

## **Islamic Culture or Muslim Culture: Missing Pieces in the Australian Cultural Kaleidoscope**

*Dr. Ameer Ali, Visiting Fellow, Murdoch University, Western Australia*

The term Islamic culture, like the name Islam itself, is a complex phenomenon subject to great confusion. There is no clear definition of Islam. Or, to be more precise, there are numerous definitions of Islam depending on the purpose and context. Similarly, there is no consensus on the composition and meaning of Islamic culture.

Let me pose the problem as follows: Muslims, whenever they are asked to declare their position on common or conventional and controversial issues start by saying, “according to Islam”. What do they mean by that? One can be more precise and clear when one says, “according to the Quran”, or “according to the Prophet’s saying and practice” or “according to such and such imam”. Such statements can be verified. But when one says according to Islam, what is one referring to? The name Islam has become an all inclusive concept for every purpose and in every context. But the fact must be faced that even as a religion Islam is diverse. It was originally an Arab religion which was adopted and assimilated by millions of non-Arab people. There are several Islams like Iranian Islam, Malay Islam, and Indian Islam each having its own distinct mark in the way it is believed and practiced.

The same confusion prevails when referring to Islamic culture. Is there such a thing as Islamic culture? The term culture itself has at least eleven meanings according to Clyde Kluckhohn, the great American anthropologist and social theorist. One of those definitions equates culture with “the total way of life of a people”. This is very relevant to my address today, because many Muslims define Islam as a “way of life” which implies logically that Islam is a culture. However, when one goes deeper into the problem one will realise that this equation is only superficial.

If Islam is a way of life and divinely ordained as some fundamentalist purists would make us believe, then the question must be asked whether that way of life is sacrosanct and uniform so that if you pick any two Muslims each from a different part of the world their mannerisms, speech, tastes and practices would appear identical. If the answer is negative then one must accept the fact that even as a way of life Islam is diverse. If culture therefore means a way of life then there is no such thing as **the** Islamic culture but several Muslim cultures.

Let me look at the problem from the religious angle. Islam as a religion was the latest divine intervention in human history but injected into an Arab culture through the Quran in the Arabic language and via the life of Prophet Muhammad who hailed from an Arab merchant family. What is more significant is the fact that the new religion was introduced in the mixed spiritual environment of monotheistic pluralism and paganism in Mecca, the then commercial capital of Arabia. This led to two

related developments. Firstly, the religion Islamised the Arab culture by removing or reforming some of its undesirable elements such as idol worship, unlimited polygamy, and revengeful warfare; and secondly, Islam in turn became Arabised by ennobling Arabic as the sacred religious language, by embossing Arabia as the epicentre of Islamic religion and by endorsing aspects of Arab life and family structure like the Arab attire and Arab patriarchy as Islamic dress code and family set-up respectively. Had Islam remained within the confines of Arabia and not spread into other non-Arab regions history might have later identified Arab culture as **the** Islamic culture.

Islam as a religion also has a global dimension. The prophet was sent as “*rahmatan lil alameen*” meaning, a blessing for humanity. Muhammad and his companions carried the religion far and wide across the globe. As the religion entered non-Arab territories and confronted other indigenous cultures, the already Arabised Islam had no choice but to interact with non-Arab customs, traditions, and practices. This interaction and cultural fusion remained apolitical until the rise of nationalism in the Muslim countries in the modern era.

The rise of Muslim political nationalism to win freedom from Western colonialism changed the apolitical nature of the Islamic religion. The new Muslim nationalists, who were mostly secularists by ideology and training and non-Arab in ethnicity, claimed Islam for themselves and to their own nations. These nationalists had to build their nationalist ideologies on the cultural particularisms of the pre-modern era, which were already intertwined with Islam. This naturalization of Islam by national cultures in the second half of the twentieth century played a crucial role in the formation of the popular cultures of these societies. Thus, most Muslims today, as members of nationalistic cultures, associates Islam in the first instance with their own national culture and only secondarily with any other culture.

It is from these more than one hundred national cultures that the bulk of the Australian Muslims have immigrated. It is therefore safe to say that what we have in Australia is not an Islamic culture but several national but partially Arabised cultures. This cultural diversity should be a source of strength and beauty to a cosmopolitan Australia. However, because of some unfortunate recent political developments, both in the national and international arena, and which treated Islam with hostility and suspicion, the cultural assets of the various Muslim nationalities, with one exception, have not been utilised to enrich the cultural capital stock of this country. The exception has been the enormous varieties of Muslim cuisines that have revolutionised the Australian palate for the third time, following the Greek and Italian dishes at first and the Chinese second. The Turkish kebabs, the Moghul briyani, the Malay satay, the Indian tandoori, and the Lebanese kufita and tabouleh, to name only a few among numerous others are crowding the dinner tables of Australians and changing their palate.

But what about the other cultural assets like dress, music and dance, art and painting, and architecture? Of the Muslim dress the female hijab or head scarf and the Arab jalabiyya or the long gown have increasingly been misconceived in the West as symbols of religious fundamentalism rather than as part of an ethnic costume which like other ethnic dresses like the European pants and frocks or the Indian sari and lungi or the Malay baju have become sartorially fashionable and commercially profitable in several parts of the world. One minister in the previous government remarked that the Muslim female head scarf may one day become a part of the national dress fashion and may even win a place in the cat-walks in this country. I hope he is right.

Music and dance, although discouraged by Islamic religious conservatism, flourished in the Muslim world before and since the dawn of Islam. In fact one branch of Islam, Sufism, has a close link with music and dance. The whirling dervishes of Turkey and Syria, the ghazzals and khawalis of Pakistan and Muslim India, the belly dances of the Middle East, the drums of Africa and other countless musical forms and instruments that delighted the durbars of the Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, Ottoman and Sokoto caliphates, and the Moghul courts are the precious legacy of Islam and they are still alive in the Muslim countries and amongst the Muslim immigrants in Australia.

On the question of Muslim music I want make a special comment. There are about thirty five Muslim schools in Australia of which five are managed by the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, the so called peak body of the Muslims, and the rest are owned and operated by individual entrepreneurs. In none of these schools music is offered as a subject to the Muslim children, because of the fear that religious orthodoxy may issue a fatwa condemning those schools for teaching a forbidden subject. Apart from narrowing the choice of subjects for Muslim kids these schools are also keeping the kids ignorant of a glorious dimension of Islam's cultural legacy. Today, music is the lingua franca of the younger generation and a great global integrator. It is time that the Muslim community reviews its historical anti-music bias.

Like music, Muslim art and painting, both in their ancient and modern forms are also assets waiting to be unearthed among the immigrant communities. Although the mullahs in the mosques discourage the development of aesthetics on the nebulous ground that they distract the believers from their spiritual pursuits, the growing younger generation of Muslims in this country are looking for avenues and support to express their talents in these fields at the earliest opportunity. The time has come for multicultural Australia to provide them with that opportunity.

I also want to make some comments on Muslim architecture. Baghdad, Alhambra, Cordoba, Delhi, and Istanbul are outstanding testimonies to the architectural achievements of Muslim civilization. The builders of modern mosques in the Muslim countries are trying their best to emulate this architectural tradition. As the Muslim

communities in Australia grow in size and affluence and as the Islamophobia that threatens to derail the achievements of multiculturalism in this country dissipates there will surely arise opportunities for the community to exhibit their architectural heritage in their mosques and school buildings.

These are some of the missing pieces in the Australian cultural kaleidoscope. I wish to conclude this short address by driving the point that it is these missing pieces that has the greatest potential to play the role of bridge building and act as social integrators in a country that is destined to remain ethnically and culturally diverse. Religion, as a set of specific beliefs, traditions and rituals divide humanity but as a set of values that are universal in character will unite all of us. Cultural assets in their variety of forms add beauty and inject dynamism to social life. Main stream Australia loves variety and shuns monotony. The Muslim community in this country has a lot to offer to the cultural enrichment of Australia and it is the task of the community leaders and the government to add those missing pieces to make the kaleidoscope even more attractive.