Migration, Continuity and Creativity in the Tropics

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Tropical Australia is a multicultural mosaic fashioned by various waves of migration and ancient Indigenous cultures. Migration, cultural diversity and multiculturalism have been at the heart of nation building in Australia. Tropical Australia represents a unique blend of cultures, landscapes and traditions. Stories of migration, by the host society and by the immigrants, themselves are embedded with celebratory and fearful narratives. Immigrants to Tropical Australia have used their culture, arts, food and handcrafts as the initial point of building bridges with the society they found themselves transposed into. The early policies of multiculturalism were founded on recognition of cultural practice. This paper explores the role of creativity and multicultural arts in contemporary Tropical Australia from an enriching or a critical perspective. It is argued that the role of multicultural arts has been under-estimated in Australia generally. The building of a pluralistic and inclusive society requires genuine representation (and voice) of all groups, shared experiences and a narrative that supports a deeper understanding of diversity. Using examples from tropical Australia, the paper posits that multicultural arts and creativity are important elements of identity development across generations of immigrant families and communities, legacy transmission and cultural preservation, social cohesion, social inclusion and citizenship and civic participation.

> *The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there...*(Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, begins by quoting L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*)

History of human kind is full of stories of migration- people have always moved, either voluntarily or by force. Australia is a country of immigrants and issues of immigration, ethnicity, and cultural diversity form have formed the debates of our nation building. Over 6.5 million migrants have come to Australia since the end of World War II DIAC (2007). This mosaic of cultures has created a nation unique in its diverse composition. Australia is known as a multicultural country with over 40 percent of its population being either an immigrant or the child of an immigrant. Tropical Australia (without entering into a debate about the geography of Australian Tropics) is unique in its landscapes, psyches and cultures. It is also a place of cultural diversity, with some areas where people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds make up significant percent of the population. For example, the three states which comprise Tropical Australia are culturally diverse: in Queensland 17percent of the state was overseas born, over 33percent had one parent born overseas, in Northern Territory 14 percent overseas born, in Western Australia 27 per cent born overseas. Key cities of Tropical Australia are culturally diverse such as 22 percent of

Darwin's and 17 percent of Cairn's population being born overseas (ABS 2006). We also need to acknowledge that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are also multicultural. However, we recognise Indigenous Australians as the original owners of Australia and have a distinct status as the First Nations Peoples and therefore, do not, include them with waves of immigrants who have come to Australia over the last 200 years.

In multicultural societies such as Australia, discourses on 'race' and culture have formed the basis of nation building and has determined who is included and who is considered the "other" (Stokes 1997, Vasta and Castles 1996). Castles et.al (1988) point out that Australian national identity has been forged on a process of exclusion and racism against Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities. Policies of multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s were an attempt to use cultural difference as a way to gain leverage for state recognition for minorities, resource allocation and equality. The new liberal forms of multiculturalism that has emerged in the 1990s and the post 2000 period question the validity of such claims and separates out issues of social justice and equality from that of cultural difference. The rhetoric of multiculturalism tends to suppress heterogeneity and constructs culture and ethnicity as particular labels. There is a constant tension between tolerance and the tolerated (ethnic groups). Thus, this process is one of 'othering' where the ethnic communities are on the outside, appearing to create binary relationships between 'ethnic communities' and 'Australian society' as if the two are mutually exclusive. In public discourse there is a projection of dual images of Australia : one that is accepting and kind and the other than is intolerant and unkind.

Migration involves movement from one cultural context into another. People move with their histories and cultures. This often involves translation and change. Integration of immigrants is a dynamic process and involves the interface of the social, psychological and political dimensions of the person/family entering Australia and the society that receives them. Many factors of family life are renegotiated subject to the pressures of the new life. People create meaning out of the context in which events occur. Consequently an experience of migration always involves a strong subjective component of people's lived experiences and their reaction to the new environment.

When people arrive in Australia there is a stage in which they adjust or settle. The term *settlement* refers to the period following an immigrant's arrival in a new country (Cox 1996). Studies indicate that immigrants and refugees face barriers to accessing services and resources throughout the settlement stages: cultural, physical, language, psychological and geographical access issues become serious. Key issues is settlement include loss of social capital, loss of social networks, impacts on family relationships, identity negotiation, intercultural relationships and racism/social exclusion (Babacan 2006, Castles & Davidson 2000, Adelman et. al 1994). For many first generation immigrants there is a sense of loss, grief and nostalgia. The subjective elements of individuals' lives such as notions of nostalgia, belonging, and identity need to be situated in social, historical and cultural locales of individuals as these change and alter based on the broader social, cultural and economic considerations. Elements of pre-migration culture are recreated in their new environment, albeit selectively (Hirsh 2003). What is included, what is left out and reshaped is determined not only by factors in the present but also by factors in the past that are triggered by memories and the nature of linkages and social networks.

Tropical Australia represents a unique blend of cultures, landscapes and traditions. Stories of migration, by the host society and by the immigrants, themselves are embedded with celebratory and fearful narratives. Immigrants to Tropical Australia have used their culture, arts, food and handcrafts as the initial point of building bridges with the society they found themselves transposed into. The early policies of multiculturalism were founded on recognition of cultural practice. This paper explores the role of creativity and multicultural arts in contemporary Tropical Australia from an enriching or a critical perspective. It is argued that the role of multicultural arts has been underestimated in Australia generally. The building of a pluralistic and inclusive society requires genuine representation (and voice) of all groups, shared experiences and a narrative that supports a deeper understanding of diversity. Using a case study across four generations in Tropical Australia, the paper posits that multicultural arts and creativity are important elements of identity development across generations of immigrant families and communities, legacy transmission and cultural preservation, social cohesion, social inclusion and citizenship and civic participation.

Identity, Creativity and Family Legacy

In contemporary societies, defining identities is not an easy task. The tensions over multiculturalism involve the conflict over the relationship between democracy, citizenship rights and culture and identity and the politics of representation and voice. Historically, people's lives were tightly mapped out according to their position in the social order and identities were more fixed and stable based on hierarchy, caste or religion (Vaughan and Hogg 2002). Today, identities are more varied and have their origins in a vast array of different social relationships that form or have formed the anchoring points for their lives, ranging from close personal relationships with family and friends, through relationships and roles defined by work, ethnicity, race, culture, gender and nationality (Linville 1985). Barth (1981) reveals the complexity of ethnic identity by making reference to three levels (micro, median and macro) that are interconnected. At the *micro* level, there is the process of self-ascription of ethnicity from an individual point of view. At the *median* level, there is the creation of shared group identities, including the process of categorisation and/or stereotyping as well as an awareness of the instrumental and symbolic aspects of ethnicity. The *macro* level takes account of the process of ascription of identity from external forces such as those imposed by the state. Identities emerge within the play of specific modalities of power in each society and are the product of marking difference and exclusion (Hall 2000, Isin and Wood 1999). Identity is about 'belonging' and points out what we have in common with others and what differentiates us. Identity is two pronged: self-perception and perception by others. It is not simply imposed but can be chosen by the individual or the group, and actively used within particular social contexts and constraints. The other side of identity is the perception of others. Stereotyping by dominant groups and repression can occur in society. Against dominant representations of 'others', identity can offer a tool for resistance (Bulmer and Solomos 1998).

Identity gives one a sense of personal location, and provides a stable core of one's individuality and his/her values. It is also about complex relationships with others. Each person lives with a variety of potentially contradictory identities and which identity is used and when depends on a host of factors. Jenkins (1996) notes that "although ethnicity can be understood as a primary social identity, its salience, strength and manipulability are situationally contingent (1996: 813) and "it is always socially constructed" (pp. 813-814).

Upon settlement and establishment, the degree to which one identifies with their own cultural origins can vary depending on how favourable the context is for difference and the level of pressure to assimilate.

The migration experience is a process where the past exerts a continuing influence in the present. The responses to displacement caused by migration triggers a range of feelings including fear, nostalgia, anguish, exile, trauma, sense of loss longing for the homeland, on the one hand, and the need to adjust, assimilate or integrate and to connect globally, on the other. This has an impact on successive generations due to narratives told by individuals and parents in the family and in communities. It influences the way children are brought up as ethnic communities are forged in the post-migration country. Some of the factors that influence transmission of values include personal characteristics of the first -generation (such as education, age, gender), family interaction variables (such as, parenting styles, approaches to discipline and nature of marital relationships) and social environment (such as assimilationist pressures, oppression, loss of economic status, presence of other community members) (Babacan 2005, Bertelli 1985). Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that the culture of first generations is fixed and unchanging (Gans 1994).

The family is one of the main institutions of society. Virtually everyone, in all societies, is brought up in a family context. Families are places where the young are nurtured, where socialization occurs and where inter-generational legacies are transmitted. Migration impacts continue over generations. Families stay connected over-time through inter-generational transmission of legacies. Legacies help family members articulate family identity, learn more about family history and provide succeeding generations with information about the family culture and ethnicity. Transmission of legacies leads to cultural continuity. But these are selective processes and depend upon favourable conditions. (Merali 2004, Babacan 2005). As family is the structure for negotiation and development of identity and connection to the broader society, multicultural families can be sites of conflict, tension and stress (Koroma et.al. 2002). These processes revolve around the tensions of difference and continuity, managing hybridity and the reconciliation of 'being in-between'.

Understanding the experiences of second/third-generation identity is complex. The process of migration has an important impact on family and the kinship relationships. Migration laws tend to break up traditional family structures, reduce family support structures and limit the connection between generations. However, it is well known that migration experiences of parents continue to exert influence in the present. The second- generation grow up with cultural references to their tradition, often without a firsthand experience of traditional family life in the country of origin of parents. Over a number of generations there is mixed levels of awareness of the impact of the migration experience on the older members of their family. Even in one family it is possible to have younger and older generations of siblings who are subject to different historical milieu. It is also difficult to separate out generational impacts from migration impacts. Burnley (2001) argues that there is less identification in ethnic heritage in third and subsequent generations although others argue this is not the case.   For example, Wilson (2008) points out that Italian Australian narratives often depict cultural maintenance and negotiation in the third generation.

Cultural Expression and Art

Cultural expressions by minorities have gained international recognition over the last two decades. According to Chalmers (1996) art is a powerful, pervasive force that helps to shape our attitude, beliefs, values and behaviours. Cultural expression is recognised now as an important element of tangible and intangible aspects of life and forms a significant attribute of a person's wellbeing. UNESCO's *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expression* states that

Parties shall endeavour to create in their territory an environment which encourages individuals and social groups: (a) to create, produce, disseminate, distribute and have access to their own cultural expressions, paying due attention to the special circumstances and needs of women as well as various social groups, including persons belonging to minorities and indigenous peoples (UNESCO, article 7.1).

Cultural aspects of places, objects and traditions that have special value for future generations as well as for current individuals and community (Nasser 2007). These relate to the question of conservation and identity, examined through the lenses of 'historical interpretation' and 'imbued value' (Nasser 2007:20). Pointing to the importance of creativity, Desai (1995) argues that cultural identity through art productions is a process rather than a historical fact. She stresses that cultural identity "has to be learnt and this learning does entail a rediscovery of hidden histories, traditions, and cultural expressions" (p. 144). Cultural expressions via the medium of art enables deeper forms of communication and gives substance to shared meaning and values and instils shared identity, heritage and belonging (Clarke 1996).

The role of art in healing and personal and community development is well documented (van Lith et al 2012). Art making is seen as an opportunity to express oneself imaginatively, authentically, and spontaneously, experiences that, over time, can lead to personal fulfilment, emotional reparation, and transformation. This view also holds that the creative process, in and of itself, can be a health-enhancing and growth-producing experience (Malchiodi 2006).

Case studies in Tropical Australia

In-depth interviews were conducted across four generations using open ended and semi structured questions, in one ethnic community as a case study. Other studies were also conducted involving a multicultural group, however, the case study is presented in this paper.

The research approach adopted was a *social constructionist approach* which posits that social reality is constructed and made real through subjective meaning (Flick, 2002). Thus lives and experiences of artists were accepted as varied and could not fit into a single law-like research structure. The research also drew from ethnography, which involves immersion in the lives of the people being studied and the placing of phenomenon in their social and cultural context (Lewis, 2003). Ethnography is useful in understanding complex human societies facets of life such as culture, kinship, and relationships (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). Vidich and Lyman (2000:38) note that Ethnography is 'born out of concern to understand the Other'. The role of the researcher in this process was as facilitator, mediator, translator, traveller, organiser, and orchestrator of knowledge (Rosaldo, 1993).

The research questions aimed at exploring a number of themes: how was identity perceived across the generation and how did the art forms they engaged with contribute to identity formation.

 Findings

The following section presents the findings from the case study across the generations of the Kurdish family. The art form was weaving and it was primarily the women who engaged in this form of creativity although it was noted that the men assisted with building looms and providing advice.

Case Study 1: The first generation comprised of grandmother (G1a) and mother (G1b). They were refugees and were recognised by United Nations as refugees and settled in Australia. Both the grandmother and mother were illiterate in their own language. They also did not speak English. They both witnessed the loss of family members by oppressive regimes and were in a state of grief and suffering from trauma. Both women were skilled weavers and this was a source of income in their country. In Australia this was not possible as it was too costly to sell the product created, so the skill was used recreationally and culturally. The weaving involved traditional patterns and these were imbued with meaning about their life, nature and culture.   They identified that weaving was an inherent part of their life, the colours, the natural dyes and the patterns were all intertwined with their sense of self.

Upon migration the weaving gave them strength. It was inherently linked with their process of settlement, adjustment and healing. Some their comments were:

> *I get a sense of peace when making rugs (*grandmother)
> *My pain is woven in each stitch* (mother)
> *It is our way, it represents our culture, it represents me* (mother)
> *I feel stronger when I am doing this, it enables me to regain my loss* (grandmother)
> *I do not have the natural dyes for my wool, I use acrylic wool from Kmart* (mother)

Thus, creativity, healing and adjustment were direct and linked for the first generation.

Case Study 2: The second generation (G2) was the daughter of 'the mother' and granddaughter of the women in Case Study 1.   When the daughter came to Australia she was 5 years old. Although she was born overseas we have classified her here as second generation, the scope of this paper does not enable the discussion about what constitutes second generation.   The daughter was highly traumatised at having lost her father and said she 'was confused about the migration at the time'. She noted how negotiated many aspects of her new life in Australia and took a long time for her to learn English.

The daughter was introduced to weaving and has memories of women weaving in their home country.   She identified that weaving was very important to her and the creative process was integrally linked with stories about her family, where they came from, their particular place and clan.   She identified that she learnt the weaving skills and the stories from mother and grandmother and it was a good time to spend with mother and grandmother.   She stated that

> *I understood about myself and place in the world*

> *The weaving gives me strength to this day*
> *The patterns and the stories are an integral part of who I am*

Creativity via the weaving made an important contribution to the identity and settlement of the second generation.

Case Study 3: The third generation (G3) was the daughter of the woman in Case Study 2. She was born in Australia and did not speak Kurdish. She had rejected being Kurdish or 'Middle Eastern' in her teens and wanted to be 'Australian'. With very few Kurdish people in Tropical Australia, there was not much of a community to relate to. G3 stated that she had "no interest in rugs although she saw them being made and have had them in their house". She had a general awareness of them but did not engage with weaving or creativity in any way. She grew up with a cultural reference to the weaving indirectly but was rejecting it. She pointed out that she did not interact with her great grandmother about her experiences and her stories and she feels this as a "loss of self". In her 20s she has taken an interest but feels that some of her cultural heritage has been lost to her. She is now trying to develop the weaving skills and talking to her mother and grandmother more regularly to learn and share. For G3, the creativity is about "rediscovery" of cultural heritage and identity. It is also about working through a sense of loss.

Case Study 4: the fourth generation (G4) is the daughter of G3. She says that most of her growing life she did not have a reference to any Kurdish identity as her mother (G3) had rejected her own Kurdish heritage. She notes that "we know we are of Kurdish heritage but do not have cultural practice". She points out that they grew up with the finished products of the weaving such as rugs, bags and so on, particularly in their grandmother's house but did not understand the history, the stories or the patterns. She also did not really understand the family history of the Kurdish people and how her family members were refugees. While she is not learning weaving skills, she is trying to 'catch up' on the family cultural heritage. She feels that while some skills have been lost across the generations others have been gained such as music.

Discussion and Analysis

The past is important in coming to terms of the present. It is important with respect to continuity, identity and self-understanding: "From adopted children to immigrants and refugees, all people need to know from where they come in order to be able to give something to the present. The past needs to be respected, the stories need to be *told*" (Dell'oso, 1989: 100-1).
Nasser (2007) argues that there is an act of interpretation of history for an individual as they seek to know their past and these acts as a psychological reference point. Individual and cultural practices are reinvented in new contexts and can be used in negotiating belonging and otherness (Gans 1979, Babacan 2005). The exploration of self and past is better facilitated via creative mediums such as dance, music, poetry, writing and so on and can enable a better understanding of ourselves and place in the world. Transmission of legacies ensures cultural continuity across families, generations and communities. Cultural identity is learnt and rediscovered via histories, traditions, expression and reinvention. Any acts of cultural preservation and practice -narratives "represent a conscious effort to transmit a [...] cultural heritage that is articulated through acts of personal and collective memory" (Seyhan

2000:12). Desai (1995:5) emphasizes culture as a process is constantly in the process of transformation, redefinition, and negotiation and posits that "art provides the context and material for the construction of individual subjectivity and collective identities".

What we observe through the case studies is the complexity of the processes of cultural transmission and the dynamic nature of culture. Culture is changing but is resilient and practiced in different ways across generations. It is critical to understand and recognise hybrid and dynamic process of cultural change in families and communities. Equally important is the role of different art forms in mediating the transformation of culture and fostering a confidence, belonging and positive identity. For this reason it is very important to support multicultural art as part of community –nation building and social capital.
The generational impact of cultural change requires a deep understanding of individuals, ethnic communities and broader societal factors. Vasta(1992) argues that many of the second generation grow up with the experience of 'cultural ambivalence' which, during the uncertainties of adolescence, can provide the basis for severe conflicts between parents and children. As adults, the second generation become 'cultural brokers' who, in a variety of ways, represent their communities and negotiate Australian institutions as well as socio-political and cultural practices (Vasta 1992:155). This study confirmed this with second and third generations acting as cultural brokers and third and fourth generations having cultural ambivalence in adolescence but becoming more engaged in adulthood. For the first generation, culture, identity and belonging are strongly connected to settlement and migration.

Conclusion

This study showed that identity was important and was linked with longing, belonging and inclusion across generations. Identity gives one a sense of personal location, and provides a stable core of one's individuality and his/her values. It is also about complex relationships with others and interplays at micro, median and macro levels (Barth 1981). Identity offers a particular focus on a 'moment' in what has been called the 'circuit of culture' (du Gay et.al. 1997). Through the circuit of culture, identity is produced, consumed and regulated within culture, creating meanings by adopting symbolic systems of representations. Artistic and creative mediums facilitate the creation of these meanings across generations. Supporting multicultural artistic expressions are supportive of building strong communities and nation.

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