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- [Members](#)
- [Muslims in Australia](#)
- [History of Islam in Australia](#)
- [Voice of Islam Radio](#)
- [Media Archives](#)

DIRECTORIES

- [Mosques and Prayer Halls](#)
- [Islamic Organisations](#)
- [Halal Butchers](#)
- [Legal Services](#)
- [Bookshops](#)

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GO

Muslims in Australia

Brief history of the Muslim Community in Australia

The Makassar

Some of Australia's earliest visitors, pre-dating European settlement, were in fact Muslims from the east Indonesian archipelago. These were fishermen from the island of Makassar who came to fish for the 'trepang', commonly known as the 'dugong' or sea cow for the lucrative Chinese market where it was considered a delicacy.

Australian records dating from the early 1820's indicate the number of ships, the size of the crew and the names of the captains. 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.

Evidence pertaining to these early visitors can be found in the similarity of certain words which occur in both the language of the Makassar and coastal Aborigines. Aboriginal cave paintings also depict the traditional Makassar vessels or 'prau' and a number of Makassar artefacts have been found in Aboriginal settlements on the west and northern coast of Australia. Furthermore, some inter-marriages between Aborigines and Makassar took place and Makassar grave sites are strewn along the coastline. Considerable research and documentation has been done by Mr Campbell MacKnight, an archaeologist with the Australian National University.

Voyages have been retold by the few surviving Makassar fishermen, recalling their voyages as boys with their fathers when they sailed to Port Darwin and the Coburg Peninsula. They retold accounts of their grandfather's voyages to the 'Tanah Marege' or 'land of the black people' and the average 60 day journey eastward to Timor and then down to Darwin. There had in fact been inter-cultural exchanges between the Aboriginal communities and the Makassar. In 1867, the Dutch Governor-General in Makassar noted that there were seventeen Aborigines in Makassar which had returned with the Muslim fishing fleets and that Aborigines had been noticed on the island as far back as 1824.

Afghan Cameleers

Another group of Muslims played a vital role of early European settlement in Australia. They were camel drivers from the Indian sub-continent who were vital in the early exploration of the Australian continent and the establishment of service links.

Among the major projects in which the Afghan cameleers were involved was the development of the rail link between Port Augusta and Alice Springs. The 'Ghan' train was so named in homage to the exploits of the Afghan cameleers. Their presence was equally important to the development of the overland telegraph line between Adelaide and Darwin during 1870 and 1872 which eventually linked Australia to London via India.

Through these early exploits, a string of 'Ghan' towns were established along the routes of the railway and many of these towns had at least one humble mosque of corrugated iron construction with a small minaret. However, the advent of the motor vehicle signalled the end of an era for the cameleers and the increased use of motor lorry for transport meant that many of these people fell upon hard economic times and eventually returned to their homelands. A few families did however settle permanently and their descendants have been active in various Islamic communities in Australia.

Contemporary Muslim Contributions

Among the most significant contributions made by the Muslim community is by virtue of the cultural diversity within the religion. This has prompted the western world, including Australia, to ponder on issues of cultural and religious identity. Islam's presence in Australia challenges the mind set of our generally Anglo-centric society, adding to the debate on the relevance of social values which have in the past not been representative of Australia's cultural diversity.

The Muslim community has contributed positively to such debates, asserting its desire to be treated with equal respect as others in the broader community, free from hostile elements and biases. Muslim have made contributions in almost every area of endeavour including, social, economic, cultural, religious and educational advancement.

Structures and Organisations

The peak Islamic authority in the Australian Muslim community is the Federation of Islamic Councils on which sit the Islamic Councils from states and territories. The Islamic Councils are representative of the broader Muslim community and deal with issues of religious significance and act as lobby groups on issues affecting Muslim-Australians.

There are numerous organisations representing the interests of Muslims at the local or regional level. These organisations include special interests groups such as cultural, women, religious, educational. Funding for community based organisations comes through government

Community Resources

The Muslim community has developed considerable resources over time which are available to its members through welfare, educational, cultural and religious organisations. Most capital cities would have a strong bond within the Muslim community, however, such structures may be lacking in rural or regional areas.

Community workers are a vital resource to the Muslim community, undertaking community development activities and resourcing community projects. Workers also provide advice and assistance to the community on issues facing individuals. Community workers play an integral role in developing services and programmes for the community by participating on advisory bodies at all levels of government.

In terms of physical resources, the community has a number of meeting or function halls and offices belonging to various organisations for use by the community. In the case of Sydney, there are presently over thirty mosques, some of which have adjoining community facilities for the social or educational needs of the community. Organisations also have office equipment and the expertise which can be accessed by members of the community.

(Acknowledgement and thanks are hereby extended to the CANTERBURY CITY COUNCIL and members of its staff for giving us permission to re-publish the above which was included in its 'MUSLIM AUSTRALIANS - a Community in Profile'.)

General demography of the muslim community

Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996 Census

Population	Australia 18 311 000	NSW 6 204 000	
Muslims - Australia	Male 104 958	Female 95 220	Total 200 178
Muslims - NSW	Male 53 734	Female 48 554	Total 102 288
Birthplace for NSW			
Australia			38 188
Lebanon			20 065
Turkey			8 994
Indonesia			3 200
Iran			2 966
Fiji			2 836
Bosnia - Herzegovina			1 961
Birthplace for Australia			
Australia			71 621
Lebanon			27 125
Turkey			22 270
Indonesia			6 923
Iran			5 221
Fiji			4 436
Bosnia - Herzegovina			6 651