

WEAVING TOGETHER:
AROHA AS CAPACITY AND WORK

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Note: This essay, pitched at a general (non-academic) audience, won the Maxim Institute Essay Competition in July 2019. It responded to a brief asking entrants to address the role of aroha and manaakitanga as frameworks for New Zealand's long-term policy and cultural response to the Christchurch Mosque attack. The essay is presented below, with added (theoretical, methodological, pedagogical, and applied) discussion questions for social anthropologists and cultural theorists to consider, at the end.

INTRODUCTION

On the 15th March 2019, fifty lives were violently ended in a place of peace. On this day New Zealand experienced a painful tear in the fabric of our collective story. However the white supremacist attack at Al Noor and Linwood mosques was difficult for another reason, too – it was possible because of, and drew attention to, other rips and tears that were *already* present in New Zealand Society. Now it requires active work to adjust the pattern, to weave a new story. In this essay I argue that this is the work of aroha, discussing how aroha and manaakitanga can function as a framework for considering a long-term response to the Christchurch terrorist attacks – through reflexive examination of our histories and institutions, and through recognising social action as part of the work of memory and healing.

MOVING FROM LOVE TO AROHA

Aroha was immediately apparent in the response to the Christchurch terrorist attack – the word was scrawled on paper hearts hung outside mosques, appeared on t-shirts, and was sent in messages attached to a flood of crowd-funding donations. As time rolls on the concern becomes: how fleeting is this surge of sentiment? What would it mean to embed aroha in New Zealand's

long term response? First we must know what we mean when we throw this word out into the air.

Aroha is sometimes translated as 'love'. But love is a word heavily tainted by western individualism. It is viewed as a feeling – an intimate, often involuntary emotional attachment to another individual. Aroha, however, is a culturally-grounded concept. Deeply embedded in Māori tikanga, it cannot be contained in this one word – involving all the senses, and being fundamentally and actively relational (Ryan 1997). In aroha we find the space for acknowledging the presence (aro) of the breath of life within others (haa) (Gray 2002). Aroha therefore comes from the centre of one's self, not as a feeling but as a capacity – a capacity for love, sympathy, compassion, charity and forgiveness (Ryan 1997). As such it can be a powerful part of relationships both within and between groups, and the intuitive reaching for this at a time of national distress may be exactly what we need, *if* we can see it for what it is, and set it to work.

THE PRIVILEGE OF SHOCK

'Aroha' may have surged as a popular public response to the attack, but it rode in on a wave of something else. Shock. 'This is not us' was the response of many. Descriptions of the attack as 'unthinkable' and the terrorist as 'evil', and a 'monster'. But there are wider social implications to such comments. Anthropological scholars have explained that projecting evil onto a specific person or group can be a way of 'allowing the dominant culture to preserve an image of itself as "pure" and "good"' (Magliocco 2003, 14). In New Zealand it has been easy to label this one person (the terrorist) or one group (those that explicitly identify as white supremacists) as evil, as a way of washing our hands. As a way of maintaining the comfortable image we have of ourselves as a tolerant, peaceful, utopia. This is an understandable response to an event that threatens this narrative. But while such a response may address and condemn this one horrific act, it distances the rest of us so completely from it that there is no room for growth.

There is a different and much harder way to see this situation. It does not negate the surge of 'they are us' rhetoric that has wrapped warmly around our vulnerable Muslim communities. But it reframes our relationship to the terrorist, by saying something rather frightening: 'he is also us'. Not a monster, but a human. We are not the first to wrestle with such thoughts. In 1961 Hannah Arendt, a philosopher and a German-Jewish emigrant, heard for herself the courtroom testimony of Adolf Eichmann – a Nazi bureaucrat who had coordinated the transport of millions of Jews to their execution, and professed to feel no sense

of responsibility or remorse for ‘following orders’ (Berenbaum 2003). The trial changed Arendt’s work forever, and she began to shape a controversial philosophy – that of the *banality* of evil. This theory emphasises how evil works not only through malicious thought, but by the very *un*-thinking-ness of many.

In New Zealand many of us have had the luxury of not thinking about racism or white supremacy before March 15th. In this way, shock is a privilege. As a number of people pointed out, while horrible, the mosque shooting was not a ‘shock’ as such to many minority communities, who were already all too aware of the racism active in New Zealand. Now it has blasted its way into a wider consciousness, let’s not just take the easy opportunity to decry one monster, but instead let’s pause and *think*. Let’s think about the instances of mundane or unintentional racism we are all part of, everyday – not just extreme and violent forms, but those embedded in science, in history, in institutions, in policies.

THE WOUNDED HEALER

Violence is a relational phenomenon – ‘challenged and supported through intricate networks that are constituted through uneven manifestations of power that are complexly gendered and generational in nature’ (Gadd 2015, 1034). The violence that flows out of racism is part of wider systems of *social* relations that extend beyond that individual. Such extreme violence in a holy place has made a specific wound on the Muslim community, whose grace and strength has also been notable. But even as we acknowledge the specific wound of this one event, we can also acknowledge that the wider social context in which this attack was planned and justified. The more entrenched and longstanding wounds it reveals – of white supremacist thought within our national history. It is painful to think about this, but ultimately less harmful than letting it fester.

In choosing to uncover this, we can become what theologian Henri Nouwen called ‘wounded healers’ – people who not only actively work to heal, but someone willing to ‘make his [or her] own wounds available as a *source* of healing’ (Nouwen 1979, xiv). His notion calls not for the glorification of individual suffering, but ‘for a constant willingness to see one’s own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition which all share’ (1979, 88). If we can truly acknowledge the March 15th attack as rising from these *shared* human conditions, then our shared and varied wounds – as victims, as bystanders, and casual perpetrators of white supremacy ourselves – can become a source of national healing.

LONG TERM AROHA AND THE WORK OF DECOLONISATION

When we move from trying to diagnose the specific wrongs that created a monster, to acknowledging the shared wrongs that we have participated in, the real shift begins. In this nation specifically, this requires acknowledging the white supremacist basis of our political, legal and social system – something intimately entangled with our colonial history. Colonisation involves a denial of any attribute of humanity, to the colonised (Fanon 1961). It involves the *internalisation* of racism (Memmi 1965). Decolonisation is therefore not simply what happens when we stop deliberately implementing racist policy. Rather decolonisation is an active stance. It is a ‘long game’ that looks at actively removing racist structures of thought and practice in bureaucratic, cultural, and linguistic systems (Smith 1991, 98). Such difficult work requires not only the feeling of love for a lucky few, but the recognition of the presence of the breath of life in all other people, and peoples. This recognition can be used to focus the work of decolonisation, in such areas as the prison system, where tangata whenua are grossly over-represented, or the child welfare system, and in ongoing issues of land rights and claims under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Department of Corrections 2019; Te Ao Māori News 2019).

In responding to the 2011 Utøya massacre, Norway drew from resources in the domestic violence sector, because of its shared relevance even though this terrorist attack was of course quite different in scope and context (Överlien and Hafstad, in Gadd 2014). In New Zealand, our *long-term* responses to the Christchurch attack can draw from the existing work from the relevant field of decolonisation by wonderful Māori and Pasifika scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Lily George (2017), Moana Jackson (2019) and so many more. These are people already and long since ‘*doing*’ things, rather than talking about or theorising change’ – and ready and equipped to teach the wider world about it (Massey University 2017). So although it is a big task, we are not starting from scratch. Their work already frames responses to the colonial and post-colonial conditions that are supporting contemporary offshoots of white-supremacist ideology in this part of the world. Imagine what might happen if this tragedy brings more attention and a wider circle of commitment to these efforts.

MANAAKITANGA AS AN EVERYDAY AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

A specialist on organisational responses to tragedy, Karl Weick says it is easy to get drawn into a long debate on causes and conditions, but ‘it is more difficult to view a traumatic event such as terrorism in hindsight and to trace potential positivity’ (2003, 68). Aroha is a form of *relational* care, through action (Rua

et al. 2017). It assumes the universe is abundance. Manaakitanga can be understood as the actioning of that abundance, visible in acts of caring, helping, hospitality, generosity, and respect. There are a lot of things that New Zealand has in abundance – a lot of sources of potential positivity. We can use this moment of national awareness to recognise our incredible capacity. At a community level, there is no need for us to limit the scope of our response to the needs of the victims of the Christchurch attack, to simply dealing with injuries and funeral costs. We have the capacity for more. At a national level, there is no need to limit the scope of our response to monitoring extremism. We have the capacity for more. In fact, risk-management approaches often make it more difficult to develop responses that acknowledge the social, educational, institutional and psychological complexity of situations through which terrorism emerges (Robinson 2002). As we do some tender work on old wounds as well as new ones, we can reach out of this new softness and self-awareness in a new way, to extend manaakitanga.

This is already happening in so many ways. There has been a resurgence of support for Shakti, a community nonprofit supporting migrant women of colour in situations of violence or discrimination (Shakti International 2019). The head of the Islamic Women's Council, Anjum Rahman, has founded the 'Inclusive Aotearoa Collective', bringing people together throughout the country for the purpose of creating a new national strategy on inclusiveness (Livingstone 2019). Mosques are running open days and all sorts of other activities, generously inviting the wider public into their communities at this time of grief, as an amazing example of the wounded healer – speaking forgiveness, enacting hospitality, in the midst of pain. There have been manifold opportunities for connection and action emerging across the country. Indeed at a national level, it is up to government bodies to keep up – investing their energies and their budget into areas where there is the capacity to do more for groups who fall through the gaps, in patterns that follow recognisable lines of ethnic inequality – including health, housing, and education, for a start! These are not only forms of action, but a way of setting the memories of this event to work, for the future.

RECONCEPTUALISING MEMORY AS ACTION

At a UN Security Council meeting on Terrorism in 2008, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared that 'the best response to a corrosive, malevolent ideology is a strong assertion of collective resistance' (cited in Aly 2013, 22). What does it look like to not only reject, but to actively resist? And to do so together? After tragic events, the public always finds ways to respond, with objects and actions, creating spaces in which to remember and grieve (Margry and Sánchez-Carretero

2013). Ana Milošević's study of the spontaneous memorialisation following of the 2016 terrorist attacks in Brussels, revealed how these processes can be an important part of healing, that cannot be hastened by the top-down establishment of 'official' memory (2017). In a similar study of responses to the 2002 Bali bombings, Australian counter-terrorist specialist Anne Aly observed that the creation of the Bali 'peace park' had over a longer period of time also brought together diverse stakeholders in Bali and Australia, offering them a collective sense of identity (2013). This grass-roots, citizen-led initiative became part of a narrative of collective resistance. This, she argues, is much more effective than the narratives of social harmony and religious tolerance that accompany state-led 'soft' counter-terrorist approaches in the United Kingdom, United States of America, and Australia.

Perhaps the first lesson New Zealand can take from this, is to listen to what is already emerging from the public. Rather than channelling money into state-led initiatives for memorialisation, a special fund could support applications from community groups for inclusive memorial projects in the longer term too. This could include not only places or events, but projects for education, awareness, diversity, and for caring, helping, hospitality and respect – in a word, *manaakitanga*. In this way the healing work of memory and memorialisation is not only about making space for collective *feeling*, but it involves allowing the memories and lessons taken from this event to be enshrined in real social and political action – as has already been done with the rapid gun law changes, and as can be extended in other areas too. In doing so we break away from simply rejecting this event as something outside of our clung-to narratives of diversity, and we take hold of a second lesson – to make our collective story one of resistance to racism and prejudice of all sorts. This is the sort of memory that works forward, as well as backwards, and honours all that have lost and been lost, with a generous future.

CONCLUSION: WEAVING TOGETHER

We are in the midst of a slow process of recognising what we already have. In the 1970s a 'Starter Kit for Māori in Schools' was introduced, with the idea that a basic understanding of certain concepts was desirable for all students (Sissons 1993). Top of the list was 'aroha', defined then as 'love, feelings for kin'. Next was 'manaakitanga', defined as 'hospitality and kindness'. On March 15th New Zealand was made painfully aware of holes in the kete of our community, through which people and ideas are falling – to disastrous result. It's time to reweave, and perhaps we all need a similar sort of starter kit for the project – only now with a deeper sense of what these terms mean, acknowledging aroha not as a feeling,

but as capacity residing within us, and reaching out. In choosing to recognise in ourselves the capacity for great wrongs, as well for respect, recognition, and empathy, the *aroha* we gave in words in the days after the Christchurch terrorist attack can become the *aroha* we weave tenderly and determinedly into a nation we now know is wounded, but ready to work.

QUESTIONS FOR SCHOLARS

1. Anthropologist Jeffrey Sissons describes the 1970s 'starter kit for Māori in schools' as objectifying, rationalising, and systemising Māori tradition (1993). How can a more nuanced, contextualised, or holistic understanding of important concepts like *manaakitanga* be brought into public places and conversations? What role should different (academic, non-academic, community or governance) parties have in this process? What are the risks or limitations of leveraging these concepts in national policy?
2. Many 'soft' approaches to counter-terrorism in the United Kingdom have emphasised identification and positive support of people in minority groups who are deemed vulnerable to radicalisation (Aly 2003). How does, or should, this work in an Antipodean setting, where the radicalisation is occurring among majority (white) populations?
3. How has the terrorist's status as an Australian national potentially shaped New Zealander's perceptions of their geographic neighbours, as the event raises concerns that intersect with the perception of social life, diversity and values, and with political issues associated with differing histories of colonialism, racism, and migration in the two countries. How is New Zealand's national identity (in the past, and now) constructed relationally, around or against Australia?
4. How are different commemorative events making sense of the losses, claims, and injustices of different (ethnic, religious, regional) groups associated with this event? In news media and public discussion to date, who is seen as having the right to grieve, and whose grief is potentially disenfranchised? In treating this event as a *collective* wound, what dangers lie in words like 'we' and 'us', and how are these slipperier facets of language including or excluding at this time in the nation's history?
5. Should academics follow the same pattern as the news media, in their avoidance of the name of, or images of, the terrorist? Who will or who should have access to the livestream video of the event, and what ethical standards should

apply to the use of this in scholarly contexts – either research or teaching? How might different pedagogical frameworks (such as ‘emotional pedagogies’, ‘trauma-informed pedagogies’, or ‘troubled knowledges’) help us to conduct responsible, sensitive, and meaningful conversations (Wardell 2019) about this event - and other facets of racism and extremism in Aotearoa – in tertiary classrooms?

NOTES

- 1 Dr Wardell is a Lecturer in the Social Anthropology Programme, at the University of Otago. Her research interests include emotion, care, mental health, affective pedagogies, disability, and digital worlds. She teaches courses such as ‘Death, Grief and Ritual’, and ‘The Anthropology of Evil’, as well as the ‘Anthropology of Religion and the Supernatural’. Responding to the events of March 2019 based on these interests, Dr Wardell’s current research involves interviews with diverse New Zealand-based participants, about their experiences (and practices) of ‘on-line care’ in the wake of the terrorist attack. She is also preparing a small project to examine the construction of the one-year anniversary memorial activities in Christchurch.

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