

## **Advice to Australian Muslim Youth [3]**

### **The Question of Cultural Identity**

**Friday Khutba**

**Kuraby**

**28 December 2012**

In my last *khutba* [sermon] I said that religion plays an important role in shaping our identities.<sup>1</sup>

Today I will talk about the place of culture in the formation of our identities, and the place of culture in Islam.

The following are some food for thought as this topic cannot be covered in one *khutba*<sup>2</sup>.

First, it is important to recognise that among the upcoming young Muslim generation there have emerged a number of notable men and women, who make us all proud. Most of the young people that I know—brothers and sisters—are comfortable with being Australian Muslims, and have been able to negotiate this identity very positively.

Furthermore, cross-cultural and inter-racial marriages have increased and show that many Muslim Australians now find themselves more Muslim and Australian than Indian, Pakistani, Algerian, Palestinian, Somali, or anything else. That is not to say that one must discard or be ashamed of his or her parent's ethnic heritage. Rather, it is a sign of maturity to be a Muslim who *is* Australian and belongs to a particular ethnic heritage. More importantly, it would be helpful to maintain one's ethnic language along with English.

Additionally, the young Australian Muslim generation shows signs of cultural maturity and are connecting on positive levels with the wider Australian society in ways often unthinkable to their parents.

However, despite such positive developments, much of the cultural creation taking place over recent years has been without direction, confused, or, worse yet, fearful the dominant Australian culture and a shallow, narrow understanding of Islam that leads—sometimes and among a loud minority—to an exclusivist or supremacist attitude.

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<sup>1</sup> In compiling this *khutba* I have benefited tremendously from Umar Faruq Abd-Allah's scholarly article 'Islam and the Cultural Imperative'. *IAIS Journal of Civilisation Studies* Vol. 1 No. 2 (September 2009); and Equally, I benefited from numerous discussions that I had with many young brothers and sisters, and more senior members of our community, both in Brisbane and elsewhere in Australia. I am indebted to their valuable input.

<sup>2</sup> Given that this is the text of a *khutba* it was not written with the usual academic rigour.

The results – especially if mixed with the ignorant and narrow views of some Muslims – ‘leads to isolation, false fear of participation and unfair judgment’<sup>3</sup> of what it means to be Australian.

It will be folly of us to assume that we will be able to define our identity if we confine the practice of Islam to the internal boundaries of the mosque, not challenged by the real world outside the mosque gates. To understand the Australian context and its people, we need to engage regularly, and positively, with the wider society, in a way that is consistent with the context, and their positive customs—‘*urf*, which does not contradict the teachings of Islam.

Without this we will not be able to define our identities, and there would be no effective *da‘wa*—invitation to Islam. That is why, for example, Australians do not hear the word of Islam, generally, by being ‘shouted at by someone at Speakers Corner’, or by reading some angry little pamphlet pushed into their hand at some shopping complex. Not only is this frowned upon, but is also inconsistent with the Australian context, and ‘*urf*. Academic evidence shows that most non-Muslims are attracted to Islam through *personal experience* of Muslims. And this takes place, overwhelmingly, at the workplace. But ‘work is a prime environment for being noticed, and judged, as Muslims’. As ‘Abd al-Hakim Murad reminds us:

There is nothing remotely new in this. Islam has always spread primarily through social interactions connected with work. The early Muslims who conquered half the world did not set up soapboxes in the town squares of Alexandria, Cordoba or Fez, in the hope that Christians would flock to them and hear their preaching. They did business with the Christians; and their nobility and integrity of conduct won the Christians over. That is the model followed by Muslims, down the ages; and it is the one that we must retain today, by interacting honourably and respectfully with non-Muslims in our places of work, as much as we can.<sup>4</sup>

### **Accepting what is good and beneficial from other Cultures**

The Prophet Muhammad and his Companions did not reject much of the existing Arab culture of his time, because he was not ‘at war’ with it but ‘entertained an honest, accommodating, and generally positive view of the broad social culture’ of his people. He retained those aspects of pre-Islamic Arab culture that were good and beneficial, and that didn’t contradict the teachings of Islam. This was so because he and his companions ‘did not look upon human culture in terms of black and white, nor did they divide human societies into absolute good and absolute evil’.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Abd-Allah, *op cit*

<sup>4</sup> Abdal Hakim Murad. British and Muslim? [www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/default.htm](http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/default.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Abd-Allah, *op cit*

Instead, ‘the Prophetic message was, from the outset, based on the distinction between what was good, beneficial, and authentically human in other cultures, while seeking to alter only what was clearly detrimental.’<sup>6</sup> In fact, ‘much of what became the Prophet’s *Sunnah* (Prophetic model) was made up of acceptable pre-Islamic Arab cultural norms.’<sup>7</sup> Hence, the reason ‘the early jurist Abu Yusuf (d. 798) understood the recognition of good, local cultural norms as falling under the rubric of the *Sunnah*.’<sup>8</sup>

Of course, it goes without saying that ‘blanket adoption of local culture’ was not accepted by any school of thought (*math-hab*). In Australia, for example, certain cultural practices or norms cannot be accepted because they go against the text and spirit of the faith. But that does not mean we reject all other good and beneficial cultural norms and practices, such as ‘fair-go’, ‘fairness’, ‘equal opportunity’, caring for the disadvantaged, road ethics, cleanliness, which (unfortunately) are often absent in modern majority Muslim countries.

The importance of good and beneficial cultural norms became known as ‘*urf*’ and continues to play an important part in the *Sharī‘a*. Hence, instead of ignoring and eventually destroying all non-Arab cultural expressions, Islam succeeded in incorporating—and indeed preserving—that which was considered as good and beneficial. At times, various cultural norms were adapted (or ‘pruned’) to suit the Islamic world view, such as the concept of *ḥayā*’ (modesty, shame or embarrassment), which in pre-Islamic Arabia led to the heinous crime of infanticide. While Islam prohibited infanticide, it developed the concept of *ḥayā*’ and used it positively to enhance people’s dignity and self-worth.

The importance of cultural was later ingrained in Islamic law’s five universal maxims, which declared: “Cultural usage shall have the weight of law”. And “Cultural usage is second nature,” by which it implied that it is as ‘difficult for people to go against their established customs as it is for them to defy their instinctive natures.’<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, ‘to reject sound custom and usage was not only counterproductive, it brought excessive difficulty and unwarranted harm to people.’<sup>10</sup>

Take for example the dress code of modesty in Islam. The ‘fifteenth-century scholar Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Mawāq said that it was not the purpose of Prophetic dress codes to impinge upon the cultural integrity of non-Arab Muslims, who were at liberty to develop or maintain their own distinctive dress within the broad parameters of the sacred law’<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> ibid

<sup>7</sup> ibid

<sup>8</sup> ibid

<sup>9</sup> ibid

<sup>10</sup> ibid

<sup>11</sup> ibid

This means that while the Shari‘a demands modesty in dress for both men and women it didn’t specify a particular style or colour. Women are required to wear long, loose and non-transparent clothing that covers the body from head-to-toe. This general code was manifested differently in different cultures and so you will find Muslim women apply the roles of modesty to clothing that fits their own cultural setting: so Muslim women’s modest dressing in Indonesia is different to that of the Middle East or Africa.

The same applies to men’s clothing. The Shari‘a demands modest dressing for men, and this is why the ‘Sunnah’ clothing for men was interpreted differently in different cultural contexts. The Arabs assume that their traditional dress code (*juba, dishdash, or thaub*) is closest to the Sunnah; equally, however, Pakistani, Indian, Indonesian or African Muslims will assume the same about their own traditional cloths. All, of course, are a true manifestation of the practice of the Sunnah adapted to suit their own cultural expressions and context. Australian Muslims should also think of the same when wishing to dress according to the ‘Sunnah.’

## Historical Examples

Look for example at Islamic architecture. The Prophet’s mosque was ‘modest and rustic with neither dome nor minaret—but it provided the underlying ideas and basic purposes informing the spirit so elegantly expressed in the mosques of later Islamic civilisation. In all regions, the great mosques of Islam translated functionality into beauty in a manner suitable to their physical environments and cultural contexts.’<sup>12</sup>

Muslims, throughout history, succeeded in giving ‘fullness to stone, wood and other materials by borrowing basic motifs from local traditions and transforming them into symbols of light and easily recognizable areas of sacred space.’ Andalusian and North African mosques combined elements of the native Roman basilica with Visigothic elements like the horseshoe arch. The Ottomans adopted the lofty domed structures and basic outlay of indigenous Greek churches along with pencil-thin, obelisk-like minarets based on native Anatolian themes. The mosques of East and West Africa captured a distinctly African spirit in local materials. Likewise, the mosque like Tāj Maḥal flawlessly blended Indian and Persian elements to become one of the most successful cultural statements of Muslim India, so effectively expressing the sub-continental ethos that it became the symbol of India around the world.<sup>13</sup>

The same innovative genius should be applied to mosques in Australia, to reflect Islam’s emphasis on ‘Oneness’, the colourful beauty of Aboriginal dot painting, and taking into

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<sup>12</sup> ibid

<sup>13</sup> ibid

consideration the surrounding environment. How wonderful, for example, it would be to see a mosque whose façade is painted with Aboriginal dot painting telling meanwhile the story of positive interaction that existed between the First peoples and the Muslims of Sulawesi.

Take another example: ‘Chinese civilisation cultivated calligraphy, and Chinese Muslims took care to preserve that legacy, while developing their own brush-painted and reed-written Arabic calligraphic styles, often using Chinese on the same inscription to translate the Arabic.’<sup>14</sup> Imagine if we can develop a form of calligraphic style inspired by Aboriginal art!

On the other hand:

Unlike China, Muslims along the East African coast did not encounter an ancient civilization with an established literary tradition but tribes and peoples wedded to the beauty of their native Bantu tongue, which East African Muslims adopted as their own and worked into a powerful cultural vehicle for Islam, creating the Swahili language (*al-sawa-h. ɪ-liyyah*, lit. ‘the language of the coastal areas’). Over the centuries, Swahili-speaking Muslims produced a voluminous and stunning literature, ranking as one of the world’s richest, which to this day has not yet been fully catalogued. Swahilidom integrated certain modes of behaviour into local Muslim identity, especially personal dignity expressed in politeness and good comportment. Swahilidom enshrined qualities like patience, kindness, and understanding. Impatience, quickness to anger, and greed – qualities that the Swahili Muslims readily identified in Portuguese sailors upon their first sixteenth-century colonialist encroachments – were identified as juvenile, ‘uncivilised’, and ‘un-Swahili’, tolerable in children but odious in adults.<sup>15</sup>

People who do not know this aspect of Islam will view the world in essentialist ways, and in doing so developing ‘confused identities.’<sup>16</sup> It is often the young people who are confused about their Australian Muslim identity and are, therefore, ‘attracted to totalitarian solutions.’ These young Muslims are usually ‘threatened by the diversity of calls on their allegiance, and by the sheer complexity of modernity, that the only form of Islam they can regard as legitimate is a totalitarian, monolithic one.’<sup>17</sup> This leads such young people to even question the existence of the four schools of thought, and such legitimate differences among the Muslim community is seen by them as ‘a species of blasphemy.’<sup>18</sup>

These young people are either ignorant of Muslim history, or dismiss it as a gigantic mistake. For them, the grace and *rahma* of Allah has for some reason been withheld

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<sup>14</sup> ibid

<sup>15</sup> ibid

<sup>16</sup> Murad, *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> ibid

<sup>18</sup> ibid

from all but a tiny fraction of the Umma. These people are the elect; and all disagreement with them is a blasphemy against God.<sup>19</sup>

At best we should engage with these people to help them understand the latitude that exists within Islam, and the depth of its historical contributions to world's cultures and civilisations. At worst, we should ignore their screams against anything but their 'understanding' of Islam, and pray that they see the folly of their approach and thinking.

Islam allows us to dive in the vast multicultural character of Australian society, and with the appropriate knowledge, skills, compassion and vision we will be able to define our Australian Muslim identity as did African, Indian, Asian and other Muslims in the lands in which they resided, without fear of the dominant culture.

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid*