Australian Islam and the Formation of Cross-cultural Alliances

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Introduction

When genealogies of oppression are revealed in their correct historical context they provide insights into the power relations of the day. Whether circumscribed by religious doctrine or political ideology, the 'oppressed' invariably align in some form for collective solidarity, national mobilization, empowerment activities or even revenge. The construct of these coalitions vary in terms of personnel, intensity of feeling, and mobility but their aims and focus are similar, that is, to defend against, or provide opposition to, an actual or imagined social force. The end goal of emancipation and empowerment, collective recognition and acceptance of reclaimed power by way of defensive, adaptive, or coping activities is the topic of this paper. But this 'recovery' is dependent on how the collective cultural trauma of the oppressed is negotiated within the greater social, cultural, and political environment. The central theme of this paper deals with recovery strategies from cultural trauma and tentatively exposes this strategy as an insight as to why Indigenous Australians align with Islam in Australia.

For the purpose of this paper, oppression is theorised as a causal link in the construction of collective cultural trauma, and different strategies are employed to recover from this trauma. The social and economic disadvantage suffered by Indigenous Australians has many forms including high levels of unemployment, extremely poor health outcomes, far shorter life expectancy than other Australians, and high levels of incarceration (Senate, 2004: 321). The term 'oppressed' when applied to these conditions does not seem excessive considering the entrenched and persistent nature of Indigenous disadvantage and inequality. The propositions raised in this paper are a) that as a collective, Indigenous Australians fit the qualifications to be considered culturally traumatized; and b) Indigenous people use the adaptive strategy of forming alliances with Islam in general and Muslims in particular to help alleviate the effects of cultural trauma. To actualise these propositions a brief outline of the basic concepts associated with collective cultural trauma are discussed. The work of Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil Smelser and Piotr Sztompka (2004) forms the theoretical base for this discussion. Attention will then turn to question how the concept of collective cultural trauma 'fits' in the process of Indigenous alignment with Islam.

Explaining Cultural Trauma

Sztompka (2000) notes that a possible use of the concept of trauma is to deal with the problem of "negative, dysfunctional, adverse effects that major social change may leave in its wake" (2000: 450). A formal definition of socio-cultural trauma is proposed by Smelser and Eyerman as: "a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is a) laden with negative affect b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural

presuppositions or group's identity" (Smelser, 2004: 44; Eyerman, 2004: 62). Alexander (2004: 1) describes cultural trauma occurring "when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways." Alexander suggests cultural trauma incorporates empirical concepts creating a space for "new meaningful and causal relationships…" (ibid.) and illuminates an "emerging domain of social responsibility and political action" (ibid.). At the core of these perspectives is the difference between collective and individual trauma, in that:

> collective trauma impacts on the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with 'trauma' (Erikson, 1976: 153 – 154).

For traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. "Collective actors 'decide' to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go." (Alexander, 2004: 10).

Collective cultural trauma as a 'traumatic process'

The 'trauma process' necessitates claims and representations of what constitutes cultural trauma. Claims about the shape of social reality are explained as "a claim to some fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution." (ibid.: 11)

Indigenous Australians and a case for a traumatized collective

Empirical and statistical evidence is not always necessary to understand and acknowledge the relative disadvantage of certain ethnic, religious, or cultural groups, and for cultural trauma to be experienced. For example, the material conditions of many Indigenous people and communities remain largely unresolved, as have symbolic reparations in terms of reconciliation and self-determination. According to Hunter (1999: 16) "Indigenous people's living standards are both qualitatively and quantitatively different to that of other poor and rich Australians". The resultant social exclusion experienced by Indigenous people is evidenced by the increasing difficulty in breaking the vicious circle of welfare dependency and unemployment. Social indicators such as arrest rates, police harassment and being a victim of assault; being a member of the 'stolen generation'; civic engagement; the loss of motivation; and ill-health all point to areas of social exclusion. "Social exclusion, unlike poverty, is an intrinsically dynamic concept, descriptive of a condition that develops over time after prolonged social isolation and deprivation" (Hunter, 2000: 3).These circumstances would constitute a major crisis within the dominant society if the conditions were experienced by 'ordinary Australians.' 'Crisis' and 'oppression', then, become one with collective cultural trauma in forming a conceptual framework involving current lived conditions and indelible historical memories.

Although Sztompka (2004) explains crisis as a "chronic, permanent and endemic feature of modern society, putting a question mark under the whole project of modernity" (2004: 157), the socio-cultural context of Indigenous oppression adds an extra dimension to this understanding. People put value on security, predictability,

continuity, routines, and rituals of their life-world, even more so in the ambivalent social atmosphere of late modernity (ibid.) The speed, scope, content, and social-psychological framework of social change delivers destructive effects on the body social (Sztompka, 2000: 452). Yet the anticipation of improved conditions combined with the direct experience of disadvantage provides fertile ground for the condition of cultural trauma. Cultural trauma is realised when people start to be aware of the common plight, perceive the similarity of their situation with that of others, and define it as shared. History and cultural relevance provides a discursive space within which to construct and nurture major cultural attributes, disasters, celebrations, and national identity. This process could apply to any group within Australia and illuminates the dual tendencies of 'remembrance' and selective 'forgetfulness'. Two examples are the ubiquitous Anzac memorials and remembrance celebrations, and the scarcity of civil markers acknowledging Indigenous loss of life, land and culture opposing colonial invasion. The contested nature of the relative importance of these events underscores the contested and contextual nature of remembering and forgetting. Memory is located not inside the heads of individual actors, but rather "within the discourse of people talking together about the past" (Radley, 1990: 46).

Collective cultural trauma, then, could be seen as being dependent on the socio-cultural context of the affected society at the time the historical event or situation arises (Smelser, 2004: 36). Furthermore, cultural trauma must be remembered or made to be remembered; it must be culturally relevant, and be associated with a strong negative affect (ibid.). The gradual revelation of alternative histories, however, is placing greater scrutiny on the benevolent and benign process of settlement, and in making claims against authorities for reparation and due recognition of social and cultural damage. In terms of collective cultural trauma, this should be seen as an evolving process, or a traumatic sequence (ibid.: 453), and that "cultural traumas are for the most part historically made, not born" (Smelser, 2004: 37). Eyerman (2004: 60) uses the example of slavery as a focus for collective memory in the formation of African American identity. As a cultural process, trauma is linked to the formation of collective identity and the construction of collective memory. Eyerman explains that slavery became central in attempts to "forge a collective identity out of its remembrance, forming a 'primal scene' that could, potentially unite all 'African Americans in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa" (ibid.).

Islam and Muslims: the Australian context

Islam, tolerance, and understanding

The other group pertinent to this study are Muslim Australians for whom oppression is also familiar and experienced differently to that of most other Australians. For Muslims in Australia, the extent of religious and racial discrimination is contingent upon both historical perceptions of Islam within Australian, and of more recent global events centring on discourses of terrorism. At a conceptual level both groups, Indigenous and Muslims, can evoke latent fears within the Australian psyche that the status quo will be disturbed by either claims for land or claims for faith. Both groups are attributed with the nominal status of what could be described as 'provisional acceptance' and where 'tolerance' of cultural and religious difference is presented as a "strong and enduring commitment to community harmony" by the current Howard government (Ruddock, 2003: 2). 'Tolerance' in the Australian vernacular has connotations of ambivalent acceptance, and is easily re-interpreted to entertain notions of indifference and superiority. These assertions are borne out in the

demonstrated resistance by various governments to Indigenous demands for equality in health, education, socio-economic parity, and not least the entitlements due to an invaded collective.

Discrimination, fear, and reactions

September 11 and 12 October have ensured a resurgent public vigilance and suspicion directed at religious and cultural difference reminiscent of earlier periods in the history of immigration in Australia. Afghans, Chinese and other Asians, Melanesians and Aborigines and all other minorities have at various times evoked particular and persistent strains of Australian national sentiment based on comfort associated with uniformity of race (Kabir, 2003). Recent surveys and reports indicate a "substantive degree of racism in Australia" with strong anti-Muslim sentiment (Dunn, 2003: 2); and Poynting (2004: 17) reported "an increase in experiences of racism, both at a personal level and in terms of their communities as a whole, and this was particularly the case for women of these backgrounds." These encounters occurred more frequently in the months after September 11. The double jeopardy associated with this event is noted by Smelser: "Episodes of national fear and unity have always had their darker potential – for the muting of political opposition, sometimes self-exposed; for the scapegoating of internal minority groups thought to be dangerous or somehow linked to the danger, and for the compromise of civil liberties in the name of vigilance and security". (Smelser, 2004: 270) The events of 2001 and 2002 have caused a refocussing of political, economic and defence discourse towards the perceived greater national threat of terror, while internal themes of the 1980s and 1990s have receded into the background. On the one hand the discursive space for affirmative action is stifled while on the other hand, increased scrutiny and vigilance adds a double blow to social unity and cultural expression. Political appeals for collective Australian identity and national interest focus is both unify and fragmenting. To what degree are Muslims in Australia called to question their loyalty and patriotic duty and rebuke a terrorist minority that happen to associate with their faith, while simultaneously defending against suspicion and scrutiny? For Muslims this is a situation not applicable to other Australians, particularly those who choose to ignore or deny their 'secure' location in Australian society due to the submission of others. These conditions also qualify Muslim Australians as equally prone to the experience of cultural trauma manifesting as racist attacks and religious discrimination, particularly since the events of September 11 (Dunn, 2003). Yet although certain Muslim individual's and communities may experience trauma the institution of Islam remains a solid and unified social structure able to incorporate and process complicated ethnic and cultural differences.

Probabilities of evolutionary or redemptive narratives

As briefly discussed above, the case of American slavery as a focus for narrative formation. Eyerman cites W.E.B. Du Bois (1868 – 1963) as outlining an evolutionary narrative by the construction of a racialised collective identity within their forced separation from the dominant society. This narrative was a way of turning tragedy into triumph, uncovering a progressive route out of cultural trauma ((2004: 88). Marcus Garvey (1887 – 1940) exemplified a second narrative that couched the past in terms of tragedy and redemption and whose goal was not progressive advancement but restoration of lost glory. Later history revealed civil rights and modernized Black Nationalism narratives developed out of the cultural trauma initiated by the failure of emancipation and then renewed in a continuous cycle of raised and crushed expectations (ibid.: 97). Later again, Malcolm X (1925 – 1965)

modified the redemptive narrative he inherited from Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad (1897 – 1975) with special reference to the meaning and recollection of slavery (ibid.: 107). For Malcolm X, this new phase of Africanism involved self-determination as a form of redemption, with the locus now moved from the individual and the group to the nation (ibid.). This initial experiment with the Nation of Islam later transformed black nationalism from being religiously based to politically based. Yet without question, slavery and a flawed emancipation remain integral referents for African American's sense of collective identity. This example is instructive in that it attaches significance to social processes and events creating historical reference points for evolutionary or redemptive empowerment strategies.

What could be considered referents for the construction and maintenance of Indigenous collective memory, and how have these processes and events raised hopes for redemption or conversely ended in rejection and further marginalization? For Indigenous Australians, and to a lesser degree Muslims in Australia, there are historical and contemporary referents for gaining collective identities within the construct of cultural trauma in Australia.

In recent times the Constitutional and legislative changes as a result of the 1967 referendum , giving power to the government to enact laws for the benefit of Indigenous Australians and for inclusion in the Census serve as useful starting points for a more optimistic outlook. Yet the Mabo and Wik land rights cases eventually ending in a 'winding back' of rights incorporated in the Howard government's 'Ten point Plan' These events raised hopes for greater recognition, economic independence and cultural status but also exposed the cycle of crushed expectations.

Rejection after raised hopes is traumatic not only because of crushed expectations, but also because it necessitates a re-evaluation of the past and its meaning regarding individual and collective identity and its relation to Australian society (Eyerman, 2004: 80). Historical references to exclusion, segregation, dispossession, extermination, genocide, and denial of economic and political rights are drawn upon to 'remember' and maintain a collective memory. The notion of cultural trauma implies that direct experience is not a necessary condition for the appearance of trauma, yet the acute socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous people feeds into the narrative loop defining group membership and collective memory.

Islam as a locus of healing?

How does Indigenous involvement with Islam qualify in terms of indelible memories associated with 'forward looking' or redemptive strategies of collective cultural resistance and re-empowerment? This question alludes to the potential reparative power of Islam to help 'heal' the destructive effects of collective cultural trauma. Sztompka (2000: 453) names cultural disorientation, as "when the normative and cognitive context of human life and social actions loses its homogeneity, coherence, and stability, and becomes diversified or even polarized into opposite cultural complexes." Cultural disorientation would seem to 'best fit' the experience of Indigenous collectives spanning the history of European occupation in Australia. Decades of disruption and uncertainty promote the collective and culturally interpreted experience as traumatizing. Some of the attributes of Islam have the potential to calm the effects of cultural disorientation, and the incoherence and instability of rapid social change. While recognising rapid social change is potentially trauma producing, some communities are better equipped than others to manage its effects. Islam in Australia has a legitimate role in providing structured, stable social, cultural and religious frameworks. Some of the enabling aspects of Islam include:

- Islam as a global life-world projects as a stable, uniform, structured, and guiding institution.
- Islam welcomes ethnic difference and is tolerant of other cultures and religious beliefs.
- Islam provides an alternative to Western and Christian oriented frameworks that some Indigenous people may experience as causal links in the dispossession and alienation aspects of social life.
- Australian Islam as both a religion and a communal institution provides valuable social capital.
- Islam and Muslims face similar discriminatory patterns and are perceived by some as 'outsiders' or 'other.' These similarities create a form of 'brotherhood' or 'sisterhood' where comparative cultural trauma is mutually understood.

These Islamic attributes provide positive adaptive gateways for redirecting the symptoms of cultural trauma and offer potential improvement for individuals and groups within incongruent and stressful cultural conditions. There is also the potential for more radical or counter-cultural aspects of expression to emerge as did with Black Nationalism in America. The fact that the West has made global Islam its focus of scrutiny, and that many see Islam as a powerful structure, may encourage the disaffected and oppressed to become involved. This is an empowering process for those who have had little if any opportunity for political expression.

Conclusion

Two groups in Australian society provided examples for an examination of the dynamics associated with oppression and resistance partly due to their status as ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities and their relation to long-held constructs of Australian identity. The concept of collective cultural trauma was applied to question if Indigenous Australians' relation with Islam based on common collective memories of oppression would be feasible. Without empirical evidence to test this hypothesis some circumstantial evidence exists to suggest such an alliance would not only be possible but in any likelihood would be mutually beneficial. As this paper forms part of a larger research project investigating Indigenous Australian's involvement with Islam, a more complete and comprehensive understanding is expected.

Indigenous Australians as an identifiable cultural group have long been seen as defending a position of unique importance in Australian identity. The degree to which Indigenous people appear as oppressed, and suffer from cultural trauma, is reflected in the continuous management, administration, control, and surveillance by governments, legislation, and the legal system. Socio-economic disadvantage is a key social indicator applied to the Indigenous population generally. The current status of Indigenous people remains enmeshed in the definitions by others, except in the cases where extraordinary effort has produced evidence of self-help and conformity to mainstream values. The potential for continued and inventive ways for Indigenous Australians to re-claim and assert empowerment strategies remains optimistic if the symptoms of collective cultural trauma are first recognised then addressed. Islam and the Muslim umma in Australia would appear to offer one possible solution.

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