

As Australia matures, racism jars

The Age - June 17, 2010



TWO parallel debates this week have taken place in very different forums. The NRL has been shaken by Timana Tahu's walkout in protest at remarks by NSW assistant coach Andrew Johns. The debate is now whether rugby league is still captive to a racist culture. An IQ2 event, sponsored by The Age, engaged a more intellectual audience in debate on a similar but broader proposition: "Australia has not escaped its racist past." The audience voted in the affirmative, 71 per cent to 20 per cent, perhaps because of the difficulty of satisfying the opposite contention. As William Faulkner wrote: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

In Tuesday night's debate, author Hanifa Deen also linked the "racism of the past and a resurgence of tensions being played out in Australia today". The legacy of a racist past is ever present, but that does not make this country racist, or the NRL for that matter. In today's Australia, people of all backgrounds can succeed, as they do in the NRL and the AFL. This is not to deny disadvantage, but any promotion of the leagues would simply feel wrong if confined to players of white, English-speaking backgrounds, as does caricaturing of this nation as the old "white Australia". Just as football teams depend more heavily than ever before on players from indigenous and ethnic backgrounds, so Australia thrives as a multicultural society, in stark contrast to many other countries.

That is why it is so jarring when attitudes from the racist past are aired. Ex-AFL player Mal Brown was at it yesterday. A sign of progress is that Tahu and others will not let racism go unchallenged, and in taking a stand they attract more support than scorn. The perpetrator bears the shame. Johns has apologised and resigned as a coach. Many more of us than we like to admit are guilty of careless or unthinkingly racist remarks, but racism is most harmful when it involves people in positions of power or authority. "This starts from the top," Tahu said. "It needs to be addressed and it needs to go all the way down from there."

This is not political correctness; it is about defending human dignity. That struggle is never over. Only vigilance and awareness can keep insidious racism in check. Australia is a maturing society but has further to go. Having leaders and role models more representative of our nation's diversity would help. Perhaps, too, multiracial Australia can do more to celebrate its success. Yes, as was argued on Tuesday night, some might think it "cool" to be racist, but the AFL's celebrations of indigenous players have largely sidelined that sentiment in football. Progress may be slow and painful, but we are not prisoners of our racist past.

Rabbi goes full circle

Posted on July 1 - Jewish News



RABBI Meir Shlomo Klugant addressed a group of Victorian Muslims at a City Circle event last weekend.

The former president of the Rabbinical Council of Victoria and current rabbi at Jewish Care discussed some of the challenges facing the Jewish community. After the presentation, which also included some background information on the Victorian Jewish community, the group had the opportunity to question Rabbi Klugant.

"It was an enlightening experience and I am glad to have been offered the opportunity to talk to the group so openly as it gave me the chance to live the message I have been promoting in relation to multifaith dialogue and engagement," he said.

Among the topics asked about were interfaith dialogue and commonalities between different religious leaders.

City Circle aims to highlight an Australian Muslim identity while developing friendship and cooperation between Muslim and non-Muslim communities.



Launceston Mosque Appeal

Muslims Australia President and Vice President visited the Muslim community of Launceston with the Imam of Hobart Mosque, Imam Sabri Samson to ascertain the requirements of the very small Muslim community of Launceston. A condemned University building is being temporarily used and the community have been given notice to vacate this building which is to be pulled down.

There is no toilet facility in the building which was freezing cold on the night of the meeting with the community.

The mainland community is requested to assist the Muslim community of Launceston to raise funds for a mosque InshaAllah to be built.

FOR DONATIONS:

Bank: COMMONWEALTH BANK

Name: Islamic Association of Launceston Inc
BSB: 06 7600 **Account Number:** 10419181

For further information contact:

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MUSLIM PIONEERS

What would Pauline Say?



'Muslim pioneers' a part of Australian colonial history? I don't think so, and besides, what would Pauline Hanson say? But a new traveling exhibition, currently on display at the Victorian Immigration Museum, throws light on the contribution of the early cameleers and on their descendents still alive today.

'The Afghan problem' in the late nineteenth century was as much talked about and as hotly debated in Australia as the subject of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants is today. The Indians and Afghans who had entered Australia as cameleers before 1901 soon wore out their 'welcome' at a time when the urge to get rid of Asians was growing year by year. Non-Caucasian races could be used for menial tasks, but must never threaten the working conditions of white Australians - the White Australia Policy became our national 'hymn' in 1901.

The ultimately ill fated Burke and Wills expedition of 1860 proved the merit of camel over horse and bullock. Over the next decade, British entrepreneurs imported significant numbers of camels with their handlers. Camels, as their mobility and endurance gained recognition, were used in remote central areas to cart water and machinery; in the Great Drought of 1896 - 1902 they saved many small rural towns.

Some men put down roots and remained here to the end of their days; they married local indigenous or European women and lived with their families along camel routes in 'Ghan' towns in places like Marree, Farina, Alice Springs, Oodnadatta, Broken Hill, and Cloncurry. Today a hundred or so families maintain these special connections forming a tight circle of cameleer descendents spanning three and four generations.

The idea for the current exhibition came from non-Muslims researchers. Many of the descendents rallied behind the organisers, willing to part (temporarily at least) with their precious family heirlooms: prayer

mats, photographs, costumes and camel regalia.

Until the South Australian Museum exhibition was created other Australian museums seemed unaware of cameleer history except for small displays located in Coolgardie and Broken Hill. Camel men were never a part of the bush nostalgia that began in the 1960s. These exhibits on show in Melbourne have their roots in the outback but the people who need to see this lost history live in the cities.

After the 9/11 tragedy in 2001, some of the older descendents found themselves confronted for the first time by people questioning their 'Muslim-sounding' names. The ugly chant 'Go back where you came from' bewildered them — nothing had prepared them for hostility of this kind. Any notion of a Muslim identity had vanished long ago supplanted by strong kinship links especially alive in people with Aboriginal-Afghan heritage; shared memories and a few old customs and sayings were all that remained from the past. Today the elderly descendents continue to meet annually around Australia maintaining a romantic 'born again' identity: cameleer heritage minus the religion.

Camel caravans often passed through Aboriginal lands. Relationships were friendly and Aborigines travelled along with the camel drivers. Visitors to the South Australian Art Gallery may notice an Albert Namajira painting, with the word 'Salaam' carved into the trunk of one of his iconic ghost gums. Namajira, in his younger days, worked as an assistant cameleer in the early 1920s for an Afghan by the name of Ali Mohammed on the track between

Oodnadatta and Hermannsburg Mission.

The camel men tried to stay good practising Muslims in a world not attuned to the daily rhythms and demands of Islam. They built small mud-tin mosques, prayed, fasted, ate halal meat, refused alcohol or pork, read the Qur'an and continued the giving of zakat (charity), but subsequent generations became assimilated — fathers were away for months at a time and their mothers had not grown up as Muslims.

Inland Muslims tended to remain with their families when they grew old. Men with families put down roots (which is why authorities refused them permission to bring their wives from their homelands). They were expected eventually to return home, but for most of these men home was with their families in Australia.

As a child I remember seeing a few old single men living out their days in small rooms at the Perth Mosque; it was too late for them to go home. They could no longer pray on their mats, bending, kneeling and standing as required. They said their prayers while sitting in chairs and my dad told me that God took their prayers just like he accepted everyone's prayers — sitting, standing, or kneeling — submitting to God was what counted.

Will the exhibition find a permanent home somewhere in Australia? I hope so.

Hanifa Deen is a Melbourne-based author. Her books include *Caravanserai* and *The Jihad Seminar*.
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