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Excavating the Past: Australian Muslims

THE MUSLIM PRESENCE in Australia between 1901-1975 is very much a fragmented history. For the first fifty years or so, the main feature is one of impermanency brought about by laws dictating who could settle in Australia and who could not. This was the legacy of an often uneasy relationship with the Commonwealth bureaucracy which formulated, implemented and monitored the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, resulting in a 'White Australia Policy' and serious repercussions for any non-whites wanting to enter Australia during this period.

Over a span of seven decades, Muslims from diverse ethnic backgrounds left behind a paper trail culminating in thousands of records – all with a story – or fragments of a story to tell as I discovered during my research at the National Archives of Australia in Canberra in 2006.

The presence of 'Mohammedans', as the early Muslims were called, coincided with the emergence of Australia as a newly independent nation, setting up its new and often inexperienced bureaucracy, formulating and implementing laws and regulations. It was also a non-technological era in history when departmental communications were slow and laborious and States were reluctant to be dictated to by the new Federal Parliament.

The initial Muslim settlement experience took place in this difficult and unusual context in Australian history, for in the days of the White Australian Policy entry was restricted by the colour of one's skin. The theory of Social Darwinism was in vogue – white genes, so it was believed, were vastly superior to the genes of other races.

Camels and Cameleers

On 9 June 1860, three 'exotic-looking' Afghan camel men landed at Port Melbourne from Karachi with twenty or so animals to participate in the (ultimately tragic) Burke and Wills expedition organised by the Royal Society of Victoria. The ill-fated journey, however, proved the merit of camel over horse and bullock. Over the next ten years, British entrepreneurs imported significant numbers of camels with their handlers, and more animals were unloaded at Derby and Fremantle in Western Australia, Port Augusta in South Australia and Port Melbourne. Through their mobility and endurance, camels soon proved their worth and were used increasingly, accompanying exploration parties, opening up remote inland areas and providing essential services. The animal was made for the desert. Horses and buffalo died through lack of water, but camels survived, capable of carrying a load of 600 kilos. However, if they were to be used, experienced handlers were indispensable, although within a decade these Afghan men became an unwelcome presence.

Between 1870 and 1920, approximately 20,000 camels and 2,000-4,000 cameleers

landed at ports and a vast network of camel routes spread out across inland Australia. The camels came from Karachi, Bombay and Calcutta and excited crowds flocked to the wharves to see the disgruntled – and certainly disoriented – dromedaries suspended in the air and lowered onto the docks ready, along with their handlers, to face a period of quarantine before moving on with their new lives.

Maree, or Hergott Springs as it was first called, was a notable rest station at the centre of the interstate camel communication network at one time called the Queensland Road and, years later, the Birdsville Track. Camel teams travelling from one state to another converged at the dusty station at the busy railway head where goods were loaded and off loaded. A white settlement, an Aboriginal camp and an Afghan camp existed at Maree in its heyday as Bilal Cleland notes in his seminal work *The Muslims in Australia: a brief history*.¹

In the wake of the cameleers came the young Indian hawkers, merchants and small businessmen with big ideas. Both my grandfathers among them.

By the 1890s, Muslim camel drivers and, in their wake, the hawkers were common sights along country roads and inland routes from Kalgoorlie to Broken Hill and beyond. A small number of Sikhs and Hindus were also lumped together with the 'Afghans'. Most people were ignorant of their religious differences and, as the Sikhs and many of the Hindus were Punjabis, they spoke the same language and shared certain customs with Punjabi Muslims. This was fifty or so years before the partition of British India in 1947 and the subsequent violence indulged in by all sides of the new nations of India and Pakistan. 'Afghan' or 'Ghan' became a generic term used to describe any Asian engaged in the camel business, whether or not they were from India, Afghanistan, Egypt or Syria. Did it really matter? Not to most Australians.

In reality, the men belonged to different ethnic, tribal and linguistic groupings which proved too much for European Australians to comprehend except for a small number of former English, Irish and Scottish army officers and civil servants who had served Queen and Country loyally in British India but who, at the end of their service, had emigrated from the 'Mother Country' to Australia. Most drivers hailed from different provinces of what later became Pakistan (Baluchistan, Punjab, the Sindh, the North West Frontier Province) and the protectorate Kingdom of Afghanistan. They maintained their identities through their languages, dialects and customs including the different ways they fashioned their beards and moustaches and tied their turbans. Such nuances, however, went unnoticed by Caucasian Australians who naïvely added insult to injury by interspersing the usual ham-fisted descriptors with terms like 'Hindoos' and 'Sepoys'. Through visiting seamen, newspaper reports, and word of mouth, settlers in the Australian colonies knew all about the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857 and 'traitorous' sepoys. These suspicions were strengthened forty years later in some quarters by allegations that mullahs entering Australia were raising subscriptions for Afghan tribesmen fighting their British soldier enemies in the Afghan wars in the late nineteenth century.



Colombo Plan students celebrate Eid al-Fitr with traditional candle dance, 2000.
National Archives of Australia, A15001/A2000/1.

‘The Afghan Problem’

‘The Afghan problem’ in the late nineteenth century was as much talked about in Australia, and as hotly debated, as the subject of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants is today. The Indians and Afghans who had entered Australia as cameleers in the 1880s and 1890s soon wore out their welcome along with the Chinese, Malays and others labeled as ‘Asiatic’; the urge to keep Australia for the white man increased as the colonies headed towards Federation. Non-Caucasian races could be used for menial tasks but must never threaten the working conditions of white Australians.

Who could have dreamt at the onset of the first Afghan – Australian connection that the camel men and the hawkers might stay behind? Politicians, officials, or the man on the street (if the latter thought about it at all) assumed that the cameleers would one day return to wherever they came from. Certainly some Afghans lived an adventure of a lifetime, saved their money, went to Mecca and then returned to their homeland, transformed into *hajjis*, men of money and status with exotic tales to tell about strange animals and stranger people ‘down under’.

Cameleers undertook what needed to be done when the country was being opened up. They accompanied expeditions to map the continent; carted wool to ports and barrels of water to drought ridden areas; and transported mail, equipment and stores at a time when railway construction was in its infancy. The significant role they played in facilitating the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line over 1870-1872 and the Port Augusta to Alice Springs rail link by carting equipment, material and supplies is now acknowledged. Without their services Australia's inland development would have lagged well behind until the era of improved roads, trucks and railway services led to machine power supplanting animal power.

The more astute Afghan men entered the camel business as entrepreneurs involved in the buying and selling side of the camel trade, expanding their cartage businesses, sometimes forming partnerships with Europeans. In turn, city Muslims from the more educated merchant class invested their capital in property and raised money to build mosques in Adelaide and Perth. The camel haulage business was at its peak in the mid 1890s-1905, run by men who had been resident in Australia for between ten to twenty years. For example, men such as Abdul Wade owned 400 camels and employed sixty men; the brothers Faiz Mahomet, Tagh Mahomet and Gunny Khan were very well known in the business. They employed their less educated, less well-off (and certainly less well-paid) countrymen to work the camel pads across vast tracts of Australia. But once Afghans and Indians entered the haulage trade as business owners in their own right and ceased to be menials, they began attracting the animosity of officials, unions and working men with aspirations of their own. Suddenly they became 'a problem'.

Reports of conflicts between cameleers and Australian teamsters often appeared in the press: cameleers were accused of monopolising water holes and tanks while thirsty horses, bullocks and their handlers waited for hours hoping the water would not run out and no camel filth was left to contaminate the water holes. Behind many of these accusations lay the fear of economic competition in the haulage and associated trades and businesses.

In the Western Australian goldfields, well educated young men with a flair for writing polemical tracts and delivering fiery speeches, came into their element as professional agitators. In 1894, Frederick Vospers and John Marshall founded the Anti-Asian League. Vospers, a talented newspaper editor, gained considerable support for his views on republicanism, Asian immigration and workers' rights.

A typical letter published in *the Coolgardie Miner*, 16 June 1894, during the period Vospers served as editor, read:

We fear that a low degenerate mongrel race of human beings will follow where they lead, and for the protection of our Anglo-Saxon race we say, emphatically, 'ooshtah', [a camel command] which being interpreted means 'lay down' we have no use for you at present. . . .

The colonies were nearing Federation and Australia's burgeoning labour movement culminated in the foundation of the Australian Labor Party in 1891. Inevitably, along

with the Chinese, Afghans became seen as a threat to working class men and were the targets of vicious racism especially in Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland. Ventures that had once prospered now began to fail, often for reasons beyond their control. Instances occurred where port authorities refused permission to unload their animal cargo and Afghan syndicates went bankrupt.

For those so inclined, it was easy to find reasons to resent these ‘aliens’ as they were officially called: any business success they might enjoy for one, especially if times were hard and you yourself were ‘living off the smell of an oil rag’. Also, a strong antagonism, sometimes voiced and sometimes unspoken but shown in a sneer or a hard look, was felt towards dark-skinned men who married, or formed relationships with white women. Miscegenation, while not illegal, led to sexual jealousy at a time when men vastly outnumbered women in Australia: the ratio of men to women in Western Australia in 1897 was 10:1; in New South Wales, as late as 1938, there were four men to every woman and in rural areas the imbalance extended to 20:1. Many of these ‘interlopers’ were young, handsome men, in the prime of their lives.

From the Australian viewpoint, the cameleers were never meant to stay, to put down roots or to raise families. Even those who remained in Australia after 1901 were not permitted to bring their wives or children from their home country, a ban not lifted until around 1923. When their contracts ended, it was assumed that they would return to the Indian Subcontinent. Today we would describe them as ‘guest workers’, but if they were our guests then Australia was a poor host.

Hawkers

Hawking was a common occupation in rural India and found a natural place in rural Australia. Credit arrangements and a peculiar chain of mutual dependency between Australian wholesalers and hawkers formed the bedrock of hawking: wholesalers sold goods on credit to small-scale Indian and Syrian wholesalers who, in turn, supplied their countrymen with goods to hawk around the countryside – again on credit. Work shirts, trousers, safety pins, dishcloths, sewing needles, sweets and numerous other items were just some of the essentials they sold. In those days, it might take as long as six months or a year for a farmer or his farmhands to pay off a bill of 6s.6d.

Long ago I found an old notebook among my father’s papers. In his beautiful handwriting he had recorded his sales when, as a young man, he travelled with horse and cart through the Latrobe Valley in Victoria during the Depression. Each page held its own little story:

Mrs Cameron, Kilmany 4 November, 1931 (second house from the school)

1 tin of curry powder, paid 1-6. Bal. 6d.

Sold Mrs Jones 23 September 1931

2 Pr Sheetings 0-17-0

2 Pr Pillow slips 4-6

2 Boys ties 2-0

1-0-0 Paid by cheque 14/11/31

Balance 3-6 paid 5/2/32

Some farmers kept the hawkers at arms length, making them camp well away from their farmhouse but others were more welcoming and formed lasting friendships.

The Dictation Test

Many bureaucratic hurdles stood in the way of the first generation as the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 continued to cast its shadow over their lives. The ubiquitous Exemption from the Dictation Test (EDT) adopted from Natal, South Africa, meant that whenever a non-European domiciled in Australia left, whether for a short or long term, a certificate (complete with photo and hand print) had to be obtained proving that he had entered the country before 1901. This exempted the holder from the dictation test. However, the test, which could be given in any European language, kept any new 'coloured' people from entering. One could clearly argue that 'Asians' were barred – not because of race – but for failing the dictation test.²

The early men who came to Australia before 1901 came from 'paperless' societies where births deaths and marriages were often unrecorded; some were illiterate in their own language. Hundreds of documents and applications housed in State archives, many marked with a thumbprint in lieu of a signature, reveal this. Men found themselves grappling with a paper grounded society and incorruptible (but not unbiased) civil servants. Because of their poor standard of English they usually needed intermediaries (often solicitors or respectable Australian businessmen) to intercede on their behalf. Stories reveal a bleak history of men living on the edges of a society that looked at them with suspicion, but documents also show the common decency of many Australians who were willing to vouch for 'Ali', or 'Muhammad' even in court as the case of Ali Abdul, the Redfern shopkeeper whom I 'discovered' in the National Archives.

During World War One Afghans were required to register as aliens under 'The War Precautions Act (Alien Registration Act) 1916'. Afghanistan was a kingdom annexed by the British and they were compelled to register no matter how long they had been resident in Australia. Indians as British subjects were not. Unlike Germans and Turks, however, Afghans were not 'enemy aliens' and were not interned.

Nevertheless, they still had to notify the authorities and fill in a change of abode form whenever they moved. As many were camel drivers and hawkers on the move from town to town this was often impracticable. Aliens were required to fill in a form within seven days at a Police Station every time they changed residences. If they stayed at hotels or boarding houses, as many did, they must give the owners of these premises information so that they could be registered.

Many of the forms show that Afghans and Indians were often confused about

their date of birth and their date of arrival in Australia. The names of the camel men and hawkers were often anglicized. This led to confusion when they were officially registered. 'Muhammad', for instance might be spelt in half a dozen different ways; 'Akbar' might be misspelt 'Ackubar'; 'Deen' could be 'Din' or 'Dean', and on it went. . . .

This early period is a masculine history as until about 1928, the wives and relatives of Indian and Afghan men were unable to enter Australia. The subject was raised at Imperial Conferences after World War One in light of the magnificent war contribution from India. Maharajas enlisted, fighting side by side with their sons; they sent camels, cavalry, rifles and money. The Dalai Lama contributed men and prayers. Even the Indian Congress Party and the Muslim League sent messages of loyalty at a time when nationalism and Indian independence was in the air.

After the war at Imperial conferences attended by dominions, calls for better treatment of Indians living in Australia, South Africa and Canada increased. Some changes were negotiated and implemented (albeit slowly) by the mid 1920s. Dr Sastri, an eminent Indian politician, visited Australia in 1923, touring the country, listening to Indians and Afghans and used his considerable influence on their behalf. However, attitudinal changes by both ordinary Australians and government officials still lagged behind.

Many men returned to their families, for home meant the Indian sub-continent. Some stayed in Australia and married white Australian women, sometimes legally under Australian law, sometimes religiously sanctified with an Islamic ceremony. Most of the children from marriages with 'white women', with some exceptions, were assimilated into mainstream society and did not practice Islam. Unions with indigenous women and their offspring were rarely recorded in official documents. Recently however, researchers have rediscovered these connections from the past. Publications, documentaries and travelling exhibitions celebrating the heritage of cameleer descendants have recaptured this history.³

Malays and Other Asians

The term 'Malay' was used loosely to describe men in the diving industry including Indonesians and Singaporeans. The Malays (sent by the Dutch colonialists) came as indentured labourers and crewmen for the pearling industry at Thursday Island, Port Darwin, and Broome in Western Australia.

In the late nineteenth-century, Broome was the major pearling centre in the world and continued to employ Malays long after other centres began using Japanese divers. Any married man was obliged to leave wife and family behind. Men worked not only as divers but also as cooks, pump hands, crewmen and labourers. Needless to say, their living conditions and wages were often deplorable.

In 1901 there were approximately 1600 Malays in Australia; in 1910, 2191 and in 1921, 1860. After World War One, most of the pearl divers were located in Broome, but by then their numbers had declined to about 700.



Four women in Asian dress, Moslem, Malay dress, taken in the portico of Emily McPherson College, 1949.
Photo by Lyle Fowler, 10 October 1949, H92.20/3231.

The Master Pearlers' Association in Western Australia was keen to continue employing Malay divers and secured an exemption from the Immigration Act of 1901 and the Commonwealth Government's edict intent on phasing out Asian indentured labour and train Australian workers to take up these jobs. Years later, the efforts of several Malay divers to unionise fellow Malay workers and improve working conditions led to their deportation in 1947 and 1948 under a legal technicality. Samsudin bin Katib, a corporal in the Australian Army in 'Z Unit' (an intelligence corps deployed in Borneo) who was honourably discharged in 1948, shows what could befall any leader who tried to stand up to the Master Pearlers.⁴

By the late 1950s many Australians were beginning to find the White Australia Policy morally repugnant and challenged these deportations. In 1961, public rallies were held around Australia in support of three divers. Unionists, students and others held protests and marches in Darwin and elsewhere until the order was revoked. The industry gradually declined and soon there was no need for imported labour.

By the 1960s, immigration became more relaxed. The Immigration Minister was

prepared to use his discretionary powers to allow certain Asians (usually business or professionals) into Australia, but the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 remained on the statute books until 1972 when it was repealed by an act of Parliament.

Within a decade of deporting Malay and Indonesian 'troublemakers', Australia instigated a groundbreaking educational scheme called the 'Colombo Plan'. Initiated in 1950, students from Malaya, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan and India came to Australia to study at our tertiary institutions. Many students were Muslims and nursing, engineering, business studies and economics degrees were popular choices. On return to their homelands, many of these students later became 'leaders' in their own societies: senior public servants, politicians, economic planners, businessmen and educators.

The Colombo Plan marked the beginning of the end of the White Australia Policy and played a significant role in the thawing of old entrenched attitudes. The students were carefully selected: intelligent, proficient in English, friendly, charming, good looking young people. Friendships were forged and many 'white' Anglo-Australian homes welcomed the newcomers and 'adopted' them.

For perhaps the first time in Australia's history, the social distance between the Australian host community and the 'other' was broken down. Australians behaved in the best tradition of hosts to their new guests. The students were happy to show off their respective cultures and went to barbecues and dances although Muslim students avoided drinking alcohol. They fitted in well with sports-mad Australians. Some were keen soccer players who formed their own teams and joined local soccer leagues. Badminton and table tennis were other sports they excelled at.

Students attended their local mosque and fasted and celebrated the special Eid days. The young female students, most of whom trained as nurses, wore the modest Malayan dress of sarong and kebaya with a thin scarf over one shoulder but did not wear veils or the hijab usually associated with Muslim women today.

Most students returned home after completing their studies and over the years continued to visit Australia, even sending their children to Australia for schooling. Some male students married Australians and settled here. This generation of leadership helped significantly to develop trade and diplomatic links with Australia and diffused negative opinions about Australia that were widely held in South-East Asia because of the White Australia Policy. Their presence also created an interest for Australians in South-East Asia.

Albanian Muslims

A small number of Albanians entered Australia in the 1920s when over a thousand, mainly single men arrived. By the late 1930s, some men with farming backgrounds moved to Shepparton in Victoria and worked in the orchards: Shepparton later became the largest Albanian Muslim community in Australia. In 1947 following World War Two, more migrated in a typical pattern of chain migration. Men either related, or from the

same village to those already in Australia, entered and found work in farming areas doing labouring work less favoured by Anglo-Australians. At first they worked on sugar-cane farms in Cairns and on cotton and tobacco farms near Brisbane and wheat growing areas in Northam and York, WA. Later, in the 1960s, the second generation began moving into professional occupations. They have always been a quiet community with a low profile. One of the first Melbourne mosques was Albanian, a small building in Drummond Street, Carlton, built in 1963.

Young Albanian men were able to enter Australia in the 1920s and 1930s because they met the race criteria and because there was a shortage of British migrants. Albanians were classified as 'Aryans' not 'Asiatics'; they were clearly white skinned. However, men – usually unskilled, semi skilled and single – were still the preferred category. In the 1920s, many entered Australia under the 'Displaced Persons' Act after the first world war. Later in the 1930s, Albanian men were allowed in under a strict quota system. Although Albanians met the race criterion, some officials were worried that too many were entering at the expense of other nationalities and instructions were given to limit their number. In 1929, only ten were allowed in between the months of August and December. British immigrants at this time were not entering Australia in any large numbers, which explains why Southern Europeans, including Albanians, were permitted entry in lieu of the British.

The Albanian mosque in Shepparton, Victoria is a reminder of the men who, after years of hard labour in the Queensland sugar fields, moved to Shepparton and worked on the land and in the following years started their own farms. In Western Australia, Albanians settled as farmers in the wheat and sheep areas of York and Northam. These young men sent for their fiancées or brides to join them (arranged marriages were still traditional). For Eid festivities, the men and their families would drive down to the Perth Mosque, founded in 1905.

The second small wave of Albanians entered Australia after World War Two. During the war Albanian partisans fought against the Italians and the Germans and their country was occupied, at different times, by both Axis powers. At the end of the war some parts of Albania became part of the Republic of Macedonia in Yugoslavia with Muslims a minority and Orthodox Christians as the dominant religious community. This post war redrawing of boundaries separated the families left in Albania from their relatives who were now in Yugoslavia, although there had always been an Albanian minority in Yugoslavia. Some Albanians entered Australia from overseas camps in Syria and Lebanon under the Displaced Persons category in 1949 after undergoing stringent medical examinations and vaccination. 'Medically fit for migration to Australia; requires dental attention', is one medical examiner's handwritten comment on an applicant's form.

Australian officials carefully screened Albanian entrants to ensure there were no Communist connections, especially those whose families were in the Albanian Resistance Movement fighting against the fascist occupation forces.



Turkish Wedding at Islamic Centre, Preston, 1971.
National Archives of Australia, A12111:1/1971/13/25.

Displaced persons were required to sign the following form:

I fully understand that I must remain in the employment found for me for a period of up to two years and that I shall not be permitted to change that employment without the consent of the Department of Immigration.

Turkish-Cypriot Muslims

After the end of war in 1918, a debate amongst politicians and officials centered on who were Asian Turks and who were European Turks. The question of whether Turkey is Asian or European still surfaces in debates surrounding Turkey's entry to the European Union in the 21st century. Even in 1919, alien Turks were still required to notify their change of abode at the Aliens Registration Office.

Turkish-Cypriot Muslims first settled in Australia in the late 1940s. Before this, the 1947 Census recorded only 252 Turkish-born residents. However, as residents of the British territory, on the island of Cyprus, Turks held British passports. This allowed them to circumvent the White Australia Policy, which held other Turks to be 'Asian'. Turkish Cypriots who came at this time were mainly skilled tradesmen who entered in the late 1940s and 1950s and were settled by the time the first wave of Turks from Turkey arrived. The early group of Turkish-Cypriot Muslims had developed harmonious community relations with Anglo-Australian society and had integrated well. They were therefore able to support and mentor the later Turks who arrived under the Australian-Turkish Assisted Passage Scheme of 1968.

Well-known Melbourne community leader Ibrahim Dellal was a Turkish Cypriot who emigrated in 1950. Over a span of sixty years he has witnessed the history of Australia's Turkish community and helped pioneer the establishment of mosques, Turkish schools, newspapers, radio programs and community organisations.

Immigrants From Turkey

Official immigration from the Turkish mainland did not begin until 1968 after the advent of the Australian-Turkish Assistance Passage Scheme, a bilateral agreement signed in 1967.

The Australian economy needed migrant workers for its expanding manufacturing industries in Melbourne and Sydney and British immigration had declined. The new scheme represented a major turning point in the history of Muslims entering Australia. The Government welcomed them with open arms and if the spirits of the old Afghan camel men and Indian hawkers were watching from afar, then perhaps they laughed aloud – a hollow laugh at best – at how times had changed!

Turkish families were allowed into Australia for permanent settlement. Unlike other guest worker schemes in Europe, wives and children were encouraged to form a family unit and to stay permanently. Wives were encouraged to work outside the home in local factories. Occupational categories recruited were mainly semi-skilled, craft and

production process workers and unskilled labourers. Although the agreement aimed for an intake of thirty percent skilled workers and seventy percent unskilled, in the early years of the program, most workers who came were unskilled.

Attempts to attract Turkish professionals as part of the Assisted Passage arrangements were only partially successful. 'Loss of caste', it was reported, was one of the reasons why professionals were reluctant to apply and there was some adroit statistical manoeuvring by Australian officials to work 'through the back door'. Naturally, the Turkish Government was not keen to facilitate a brain drain. Applicants with 'a good attitude' were favoured in the selection interviews: young families with husbands prepared to accept any job 'including heavy manual or industrial work at minimum wages'.

For the first time in Australia's history, Muslim families – Turkish-Muslim families – were encouraged by the Government to settle in Australia permanently and this marked the beginning of the dismantling of the Immigration Restriction Act.

According to the 1961 Census, there were 1,544 Turkish-born migrants living in Australia; by 1971 the number had jumped to 11,589. Turkish Kurds persecuted in Turkey as dissidents because of their dream of Kurdish nationalism also entered Australia between 1965 and 1985.

Muslims from Bosnia and Sarajevo also entered in the 1960s and worked on the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

In the 1980s Turks were able to enter under the independent immigration category and the family reunion policy. By the end of the 1990s immigration from Turkey had almost ceased except for Kurdish immigrants who were entering under the Humanitarian program.

Because of the respect between Turkish and Australian and New Zealand soldiers that grew out of their wartime encounters, and the subsequent Gallipoli/ANZAC tradition, Turkish immigrants to Australia have not been regarded generally as 'typical Muslims'. This attitude was emphasised by an article in the Melbourne *Herald* in 1971:

But their hearts were full of courage, for they were descended from the brave soldiers of the Crimea and Gallipoli, and they knew the terrors of earthquakes and famine in their own unlucky country. . . .⁵

However, first generation Turkish migrants experienced the same settlement problems that all immigrants of non-English speaking backgrounds experience: lack of housing, employment difficulties, poor English, and unfamiliar cultural norms. Childcare was a special problem as husband and wife were out working – often on shift work – leaving school age children to look after their younger siblings. Many parents, especially fathers, felt a loss of esteem for suddenly they were dependant on their children who were learning English at school and acting as interpreters for their non-English speaking parents. At the end of a long day working on the assembly line, parents were too tired to attend the few English classes available. Learning English 'on the job' did not

exist at this time.

Many parents paid a heavy price for their children's prosperity in the new land. It was not unusual for children to be sent back to Turkey to be looked after by their grandparents until they were older. On their return, the bonds of filial respect and obedience had sometimes lessened. Parents also worried that in a Christian society, children would adopt western ways and stray from Islam, these have always been the concerns of later generations of Muslim parents regardless of their ethnicity and homeland.

Lebanese Muslims

Turkish immigration was followed by the first phase of Lebanese-Muslim migration, which began in the early 1970s during the civil war in Lebanon. During this period, young professional couples from Egypt, Pakistan, and India also began arriving in the early 1970s, as visa requirements were made less restrictive after the 'White Australia' policy was abolished in 1972.

The Lebanese have actually had a long history of migration to Australia, but prior to 1975 the vast majority of Lebanese people who entered were Christian Lebanese although they continued for some time to be classified as 'Asian'.

Lebanon as we know it today was once under the control of the Ottoman Empire; firstly as a province from the sixteenth century to the onset of World War One, but later under direct rule until 1919. In 1920, Lebanon came under the mandate of France until independence in 1943.

Prior to World War I, Lebanese immigrants coming to Australia were issued Turkish documents. This confused Australian officials and angered many of the Lebanese who were fleeing Turkish persecution. At times, the term 'Syrian' was used which added to the confusion. Lebanese passports came into use in about 1926 for there came a time when Syrians began calling themselves 'Lebanese', and the nomenclature began to change after World War Two.

In the early 1950s, a small number of Muslim families arrived from North Lebanon. But the first real wave of Lebanese-Muslim migration began in the 1960s in the wake of the Turks and later as civil war broke out in Beirut in 1975. When the war intensified, significantly larger numbers of Muslims arrived with quasi-refugee status sponsored by their relatives already living in Australia. During the civil war period, many of the usual requirements for entry into Australia (such as health and security checks) were held in abeyance or waived and the Lebanese were treated as quasi-refugees. Those who came to Australia were required to have relatives already living here. This system of sponsoring relatives became especially prevalent in the 1970s, covering sixty percent (estimated at 14,000) of total arrivals between 1975 and 1977.

The Lebanese worked on assembly lines with their Turkish co-workers at car factories like Ford and Leyland. Lebanese Muslims entered Australia late in the history



Shaykh Fehmi inspecting *halal* meat, 1974.
National Archives of Australia, B4498, 74CI.

of Lebanese immigration and lacked the religious structures and organisations to assist them in their settlement; unlike Christian Lebanese who were by now a well established community.

Muslim Lebanese settled in Canterbury, Western Sydney, which later developed into a major Lebanese enclave: the local area where Sunni Muslims first established their mosque, a modest house in Lakemba very different in size and architecture to the magnificent Lakemba Mosque situated in Wangee Road which was later built in the 1980s.

The vast majority are Sunni Muslims but there is also a sizable number of Shi'as with their own mosques and organisations. Most Sunnis in the Bankstown area worship at the Imam Ali Mosque, better known as the Lakemba Mosque. The Shi'a mosque in Arncliffe is called the Al-Zahra Mosque; relations between the two Islamic sects are amicable in Australia.

In Melbourne today, most Lebanese live in the suburbs of Brunswick, Coburg, Preston, Northcote, Williamstown and Newport. Under the leadership of leading Imam, Shaykh Fehmi, the Lebanese were always well represented in the early Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV), and in the Australian Federation of Islamic Societies (AFIS) 1968, which



Young people from Oceania, at the annual Muslim Youth Camp, 1981.
Photo by Khalil Abou-Eid, 1981, H92.250/1300.

later became the much larger Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC). Today, the Lebanese community has a proliferation of organisations and societies and Lebanese women are especially prominent in Muslim women's societies.

Later Australian-born generations have become tertiary qualified professionals, building on their immigrant parents' sacrifices and living out their dreams. By 1981, there were 17,000 Lebanese Muslims living in Australia.

With the advent of Turkish and Lebanese leadership by the late 1970s, institutional Islam was entrenched in Australia through the building of mosques, Islamic schools and a plethora of religious societies and cultural organisations, some ethnic-specific, others multicultural. Much of this occurred under the leadership provided by the Turkish and Lebanese communities who as Australian citizens were now in a position to lobby politicians.

Shaykh Fehmi: a prominent Lebanese migrant

Shaykh Fehmi El-Imam arrived in Melbourne in 1951 as a twenty-three year old from Tripoli in northern Lebanon. When the young man, a former theology student in his homeland, arrived in Melbourne, he found himself in another world and first worked as an electrician.

At that time, there were no mosques in Melbourne and virtually no Islamic institutions to speak of. Following Islam was a private matter carried out in one's own household. Festivals were celebrated in one's own home where families gathered together and, if necessary, a community hall might be rented for the evening. Unlike Perth and Adelaide where the mosque was always the centre of prayers and celebrations, there was nothing comparable in Melbourne. In the years to come, more mosques would be built but not without legal and political struggles with local authorities, with many of the fights being bitter, expensive and prolonged.

The spirit of White Australia was still strong, recalled Shaykh Fehmi. If you sat in a tram or bus and spoke to a fellow Lebanese who had just arrived off the plane in your own language, you were likely to be reminded that, 'You're in Australia now! Speak English!'

Shaykh Fehmi has borne witness to a remarkable transformation. Victorian Muslims have a strong presence in the State as the number of mosques, schools and religious organisations testify. Shaykh Fehmi and his friends from the early years: men such as Ibrahim Dellal⁶ and Pakistani-born Dr Kazi⁷ who taught for many years at Melbourne University, led the way and fought the good fight that Muslims needed to mount to ensure an equitable and just existence for all Muslims regardless of ethnicity.

Muslim practices for burying the dead was an issue. Following a few court cases, imams and health authorities reached a compromise. Permission was finally granted in most states for Muslim dead to be buried in a shroud without a coffin. The Victorian Preston Mosque in the mid 1970s was one of the first mosques to build its own mortuary.

Another issue flared in 1963 when the Attorney-General's office announced that the State marriage laws would be superseded by new Federal legislation. In other words, the new Federal Marriage Act of 1961 would hold sway with Islam not recognised for the purposes of the Act.⁸ At the time, the Federal Attorney-General Sneddon was worried about polygamy.

Ibrahim Dellal was then the President of the Islamic Society of Victoria and, together with Shaykh Fehmi and fellow committee men, they successfully mounted a campaign to have this changed so that imams, like the Shaykh, could marry Muslim couples in religious ceremonies that would be recognised legally under Australian law. Shaykh Fehmi became the first registered Islamic marriage celebrant in Victoria in 1967.

Other imams from other Islamic societies in other states were also accorded the same right.

Ibrahim Dellal recalls that Immigration Minister Don Chipp was more sympathetic towards legally recognising an Islamic ceremony under certain conditions. In the past, couples (including my parents, my siblings and myself) underwent two separate ceremonies – a long drawn out process to say the least – one Islamic religious ceremony (legally unrecognised) and the other legal event at a Registry Office or hall.

Shaykh Fehmi performed the first Islamic ceremony as a registered celebrant in

1967, with Ibrahim Dellal acting as witness and interpreter for the Turkish couple.

In 1957 Shaykh Fehmi and a small group formed the Islamic society in Victoria (ISV). Later in 1976, he became the organisation's full time imam where he began the ambitious project of building a large Islamic Centre in Preston. Like the first generation of Muslims in the early twentieth-century Shaykh Fehmi and his friends set about raising funds. The Preston Mosque was completed in 1976 with donations from the Saudi Government.

In September 2011, Shaykh Fehmi, long regarded as one of Australia's most influential religious leaders, retired from his role as Mufti of Australia.

Building a Muslim Presence

Young professional couples from Egypt, Pakistan and India came in trickles in the early 1970s, as visa requirements were made less restrictive. Later under the Family Reunion policy, more Arabic-speaking Muslims entered Australia.

Muslim refugees entered Australia in the 1980s from the Horn of Africa countries, such as Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea. In the 1990s Bosnian Muslims claimed refugee status as well, fleeing from the horrors of Sarajevo. Prior to this influx, only small numbers of Bosnian Muslims had come to Australia.

Today, Australia is home to Muslims from all over the world. The two main communities are the Turks and Arabic-speaking Muslims predominately from Lebanon. According to the 2006 Census, 340,392 people identified themselves as Muslims. Of this number, approximately one-third are Australian born. Over the last decade, there has also been an increase in the number of converts to Islam although the exact numbers are unknown.

Conclusion

In reading the archival documents, the key to interpreting the history of the Muslim experience of Australia 1901-1975 lies in understanding the social and political contexts of the period. By exploring the documents that encapsulate our history we break the silences of the past and learn more of ourselves.