

# Enculturation and acculturation of young Muslims in Australia: What is the right mix?

Nahid Afrose Kabir<sup>1</sup>  
Edith Cowan University

## Abstract

Culture comprises the pattern of values, beliefs and behaviours common to a particular group of people. First generation migrants may cling steadfastly to their own cultural values, while second generations migrants' cultural identity is more likely to include host country values. In this paper, I discuss the life stories of ten Muslim youths, aged between fifteen and eighteen, who were living in Sydney and Melbourne in 2006 and 2007. Through the life stories of these young people, I try to understand their enculturation and acculturation processes (becoming competent members of cultural groups). How are they acquiring and retaining their culture and how is this contributing to their identity? This paper relies on oral testimonies and secondary sources.

## Introduction

In October 2007 the former Liberal Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Kevin Andrews, said that African refugees were fighting each other in night clubs, forming gangs and congregating in parks to drink alcohol (Laws 2007). Andrews said that that was why he announced his decision to restrict the number of African refugees to just over 4000 a year but accept about 9000 from Asia and the Middle East (Australia's annual refugee intake was 13 000). Mr Andrews further stated that it was not racism, but rather, 'it's all about integration or the problems being experienced by African migrants, specifically those from

1

### Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

<http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>



the Sudan' (Laws 2007). Sudanese refugee and ethnic representatives were critical that the Sudanese had been singled out. 'It almost borders on vilification of Sudanese refugees', said activist Jack Smit (Farouque, Petrie & Miletic 2007, p. 2).

In associating the Sudanese refugees with gangs, night clubs, fighting and alcohol it appears that Andrews selectively forgot the Cronulla riots that broke out between mainstream Australians and Australians of Lebanese background in December 2005 (Kabir 2007a). The Sudanese situation, once again, begs the question whether and when immigrants should assimilate. In a study conducted by Kabir and Rickards (2006), it was found that Sudanese youth has integrated into 'the Australian way of life' through their bi-cultural skills—the skills that are acquired through enculturation and acculturation. In this paper I will firstly define the terms *enculturation* and *acculturation*. Secondly, I will discuss the methods employed in this study and follow this with a discussion of first and second generation Muslim students.

### **Defining enculturation and acculturation**

Enculturation generally refers to the process by which individuals learn and adopt the ways and manners of their respective culture (Matsumoto & Juang 2004, pp. 134, 156).

Matsumoto and Juang (2004, p. 155) state that the issue of enculturation is related to that of ethnic identity development, whereas acculturation entails adopting a second culture. In other words, enculturation is first-culture learning and acculturation is second-culture learning.

In this context, first-culture learning involves acquiring one's mother tongue, and adopting traditional dress, food, music and dance, and religion. Muslim youths' religion is identified by their names, eating and drinking habits, and adherence to religious rituals. Matsumoto and Juang (2004, p. 135-154) observe that enculturation (into their ethnic culture) occurs



through parenting styles, child-rearing practices, peer groups, day care, the education system and religious institutions. Second-culture learning occurs through involvement in the external environment. For example, youths acquire education, English language skills, knowledge of music and sports from their participation in the wider community.

### **The research methodology**

The data for this study comprises responses from in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with ten Muslim students, aged between fifteen and twenty, from diverse backgrounds who attended two state schools in Sydney and Melbourne in the period 2006-2007. Participation was voluntary and all interviewees signed consent forms, while students aged under eighteen required parental consent to participate in the study. Each interview lasted approximately thirty to forty minutes and students were interviewed in their own school environment. I asked the participants details about their lives, including early school memories, family members, parents' employment status, students' part-time work, sporting activities, music, entertainment and cultural interests, together with their hopes, ambitions and dreams. I employed a form of narrative analysis (Charmaz 2006), whereby each interview response was regarded as a story about life generally and about one life in particular. The emphasis was also on identifying the connections, meanings and patterns that exist in the 'story'. Interpretation of a life story is a highly personal matter, even intuitive and empathic at times, because each narrative is seen as containing unique elements (Kabir & Rickards 2006). In this paper, I probed, checked and compared the responses of the ten participants to the semi-structured questions and evaluated their enculturation and acculturation processes.

The participants' schools were located in south-west Sydney, and south-east Melbourne—regions well known for their cultural diversity. South-west Sydney residents include Africans, Greeks, Italians, Pacific Islanders, Lebanese, Vietnamese, Koreans, and white Australians.



The region has several mosques, Islamic schools and state schools, all of which are attended by Muslim students. One of its suburbs, Lakemba, is known as 'Little Lebanon' because of the number of Lebanese shopkeepers there (Kabir 2005, p. 285-286). In south-east Melbourne there is also a lot of cultural diversity amongst its inhabitants who include Afghanis, Fijians, Iraqis, Sri Lankans, Sudanese, South Africans and white Australians. About eighty-one percent of the residents or their parents were born overseas (ABS 2006).

I will now consider the life stories of the ten Muslim youths (seven overseas-born and three Australian-born) in terms of their enculturation into their traditional culture and their acculturation into Western culture. In the discussion section, I will examine which group has been acculturated better into the wider society. For anonymity, I have given the participants fictitious names.

### **First generation (overseas-born)**

A Bangladeshi girl, Saleha, married a Bangladeshi man at a young age and they moved to Australia. Raised in rural Bangladesh, she lived with her parents and grandparents in a traditional Bengali-Muslim environment. Saleha took Bengali singing lessons with a traditional Bangladeshi musical instrument, a harmonium (similar to a keyboard), at a young age. Music has been integral to the Bangladeshi cultural identity (Kabir 2007b). Many Bangladeshi people sing songs composed by two great Bengali poets, Nazrul Islam and the Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, as well as folk, devotional and modern songs. In some Bengali homes, children grow up in a very rich musical environment where parents and other family members are amateur musicians. Saleha was brought up in a Muslim environment and performed her Islamic rituals including regular prayers and fasting during the month of Ramadan. She was reluctant to move to Australia because she believed that in a non-Muslim world she would lose her cultural identity. Saleha stated:



Yeah when I was in Bangladesh and I was thinking about Australia, first of all I was just scared because it is a Western country and here girls wear clothes that are totally different to ours. But my husband told me Australia is more religious than our country. I was just surprised; how can it be possible? So when I came here, I saw that this is really true, because in our country I never used to wear a headscarf, but here I am wearing a scarf.

In Australia, Saleha lived in a predominantly Muslim suburb and attended a school where there were many Muslim students. As mentioned above, Saleha started wearing the *hijab* (headscarf) in Australia, making her Islamic identity more obvious. In school she enjoyed time with friends and teachers, but at home she was lonely because her husband worked during the day and sometimes after hours. As a consequence she gained support from her religion and Islamic culture. Reading the *hadith* (the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him) gave her spiritual healing and she was drawn to Bengali music during her time alone. Saleha said:

Yeah music is important for me. Music is like my first husband – is more important for me – because when I feel sad or isolated I sing song, otherwise I hear song and I sing much better here than I used to. Talking about the Muslim people, some people say that we shouldn't sing because some of them consider it to be un-Islamic, but I sing and because I believe that it goes to God. When I sing that I feel so cool, and I feel that God is with me.

On the other hand, an Afghani girl, Afsana, recently arrived from Iran, said that she and her Afghani husband were both involved in Afghani community affairs. She listened to Persian and Arabic music and watched Indian (Bollywood) and Persian movies. She spoke Persian (Farsi is spoken in Iran) and Dari (spoken in some parts of Afghanistan). These languages are very similar and together constitute her ethnic language.



Neither Saleha nor Afsana (new arrivals) liked sports or English television programs. Saleha felt connected to Bangladesh and Afsana felt more connected to Iran as she had lived there for most of her life. They displayed their Islamic culture/identity through their *hijabs* and their ethnic culture through their traditional dress. However, both have retained their culture in very different ways: Saleha through religious readings and her love of music while living in isolation; Afsana through socialising with members of her community (and privately through Persian music and movies). They were both exposed to the English language through schools and television shows.

Through involvement in their ethnic environment (marriage, friends, music and religion) at home and in their surroundings, first generation immigrants tend to sustain their culture more than the second generation immigrants (discussed next).

### **Second generation (overseas-born)**

In this section I discuss overseas-born and Australian-born students studying in state schools in Sydney and Melbourne. In their schools these students interacted with mainstream Australian students and staff. In their leisure time they read books, played or watched sports, listened to music (mostly western and traditional) and, in some cases, worked at part-time jobs. Yet, they tend to be more involved with their ethnic boundaries compared to the Australian-born second generation (who will be discussed later). Here are thumbnail sketches of the overseas-born students who arrived in Australia between 2000 and 2005:

- An Afghani-born student, Nawshad, spoke of his interest in traditional Afghani music, particularly *Ghazal*. He said that his family was very musical. Nawshad planned to buy a harmonium and learn music from his elders. He said, 'We had good music in Afghanistan but it is all gone due to war. I am learning to sing *ghazal* from my cousin who composes his own music'.



- Farid was born and raised in Jordan. His family was very religious and he spoke Arabic at home. His family usually watched Jordanian television through the satellite antenna, so he did not get much opportunity to watch English programs.
- A Malaysian-born student, Sami was brought up in his family's ethnic environment in Malaysia. Now in Australia, on weekends he goes to the mosque, which is an hour's ride from his home. He stays a few hours in the mosque to read the Quran. When I asked him what else he did in these long hours in the mosque, Sami replied, 'Yeah that's like, there's a massive group there so on break times I just socialise with them'.
- An Iraqi-born Kurdish student, Mezbah spoke enthusiastically of his Kurdish culture:

I'm a Kurdish. I speak Kurdish language. My nationality is Kurdish. I listen to both English and Kurdish music, especially Kurdish. Yeah because all the Kurds, they're on the border (of Iraq) and there could be a country (Kurdistan), like we would be 45 million in a proper nation.

It appears that all of the overseas-born second-generation youths (recent arrivals) have a strong cultural influence at home. The Afghani student, Nawshad, is keen to learn Afghani music and the Kurdish youth, Mezbah, is mindful of the imaginary nation of Kurdistan. I assume that, since the Kurdish people do not have a homeland, their desire for a nation is an important part of their culture.

The last case study in this section is a Sudanese-born Muslim girl, Nushat, who migrated to Australia with her parents. Nushat's parents and extended family came to Australia through the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Nushat listens to both English and Arabic music. She speaks Arabic and attends an Arabic school at weekends. She plays volleyball, soccer and enjoys swimming. When I asked her if she played any music, Nushat said,



Yeah actually I bought a guitar about last week. And I'm learning it now because I like music and singing. I also listen to Beyonce, the Game, 50 Cent, all of those.

Nushat also worked in a mainstream Australian fast food shop. When I asked her about her national identity, she said:

Well actually emotionally I feel back to my country and because I miss all my family over there, the rest of my family, and also Australia because it provides me education and supports me, and yeah I love Australia too.

Regarding her hopes and dreams, Nushat said, 'I want to be a social worker or work in the hospital or something and yeah I like singing'. Nushat's life story revealed her enculturation and acculturation into Australian society through her bi-cultural skills. This contradicts the former Federal Immigration Minister's generalised statement that Sudanese immigrants were not integrating.

## Discussion

The seven cases discussed in this paper show three different acculturation patterns. These participants attend state schools and are therefore exposed to the wider community. However, the overseas-born first-generation students, Saleha and Afsana, are confined to their own community. The four overseas-born second generation youths, Nawshad, Farid, Sami and Mesbah also stay within their own ethnic and religious boundaries. The Sudanese-born girl, Nuzhat, has acculturated into the wider community through music, sports and work.

Some scholars (Poppitt & Frey 2007, p. 163) have observed that the feeling of ethnic belonging is not necessarily reduced when combined with a sense of belonging to a new



(host) culture. In adjusting to a new culture, to identify primarily, but not exclusively, with one's culture of origin can be a sign of successful adaptation to bi-cultural living. However, certain factors such as language difficulties, parental control, gender roles (girls may have more restrictive lives) can be a barrier to acculturation. For example, some ethnic parents may not encourage their children to have Australian friends because they fear that their own culture would be lost. In the case of refugee students, their traumatic past could restrict adaptation to a new culture. One Year 11 refugee student described how, '... it is difficult to concentrate on studies when your mind is not at peace and filled with bad memories ... you need peace in your heart before you can really study' (Cassity & Gow 2005, p. 53).

Studies have found that immigrants need an extended period of stay in their host countries to adapt to the new culture (Poppitt & Frey 2007, p. 163; Kabir 2007b). If an immigrant youth experiences racism and discrimination from the wider community then it restricts the acculturative process (Cassity & Gow 2005; ARACY 2007, p. 24-26). The seven overseas-born youngsters have not encountered any direct racism from the wider community but Nawshad observed that the Australian print media appeared to be against Muslims. The seven also said that their national identity was their country of origin. On the other hand, three Australian-born students of diverse origins defined their national identity in the following manner. Feiz, an Australian-born youth of Turkish origin, said, 'I feel connected to Turkey but you know I do live in Australia; I was born here. I regard myself as an Australian'. Similarly, Dawood, an Australian-born student of Lebanese origin, said, 'I feel connected to Australia, because I've been here most of my life'.

As previously mentioned, some researchers observe that racism can impact on a sense of belonging to the broader community (Cassity & Gow 2005; ARACY 2007, pp. 24-26). The following remarks of Liaquat, a young Australian-born male of Lebanese origin, support this:



I'm Australian, but what happens, people make you think you're not Australian. You know like you go down to Cronulla (beach), me and my mate went down to Cronulla the other day, even before the riots (in December 2005) the Sutherland boys showing off! Saying racial comments, but little do they know we're exactly like them. But what we're just a little bit more tanned.

The Australian-born Muslim youths were more bi-cultural than their overseas-born counterparts. For example, the two Australian-born Muslim participants of Lebanese background proudly spoke of their traditional food—*tabouleh*, *hummus* (salad items), *falafel* (fast food), *kebab*, *warak einab* (stuffed grape leaves, main meal) and *baklava* (sweets). They also enjoyed traditional dance (*dabkeh*) and music (*derbekah*) in their wedding ceremonies. In sports most Lebanese students in Sydney supported the Canterbury Bulldogs (National Rugby League) and were fans of the Lebanese-born Muslim player Hassan El Masri. They liked western music—rhythm and blues and rock. Feiz, the Australian-born student of Turkish origin, added that his mother played the Ud, a Turkish instrument, and he accompanied her on the guitar.

## Conclusion

I would argue that the bi-cultural tendencies of young Australian-born Muslims should also be viewed positively. The young overseas-born young Muslims are still within their ethnic circle. As they live longer in Australia, they are likely to develop a connection with the wider community (while retaining their Muslim identity as Australian-born students). In this study, the only overseas-born Sudanese girl was bi-cultural and had integrated into the wider community. Therefore, I argue that Kevin Andrews' statement that Sudanese immigrants do not integrate holds little merit. As discussed earlier, Sudanese-born Nushat's case shows that she (and her brothers) have integrated into 'the Australian way of life' through music,



work and sports. On the other hand, if the Sudanese immigrants' cultural sustainability continues, what is wrong with this, if they are law-abiding people?

### Author's note

I express my sincere gratitude to all the students who participated in this study. I thank the parents and the school authorities for supporting the survey. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. Research for this paper was supported by an early career researcher grant awarded by Edith Cowan University.

### References

ARACY 2007, *Multicultural Youth in Australia: Settlement and Transition*, Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth, Canberra.

Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, Profiles of Victorian Municipalities, viewed 14 October 2007, <[http://www.greaterdandenong.com/Resources/SiteDocuments/sid1\\_doc12222.xls](http://www.greaterdandenong.com/Resources/SiteDocuments/sid1_doc12222.xls)>.

Cassity, E & Gow, G 2005, 'Making Up for Lost Time', *Youth Studies Australia*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 51-55.

Charmaz, K 2006, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*, Sage publications, London.

Farouque, F, Petrie, A & Miletic, D 2007, 'Minister Speaks on Africans', *Age*, 2 October, p. 2.

Kabir, N 2005, *Muslims in Australia: Immigration, Race Relations and Cultural History*, Kegan Paul, London.

Kabir, N 2007a, 'The Cronulla Riot: How One Newspaper Represented the Event', in *Public Sociologies: Lessons and Trans-Tasman Comparisons: TASA/SAANZ Conference*, eds B Curtis, S Mathewman & T McIntosh, Department of Sociology, The University of Auckland, 4-7 December.

Kabir, N 2007b, 'Why I Call Australia Home: A Transmigrant's Perspective?', *M/C Journal*, vol. 10, no. 4, viewed 14 October 2007, <<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0708/15-kabir.php>>.



Kabir, N & Richards, T 2006, 'Students "at-risk": Can Connections Make a Difference?', *Youth Studies Australia*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 17-24.

Matsumoto, D & Juang, L 2008, *Culture and Psychology*, Thomson/Wadsworth, Belmont, CA.

Poppitt, G & Frey, R 2007, 'Sudanese Adolescent Refugees: Acculturation and Acculturative Stress', *Australian Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 160-181.

## Note

1. Dr Nahid Afrose Kabir is the author of *Muslims in Australia: Immigration, Race Relations and Cultural History* (London: Kegan Paul, 2005). Email: n.kabir@ecu.edu.au.

