CHAPTER 9

The Long Road Home: Indigenous Assyrian Christians of Iraq and the Politicisation of the Diaspora

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I was born before the earth and sun, I was born before the sunrise and the sunset, I have no death, I have no life. I am the star of Atour (‘the land of Assyria’) in the city of Atour gleaming, I am the god Ashur, I have been speaking for centuries. I am the light of all the peoples of the nation, I know I am slowly slowly disappearing, but no, a thousand times Atour will stay, and the history will remain for centuries. Atour will stay, and the tower will rise. It will never die.

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These words were spoken with passion and intensity at the opening of the Assyrian Genocide Memorial in Fairfield, Australia, in 2009. With these words echoing the *Epic of Gilgamesh* at such an event, the connections between trauma, nationalism, religion and indigeneity are inter-wound. Assyrians, like many self-professed indigenous peoples, have based their identity upon a combination of religious traditions, traumatic and violent narratives, and the effects of modern national configurations and dislocations. In many cases these factors are very much connected to and reflected in the modern practice of their religious tradition. For Assyrians, who see themselves as an indigenous people of Iraq, the 2003 American invasion of that country, and more recently the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL hereafter, also known as ISIS and the Islamic State) are part of an ongoing traumatic narrative that has resulted in reactionary political movements from the Assyrian diaspora and from within the homeland that Assyrians take to be theirs. In the wake of this cultural trauma, it is the manner in which Assyrians have used their indigenous status that should encourage academics to take seriously the side effects that our academic categorisations (such as ‘the indigenous’) have in the ‘real world,’ and to question the adequacy of these categories to effectively encapsulate and legitimise a variety of socio-religious manifestations. In this chapter I will briefly discuss Assyrian religious beliefs and where they contrast with the violence experienced as Assyrians: violence that is now memorised as trauma and defeat. I will then examine the Assyrian diaspora’s use of indigeneity (particularly in
The experience of compounded national and religious trauma has brought about the politicisation of the Assyrian diaspora, and the recent use of indigeneity within this context has further bolstered political justifications and traumatic reactions from these communities. The use of ‘indigenous religion’ throughout modern scholarship creates ambiguity when approaching the crossover between world religions and indigenous religion (Cox 2007, 62; Johnson 2005, 40–41). Tafjord has produced critical scholarship in an effort to tackle the issues surrounding our current taxonomical inconsistencies. In ‘Indigenous Religion(s) as an Analytical Category,’ Tafjord examines the current academic use of ‘indigenous religion’ and the way it is confused and melded with the religion of indigenous peoples, a remaining trait of the world religions paradigm (Tafjord 2013). He astutely outlines many problems in promoting ‘indigenous religion’ as an analytical category due to the scholarship from which it was derived (Tafjord 2013), finally he concludes that it fails to provide a workable taxonomy to encapsulate the variety of religious configurations that we continue to grapple with. This chapter will assess constrictions of history within the modern Assyrian community.

I approach the discussion of indigenous religion from two perspectives: firstly as an academic working in field of the study of religion, and secondly as an Australian Assyrian. Whilst my observations have their own inherent inconsistencies and contextual blind spots, my background nonetheless provides an opportunity to examine indigenous religion in a manner that is both politically contemporary, personal, and relevant to the present academic discussion. As a ‘member’ of the Australian Assyrian diaspora it is interesting to see the evolution of social needs and the politicisation of the diaspora due to homeland issues. Since my parents’ emigration from Iraq to Australia in 1968, there have been several waves of immigration from Iraq that have resulted in one of the largest Assyrian diaspora communities in the world developing mainly in the city of Sydney. My research into the Australian Assyrian diaspora focuses on the connection between nationalism and religion to the extent that they have amalgamated into an indivisible religious nationalism. The religious nationalism experienced in the Australian Assyrian diaspora has become politicised through many organisations in particular the Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA). This group demands the establishment of an autonomous region in Iraq,