, conviviality and trade observed by Todd was not confined to Aboriginal people. Haebich and Taylor (2007, p. 63) contend that in the colonial history of black and white Australia, there are few recorded instances of public performances that draw together the traditions of Aboriginal and settler dance cultures to create 'mutually constitutive corporeal dialogues.' Yet there are at least three recorded instances in Victoria and there are certainly many instances in other parts of Australia - such as French sailors in 1826 at King George Sound (Western Australia) (D'Urville 1992) - where non-Indigenous people did not look on passively but chose to be intimate, yet inherently ignorant, participants in cultural-trade. In February 1802 a British naval exploratory party in Port Phillip Bay, Victoria came ashore to obtain water at what is now known as Bellarine Peninsula whereupon 'a friendly intercourse took place with dancing on

both sides' (Hill 2004, p. 6). It is possible a similar encounter was repeated by a French naval exploratory party in nearby waters, also in 1802, as the naturalists on board transcribed, and later published three pieces ('Chant', 'Dance melody' and 'Rallying cry') of Aboriginal music (Fornasiero, Monteath, & West-Sooby 2003, p. 353). More strikingly, Katherine Kirkland (1845, p. 5) described how in January 1839 an overlanding party of squatters or landowners near Geelong had made it their point to 'see a meeting of the natives, or a *corobery*, as they call it' and noted also the great anticipation the Aboriginal people had to witness how the white people 'corroberied'. This performance, put on in the absence of a common language was not simply to entertain, but to mediate events and arguably was a manufactured event on both sides of the frontier, to articulate the disputed space occupied by Aboriginal people and non-Indigenous colonisers. Kirkland observed what is perhaps the first recorded instance of white people paying 'white money' (gold coins, not copper) to Victorian Aboriginal performers:

About a hundred natives [presumably Wathawurrung] were assembled...The natives when done with their corobery, were very anxious that we white people would show them how we coroberied; so we persuaded Mr Yuile [a neighbouring landholder] to dance for them, which he did, and also recited a piece of poetry, using a great many gestures. The natives watched him most attentively, and seemed highly pleased. After giving the natives some white money, and bidding them good night, we returned to Mr Russell's hut (Kirkland 1845, p. 5).

Kirkland in an unpublished account of the same event noted that 'while they [Wathawurrung] were going through their strange antics a tall handsome young man [William Yuille] jumped into their midst...He let out a wild shriek and then began to dance a fierce highland fling. The blacks stopped and looked on half frightened and half amused. When he had finished he let out a tremendous highland war cry' (Kirkland cited in Spielvogel 1974, p. 197).

Government officials in 1839 sought mollification and peace keeping gestures with the Kulin people gathered in Melbourne through theatrical exchanges such as 'fetes' involving fireworks, public feasts and corroborees. In October 1839, CJ La Trobe, the first Superintendent of Port Phillip (now Victoria), recorded how he and his official party felt obliged to engage in a ritualistic entertainment which had a symbolic diplomatic function, noting: 'Went across the [Yarra] river in the rain to see the entertainment given to the Aborigines in my honor!' (Beissbarth 2006, p. 80). It was noted in the 1840s that Melbourne residents actively encouraged Aboriginal people to perform corroborees for their entertainment (Thomas journal, 12 April 1840) and in return the colonists supplied fireworks displays and a banquet *for all*. Other non-Indigenous colonists actively sought to blend their musical wares. When the ship 'David Clark' landed 229 passengers opposite Williamstown, Melbourne in November 1839 they walked overland to the banks of the Yarra to camp in tents. The *Port Phillip Gazette* reported:

In the evening the piper struck off with some of their wild national airs, and the greater part of the immigrants danced by moonlight on the grass; after some time passed in this way the whole party, headed by the band of wind and pipes, went off through the bush of about a mile to see a grand corroboree of the blacks;

it was a singular [event] to hear the blending of their highland music with the deep monotonous chant and beat of the Austral aborigine (*Port Phillip Gazette* 1839, p. 4).

Some Aboriginal people sought to incorporate Western sacred music into their corroborees as evidenced by Charles Lockhart (1849) who noted the assimilation of white religiosity into Aboriginal ritual and reported that Aboriginal people at the Goulburn Protectorate station sang Christian hymns at their corroborees. Charles Panton, Gold Commissioner in central Victoria in the 1850s also recorded notable Christian elements in corroborees held near Mangalore in central Victoria.

When I first witnessed one of these performances, the leader had a book in his hand, which he pretended to refer to, as he led the song. During the interval I approached him and asked what book he had. Ie Yabberea [He said] “Belong to that one” pointing to the heavens...thereby indicating the Deity. I looked at the volume and found that it was a Testament in Gaelic (Panton 1854-60, p. 44).

Parallel convergences of Western and Aboriginal culture and especially musical genres have continued unabated which attempt to create ‘intercultural alignments between black and white Australians’ (Haebich and Taylor, 2007, p.74). Most notably, an all Indigenous theatrical production was performed at Melbourne’s inaugural Moomba Festival, now one of Australia’s largest public festivals, in 1951 featuring opera, blues and Indigenous music (Butler-Bowden, 2008). Over fifty years later in January 2008 Melbourne’s Botanic Gardens staged a fusion of ‘ancient corroboree with modern rock and jazz influences’ (Burchall, 2008), as part of the 2008 Australia Day Arts Festival. Gilbert and Lo (2007, p. 23) also consider that Aboriginal contemporary theatre groups such as ‘Bangarra’ have ‘tended to reappropriate corroboree dance forms as part of a larger project of cultural recuperation’. Dow (1999, p. 111) similarly argues that Aboriginal cultural tourism in nineteenth century Victoria ‘offered an alternative form of co-existence with settler society and assisted in the maintenance of cultural and social connections with country’ whilst Henry (2000) posits that there is a discernable connection of politics and cultural identity at cultural dance performances such as the Laura Dance Festival and the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park in Queensland, noting that performances are ‘not just a mere mirror image or reflection of economic and political realities, but are themselves political and economic realities’ (Henry 2000, p.331). Other commentators have noted that for many Indigenous communities ‘cultural tourism and art production offer a way to achieve economic empowerment. This is not an arena into which Indigenous peoples have been unwillingly dragged, but rather one to which Indigenous peoples, who have been unwillingly colonized have turned as a means of asserting their rights and autonomy’ (Smith, Burke & Ward, 2000, pp. 14-15).

The distinction between those Victorian Aboriginal ceremonies which were allowed to be ‘commodified’ for non-indigenous purposes, and those which were not (such as initiation ceremonies), was at times clearly spelt out to non-Aboriginal people. In 1843 William Thomas was informed by ‘principal men’ that the very large population of Aboriginal people who had gathered in Melbourne were there for sacred purposes and Thomas was further assured that ‘it [the ceremonies] were not like their

Corroborees but like our Sunday' (Blaskett 1979, p. 232). It is noteworthy that Aboriginal people were cognisant of white people's ceremonial singing and understood the solemnity with which some colonisers ceremonies were practised. In a Christian service conducted at Melbourne in April 1836 the Reverend Orton noted that the 'larger proportion of my congregation consisted of natives, about 50 in number, who sat very quietly during the time of service and seemed particularly interested by the singing' (Billot 1982, p. 68). John Batman, one of the people present at this service further noted that when the Sydney Aboriginal people 'joined simultaneously in sacred song [with the whites]', the 'Port Phillip aborigines astonishment was very great' (Batman 1856, p. 24). William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines, 1839-1850, and later Guardian of Aborigines in Victoria, 1850-1867, acknowledged in a letter to the Victorian Minister of Lands that 'Songs & dances among Aborigines like among civilised are either sacred or profane, or more properly stating for pleasure or sacred and traditional' (Thomas 1858, n.p).

Unlike Thomas' informed accounts (Thomas, along with his family maintained close associations with the Boonwurrung people for over three decades) many descriptions of corroborees in the colonial period often conveyed, according to Gilbert and Lo (2007, p. 23), 'both the aesthetic appeal of the corroboree as an exotic spectacle and its power to unsettle viewers lacking the requisite cultural knowledge to appreciate its function and meaning within Aboriginal societies'. A number of Europeans recognised that corroborees were not merely theatrical productions put on for them but were according to Carter (1992, p. 169), 'improvised and institutionalised *in response to the white invasion*'. It is important to note that in nineteenth century Victoria, corroborees were often the first occasion at which non-indigenous colonisers gained an in-depth impression of Indigenous culture in a setting that was foreign to their own predominately British cultural experiences. Carter (1992, p. 165) further argues that although no early nineteenth century visit to the colonies was complete without a description of the corroboree, the event was 'invariably treated as pure theatre'.

Some long-time colonial residents recognised the event as more than just a theatrical tourist performance. GS Lang (1865) wrote at length about an unsettling Victorian corroboree he witnessed which candidly illustrated the colonial occupation story from the other side of the frontier in three acts. The first act of the corroboree was a representation of a herd of cattle, the second act was the acting out of a party of Aboriginal warriors stalking and spearing of cattle which Lang observed was 'to the intense delight of the black spectators, who applauded rapturously' (Lang 1865, p. 28). The third scene depicted 'manufactured whites' on horseback, 'remarkably well got up', authentically painted to depict the clothes of local white stockmen. The corroboree participants then acted out the terrifying historical scene of 'loading, firing, wheeling their horses and driving the blacks before them!' which according to the white spectator was performed 'with an exactness which proved personal observation' (Lang 1865, p. 29). For the Aboriginal spectator too there was a distinct sense of cathartic revenge occurring, which unsettled Lang: 'The native spectators groaned whenever a blackfellow fell, but cheered lustily when a white bit the dust; and at length...the whites were ignominiously driven from the field, amidst the frantic delight of the natives' (Lang 1865, p.29). The European observer on this occasion immediately appreciated that the performance he witnessed, although grafted on to traditional dance and song forms, was not a mere repetition, but a unique fusion, or

what Carter (1992, p. 165) calls ‘a unique *rewriting*’ of these theatrical forms specially designed for the occasion. Carter, referring to a similar grafting in Western Australia contended that ‘the power of the performers to modify their actions constituted the corroboree as a historical record, the spatial embodiment of a distinct moment in contact history’ (Carter 1992, p. 165). And, as Lang realised, the historical record was not a reflection on events but, because of its theatrical nature, the event itself.

Unlike the informed spectators in Lang (1865) and Carter (1992), Spark’s (2002) study implicitly supports the notion that contemporary tourists, both domestic and international, are entering into Victorian Aboriginal cultural centres such as Brambuk in a *tabula rasa* fashion with very little contextual knowledge of Aboriginal cultural heritage and with the ‘long-held notion that Victoria is not an Aboriginal area’ (Sparks 2002, p. 35). Ryan and Huyton (2002) share Spark’s (2002) concerns and highlight other contemporary issues for Aboriginal tourism. They include the stereotypical images of a past life; that new vibrant contemporary music and art is being ignored by tourism marketers; the diversity and strength of contemporary Aboriginal people is ignored; and that the indigenous, plus the tourist voice or realistic demand is missing in much marketing of Aboriginal tourism (Ryan & Huyton 2002, pp. 634-35). They suggest operators seek ‘value-added’ tourism within the mainstream and locate Aboriginal tourism within the context of landscape, as satisfaction is increased where tourists participate rather than just observe (Ryan & Huyton 2002, pp. 642-43). Beck and Somerville (2002) also identified how places with shared Indigenous and colonial pasts are communicated to tourists is a problem and that socially acceptable genres, such as books could be successful in conveying multi-layered shared stories. From an Indigenous tourism viewpoint this is critical as it is ‘necessary to determine the key factors that are inhibiting greater engagement of the domestic traveller with Aboriginal tourism products’ (Butler & Hinch, 2007, p. 66). Spark (2002, p. 31) emphasises the importance Aboriginal tourism has of ‘linking the development of the knowledge that Aboriginality is a ‘living’ entity with visitors’ diversely sensual encounters of Aboriginality’ by meet[ing] the living thing, get[ting] the living experience. This is especially so in central Victoria where Indigenous dance troupes combined with each other as recently as 2004 to ‘stage a corroboree unseen since the last great union of the tribes in 1843 on the Merri Creek in Melbourne’ (Parks Victoria, 2004).

It is revealing to read non-indigenous observations of Victorian corroborees in the nineteenth century: for example, one Victorian gold field writer (Sherer 1853, p. 131), claimed: ‘It is one of the most extraordinary exhibitions of savage hilarity of which the human mind can form any conception. All that was ever put on stage whether in German Opera or British pantomime sinks before it into utter insignificance’. Other commentators frequently remarked upon the length of performances (some corroborees were observed to have continued for seven nights, and it is not unusual for some ceremonies to last for several weeks) (Stubington 2007, p. 90) and their memorability: ‘The scene was one of weird pathos which can never be forgotten.’ Others tried to compare them with Scottish, Turkish or Masonic traditions (Longmire, 1985), whilst others were at pains to convey their incredulousness at what they had witnessed, such as Charles Griffith (1840, p. 249) who exclaimed: ‘I never witnessed any scene so rich in dramatic effect’. This wonderment and astonishment was echoed widely. Language such as this demonstrates that these spectators often had little

understanding of the significance of the ceremonies they were observing, and that the Indigenous participants in the ceremonies were either unwilling or not asked to provide explanations of their significance. Gilbert and Lo (2007, p. 23) note that the 'unsettling appeal' of corroborees in the nineteenth century ensured 'not surprisingly, [that] corroborees – or rather simulated fragments of them – were rapidly incorporated into settler theatre' but fail to acknowledge that Aboriginal people also adapted or acculturated British theatrical devices into their corroboree performances (Griffiths 1996, p. 52).

Cahir (2006) has documented a plethora of accounts by miners and other observers who attended corroborees and also a number who penned their perceived notions of corroborees into their reminiscences to afford some 'savage' exotica to their tale of the goldfields. Edward Tame's (1852-6) reminiscences, and Abraham Abrahamsohn's (in Kellerman, 1974) account of his travels during 1852-3 in Victoria, provide colourful illustrations of what their fervid imagination and a potpourri of second-hand stories, some with foundation and some without, has conspired into descriptions of unseen corroborees. In their descriptions of corroborees witnessed with their own eyes, other miners, such as Edwin Middleton (1860), emphasized their vigour, and dramatics and nudity. Some miners appeared to have come upon the corroboree serendipitously whilst others were invited and egged on by Aboriginal people to view their ceremony (Clutterbuck n.d). Usually it would seem to signify an exchange had occurred, a fact not lost on some spectators (Carter 1911; Longmire 1985). George Admans recollected Wathawurrung people in the 1860s on their usual visit to the lighthouse keeper at Queenscliff, Victoria, Mr Foy, that after receiving supplies on behalf of the Government were 'accustomed to remain for a few days and before leaving to entertain us by giving a corroboree' (Hill 2004, p. 37). In 1854 French miner Charles Eberle also wrote naively of customary exchange in central Victoria after a meeting with 'Jimmy, King of the tribe of Emu Creek: 'His first question was "give me tobacco", offering us in exchange his women and his dogs. We coveted neither one nor the other, but in order to remain on good terms with the natives we gave him all the tobacco we had. Enchanted His Australian Majesty invited us that night to a grand "Coroboree" (ball) in honour of the full moon which we accepted' (Eberle 1854-8, n.p).

Early Victorian colonists often expressed the view that corroborees were a theatrical event frequently held in metropolitan centres such as the site of Melbourne cemetery (Lucas 1848-76), the site occupied by the Melbourne cricket ground and 'Smith St, Fitzroy' (Kyle 1917, p. 164). In the 1840s, Aboriginal protectors such as William Thomas and G A Robinson recorded their frustration about trying to keep the Aborigines in Melbourne from 'corroborying which were encouraged by the whites' (See Thomas 1840). William Simkin recalled similar events at Queenscliff in the 1860s: 'These blacks used to entertain the visitors in the day by throwing their spears and boomerangs, and in the evenings, by what they called a Corroboree' (Hill 2004, p. 36). Simkin also alluded that there was an element of conscious ritual exchange occurring between the respected non-Indigenous 'elders' and the Wathawurrung head clans man: 'Some of the gentlemen visitors would give the king of the tribe a part cast off dress suit of clothes namely a swallow tail coat and belltopper hat, and after the performers had sung and danced, the king would go around collecting with his hat...they were liberally supported' (Hill 2004, p. 36).

William Burrows, an American miner on the Victorian goldfields wrote emphatically of the corroborees he witnessed as ‘truly demonical in character, never to be forgotten by those who have once beheld it’ and further observed the pecuniary motivation for their performances for the white spectators, noting that when they stopped dancing they would ‘come over to where the white spectators are looking on, with their ever lasting demand of “tixpence for rum”’ (Burrows 1986, p. 90). Burrows, like many reporters of corroborees on and around the Victorian goldfields considered their earnings were ‘indeed fairly earned’ but averred that ‘This wild and exciting kind of dance is generally to be seen in the vicinity of a bush public house’ (Burrows 1986, p. 90). Carl Lagergren also espied that on the diggings when Aboriginal people got ‘hold of spirits and start a so called corroboree’ that the result was ‘A truthfully scary scene’ (Lagergren 1858, n.p). The over-consumption of alcohol at corroborees, especially noted on the goldfields, led to a lengthy period (1860-1900) of official concern and at times government censure of Aboriginal corroboree entrepreneurship (Porteous in Victoria 1869).

Michael Parsons (1997, p. 46) has argued that corroborees staged by Aboriginal people for a non-Indigenous audience emerged as a ‘cultural product jointly negotiated between two cultures’. Furthermore, he posits that during the process of negotiation, four major framings of corroboree can be identified: the peace corroboree; the command performance; the gala corroboree; and the commercial or tourist corroboree; of these four, the first three were generally only witnessed by invitation. There is a surfeit of historic examples in Victoria within the study period which fit neatly into the four major framings outlined by Parsons (2002):

Firstly, the ‘peace corroboree’, marking a new state of cooperative relations between Aboriginal people and the Crown, or representations of the Crown such as ‘gentlemen squatters’. This ‘corroboree’ is probably an adaptation of the ‘traditional’ diplomacy ceremony or ritual which had the purpose of establishing friendly relations between people from different communities. There was usually an exchange, often misunderstood by white observers, which cemented the new co-relationship. In nineteenth century guide books for intending emigrants to the Victorian goldfields there were often references made to the friendly overtures to be expected from the ‘Blacks of Victoria’. By way of example, RG Jameson related how a recently arrived family to the Colony of Victoria had received an invitation from ‘King Jack, the chief and his wife’ who ‘conveyed to us the information that a large native gathering and corrobory, or dance was to take place in an undisclosed location with “plenty of noise” that evening; but that no harm need be apprehended by his white friends’ (Jameson 1852, p. 50).

Secondly, the ‘command performance’ corroboree, a restatement of the above, but now orchestrated by the new occupiers as a joint act of homage to the Crown. This was itself a re-framing of the corroboree as a traditional act of welcome, but also functioned for settlers as a handy piece of ready-made uniquely local pageantry that could be included on the program of reception for notable and official visitors. Thus in 1867 the Buninyong Shire Council wrote to Andrew Porteous, the local Guardian of Aborigines in the Ballarat District, informing him ‘the Council has determined on getting up a grand corroboree of the Natives on the occasion [of his Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh’s visit to Buninyong]. I have therefore to beg that you will be

pleased to secure as many of the aboriginals as possible for that purpose; every care will be taken of the Blacks whilst in the locality' (Netell 1869, n.p).

Thirdly, the 'gala' corroboree, the commoner's imitation of the vice-regal 'command performance' corroboree to mark significant social occasions. This drew on both the framings already described, but allowed all colonial notables to play at being Governor, while like him, enjoying and entertaining new arrivals with a suitably novel, uniquely local entertainment. The intermingling (or 'bleeding' as Parsons (2002) describes it) from one framing to another allowed any significant occasion – anything from the opening of a railway line (*Riponshire Advocate*, 1860) to the arrival of a photographic expedition. On these occasions observers often note, albeit condescendingly, that they had been invited or as AB Pierce recorded that 'a corroboree was held in our honour' thus adding a vice-regal relish through staging a corroboree at the event (in Leatherbee 1984, p. 35).

In the fourth, Parsons argues that within the 'commercial or touristic framing of the corroboree, the performers and promoters were able to trade on the sense of privilege and occasion established by all the co-existing framings of peace corroboree, command performance and gala corroboree, enhancing its commercial value' (Parsons 2002, pp. 46-7). Evidence of the fourth 'touristic' framing of the corroboree or simply an exhibition of Aboriginal cultural wares such as boomerang throwing or spear throwing demonstrations is particularly evident in goldfields' historical records. For example, Alexander Finlay, a miner in 1852, recorded how his mining party had 'met in with several of the native blacks, got them to throw the boomerang for a shilling' and also how they had witnessed one of them demonstrate how they climbed trees for possums. Finlay like most visiting miners considered this impromptu display 'well worth the little time we devoted for our amusement' (Finlay 1992, p. 36). A corroboree got up by Wathawurrung clans at Smythesdale, in central Victoria in April 1863, amply illustrates that as access to their land and its raw materials was progressively denied them by pastoralism and then gold mining, Aboriginal people seized upon the opportunity to market their cultural knowledge and skills - their cultural capital - and convert it, not just into hand-outs of food and tobacco, but hard currency. Indeed, given the loss of unrestricted access to their 'traditional lands' and the concomitant destruction of hunting and gathering - their traditional mode of production, this adaptation of ceremony was a fundamental way of gaining access to European food and other desired resources such as tobacco through exchange and a fundamental way of obtaining hard currency with which to participate in the settler economy and thus purchase desired items and necessities.

A CORROBOREE – During the past few days the town of Smythesdale has been infested by a numerous gang of aborigines-men, women, and children. On Tuesday and Wednesday they went about the town in quest of sixpences, tobacco &c., and announcing a grand "corroboree" to come off on Wednesday night, as it accordingly did, in the presence of a hundred spectators or more (*Argus* 28 April 1863).

This event and others like it were independently organized without joint partnership of any kind, and were pre-planned, and not *ad hoc*. It is plausible to argue that in one sense the gold era ushered in more opportunities to perform corroborees, as more spectators inevitably ensured more food and other rewards for the performers, and the

requests by non-Indigenous people for more performances may have led to some small degree of reliability of income. Special occasions such as Christmas Day may have been taken advantage of, judging from a diary entry by Mrs. James Madden concerning the Ballarat district in 1853: 'Here we arrived on Christmas day, 1853, and were entertained by about two hundred and fifty blacks at a grand corroboree at night' (in Notman 1939, p. 7). Reports such as appeared in the *Corowa Free Press* in 1876 indicate that Aboriginal people were financially supporting themselves through performing corroborees, and were somewhat adept at petitioning for pre-booking fees, and actively promoted and marketed their cultural heritage product within their means to do so.

The Aborigines had promised for some weeks beforehand that there would be a grand affair on a Saturday evening which was well attended by the townsfolk ... some of them going around town asking for a mug of beer or some food, or some cast-off clothing before the corroborees ... At the conclusion the hat was taken around and the ringmaster stated: 'That he didn't mind if they gave one shilling or six pence Koonong. Tommy said they would have an ever greater corroboree when the Wangaratta blacks came over (*Corowa Free Press* 1876, n.p).

In addition to Parsons' typology of corroborees or dance events staged by Aboriginal people for a non-Indigenous audience, could be added a fifth 'type' that of the 'solemn and sacred' corroboree encompassing purely Aboriginal matters that was designed strictly invitation only (Hancock 1996, p. 147). The religious or 'peace' corroboree was also recorded as being performed on the goldfields, probably witnessed by uninvited non-Indigenous audiences. George Rowe, writing a letter from the Castlemaine diggings, recorded a conversation with a Djadjawurrung woman who had remonstrated with a neighbouring clan and intimated that a peace-making 'religious' corroboree was to be held at the McIvor diggings (Rowe 1854, n.p).

Furthermore, it is quite possible that the gold era ushered in, or at the very least enabled a greater frequency of a sixth 'type', the staging of corroborees for secular enjoyment or just for the fun of it, or as a correspondent for the *Maryborough Advertiser* (cited in *Argus* 30 June 1862) implied as a celebration to mark the occasion of when they found a 'four and a half ounce nugget'. The reporter noted: "The proceeds, amounting to 18 pounds, were soon disposed of, and a grand corroboree has been held ever since, and doubtless will continue till all the money is gone" (*Argus* 30 June 1862, p. 5). This type of impromptu corroboree may explain the poor comparisons made by some 'old hands' between the corroborees of later years with those of the 1840s (Forster 1965, pp. 6-7).

The frequent occurrence in miners' accounts of festive corroborees testifies to the frequency that Aboriginal people held such events. Moreover it also signifies that many non-Indigenous spectators recognized the uniqueness of what they were witnessing. In memoirs and reminiscences of diggers the corroboree is a piece of exotica; a unique form of entertainment in which their descriptions were pockmarked with expressions such as 'heathenish' and 'savage'. Robert Whittle (1857), a storekeeper at Daisy Hill and Talbot in 1857, witnessed a corroboree by Djadjawurrung people and announced: 'I can never forget the sound of the droning song interjected with occasional unearthly shouts and yells, from three or four

hundred savage throats...the moon shining silvery and clear meanwhile through the gnarled branches of the box trees above us on this wild, weird scene of superstitious savagery' (Whittle 1857, n.p). Goldfields' newspapers tended to memorialize the corroboree, and often was the subject of some commentary such as an article which appeared in the *Inglewood Advertiser* on 2 May 1865 (in Nixon 1982). The writer infers, and is certainly corroborated by other reports, that one of the prime motivational factors of Aboriginal peoples' visitation was to corroboree and gain monetarily from their 'white brethren's' proclivity for the entertainment they provided.

Natives. Inglewood is now honored with the presence of a body of natives, male and female, who have come down from their native river, the Murray, to see their white brethren inhabiting this town. It is some time since they paid us a visit and their appearance in the street, with their long spears, opossum cloaks, etc form quite a novel feature. ...Yesterday they were busy levying contributions, and showed a great predilection for white money. Last night they held a grand corroboree, which was quite a success, and attracted many visitors (Nixon 1982, p. 37).

This Aboriginal expression of entrepreneurial activity was widespread throughout the goldfields. Without the aid of bill posters or newspapers to promote their event, it seems that on many occasions Aboriginal performers put on an 'appearance' with all their accoutrements in the streets to elicit interest in their exotic differences and to announce their intent to perform. A number of corroborees reported upon, such as several at Echuca, included their colourful presence as an incentive to witness in itself. An article in the *Border Post* (1857) provided a description of a corroboree that had been witnessed near Ballarat on 28 March 1857 and demonstrates the considerable attraction the event had on a wide range of Ballarat residents. The correspondent reported: 'We agreed to walk out as far as the camping ground at the ever famous Swamp [now Lake Wendouree] to see the blackfellow's corroboree...Groups of well dressed Europeans, both males and females were gathered around to witness the strange forms and stranger evolutions of this singular race...' (*Border Post* 1857, p. 2). Healy (2006) confirms that the considerable interest in nineteenth century Victorian Aboriginal cultural performances was far from being an elitist, intellectual pursuit but was in fact occurring at a very popular level. In the context of European racial discourse, Tsari Anderson (1997) considers that reports of this nature reveal the high level of interest 'Europeans in nineteenth century Australia showed in the "peculiarities" of Aboriginal culture and society; of the way Aboriginal people were viewed as remarkably different, even opposite, to Europeans; and of the general confusion between race and culture' (Anderson 1997, p. 9). Moreover, the commodification of Aboriginality particularly during the gold rushes in theatrical and literary performances such as poetry (Lloyd 1862), plays (Carboni, 1993) and song (Gilbert & Lo 2007) affirms Anderson's position. Broome largely concurs, but interestingly adds an inquiry: what of the Aboriginal racial discourse?

We know European artists drew corroborees as dramatic open-air events, exotic and archetypal representations of 'savagery'. Were Aborigines showing ritual about country to welcome, impress and claim ownership? Were they increasingly influenced by a new or additional profit motive, as money, rations and alcohol flowed their way at such events (Broome 2005, pp. 110-111)?

A contrasting set of partial Aboriginal views on the merits of touristic corroborees for non-Indigenous audiences, (partial because the Aboriginal discourse is viewed through non-Indigenous reporters' lenses) can be obtained from newspaper reports such as appeared in the *Argus* (13 March 1857) and the *Ballarat Star* (29 May 1860). A correspondent for the *Ballarat Times*, reported in the *Argus*, after witnessing a well-attended corroboree at Lake Wendouree in Ballarat, central Victoria, met with a small party of Wathawurrung people who 'seemed grieved at the revelry and debauch which on hands surrounded them, and was evidently taking no part in the noisy performance' (*Argus* 13 March 1857, p. 6). The disdain which this group held for such an event is juxtaposed with the renewed sense of independence and pride observed in a neighbouring Djabwurrung clan at Back Creek who performed for gold diggers:

on the stage at the Royal, and that the audience were highly pleased at witnessing the intelligence of the sable tribe. The warm reception they got has completely transmogrified them from slow motioned bush wanderers to aristocrats, possessing strong self esteem. They were engaged to give a grand performance at the Back Creek Theatre Royal last week. The contractors no doubt expected them to walk the distance of ten miles, but he found to his astonishment that they had grown so aristocratic since their appearance at the Royal that they refused to stir one inch unless their passage was paid by Cobb's coach or a "special" grand conveyance procured for them (*Ballarat Star* 29 May 1860, n.p).

Judging from the frequency with which such events were held, the substantial turn out of paying non-Indigenous viewers, how well organized the dance troupes were and the developing Western styled business acumen they displayed it is clear that monetary considerations became an underpinning feature of the performance of corroborees for non-Indigenous audiences particularly from the 1850s. A lengthy quote from the memoirs of George Bishop (1908) tells of a corroboree that took place at Essendon (a northern suburb of Melbourne) in 1868. It shows strong indicators of Parsons' praxis of corroborees as jointly negotiated cultural products being framed into new economic paradigms on Aboriginal terms:

I have witnessed several corroborees, between eight and fourteen, but the one before last, in 1868, saw two northern tribes from Ballarat [presumably Wathawurrung] and Bendigo [presumably Djadjawurrung]...As they were friendly they camped near one another and Mr. Jamieson and others asked them for their usual display...A very large number of the residents were present...The spectators had a good two hours enjoyment and all that was required to make these poor aborigines happy was white money, so Mr. Jamieson went round with the hat and distributed the takings among them (Bishop 1908, n.p.).

Not surprisingly some Aboriginal people also chose to perform for non-Indigenous audiences in goldfield theatrical venues displaying an entrepreneurial panache which stunned colonial audiences:

A most novel scene I witnessed at the Royal theatre on Thursday evening. The Ararat tribe of Aborigines [Djabwurrung] has been here for some days, and

most pleasing it is to see them so far advanced in civilization...An offer was made to them to appear and dance at the Royal, which offer was accepted with avidity. Upon the curtain being raised the dance commenced; and the strict time kept, together with their various steps, completely astonished the audience. After the first piece was over, one of them appeared at the footlights and announced a programme of what would be exhibited before us. In his intelligence and manners he was a pattern to hundreds I have seen of Europeans attempting to address an assemblage. One of them has gone up the country for fifty more, and a grand evening's entertainment is to be given by them at the Royal on Saturday evening next (*Ballarat Star* 21 May 1860, p. 4).

In gold-feverish Melbourne Aboriginal people, in collaboration with theatre managers, performed their unique dances at the 'Queen's Theatre' to enthusiastic reviews (*Argus* 3 January 1856, p. 6). There is evidence too of traditional rivalries between distant language groups being relaxed and of Aboriginal people adapting the 'traditional' diplomacy rituals to include a commercial aspect to their proceedings, as evidenced by a report of a gathering at Ballarat:

During the last few days a number of aborigines, probably about two hundred have arrived on Ballarat from Port Fairy, Mount Elephant, Mount Cole, the Hopkins, Warrnambool and the Wimmera, for the purpose as they state of seeing the towns and each other...During the whole of Monday they infested the principal parts of the town and levied contributions in money or otherwise on the white man. Towards evening they made preparations for a corroboree...and away they went to the intense delight of some 500 persons, who were present to witness the performance...While the dancing was going on King Wattie procured a tin can, and fulfilled the not very dignified position of tax-gatherer in-chief (*Ballarat Star* 12 March 1861, p. 7).

By the mid 1860s there is clear evidence on several goldfields of corroborees being staged in collaboration with non-Indigenous promoters principally as a cultural tourism product for goldfield audiences. For example, in the Minutes of the Ballarat Mechanic's Institute in February 1879 there are references to the hire of a lecture hall for an 'Aboriginal Concert' that had been held. Presumably this was an instance of non-Indigenous goldfields promoters trading on a 'modernist preoccupation with primitivism' (Healy, 2006) which Aboriginal performances provided (Ballarat Mechanic's Institute Committee, 1879). Healy's (2006, p. 18) observations upon the wide spread appeal enjoyed by Aboriginal performances in Victoria during the 1930s (built upon the generational interest generated in the nineteenth century), indicates that their popularity 'far from being an elitist, intellectual pursuit, was occurring at a very popular level' (Healy 2006, p. 18). The monetary value for white entrepreneurs of Aboriginal corroboree touring ventures had been touted as a lucrative venture since the 1840s. Charles Griffith wrote effusively about a Victorian corroboree he witnessed and mused: "Why then, a man would make a power of money, if he had them fellows at home for a show" (Griffith 1845, p. 159). The goldfields population allowed for the very 'show' that Griffiths had intimated at, minus the inter-continental circuit. In an advertisement (*Ballarat Star* 20 February 1865) and subsequent news report of the 'gala' event in Ballarat, it appears clear that the touristic framing of the event was carefully planned and intended to be an economic initiative which would utilize Aboriginal peoples' heritage as a vehicle for economic self sufficiency.

[Advertisement]

COPENHAGEN GROUNDS

Grand Corroboree by Fifty natives

THIS EVENING, MONDAY, 20th INST.,

Also, Extra Exhibition of FIREWORKS and Balloon Ascent. For the Benefit of Professor Prescott. Grandest Gala Night of the season (*Ballarat Star* 21 February 1865, p. 4).

[Subsequent news report]

The aboriginal corroboree and display of fireworks at the Copenhagen grounds on Monday evening drew together a large number of persons, and the novel entertainment proved a decided success...it may be stated that it afforded amusement to the number of persons, between five and six hundred, who assembled to witness it. A plentiful supply of coloured fires added to the savage appearance of the scene, and after it was concluded some beautiful fireworks were displayed. Professor Prescott, the lessee of the grounds, purposes on a future evening to allow the natives the use of the grounds for another corroboree, they receiving the proceeds (*Ballarat Star* 21 February 1865, p. 6).

At least one other performance, presumably by the same Wathawurrung people, was co-staged two years later at the same Ballarat venue on the 2 April 1867, receiving similar critical accolades (*Ballarat Star* 2 April 1867, p. 2).

Conclusion

Touristic cultural ceremonies performed by Victorian Aboriginal people, described under the banner of 'corroborees', were performed for non-Indigenous people from the very outset of non-Indigenous colonisation (Kirkland 1845). The popularity of the corroboree as a piece of theatrical entertainment was significant in both the pastoral and gold period spanning from the mid 1830s until the late 1870s. The development of the corroboree event by Aboriginal (and non-Indigenous) entrepreneurs gave witness to some very innovative and successful transformations during the gold period (Mereweather 1859; Graham 1863; McDonald 1996). Though rarely articulated by historians, nineteenth century corroborees performed for non-Indigenous colonial audiences may be regarded as Australia's pre-eminent prototypical Indigenous cultural tourism product (Parsons 2002).

This paper has sought to extend Parson's framing of corroborees staged for touristic purposes and to consider the motive, nature and extent of Aboriginal performances during the pastoral period and on the Victorian goldfields, spanning from 1835 until 1870. It has demonstrated that Aboriginal people were quick to enter into monetary commerce with non-Indigenous miners, by performing on the goldfields. This is a significant departure from most historic appraisals of economic intercultural interaction which have tended to emphasise only a barter economy (Clark & Cahir 2003). Moreover it has been confirmed that Indigenous theatrical cultural products such as corroborees were jointly negotiated between two cultures and were increasingly instigated by Aboriginal people for monetary purposes during the Victorian gold rush period. It needs to be emphasized however that the swiftness with which Aboriginal people adopted and adapted the Western economic model of

commerce can be observed to have operated within the cultural parameters of traditional Aboriginal commerce, reciprocity and kinship. It is apparent that the two economic models have been shown to be more convergent than previously thought, and non-Indigenous mining communities were eager to appropriate and commodify Aboriginal cultural heritage to a degree hitherto rarely considered. Modern proponents of the corroboree traditions, heritage tourism and Aboriginal eco-tourism providers would benefit greatly from studying the successes and failures of their nineteenth century predecessors and understanding that the fusion of indigenous, European and Asian cultures is an attractive lure for visitors looking for new music, theatre and dance (Van Den Berg, Collard, Harben & Byrne, 2005).

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