

## **Origins of Islam in Australia**

By Zachariah Matthews

### **The Makassans**

Well before 1788, Makassan fishermen from the east-Indonesian archipelago, fishing for trepang (sea-slugs), began annual voyages to our northern shores. It is thought that the fishermen of Makassar had been visiting the north coast of Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland from as early as the 16th century. Aboriginal cave paintings also depict the traditional Makassan sailing vessel or 'prau' and a number of Makassan artifacts have been found in Aboriginal settlements on the west and northern coast of Australia.

In 1803, Matthew Flinders recorded the sighting of 6 praus off the east of Arnhem Land. Some inter-marriages between Aborigines and Makassans took place and Makassan grave sites exist along the coastline.

These early Muslim traders were among the first visitors to establish an economic enterprise, founding Australia's first 'modern industry'. Unlike later European settlement, Makassan enterprise encroached little on the Aboriginal way of life. More lasting is their place in Aboriginal history and culture.

They came intermittently as visitors, revealing only a part of Islam. While day-to-day contact would have made Aborigines aware of prayer times and burial practices, Islam as a way of life had little impact on Australia.

### **The First Fleet**

In 1770 Captain Cook landed at Botany Bay and in 1788, the First Fleet sailed into Australian waters. Ali Williams, a Member of the Fellowship of the First Fleeters, when investigating his own family history, found that according to Government records, the Musters of 1802, 1811, 1822, and the Census of 1828, had listed a number of Mohammedans, the term used for Muslims at the time. Thus, the first Muslims settled in NSW only 13 years after the colony was formed.

He found that a person by the name of Rhamut, aged 23, came free on the ship "Favourite" in 1801. He was later listed as a land-owner residing at Evan, near the Nepean River in NSW. Satim, aged 25, and Marnie, aged 23, both came free on the "Louisa" in 1828 and were employed by John Maughan as servants, residing at George Street, Sydney.

### **Malay divers**

Long before the last Makassan prau had sailed from Australian waters in 1907, Malay divers were employed in the pearling grounds off Western Australia and the Northern Territory. By the 1870s, Australian pearlers were actively recruiting Asian divers for the pearling industry, acknowledged as being of primary importance to Australia's fledgling economy.

In 1875, it was estimated that there were 1,800 Malays working in Western Australian waters. They were mainly recruited from Koepang under an agreement with the Dutch colonial authorities.

Later, Japanese were preferred and Malays were forced into other areas of employment. In 1921, only 14 were recorded as employers, while 131 worked on their own account and 1,207 were wage-earners. The number of Malays decreased significantly over the following decades. In the 1930s, the Malays built a mosque in Broome.

### **The Afghan camel drivers**

Another group of Muslims to settle in Australia was the Afghan camel drivers. They came between 1867 and about 1910 when the use of the camel as a means of transportation was at its peak.

Every school-aged child in Australia probably knows something about the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition in the central outback in 1860. Camels were imported specifically for that expedition, as it was correctly considered that camels would be more suited to exploration in this arid and waterless land than either horses or bullocks. What seems to have escaped most history textbooks is the fact that those expeditionary camels were accompanied by two Muslim Afghan cameleers, Dost Mahomet and Esan Khan. Both of these men survived the ordeal due to the resilience of their camels. However, Dost Mohamet died shortly after his return to Menindie, South Australia, where he suffered an injury to his arm from one of the camels. He was buried at Menindie, the first Afghan to die on Australian soil.

From then on, the immense value of the camel was acknowledged and thousands of them were imported to assist in exploration and freight haulage by rich pastoralists like Thomas Elder. Elder was knighted in 1876 for his importation of camels and his services to exploration, unlike his faithful Afghan retainers, and even unlike his active partner, Samuel Stuckey. Stuckey had gone to India in 1862 and again in 1865, and eventually landed over 120 camels at Port Augusta, along with 31 Afghan handlers. Included among them were two brothers, Faiz and Tagh Mahomet, who were to go on to become perhaps the most successful and enterprising Afghans in Australia, with huge businesses and camel studs.

The journals, diaries and reports of early European explorers speak very highly of the Afghans - their strict adherence to the code of Islam (especially in regard to their daily prayers and the eating of halal meat and the avoidance of alcohol), and their excellent character, reliability, stamina and live-saving skills. Many of the explorers gladly acknowledge the debt owed to their camel-handlers in saving their lives in difficult and dangerous situations. The very success of most of these important expeditions was due to the Afghans themselves, and their ability to manage their camels.

But no public recognition or reward was ever given to the Afghans. The best that happened for some was to have a landmark named after them - for example, "Allanah's Hill", "Bejah's Hill" and "Kamran's Well". In all probability, the first non-Aboriginal to stand on top of Uluru (Ayer's Rock) was not the European explorer, Gosse, but his Afghan guide and companion, Kamran. Gosse's diary states that on 20 July 1873, after reaching the summit, he envied Kamran's tough feet: "He seemed to enjoy the walking about with bare feet, while mine were all in blisters, and it was as much as I could do to stand."

The only public reminder of the Afghans is to be found in the "Ghan", the name of the famous train that runs from Port Augusta in South Australia to Alice Springs in the Northern Territory.

In 1887 the NSW railways reached Broken Hill and Bourke, and these towns too became gathering points for the Afghans. At each of these railheads the Afghans constructed their shanty "Ghantowns", attempted to raise families and built ramshackle, corrugated-iron mosques. Their role in transport, supply, discovery and camel breeding was indispensable to Australia's economic growth and development.

But what happened to the Afghans? Why are there to be found no resilient, thriving communities descended from them, at least in some of those inland towns? The answer to that question lies in a number of factors. Racism and religious intolerance were always prevalent. The Afghans were

always "aliens" in a foreign land, never allowed to become its citizens, even after Federation in 1901 and having lived here for two generations. They were "non-whites", considered as culturally inferior as the Aborigines, but more feared, because of their reputation as rugged fighters in the two Anglo-Afghan Wars of the 1840s and 1870s.

The death-knell really came with the advent of modern road transport. Cars and trucks finally ended the reign of the camel as undisputed master of the inland. Many were shot by the Authorities as a "public nuisance"; they were taxed so heavily by a burdensome licensing system that many Afghans simply could not pay and preferred to release them into the wild than see them destroyed. This is why Australia has the only feral camels in the world, roaming among the saltbush scrub and gibber plains. They are free, in robust health and excellent physical condition, and now highly-prized as an export commodity and as tourist attractions. It's a pity the same cannot be said for the men who introduced them and bred them here.

### **The years of decline (1900-40)**

In 1903 the Naturalisation Act excluded most non-Europeans from the right to apply for naturalisation; nor were they permitted to bring their families into the country. The 'White Australia Policy' had significant implications on the Australian Muslim community. Many Muslims chose to return to their homelands. By 1921 there were fewer than 3,000 Muslims living in Australia.

Amid the decline was a second wave of emigrants from Albania who worked as casual labourers in Western Australia, Queensland, and Victoria throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Albanians, not of Asian descent, were not subjected to the 'White Australia Policy'.

### **The Post-War years**

After the Second World War, the need for better security and a larger population became important. The government was compelled to widen its criteria on what constituted an acceptable Australian. The first intake of Muslims were displaced persons from Europe (Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Poland, Hungary and Russia).

Liberalisation of Australia's immigration policies was further underpinned by an economy which grew strongly over the next two decades. The key event in Australia's immigration history was the official abandoning of the 'White Australia Policy' in 1972. Between 1967 and 1971 more than 10,000 emigrated from Turkey under an agreement signed in 1967 for large-scale assisted immigration.

Following the Arab-Israeli war in 1967 and continuing civil war in Lebanon, Lebanese Muslim immigration to Australia also increased dramatically. By 1981, Australia had received around 16,500 Lebanese-born Muslims.

### **Religious Groups**

Between 1981 and 1991 Muslims increased from 0.5 per cent to 0.9 per cent of the Australian population. The two largest groups, Catholics and Anglicans, still account for over 50 per cent of the population. Immigration has accounted for the vast majority of the growth of Muslims. The second reason for the growth is the higher fertility rate. In the 1986 Census, Muslims had the highest rate of marriage, the lowest rate of divorce, the lowest proportion of women with no children, and the lowest rate of religious intermarriage. [At the time of writing, the 1996 Census data had not been analysed]

### **Countries of origin**

According to the 1986 Census, two-thirds of Muslims were born overseas. Very important, is the

fact that one-third of Australian Muslims were born in Australia. The bulk of Muslims in Australia have come from Turkey, Lebanon, Yugoslavia and Cyprus (more than 50 per cent). According to the 1991 Census, 17.4 per cent were born in Lebanon and 15.5 per cent in Turkey. The largest group of Muslims were the Australian-born, 35 per cent. This percentage is likely to increase as births grow more than immigration. Muslims have settled predominantly in Sydney (50 per cent) and Melbourne (32 per cent). Only 4.3 per cent live outside one of Australia's major cities.

#### Future growth

The Muslim community will continue to grow. The growth rate will be determined by the Muslim population's high birth rate, low rate of religious outmarriage, conversions, and immigration.

#### **Mosques in Australia**

There are more than 60 mosques. The first city mosque to be built in Australia still serves the Muslim community in Adelaide, South Australia. It was built between 1888 and the early 1890s by the Afghan cameleers. The first mosque in NSW was built in 1891 at Broken Hill. The Broken Hill mosque, now a museum, is presently maintained by the Broken Hill Historical Society. The second city mosque was built in Perth in 1905. The first mosque established in Sydney in the late 1960s was in Lakemba (Imam Ali Mosque). The King Faisal mosque in Surry Hills was built shortly thereafter. The largest mosques in NSW are in Lakemba and Auburn. The largest mosques in Victoria are in Preston and Broadmeadows.

#### **The future of Islam in Australia**

Islam is here to stay and Muslims are going to play a significant role in Australia's future. The Muslims have already put religion back on the agenda with secularism versus religion the debating point.

The mosque remains the most vital social structure in Islam and our association with it must be increased. Secondly, we must ensure that the benefits that we as Muslims receive from Islam are also communicated to the wider non-Muslim community. We should be ambassadors of Islam and promote Islamically-based systems and alternatives as potential solutions to the problems faced by the wider community, such as: abstention to combat alcoholism; having a life-mission to prevent suicide, shared equity and rental instead of usury, etc.

Equipped with good will, hard work, increased faith, wisdom and dedication, Muslims in Australia will indeed ensure a brighter future for themselves and for Australia as a whole. *"You are the best of peoples ever raised up for mankind, you enjoin what is good and forbid what is bad, and you believe in Allah."* (Q3:110)

**Source: SALAM magazine July-August 1997: ([zeta.org](http://zeta.org))**