

Australia

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Images of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Opera House, Centrepoint Tower, and Darling Harbour flank the mosques of Mecca and Medina on this greeting card designed and printed in Australia. This card reflects on the theological and cultural struggles experienced by Australian Muslims since their period of mass migration to Australia in the 1970s, particularly among the most influential of Australia's Muslims: the migrants and the Australian born and bred generation. The experiences of both these groups may be understood through a remark made in a recent article published in *Salam*, the official magazine of the Federation of Australian Muslim Students and Youth (FAMSU): 'It is our destiny that we found ourselves here (Australia). However, the rest is a test.'<sup>1</sup> Destiny is a fundamental pillar of the Islamic faith. However, as with the practice of Islam, the ways in which destiny is perceived differs between particular places, periods, cultures and peoples. How have members of the Australian Muslim population conceptualized their destiny? Where will it lead them?

A greeting card designed and printed in Australia commemorating the occasion of Eid Al-Adha.

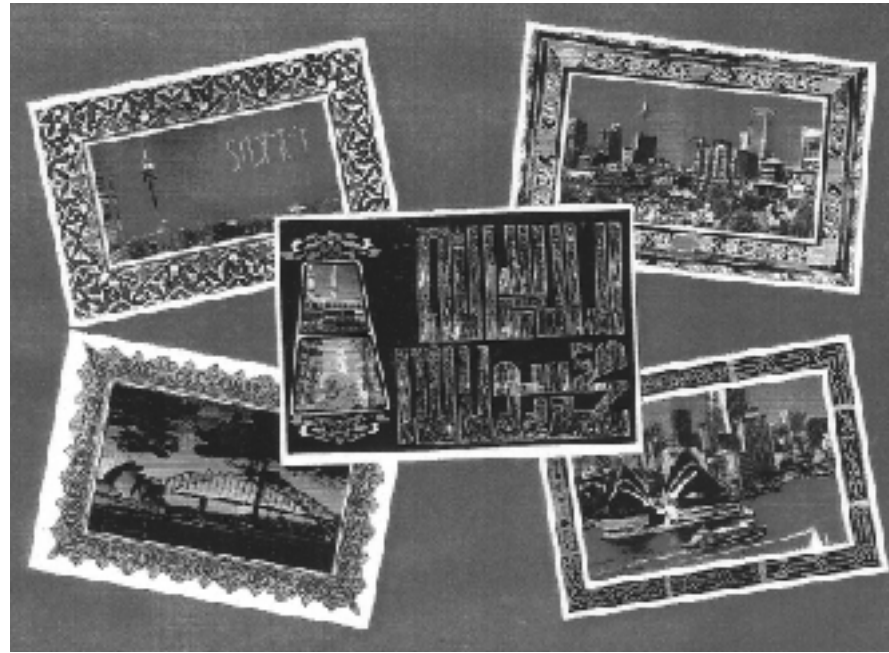
The new interest in Australian Muslims in the last two decades – inspired by the mass migration of the 1970s – has produced numerous studies, literature and audio-visual material within the Australian context. Whilst taking into account the differences which exist among these, both in terms of medium and content, the majority have taken a largely empirical approach centred around the Muslim migrant experience.

Both religious and ethnic identifications are central to understanding the ways in which Australian Muslim migrants have constructed a place for themselves in Australian society. Whilst religious identification may be important to many of these immigrants, it is clear from the designated names of the majority of associations and mosques, that religion, though important, has not generally acted as the socially or organizationally cohesive category. Numerous mosques including the Albanian Mosque in Victoria, the Lakemba Mosque built by the Lebanese Muslim Association in Sydney, and the various organizations including the Bosnian Islamic Society and the Islamic Egyptian Society, point to significant ethnic divisions among Australian Muslims. This is not surprising since the Australian Muslim population represents 64 distinct ethnic groups who speak over 55 languages. Do these ethnic Muslim groups stand detached under the umbrella of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)? Where do 'other' Muslims fit into their conceptions of their destinies? Is there a sense of a shared Australian Muslim identity?

The tendency to form ethno-religious associations is characteristic of the majority of immigrants to Australia. For many migrants, the establishment of ethnic associations, clubs, places of worship and shopping centres are a means of securing the cultural, linguistic and religious heritage in their new home. Muslim immigrants were no exception. As the majority had poor English language skills, resulting from the conditions and requirements of work which made it difficult to attend English language classes, communication amongst members of the linguistically diverse Australian Muslim population was extremely difficult. A remarkable amount of ethnic newspapers were, and continue to be, published by various ethno-Muslim groups in languages other than English. In many mosques today, the Friday sermons continue to be given in the native languages of the majority of those attending. The highest authoritative figure in Australia and the Pacific, the *mufti*, does not speak English. At present, it appears unlikely that the ethnic basis of many of these already established associations and mosques will dissolve. Further, few of the founding members are willing to give up the security and social networks which these associations provide.

The incorporation of 'Muslim' or 'Islamic' in the titles of many of these 'ethnic' institutions was in some cases informed by the desire to

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distinguish them from others which shared a common ethnic background but not the faith. In a recent interview I conducted with one of the founders of the Lebanese Muslim Association (est. 1959), the sense of rivalry between Lebanese Christians and Muslims was still given as the reason for which 'Lebanese Muslim' was chosen as the definitive title. He pointed out that just as Lebanese Christians had established themselves in Australia, they too wanted to be identified as a distinct ethnic group albeit with a Muslim identity.

The active display of this Muslim identity and its influence on relations between many of these ethno-religious institutions has not been great. The only significant exception has been the references to the Afghan 'Muslim' contribution to Australia in many of the histories written, with varying degrees of sophistication, by members of these institutions. The modest mosques built by the Afghan cameleers who came to provide much-needed transport in the outback between 1867 and 1910, are regarded by many Muslims as marking the foundation of their destiny in Australia. Though this has not necessarily led to the concept of a single destiny with a dominant Islamic orientation, it has provided a sense of a collective consciousness.

The sense of struggle which marked the experiences of the Afghan cameleers and the later Muslim migrants appears to have brought about identification with this collective consciousness. The White Australia policy which denied Afghans the opportunity to bring spouses and family from their homeland, and the replacement of camel driving by the motor truck in the 1920s, saw the small Afghan population of Australia fade away. Though only a few of their mosques remained in Adelaide, Perth and Broken Hill, for the significant number of working class Muslim immigrants who came to satisfy the labour needs of Australia after 1945, these overseas-born pioneers who worked with a predominantly Anglo-Australian population provided a potent symbol. 'Muslims: helping Australia get off its feet'<sup>2</sup> – these words represent the popular sentiments of most Australian Muslims. These 'tough, successful men, held by many Australians in great respect' provided Muslim working-class immigrants with the semblance of hope they needed at a time when securing good jobs and social mobility was difficult.<sup>3</sup>

It was through this shared experience of struggle and hope that middle and working class Muslim immigrants harmonized the Afghan experience with their own. AFIC – the peak Muslim organizational body in the country – was particularly influential in upholding the memory of the Afghan contribution through its numerous publications, most notably the *Australian Muslim Times*. The Afghan experience was codified and used as a positive foundation around which subsequent Australian Muslims could base their historical origins in Australia. However, for the children of these migrants who now make up the second and third generation of Australian Muslims, the largely migrant character and ethnic orientation of this collective consciousness has proved to be a hindrance. As well as keeping them culturally and socially isolated from the diverse mainstream Australian society, it has also kept them apart from Australian Muslims who may also come from different cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Their reaction to these ethno-religious divisions on the one hand, and the use of the past as a prologue for the construction of a collective consciousness on the other, have seen the emergence of a radical movement which aims to promote the unity of an Australian Muslim identity through stronger religious identification.

Some of the earliest institutions to promote the centrality of an 'Australian Muslim' identity over an identity based largely on ethnicity, include FAMSU (est. 1967), the Muslim Women's National Network of Australia (est. 1980s), and more recently the Muslim Community Cooperative Australia (est. 1989). In the last decade, there has also been a marked increase in non-ethnic based suburban associations like the Illawarra Islamic Association, and the Islamic Society of Manly Warringah. In 1996, the privately owned *Australian Muslim Times* was replaced by the *Australian Muslim News*, which is owned by AFIC. This saw a major change in the national and widely read paper. Space previously allotted to non-English languages was replaced by a wider variety of local and global news as well as advertising in English.

The importance of language as an agent of change can also be seen through the increase in the number of overseas scholars and academics invited to conferences and seminars held by AFIC, FAMSU and the various state organiza-

tions. Whilst many continue to be invited from the Middle East by the various ethno-religious organizations, these scholars and academics are increasingly coming from North America, Canada and the United Kingdom. As the largest group of Muslims in Australia are Australian born, it is not surprising that these English-speaking guests continue to draw large audiences from both the youth and the educated middle class.<sup>4</sup> As well as crossing the linguistic barriers of the members of their audience, their message of tolerance and unity is often more relevant to the second and third generation of Australian Muslims who play an active role in organizing these events. However, it must be pointed out that as with the *Australian Muslim News*, the majority of these events cater to a largely English-speaking Australian Muslim population. Although they acknowledge the benefits of a diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic Australian Muslim community, their struggle to smooth the disunity which this diversity creates has left a gap in their struggle for tolerance and unity which has yet to be bridged. That is not to say that attempts have not been made.

An example is the annual Australian Multicultural Eid Festival and Fair (MEFF) held at the end of Ramadan in Sydney. MEFF's attempt to create such a bridge is evident in the strategy they developed 'in recognition of the fact that there is a lack of tolerance and acceptance among people of different ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds within the Australian Muslim community.'<sup>5</sup> Creating an exhibitive and socially-relaxed atmosphere with participants from state and regional ethno-religious institutions and non-ethnic based others, government representatives, and visitors from a diverse range of backgrounds including a small number of non-Muslims, MEFF attempts to help Australian Muslims 'adopt and thrive' not only as a unified Muslim community but also as an Australian one. The relative success of their initiative may be seen in the increase in participants from 800 in 1987 to over 30,000 in 1998.

However, with the rapid changes taking place among the Australian Muslim population today, it is difficult to predict what destiny has in store. Ethno-religious institutions continue to yield some influence among migrants, although they are being eclipsed by ethnically and linguistically diverse institutions. The growing number of Australian-born youth continues to set new trends centred around a more religious-based identity through the English language. Although approached in different ways, attempts at tolerance and unity continue to hold the imaginations of the Australian Muslim population. While they have gained some ground in the last two decades, as one article in *Salam* magazine put it, 'It's a long road, mate...' ♦

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## Notes

1. H. Ayoubi, 'The Destiny of Muslim Youth in Australia: Expected Role', in: *Salam*, January/February 1998, p. 19.
2. *Islamic Council of New South Wales: Profile 1994*, Sydney: Islamic Council of New South Wales, 1994, p. 22.
3. F. Imam, 'Muslims of Australia', in: *Salam*, February, 1983, p. 9.
4. See table 2 in Omar and Allen (1996), p. 25.
5. *Multicultural Eid Festival and Fair: 1996 Annual Report* (1996), Sydney: Australian MEFF Consortium, p. 2.