Encounters with Aboriginal Sites in Metropolitan Sydney: A Broadening Horizon for Cultural Tourism?

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This paper reports on a subject which has historically received little attention in tourism studies, namely, the place of Indigenous heritage in a major metropolitan centre. In Australia, a dominant discourse has promoted the perspective that ‘authentic’ Aboriginal culture is confined to the relatively undeveloped, under-populated, and isolated, north of the continent. Images of ‘tradition oriented’ Aboriginality have played a central role in the promotion of Australia as a distinctive tourist destination. The dominance of such images has served to comprehensively marginalise the Aboriginal heritage of metropolitan areas. The paper explores some of the reasons why an ahistorical ‘tradition oriented’ construction of Aboriginality has retained its resilience in Australia. It discusses some of the events of the past decade, which have seen new Aboriginal perspectives beginning to be incorporated into the metropolitan landscape of Sydney and considers the implications of such developments for the visitor experience and sustainable tourism.

Introduction

This paper is based on research undertaken in Sydney in 2000 for a book entitled Aboriginal Sydney: A Guide to Important Places of the Past and Present (Hinkson, 2001a), a project which involved identifying sites of pre-colonial, colonial, and contemporary significance to Aboriginal people in the greater Sydney region that are publicly accessible and suitable for visitation. The book profiles 50 places within a region bordered by Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park in the north, Cranebrook and Greendale in the west, and Kurnell and Botany Bay in the south. Among the sites, which were selected for inclusion after extensive consultations with local Aboriginal representative organisations and communities, are rock art and engraving sites, shelters and shell middens, the site of the first land grant made to an Aboriginal person, the site of the first government-endorsed removal of Aboriginal children from their families, buildings where historic meetings occurred, and a range of contemporary places such as an Aboriginal art cooperative, retail outlets, a cultural centre, a dance theatre, a ‘bush tucker’ (native foods) walk, as well as new, special-interest sections of galleries, museums, and other cultural institutions.

The research was conducted at a time when a new interest in the Aboriginal history of Australia was taking form, primarily as a result of the nation’s reconciliation process (Hinkson, 2002), and a number of new sites exploring aspects of that history were being unveiled. Members of Sydney’s Aboriginal communities who were prepared to engage with non-Aboriginal people about their past were
finding new and sympathetic audiences. In short, Sydney, like other major Australian cities, seemed to be gaining a past that had until recently been denied – it had become a city with an Aboriginal history (Byrne, 1996). This recently acquired Aboriginal past is providing a subtle, yet significant, new dimension to the experiences on offer to visitors to the city, and a new set of considerations for those working in the tourism trade.

While Australia’s recent reconciliation process provides one point of reference for developments explored in this paper, a broader set of factors has been identified in recent tourism research in relation to which we might consider Sydney’s emerging identity as a city with an Aboriginal past. In their study of visitor interpretation displays in national parks, Staiff et al. (2002: 98) consider the increasingly diverse communities of people who are visiting national parks in an era of increased global travel and the rise of multiculturalism. They draw attention to the new challenges faced by agencies such as the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in attempting to present interpretive materials in public spaces that meet the needs of an increasingly diverse array of visitors. Most particularly, the researchers observe that the Western, science-based, ecological perspective within which visitor interpretation in national parks has traditionally been presented is likely to fall well short of meeting such diverse needs (see also Ryan & Huyton, 2000b: 27; Thomas, 2001). These observations have significant implications for the packaging of tourism experiences in general in the present period and those dealing with Indigenous cultures in particular.

Visible ‘Culture’, Invisible History

Contrary to popular misconceptions, there is no shortage of Aboriginal heritage in Australia’s metropolitan centres (see e.g. Eidelson, 1997; Lonely Planet, 2001; Stanbury & Clegg, 1996; Stewart, 1988), but until recently only particular kinds of places – those associated with pre-colonial Aboriginal society – have received significant public recognition. Many are signposted and appear on maps. Ku-ring-Gai Chase National Park is a particularly notable visitor destination that promotes such sites, providing detailed interpretive panels for many of them. A disproportionate attention to sites of the pre-colonial era is reflected in the Aboriginal Sites Register maintained by the New South Wales (NSW) NPWS, which holds records for some 30,000 sites, only a few hundred of which belong to the post-1788 period. Similarly, of the 17,500 sites listed on the NSW Heritage Register (all of which date from 1788) only seven have been placed there for their value to Aboriginal people (Nugent, 2002). This lack of recognition accorded to sites of colonial and more recent significance reflects the contested nature of Australia’s history (see e.g. Attwood, 1996; Attwood & Foster, 2002), and more particularly, unresolved conflicts between urban-based Aboriginal people and state and federal governments over claims to land and compensation for historic dispossession (Goodall, 1996). While ‘ancient culture’ attracts tourists, unresolved political contests do not.

Australia has historically taken a highly selective approach to the promotion of its Indigenous heritage. Since the 1970s there has been an explosion of interest in indigenous cultures globally. In Australia, the preservation and promotion of Aboriginal heritage sites commenced comprehensively in the 1970s (Byrne,
1996). Since then celebratory images of Aboriginality have been central in the promotion of the country’s cultural distinctiveness, particularly since the 1988 bi-centenary celebrations (Povinelli, 2002), as was the case during the closing ceremony of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, and the opening and closing ceremonies of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. The sound of the didgeridoo and images of smiling, painted Aboriginal bodies continue to be among the most commonly used images in the selling of Australia, as are images of Northern Territory and Kimberley Aboriginal rock art sites, and increasingly also contemporary Aboriginal art (see e.g. Australian Tourism Commission, 2002b). Yet these are images of a very particular kind of Aboriginality – one thought to reside in the relatively remote northern half of the continent, associated with what is often misleadingly referred to as ‘traditional Aboriginal culture’. As Attwood has argued, the ‘ever present image’ of ‘the Aborigine’ in Australia has for much of the past 200 years been one firmly located outside time – Aboriginal people have been ‘consigned to the past, but not to history’ (Attwood, 1996: xii). The key signifying label in this colonising process is ‘traditional Aboriginal culture’, which firmly fixes all ‘authentic’ forms of Aboriginality within an imagined pre-colonial moment, viewing all forms that diverge from this, and the people with whom those forms are associated, as diminished culture. While these images might be thought to be associated with Aboriginal communities of the north, in reality they fail to correspond to any particular living Aboriginal people. At the heart of the north–south divide implied in this conception of Aboriginality lies a significant phenomenon regarding the history of Australia’s colonisation, a ‘cult of disremembering’, as Stanner (1969) described it, in which it is thought that the Aboriginal population of south-eastern Australia either died, moved out, or simply vanished, following the arrival of the British in 1788. It follows that, while pre-colonial places of significance have been publicly recognised, historically travellers have been given little encouragement to recognise the existence of, or engage with, local histories of Aboriginal/European interaction. To engage with such history would be to expose those aspects of the nation’s past which remain highly contested (Attwood, 1996; Byrne, 1996).

In this respect, Australia’s metropolitan landscape differs significantly from that of its neighbour, New Zealand, where the memorialisation of race relations is so prominent, and provides a distinctive component of any visitor’s experience (Hinkson, 2001b). The reasons for this difference may, on the surface, appear self-evident. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up just over 2% of the population (compared with New Zealand’s Maori at 14%). The highest Indigenous/non-Indigenous ratio is in the Northern Territory, where Aboriginal people constitute 24% of the population. In Sydney, Aboriginal people comprise less than 1% of the population, numbering approximately 36,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). Demographics alone explain why for many Australians, let alone international visitors, a visit to a museum or gallery with Indigenous displays is likely to be the closest they will come to having ‘an Aboriginal experience’ (Altman & Finlayson, 1993).

But as noted above, demographics are not sufficient to explain why much of Australia’s history of race relations is not visible in the social landscape. The inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives in the official telling of Australian history remains highly contested. Nowhere has this been more evident in recent years
than in debates surrounding the federal Government’s response to the documentation of experiences of the Stolen Generations – victims of the sanctioned removal of Aboriginal children from their families under earlier government policy (see Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Conflicts over the telling of history, over land and resource rights, and native title claims, continue to set the tenor of indigenous/non-indigenous relations in Australia. Such disputes are far removed from the images used to sell Australia as a distinctive tourist destination. As Povinelli has observed, these images are of an Aboriginality ‘unhinged’ from the specific circumstances of actual Aboriginal people and the challenges they pose to the nation-state (Povinelli, 2002: 24).

For the same reasons, it is rare to find that visitor destinations in Australia with coexisting Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage values are promoted as such. Historically, there has been a stark separation in the presentation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage in Australia, with the former unambiguously presented as a marginal interest. But as Staiff et al. (2002) have argued, such a delineation of visitor experience in culturally specific terms is unlikely to reflect or satisfy the diverse interests of an increasingly diverse community of travellers.

Revising History and the Significance of Sites

But there are subtle signs that this approach to the country’s colonial past is shifting. Such a shift has become particularly apparent over the past decade, as the reconciliation process has taken root at a local community level, fuelling a surge in interest in the Aboriginal and colonial histories of Australia. Across the country, citizens’ groups, local municipal councils, and schools have undertaken to revise their official local histories, incorporating previously unrecognised Aboriginal perspectives. Such activity has been particularly pronounced in large metropolitan centres such as Sydney, where a number of local councils commissioned and then made publicly accessible Aboriginal histories of their municipalities (see e.g. City of Sydney, 2001), and state government agencies produced their own reconciliation statements (see e.g. NPWS, 2000). In recent years, the influence of this process has become visible in subtle ways in the public landscape, in new sites and new approaches to visitor interpretation, offering visitors to cities such as Sydney opportunities to engage with a wider range of perspectives on Australian history and society than were previously available.

One such reinterpretation project has occurred at Old Government House in Parramatta Park in Sydney’s west, which, as the oldest public building in Australia and located in a historic precinct with other buildings of similar vintage, is a popular tourist destination. For years volunteers for the National Trust have conducted guided tours of the house on a daily basis. These tours promote particular understandings of the heritage values of Old Government House – visitors are encouraged to appreciate the courage and fortitude of the British governors and their families who lived in the house, the hardship of life in the colony, and the volatile nature of a society built on the back of convict labour. There is also an opportunity to admire the construction of the house and its antique furniture. The products on sale in the tiny book and souvenir shop attached to the house reaffirm this particular appreciation of colonial heritage, and certainly do not give any cause to think that the land on which the house
stands and the house itself might also have a rich Aboriginal heritage and a complicated contact history.

But this framing of Old Government House within an uncontested colonial narrative is beginning to be challenged. In recent years the National Trust itself has made some considerable investment in this process. In 1999 the Trust commissioned a study of the Aboriginal significance of the area (Kohen et al., 1999). An Education Officer has been working in conjunction with local Darug Aboriginal people to develop an education programme for school groups. Armed with the knowledge that accompanies this programme, a visit to Parramatta Park and Old Government House becomes a very different experience – drawing visitors’ attention to such features as the brickwork of the house, which is held together with mortar made from ground down Aboriginal shell middens, that once lay in enormous piles along the Parramatta River; a number of scarred trees, whose bark was removed by Aboriginal people to make food and water containers; and an area behind the house from which significant quantities of stone artefacts were recovered by archaeologists during an excavation (Attenbrow, 1996; Hinkson, 2001a: 134–7). Yet this Aboriginal perspective on Old Government House is not self-evident. It is not possible to grasp this dimension of the site’s significance without the aid of an education officer or relevant interpretive materials. Parramatta Park’s Burramatta Visitor Centre provides some information on the cultural history of the area, but it is located at the other end of the park, some three and a half kilometres away from Old Government House, and staffed on a voluntary basis with limited opening hours. The programme being run by the National Trust has the potential to be extended to the general public if there is sufficient interest.

Old Government House and Parramatta Park fall within the municipal boundaries of the Parramatta City Council. The council has been at the forefront of the move to reinterpret local history, most particularly through its commissioning of a series of public artworks such as the Parramatta Riverside Walk, an 800m long painted pathway that explores the Aboriginal history of the area, and links the Parramatta ferry terminal with the town’s main street. What is particularly interesting in relation to this site is that it not only celebrates the uncontroversial aspects of pre-contact Aboriginal society in the Parramatta area, such as the hunting and fishing practices of local Aboriginal people and select words from their language. It also confronts the frontier violence associated with invasion of Aboriginal lands. The themes of invasion, massacres, Aboriginal resistance, and the Stolen Generations are all represented. More interestingly still, these themes are not presented in generalised terms but as specific acts that occurred locally in the Parramatta region. The walk ends with a ‘Reconciliation Soundscape’ – a recorded conversation between members of local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

Aspects of this process of historical revisionism are also apparent in the heart of Sydney. On the edge of the city’s central business district lie the Botanic Gardens. Here, too, visitors can find a response to the reconciliation process and its demand for new approaches to the recasting of Australian history. The Cadi Jam Ora display explores the life of the area’s Aboriginal traditional owners, the Cadigal, through their use of plants and relationship to the land. Interpretive stories focus on the first three years of British colonisation of Sydney and the
meeting of two vastly different cultures through their different attitudes to the environment. *Cadi Jam Ora* was developed by the Botanic Gardens’ Aboriginal Education Officer, who conducts tours and organises local Aboriginal elders to address interested groups. This botanical cross-cultural history adds a further dimension to visitors’ wider experience of the gardens (Hinkson, 2001a: 8–10). Aboriginal tour guides from local tour group Sydney Aboriginal Discoveries also conduct tours of this part of Sydney. These tours interweave oral history and botanical knowledge to provide an Indigenous perspective on the city.

Around Sydney Harbour there are hundreds of sites which provide evidence of pre-colonial Aboriginal occupation – rock shelters where people camped, art and engraving sites, shell middens, many of which are situated in close proximity to the places where Sydneysiders live, work and play (Stanbury & Clegg, 1996). In recent years, a small number of these sites have been developed to cater for visitors, most notably the ‘Gadyan Track’ on Berry Island, on Sydney’s north shore, and engravings sites at Grotto Point (Hinkson, 2001a: 32–33, 45–46). Part of the dilemma in regard to the promotion of such sites is that they lie in the public domain precisely because they are no longer in use by Aboriginal communities. Most of Sydney’s rock engravings and paintings are now badly eroded and increasingly hard to see. In terms of the way in which Indigenous cultural heritage has historically been promoted in Australia, such sites are seen to represent the relics of an Aboriginal society long since past – ‘dead culture’ – to be juxtaposed with the ‘real’ cultural experiences on offer in the northern part of the country. Such ways of understanding ‘culture’ are, however, slowly being displaced by new policies and collaborative ventures. The NSW NPWS 1998 report *Visions for the New Millennium* recognises that ‘Aboriginal cultural heritage requires the stories and traditions of the people to give it context in the national landscape’ (NPWS, 1998: 7); the service’s policy commits it to new levels of consultation and collaboration with local Aboriginal communities in the management of Aboriginal sites. Tours of national parks such as Ku-Ring Gai Chase and Botany Bay by Aboriginal sites officers expose visitors to the pre-colonial significance of these areas, but often also to their contemporary significance – as places where Aboriginal human remains have been reburied, for example, another outcome of recent collaborations between cultural institutions, NPWS, local land councils, and Aboriginal communities (see e.g. Australian Museum, 1999). Other examples of local community initiatives, operating without the assistance of government agencies, include a newly planted ‘bush tucker’ (native foods) walk in the grounds of Yarra Bay House at La Perouse, the outcome of a successful local work project for the unemployed, and the Muru Mittigar Cultural Centre at Cranebrook in Sydney’s west, which promotes the local history of the area and artworks by local Aboriginal artists (Hinkson, 2001a: 114–15, 152).

Increasingly, Sydney’s major cultural institutions are also promoting aspects of the city’s Aboriginal history. This is part of a wider development which has been occurring in cultural institutions across the world, a shift away from the traditional museological ‘natural history’ approach to one in which diverse interest groups, with diverse perspectives and cultural backgrounds, are recognised and consulted (Byrne et al., 2001; Staiff et al., 2002). As part of this shift in the management of cultural institutions, Indigenous curators have been appointed,
and consultative committees established, to canvas the views of Indigenous communities in regard to the representation of Indigenous perspectives and traditions. Institutions that have undergone this revolution in Sydney have established their own Aboriginal advisory boards and developed educational programmes in conjunction with local Aboriginal stakeholders. Other government agencies, such as the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority, have also been working with local Aboriginal groups in the development of interpretive signage for places of significance around the harbour (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, ATSIC 2001: 54).

This apparent explosion of interest in revising Australian history to incorporate an Aboriginal perspective has emerged out of a momentous decade of events in Indigenous affairs in Australia. In 1991 the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody tabled its final report and recommendations, which included the proposed establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. The aim of the Council was to foster deeper understanding by all Australians of the history, cultures, past dispossession and continuing disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and of the need to redress that disadvantage (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 2000). A grassroots ‘people’s movement’ grew up across the country, culminating in a historic ‘people’s walk’ in May 2001 in which more than 100,000 people marched across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of the reconciliation process. Similar marches followed in all other state capital cities. The growth of this people’s movement was fostered by other events in the 1990s, most particularly the 1992 historic Mabo decision in the High Court which overturned the legal fiction that Australia was terra nullius (land belonging to no one) when the British colonised the continent in 1788, and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s presentation of its report into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families – the Stolen Generations – to the federal Government in 1997 (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). One aspect of the public response to these events was an unprecedented rise in interest in Australia’s Aboriginal and contact history, an interest which in turn resulted in a new focus on sites associated with that history.

**Promoting Difference in its Many Guises**

The heterogeneity of Aboriginal societies today is rarely well understood by Australians, let alone overseas visitors. It remains unclear how elements of Aboriginal culture that are desired by visitors can be appropriately packaged for tourist consumption, without undermining the very culture that is generating them. (Altman, 1993: 10–11)

Research conducted over the past decade has tracked the continuing interest of tourists in Indigenous people and culture in Australia (Altman, 1989; Altman & Finlayson, 1993; Brokensha & Guldberg, 1992; Finlayson, 1996; Ryan & Huyton, 2000a, 2000b; Spring, 1990, 1993). The same research has found, however, that many of the experiences enjoyed by those same people fall short of their expectations. One dimension of visitor disappointment seems to lie in the fact that the majority of ‘Indigenous experiences’ on offer are indirect experiences such as visits to art galleries, museums, and cultural centres rather than
direct interactions with Aboriginal people (Altman, 1993; Ryan & Huyton, 2000a: 81; Spring, 1990). In any discussion of prospects for developing Indigenous cultural experiences, questions of authenticity loom large. What kind of ‘culture’ are tourists interested in engaging with and prepared to pay for? How are these interests shaped? To what extent are Indigenous people themselves involved in this process of commodifying aspects of their culture and history? In Australia, cultural stereotypes of Aboriginality have proved particularly resilient and difficult to dislodge, as has the reduction of regional cultural differences to a commodified Aboriginal monoculture, often symbolised by the boomerang and digeridoo. But interestingly enough, the results of visitor surveys suggest a strong desire on the part of visitors for authentic interactions with Aboriginal people and culture (Australian Tourism Commission, 2002b: 5; Ryan & Huyton, 2000a: 82; Ryan & Pike, 2003). The incorporation of locally specific Aboriginal perspectives into urban environments might go some distance to meeting that need, allowing interested visitors to engage with a broader, more multi-layered understanding of Australian history and culture than was previously available. Sites with the greatest potential in this regard are those that promote coexisting sets of heritage values, such as Sydney’s Botanic Gardens and Old Government House discussed above. These places can simultaneously stimulate the interests of diverse groups of visitors, perhaps even capturing the interest of those who previously expressed little interest in Indigenous culture and history.

Conclusion: Cultural Tourism in the Metropolis and Issues of Sustainability

In expanding the Aboriginal experiences accessible to visitors to Sydney there are a number of complex issues to be addressed. The issue of Aboriginal involvement in new tourism enterprise is the first of these. The politics of contested history briefly discussed here, and indeed the continuing dominance of images associated with an imagined ‘traditional Aboriginal culture’, have impacted hardest on Aboriginal people living in urban Australia (Keen, 1988). Opportunities to confront such stereotypes and gain recognition as Aboriginal people with distinctive life histories, have to date been enthusiastically embraced by many. As discussed, the historic denial of their identity as Aboriginal has been a common experience for many urban-based Aboriginal people, and it follows that many have enthusiastically embraced recent invitations to participate in programmes where that identity is explicitly recognised, for example, as Aboriginal Sites Officers working for NPWS or land councils, as Aboriginal Education Officers working for various state agencies, as curators in galleries and museums, as participants in reconciliation meetings, in performing ‘Welcome to Country’ at public events, in running cultural centres and conducting guided tours. Some of these people articulate aspirations which reach well beyond the opportunities currently available to them (Department of Industry, Science and Resources, et al., 2000; Hinkson, 2002). This observation serves as an important counterpoint to the findings of research in north Australia, where many Aboriginal people have demonstrated a strong preference for indirect participation in the tourism industry through such activities as the production of art and crafts, rather than direct social interactions (Altman, 1989; ATSIC & Office of National
Tourism, 1997; Finlayson, 1991). While detailed research is required in this area, recent developments discussed here suggest that Aboriginal people in Sydney are more likely to be interested in participating directly in the promotion of aspects of their culture and history than Aboriginal people living in more remote parts of the country.

The importance of using distinctive local cultural and historical interpretations rather than pan-Aboriginal images and concepts will be a critical factor in gaining the support of Aboriginal people and establishing tourist attractions that are sustainable over time. While recent developments, such as the commissioning of local Aboriginal histories, suggest this approach to interpretation is being taken up widely, images of ‘tradition oriented’ Aboriginality remain all-pervasive in the marketing of Australia as a tourist destination. Lessons from nearby New Zealand, as well as travellers’ responses to surveys in Australia, suggest that the most successful Indigenous cultural tourism ventures – for local Indigenous communities, tourism operators and tourists themselves – are likely to be based on the promotion of distinctive regional differences, not stereotypes which deny those differences (Mitchell et al., 1991; Ryan & Pike, 2003).

In terms of commercial sustainability, it is worth noting that the kinds of new sites and interpretation discussed in this paper meet with the recommendations of ATSIC & Office of National Tourism regarding increased Indigenous involvement in the Australian tourism industry, namely, that priority should first be given to building new indigenous components of existing enterprises rather than establishing entirely new ones with the significant financial outlay and risk that this entails (ATSIC & Office of National Tourism, 1997: 36).

Clearly, there are risks associated with drawing attention to sites that have until recently remained largely invisible. In the past such invisibility has served to protect sites from vandalism and other forms of desecration (Jacobs & Gale, 1994). Yet Aboriginal organisations, land councils, and representatives of local communities consulted in the course of research for Aboriginal Sydney (Hinkson, 2001a) felt strongly that the potential benefits that might flow from promoting greater public awareness of Sydney’s Aboriginal sites greatly outweighs any risk associated with making those sites publicly accessible. They view the process of educating the wider public about Aboriginal places as integral to fostering greater understanding and respect for Sydney’s Aboriginal communities. In this sense these stakeholders endorse the view that sees cultural tourism as potentially assisting the promotion of Indigenous Australia as a living culture in diverse settings, rather than a museum piece located in the north. The NSW NPWS backs this perspective, recognising that ‘[r]espect for Aboriginal knowledge, culture and traditional practices contributes to the sustainable and equitable development and management of the environment’ (NPWS, 1998: 7).

Encouraging a greater appreciation of the diverse Indigenous cultures and their histories to be found across Australia may also help spread the tourism load, as it were, by taking some focus off popular visitor destinations of northern Australia. Moreover, in promoting awareness of the fact that cities and ‘Aboriginal culture’ are not mutually exclusive categories, a new approach to cultural tourism may contribute to a more complex, diverse, and interesting experience for both domestic and international travellers in Australia.
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Note

1. Cadi Jam Ora – Aboriginal for ‘I am in Cadi’ – and Cadi is the Aboriginal word for Sydney Cove.

References


