Faith and Loyalty: A Short History of the Muslims of Colonial New Zealand

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Abstract

The popular association of Muslim immigration to New Zealand with recent Asian and African arrivals obscures a longer trajectory of settlement dating to the mid-19th century. From the 1850s onward, Muslim individuals and families have migrated, lived, and worked across various regions of the country, contributing in diverse yet often unacknowledged ways to New Zealand's

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historical tapestry. This paper examines the first century of Muslim presence, mapping key phases of migration and the gradual emergence of Islamic institutions. It also interrogates the archival silence surrounding these communities, arguing that their marginalisation in dominant historical narratives belies a rich and instructive legacy. The evidence recovered not only illuminates the lived experiences of early Muslim settlers but also offers insight into the broader dynamics of religious adaptation and social integration in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Colonial New Zealand, Muslim diaspora, South Asian migration

Introduction

This essay aims to trace the first few decades of Muslim presence in colonial New Zealand, spanning from 1841 to 1907. In 2019, terrorist shootings at two mosques in Christchurch, drew international attention to this small faith group and generated much interest in their presence and activities–their history, less so. Today, the Islamic community in New Zealand–estimated at approximately 60,000–is marked by pronounced diversity in ethnicity, profession, education, social class, and regional dispersion, rendering generalizations about contemporary dynamics increasingly imprecise.[1] Broadly, the community may be categorized into four intersecting groups. First, immigrants from varied national origins, including both recent arrivals and long-term residents. Second, refugees from African, Asian, and European regions. Third, converts from Anglo-European and Polynesian backgrounds, whose affiliations with Islam arise through theological conviction or intermarriage. Fourth, and increasingly prominent, are the New Zealand–born descendants of these groups, shaped by hybrid identities and situated within local cultural milieus. A minority emerge from mixed-faith or mixed-ethnic households, further complicating communal boundaries. These layers of origin and social adaptation suggest an evolving matrix of Muslim

identity in New Zealand–one whose implications for civic inclusion, religious representation, and intergenerational transmission merit critical attention.

Scholarly engagement with the early history of this community has often been cursory, with some commentators contending that a compelling narrative is unattainable due to the fragmentary nature of archival sources. Such assessments argue that the paucity of documentation precludes meaningful analysis of personal religious practices or communal characteristics. However, this essay contends that even the silences and absences within the historical record are analytically fruitful. The nuanced religious dispositions and pragmatic adaptations exhibited by early Muslim settlers–though inconsistently preserved–invite interpretive reflection. Textual ambiguities, contradictions, and historiographical gaps, rather than obstructing inquiry, enhance its depth. These liminal spaces reveal a complex interplay of belief, identity, and settlement that merits sustained attention.

To trace the Muslim presence in colonial New Zealand is to engage with historical constellations that extend beyond discrete migration events and to explore a complex and evolving constellation of competing and cooperating social hierarchies. Early Muslim settlers arrived not merely as isolated individuals but as participants in broader imperial, commercial, and socio-cultural networks. Their trajectories and fealties reflect the mobility patterns of indentured laborers, sailors, merchants, and hawkers situated within the British imperial web and regional circuits spanning South Asia, the Middle East, and Australasia. Yet, despite these transnational linkages, prevailing historiography has largely overlooked their stories, treating Muslim presence as an incidental footnote rather than a formative strand of the colonial experience. Recovering and contextualizing these lives reframes the early religious landscape of New Zealand as one marked by pluralism, ambiguity, and quiet persistence. Ultimately, by foregrounding interpretive tension and embracing the fragmentary contours of the record, this work seeks to contribute a more textured understanding of the history of the early formative period of the Muslim community in New Zealand.

Foundations

In May 1841, New Zealand was proclaimed a colony by the British authorities.[2] Prior to this date, New Zealand was inhabited by Polynesian tribes for approximately 500 to 800 hundred years.[3] The colony lasted until September 1907 when it transitioned into a self-governing Dominion–a status that remained until its legal reconstitution as a Realm in 1983. This colonial period coincided with the arrival of the European settler population–the colonists, mostly from the British Isles.[4] These folk built the country, introduced law and order, and created a modern economy. This era also saw the earliest Muslim settlers, many of whom hailed from British India. The contribution of India and Indians to the colonial and developmental trajectory of New Zealand has often been understated in local historiography. Beyond the prevalence of Indian place names (Berhampore, Khandallah, Bombay Hills, and so forth), the scholarship of Jacqueline Leckie has foregrounded the diverse presence of Indian settlers–predominantly Hindu and Sikh, though including Muslim and Christian migrants–whose socio-economic contributions shaped emerging settler society.[5]

I consider the role of early Muslim migrants as warranting particular attention. Analogous to the influence exerted by European pioneers–sailors, whalers, merchants, and missionaries–in cultivating Anglo-European institutions and identity, Muslim forerunners similarly laid foundations for the development of Muslim minority communities in New Zealand. These individuals did not merely reside within colonial society but actively participated in the structuring of religious and communal identities that would evolve throughout the 20th century. Their historical significance, though frequently overshadowed, remains integral to understanding the pluralistic fabric of New Zealand's national narrative.

Prevailing historiography has long cited the 1874 government census–which recorded 17 individuals under the designation "Mahometans"–as marking the inaugural presence of Muslims in New Zealand.[6] However, my own recent research has revealed an earlier Muslim settlement, challenging this conventional starting point.[7] Evidence suggests that a Muslim

family resided in Canterbury from the 1850s, with the first clearly identifiable Muslim settler being Mahomet Wuzerah (alternatively recorded as Wuzerah Moosalman), commonly known simply as Wuzerah. His arrival in New Zealand appears to have coincided with his employment under Sir John Cracroft Wilson (1808–1881), who disembarked at the port of Lyttelton in 1854 aboard the *Akbar*. Wilson subsequently acquired property on the southern base of the Port Hills—land encompassing swamp and low hill terrain—which he named Cashmere, in reference to Kashmir, India. Notably, Wuzerah's presence is corroborated by his involvement in a legal proceeding dated 1858, thereby constituting the earliest documented appearance of a Muslim in New Zealand's judicial records. This finding urges a reconsideration of the temporal and demographic contours of early Muslim settlement in New Zealand, underscoring the interpretive value of archival recovery and historical nuance.

> The case which occupied the Court to-day was an action brought against one Goorden, a native of India, by Wuzeera another Indian, for a robbery of some money from the house of the latter on the 27th September last. Both were servants of Mr. Wilson, of Cashmere. Both parties being ignorant of the English language, Mr. P. Ashton acted as interpreter, and the witnesses Wuzeera and his wife were sworn upon the Koran (English translation) and repeated the Mahometan formula and genuflexions of a solemn oath.[8]

The presence of Wuzerah in Canterbury was familial, not solitary. Archival press sources identify his wife, Mindia, and two sons, Pero and Mero, born in India circa 1850s. Subsequently, two additional sons–Noora and Rabbi–appear to have been born at Cashmere around 1859 and 1861. Wuzerah, identified in the newspapers as a "Mahometan," contributed to the 1857 Indian Relief Fund alongside Anglo-Saxon donors, colonists. I think his inclusion underscored his sociocultural proximity and loyalty to other Christian-European settlers despite ethnoreligious difference.[9] The 1861 government census recorded four individuals under the classification "Mahometans," likely referencing Wuzerah and his

immediate household, thereby marking the first official recognition of Muslim residents in New Zealand.[10]

Curiously "Wazera Noora" was later involved in horse breeding and by the 1890s was selling trotting stallions in Otago.[11] This is almost certainly the New Zealand-born son of the Wuzerah mentioned above. Throughout the 19th century, members of Wuzerah's family were involved in multiple legal proceedings, including an inquest following the drowning of one son. These events generated a modest but invaluable corpus of official documentation, offering historians a rare–albeit asymmetrical–glimpse into the internal dynamics and lived experiences of an early Muslim settler household in colonial New Zealand.[12]

The *Star* newspaper, dated 1 May 1902, published an obituary for Wuzerah under the alias "Bezire," describing him as a bullock driver who transported stone from a Port Hills quarry for the construction of Christchurch Cathedral in the 1870s. Whether viewed as a pragmatic labor engagement or an instance of early interfaith labor integration, this contribution by a Muslim settler to a major Christian institution holds considerable symbolic weight. The death of Wuzerah from heart disease at the Cashmere property–where his son Mero reportedly discovered the body–received detailed coverage in the *Christchurch Star*, and more succinct mention in several regional newspapers, including those in Auckland, Otago, and Wanganui. I suggest that this was evidence of their integration into colonial communal life. His burial record at Sydenham Cemetery lists him as a pensioner under the Cracroft Wilson family, while press accounts estimated his age at death to be between 80 and 100 years. The widespread attention suggests that an Indian Muslim's life and passing in colonial New Zealand elicited notable public interest, further emphasizing the social visibility of early Muslim presence during this formative period.[13]

The progeny of Wuzerah seem to have remained in the Christchurch region into the early 20th century, contributing to its laboring workforce. His son, Mero Wiggers, a resident of Drain Road, Halswell, died in 1927 at the age of 75.[14] His brother, Noah Wizero–a laborer of Hoon Hay–was interred in the same plot on 25 September 1928.[15] Their younger sibling, Rabbi (also recorded as Robert Wazero), born in Christchurch,

worked as a farm laborer and resided on Cashmere Road. He died aged 79 on 21 March 1941 and was buried in Block 29A Plot 33 at Sydenham Cemetery.[16] The exact identity of Wuzerah remains difficult to verify, with significant ambiguity surrounding his full name and historical documentation.

South Asians

The 1871 Otago regional census recorded a single individual designated as a "Mussulman," almost certainly Mahomet Khan, who is understood to be the earliest traceable Muslim resident in the region.[17] Khan reportedly worked in the Kyeburn goldfields circa 1869 during the Otago gold rush. His surname suggests Indian origin, though no further biographical detail is available.[18] By April 1874, the government census identified 15 Chinese Muslim goldminers residing in Dunstan, Otago—reflecting both the ethnic diversity and religious plurality of the colonial goldfields. Additionally, two Muslims were recorded in Auckland and Dunedin, respectively.[19] From the late 19th century onward, Indian men began settling in New Zealand in increasing numbers. Many of these migrants formed households through marriage with local women, predominantly of Anglo-European descent, marking a slow but sustained expansion of South Asian Muslim presence across New Zealand's urban and rural landscapes.[20] Curiously enough, one of the first identifiable Muslims living in Dunedin in the 1870s was "Butterdean" (presumably Badruddin) "a Mahommedan, born in Cashmere." We know little of the rest of his dress but in 1875 he was described as having "recently arrived in this Province" and was "wearing the turban in court" as a witness.[21]

Contemporary newspaper accounts from the 1870s document the presence of an elderly Indian lascar residing in impoverished circumstances within one of New Zealand's port cities. Despite his material hardship, reportage conveyed a tone of sympathy and quiet respect, suggesting a degree of public recognition for his laboring past and dignified endurance. Such references offer rare insight into the socio-economic realities and public perceptions of non-European maritime workers in colonial urban settings:

> Baba, a Hindoo, who was remanded on a charge of vagrancy, in order that might be seen what would be done with him, as he was very old and decrepit, was again brought up. Sergeant-Major Pardy said nothing could be done except sending him to gaol. The Bench, out of kindness, ordered the prisoner's confinement in Mount Eden for three months.[22]

Newspaper references to the individual as "Hindu" likely reflect reductive journalistic shorthand conflating Indian ethnicity with religious identity. The name "Ali Baba" also appears improbable as an authentic identifier, more plausibly serving as an Anglo-European substitute for a Muslim name. Records suggest he had resided in the colony for an extended period, lacked familial ties or dependents, and was unsupported by any official agency. A similar case recurred the following year, underscoring the isolation of elderly laborers of non-European origin. The condition of Ali Baba did not improve and he was remanded in court on identical charges the following year:

> Ali Baba, a Hindoo, was brought up on a charge of vagrancy, having been found in an oil jar in Chancery Lane, and having no visible means of employment. Sub-Inspector Pardy described the old man as miserably poor and inoffensive, and rather than allow him to starve, had brought him to Court. His Worship remanded the old man until Monday to consider what should be done with him.[23]

Despite his infirmity, incarceration appears to have been framed as a form of provisional charity, offering shelter and sustenance to a man perceived as law-abiding and loyal–but basically destitute.[24] His final mention in the press placed him within a refuge for impoverished men in the city. A newspaper article places him in a room alongside an aged Maori warrior–Hori Henni of the Taranaki province–as well as a superannuated sea captain and a retired dancing master.[25] These men represented an eclectic assembly of the marginalized yet diverse constituents of colonial society.

> This old Hindoo shares a room with his dark-skinned brother of New Zealand. Baba is a well-known character. He used to show a decided partiality for empty outhouses and was often found roosting amongst the fowls, not with any predatory object, for the old man is a staunch idolater, and would not even steal a copy of Confucius on the Laws of Menu if he found one lying handy. In reply to inquiries, the old man managed through a mist of broken English to convey the impression that he had never been more happy and contented in his life. He is always sure of food, shelter, and clothing, and on fine days can bask in the sunshine and contemplate the beauties of Parnell and the North Shore. The only thing he misses is the turban and a few other odd luxuries to which he was accustomed in days of yore on Indias Coral Strand. Baba has been brought up 999 times more or less for having no visible means of support.[26]

Ali Baba appears to have died in 1877. In the late 19th century, scattered court records and newspaper reports reveal a small but active cohort of South Asian Muslim hawkers operating within New Zealand's urban landscapes. In 1887, one "Ammer Nuddeen"–likely a transliteration of Amir Nuruddeen–successfully brought legal action to recover £2 for dress material supplied to a local client.[27] His subsequent disappearance from public record suggests a probable migration to Australia or return to South Asia, following patterns common among itinerant Asian traders. Further episodes underscore the occupational and social precarity of these individuals. In January 1889, the residence of one "Moslemalli" (Muslim Ali) on Newtown Road was burgled, with textiles among the stolen items (shawls and handkerchiefs).[28] Later that year in September, "Haniff," another Indian hawker, unsuccessfully sought legal restitution for unpaid goods.[29] In 1891, "Isser Alli" (likely Isa Ali) initiated legal proceedings against Alfred Greenway for silk handkerchiefs supplied to sex workers associated with brothels; another hawker, "Deedor Box" (interpretable as Deedar Baksh), served as witness.[30] These cases not only reflect economic interactions across class and gender lines, but also register the hawkers' engagement with local legal mechanisms.

Violence and discrimination also marked their experiences. In February 1891, "Goolam Basar" (Ghulam Bashir) was physically assaulted while seeking shelter under a veranda in Karangahape Road.[31] In April 1894 during the month of Ramadan (1311 AH), a legal altercation occurred involving "two Hindoos and a Persian" named Hasan Alli–all hawkers–who were charged with assaulting Abdul Khan. The incident raises questions regarding intra-community tensions, possibly exacerbated by religious observance, though the sources remain silent on such specifics.[32] These are all Muslim names. Was the flare up fueled by the fasting month? Were these Muslims fasting and observing the tenets of their faith? We cannot know for certain. The court case involving "three natives of India" was flummoxed by issues surrounding language, with the complainant rejecting the assigned interpreter for alleged bias.[33] The *New Zealand Herald* reported in tones stentorian and sententious:

> It seems strange considering the few Persian lollie dealers that ply their calling in our city that they cannot carry on their trade without falling out. But judging from the proceedings at the Magistrate's Court yesterday, it would appear that competition is so keen between them that it often leads to strife, and that jealousy exists among them to a greater extent than among our own tradesmen. [...] The hearing of the case lasted the greater part of the day. A large number of witnesses were examined on both sides.[34]

The case and testimonies were taken seriously, some charges were dismissed, and fines were issued. This episode offers a compelling lens through which to examine interethnic and interreligious dynamics in late 19th century colonial Auckland. At once illustrative of socio-cultural negotiation and symbolic representation, the narrative documents moments of interaction between Muslims and Christians, Anglo-Europeans and South Asians, capturing the interpretive agency and emotional registers of those involved. The journalist's approach to the subject matter–undertaken with evident acuity and literary flair–remains strikingly resonant, affording valuable insight into the period's public discourse. Notably,

the conduct attributed to the "Persians" reflects much on both colonial society and the Muslim presence within..

The case itself, preserved and filtered through local media reportage, assumes an archetypal quality, emblematic of broader patterns in urban colonial life. Its imagery–of immigrant men navigating modest livelihoods amid a growing metropolis–evokes the social textures of Auckland during the turn-of-century and its lower-class milieu and disrupts monolithic portrayals of settler society. Framed within the macro-economic development and emerging urbanization of New Zealand, this account foregrounds human mobility, precarity, and pluralism at the margins of colonial orthodoxy. It arguably marks one of the earliest instances in which the voices of Muslim residents surface in local public record–men articulating lived concerns, negotiating status, and expressing sentiment within a society in formation. It is interesting to note the appellation "Persian" being applied broadly here and the distinction drawn to "our tradesmen"[35] (by which the newspaper almost certainly meant Anglo-European). This reporting underscores the evolving power dynamics between media proprietors, their readership, and the represented subjects. Importantly, it highlights the active role individual Muslims played in shaping public perceptions of cultural and religious plurality, alongside international affairs. Immigrant activity remained a recurrent focus of popular journalism within the colonial public sphere.

In the 1890s, Dunedin court records reveal the presence of two Muslim men—"Abdul Borham" (likely Burhan) and "Soloman Shah" (possibly Suleiman)—presumed to be hawkers from Bengal, eastern India. In 1893, Borham was party to a legal dispute involving another hawker.[36] A contemporary report in the Christchurch Press simply calls him and Charles Abraham "Assyrians"[37] although the Christchurch Star presented Shah as "an Indian hawker."[38] Unhelpfully, an earlier account in the *Otago Daily Times* simply called both Shah and Abdul Boreham "two Hindoos."[39] By 1898, Shah was residing in Christchurch but was arrested and returned to Dunedin for neglecting to support two illegitimate children–Solomon and Robert McGuire–born to Isabella McGuire in 1896 and 1897. He was defended by prominent lawyer Alfred Charles Hanlon (1866–1944). Shah subsequently married McGuire and fathered

a daughter before his death in Christchurch on 16 December 1909. These fragmented narratives reflect the tenuous social positioning and varied public portrayals of South Asian Muslims in colonial New Zealand, shaped by racialized descriptors and inconsistent journalistic framing.[40]

Also in the Otago province, Ahad Baksh Malik arrived in 1890 from northern India and settled in Arrowtown, in the heart of the region. He lived and worked as a hawker–travelling to remote farms to proffer his merchandise and wares. He was married to an Anglo-European woman at one point but there do not appear to be any descendants. He remained a popular small businessman and—community spirited—in 1917 he contributed 5 shillings to the Dunstan district hospital subscription fundraiser. A year later, he was delighting newspapers with semi-humorous outbursts in court, in yet another legal dispute over one of his horses, the *Cromwell Argus* reporting: "He proceeded to impress on all concerned that he was a Mahommedan, and assured them they were lucky they were not in India."[41] These were not the words of a man who felt particularly oppressed or downtrodden by anything other than regular bureaucracy. Later in 1918, Malik died after a fatal heart attack whilst visiting an old friend, one John McMaster, farmer, at Arrow Junction. In their obituary for the Indian hawker, the *Cromwell Argus* described him as "quite a local celebrity in Central Otago." Malik was buried in Arrowtown, his service conducted by the Presbyterian Reverend James Rattray, on August 26, 1918.[42]

In fact, the 1890s saw a small influx of identifiable Punjabi Muslim settlers. Sheikh Mohammed Din (1877–1945), likely the earliest traceable Punjabi Muslim settler in the South Island of New Zealand, originated from Sialkot and was born to Fazal Din, a farmer and merchant. In 1904, his entry to the colony at Lyttleton (the main port serving Christchurch) was granted by W. T. Glasgow, Customs Secretary and Inspector, strictly contingent upon a written guarantee from Mr. Devereux that Din would depart within one month alongside a Mrs. Kempthorne–a condition he did not fulfil.[43] Within months, Din became store manager of Pannells Ltd. on Lavoud Street, Akaroa, and was soon married, signaling his intent to settle permanently.

The local newspaper contains a positive account of his marriage at St Peters (Anglican) Church on 15 September 1904 to Gertrude Esther Hill, a 20 year old spinster and the eldest daughter of A. W. Hill (proprietor of Criterion Hotel in Akaroa).[44] The couple separated and by March 1905 Hill were filing for divorce.[45] Sheikh Mohammed Din and Gertrude Hill were divorced (by Decree Nisi) in September 1909.[46] However Din remarried the following year, to Madeline Elizabeth Olsen, aged 19. Whilst Sheikh Mohammed would use his surname 'Din' throughout his life, the children were all given an English version: their first child, a girl named Zohra Elizabeth Dean, was born in 1911, and their only son, Lawrence Edward Dean, in 1912. Newspaper evidence suggests there were two further daughters–Myra Gladys and Onyx or Onex Miriam Dean.[47]

The professional and personal trajectory of Din proved turbulent, marked by legal disputes, bankruptcy proceedings, marital separation, and divorce. In 1923, his marital complications were sensationalized in the *NZ Truth* under the headline "Mixed Marriage Muddle."[48] His death in July 1945 occurred under ambiguous circumstances near his shop in the Chatham Islands.[49] His son Laurence "was suddenly anxious to show solicitude towards his father's body and ordered a coffin suitable to send back to Mecca, as befitted a good Moslem."[50] However, Din was ultimately cremated at Bromley Crematorium in Christchurch on July 24, 1945. His ashes were later interred at Waikumete Cemetery in Auckland in 1948, for reasons not clearly documented but plausibly attributable to practical considerations.[51]

Men from the Gujarat province of India started to arrive in the 1900s, with the Bhikhoo and Musa families settling in the North Island; their descendants would later establish the New Zealand Muslim Association in 1950–the first Islamic agency in the country. In the South Island, Mohammad Kara from Adad arrived in 1907, marking the beginnings of a Gujarati Muslim presence across both regional spheres of New Zealand. Like other Muslim men from the Gujarat, the Kara family "were all Sunni Vohras of the Hanafi branch of Islam."[52] Mohammed Kara, having previously resided in South Africa, pursued opportunities in Fiji before applying for residency in New Zealand during transit. Upon securing

residency, he settled in Christchurch, where he established himself as a hawker and engaged in small-scale recycling entrepreneurship.[53] In 1921, Mohammed Kara facilitated the arrival of his 13-year-old son, Ismail, and both later joined the Canterbury Indian Association upon its formation in 1936. The devout religiosity of Kara was reflected in his practice of personal Halal slaughter, discontinued only due to municipal regulations. Like other Indian businessmen, hawkers and shopkeepers of the era in New Zealand, Hindus and Sikhs alike, both Mohammed and Ismail Kara returned to India from time to time to visit family. At some point Ismail Kara married in the Gujarat and fathered a son himself. In 1949, Suliman–son of Ismail Kara–migrated to New Zealand at age eight, joining his father and grandfather. By 1960, Suliman had established a dairy business and subsequently became a founding member of the Muslim Association of Canterbury in 1977.

Peripheral presences

Some Muslim immigrants during the colonial era were from outside the British Empire; some only stayed for short periods. The earliest identifiable Turkmenistani family to settle in Christchurch was that of "Sali Mahomet"–likely a transliteration of Saleh Mohammed–whose birth name was reportedly Mohammed Khan of Ashkhabad. Fleeing the Russian incursion into Central Asia in the 19th century, the family endured profound hardship. Female relatives perished during the crossing into British India via Afghanistan. Sali and his father, Sultan Mahomet, eventually migrated through Australia, arriving at Bluff in December 1896.[54] They sustained themselves as itinerant hawkers across Otago and the West Coast until Sali's injury prompted relocation to Christchurch in 1903. Sultan, described in contemporary press as an "old Assyrian," died and was interred in December 1905.[55] Soon thereafter, Sali established an ice cream business operating from a vividly painted cart in Cathedral Square's southeast corner. In 1906, he married Florence Henrietta Johnstone, an Anglo-European woman from Otago. The couple had four daughters who, according to local accounts, attained notoriety for their beauty in urban Christchurch. This familial trajectory

encapsulates both the transregional dislocation and complex social integration of Central Asian Muslim migrants in colonial New Zealand.[56]

> On his marriage certificate, Sali gave his birthplace as Ceylon and, elsewhere, he said that he was a Punjabi. He may have decided that, when living in a country that was proud to be part of the British Empire, it was best to claim that one had been born within the bounds of that empire.[57]

Fluent in Arabic, Russian, German, and Punjabi, Sali Mahomet periodically served as a court interpreter for foreign sailors facing legal proceedings. His affable temperament and generosity endeared him to the Christchurch public, earning him the moniker "Ice Cream Charlie" (with "Charlie" likely an anglicized rendering of Saleh). In April 1943, he entered the Old Men's Home in Ashburton and died of a second stroke on October 7. He was interred alongside Sultan Mahomet at Linwood Cemetery.[58]

Sali Mahomet remains an elusive figure within New Zealand's early Muslim history—possibly the first Muslim refugee to enter the colony, and unequivocally its earliest Turkmenistani settler. His biographer Richard Greenaway of the Christchurch Library writes convincingly that Sali Mahomet was absolutely "devoted to his wife [...] Loving and indulgent to his daughters, he also encouraged them to gain as much as possible from their education."[59] Such testimony not only reflects his familial commitments but also offers a rare, intimate glimpse into the personal values of an early Muslim migrant navigating domestic and social life in colonial Christchurch.

The earliest known European Muslims to work and reside in New Zealand appear to have been Omer and Salko (Salih) Hadžiahmetović, whose names (subject to multiple variant spellings) are associated with the November 1904 arrival of Dalmatian gum-diggers aboard the *SS Zealandia.*[60] The precise composition of the party remains ambiguous due to incomplete passenger records, though the men were all identified as "Armenians" by the recording official. The records suggest the emergence of a small enclave of thirteen Muslims from Hercegovina

in Maropiu, Northland, under the informal leadership of Mustafa Fetagić.[61] Documentation from the National Archives indicates that Lahir Hadgovic (likely Hadžović) received a gum-digging license for the Aratipu Riding on December 14, 1904. Subsequent additions to the community included Zaim Budalica, Ahmet Falajić, Osman Felajić, Ahmet Galujatović (presumably Galijatović), and both Omer and Salko Hadžiahmetović, all licensed in mid-1905.[62] In 1906, Mustafa Fetagić, Ahmet Fetagić, Avdo (Abduh) Fetagić, and Ahmet Galujatoviić also obtained licenses for the Kaihu Riding, followed by additional grants to Ahmet and the Hadžiahmetović brothers in March 1907.[63] In October 1907, two members of this community were summoned to testify at the Dargaville Court and instructed to remove their fezzes –Although the men complied on the day, their appointed group leader, Mustafa Fetagić, lodged a formal objection through diplomatic channels. At the time, Hercegovina was under the jurisdiction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its official representative in New Zealand, Eugene Langguth, was a German-born Roman Catholic with an English spouse. On behalf of the aggrieved Slavic Muslims, he addressed a letter to the Minister of Justice, James McGowan, an Irish-born Protestant, on September 27, 1907. The letter requested that "Herzegovinians of Mohammedan religion be allowed to appear in Court in dress prescribed by their religion." The affirmative response from the Ministry arguably established a precedent for the legal permissibility of religious dress–such as the fez-in the judicial settings of New Zealand. To date, the continued presence of this small group remains relatively undocumented, although departure records confirm that O. Hadžiahmetović and Zaim Budalica left Auckland for Sydney aboard the *Mokoia* in January 1909. These fragmented traces reflect the modest yet formative Muslim presence and fealty among South Slavic laborers in the early gum-digging frontier of colonial New Zealand.[64] This episode offers a striking illustration of early multicultural engagement, interreligious negotiation, and diasporic self-representation. Moreover, this group of Slavic Muslims likely formed New Zealand's earliest Islamic congregation or *jamaat*, though they appear to have departed prior to World War I and remain largely absent from collective historical memory.[65]

As the 20th century dawned, the imprint of Muslim lives in colonial New Zealand (although faintly traced in official records) had already seeded a diverse and multifaceted presence. The scattered biographies of lascars, hawkers, householders, interpreters, goldminers, and gum-diggers all point to forms of quiet perseverance in a land whose social and legal frameworks were often indifferent, if not obstructive, to spiritual identities outside mainstream and dominant forms of Protestant Christianity rooted in the British Isles. Whether navigating discriminatory court proceedings, labor exploitation, or tenuous immigration status, these individuals exhibited resilience, adaptability, and a commitment to familial and religious integrity. Their experiences underscore how marginal actors nonetheless engaged meaningfully with civic institutions and left tangible marks on their communities—be it through interfaith commerce, court appearances, or intermarriage. At the core of their settlement lay a negotiation between personal piety and public survival, between the comforts of tradition and the uncertainties of diaspora.

Despite prevailing historical silence, these early Muslim migrants contributed not only to the material scaffolding of New Zealand's infrastructure–transporting quarried stone for cathedrals, trading fabrics with sex workers, selling ice cream from painted carts–but also to its evolving pluralism. In their interactions with employers, staff, brothel keepers, Protestant magistrates, and Roman Catholic consuls, they partook in the understated social dramas of a nascent multiculturalism–one that challenged rigid constructs of race, religion, and imperial identity. The protection of religious dress in court, for instance, reflects the subtle impact of minority advocacy within the colonial justice system, anticipating contemporary debates on religious freedoms and cultural rights. These precedents remind us that cultural pluralism in New Zealand did not emerge *ex nihilo* in the late 20th century but carries antecedents that demand rediscovery and recognition.

It is precisely through the recovery and reanimation of these fragmented lives and loyalties that one glimpses the promise of a more capacious historiography–one that honors ambiguity and refuses to marginalize early Muslim presences as anomalous or exotic. Rather than isolated anecdotes, these stories signal a more expansive reading of New

Zealand's religious and ethnic tapestry, foregrounding the agency of communities who, though peripheral in demographic scale, engaged earnestly with the moral, economic, and spiritual contours of colonial life. This historical reckoning offers not only correction, but inspiration. For in retracing these immigrant paths, often forged with limited resources and uncertain futures, one recognizes the foundations of a contemporary Muslim community marked by diversity, resilience, and civic engagement. Their legacy invites us to imagine belonging not as a consequence of numerical dominance or political visibility, but as a quiet accumulation of lives lived in commitment to faith, family, and fairness. It is a legacy still unfolding–one that continues to write itself across mosques, migrant centers, cemeteries, and courtrooms.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to briefly overview the history of the Muslim community of New Zealand from the 1850s to the 1900s. I wanted to focus on the earlier formative period, those first few decades that laid the groundwork for the subsequent events and issues of more recent times. During this formative period of Muslim presence in New Zealand, the absence of formal Islamic institutions necessitated individualized expressions of faith. Early Muslim identity was often negotiated through personal or familial frameworks, shaped by varying levels of religious education and comprehension. Distinctive markers such as Muslim names for children, religious provisions in wills, and court oaths taken upon the Qur'an reflect diverse modalities of spiritual articulation within this nascent community.

Following the creation of the New Zealand Muslim Association in 1950, the first Islamic agency in the country, there has been a gradual proliferation of Islamic organizations, especially after 1990. The contemporary Muslim community in New Zealand has evolved into a highly heterogeneous body, rendering generalizations increasingly untenable. The multiplicity of cultural, theological, and institutional affiliations underscores the complexity of its current composition. In reflecting upon this historical continuum, the future of Islamic communal life in New

Zealand rests upon the capacity to translate historical depth into meaningful and enduring institutional structures–ones that embody substance rather than merely ornamental representation.

Engaging seriously with these early Muslim narratives affirms that the colonial history of New Zealand is not solely the domain of stereotypes or monolithic settler paradigms. The stories of Wuzerah, Kara, Mahomet, Shah, Fetagić, and others reveal micro-histories of interaction, resilience, and overlooked contribution. Rather than tokenistic gestures toward diversity, their lived realities deep in the South Pacific prompt a reckoning with how religious minorities navigated (and subtly shaped) colonial institutions and society, from legal systems to commercial economies. In embracing the complexity and contingency embedded in these accounts, we edge closer to a historiography that honors both the margins and the multitude, acknowledging that even ephemeral presences can cast enduring shadows across the national memory.

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