

MACEDONIAN AGENDA



16 essays on the development of Macedonian culture in Australia. Includes cultural values, language, religion, arts, identity, women's issues, the elderly, immigration, politics, the "child refugees", human rights and more

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Victor Bivell**

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*Front cover: February 2, 1960, Bitola Railway Station, Macedonia:
Mr Aleksandar Kolupacev is farewelled by his village, Gjavato, as he
sets out for a new life in Port Kembla, Australia.*

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Macedonian Values in Multicultural Australia <i>Zoran Coseski</i>	9
Some Observations on the Speech of Bilingual Macedonian- Australians <i>Betty K Stewart</i>	15
The Australian-Macedonian Drama Group <i>Stefo Stojanovski</i>	27
The Macedonian Orthodox Church: Its Role in the Moulding and Maintenance of Ethnic Identity in Australia <i>Dr Christopher Popov and Michael Radin</i>	36
Barriers to Social Change for Macedonian Women <i>Malina Stankovska</i>	53
A Study of Women Activists in the Macedonian Community <i>Malina Stankovska</i>	62
The Macedonian Elderly: A Needs Study of the Macedonian Elderly in the Western Region of Melbourne <i>Macedonian Community Welfare Association of the Western Region Inc</i>	74
Features of Settlement in Australia by Macedonians from the Aegean Region <i>Michael Radin</i>	113
Proud of the Macedonian Heritage <i>Faye Kolev</i>	132
Assimilation and the Public and Private Identity of Macedonians: A Dialectical Expose <i>Pandora Petrovska</i>	135

Declaration of the "Child Refugees" <i>The Association of Refugee Children from the Aegean Part of Macedonia</i>	185
Submission on the 28,000 Ethnic Macedonian "Child Refugees" <i>Aegean Macedonian Association of Australia</i>	189
A Political Strategy for the Macedonian Diaspora <i>Victor Bivell</i>	204
The Political Future of the Macedonians in Australia <i>Zoran Coseski</i>	213
Australian Law, International Treaties and the Government's "Slav" Prefix <i>Risto Balalovski</i>	215
Why Australia? <i>Bob Spasenovski</i>	223
The Authors	226

Macedonian Values In Multicultural Australia

Zoran Coseski

This paper was written as part of a Bachelor Degree in Intercultural Studies and was published in the Australian Macedonian Weekly in 1991

Macedonian-Australians have been living in Australia for more than 70 years, and although the majority came after World War 2 certain families can trace their settlement to the early decades of this century. For many years Macedonian-Australians have been called "migrants" to distinguish them not so much from "older settlers" as from people of British origin, some of whom are more recent arrivals than the Macedonians, but who usually have no difficulty in acquiring an unhyphenated Australian identity. The latter applies to virtually all children of British migrants.

A good example of the ease with which people of British origin can become accepted as just ordinary "Australians" is the fact that there is differential treatment of minorities by the general Australian community. Another example of this is the way even grandchildren of immigrants from Macedonia are often labelled as third generation migrants. This of course is an absurd notion, since people born here are not migrants of any kind but Australians who by retaining aspects of Macedonian culture identify as Macedonian-Australians.

But if some of us feel and act as Macedonian-Australians, while others do so as Italian-Australians or Dutch-Australians, will this not fragmentalize the country and endanger its social and cultural cohesion? That cohesion has never been as clear cut and absolute as has been idealized in the mateship and the egalitarian myths about the Australian past. Nor is cohesion necessarily a virtue in itself; as Michael Novak (1982) has argued, there is a revulsion against the uniformity of the modern world. Furthermore as Mr Justice Kirby (1982) has pointed out, excessive stress on nationalism and cohesion can carry with it dangers of conformity and even some totalitarian overtones. It is not an accident that totalitarian regimes almost invariably regard "cohesion" as their aim, while "pluralism" is looked upon as dangerous deviation. It is also an acknowledged part of Australian history that people of English ancestry have

had a close identification with the language, culture, laws and customs of their native country without this being questioned as un-Australian and divisive.

If people of English ancestry can take legitimate pride in English derived institutions such as the Westminster style parliamentary democracy it is also legitimate for Macedonian-Australians to remind their English counterparts that Macedonians have proud traditions of the notion of freedom and of a fair go for the underdog.

The English language is the most important value in our multi-cultural society as the common means of communication for all Australians regardless of their heritage. However, it was never meant as a substitute for the native languages of non-English Australians but as an addition to Macedonian, Italian, Filipino etc as well as to some 50 surviving Aboriginal languages, that all in all over one million Australians learn from their mothers' lips and regard as their home or community language (Commonwealth Department of Education 1981). Such bilingualism is a fact of life in Australia. What is needed however is further public recognition of this social reality, as well as educational reinforcement of bilingualism in order to make it as acceptable and as normal a part of Australian life as the plurality of religions, educational systems and life styles that already exist and form an accepted pattern of Australian society.

The example of linguistic diversity as seen in the ability of some Australians to speak Macedonian and English shows that overarching values for all Australians may compliment the core values of the various ethnic groups.

This demonstrates that there is no intrinsic and inevitable conflict between the overarching values of the whole country on the one hand and the ethnic values on the other. In some instances these values are parallel to one another and can be used on different occasions. Thus one may speak, read and write Macedonian and English without one language interfering with or harming another. A further instance of such cultural co-existence is the celebration of both birthdays and namedays on the dates of the patron saints by many Australians of European heritage. In other instances the various majority or minority ethnic values may amalgamate to produce some new synthesis (such as Australian BBQ peppers or pineapple pizza).

Collectivism of Macedonian Life

One of the differences in the case of Macedonian culture is the special

bond that unites Macedonian families and the spirit of solidarity and collectivism that represents one of the most characteristic features of Macedonian life.

In this respect the Macedonian tradition differs from the more individualistic orientation of Australians who derive their family models from northern Europe. Such diversity of family patterns represents part of Australian multiculturalism which makes allowances for variation within a consensus framework provided by several aspects of our political or economic life. This allows for the possibility of mutual interaction in the sense that Macedonian family traditions can act as a model of inter-dependence for Anglo-Australians. On the other hand the British virtues of individualism and independence may in some way appeal to younger Macedonian-Australians who might like to preserve some aspects of their traditions while at the same time modifying other features to meet the changing conditions of life in Australia.

Anglo culture is concerned with preparing the individual to take their place in the formal structure of society. This is in contrast to the Macedonian culture which is essentially concerned with preparing the individual to take their place first and foremost in the family network. This implies that Macedonian society at large has been used to serve the individual as the member of a family. Hence the contrasting enculturation patterns in the two cultures and the Anglo concern to "free" the individual at an early age, so as to allow the external system to allocate his or her place through processes involving secondary personal relations.

My study of the collectivist Macedonian family indicates that the Macedonian family structure displays certain cultural features that differentiate it strongly from the Anglo type of family relations. The second most important finding is that there are no signs that this cultural difference is dissolving in Australia or that second generation Macedonian-Australians are abandoning the family traditions of their own group in favour of those evolved in Britain. This does not mean that Macedonian family tradition is static and that younger generation Macedonian-Australians are wholly unaffected by the mores of the dominant group. A degree of cultural interaction is undoubtedly taking place but my research indicates that the Anglo assimilation process so much advocated by the majority group in the 1950s and 1960s has failed at least in the realm of family relations.

Core Values of Macedonian Culture

In relation to the continuance of Macedonian culture in Australia as

well as the integration of Macedonian-Australians into the fabric of Australian life the question can now be asked as to which Macedonian cultural value needs to be maintained to ensure the survival of the Macedonian culture in this continent, and what modifications are likely to occur in the course of time?

The erosion of Macedonian values in Australia and their replacement by those of the Anglo majority would have resulted in cultural assimilation (although not necessarily in the structural absorption of the Macedonian migrants, since social discrimination may continue even against a culturally assimilated minority that can be distinguished as "different" from the dominant group by some physical features or residual cultural fragments). The opposite of assimilation, outright separatism, would eventuate if the Macedonian group kept itself utterly separate from the majority and searched for ways to preserve the specific political, legal and even economic structures that it brought from Macedonia. There is no sign of desire on the part of Macedonian-Australians to seek such ghetto style separation since it would only serve to undermine their chances of occupational and social advancement and arouse suspicion and resentment on the part of the dominant group.

The question then arises as to which values need to be preserved as specifically Macedonian, while the group remains firmly embedded within the multicultural setting of Australia and its overarching values.

My study of some 50 Macedonian families shows that Macedonian-Australians wish to preserve their traditional values in the area of the family, and that although these are likely to be modified in the course of time (and indeed many have already been partly affected) one cannot envisage at this point of time their complete convergence with the Anglo values of individualism and the specific emphasis on individual autonomy. (There are also few signs to suggest the opposite, namely the alteration of Anglo values to match more closely the Macedonian stress on family collectivism, although such mutual interaction cannot be excluded and it is likely that it may increase in the future.)

It would seem however that there are other Macedonian core values that will have to be maintained to prevent Macedonian culture being converted to a mere sub-cultural variant on the majority theme. (The majority group is accustomed to social class sub-cultural differences, as well as to the differences between town and country but all such variations occur within the overall Anglo-cultural mould and if ethnic cultures were to be reduced to the level of such variations they would lose their unique cores and retain mere trappings, or those aspects that are easiest to preserve and that are most palatable to the majority.)

In addition to family structure, two such core values suggest themselves in my study of Macedonian life in Australia, and they are the Macedonian language and the Macedonian Orthodox religion. A simple test to determine what constitutes such a core value is to ask oneself whether one would still be acceptable to the Macedonian community if one had forsaken one's family, lost or never acquired the ability to use the Macedonian language, or changed one's religious affiliation to some other faith. It would seem that the loss of any of these values would to a greater or lesser extent undermine one's continued membership of the Macedonian group in Australia. One must remember in this connection the traditional Macedonian concern for the opinion of their fellow countrymen which appears to be encapsulated in the saying, often repeated by parents as a warning to their more adventurous children "But what will the people say?" This must be understood in the sense that people refers here only to the Macedonian people, and that the opinion of outsiders may be irrelevant. This concern for acceptance by one's own ethnic group whether in Australia or in the homeland can help maintain core values and ensure their transmission to the next generation.

It is a matter for debate and further study whether language, religion or family structure should be given pride of place. These values are in any case integrated since family cohesion helps to preserve both language and religion, while in the absence of the common ethnic tongue family unity would suffer and church services become less meaningful.

In fact my research indicates that religion which is unique to a given group can only help with language maintenance if church services are conducted in that tongue and if parish activities also provide an avenue for the use of the ethnic language.

In conclusion one could quite safely say that Macedonian-Australians face many difficulties experienced by all minorities that rely upon language as one of their main guarantors of authenticity. Australia has learned how to be a religiously plural society, but it is still learning how to become a linguistically plural society. It is still uncertain whether linguistic diversity will ever be fully accepted (linguistic pluralism has not flourished in Great Britain, where Celtic languages have been reduced to near extinction despite attempts at Welsh and Irish revivals).

Yet it would seem that the Macedonian language is a principle core value of the Macedonians in Australia and that religion and family may not be enough to ensure a viable and intellectually stimulating cultural continuity. The Macedonian community has shown its concern in this regard by having evolved an extensive network of part time schools and folkloric ensembles.

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