Culture Maintenance and Identity among Members of the Druze Community in South Australia

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Abstract

The paper investigates the cultural values and identity of Druze community members in South Australia. The conceptual framework and approach to the study is provided by Humanistic Sociology, according to which cultural and social phenomena can only be fully understood if they are studied from the point of view of the participants (Smolicz, 1999: 283–308). The data for the present research were gathered in several intensive interview sessions with a small group of participants of Druze origin combined with the participant observations of one of the authors who is also of Druze origin. The study demonstrates the successful establishment of the Druze community in South Australia and their general maintenance of Druze cultural values and identities. In addition to the impact of modernisation on traditional values and practices, such as marriage and family values, the research identifies changes in cultural and political values of the Druze community in South Australia as a result of the impact of more recent arrivals.

Key words

Culture maintenance   cultural identity   cultural values   Druze religion

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The Druze who have maintained a presence in South Australia since the late 19th century represent a relatively small cultural group which currently includes some 450 families[i]. Like their Phoenician forefathers, the Druze travelled around the globe and made homes in far away lands. Originating in the eleventh century from the Shiha Muslim sect, Druzism is a philosophical movement based in the Fatimid Caliphate and influenced by Greek philosophy, Gnosticism and Christianity, among others (Betts, 1988:19). Druze identity is represented by the five colours that form the Druze flag or the five-pointed star. Each colour represents a luminary or prophet. The star is headed by the green colour which represents the foremost prophet, *Al Aql* (the universal mind or intelligence) who encompasses and dominates all of the other prophets. The red represents *Al Nafs*, the Universal Soul. The yellow represents *Al Kalima*, the Word. The blue represents *Al-Sābiq*, the proceeding or the cause. The white represents *Al-Tāli*, the following or effect. These represent the beliefs or values of faith which are held within the Druze community.

During the twentieth century, the Druze homelands in Lebanon and Syria have witnessed times of political, social and economic turmoil which have prompted a Druze diaspora. Australia governments, at various times, have responded to the Middle East crises by facilitating the migration of people of Lebanese and Druze origin. The unstable political state of affairs in the Middle East has been reflected in the names which the South Australian Druze community has adopted from time to time to reflect its changing identity. Initially the Druze joined other denominations in the Ottoman Association of South Australia founded in the early 1900s, and a subsequent unofficial Lebanese organisation founded in 1903, until the formation of a Druze association in 1925.

Originally known as the 'Syrian Druze Association', the name of the association was changed, as a result of Lebanon gaining its independence in 1943, to the 'Australian Lebanese Druze Association'. However, in response to an influx in the 1960s of Druze migrants originating from other countries, the name changed to the 'Australian Druze Association' the name by which it is still known today. It was believed this would facilitate the maintenance of unity within the Druze community serving thus as an umbrella association of people of Lebanese, Syrian, and other origins. In the 1990s the South Australian Lebanese Women's Association (SALWA) was formed as a unified organisation, uniting Lebanese of all denominations (Migration Museum, History Trust of South Australia, 1995).

Early Druze migrants to South Australia established a foundation for succeeding migrants. The early Druze migrants worked hard and integrated well into the Australian community, yet many returned to their village of origin to marry and return to Australia to establish their families (Rasheed, 1993). The family was valued, and pride expressed in their children's achievements. Whilst many of the first generation Druze often lived in rural areas, the second generation became more urbanised, establishing themselves in either rural centres or in Adelaide. Although third generation Lebanese Druze maintained certain family traditions, there was an increasing sense of cultural remoteness from Lebanon and Lebanese identity. A majority of third and fourth generation Lebanese speak only a few colloquial words or phrases in Arabic. They have very little knowledge, or interest, in Lebanese history and politics. Australia's public ideology to assimilate immigrant communities influenced many Lebanese to adopt Anglo-Australian values and attitudes (Jupp, 2001: 557). These same attitudes were reflected in the interview sessions

with the present study group and in participation observation with the Druze community in Adelaide.

By the 1970s many Druze migrants, in particular the refugee migrants, were joining the already established Druze community in South Australia. With the majority of Druze being of Lebanese descent, the Druze in South Australia have always held a close affiliation with Lebanon. Whilst Australia had no involvement in the Lebanese civil war or any historic fear of the Lebanese, the events in the Middle East generated political controversy among Lebanese immigrants. This has caused some third and fourth generation Druze to distance themselves from the controversial homeland of their forefathers, as they see their families have been well established in Australia. Indeed, interview responses from members of the Druze community have revealed that many of the established Druze community (pre 1960s) consider that the new migrating Druze have a different character, believing that those recent arrivals (post 1970s) hold a presumptuous attitude toward Australia's welfare system. After the 1990s, Druze migration to South Australia eased off considerably, largely due to Australian government's immigration restrictions.

According to Jupp (2001: 557), the cultural values of Druze migrants may be viewed in a similar light to that of the broader Lebanese community which emphasises the family was the core of Lebanese identity. This is linked to other family identifiers such as food preparation, hospitality, respect for family elders, and the maintenance of close family ties. Lebanese hospitality to guests and visitors is also considered important, since the extent to which a family has the ability to entertain, as well as who they have in their household, is a measure of their status and reputation. The role of Lebanese women

is pivotal in the production and maintenance of cultural values, especially in terms of fostering unity within their own families and linking the various families in the communities. The commitment of Druze women, in their traditional roles as wives, mothers and grandmothers, is expressed through the preparation of food for family gatherings and festivals, caring for children and grandchildren and caring for the sick. These situations provide the opportunity for the cultivation of cultural values and identity to family members and the community (Jupp 2001: 557).

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

From the perspective of humanistic sociology (Znaniecki, 1963, 1968, 1998; Smolicz and Secombe, 1981; Smolicz, 1999) the culture of a given group is conceptualized in terms of the shared meanings or *group* systems of cultural values. A collective identity develops when group members are aware they share similar attitudes towards certain group cultural values. Such values make up the group's *ideological system* which regulates the principles of judgment and the ways of acting that group members are supposed to accept and abide by. Group members are able to construct *personal ideological systems* from the attitudes by which they evaluate and assign meaning to new and old cultural and social values. The ideological orientation toward group cultural systems, such as language, religion or family, is indicative of the extent to which individuals identify with the group's cultural heritage.

In culturally plural societies like Australia, two or more corresponding sets of group values for each aspect of culture (language, ideology, religion, family and so on) are typically available to individuals born into minority ethnic cultures, as well as to those

of the dominant or Anglo–Australian cultural group who enter into some form of social relationship with members of other ethnic groups (Smolicz, 1999: 129). Furthermore, the ideological system of each ethnic group constructs almost invariably includes judgments about the value of its culture as a distinctive entity, and hence about the extent and nature of cultural and social interaction that should take place between itself and various other groups. In some cases such beliefs are elevated to the status of core values and act as symbols of group identity. A group's resilience in maintaining its unique identity generally depends on the degree to which its heritage interacts with new cultural inputs. Most importantly, the outcome of such interaction often depends on the extent of overlap and mutual compatibility between the cultural values emanating from the minority and majority groups involved but also between newer and more established members of the same cultural communities (Chiro, 2003; Chiro and Smolicz, 1997; Smolicz and Secombe, 1985, 1989).

One of the challenges of data gathering for this research has been the limited number of studies on Druze culture in diaspora and the sceptical reaction that previous (English language) studies on the Druze faith have created within homeland and diasporic Druze communities (Najjar 1973). Indeed guardians of Druzism have been reluctant to reveal its contents concerned as they were that exposure would lower its dignity and standing. It is a common practice among Druze devotees to withhold knowledge of the faith from the majority of their own male members, admitting only the true, tried and upright into its sanctum[ii].

The ten participants in the present study included members of the Druze community who have either migrated to South Australia or are descendents of early

settlers who originated from different areas of Lebanon and Syria. The participants were selected on the basis of age, gender, occupations, vintage of migration and community involvement. The data gathered by extensive interviews were categorised into concrete facts and cultural facts. Concrete facts take into consideration information on the participants, such as gender, birthplace, age, level of education, occupation, details of migration, number of siblings, marital status, level of spoken and written Arabic, and the religious and social activities they participate in. The analysis of concrete facts provides a point of reference for the interpretation of cultural facts which include the expressions of knowledge of whose attitudes and values are being studied and the status of their social, economic and cultural situation (Smolicz and Secombe, 1981: 26).

The cultural data take into account the expressions of the participant's attitudes and aspirations, as well as an assessment on society in the context of the participant's own situation and social role. Cultural data gathered from the thoughts, feelings and aspirations of the participants about themselves, present indirect evidence of group values. Cultural facts are as valid and significant as concrete facts in influencing the actions of an individual (Smolicz and Secombe, 1981: 28). It is through this method that it is possible to evaluate the extent to which the Druze cultural values and identity are being maintained in South Australia, and the degree to which it was being modified and adapted to the Australian situation (Smolicz and Secombe, 1981).

Participant observation, whereby researchers are able to reflect and critically engage with their own participation within the ethnographic frame (Tedlock, 2008), allowed the researchers an insight into the life-worlds of the participants as they interact and assign meanings to their everyday actions and environments. According to Smolicz

and Secombe (1981) it is also useful if researchers themselves originate from the group under consideration and are familiar with its culture and socio-historical contexts. This was the case in the present study and has provided the opportunity to gather and interpret information from an internal group perspective. The analysis which follows examines the cultural values and identity of participants within the context of the Druze community in South Australia.

Evaluations of Cultural Identity

The major identifying value among the Druze is their religious belief system. All participants were proud of their Druze origins and particularly of the Tawhid faith that regards communication with God a personal activity requiring no intermediaries (Alamuddin and Starr, 1980: 30). When participants were asked to evaluate their cultural identity, nine out of ten responded that they embraced the faith's values and beliefs which included high morals, pure heart, kindness, respect for others and upholding the seven commandments[iii]. The social and moral values of the Druze culture of which the participants are most proud include: honesty, generosity, unity, faith, sincerity, origins, respect for elders, respecting others' beliefs, faith as the foundation of life, language, dignity and reputation.

A person is deemed Druze by birth (that is, having Druze parents or Druze father), by their upbringing and beliefs, by the way they treat others, by what they believe, what they wear and how they behave. As confirmed by Hamden's study (1985), the present participants also drew attention to the personal values prized by the Druze which include truthfulness and fidelity, courtesy and hospitality, respect, honour and dignity. They also

noted that there are two levels of Druze identity, the initiated and the uninitiated, with the former having been initiated into the religious teachings of the faith, therefore possessing a much higher expectation of conformity to ideal Druze values.

Family values were considered important by all participants of the study group. Many considered maintaining close family ties as part of respect towards family members. Another participant considered maintaining close family ties as part of one's personal strength, whilst another participant reported moving several hundred kilometres to settle close to her family. Another participant drew attention to each Druze member is considered being part of their greater family, which was verified when the researcher was welcomed into the homes of the participants and made to feel like part of their family.

According to Jupp (2001: 563), there is a tendency among the Druze, like their Lebanese counterparts, toward a patriarchal family system whereby sons occupy a preferred status and wives and daughters occupy a protected and subordinate position. The participants in the present study also support Jupp's (2001: 563) claim that in Australia the authority of the father and the protected position of the wife is challenged when the wife enters the work-force, travelling alone to work, mixing with other people at work and outside the family, and achieving some degree of personal and economic independence. As a consequence, according to one participant, the traditional values of family unity and respect for elders were diminishing among the Druze in today's society.

Endogamous marriages were generally held to be vitally important to the preservation of Druze identity in Diaspora and the maintenance of family and cultural unity. Since Druzism does not accept conversions into the faith, should a Druze marry outside the faith they remain Druze, but their partner cannot become Druze. Should a

man to marry outside the faith, his children would remain Druze, but should a woman marry outside the faith her husband and children can not considered Druze. When the Divine Call into the Druze faith was closed in the first half of the eleventh century, no new members were admitted and members could not cease being Druze. The marriage restrictions which forbid Druze marriages with outsiders permitted the sect to maintain its boundaries, and hence its identity.

Alamuddin and Starr (1980: 28) further assert that there is also no legitimate way in the eyes of the community that the Druze can give up their confession and join another faith. Accordingly endogamy within the sect has been the rule and intermarriage with members of other sects specifically prohibited. This can lead to friction within Diaspora communities between the established members and the more recently arrived members. For example, one participant reported that whilst their children were encouraged to be involved in the Druze community, her grandchildren had been rejected by members of the community because their mother was not Druze.

The sense of belonging to an extended family within the Druze community is reinforced by the widely held belief that all Druze are like brothers and sisters (Alamuddin and Starr, 1980). However, participants in the present study reported various levels of commitment to Druze community life. At different stages in their lives they reported having attended social and religious events, prayer, religious committee, representation of Druze in broader community, paying respects to families within the Druze community, attending Lebanese dancing, language classes and *hufflees* (parties). Many participants stated they had been encouraged by their parents and families to become involved in community activities.

While the maintenance of Druze culture was generally considered the duty of the parents, the teaching of religion and language is considered the responsibility of the community and in particular, specialist language teachers and the Sheikh. The Arabic language school and prayer classes held at the Druze hall has provided a more formal vehicle for the preservation of Druze culture, values and identity among the younger generations. Some participants also advised that they would take their children to Lebanon or Syria for extended periods to enable to provide the children with a good appreciation of their heritage, the language and the culture.

Whilst some participants considered themselves Australian Druze, others acknowledged that they were additionally of either Lebanese or Syrian descent, although one participant identified themselves as Australian Lebanese with Druze being a secondary part of their life. Another participant commented that they were proud to be Australian, signifying the acceptance and adaptation into the broader Australian community. One participant of Syrian origin revealed a feeling of rejection amongst the predominant Lebanese Druze community, especially in the Druze Hall. The general perception is that *nehna libneynee* (we are Lebanese), thereby ignoring or denying the Syrian Druze identity. Such national and political divisions relate to two deep seated factions with the Druze community: the Yazbaki and the Jumblati. These are long standing clans that have caused political divisions within Druze communities in Lebanon, Australia and around the world. The division can be highlighted in times of political turmoil, causing rifts between families belonging to the opposing faction (Alamuddin and Starr, 1980: 27).

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates the successful integration of the Druze community in South Australia and their maintenance of Druze cultural values and identities. Their core cultural identifiers rotate around the moral values associated with the Druze faith (high morals, pure heart, kindness, respect for others and upholding the seven commandments). In their family values, the Druze emphasise patriarchy (although this is weakening), close family ties, respect for the elderly, family standing and maintenance of face/honour. Endogamy continues to be the preferred practice not only among the more recently arrived members of the community but also some of the longer established families. This attitude can result in social pressure on those who have chosen exogamous marriages who at time can be made to feel like outsiders. The divide between "pioneers" and latter-day Druze members is also evident at the political level and the greater engagement of the recent arrivals with events in their homelands.

The Druze community in South Australia has undertaken numerous activities over the years to preserve its cultural identity. The establishment of the Druze Hall, the first in the world to embrace Druze of diverse national origins, is indicative of the strength of the Druze community in South Australia. Monthly faith evenings provide an opportunity for discussions and forums for all members of the community. The longer established participants also drew attention to the respect that the Druze had achieved in South Australia as hard working, law abiding Australians.

The continuity of Druze identity in South Australia also appears reasonably secure for future generations. Teaching language and culture to the younger generations has led to closer links with Lebanon and Syria to learn more about their heritage. The Young

Druze Professionals (known as the YDP) actively promote and support social interaction within the community, whilst monthly faith forums provide members of the community an opportunity to understand and get closer to their faith. Arabic newspapers in Australia, satellite television offering direct television channels from Lebanon and the Middle-East, Arabic radio broadcasts, and the internet, now provide greater and more immediate information with a broader perspective. Additionally, third and fourth generation Druze members are increasingly embarking on travel to their ancestral homelands to gain a better perspective of the traditions and culture of the Druze.

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[i] It is difficult to ascertain the actual number of Druze living in Australia since the Australian Bureau o f Statistics does not consider Druzism a national identity. In the present study, data on the Druze in South Australia have relied on the information obtained from the Druze community, in particular the Druze Sheikh.

[ii] Personal communication received from Sheikh Shakeeb Rasheed, one of the oldest and longest serving Druze Sheikhs in South Australia. Sheikh Rasheed has gathered irreplaceable statistical data and family histories on the Druze in South Australia, as a result of his many years of involvement in religious and civic duties within the Druze community (Rasheed, 1993).

[iii] The seven commandments of the Druze faith are: A truthful tongue; cultivation and protection of the Brethren; Excision of fallacies and falsehood; Rejection of the villain and aggressor; adoration of the Lord (*al-Mawla*) in every era and at all times; Cheerful acceptance of whatever comes from Him; and spontaneous submission to His will and in all exigencies (Swayd, 1998).