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SZAKDOLGOZAT

Riesenberger Mónika

Angol nyelv és irodalom szak

ELTE 2018

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Representation of Aboriginal identity in the works of Jack Davis

Az őslakos identitás ábrázolása Jack Davis műveiben

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Abstract

The following paper is intended to offer an overview of the representation of Australian Aborigines and Aboriginality in selected works, mainly the most important and known plays of Jack Davis, by elaborating on themes represented in them that relate to the subject of the paper. These major themes are assigned separate chapters in which they are represented in detail, underpinned by related examples taken from the history of Aborigines, the personal life of Davis, as well as scenes and events of the selected plays and literary works. Even though there is a visible advancement in the treatment of Aborigines since the time these writings were first published, the themes and issues raised in them are unfortunately still valid today, and the message these literary works carry is still very actual, one to which not only the represented minority of Australia, but any member of any minority worldwide today may relate.

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1. Introduction

The thesis starts by introducing Jack Davis. Through an overview of his childhood years, the months spent at the Moore River Native Settlement, and later his physical working years before he became a political activist and writer, the reader will be able to catch a glimpse of the main influencing factors in the life of Davis that later had an impact on his writings.

The paper then continues by listing the major topics and themes that appear in connection with Aboriginality in these selected literary works. It gives a general summary of Aboriginal languages, introduces *Nyoongar*, the language used in the plays of Davis, and describes the importance of both *Nyoongar* and Aboriginal English language, and also of the nonverbal communication that accompanies the dialogues. A description of The Dreaming follows, in which the reader is presented examples of how this fundamental phenomenon of Aboriginal culture appears in one of the plays, *The Dreamers*. The next chapter elaborates on the role and importance of women in Aboriginal society and family, by providing a historical background and analysing example characters from various plays by Davis, as well as from a short story written by him. Family and relations are assigned significant importance in Aboriginal culture, so the subsequent chapter offers an overview on tribal and family hierarchy, presents real life examples from the life of Davis that later had an influence on the strong presence of this topic in his plays, and also describes the family relations depicted in these plays.

The last two chapters present external factors and their interaction with Aboriginality. The thesis analyses the conflicts caused by the differences between the Aboriginal and white ways of life, and the difficulties Aborigines are facing in late twentieth century urban conditions upon trying to lead a white life. The chapter also offers an example via a short story which represents the problem from the white point of view. The final chapter of the paper is focusing on Christianity, a white cultural phenomenon that became strongly present also in Aboriginal life, though due to the significant cultural differences, in a different and rather practical format.

2. Life and works of Jack Davis

2.1 Introduction

Sometimes referred to as the "grandfather of Aboriginal theatre" (Heiss and Minter 57), Jack Davis is certainly among the most important Aboriginal writers. His name essentially appears in any anthology about Aboriginal literature, and his works of any genre are often cited or referred to. Other than having an important role in shaping the history of the literature of his people, Davis was also politically active and had an influence on the perception and education of his people and their relation to 'European Australians'. The following section of this paper will present the most important events and milestones in the life of Jack Davis, all of which had an influence on him to an extent that they have later become major themes in his works, and contributed to how Aboriginality was reflected in these works.

2.2 Early years

Jack Leonard Davis was born in Perth, Western Australia, in 1917, to parents Alice McPhee and William (Bill) Davis, both of whom were taken away from their families to be raised by white Australians (Gilbert 53; Davis, *The First* v). The maternal grandfather of Davis was a Scotsman (Davis, *A Boy's* 144), and through his father he was of part-Sikh descent. Literary anthologies seldom talk about the early life of Davis, but his autobiographical book, *A Boy's Life*, offers an insight to his childhood years. When Davis was five years old his family relocated to Yarloop, a milltown in Western Australia (Gilbert 53; Davis, *A Boy's* 7). This small town provided many first-time experiences to the family accustomed to smaller communities and a more rural life. This town was where Jack Davis had his first closer encounters with Christianity, an important theme-to-be in his plays, when his mother became a member of the Methodist Church. The community was basically all white, but Davis does not recall any kind of discrimination towards him or his family, the mistreatment of his people was only familiar to him

through the stories told by his parents. The father, Bill Davis was a well-respected worker and sportsman in the community, and the children were all treated equally. This milieu may have helped Davis to develop the overall positive and hopeful tone that later became characteristic of his works. The strong, courageous and self-sacrificing mother, Alice served as a base for another key theme, that of the strong woman. The Davises led a balanced private life with none of the children removed by law or force.

Jack Davis possessed a vast imagination already as a child. In his own words, his childhood was full of wonders, fairytale-like stories and creatures. His mother was sure he will become a writer (Davis, *A Boy's* 28), and while he started writing already at an early age, when his first book was published he was already over 50 years old. While both of the Davis parents were good storytellers (Davis, *A Boy's* 20), neither of them could read or write (Davis, *A Boy's* 34, 58). Still they found the education of their children important, and all the children were able to and enjoyed reading. In the opening interview in *The First-Born and Other Poems* Davis describes that while other boys found more enjoyment in comic books, he highly preferred reading a dictionary before going to sleep, "because [he] loved words and wanted to understand words" (Davis, *The First* ix). No wonder language as a main theme also became significant in his works. Davis attended Yarloop State School for 8 years, where he received average white Australian education (Pierce 324; Davis, *The First* v).

2.3 A visit to Moore River

Upon finishing school in 1932, Jack Davis and one of his older brothers, expecting to receive education in farming skills, have travelled to Moore River Native Settlement by their own will (Davis, *A Boy's* 116). This was the first time Davis encountered Aborigines outside of his own family, and also the first occasion when he experienced discrimination (Davis, *A Boy's* 117). While related reminiscences of Davis are mostly diplomatic, he does pronounce overt and

political criticism by citing that the amount of daily money available to keep a prisoner in Fremantle jail was more than twice the amount than what was available per person at Moore River. The settlement "suffered from bad administration and lack of funds" (Davis, *A Boy's* 120), as well as pest invasions in the dormitories. It was populated by approximately 450 Aborigines, the majority of whom were prohibited to leave (Davis, *A Boy's* 119).

It was also here where Davis had a chance to meet actual historical characters like Mr Neal, Superintendent of the settlement, as well as the trackers Billy Kimberley and Bluey, all of whom have later become characters in his plays. While several events and incidents Davis has seen here (like the flogging of two girls who have tried to escape) have had such an impact on him that they have become parts of his plays, by hindsight Davis looks back with diplomacy even on Mr Neal: he notes that he was never able to look up on him, but he considered the position of the Superintendent to be "a tough job and one had to be tough to handle it" (Davis, *A Boy's* 131).

Despite what has been promised to them and their parents, the Davis brothers never received any education about farming at the settlement, and after spending nine months there they were eventually sent back home (Davis, *A Boy's* 130).

2.4 Work years, and the beginning of political activity

After the death of his father in 1932, Jack Davis left Yarloop to look for work, and tried himself in various areas such as droving, horse-breaking and boundary riding, he worked as a windmill-man and as a stocksman, even receiving promotion to be a head stocksman on some stations. For a number of years he also worked in the timber district in several areas throughout the country. Davis recalls he was always treated with the same respect as white workers were, and while none of these occupations meant a significant income, he highly enjoyed them, as they

involved travelling and living in the open, amongst full-blood Aboriginal people. The discrimination of Aborigines which Davis witnessed during these years though, was a main reason which made him become more deeply interested "in writing as a means of expression" (Davis, *The First* vi), especially because he learned that while he himself was evenly treated, as soon as he started openly voicing his concerns over the unfair treatment of Aborigines, he himself also got into trouble. At one time he even got imprisoned for 4 days for encouraging Aborigines to stand up for equal rights (Davis, *The First* vii). The injustice he has seen during his years working in the North-west was what convinced him to, after long years of disposing of his scribbles, keep the verses he has made up, and the bitter feeling over this unfair treatment is what fills his early writings.

Davis felt the need to become politically active when the Government started to apply provisions that were against Aborigines. As a member of the Aboriginal Advancement Council he and his people stood up against the aforementioned Government provisions, drawing attention to that they, while claiming to help Aborigines advance, were having the opposite effect. In 1967 Davis became the director of the Aboriginal centre in Perth, and in 1969, the director of the Aboriginal Advancement Council in Western Australia. In 1971 he was appointed to be the first chairman of the Aboriginal Lands Trust in Western Australia. In 1972 he became the managing editor of Aboriginal Publications Foundation. He held this position until 1977, and with this he inevitably started to drift away from activism, towards writing.

2.5 Writing and theatre in focus

In 1970, Jack Davis became the second ever Aboriginal writer to produce a book of poetry, when his book, *The First Born and Other poems*, was released (Gilbert xv; Page 47). In 1973, Davis moved to Sydney and joined the Aboriginal Publications Foundation to hold the position of joint editor of *Identity*, an Aboriginal magazine (Wilde et al. 206; Heiss and Minter 57). He

remained in this position until 1979. While he produced a second collection of poems later in the decade (*Jagardoo: Poems from Aboriginal Australia*, 1978), he was gradually transforming into a playwright. He joined the Swan River Stage Company with which he successfully staged his first plays, and in most of these he also took part as an actor, further shaping the message he wanted to transmit, receiving country- and worldwide attention. In 1977 he was awarded the "British Empire Medal for services to literature and the Aboriginal people" (Gilbert 54). Gilbert notes that while Aborigines initially received this honour coming from the British with disgust, upon seeing the plays of Davis they realised that his was a voice worthy of and able to present the story of the indigenous people of Australia adequately (54).

Marking the sesquicentenary celebrations in Western Australia, *Kullark* was the first play published by Davis, in 1979 (Wilde et al. 206). A successful tour followed during which the play was performed almost 100 times (Shoemaker, *An Interview* 112). *The Dreamers*, published in 1982, also received unanimously positive reaction over an extensive tour with the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust. Jack Davis received the "Patricia Weickhard Award for an Aboriginal writer" (Wilde et al. 206; Heiss and Minter 57) in 1980. In 1985 he was awarded the Sydney Myer Performing Arts Award (Holloway 590), and was elected Citizen of the Year in Western Australia (Davis, *No Sugar* 1). In 1986, *No Sugar* was published, and soon became co-winner of the Australian Writers Guild award for the best stage play of the year (Davis, *No Sugar* 1). After a successful tour of the eastern states (Holloway 178) the play has crossed borders to represent Australia at the World Theatre Festival held in conjunction with the 1986 Expo in Vancouver, British Columbia, and was received with standing ovations (Hergenhan 36). The international march continued when in May 1987, *The Dreamers* was performed in Portsmouth, England (Hergenhan 41; Davis, *No Sugar* 7). In 1988, Jack Davis was awarded the BHP Bicentennial Award of Excellence For Literature and the Arts (Hergenhan 581).

In the early 1990s Jack Davis ventured into new genres by first editing and producing a collection of Black Australian writings (*Paperbark*), and later by using the grant money for this collection to establish a literary award for new Black Australian writing, the David Unaipon Award (Davis, *Paperbark* xi). In the making for approximately 10 years, his autobiographical work titled *A Boy's Life* was released in 1991, telling the story of his childhood and early adulthood in short, loosely connected chapters. In 1998, two years before he died at the age of 83, he was deservedly named an Australian Living National Treasure (Heiss and Minter 57).

The works of Jack Davis are outstanding among the plenty of other Aboriginal writers and playwrights with a reason. His ability to compose using his own composite background, to write in an Aboriginal tone but still in a "white way", addressing and speaking to all audiences regardless of colour and historical background, telling the story of his people, but in a way that makes his works understandable and relatable to any minority in any part of the world (Shoemaker, *An Interview* 111-112) are only a few of his skills to prove this. However, overall the most outstanding feature of his writing is the optimistic tone so unique among Aboriginal literature: the tone of an advocate of peace, a tone that is accurate, strict and unconcealing, but never aggressive or verbally racist, transmitting the message that wrath and revenge can never be the way towards the desired peaceful and equal future.

3. The importance of language

3.1 Introduction

During the years Davis spent working in the open he noticed how Aboriginal culture and language is gradually disappearing, and how young adults are no longer able to speak their language or have the skills that were once essential in tribal life (like making weapons). During the years he spent living and working at the Brookton Aboriginal Reserve he started to collect and learn the *Nyoongar* language, a dialect spoken by the Aborigines of Western Australia (Heiss and Minter 57). This collection later became the base of the language used extensively and with a symbolical role in the plays of Davis. The following section of this paper will offer a general background to the history and variety of the languages of the Aboriginal people, and will discuss the role, importance and power of the *Nyoongar* language used in the plays of Jack Davis.

3.2 A basic historical background to Aboriginal languages

It is important to state that Aboriginal language as a general or common language spoken by all indigenous people of Australia does not exist. This term rather refers to a significant number of languages, each of which has a number of dialects of its own. Several of these have become extinct in the past almost 250 years of strong English influence, but a few, like *Nyoongar*, the major language of the South West of Western Australia, have been preserved via collections.

Walsh and Yallop estimate the number of separate Aboriginal languages spoken in the late 18th century, around the time of European settlement and the first notable contact between settlers and Aborigines, to be around 250 (1). Also counting the separate dialects, the total crawls up to a number between 500 and 600, and while some were spoken only by small groups of 100 people, others had up to 1500 speakers (Edwards 3; Rickard 63). All of these languages – with the possible exception of the dialects spoken in Tasmania – belonged to one language family that

seems unrelated to any other language family in the neighbouring continents and islands, further enhancing the lack of proven relation of the extracontinental origins of Aborigines (Edwards 3). These languages were often so heavily differentiated that their speakers were unable to understand one another by means of verbal communication, suggesting that their differentiation had existed for several thousands of years (Clarke, *Australia* 2). Based on this, Clarke recommends looking at Aborigines not as a unity, but as people belonging to hundreds of "small independent republics" (*Australia* 2). Further enhancing the necessity of this distinction, the word Aborigines use to refer to themselves also differs from region to region: while those living in New South Wales and Victoria call themselves *Koori*, Aborigines of Queensland refer to themselves as *Murri*. *Nyoongah* Aborigines populate the South West of Western Australia, and the Murchison River area of this region is inhabited by the *Yammagee* (Walsh and Yallop 2).

During the first 150 years of British settlement no attempt was made to preserve these indigenous Australian languages. Aboriginal people were prohibited from continuing their traditions, including speaking their language, and as using English language became a tool for survival, Aboriginal people were gradually forgetting the languages of their own (Heiss and Minter 2). Approximately two-thirds of the pre-settlement Aboriginal languages became extinct only within a few generations. Walsh and Yallop in 1993 estimated that only twenty Aboriginal languages are likely to survive, and these, too, only on a shorter term (2). More recent studies would most likely include a number further decreased.

3.3 A basic introduction to the *Nyoongar* language

Nyoongah people, the relatives and ancestors of Jack Davis, inhabited the South West part of Western Australia. Out of the total of 600 000 to 1 million Aborigines who have lived on the Australian continent in the late eighteenth century (Clarke, *Australia* 3), about 6 000 to 12 000 Aborigines are estimated to have been *Nyoongar*. Thirteen or fourteen dialects of the language

existed back then, and while they were somewhat different, their speakers were able to understand each other (Davis, *The First* xvi). All of these later faded into one composite, modern *Nyoongar* language that Berndt suggests to be referred to as *neo-Nyoongar* (xv; *Kullark* 6). *Neo-Nyoongar* already included words of English origin, most commonly referring to phenomena that did not exist on the continent before the British settlement. The most common example of this is *wetjala*, the word used to refer to white people, derived from 'white person' or 'white fellow' (Berndt xx; Vászolyi 62).

The *Nyoongar* language is a member of the *Pama-Nyungan* language family which groups approximately 300 languages used in the area surrounding Perth. While the word *Nyoongar* is most commonly stated to have originally meant 'man' or 'person' (Berndt xv), some believe it has originally referred to the region where these languages were spoken, and meant Western Australia (Vászolyi 40; Walsh and Yallop 16). Another word that is occasionally used to refer to the language is *Bibbulumun*, which was originally one of the fourteen languages that later combined into the language also used in the plays of Jack Davis (Davis, *No Sugar* 111). Davis claims to have saved about two-thirds of the language – approximately 750 words – during the years he has spent collecting it (Davis, *The First* xvi), and this collection has become the language used by the characters in his plays.

3.4 *Nyoongar* and Aboriginal English in the plays of Jack Davis

3.4.1 The use and importance of broken 'Aboriginal English'

The Aboriginal people represented in the plays of Jack Davis use a language for communication that contains both *Nyoongar* and English words. Berndt recommends this language to be called 'Aboriginal English', as it contains *Nyoongar* words, but is made up mostly of English words, and is thus a large part understandable to the English-speaking reader and

theatregoer (xx). This Aboriginal English is distinctive not only because of the presence of *Nyoongar* words in the discussion, but also because of its inconsistent broken grammar: the plural is often missing ("I got three dog"; "all the girl gotta uniform like dis"), grammatical structures are combined incorrectly ("Who your name?", "You gotta haircut, ini?", "What you did?"), and sounds are also missing – the most common examples for the latter are the 'h' sound from the beginning, and 'g' from the end of a word ("tryin" for "trying", "'im" for "him") (Vászolyi 69). It is also important to note that Aboriginal languages like *Nyoongah*, based on and relying heavily on oral tradition, were very different in their structures compared to English, which further aggravated the use of correct English grammar.

Davis, who himself spoke and wrote perfect English, was occasionally criticised for the use of this 'bad language' in his plays. However, as he himself stated in an interview, the reason for using the above described broken English was to depict Aborigines more realistically, to show their true contemporary aboriginality. As back in the times in which the plays of Davis are set this was the language that reflected the command of language of the majority of the Aboriginal population, without this "the dialogue would have rung false" and non-Aboriginal, and the circumstances would have seemed misrepresented (Davis, *The Dreamers* 47). 'White' school education was unavailable for the majority of these indigenous people before the early twentieth century, thus the Aborigines of these times learned English by listening to the language used by the people surrounding them, or picked it up from relatives who have learned it the previously described way. No wonder grammatical structures were lost and forgotten during this indirect and fragmented learning process. Even though basic education was mandatory in the settlements and later also became generally available, it was initially poor, and, naturally, only affected the new generations, who, at home, still continued to hear the broken language used by their parents and relatives. Therefore even in the 1970-80s when modern scenes of plays written by Davis take place, many Aborigines still did not speak perfect, or even good English.

However, while Davis did stay true to the raw, simplistic and broken nature of the language used by these people, at the same time he also created a balanced unity by using the tools and symbolism of classical literature in his plays, which resulted in a collection of works easy to read and understand for the classical reader, which was of key importance in the times of their production (1970-80s), as the majority of literature readers and theatregoers, thus the main audience for his works, were still the non-Aboriginal population. Moreover, on a more political note, and referring back to the political background described in Chapter 2, the message these works transmit was aimed mainly at the white listener – to the black population they were already painfully known. This is the reason why some elements, like the chant of Yagan in Act One – Scene Two of *Kullark* (12) – are included in the play in a non-broken format. The chant is sung by an Aborigine, but in perfect English, with as little Aboriginal words used as possible, moreover, it is written in a traditional classical literary narrative. It is technically a classical poem written using the rules of European literature, with the aim of an easiest possible transmission of the black message into white minds.

3.4.2 Non-verbal means of communication and their importance

While this section of the paper is dedicated to language, it is also important to take note of the non-verbal means of communication used in the plays of Jack Davis, as these form a core part of the message, and without them, a part of the message – and the aboriginality portrayed – is lost.

Many note that the plays of Jack Davis should be evaluated based on their performances and not solely based on reading. As these plays are neither currently performed nor are widely accessible in a recorded format, this paper cannot aim at such an extensive evaluation. However, a basic overview of what makes the visual performance a more effective representation is possible even without seeing full performances, based on what we know of the characteristics of

the culture of these people. Aboriginal culture is based on oral tradition: history and legends were transmitted by means of oral communication for thousands of years. Since the written format was completely unfamiliar to Aboriginality, to keep the transmission of culture and roots as smooth and effective as possible, other means of accompanying features like non-verbal elements of communication (sounds, gestures), dance, music and percussion all played an extensive role in enhancing the message and thus helping it to be memorised and passed on. Later these accompanying features themselves also became an important cultural part, without them in place, part of the Aboriginal culture, and part of the message, would get lost (Shoemaker, *Swimming* 3). The fact that Jack Davis used these elements heavily shows how important these were also to him. These are what make the dialogues in his plays really come alive. Realising this, Davis included extensive descriptions on all visual elements of his plays, like the surroundings, clothing, human features, but also on non-visual elements like the type of music played and its volume. Davis uses audio elements also as themes, to differentiate between scenarios and situations: for instance, in *Kullark*, the type of music used as an accompanying background feature offers an even more clear distinction between the changing timelines: didgeridoo music indicates historical scenes, while whenever the scenes involving the contemporary Yorlah family are performed, country music is heard.

3.4.3 *Nyoongar* language as part of Aboriginality in the plays

Jack Davis was brought up in a mostly English way. A significant part of this is due to the fact that both of his parents were part of the so-called *Stolen Generations*, and at a young age they were taken away from their parents to be raised, devoid of their Aboriginality, by white families. Such Aboriginal children have lost their tribal connections and their language and in principle this meant an irreversible loss. Davis is a rare counterexample of those who were later able to regain some of this – in his case, this became possible when, already as a working adult,

Davis spent some time with his tribal people, and, by his own will, learned and collected the language of his tribe, thus, at least partially, regaining his original culture. Aboriginality measured upon the knowledge of the language has later become an important theme in his plays, most likely based on his own experience of enlightenment upon regaining his tribal roots.

The *Nyoongar* language is used extensively in the plays of Davis. *Nyoongar* words are not only frequent in the speech of the main Aboriginal characters, but at times entire sentences are spoken in this language. This is part of the realism Davis represents: as Hergenhan explains, this phenomenon gives an insight of what bilingual Australia was like fifty or two hundred years before the plays were written, transmitting its inconvenience onto the English-speaking theatregoer who – unlike the reader who has the glossary of *Nyoongar* words included at the back of the printed play – must rely on the aforementioned important non-verbal means of communication to at least partially understand the actions or the topic of a dialogue (43). "Plays such as those of Davis are stating quite clearly that Black Australian culture is different and distinctive and that, while it is not inaccessible to non-Aborigines, some effort is required in order to reach an understanding of it" (Hergenhan 43). The best example for this is *Kullark*, the play that includes scenes of very early encounters between the settlers and the indigenous people. In the beginning of these scenes, the dialogues are completely separated: settlers talk to each other in English, while the Aborigines only use the *Nyoongar* language. While these two groups are, in this case, clearly distinguishable based on visual characteristics, if these differences were unknown to the eye (an example of this – from the point of view of a settler – could have been Aboriginal people of different regions trying and failing to actually understand each other by using verbal communication only), the different language clearly distinguished and created a barrier between the two cultures and their people. Language here is clearly the most important characteristic that indicates the Aboriginality of Yagan, Mitjitjiroo and Moyarahn.

As the play progresses and the represented time passes, the reader is offered an insight into how the Aborigines learned English, as well as European ways of living, and even into how some English words that previously did not have an Aboriginal counterpart have entered the *Nyoongar* language. This new knowledge came with benefits for the Aborigines, as the enhanced understanding between them and the settlers meant new relationships to be formed, and new, more convenient ways of everyday tasks (like the usage of flour to make bread) to be learned, however, it also meant the gradual loss of their own culture, and not only language-wise. The loss of language and the loss of aboriginality is not yet so significant in the scenes of *Kullark* representing the late eighteenth century scenario, but in the scenes representing later eras (Moore River and mid-late-twentieth century scenes) they become gradually more prominent. As the characters speak less and less *Nyoongar*, they also gradually become less connected to their ancient roots and culture, losing a substantial part of their aboriginality – while not really becoming part of another culture – that of the white Australians – either. *Kullark*'s modern scenes, allowing the reader and theatregoer an insight into the life of the Yorlah family, are set in 1979. The parents, Alec and Rosie no longer use *Nyoongar* words often, only occasionally, their everyday tool of verbal communication inside the family is already English – but this English is still very broken, and the previously quoted examples of inconsistent brokenness are all very clearly represented in their speech: Alec starts his story of Wahrdung and Koohlbahrdi by telling that "the magpie and the crow was brothers" (Davis, *Kullark* 10), and scolds the priest holding the speech at the funeral they have been to by stating "all 'e was tryin' to do was frighten people inta goin' to 'is church" (Davis, *Kullark* 8). His wife, Rosie uses English with the same grammatical errors. Their son, Jamie, who is already part of the next generation and is also attending university to be a schoolteacher, uses non-broken English, but this also means that he is further torn from his aboriginality in this aspect: he does understand his parents, but he himself no longer finds a need to express himself in a way that is more connected to his culture: he hardly uses a *Nyoongar* word, and when it occasionally does happen, it is only in order for non-Aboriginal people not to

understand him – like when in Act One – Scene Six he scolds his father for his rude behaviour towards Lyn, the white schoolteacher who is visiting the family (Davis, *Kullark* 24).

Compared to the modern scenes of *Kullark, The Dreamers* takes place only 3 years later, however, it offers a greater variety of generations by including young children, as well as an old man in its character cast. The differences in the use of *Nyoongah* words, and the differences in the level of aboriginality of the characters, are more significant in this play. Worru, the old uncle of the family represents the oldest generation, and he is also the most Aboriginal in the sense of being more connected to the ancient roots of his people, and his aboriginality is clearly represented also by the amount of *Nyoongar* words he uses. While the play begins in a similar way to *Kullark* in that Worru recites a classical poem in perfect English, with no *Nyoongar* words in it, the reader soon learns that these thoughts of the old man are basically translated into classical English to offer an easier transmission of the main theme to the non-Aboriginal reader and theatregoer. In the play it becomes obvious that not only is Worru incapable of speaking perfect English, he also finds it unnatural and often inconvenient to express himself in English, and when he does, his English is very broken and still contains a significant amount of *Nyoongar* words. He speaks with sentences containing mostly *Nyoongar* words, and he replies in a similar way even to English questions:

> "MEENA: Hello Pop, you look super. New clothes? You look real *moorditj*.
>
> WORRU: *Kia gnullarah bridaria nyinning.*
>
> [They laugh.] . . .
>
> MEENA: You should have got them to shave your beard off.
>
> WORRU: *Yuart! Yuart!*" (Davis, *Kullark* 87)

The younger generations show gradually less connection and less aboriginality, and this is also represented in the amount of *Nyoongah* used by them, as well as the brokenness of the English they speak. Roy and Eli still speak some *Nyoongah*, but they only use these words occasionally in their English speech, often to emphasise something. The children of Dolly and Roy, Shane and Meena rarely use *Nyoongar* words anymore, and when they occasionally do they are usually talking to Worru, knowing he will understand it better that way. In Act One – Scene Six, they even verbally admit to Darren, a *wetjala* schoolmate visiting the family, that they do not really speak *Nyoongah*, and thus they are not able to recall and translate even some basic words Worru said to Darren a few minutes earlier (Davis, *Kullark* 97). It is also not clear if in the conversation cited above, Meena and Shaun laugh because of what Worru said (his first sentence translates roughly as 'Yes, our boss is here.", referring to Dolly stating earlier that he will look like a boss in his new clothes), or only because the children did not understand the reply they received from Worru completely. Another generation on, in *Barungin*, a play that tells the story of the already grown Meena and her children, the amount of *Nyoongah* used compared to the previous plays is negligible throughout and for all characters.

An interesting phenomenon related to the use of *Nyoongar* words can be observed in the works of Jack Davis. Regardless of the level of connection, in times of serious actions and heated discussions, even the least connected Aborigine starts to use more *Nyoongar* words in their speech. This phenomenon is more strongly present in scenes representing the early years. In *Kullark*, when Yagan, already capable of communication using very broken English, reverts to using almost only *Nyoongar* words in more unpleasant discussions that involve the problems of stealing, or when he becomes infuriated by the death of his people. In such discussions, even though he has already learned their English counterparts, he reverts to using the *Nyoongar* words when talking to the settlers. The phenomenon continues to be present in all other works of Davis, regardless of the historical era, and while it becomes less obvious with time, even the

characters living in the second half of the twentieth century tend to use *Nyoongar* words more frequently whenever there is an overflow of emotions of any kind.

By the 1990s the importance of Aboriginal languages and their preservation has become more widely recognised. Schools have started to include language courses for children of Aboriginal descent, and bilingual elementary education was also available in over 30 schools in Australia (Vászolyi 19). When the language disappears, a remarkable part of the culture and aboriginality also disappears, and it is now the joint mission of the people of Australia not to let what is still left fade out completely. Projects to keep languages alive have appeared, and with the widespread use of internet today a firm ground is available for them to remain alive and be spread, offering the knowledge of these languages not only to be regained by descendants of those who spoke them, but also to anyone who is interested to learn them. The collection and the works of Jack Davis have played, and still play an important role in keeping the *Nyoongah* language alive, and via them, partially but still firmly, the *Nyoongar* culture is being preserved.

4. The Dreaming and Aboriginality

4.1 Introduction

The Dreaming, or Dreamtime as it is also often referred to, the creative era during which the world as we know it – including its flora, fauna and geographical attributes – was shaped from an already existing, formless substance, forms the basis of Aboriginal culture and thus also of Aboriginality. Aboriginal people are all connected to The Dreaming, and through it also to nature, their people and their history. No wonder this phenomenon also plays an important part in any work of literature written by an Aborigine, and Jack Davis is no exception. The following chapter will provide a brief explanation to The Dreaming, as well as include examples for its representation in the works of Jack Davis.

4.2 Defining The Dreaming and its relation to Aborigines

While scientists still struggle to find a starting point for Aboriginal presence in Australia, Aborigines themselves, based on their legends and lore passed on with every generation, believe that they have been living on the continent ever since they existed, since a time that they call The Dreaming. This phenomenon is difficult to translate and interpret, and its name is misleading, as it is far more from a state of being asleep. While all tribes agree on that this phenomenon refers to an event during which the world was created, different tribes describe and recite the actual event in different ways, and the differences usually originate from their lifestyles and location (Edwards 12-13). It is important to note that on one element they all agree: for them these stories are not fiction, but their actual history passed on via oral tradition. Shaping was carried out by spirit beings homed by the initial shapeless substance, and these beings were anthropomorphic in some of their features, yet also resembled animals. They are thought to be ancestors of currently living beings, and their ways of life serve as role models to how life should be led by their descendants living on the continent today. The spirit beings are believed to still

inhabit the land in one form or another, most often in the form of natural phenomena such as mountains, rocks, trees and lakes, thus making areas and objects sacred (Edwards 14).

It is important to point out, and this will also be of importance in the works of Jack Davis, that Aborigines have a significantly different concept of time compared to how we refer to it nowadays. For them it is rather a circular than linear phenomenon, in which events do not simply follow one another, but all of them are connected in complicated ways, and thus everyone in every era is connected or linked to The Dreaming (Edwards 13). As a result of this, for Aborigines life is the re-enactment of events that took place in The Dreaming, a constant state of recurrence (Edwards 17).

4.3 Connection to The Dreaming as represented in *The Dreamers*

The connection to the phenomenon of The Dreaming is represented in the most detail in the symbolically titled play of Jack Davis, *The Dreamers*. The old Uncle Worru, via his strong connection to The Dreaming, evokes a connection also for younger and urbanised family members who no longer have a strong connection to it, having been torn from their culture by white ways of living. Worru is the most Aboriginal of all characters represented in the play: he has lived in times and under conditions that were more closely connected to nature, and also to his tribal roots and through them, also to the The Dreaming. Every time he is in a not fully conscious state – asleep, drunk or in fever – he becomes connected to his past, is suddenly surrounded by friends and relatives whom he knew in the past, and he even interacts with them. He makes weapons with which he hunts for kangaroos afterwards, he camps with his friends by the fire, and does not sleep in a bed of a worn-off suburban house. The connection with a different era is further enhanced by the character of the Dancer who always reappears on stage during such events, in traditional Aboriginal body paint, acting as the materialisation of the connection between Worru and The Dreaming. As Worru ages and his condition worsens such

events become increasingly frequent, and the old man gradually loses the ability to distinguish between the state of connection to The Dreaming, and of being in the present with the Wallitch family. Family members, unaware of what is happening, usually believe Worru to be hallucinating or having nightmares and talking in his sleep. As a result, these scenes are usually frightening to the others, and the fact that Worru usually does not 'wake up' completely after such an event and continues to mix up dream and reality makes them even more terrifying for the observers. These returns to the past are accentuated also with an extended use of the *Nyoongah* language: as Worru spends more time in the past, he also gradually starts to be removed from the urban settings and lifestyle, and speaks mostly in *Nyoongah*.

The three separate generations represented in the play all show a gradually decreasing level of connection to their ancestors and The Dreaming. The youngest members of the family who already lead an urban life have lost a significant part of their Aboriginality and thus no longer have any connection to The Dreaming. They only regain some level of this connection with the help of Worru, who tells yarns, stories of the origins of their people, of the creation of some animals, and of the afterlife of souls after death. Worru uses the oral tradition to transfer the knowledge of legends and lore that together form The Dreaming, to the younger generations. To the youngest generation like Peter and Shane these stories are strange or even morbid. The boys are so far removed from this culture already that they can no longer understand these stories, let alone look at them as part of their history. Peter, for instance, finds the story of Aboriginal souls going to spend time in the *moodgah* tree after death, morbid, and he also laughs at how Worru dances the traditional Aboriginal way to the disco music the radio plays. Dolly, their mother, slightly more connected to her past and her Aboriginality through The Dreaming, is not frightened and understands these stories more, however, she, too, initially struggles with believing they are true. However, when Worru dies, some of the connection is restored or redistributed to the younger generations: after his death Dolly recites that his soul is now in the

moodgah tree, implying she now believes this to be the fact, and even Shane who is the youngest of all, senses a strange presence in the room of Worru, around the time of the death of the old Uncle. However, even though some of this connection becomes redistributed and thus remains within the members of the family, a significant part of it is lost forever with the passing of the oldest family member. The closing song of Dolly is not only to say farewell to a man gone, but it is also to imply that the Featherfoot, the traditional Aboriginal bringer of death has not only taken Worru away, but with him also a piece of Aboriginality. With the death of Worru some Aboriginality of the family is also lost, and is never to be regained: Dolly herself knows less about her people and their history, and she will be able to transfer even less of this knowledge to her children, who will never be connected to The Dreaming in a way Worru was.

5. Role and representation of Aboriginal women in the dramas of Jack Davis

5.1 Introduction

Women are assigned key roles in the dramas of Jack Davis. All of his works contain at least one main female character, a remarkable protagonist who plays a significant role both in the play and in the family life of the people depicted in the play. These characters are often the mothers (or mothers-to-be) in the family, and they are all brave and have a strong will with which they shape the family and influence their decisions. The following section of this paper is intended to discuss the important role of women in Aboriginal culture through the representation of women in the plays of Jack Davis, and to highlight the main themes related to, or brought up by the female characters in these works.

5.2 Historical background: the role of women in Aboriginal society

According to anthropologists and historians the importance of women in Aboriginal societies has always been significant. During the several thousands of years before the European settlement Aboriginal groups have developed a way of living in which food supplies were acquired by hunting and collecting. The roles in these daily tasks were divided mainly by gender, and it was the women – accompanied by children – who were responsible for supplying the family with varied food via collecting edible species of the Australian flora and fauna (Rickard 63). Clarke emphasises that even though these gathering activities might seem minor compared to the hunting activities carried out by men, they still "provided approximately two-thirds of the daily food intake" (*The History* 12), and were also a more dependable resource of food compared to hunting. In addition, women were sometimes also hunting for smaller game (Rickard 64).

Women were of inevitable importance also because of their extended knowledge of food processing. It was them who knew what kind of meat requires cooking and for how long, just as

they were the ones who knew the special and complex ways of processing the different types of plant-based food required before they became edible. Aborigines had a notable variety of food which not only made their survival on their continent easy, but also provided sufficient nutrition and an overall healthy diet for them, a fact which is in shocking contrast with the great account of starvation, and even deaths by starvation, among settlers (Rickard 64).

Women had a significant impact on the population and diversity of their tribes. Their knowledge of the flora of the continent did not only consist of knowing edibility and processing specifics: Aboriginal women also knew which plants triggered spontaneous abortion, with which they were able to apply "reliable and safe means of birth control" (Clarke, *The History* 12). This was an important factor in the survival of the tribe: too many children in need of nursing would have meant too many female hands not involved in collecting the necessary amount of food supplies. As a mother was only able to care for one child at a time and at the same time maintain her daily tasks as a member of her tribe, Aboriginal women kept their children on the breast for years to increase the time between births (Clarke, *The History* 12). A temporary (via becoming a mother) or permanent (via marrying outside the clan) loss of a female member bore a great risk for the short and long-term future of the tribe. "Women were so vital to survival" (Clarke, *The History* 13) that while direct confrontation between Aboriginal tribes was uncommon, when it did occur, one of the most common reasons were raids for women (Clarke, *The History* 13).

Rickard notes that "many of the creative spirits of the Dreaming are female" (65), while Edwards raises awareness that Aboriginal people tend to refer to the land as Mother, showing the view that spirit beings responsible for the creation of the land as it is, have often entered the role of the mother, not that of the father (17). Therefore women, through their ability to give birth to completely new beings, are more closely linked with the Ancestral Beings (Edwards 17). With these taken into consideration, it is no wonder how the theme of strong women is omnipresent in plays dealing with aboriginality, and thus also in those of Jack Davis.

5.3 Non-fictional influence for the Aboriginal woman figure in the works of Jack Davis

Besides the aforementioned historical importance of Aboriginal women, the most prominent role model for the character of the strong woman and mother figure for Jack Davis must have been his own mother, Alice. In his autobiographical work, *A Boy's Life*, Davis notes several characteristics of his mother that represent her as a strong and independent person. She "displayed a special kind of courage, and self-sacrificing guts" (Gilbert 53). As a mother of eleven children, one needs to be strong both in her will and also physically to maintain some level of order in the house. Both of these are evidenced by Davis in the novel via describing numerous (insignificant or major) incidents such as the mother driving or shooting menacing snakes away from around the house, or mentioning a shooting contest in which the mother was brave enough to challenge her husband in such a manly sport. Davis describes his mother as a good shoot, as well as a good storyteller – both of these characteristics lift the mother up to an almost similar quality as that of the father. Besides physical strength, Alice was also emotionally strong, at times like the passing of her eldest daughter, even stronger than her husband. Davis notes how the mother remained strong also upon the passing of her husband, realising the importance of maintaining a level of emotional comfort within the family, and also that she must remain strong and perspicacious to be able to maintain feeding her family of nine mouths without a money earner. She was ready to take compromises like accepting government native rations, something the family has rejected up until this point, as they were strong enough to cope without such means of external help (Davis, *A Boy's* 140). While on one hand the mother might have felt weak and disloyal to her own rules, this sacrificing of personal principles for the sake of the family was indeed a decision showing strength rather than weakness. The situation must have left a significant impression on Davis: making painful yet strong decisions for the sake of a greater cause later became a reappearing theme in his fictional works, and these decisions were usually ones the women were to make.

5.4 Aboriginal women in the fictional works of Jack Davis

5.4.1 The urban Aboriginal heroine – post 1950

Rosie, the wife of Alec Yorlah of the modern (meaning 1979) scenes of *Kullark*, is the first strong female protagonist created by Davis to appear. Already on the very first page of Act One, Scene One, the reader is confronted with a woman who is not afraid to oppose her grumpy and hungover husband to defend both her own rights and those of others. Rosie treats her husband almost as if she was his older sister, or, at times, his mother: she punishes Alec for his hangover by turning the headache-inducing radio back on, she banters him about the hangover causing him to find the radio's sound unbearable, and concludes that the husband is destined to go to hell based on his attitude towards the priest who held the speech at the funeral the family attended the day before. However, before the reader could pass judgment on Rosie for being a strong but uncaring woman, they are quickly offered a glimpse of her less sarcastic side, through the pages of Scene One and Scene Three of the first Act: she always has a positive, defending comment about everyone, and she always finds a good reason for people's behaviour, even when their acts initially seem negative or inaccurate. She is depicted as a preacher or teacher-type person, knowing and often reciting the morals, and punishing, or at least verbally scolding anyone (though mainly her husband) who behaves ill-mannered. Rosie is admittedly the head of the house. The family hierarchy is well-illustrated in the extract below from Act One Scene Three, where Alec and Rosie are arguing about that their son, Jamie, studying in a different city, did not manage to arrive in time for the funeral of a relative, and the discussion quickly advances to a moral and racial argument:

> ALEC: Pity Jamie couldn't get down for the funeral . . .
>
> ROSIE: Anyway, I've got everything ready for 'im when 'e gets down.
>
> ALEC: Yeah, you went to a lot of trouble, borrowin' that bed an' mattress orf that flamin' do-gooder Lyn what's-'er-name.

ROSIE: Here you go again. Any *Wetjala* does you a favour you call 'em a do-gooder . . . [Jamie]'ll be down today, you'll see.

ALEC: That'll be great, seeing that we buried the old fella yesterday.

ROSIE: It ain't easy for him being a student in Perth, workin', an' you gotta remember that . . . Well, at least 'e's gettin' a chance.

ALEC: Sure 'e's gettin' a chance, gunna be a schoolteacher. So what? Ain't gunna do me much good . . . 'e'll finish up marryin' some *Wetjala yok*, 'ave blue eyed kids and 'e won't want nothin' to do with us.

ROSIE: 'E can please himself who 'e marries . . .

ALEC: I don't want 'im marryin' no *Wetjala yok*.

ROSIE: You're just plain bloody racist.

ALEC: No I'm not, but 'e's a *Nyoongah* like you and me, and 'e should marry a *Nyoongah*.

ROSIE: What about your sister Mary? She's married to a *Wetjala*.

ALEC: Aw, that's different. Ol' Bill, 'e's all right.

ROSIE: Yeah, specially when 'e brings you a flagon around now an' again . . .

ALEC: You know, in the twenty-five years we been together I never won an argument yet.

ROSIE: And if you drink that you won't win this one either. (Davis, *Kullark* 16-17)

The above excerpt from the argument clearly illustrates the personalities of the two main characters, as well as reveals the leading position of Rosie. Her fast, clear reasoning has never failed her so far when it came to arguments between her and her husband. However, it also shows that she does not only use her reasoning as a weapon against her husband during arguments, but also to show the positive side of every situation, and the logic behind the behaviour of people. Rosie is clearly a modern Aborigine in the sense that she is an open-minded, strong person who does not let herself be conquered or swept aside by ill-disposed or racist thoughts. She is a good, enlightened leader, a magnificent female figure, especially

considering the striking contrast with her narrow-minded, racist husband who fears to take ownership to support the world in going forward towards a better tomorrow and fails to grasp the reasoning behind an action. On the other hand, as noted already, while Rosie criticises Alec in situations like the above, she is also ready to protect her husband when that is what the situation requires, for instance, when their son, Jamie, talks disdainfully about him upon reading activist writings in a book:

> ROSIE: You don't 'ave to read books to know about things like that. Somethin' just like that 'appened to your father.
>
> JAMIE: Yeah, but the trouble with Pop and his generation is they got no guts. If a *Wetjala* said 'jump', they all jumped.
>
> ROSIE: They 'ad to jump. If not they went to gaol. Anyway, I don't want you talkin' about your father like that. 'E's respected in this town, 'e's in the dart club; and another thing, 'e don't owe nobody nothin'. (Davis, *Kullark* 34)

In many situations, Rosie acts like a teacher, or a mother, even with those who are not her children: she disciplines her husband and son when they are about to fight each other. She also understands that alcoholism, a serious issue often cited with Aborigines, is also present in their house, and tries her best to prevent her husband and son from excessive drinking to prevent the risks it poses (monetary issues and mental trouble). Her 'alpha' status is well-illustrated when in Act Two – Scene Four she dares to go as far as pouring a glass of wine down the sink to prevent her husband and son from drinking it despite previously requesting them not to. Alec, the husband warns her that he would hit her if she was a man, but – well-known to Rosie – he does not pose real physical threat to her. Milly in *No Sugar* is in a similar position of power as Rosie in *Kullark*, and at one point she even uses the same tactic to show her power in front of her drunkard husband and brother and transmit the message to them that the reason why they were about to start a fight, the reason for the presence of aggression in the house, is alcohol (Davis,

No Sugar 30). In a short story by Davis, *White Fantasy – Black Fact* (published in Paperbark), Molly, the mother of the Aboriginal family is also brave enough to voice her disgust toward the unfortunately omnipresent matter of drinking issues among their people: after the family is declined to board the bus to the city, she scolds her father and declares that if her baby misses her hospital appointment that will be the fault of the father not having given up drinking despite her telling him to, and also criticises the visibly wretched state of the father, caused by alcoholism, which was most likely the main reason why the family was not allowed on the bus (Davis, *Paperbark* 108-9).

Dolly Wallitch of *The Dreamers* is another example for the very strong, dominant female Aboriginal character in an urban setting. As stated by Saunders in the introduction of *Plays from Black Australia*, she "is a wonderful Jack Davis heroine. She will make sure that Meena and Shane finish school, money or no money" (ix). Just like Rosie in *Kullark*, Dolly is the real head of the family, not her husband or any other male member in the house. She is depicted as an active, positively bossy woman already during her very first appearance in the very first act of the play. As Webby points it out, Dolly is shown as the active member in the family who is preparing bathing water and breakfast for their two youngest children who are getting ready for school, and at the same time also making tea for her husband, while the grown-up men of the family just sit around 'lethargically' (68). Dolly is the engine who moves the family, and also the only family member who seems to be concerned about their wretched situation. She collects the regular unemployment money from the grown up men because she is the only person in the house who is capable of handling it wisely. When she suggests her husband should apply for a job so that they could have "a decent place to live in (Davis, *Kullark* 76), her effort is answered by a passive and powerless husband, accompanied by a similar-behaved uncle to prove him such a behavioural pattern is normal. For a reader unfamiliar with the relationships the whole scene could easily be interpreted as a mother arguing with her four children of varied age on a weekday

morning – while in reality only two children are getting ready for school, the other two participants are grown up men, both of whom – according to the dialogue – are at home, unemployed, and not showing any interest in changing this situation. The motherly figure of Dolly is dominant also whenever she is around Worru, and the scenes in which she takes care of Worru make Worru seem like a child. She takes care of the old Uncle as if he was completely unable to do so on his own (and in her presence Worru does behave likewise, however, scenes in which she is not around prove otherwise), and when he does not behave she scolds him. Given the old age of the Uncle and that he has just been released from hospital this may be reasonable and understandable, but the continuous need of disciplining the other grown-up men of the family becomes increasingly ridiculous as time passes. It suggests, again, that Dolly shares the house with young rascal boys instead of fathers and grown up men.

It is not only inside the house where Dolly is the only active adult in the family: she goes alone to the hospital to bring Uncle Worru home, after a futile attempt at convincing Uncle Eli to come along. Dolly is also not afraid to voice her criticism at her relatives and husband – in this case, for instance, she concludes the discussion by stating she will go to the hospital on her own, and pointing out that he and her husband are clearly related in their lazy nature (Davis, *Kullark* 77). Not much later in the scene her young adult son, Peter arrives at the house, and in a glimpse the reader realises that if the above demonstrated attitude can be inherited, his relation to his father and the uncle is also crystal clear: Peter also refuses to accompany Dolly to the hospital with a rather absurd excuse:

> DOLLY: (…) If you wanta pick anythin' you can come down with me an' pick up Uncle Worru.
>
> PETER: Aw, Mum, I'm feeling a bit tired. Those fellas [relatives Peter – allegedly – visited and spent the night at their house] kept me awake all night talkin' an' playin' cards. Gawd,

they're a rowdy lot.

DOLLY: If you'd come home, you'd a gotta decent sleep. (Davis, *Kullark* 78)

As shown, while she is constantly left alone with the real issues of her family, Dolly is strong and stands her ground firmly, in addition, she is not shy to criticise the lazy men, and in this she is very much like Rosie of *Kullark*. However, these women also share a bitter fate: while they stand their ground and remain strong, in the end they both fail to accomplish their aim of keeping the family together and 'clean': where Rosie in *Kullark* does her best to show *Wetjalas* that her son is at least "as good as theirs, even better" (Davis, *Kullark* 44), her efforts fail when Jamie ends up in prison on the first night he spends back in his hometown. And as for Dolly, not only does she go to the hospital alone in the end, it is also revealed that while she was away, the men, who, in return for not offering help in bringing home the hospitalized relative, were ordered to prepare lunch for the children, buy meat for dinner, and clean the house, have spent the money and cleaning time on getting drunk instead. As a result, the two youngest children who came home for lunch during their schoolday were not able to have a proper lunch and had to settle for a single slice of pie – for the two to share – for this purpose. The pie was bought with leftover coins received mostly from Uncle Worru, freshly back from the hospital – who, for that matter, is also getting drunk again already hours after receiving his hospital discharge summary. When Dolly arrives at home and discovers that the men have spent the food money on grog she becomes furious and physically threatens Roy, her husband, who flees from the house.

The same inevitable faith and failed hopes are foreshadowed for Dolly in a different context, with relation to her daughter, Meena, and this also brings in another type of woman character into the davisian world. The beginning of *The Dreamers* introduces Meena, the daughter of the Wallitch family, as a child who is smart and eager-to-study. She is mockingly called *little wetjala* by the rest of the family as a result of her extended knowledge of, and visible interest in history and cultural studies. Dolly is proud of her daughter and dreams of her continuing her

studies so that she can acquire a decent job – a hope which would mean a next step towards integration and a truly equal future. Until this point all women represented in the plays of Davis were housewives. Via hoping for a different future for her daughter, Dolly demonstrates an enlightened way of thinking also in this area. However, her smart and diligent girl is starting to stay out and come home late at night as she grows, gradually losing interest in her studies, and by Act Two – Scene One, she even expresses her interest in leaving school. In *Barungin*, a play that offers a continuation to *The Dreamers*, and in which Meena is the main female character, it is clearly visible that she did not live up to the expectations of her mother (renamed Granny Doll to suit the new family setup) who is still strong-willed and dominant (in one scene of *Barungin* she is shown in her familiar role, preparing breakfast and nagging the children – the grandchildren and also her own, the mother, Meena – to get up and get ready for church), but by this time Dolly is only an aging side-character who has little influence on the life of the family, or impact in serious decisions. Not only is Meena without a decent job (or a job, for that matter), she is also involved with the same type of shady men who need to be ordered around – however, this role is less suitable for her as it was for her mother, and she visibly fails to excel in it. Without a strong leader, a position which was possessed by Rosie in the Yorlah and Dolly in the Wallitch family, the family in *Barungin* is falling apart, and while Dolly is still there, she has by now lost the strength to be either the head of the pack, or to serve as a sole model for her daughter. Meena is also starting to possess characteristics that were earlier only reserved for the male members of the family: she no longer finds the family bonds that important, which is well-illustrated by the fact that while her husband is in prison, she is having an affair with a friend of the family. Furthermore, Arnie, the husband is not the man Meena started dating at the end of *The Dreamers*, and, based on that both of the children call the husband Uncle Arnie, he is not the father of the children either. However, always optimistic as Jack Davis is, it is important to note that a positive future is foreshadowed by the daughter of Meena: Little Doll. Her symbolic name already implies her connection to her once powerful grandmother, Dolly, and based on what the reader learns

about the young girl, she resembles young Meena in that she shows interest in her Aboriginal roots, and is looked upon by the family because of a skill that she possesses: she excels in sports, namely swimming, and she qualifies to enter a county swimming competition. In the end the plot of Barungin is drawn to another topic and the plotline of Little Doll remains unfinished, but the reader is left with the hope that she may be strong enough not only to fight her racist mates in the swimming team and win the competition, but also to restore harmony in her future urban Aboriginal family.

5.4.2 The Aboriginal heroine of pre-1950

It is important to note that the heroine woman in the dramas of Jack Davis is not a character restricted to urban Aboriginal households of modern times, as the reader gets to see in *No Sugar*, a play which takes place in the late 1920s–early 1930s and tells the story of an Aboriginal family living in Northam, and later getting transferred to the Moore River native settlement. All Aboriginal women of *No Sugar* possess the important characteristics of the Jack Davis heroine in that they are brave, influential, and serve as an important and dominant part in the family. Gran Munday, and her sister-in-law, Milly Millimurra are the first two female characters the reader is introduced to, and already at the beginning of the play they are portrayed as the two members who form the core of the extended family. They are actively engaged in washing while the rest of the family around them is resting, reading the newspaper or playing. These two ladies together both share the characteristics of Rosie and Dolly: Gran has the power to order the other family members around, while Milly is not afraid to direct sarcastic comments towards her brother and her husband when the men complain about the behaviour of Aborigines on the Australian centenary celebrations. It is also Gran and Milly who collect the weekly Aboriginal rations from the Northam Police Station, and they are not shy to voice their dissatisfaction over the reduced contents of the rations. They are both brave to oppose the

Sergeant and use clear reasoning to prove the necessity of items like bicarbonate and soap that are no longer provided to them. When the Sergeant states they could collect or buy these instead, they immediately give clear reasons for why the recommendation is not functioning: the settlers have cut down the trees in the area, leaving no flora suitable for substituting bicarbonate in damper, and men are not employed under conditions similar to those of whites, seldom receiving actual money in return for their efforts, and thus buying soap for money earned with work is not an existing option (Davis, *No Sugar* 22-23). Milly continues to be herself even outside the family, and is not afraid to direct scoffing comments also towards the Sergeant when she feels there is room for them. Gran also reveals her vast knowledge and strength when at the end of the play it is her who helps her daughter-in-law give birth to her grandson – as she had already done several times in the past – and by the time Matron Neal arrives at the hut there is no need for her further assistance in the deliverance, as a healthy baby is already born, and the mother is also healthy.

In Moore River, another brave young female character is introduced to the story: Mary Dargurru. Mary meets the Millimurra children when the latter arrive in the settlement and go swimming and to collect some water from a nearby clearing. Mary and Joe, the eldest Millimurra boy, show immediate interest in each other, and pledge to meet again. They start dating secretly, and Mary shows her bravery by sneaking out of her compound after closing hours for these secret dates, and later also by agreeing to run away with Joe to escape having to work in the hospital and be the subject of the ulterior motives of Mr Neal. Mary is determined to defend herself, as well as her future family: she is ready to oppose Superintendent Neal and suffer physical pain to protect her future family, and is waiting eagerly for Joe to be released from prison, so they and their baby can start a new life. Her behaviour guarantees her to be a good mother and a strong-willed head of her family-to-be.

6. The importance of family in Aboriginal society

6.1 Introduction

Aboriginal culture is, and has always been strongly dependant on the groups its people form. The community, and especially the extended family, has always been very important in it, both technically and culturally. Aborigines for tens of thousands of years formed and stayed in strongly-bonded groups with assigned hierarchies, and these have been transferred into their urban lives and remain to be of great importance up until today. The following section of this paper is intended to discuss the importance of family in Aboriginal society, and the representation of this phenomenon in the plays of Jack Davis.

6.2 A brief historical background to Aboriginal tribal and family hierarchy

Several aspects of family setup, relations and assigned rules have already been covered in the previous chapter elaborating on the importance of women in Aboriginal society. Before acquiring an urban lifestyle Aboriginal people were living in groups or bands, usually consisting of approximately fifty people. A complex web of structures governed the relationships within these groups, and relations like marriage were governed by strict and elaborate rules. Rickard states that "tribe" is not an appropriate word to describe these Aboriginal communities due to the different hierarchical rules found in these groups compared to groups that are generally called a tribe: for instance, Aboriginal groups were able to function effectively without a chieftain or similar leadership as a result of the rules specifically assigned to each member (Rickard 64-65).

The family formed the base unit of these bands. In the Aboriginal context this term is used in an extended way: family not only consists of man, wife and children, but also of other direct relations like grandparents, uncles, nephews and similarly close other relations. These people all grouped into bands for a more optimal efficiency in collecting daily food necessities.

Separate tasks were traditionally assigned to male and female members of the family: men were responsible for hunting, and women were mainly collecting food and taking care of young members of the family. This setup was transferred also into an urban setting in which men earned money with labour while women stayed at home and were responsible for taking care of the family, as well as handled the majority of tasks in and around the house. This setup remained common even in the second half of the twentieth century: when women in general were already actively involved with full-time work, and Aboriginal women were already allowed to work, Aboriginal families usually still consisted of one worker – the father – and a housewife taking care of the house and the children, even when the latter were already of school age and thus did not require extensive nursing.

Clarke notes an important feature of the Aboriginal family, which has a strong presence also in the works of Jack Davis, that "in traditional Aboriginal society no-one was ever alone" (*Australia* 6). This was true both technically and materially: Aboriginal households were always buzzing due to the number of people present, and family relationships did not only hold a vague and symbolical meaning, but actually meant a strong and effective connection, with a high level of dependence and trust involved. Aborigines existed in wide and complicated relationships, yet due to the aforementioned strong bonds they were fully aware that in times of need they could always depend even on their extended family.

6.3 The importance of family in the autobiographical and fictional works of Jack Davis

A Boy's Life, the autobiographical novel of Jack Davis depicts, and at times even explicitly mentions the importance of the closeness of the family. The author was the fourth child of Alice and Bill Davis, and had ten siblings. This number was not the result of a high death rate: only one older sister died during their childhood, already in her teens, due to pneumonia. While the Davis family operated based on the above described Aboriginal family rules, it also resembled

families of white Australians of those times: children were all in their actual family, none removed, so it was possible for them to experience what the true closeness of their own family meant. As the father, Bill was treated similarly to white workers and received a regular and sufficient income, the family did not have to depend financially on their extended relations or on other external ways of support. Alcohol issues were completely absent from the family, the children lived in strong bonds both with their parents and one another. They remained close even in their adulthood, and Dorothy, one of the sisters of Davis, even participated in some plays of his brother: she played Gran in *No Sugar* and Granny Doll in *Barungin*.

Davis did realise though, that his own family life did not represent the conditions of those of the Aboriginal majority, and thus his plays, while they do emphasise the importance of family, do not represent conditions taken from his own life. The more realistic experiences that later became the model for the basic family setup, roles and relations depicted in his plays came from the months Davis has spent in the Moore River Native Settlement, and from the years when he worked as a stocksman in areas where Aborigines still lived under less urban conditions. Davis in an interview once stated that he was sometimes questioned why he did not depict the life of Aborigines in a more positive way. He found it important to differentiate between the usual lives white and Aboriginal families lead, and emphasised that some elements of Aboriginal family lives that may seem negative for the white reader are actually only unusual or uncommon in a white family. These two cultures lead different family lives, and only because Aborigines are moved into a house they will not be willing to, nor should they be required to give up these cultural standards and start living "the white way" (Davis, *The Dreamers* 47).

Despite the above mentioned differences, there were some features the life of the Davis family and the average Aboriginal families Davis encountered in the settlements had in common: the aforementioned fact of never being alone is among them. This theme later became the standard also in his plays: all of the families depicted in them are relatively large. What Davis did

not experience as a child but encountered only in the settlements was the phenomenon of extended families living under the same roof, however, realising that this is also an important factor in the everyday Aboriginal family, he portrayed most of the families in his plays this way: the Wallitch family of *The Dreamers* shares their home with a cousin and an uncle; the Millimurras of *No Sugar* live together with the brother and the mother of the wife, Milly, and the family of Meena in *Barungin* also includes her mother and two brothers. Additional relatives, as well as friends visit these crowded homes frequently, staying for several days, concluding in even busier days, but also in a true sense of togetherness and never being alone. These extended relations are considered to be equal members of the family, and it is natural for the wives leading the families to also cook for and look after them. Similarly, in case these relatives have an income (either through work or Social Service cheques) they use that money on collective family expenses, and they are also often seen giving or lending money to one another. Extended families not living under the same roof also help one another out: in *Barungin*, for instance, Uncle Robert is mentioned to have a kangaroo for the family of Meena. While the origins of the described, extended family setup had its practical historical roots in the near-nature life, Aborigines continued to lead a similarly crowded family life even in an urban setting, and they also found it important to maintain contact with relatives who do not live with or close to them. This theme is depicted in *The Dreamers* when Dolly sends a song via a radio song request programme to an aunt and her family. Her eldest son, Peter is shown as having just returned from a visit to another aunt and her family – where he even received money to buy his bus ticket for the trip back home. A few months later in the play, when Dolly visits Peter who is imprisoned, she is staying at the family of yet another aunt, and is brought back by car by Uncle Robert, who, in return, also stays for several days with the family. Such visits and favours are depicted as being rather common, and a part of the everyday life of Aboriginal families. It is in general also common to borrow money or request some food even from far relations. The characters are always certain

that they can depend on these relatives and will be helped out, and they indeed always are. The strong bonds described earlier, even with far relations, might be the main reason for this.

Occasions when the extended family is given a chance to meet up are cherished, even if the cause of the family gathering is not a joyous one. A typical occasion like this is a funeral of a relative. Funerals, as also noted by Mudrooroo Narogin in *Black Reality*, the foreword of *Barungin*, are important family happenings because in the urbanised world where relatives are scattered over the continent, occasions when most members of the extended family can reunite are very scarce and are thus cherished, because these have the power to maintain and strengthen bonds further (*Barungin* viii). A funeral takes place in both *Barungin* and *Kullark,* in both plays right in the very first act, noting the importance of this occasion. They are especially important as time progresses, as the urban settings noticeably take their course and slowly but firmly start disassembling families: the family of *Barungin* is visibly less unified than the one in *The Dreamers*.

Another interesting theme in the plays of Davis is the recurrence of certain types of roles in the represented Aboriginal families. Reading through the plays of Jack Davis, a feeling of *déjà vu* may occasionally overcome the reader upon the actions of certain characters: their behavioural patterns resemble those of other characters of other plays. This is not caused by a lack of creativity of the writer, but is a deliberate act showing how in the Aboriginal family setup certain members were assigned certain rules, and how the remnants of these rules can still be found in modern Aboriginal families living under urban settings. Hodge notes in *The Artist as Hunter*, a foreword to *Barungin*, that, for instance, there are certain characteristics and roles in the family of Meena that strongly resemble some found in *The Dreamers*. Even though *Barungin* takes place at least fifteen years after where *The Dreamers* has ended, the basic setup of the family is the same, and "new people [are] filling in new versions of old roles" – for instance, Arnie of *Barungin* resembles Roy of *The Dreamers*, and Peegun resembles Eli (Davis, *Barungin* xiv). However, while still present, these rules are gradually fading: Dolly, for instance, was more powerful in *The*

Dreamers than she is in *Barungin*, and her effective role as the actual head of the family was not transferred to the main female character of *Barungin*, Meena. She is already less connected to these old rules, and thus cannot become what Dolly once was. Granny Doll however, does become Worru in the sense of regaining a closer relation to her ancestry upon growing old, and similarly to Worru, she is also feeling unwell because of being torn from this old culture and history. Just like Worru did, Granny Doll recites family stories as well as Aboriginal legends – like that of *Wahrdung and Koohlbahrdi*, also told in *The Dreamers* - to the family, and she explains the meaning of *Nyoongah* words to them, including that of the title word, *barungin*, to smell the wind, a skill that is no longer possessed by Aborigines, as it has been extinguished by urban life. The life of Aborigines changes, and they must adapt to new ways of living and learn new skills in order to survive.

7. Relation to white man and his way of life

7.1 Introduction

Jack Davis was never afraid to admit and accept the fact that his ancestry was not exclusively Aboriginal: through his father he was of part-Sikh descent, and while according to John Leonard, editor of Contemporary Australian Poetry, he was the other part-Irish (19), Davis himself in the Epilogue of his autobiographical book *A Boy's Life* claims that his maternal grandfather was a Scotsman (144). This diverse ancestry may also bear the roots of the peaceful and accepting tone with which Davis writes about the differences between the races inhabiting Australia, and – while the unpleasant facts are also mentioned – these may also be what help Davis maintain his positive way of thinking, and his belief in a better future. The following chapter will give an overview of the relationship between white man and the Aborigines both from a historical point of view, as well as by elaborating on how it is represented in the works of Jack Davis.

7.2 The beginning of white presence, and the worsening of relations

When the first European settlers arrived in Australia, Aborigines believed them to be the *jungara*, the souls of their own dead relatives returning from the traditional island where souls were believed to live on after death. This belief was based on an association caused by how ghostly white the skin of the settlers was compared to the black skin of the Aborigines (Berndt xv; Davis, *Kullark* 142). They thought the visit of the dead to be temporary, and were surprised to see they have forgotten their names, language, laws, and have eventually started to kill the remaining living. This is revoked by Yagan in Act One – Scene Two of *Kullark*, in a chant he performs about the creation of Earth, his land, his nation, and their life up until the white man came.

Upon the very first encounters the settlers were afraid of Aborigines. Healy notes that the terror was so great that there are stories of ridiculous encounters where white men were startled by trees mistaken for Aborigines (22). Such incidents aside, the initial encounters were friendly, and the relationship harmonious. As also noted in *Kullark*, in the beginning it was even forbidden for the settlers to act "in a fraudulent, cruel or felonious manner towards the Aboriginal race", and anyone who opposed this was to face serious punishment (Davis, *Kullark* 19). The two groups of people were fascinated by one another and showed mutual interest, and *Nyoongar* leaders like Yagan were even looked upon (Healy 23). This though, was mainly because the settlers considered themselves to be inferior and were fascinated by Aborigines showing even the slightest signs of intelligence. Davis illustrated this well in the scenes of *Kullark* where Yagan learned English words from Will and Alice. The letter Alice sends home to Britain lacks any ulterior motive, yet still clearly illustrates her subjective relative status compared to that of Yagan:

> "I am sure Meg would never believe me if I told her there is a native here who actually appears to be intelligent and who has already learned several words of English" (Davis, *Kullark* 22).

Since in Aboriginal society food was generally shared and the flora and fauna belonged to everyone, Aborigines were unable to understand the concept of stealing, and occasionally swiped some sheep from the settlers (Rickard 70). Initially they were not considered to be a serious threat and such events did not trigger punishment or aggression. However, with the arrival of the settlers, food supplies that were previously sufficient for Aborigines quickly became scarce, and aggressive confrontation over these resources soon became correspondingly common. Settlers were more adequately armed, and thus by the middle of the 19th century Aborigines were at loss in the battle for their own land. While some relationships remained friendly, and trades of clothing and food continued, the records of these are considerably less compared to those of aggressive confrontation between the two groups.

Prostitution was an existing phenomenon from the beginning of British settlement, and by the second half of the 19th century a significant mixed race population emerged. With the pronounced aim of civilising these "half-British" individuals, and the less advertised thought of eventually breeding Aborigines out, settlers have started to remove half-caste children from their Aboriginal parents and families (Berndt xvii). Fink notes that discrimination and mistreatment became official in the beginning of the twentieth century, when the Native Administration Act "enforced minority status on the aborigines, by controlling and preventing their intermarriage with white persons, by segregating them from town areas" (qtd. in Healy 34), and from the 1920s by transferring Aborigines to government Settlements which some were never allowed to leave again.

7.3 Eighteenth to early twentieth century relations in the plays of Jack Davis

The Swan River scenes of *Kullark* illustrate the earliest encounters between the white settlers and *Nyoongar* Aborigines. Historical characters from the early 1800s, like Yagan and Captain James Stirling, the founder of the Swan River Colony, appear in these scenes and re-enact some of the previously noted events. These scenes are rather objective and hold less symbolical meaning compared to those that depict later stages of history. It is important to note however, that while these scenes show how the initially friendly encounters later became battles for one side and massacres for the other, the davisian optimism is present also in them: the settlers, Will and Alice remain friendly towards Yagan even in times when trading and interacting with the Aborigines becomes prohibited for settlers. They continue to call Yagan their friend, and attempt to make him understand why his actions of stealing and revenge are of fatal consequences in the eyes of the white community.

The same optimism can be seen in *No Sugar*, taking place a decade later, in the times when Aborigines were discriminated to the point where they were non-citizens with almost no

human rights, and when significant amounts of the Aboriginal population were transferred to settlements. Two types of white characters are represented in this play: the officers at government reserves and settlements, representing the previously described discriminating mentality (which is mirroring the general historical approach of those years), and Frank, the unemployed white farmer, representing the davisian theme of hope for a better and equal future. Frank, roaming the area during the depression years in search of work in order to be able to feed his family left in Perth, develops a friendly relationship with the Millimurra family, and, despite knowing it is prohibited to mingle with the Aborigines, he accepts their invitation and shares their food. Jimmy, a character who until now has not spoken a single positive word about white men, behaves in a friendly manner towards Frank, at one point even calling him a friend in front of the family, while also warning Frank about that he will be in trouble if he is seen together with the Aborigines. However, Jimmy is also not shy to highlight the differences between their kind: he complains he is not allowed to do the same things Frank can do, for instance, he is not allowed to visit towns or walk down the streets after sundown (Davis, *No Sugar* 28). Later, when Frank is sentenced for providing alcohol to the Aborigines, he does not deny this act, but offers an explanation that reflects on how amicably he looks at these people: he states to the court that Jimmy and his family were very kind and helpful towards him in his time of need. The indifferent court still sentences Frank, who has no previous record, to six weeks imprisonment with hard labour (Davis, *No Sugar* 34-35).

Sister Eileen of *No Sugar* is another good example of the davisian heroine, and also of how a real soldier of God should behave: she is caring and friendly towards all, regardless of colour – she helps the Aborigines, she despises violence and reports it to Superintendent Neal, she lends books to Aborigines to encourage them to read, and she almost gets herself into trouble because of standing up for the rights of the natives (Davis, *No Sugar* 95-96). These positive characters must at least partially be derived from the good background experience Davis

had with white people. He notes in the foreword of his book of poetry, *The First-Born and Other Poems*, that he and his family were practically treated as whites during his childhood years. He even recalls not understanding or caring for the rare occurrence when neighbours called him and his brother names referring to their skin colour. He notes: „Race relations never worried us. That was something that only came upon me after I had left school and after I had left home" (Davis, *The First* xi). These experiences may have convinced Davis about the importance of portraying white characters like the above: characters who are set as examples to show that violence and oppression are not the right way for a mutual peaceful future.

7.4 Aborigines in a white urban setting in the works of Jack Davis

The Dreamers, *Barungin*, and certain scenes of *Kullark* all depict Aborigines in an urban setting. This state of separation from a constant connection to nature is alien to the traditional Aboriginal way of life, and is thus a considerable problem source for Aborigines living under initially white urban circumstances. The main problem here is the clash between the constant longing for the old way of life, and the awareness of the impossibility of going back to that ideal state at this point. As it is worded in the anthology *Plays from Black Australia*: "just as you can't go back to a traditional way of life, nor can you live a totally European way . . . the way ahead is to try and keep what's good of the past" (*Saunders* viii). Urban Aborigines are constantly fighting with the powerful influence of the European way of life and culture, and a significant part of the dilemma is caused by that while they long for their previous way of living, at the same time several elements of the urban lifestyle are convenient and appealing to them. However, similarly to how they are unable to completely go back to their past way of life, it also is impossible for them to switch to the European way of life completely, and even if it would be an option, society would still not consider them to be equal to whites.

Kullark includes numerous references to how strongly the British way of life has crept into the daily lives of the Aborigines. On the very first page Alec asks his wife about the breakfast, and Rosie replies "Well it ain't 'am and eggs" (Davis, *Kullark* 8). The classical and basic English breakfast is depicted as a desired yet inaccessible element for the Yorlah family. Alec and Rosie are leading an urban life that is already more white than Aboriginal (some of their relatives still live in tents, whereas they rent a house) yet they still clearly identify themselves as Aborigines. These scenes also share some main concerns about their visibly different appearance and its possible consequences: Aboriginal protests are common in the area, and Rosie is afraid they are at risk of abrogation of their tenancy only because their skin is also coloured. As she overtly phrases the main issue of the times between white Australians and Aborigines: "*Wetjalas* look at us as bein' different and we can't get away with things the way they do" (Davis, *Kullark* 10). Approximately 15 years later, Peegun shares painfully similar concerns in *Barungin*: he states that Aborigines are ten times more likely to end up in prison than white men (Davis, *Barungin* 12), and Shane points out that the high unemployment ratio of Aborigines is caused by that non-Aboriginal people have considerably better chances at getting jobs (Davis, *Barungin* 12). Rosie of *Kullark* still does not believe all white men are evil though, and she despises of the comments her husband, Alec states about disapproving of the thought of his son marrying a white girl, as since he is a *Nyoongarah*, he should marry a *Nyoongar* girl (Davis, *Kullark* 16). Rosie finds this reasoning incorrect especially because Alec does not seem to have an issue with his own sister being married to a white husband. The sister is a good example for an Aboriginal character being torn between two cultures: both Rosie and Alec find her behaviour 'more white' as a result of her white husband, however, she cannot cut herself off completely from her roots or her skin colour. As Rosie points out, "Just because she's married white she tries to think white. She'll always be black" (Davis, *Kullark* 17).

While Alec seems to have developed a racist attitude towards white Australians and their way of life by the late 1970s, in the scenes where he is younger and freshly back from World War II he is depicted as a person who is happy to have received citizenship, and he even jokes about that he is now officially white, so he needs to think white. While these comments are likely ironical, he does see the good sides of "being white" as well when he notes he does not want to become a heavy alcohol consumer, and that it will be important for him to ensure proper "white" education for his children (Davis, *Kullark* 59-64). As per where the play ends though, while his son, Jamie is indeed attending university, Alec does not despise excessive alcohol consumption. And while Jamie starts up as enlightened as young Alec did, his radical views and hot temper quickly send him to prison, and he starts to follow the same pattern and road as that of his father.

The Dreamers illustrates well how urban Aborigines are slowly but firmly taking on white habits and ways of living, while at the same time they are starting to lose the culture of their own. The children of Dolly, already part of a next generation, are attending a school where they are educated together with white children, and no longer have the extended knowledge of *Nyoongar* words their mother and old Uncle Worru still possess. When a white schoolmate visits the family and Worru tells him some *Nyoongar* words, the Aboriginal children are later unable to recite and translate these words into English when the white boy asks them to (Davis, *Kullark* 97). But the mother, Dolly is also starting to lose some of her Aboriginality by taking up white habits like phoning up song requests on the radio, to relatives, with a message from the Wallitch family. The song requested to be accompanying the message (*Me and Bobby McGee* by Charlie Pride) is an interesting cultural clash in itself: it is a country song – a genre initially created by and belonging to white Americans – sung by an American black singer (Davis, *Kullark* 98).

The most elaborate example of a person torn between two cultures is Cousin Eli: he thinks ungraciously of both the white and the black, and his lack of trust is underpinned by

actual examples of events taken from his own life. He is aware that he can never turn white, but also knows certain elements of his Aboriginal culture are outdated or no longer suit the circumstances of life in the 1980s. This is illustrated well by his disbelief in Aboriginal healing. When Uncle Worru in his sickness wishes to visit the *Nyoongah* doctor, Roy and Eli argue over whether this is a good idea: while Roy agrees with Worru and believes the old man should try the traditional way of healing, Eli – who is otherwise a racist and does not trust the *wetjala* – believes the *Nyoongah* doctor to be 'bullshit' (Davis, *Kullark* 123), and when Roy states that back in the old days *Nyoongarah* did not visit *wetjala* doctors, Eli concludes that this is the reason why so many of them died. Eli also claims to be Christian, thus to be part of a white cultural phenomenon, and he also voices his disapproval of his own kind by stating that his injuries, stitches, and an ill-working eye have all been caused by his own people. At the same time though, he does not trust *wetjalas* either, and believes them to be a threat for both people and the land:

> "The *Wetjala*'s a lion, he eats. Aw, he eats, he eats everything: land, trees, rivers, forests, even people, 'specially people. I 'member old grandfather Koorop used to say: 'Don't trust the *Wetjala*, he's a real *widartji* [meaning evil spirit]. He'll kill you for sport and eat your brains and kidney fat.'" (Davis, *Kullark* 121).

Eli – together with his nephew Peter – also seems to enjoy ripping *wetjalas* off: on one occasion Peter receives money from a relative to use for bus fare to travel back home, but it is later revealed that he pretends to have lost the money upon boarding the bus, and an old *wetjala* lady helps him out by paying for his ticket (Davis, *Kullark* 89). Likewise, Eli once victoriously describes how a *wetjala* hippy man gave him two dollars when he was begging outside the shopping centre (Davis, *Kullark* 105). It is of symbolical importance that in both of these occasions the men find it important to share that the incident took place between them and a white person.

Another interesting mixture of the two cultures is depicted in *The Dreamers* by teenaged Meena. She is often called *'little wetjala'* or *'miss wetjala'* by her family as a reference to her overall good performance at school, as well as to her extensive knowledge compared to that of other members of the family. She seems to be interested in, and is also good at British geography, and she lectures her brother about British capital cities and how they are spelled, while her brother is depicted as uninterested in the subject. Meena, though, is still tied to her own cultural background too: she recites school lectures about the origins of her people, indoctrinates older family members on racial differences between the Aborigines and the Indians, and later on is depicted passionately writing a homework assignment about Aborigines. She is also interested in the etymology of *Nyoongarah* words, and asks old Worru why, for instance, tea is called *mahngk*, the *Nyoongarah* word initially used for leaf and vegetation.

The nephew of Dolly, Robert, is yet another aspect of Aboriginality and whiteness combined, he is basically what Dolly wants Meena to become: an educated person with a prestigious job, who is also level-headed when it comes to alcohol consumption. All these features make Robert stand out both from the family and from Aborigines of those times. However, he still is very Aboriginal and cares about his people. On one occasion in *Barungin* he gives a speech about Aboriginal deaths in custody, in a rather accusatory tone. He is a true diplomat though, and only uses the speech to open up eyes. He does not think of *wetjalas* in an aggressive manner, and he does not believe *wetjalas* of today should be blamed or punished for the gruesome actions that have taken place in the past. He is the ultimate davisian advocate of peace, and his character, with his optimistic view of a future in which the relation of Aborigines and white men is harmonious again – amidst the abundance of more realistic, doomed and desperate Aboriginal characters – is the essence of the works of Jack Davis in a nutshell:

"MEENA: You can't hurt *wetjalas*, they've got no conscience.

ROBERT: Yes they have. We just gotta help them find it.

PETER: There hasn't been much sign of it in the last two hundred years.

MEENA: And there won't be in the next two hundred.

ROBERT: You're wrong" (Davis, *Barungin* 52).

7.5 The other side of the problem: Aborigines from a white point of view in a short story by Jack Davis

For a long time, white Australians living in big cities – representing the vast majority of the population of the continent – seldom encountered Aborigines who were usually living in the outskirts and in more rural areas. As a result, the serious issues Aborigines were facing were disguised from white eyes, which delayed an initiative of a will to find a resolution. A short story written by Jack Davis, *White Fantasy – Black Fact*, deals exactly with this matter: the plot starts with the description of the situation from the point of view of a white character, and when the story later shifts to revolve around an Aboriginal family, the initial description becomes a strong criticism and an outcry for those who do not see the issues that lie under the surface. The story begins with the description of a bus driver: the reader comes to know a peaceable man who is against violence and cruelty to animals and people. He and his wife are eager to help those in need, and have sent money to missions in Asia where millions of people were starving and living under bad conditions. In addition, "He was glad that he lived in a country that was white, where there was plenty for all, where nobody starved, and everyone was equal" (Davis, *Paperbark* 107). While based on this initial description the bus driver is depicted as a sympathetic man, another attribute suits him – and also his wife – even more: that he is *blind*. It seems ironic that he supports overseas missions helping to improve the miserable living and health conditions of those people, when in his own country Aborigines are struggling to survive and support their families, and in general are living under the exact same conditions as the ones described in Asia.

In addition, Australia during these years was – from the point of view of the whites – indeed white, but if it was white, it could not have been further from being also equal. While for the reader of today, familiar with the status of Aborigines during those years, this may seem negligent or at least naïve, in truth it really is only a matter of the problem having been well-hidden from most white eyes.

The real action in the story starts when an Aboriginal family, after their car has broken down, attempts to board the bus, but is refused by the driver. Upon this, Molly, the Aboriginal mother asks the driver: "Why ain't we allowed [on the bus], we're people ain't we?" (Davis, *Paperbark* 108). People who starve, people who suffer from the lack of funds and food, and as a result suffer from disease – but also people who do not exist in the imaginary white country of the bus driver. Davis draws a strong parallel between the two families to further enhance their disguised equality: both families are in the exact same situation, they have a baby who needs medical assistance. While in the family of the bus diver it is his newborn daughter who is sick, in the Aboriginal family it is their baby in need of a medical check in the hospital of the nearby city. The story later ascends to an even more critical climax when one of the Aboriginal children is bit by a death adder, and despite the desperate requests for help, no car stops to take the family to the city. However, this would not be a real Jack Davis story without an optimistic outcome: a sudden change takes place in the plot when a gang of motorbike riders slows down next to the desperate family. The – based on prejudices thought to be – menacing group offers help without even being asked for it, and both children arrive at the hospital in time to survive the incident. The frightening motorists in black leather, another group of "black-coloured" people who are feared by the whites, turn out to be peaceful fellows. This story is a vision of, and an outcry for a world where all people are really equal, and where men "thought [to be] a pack of devils [turn out to be] all angels on chariots" (Davis, *Paperbark* 112), a delightful protest against differentiation of any kind, not only based on skin colour.

8. Religion and relation to Christianity

8.1 Introduction

When the first settlers arrived in Australia they brought a whole new cultural background along, and Christianity was one of the most influential elements in it. It was significantly different compared to any Aboriginal sense of religion, and the perception of the inferior forms of existence included in the Bible was also completely new to the indigenous people of Australia. This, as well as the fact that the settlers – after some time – have started to actively convert Aborigines into Christians, has resulted in Christianity playing a significant role in the shaping of aboriginality. As a result it also plays an important role in the dramas of Jack Davis. Not in a deeply religious form, but as an omnipresent phenomenon, a part of everyday life, however, aboriginalised. The following chapter will introduce the reader to how Aborigines relate to Christianity, and how this religion affects their aboriginality, through analysing the presence of this theme in the works of Davis.

8.2 A basic background to Aboriginal "religion"

Christianity did not play a significant role during the first encounters between the Aborigines and the settlers from an Aboriginal point of view. Only later, when the connections between these two groups of people were already stronger and more established, have Aboriginal people become more exposed to the religion of the settlers. Rickard points out that even the basic understanding of Christianity must have presented great difficulty to Aborigines, mainly due to their very different sense of understanding of "religion", and the unfamiliarity with such significant hierarchical differences or inferiority similar to the status of biblical characters. Aboriginal societies operated based on significantly different rules, and there was no presence of hierarchy and firm organisation in them. For Aborigines, "religion [lacked] secular organisation. So personalised by culture and experience was The Dreaming that there was no *need* for such

organisation to maintain it" (Rickard 68). While Aborigines do have important spirit-beings in their mythology who define the rules of everyday life, Rickard mentions a major difference in how Aborigines relate to these spirit-beings of their creation history: these beings are not considered to be so notably inferior to the people of the tribes, and, probably also as a result, are not worshipped in a formal sense similar to as how believers of Christian religions relate to God or Jesus (68).

Just as how Aboriginal "religion" lacked significant hierarchical differences and inferiority, the rules which their followers needed to observe were also more loosely defined and were less rigorous. Rickard sums up the essence of this "religion" perfectly:

> "Aboriginal religion was life-oriented. It contained no sense of sin or personal salvation, and death, while it did not destroy the spirit, offered no promise of a heavenly after-life . . . The spirit was, in effect, dispersed. Part of it lingered in the land, always having the potential to haunt the living; but the main energy of the spirit travelled to the land of the dead, losing its individual identity, and awaiting some later re-birth." (68-69)

Untimely deaths were usually suspected to have been caused by the sorcery of other tribes. They were never connected to actions of the spirit-beings, nor did they offer a justification for the passing, something which is so common in Christian religion. The souls of the dead were believed to take a specific route: they first spent some time in a particular species of tree, the *moodgah*, and later they moved to *Watjerup* (Rottnest Island), an island approximately twenty kilometres away from the coast of Perth, on the Indian Ocean.

When Aboriginal settlements were set up and the settlers started to educate the Aborigines, education was naturally very religious. The British believed these people to be incapable of living a fully enlightened, European way of life without being converted into Christians. Missionaries have been employed as teachers, stories told in the Bible became part of

everyday education, and Aborigines found themselves between two cultures also from this aspect, struggling to understand how these stories connect to those of their own. Most of them adapted to – converted to might not be the most sufficient word to describe this act – Christianity and kept it in their everyday lives, but in the end, for most Aborigines, this religion ended up being only a habitual part of life, without a deep underlying meaning or devotion.

8.3 The role of Christianity in the personal life of Jack Davis

While Christianity has a strong presence in the works of Jack Davis, this theme may probably be among the few that were not directly taken from the personal life of the writer. Based on the information available on this topic, while Christianity was present in the life of Davis to some extent, it never appeared with the intensity with which it is represented in the dramas. References, like the family saying Grace before meals, and the mother becoming a member of the Methodist Church upon the family moving to Yarloop, indicate its presence, but based on personal records, and mainly on the autobiographical work *A Boy's Life*, these elements of the religion were rather a routine for the Davis family rather than something with a deeper meaning and a critical impact. Chapter 15 of *A Boy's Life*, describing a memorable situation in which the family constantly keeps bursting into laughter during saying Grace before a meal clearly represents that the act, and the consequences of making fun of it, are not taken seriously (Davis, *A Boy's* 60), and the fact that the relation of Alice Davis to the Methodist Church is never explained in further detail suggests that this membership was also rather a community activity for the mother, and served as a platform for her to find friends in their new hometown, and did not hold a deep religious meaning. In an interview recorded in 1989, Davis admitted that he goes to church, and explained his relationship to Christianity as follows:

> "You cannot argue against Christianity, you cannot argue against God. But you can argue the way in which they portrayed religion . . . I'm not against religion, in fact, I go to

> church myself. What I am against is what the way people, and the way the missionaries treated Aborigines, and used God as an excuse" (Davis, *Facing Writers*).

The above suggests a healthy and not overwhelming relationship to this religion, and it also explains the often ironical representation of Christianity in the plays of Davis. While he admits that it is an important part of life, also of his own, he strongly opposes unfair treatment being carried out under the name of God, something Christianity has regrettably been prone to do ever since it existed. It is also important to note that Davis believes going to church and keeping his tribal connections are not contradictory, but in fact can be linked together, and combined they help him lead a happy life. This aligns with the message his plays transmit: that Aborigines can be Christian and still keep their Aboriginal identity at the same time.

8.4 Representation of Christianity in the plays of Jack Davis

8.4.1 Early representation of Christianity – education and conversion

The theme of Christianity is present in all plays of Davis, but the level of its presence differs based on the era each play depicts. In *Kullark*, depicting the earliest historical scenes and the first encounters of the settlers and the Aborigines, the presence of Christianity is almost negligible, as these days were not yet revolving around the question of religious differences or a will to convert the indigenous people, the settlers and the Aborigines were only just getting to know one another. *No Sugar*, the play that follows *Kullark* in a historical chronological order, already contains a prominent Christian theme, as Christianity was already an influencing factor in the lives of Aborigines during the years it depicts (1929-1934). *No Sugar* tells the story of the transition of the Millimurra family to Moore River Native Settlement. Children living in the settlement were obliged to attend school where missionaries educated them the Christian way. In Act One, where the family is still living uninterrupted in Northam, Christianity is basically

absent from everyday life – other than the fact that the reader learns that Milly and Sam are "proper church married . . . white dress an' all", and they "got paper to prove it" (Davis, *No Sugar* 43). Since Christianity for Aborigines during these years was rather forced than a choice of their own, not much significance seems to be attributed to this fact in the everyday lives of Milly and Sam, it is rather used as a trump-card in situations where they, for instance, feel they are not taken seriously because of their Aboriginality. Christianity is pictured as having the power to bring Aborigines closer in the hierarchy to white Australians. Joe, the eldest son of Milly and Sam, is too old for school already, thus Christianity does not become so prominent in his life after their relocation to Moore River, yet the reader still learns that he plans to marry his girlfriend, Mary, the same way. Based on the aforementioned power Christianity holds in the eyes of the Aborigines, proper church marriage is likely important to Joe only because it offers a recognised way for him to keep Mary for herself, as well as keep Superintendent Mr Neal, who seems to have eyes for her, away from her. For the young lovers, Christianity means safety and protection in a white society, without significantly interfering with their Aboriginal identity.

Christianity has a more significant influence on the children because of its strong presence in school, and is thus a more prominent threat to their aboriginality by means of cultural brainwash. An effective example of this is when Mary explains Joe that she has already spent three Christmases in the settlement when she is asked for how long she has been there, instead of stating the number of years or using another term that reflects her aboriginality more. An awkward reference to Christmas, also reflecting on the incomprehensible nature of Christianity for Aborigines, takes place on the 1934 Australia Day performance, when Neville threatens the Aborigines by stating that they will be punished for hijacking the celebrations by not having Christmas that year. This invalid punishment clearly shows how this event is so alien to Aboriginal culture, and has no real religious meaning for the Aborigines: it is simplified to a material event when one receives presents, the lack of which may seem a punishment for a child.

The story of Jesus and King Herod told by Sister Eileen at the Sunday School has a symbolical meaning in the play, or rather the characters of Mary and Joe (short for Joseph, as we learn in Act One – Scene Nine) have symbolical names. It must not be accidental that Davis gave names similar to the biblical couple to the lovers who must flee from the settlement to ensure a safe future for themselves, and more importantly, for their first-born baby Mary is pregnant with; just as it is also not accidental that the Sister recites this exact story. It is also important to note here that the theme of first-born children has an important meaning in Aboriginal history: plays of Davis also take note of the sorrowful event that took place around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Aboriginal, and mostly half-caste babies were taken away from their mothers after birth, to be brought up on a reserve by whites, where they received white education, and were prohibited from meeting their mothers, their relatives, or from mingling with Aborigines in general. Rumours on the settlement also stated that sometimes these babies were not taken away to be transported to a reserve, but were killed by the black trackers, and later buried in the pine plantations. It is daunting to hear the story of King Herod and his order to kill the first-born in the light of the historical background and the suspiciously often recited rumours, but Davis, optimistic as he ever was, offers a positive ending to the characters in the play: the baby of Mary is not taken away, and after Joe reunites with his family the three of them are allowed to leave the Settlement together, and the play ends with a positive future in sight.

Christianity, in a way, also represents white man and his aggressive and often illogical rules for the Aboriginal mind, and thus, becomes something not to be taken seriously, and may even be parodised. This is exactly what is depicted in Act Four – Scene Five of *No Sugar*, when on the Australia Day celebrations the Aboriginal choir sings a Christian song, *There is a Happy Land*, with the lyrics rewritten to reflect the wretched status of the Aborigines, and to imply that this is a result of the ill-fitting rules the white man forces on Aborigines, Christianity included.

The parody is especially effective as these people are forced to celebrate and sing on a day that is for the whites a day to celebrate, but for the Aborigines to mourn.

8.4.2 Late twentieth century – Christianity in the urban Aboriginal life

Several plays of Jack Davis depict the urban Aborigines of the second half of the twentieth century. *The Dreamers*, *Barungin*, as well as certain scenes of *Kullark* all deal with the everyday lives of Aborigines in an urban setting, and Christianity is among the recurring themes in all these plays and scenes. By these years Christianity was no longer a forced element of life, but has become so strongly represented in daily life that, while some who refused to believe based on rationalism have appeared already, most Aborigines remained – habitually or based on belief – Christians.

In the 1979 scenes of *Kullark*, it quickly becomes obvious how strongly Christianity is represented in the daily life of the Aborigines depicted, and the Yorlahs are no exception: the very first Scene of the first Act starts with Alec and Rosie Yorlah coming home from the funeral of a passed relative, and the reader learns that the deceased has received a traditional Christian funeral led by a missionary priest who is a member of the Nyoongar Church (Davis, *Kullark* 8). A strange conjunction is depicted here, showing the status of *Nyoongahs* being lost between two cultures: these people traditionally had neither religion nor churches, these are both something that belonged to, and were forcefully introduced by the white settlers. When Alec starts to criticize the priest and his lengthy speech, the conversation quickly advances into an argument about going to Heaven:

ALEC: Ah, all 'e was tryin' to do was frighten people inta goin' to 'is church.

ROSIE: When you're dyin' you'll be glad of a man like 'im.

> ALEC: [*laughing*] You know, 'e can't lose, it's like an each way bet: If 'e can't get ya to 'is church that don't matter, 'e'll still get to 'eaven 'cause 'e tried. It's even better than an each way bet, cause 'e bets on the whole bloody field.
>
> ROSIE: [*reproachfully*] Alec Yorlah, I'm sure I know where you're going when your time comes.
>
> ALEC: But what I said is true. [*He points upwards.*] 'E's just a bookie's clerk" (Davis, *Kullark* 8-9)

The belief that it makes a difference if there is a priest holding a speech at the funeral of someone is an exclusively Christian feature, and is not a traditional part of Aboriginal mourning. Similarly, Heaven is an unfamiliar place to Aboriginal culture. Still, neither of the characters seem to question the existence of Heaven, it seems to be natural, even though Aboriginal souls would traditionally go elsewhere after death. Based on the extended discussion though, Christianity and the power of it is rather cherished for its practical features: a proof for forgiveness and of a place for their souls after death, while in reality the couple does not live by the word, and thus – from a true religious Christian point of view – would not qualify to go to Heaven. The theme of Christmas also appears in *Kullark* when the reader learns that the sister of Alec is married to a *wetjala*, and they bring Christmas presents when they come to visit. This feast is also represented as something solely of material importance for the Yorlahs, which reinforces the 'practical' rather than devoted approach of Aborigines towards Christianity, but also illustrates how Christianity has still become an omnipresent part of everyday Aboriginal life.

The Dreamers contains further examples of this light-hearted Christianity: when Roy, the father in the Wallitch family says grace to the Lord before eating a meal a familiar scene is shown: Roy tries in vain to remain serious while he is constantly being interrupted by old Uncle Worru who does not seem to understand the purpose of the scenario:

> "SHANE: Shh, shh, Popeye, close your eyes.
>
> WORRU: What for? Can't eat with me eyes closed.
>
> ROY: We thank you, Lord, for what we have got.
>
> WORRU: [*to* SHANE*, pointing upwards*] I forgot about that fella up there." (Davis, *Kullark* 103)

The scene is awkward and ends in frivolous laughter, resembling a similar event that happened in the family of Davis, as reported in *A Boy's Life*, reflecting how this habit is taken up as a new tradition by Aborigines, but not really understood and taken seriously. In addition, this scene also shows how Christianity is an alien phenomenon to Worru, the old uncle who is still more connected to his Aboriginal culture and land, and who also feels out of place in the urban settings, under the concrete roof.

Generational differences joined with a different level of Aboriginal identity in connection to Christianity can also be seen in Act One – Scene Four, when Worru tells the story of what happens to Aboriginal souls after death. He refers to the *moodgah* tree as Christmas tree first, so that Peter, two generations younger than him, can also understand which species he refers to. While Peter, a late twentieth century child, no longer has a strong connection with his *Nyoongah* roots, and thus may no longer know the meaning of *moodgah*, he does know what tree to associate with Christmas. He is already part of a more Christian and less Aboriginal society and culture.

The Dreamers presents a variety of characters who are unusual or interesting from a Christian point of view. Robert, the educated nephew of Dolly, is an example of the rational *Nyoongah* who deliberately chooses not to become a believer. He declares "belief in the Bible is based on faith, not fact" (Davis, *Kullark* 127), and since Robert is a lawyer, it is somewhat understandable that he is too rational to associate with something lacking underpinning evidence.

Cousin Eli, on the other hand, openly advertises his Christianity: other than specifically calling himself one, he is caught singing Christian songs, he talks to God, and he confirms that he believes everything that is written in the Bible. However, despite his loud belief, out of the whole extended family represented in the play, Eli behaves the least Christian. He is aggressive, he cheats during a card game with relatives in order to win their money, and he frequently panhandles, pretending to be half-blind with a fake eye patch, in hope he will receive more money out of commiseration. He also seems to approach Christianity practically, as something that is useful to be a part of in order to ensure himself a heavenly afterlife, not realising that the verbal declaration, without following the rules of Christianity, will hardly earn him this.

The last play in the First-Born trilogy, *Barungin*, similarly to the beginning of *Kullark*, starts with a Christian funeral held for a deceased *Nyoongah*. However, in this play Davis actually lets the reader be present at the funeral instead of referring to it as an event that occurred in the close past. The speech of the priest in *Barungin* is the exact incarnation of what Alec was accusing the priest in *Kullark* of: it is threatening, verbally aggressive, and includes a message that is not general, but is directed at the people gathered there. The priest spends considerable time elaborating on why men are sinners, emphasising embarrassingly often that this refers to everyone who is currently present at the funeral – its obvious aim is to frighten people into going to church and becoming a believer. And, incidentally, the deceased who is being said the last farewell to, is Cousin Eli of *The Dreamers*. In this play, though, the scene that follows the funeral is somewhat different than what happened in *Kullark*: it is Meena, the mother figure in the play, who starts complaining about the awkward speech, and Shane, her bother, agrees. Dolly, their mother who is approximately of the same generation as Rosie of *Kullark* was, disagrees with the diatribe and scolds them. A generation ahead, the family of *Barungin* is visibly less Christian than the families of *Kullark* and *The Dreamers* were: Dolly, Meena and Little Doll are once depicted going to church on a Sunday, but there is no further mentioning of Christianity in this play. This

may suggest that with the passing of time an increasing number of Aborigines will realise how ill-fitting Christianity is in Aboriginal culture, and as new generations appear who never lived in the era when this religion was forced on Aborigines by the settlers, the need to keep Christianity as a habit will gradually decrease. In earlier times Christianity may have offered these people an appealing and easy form of hope in a hopeless situation, but in the present time of *Barungin* such a handhold is no longer needed.

9. Conclusion

By offering an overview of the most important and readily available plays of Jack Davis, this paper intended to confirm the outstanding importance of Davis and his oeuvre in Aboriginal literature and culture. Several examples were presented from the personal life and cultural activity of Davis, as well as from his plays, which together offered a comprehensive overview of how the life, culture and status of Aborigines have changed during the past two centuries of white cultural domination in Australia.

With the help of the collecting work of Davis the *Nyoongar* language was given a chance to survive among the slowly disappearing Aboriginal languages and dialects, and his political activism has made the problems Aborigines have been facing in the second half of the twentieth century become visible to a greater audience, thus facilitating their resolution. While Aboriginal writing, printed and published in the classical European literary style, is always a covert political statement directed at the white audience, the writings of Davis stand out with their enlightened and diplomatic tone. His works are never accusatory or resentful: Davis realises by listing the differences in the cultural background of white man and Aborigines, and offering an objective account of examples of past events as memento, the message will be transmitted to the enlightened and emotionally sensitive reader and theatregoer of today even without further emotional emphasis or an openly accusing tone. Understanding and embracing differences is a key to any long-term relationship, and the strong, progressive, broad-minded and forgiving characters represented in these plays emphasise that with a mutual effort to reach an understanding and acceptance, the white and the Aboriginal population of Australia should be capable of reaching a state of harmonious relationship in the future. This optimistic approach and tone is what clearly distinguishes Jack Davis and his literary works, and this is what makes him one of the most important and influential Aboriginal writers to date.

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