

Tracing the Crescent: Early Muslim Presence in Aotearoa New Zealand (Pre-1900 Period)

The history of Muslims in New Zealand is often seen as a recent development, linked to contemporary migration and multiculturalism. However, even in the early colonial period of Aotearoa, there are small but important traces of Muslim presence, revealing a history that has often been underrepresented in mainstream historical narratives.

In the pre-1900 period, New Zealand was a small colony undergoing rapid transformation under British rule. The population was predominantly European, while Māori communities experienced substantial disruption due to colonisation. Within this context, a few individuals of Muslim heritage arrived, often as sailors, labourers, or traders connected to wider maritime and imperial networks across the British Empire (Leckie, 2007). Their arrival demonstrates how global mobility and imperial connections influenced settlement patterns, shaping a diverse human landscape even in relatively remote regions. These movements reflect enduring links between Aotearoa and the wider world, connecting it to historical networks across the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia, and highlighting the sustained human and cultural connections that shaped the early colony (Drury, 2007).

Historical records, including shipping lists and immigration documents, reference individuals from the Indian subcontinent, often classified under broad colonial categories such as “Hindoo” or “Malay,” which may have included Muslim individuals, though religious identity is not always recorded in these sources (Drury, 2007). Sailors on British ships, small-scale merchants, and travelling labourers were among the earliest arrivals. These patterns highlight the fragmented nature of colonial records while still indicating the early Muslim presence in the colony.

These early Muslims often lived on the social, economic, and geographic margins of colonial society. Without mosques, community centres, or public recognition, they practised their faith in relative isolation. Despite their small numbers, their settlement marked the first layer of Muslim life in Aotearoa and reflects resilience in a challenging colonial environment (Kolig, 2010). Their quiet perseverance laid the groundwork for future community formation.

Some individuals stayed temporarily in port towns such as Auckland and Dunedin, while others travelled through New Zealand as part of wider imperial trade routes. Maritime employment was a key pathway that brought Muslims from South Asia and the Malay archipelago into the colony (Drury, 2007). Oral traditions and fragmentary records refer to early Muslim individuals believed to have arrived in the late nineteenth century. Although details of their lives remain scarce, these accounts demonstrate an understated and often overlooked presence. Together, they challenge the assumption that Islam is a recent arrival in New Zealand (Drury, 2018).

The pre-1900 period demonstrates that Muslims were present in Aotearoa well before the emergence of organised communities in the twentieth century. These early accounts document the lived presence of Muslims in New Zealand during the nineteenth century and indicate the gradual development of Muslim connections alongside later community formation (Shepard, 2006; Nisa & Saenong, 2019). Though numerically small, these individuals were historically significant, forming the foundational layer for later Muslim communities in the country (Drury, 2007). Their presence therefore contributes to a longer and more continuous history of Islam in Aotearoa.

Key Moments in the Pre-1900 Period

1769-1830s: Early Maritime Contact

Muslim sailors working within British and Indian Ocean maritime networks may have been present in voyages reaching New Zealand during this period. Individual identities, however, are rarely recorded in detail (Drury, 2007).

1840: Signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi

Te Tiriti shaped future immigration policies and colonial governance.

Within this context, small Muslim presences appeared through trade, maritime work, and labour movements, though they were not formally recognised (Drury, 2007).

1850s–1870s: Muslim Individuals in the Colony

Archival sources list names indicating Muslim heritage. These individuals were mainly workers, sailors, or traders. This illustrates the ongoing presence of Muslims in the colony despite the lack of organised communities (Drury, 2007).

1888-1890s: Trans-Tasman Muslim Mobility

Men of South Asian heritage travelled through Australasia during this period. This reflects wider patterns of regional mobility and labour movement that also shaped New Zealand's early migrant landscape (Leckie, 2007).

Late 1890s: Increased Public Awareness of Islam

Newspapers, missionary writings, and travel accounts increasingly referenced Islam during the late nineteenth century, suggesting growing public awareness and recognition of Islam in New Zealand, even before organised communities were established (Kolig, 2010).

Closing Reflection

These early communities, while limited in number, are historically significant. They contest the notion that Islam is a recent arrival and encourage reflection on New Zealand's settler-colonial narratives from a more inclusive, globally connected perspective. While these individuals did not

form sustained communities, their arrival established the foundations for the emergence of Muslim life in later decades.

The pre-1900 period offers a vital starting point for understanding Muslim heritage in Aotearoa, highlighting resilience, quiet belonging, and perseverance. These figures, though few, demonstrate that meaningful contributions do not always require visibility to be historically important.

References

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