

## **MUSLIM AND CALD Oral Histories at the State Library of NSW**

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I am going to talk to you today about two ongoing projects at the state Library – one documenting Muslims in Sydney, the other documents culturally and linguistically diverse communities, with a focus on migrant and refugee stories. Both are interrelated, but carried out by two different oral historians, and of course have their own specific themes and questions.

I will start with some context about how these projects came about, attempt to convey to you a feel for the rich, informative, at times heart-rending, and always inspiring content that we have accumulated; discuss some of the issues and challenges that surfaced in the process of producing these recordings, and briefly look at how the material has enabled the Library to connect with communities.

First, some context about the Library's collection:

Oral history has made a great contribution as a resource for migration history - over the past 30 years major collections have been created in Australia, and in northern America and the UK and elsewhere around the world. In our own Library – SLNSW – there is the Ethnic Affairs Commission collection – created in the late 80s to early 90s - more than 100 interviews with migrants that arrived in the 1950s; and that other iconic collection of the Library of post –World War II migration, the 12thHour project, interviews with over 200 holocaust survivors – a significant component of which is the story of Jewish immigration and resettlement in Australia.

But what of the changing face of Australian immigration and refugee intake? The past 10 years or so have seen significant changes in immigrant and refugee arrivals, further enriching the cultural diversity of Australian populations. 28 percent of our population is now born overseas. In Sydney and New South Wales, there are over 200 languages spoken and a visible mix of people from countries all around the globe.

So out of these hundreds of thousands of new citizens, we have attempted to capture a selection of oral histories to add to our collections: along with the many other formats of material collected, these will provide vital source material for future historians, family historians, sociologists, and other social scientists.

CALD – refugees and immigrants

The Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities of new South Wales oral history project grew out of a photographic project that the award-winning photographer Louise Whelan had initiated a few years earlier. Working with our former photography curator the Library had acquired her dynamic photographs of Sydney communities; Louise approached the Library with her proposal for oral histories – since, after 2 years of photography she felt compelled to go further, and record people's stories. Louise had built friendships, travelled all over Sydney, and made a name for herself as a compassionate and empathetic photographer, and that was a great advantage for this project. Since 2013, Louise has completed some 30 interviews.

Louise approached community organisations, asked friends, obtained referrals from others as she went along. Her connections with African communities were particularly strong - hence amongst the interviews, there are people who were formerly from Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Southern Sudan, central Sudan, Somalia and Egypt, many of who knew Louise and entrusted her with very personal stories. Other interviews are with people from Iran, Bhutan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and interestingly one from Kiribati, who talks about the issue of climate change refugees.

As the project progressed, I was amazed at Louise's stamina and energy – she crisscrossed Sydney, driving for hours, sometimes to have the interview cancelled, or to find that the space for interviewing was noisy or lacked privacy. The Kisimba family – about whom you will hear more shortly, were extremely accommodating. When Louise interviewed Isaac, his wife, unbeknown to Louise, sat out in the car with all 6 kids, for an hour and a half, to ensure she had a quiet space!

As you would expect from interviews with many people who migrated to Australia as refugees, and in some cases asylum seeker, Louise recorded many harrowing stories. There are accounts of escape from life-threatening civil wars, death threats, life in refugee camps, loss of lives of family members, illness, perilous journeys – including boat journeys between Indonesia and Australia.

Louise - in our many discussions and feedback sessions, talked about the emotional challenge of hearing so many stories of trauma and violence - she said for some stories of personal loss and hardship she had no reference points of her own to process what she was hearing. The individuals who have recorded their stories have demonstrated remarkable resilience – this is what most strikes the listener.

I will give a couple of examples:

Deng Adut was one of the earlier refugees who came to Australia from Sudan. He lost his father, was separated from his family, and recruited as a boy soldier. He describes all this with graphic detail - he survived extreme hardship and suffering. In Australia, arriving as an unschooled 13 year old with no English – he turned his life around. He received an education, and after many years of hard work, is now a criminal lawyer – he is proud to be helping others. Sadly, further violence in South Sudan resulted in the death of most of his remaining family.

EG Amjad Hussain, a Hazara from Pakistan, fled persecution and death threats, and in desperation came by boat to Australia as an asylum seeker. He spoke while still on a bridging visa, and in an uncertain situation, but as a journalist he has given an articulate and insightful interview. (There are many other similar examples I could mention from this collection.)

Likewise, the stories of arrival in Australia are emotional. While it is heartening to hear about the relief of being safe, there's a poignancy to learning about the challenges of the settlement process, immigration issues, being in an unfamiliar place, building a new life - finding education and work opportunities, new careers, sending children to school, adjusting to language and cultural change, to not always feeling welcome...

I will play a short extract from the interview with ISAAC KISIMBA - on arriving in an unfamiliar place – the city not being how he imagined it, as he went from the airport to Blacktown, bypassing tall buildings, and finding himself in a ground floor flat. He asked for a map, and the huge street directory he received brought it home to him what a huge and unknown place he was now living in. It is captivating oral testimony of a new settler, in the first 24 hours, finding their feet.

There is a high level of awareness and reflectiveness amongst those interviews - significantly, many have studied to become migrant resource workers. They speak frankly about the good and the bad of Australia's refugee and asylum seeker policies and resettlement services. Many have encountered help and kindness, but, also, at times racism or lack of service. The Kisimbas, for example, arrived just before Christmas, they were taken to their new house by their case worker on Christmas Eve. The case worker didn't come back for days, and they had no furniture or gas to cook with, so they were camping in this bare house, and had to go out and buy fast food which they didn't like. Luckily a stranger helped them and things slowly got on track. Rim Jezan, who came with her family from Iran as asylum seekers, recounted the story of her teenage years - age 13 to 16 – lost in Villawood detention centre. When the family were given approval to leave Villawood, they were given just 2 hours' notice, to pack up, and transport themselves to a new home, which of course they didn't have. Again, they were lucky to have made friends with people in refugee support networks, who helped them out.

A great strength of this collection of interviews is Louise Whelan's accompanying photography. We now have high quality photographic portraits of many of the interviewees. The photography was Louise's starting point, it was through that practice that she built relationships of trust and, in some cases became good friends, even part of some of these people's lives. This is demonstrated by the following photos of the family of Justine and Isaac Kisimba – they consider Louise their personal photographer now! From the first - and now iconic shot she took, of Isaac mowing his lawn – through to this series of their daughters 16<sup>th</sup> birthday – the Library has benefitted from this collaboration – and the family – proud to be represented in our collection - has become friends with the Library too.

After some time the project expanded to include community support workers - a natural extension given the number of former refugees being interviewed. For example, Louise held interviews with both the school counsellor and school principal of Cabramatta High School, Phil Glendinning human rights and refugee advocate, Petra Playfair, migration lawyer, and Anni Gallagher in Orange, a case settlement officer. Through these interviews we gain an extra dimension of understanding about the resettlement process, the kinds of services offered, and the changes to immigration and refugee laws brought about by political changes, and how that impacts on people's lives.

Louise asked a consistent set of questions – especially about perceptions of racism – and perceptions of changing attitudes towards refugees; she was also consistent with her final question - how do you define Australian culture and how do you connect with Australian culture? Which has elicited a number of interesting answers, and adds to the research value of this collection.

## ISLAM IN CONTEMPORARY NSW

Two years ago it was decided that given Islam is a fast growing religion in Australia and that the largest population – two to three hundred thousand Muslims - lives in Sydney, it should be a collecting focus for the Library. Oral history was seen as a prime way of capturing the direct voices of people of Islamic faith. This is a modest program, but it has been a great success. Louise Darmody, the oral historian the Library commissioned, has interviewed 24 people. It's a wonderful range of people, women and men, a mix of professions, religious leaders through to fashion designers, educators, lawyers and community workers. As can be expected, people of Islamic faith are from diverse language groups and cultures – former countries of origin include Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Kenya, Indonesia and just recently a Rohingya. There are also two Australians, raised as Christians, who explain why they converted to Islam – both are very active in raising awareness of Islam, teaching peace and tolerance.

It has taken a lot of networking to find people willing to share and record their stories – like the CALD project, it has grown organically – but Louise has had to persist, and chase up her leads, and done a lot of negotiating and convincing. When we held a discussion panel recently with a number of participants talking about why they agreed to do the interview, Walid Ali, the Principal of Unity Grammar, an Islamic college, joked that he wondered whether Louise was an ASIO spy!

Again, for this project, we identified a number of themes that we would consistently ask in all the interviews – to give the project some rigour and ensure its value to future researchers. These are life stories, but they specifically delve into what Islamic faith means to people, how it shapes their lives, and how it sits with living in contemporary Australia. Besides faith, important subjects touched upon are identity, education, community, tolerance, discrimination and gender equality.

A very important question has been the impact of international and national events on Muslim people – September 11, the Cronulla riots, the Arab Spring, and radical extremism. We debated this, and tossed it around – how would we phrase these questions? Louise has managed to approach it diplomatically, inviting people to comment, but making it completely optional. Some declined to answer – those who have, consistently deplored extremism and refuted its connection to what they considered true Islamic teaching. They have a lot to say about the adverse impact this has had on how their communities are perceived in Australia.

The role of women in Islam was another theme we felt we had to include, and this has mostly been answered positively, and without hesitation. We have interviewed one woman formerly from Iran who has spoken out against the treatment of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This woman has requested anonymity for her interview, and for her voice to be modified to make it unrecognisable. It's a very interesting interview to have, but it took delicate negotiating.

An outstanding feature of these interviews is the richness of family histories that emerged as people answered questions about their ancestry and cultural heritage. Everyone seems to be able to talk about their parents, grandparents and great grandparents – their professions and skills, the villages they came from, what they were known for.

One of the most important interviews in this collection is with His Eminence Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Al-Ansari, the spiritual leader of the Shia Muslims of Australia and New Zealand.

In response to the first question, 'who were your ancestors?' the answer is very long –

Al-Ansari ancestry is interwoven with the history of early Islam. The Al-Ansaris - led by Jabir Bin Abdullah Alansari - were 'helpers', that's the meaning of their name– who gave refuge to the prophet Mohammed and his people, and for this, they are honoured in the Qu'ran. His family history is filled with eminent sheiks and scholars, through to his own father, and the Ayatollah himself – eminent and awarded in the world of Islamic theology.

Louise and I spent a day at the AlAnsari's house in Bankstown, (PICTURE) and it was a unforgettably special experience to be so warmly welcomed in this household of scholars.(and great cooks..)

Their family, as it happened, came to Australia as asylum seekers, having escaped Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime, and several attempts on the Ayatollah's life. Their story epitomises how resilient and courageous many of our citizens are – their extraordinary stories of survival and their ability and drive to build a new life, and more – for they are now community leaders. I - and I know Louise too – feel deeply honoured to have acquired oral histories such as this as a permanent public resource.

### **FINAL REMARKS – how these projects have CONNECTED COMMUNITIES with the Library**

- Ayatollah visit in the library – photos and SL magazine article
- New website currently under development – features, at first, 5 CALD stories, with extra interviews, photographs, interview with Louise Whelan for the new web site
- Multicultural march event – invitation to library to acknowledge and celebrate the projects, everyone invited – it was interesting to reflect on the project –to discuss how the respondents felt about doing the interview– and the importance of participating, to them

Justine Kisimba and Deng Adut, for example, stressed the importance for telling their story, so their kids and their kids' kids will know their history.

It inspires me to think of the grand children, great grandchildren and their descendants - of kids like these – the Kisimbas – one day being the inheritors of these stories preserved in the library. They will hear what life was like in the Congo in the 1990s, what immigration was like, what it was like arriving in Sydney in 2004 and not knowing where they were- and the frustration of not having a map...

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