

## MOSLEM ALBANIANS IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

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So much of the unrest in today's turbulent world directly involves Moslems that it might almost seem that any Islamic community at peace with its neighbours, would qualify as "news". In fact the existence of such an Islamic community in the hinterland of Cairns for nearly half-a-century has gone almost wholly unnoticed outside the immediate district. The reasons for this tranquil existence are worth examining, not least because the opinion is again being heard in Australia that any influx of migrants with a sharply different culture must of itself arouse hostile reactions.

Albanians have never been present in North Queensland in large numbers, and of those resident in North Queensland at any time not all have been Moslem. In Australia as a whole only 2.7% of male settlers originating in southern Europe came from Albania between 1890-1940:<sup>1</sup> even in North Queensland absolute numbers were never very large. By 1941 only 224 Albanians, Moslem and Christian alike, lived north of Ingham: in 1976 only 98 adults of Moslem Albanian origin were living in the district of Mareeba,<sup>2</sup> the main centre of concentration. These small figures certainly provide part of the explanation for the lack of friction between Albanians and their neighbours; just as certainly it is not the whole explanation. The concentration of Albanians not only in one region but in a single industry, coupled with religious and linguistic barriers clearly isolating them from all their neighbours, would seem to be circumstances likely to arouse prejudice irrespective of numbers.

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The nation-state of Albania is younger than Australia having been carved from the remains of the decaying Turkish Empire in 1912.<sup>3</sup> An Albanian national identity, however, is very old. Tradition and archaeological evidence have shown that the Albanian people had their origins in the time of the ancient Greeks. Since that period, they

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have needed to maintain constant vigilance against aggressive neighbours who sought to erase their identity. Romans, Greeks, Turks, Italian Fascists and German Nazis all left their indelible stamp upon this people. A legacy of this history is the great value Albanians attached to hard work, honesty and family relationships, values which served them well as pioneers in North Queensland.

Most of the Moslems who finally settled in North Queensland came from the Korcha region of south Albania. They were country people, quite used to manual labour. However, farm work proved unsatisfying to many young men of this region, who throughout history, sought their fortune in other countries. Egypt's last king, Farouk I, was descended from an Albanian who ruled that country in the early nineteenth century. Towards the end of the nineteenth century a combination of stagnant local economic conditions and a steadily rising population spurred greater numbers of young Korchari to find work in foreign countries. The industrial east coast of the U.S.A. provided such opportunities until the government of that country placed restrictive laws on immigration in the mid 1920s. Australia then became a potential source of new jobs, through which enough money could be earned to pay off debts and to increase family income. These hopes were soon dashed, for world economic Depression and World War II created circumstances which prevented travel. After World War II the communist government of Albania prevented emigration, so the only people to enter Australia were political refugees or the brides of men already here. This abrupt conclusion of migration to Australia encouraged Albanians who settled here to integrate with Australian society, at a rate which Australians found acceptable.

Many of the earliest Albanian migrants landed in Western Australia where they found work associated with the grain-growing industry. As world Depression set in, casual jobs became scarce, so many moved to the cane areas south of Cairns, where employment opportunities were better, due to the continued high domestic price for sugar. Northern Queensland also provided work through the cotton industry

around Biloela, the maize industry on the Atherton Tablelands, and later, the tobacco industry at Mareeba. This work provided adequate returns for those who wished to return home and also gave work experience to those who decided to remain in Australia. Competition for jobs with Australians caused trouble, but much of this was directed against the more numerous Italian. In fact contact between Australians and Albanians was probably limited to work or the occasional meeting at local pubs. Social life for the Albanians, especially in the Babinda sugar area, was centred on the "Albanian Club". This establishment served as a temporary boarding house, but its main function was as a focus for workers whose main recreation was talking and playing cards.<sup>4</sup> Thus sustained contact between these early labourers and their Australian neighbours was limited because the residence of the Albanians in North Queensland was regarded as only temporary.

After World War Two, many Albanian workers returned to families in Albania, but others remained in order to fulfil a wish to own land. This desire to become independent landholders, which was the ambition of many Southern Europeans like the Italians, was accomplished mainly by syndicates of like-minded men who pooled their finances and worked together until all owned land. Many Albanians sought land in the newly-opened tobacco lands around Mareeba, but others preferred to settle the maize country on the Atherton Tablelands where returns on investments were more secure. Land had to be taken where it was available, so no "exclusive communities" were established as was feared by some Australians. This did not prevent these new settlers from co-operating over financial and labour commitments, in a way which guaranteed the success of their ventures. Such co-operation proved effective in the tobacco industry, which faced all the problems associated with the cultivation and marketing of a crop that was totally new to most of the farmers. Legal obstacles to land purchase were minimized as soon as the Albanians became naturalized.

In 1937, an Australian Security Service report stated: "Albanians are concentrating on tobacco and cotton-growing rather than on working



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in the sugar cane areas."<sup>5</sup> This preference by the Albanians for settlement in what were considered to be unimportant industries relieved both the Australian authorities, and these new settlers themselves, of the worry associated with anti-Southern European sentiment from those Australians who resented Italian success in the profitable sugar industry. The tobacco industry also proved to be a fortunate choice in one other respect: family labour could significantly cut capital costs. This advantage was significant for new settlers who lacked large financial reserves, despite the fact that Albanians willingly loaned money to their fellow countrymen. Tobacco-cultivation was risky in the early days without irrigation and firm price level guarantees, but these new settlers were willing to co-operate with other communities in improving these circumstances. As this industry evolved, they were able to integrate gradually into the developing economic structure. Albanians have never been numerically strong in the tobacco industry, in which they concentrated. In 1937, there were only eight Albanian producers of tobacco registered under the Excise Act in the Mareeba district, compared with 320 British and 109 Italians.<sup>6</sup> By 1973, they still formed only 6% of farm operators in the North Queensland tobacco industry, who were born outside Australia.<sup>7</sup> There was no ground, therefore, for accusing Albanians of trying to dominate a particular rural industry.

Relations between the Albanians and Australia's State and Commonwealth authorities were influenced by a desire on the part of the government to maintain harmony in the Australian community. Government attitudes appeared to have been determined by immediate considerations, such as concern over the rate of land occupation by aliens and the need to intern "enemy aliens" during World War II. However, these attitudes were at least consistent, in that Albanians were seen in purely national, rather than religious terms. In times of peace, these new settlers were given faint praise by Commonwealth investigators:

The Albanians in Queensland have a reputation of being excellent workers, honest and reliable. With one exception, all who came under notice were men of good type who could readily be assimilated into the general community. Albanians are essentially tillers of the soil.<sup>8</sup>

In times of war the manner changed to one of petty bureaucratic concern. Albanian Nationals were declared "enemy aliens" after Italy declared war on the Allies in June 1940, because the Italians had conquered and incorporated the Albanian state into their Empire during April 1939. As a result they were either put under police surveillance or made to work under the direction of the Civil Aliens Corps. Their response to these impositions varied between acceptance and reluctant co-operation. One report on the Townsville prison stated that Albanians were satisfied with conditions,<sup>9</sup> while a report from the Civil Aliens Corps stated that the poorest performance at directed work was made by Bulgarians and Albanians.<sup>10</sup> Such a bitter response was understandable, for many men felt that in this war they were natural allies of Australia against Italian conquerors of their country. At the conclusion of hostilities many migrants returned to their families in Europe, while others moved away from Queensland, where the restrictions had been harshest. Those who remained regarded conditions in Australia as significantly better than those to be found in their war-torn homeland with its new and aggressive communist government under Enver Hoxha.

Relations between Albanians and the general Australian community proved to be peaceful at most times. Petty prejudice was sometimes expressed in hotels by individuals, but the Australian business community seems to have welcomed all new settlers as potential clientele. Most Australians did not differentiate among the various Southern European nationalities,<sup>11</sup> and Albanians might have been expected to share some of the hostility which was directed against Italians in North Queensland in the inter-war years; but these feelings were strongest in sugar areas where Italians were competing for work and land with native Australians. Conditions around the Mareeba area were peaceful enough to receive favourable comment from a visiting Italian Consul in 1932.<sup>12</sup> Albanians were concerned only about their own affairs and concentrated most of their time and effort upon establishing profitable farms. Perhaps the chief reasons for peace between Australians and these European Moslems were the facts that their interests coincided in the economic sphere and that events in Europe had little noticeably

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detrimental effect upon North Queensland. Peaceful relations continued even when Australia and Italy were at war, and this maintained an atmosphere free of resentment for past wrongs.

The early Albanian workers in North Queensland were careful not to offend the local authorities or population on whom they relied for protection and employment, but personal disagreements between themselves were sometimes settled outside the Australian law. Violence was endemic to a group of men living in an alien land, and isolated from normal family life. One Albanian man stated at his trial that he carried a firearm as there might always be trouble in the Albanian Club, Babinda.<sup>13</sup> Such behaviour became more infrequent as individual troublemakers left and the remaining settlers established families.

One of the main reasons for good relations between Moslem Albanians and their neighbours is that they were able to integrate into the affairs of their new Australian community. In the tobacco areas, this integration was made easier through the institutional framework of the North Queensland Tobacco Growers' Co-operative Association which fought for growers' rights after World War II. Though Albanians formed only a relatively small percentage of growers, on at least two occasions, members of their community have been made directors of this organization. This involvement in community affairs has been limited to older men, but in recent years, younger people have expanded their social horizons through work in urban centres.

Economic integration came first followed slowly by social integration, for business partners cement commercial contacts through social relationships. Albanians have been invited to join service clubs in Mareeba and in some cases have responded. Affluence and the relatively less stringent demands of tobacco cultivation in recent times have encouraged this process. Expansion of friendships with Australians has also been a necessary process for those Albanians living outside Mareeba, in places like Dimbulah and on the Atherton Tableland. However social integration of the children was achieved

by an expansion of social contacts through the school. New friendships were stabilised by organizations like the Junior Farmers, and in more recent times through sporting clubs and social activities at the Mareeba International Club, which was established in 1972. This process of integration has been accompanied by growing self-confidence and a desire by older people to express their religious and political beliefs.

Expression of political beliefs was always dangerous in Albania, especially under the rule of the Turks. After 1912, political inexperience led to conflict, which in turn limited the ability of people to improve their country's economic and diplomatic position. After World War II, the Communist regime espoused a dogmatic ideology which accepted no criticism. Liberal values such as support for national sovereignty and freedom of belief were supported by men who had worked in the U.S.A., but were not well received or understood at home. When Albanians in Queensland sought to form a Society, the U.S. experience of some provided a suitable model. In 1943 the "Albanian Association of Queensland" was formed with branches in Mareeba, Atherton, Babinda, Biloela, and headquarters in Brisbane. By 1945 membership of the Far North Queensland branches totalled 134.<sup>14</sup> The Association Constitution stated that friendship between Albanians and Australians was to be promoted, but conditions produced by World War II made this aim difficult to achieve. Association efforts concentrated upon financial relief for needy members and their families. Following the cessation of hostilities, many unnaturalised members returned home and the Association's branches in the North were closed. Nevertheless this experiment in community co-operation provided useful experience for men who settled in Australia and relied on the help of neighbours from all nationalities to build successful farms.

The formation of a purely religious society had to await the creation of a more stable community, made up of family farmers. In 1942, of 458 Albanians in Queensland, only 43 were naturalized British subjects, and



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of these many were Orthodox Christian.<sup>15</sup> At that time men were more concerned with making enough money in order to return to their families in Europe, than in following an institutional religion. However, after the War, most Albanians settling in North Queensland were Moslems who wanted to recreate the religious institutional framework which they left in Europe. Therefore the Mareeba Islamic Society was formed in 1953, under the leadership of an Albanian *Imam* or religious leader from Cairo.

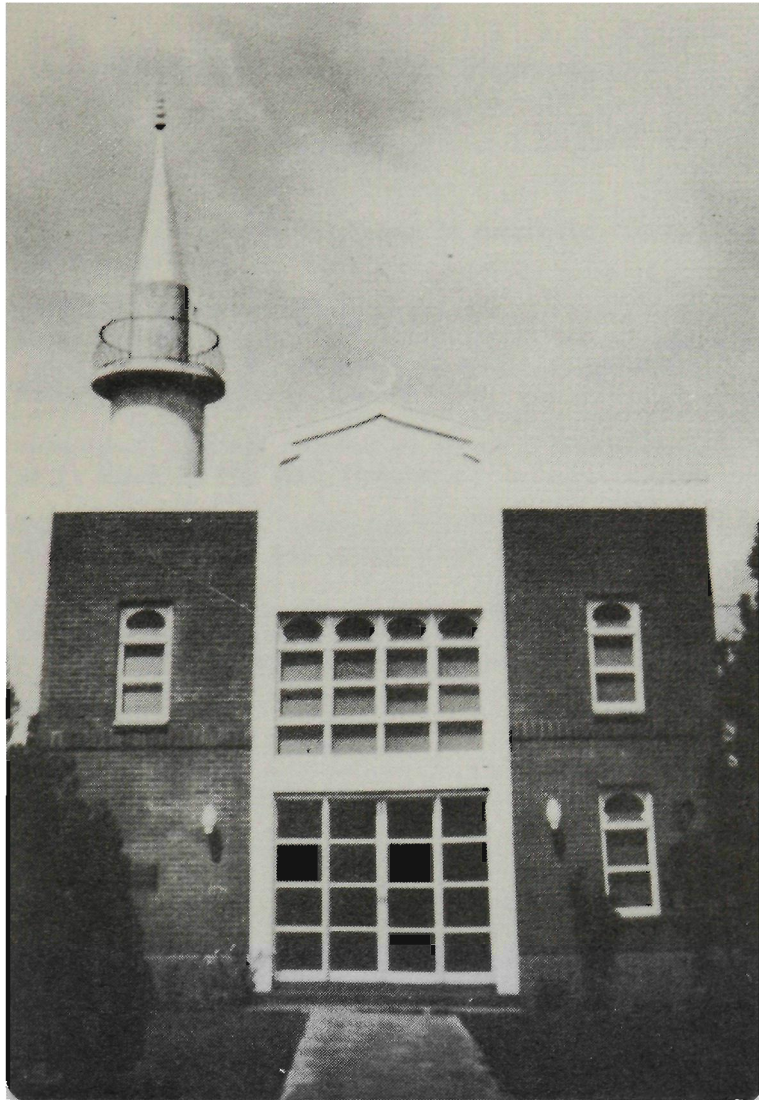
The Islamic religion professed by these Albanians is not a dogmatic creed such as the politically-oriented religion of revolutionary Iran. For them as for all Moslems the *Koran* or holy book of Islam contains all the basic teachings of their faith, but its legal authority has been abrogated in favour of Australian criminal and civil law. The essential commitments of this religion are belief in One God; regular prayer; almsgiving; fasting at appropriate times; and pilgrimage to Mecca, if possible. Such commitments do not conflict with the values of general Australian society, and in specific instances, the values of Muslim and Australian societies coincide. Albanian Islam is also tolerant of other religions, perhaps because Christians formed a significant minority in that country, and especially in the Korcha region where most of Australia's Albanian settlers originated.<sup>16</sup>

Mareeba's Islamic Society has tried to preserve and transmit these traditional values, to compensate for the fact that Albania's communist regime has actively suppressed all religious activity in that country. It has catered more for the spiritual aspects of life, than the material concerns which were most important for the earlier Albanian Association. One of the Society's first actions was the purchase of a house in Mareeba for use as a mosque; this building was replaced in 1970 by a modern brick structure, designed by a local Australian. This new mosque, which was opened by the Shire Chairman on Anzac Day and dedicated to Australia's fallen servicemen is a symbol of the Albanian desire for close links with the general community. The opening coincided with another welcome development, when the Imam of the

Mareeba mosque was authorised to register marriages. In 1973, Albanians were granted another expression of community respect, when they were given a section of the local cemetery in which to bury their dead. Their unsealed graves which face westward together with the mosque are now symbols of a confident and stable Islamic community that has been fully accepted by the local non-Islamic communities.

Perhaps the final test that may be applied, in order to estimate whether peoples of different ethnic communities have fully integrated, is that of intermarriage. The earliest settlers brought wives from Europe or brides from countries with large Albanian populations, as emigration from communist Albania was halted. Australian-born persons of Albanian descent in North Queensland have continued this preference for partners of similar ethnic descent, though partners are now sought from communities in places as varied as Shepparton, Victoria and York, Western Australia.

The story of Albanians in North Queensland is relatively modern compared with that of the Chinese and even Italians. This story is basically one which describes how a small group of transient workers from Southern Europe came to work in the sugar areas where their presence was not encouraged by many local people. Despite the setbacks of World Depression and World War, a number of these casual labourers settled down and through a combination of hard work and community co-operation established profitable farming ventures. Moreover, this was achieved without the loss of their religious identity by which they are mainly distinguished today. The lesson of this story is that Islamic and non-Islamic communities can reside together peacefully, provided the negative attitudes spawned from historic confrontations can be forgotten.



The new mosque, Mareeba

MAREEBA AND DISTRICT  
MEMORIAL MOSQUE

Erected by the  
Albanian Australian Moslem  
Society.

This house of God is dedicated  
to those who gave their lives  
in the defence of Australia and  
in appreciation of all who served.

"Lest We Forget"  
25th April, 1970.



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### REFERENCES

1. C.A. Price, *Southern Europeans in Australia*, (Melbourne, 1963). Table 2, p.23.
2. Appendix to letter from Commissioner of Police to Commonwealth Investigation Branch, 30.6.1941. A/6481 190.18 Queensland State Archives. Mareeba Shire Council Voters Rolls, Divisions 1, 3 and 4, 27 March 1976.
3. This event is still celebrated in North Queensland on "Flag Day", which is the 28th November.
4. Descriptions of the "Albanian Club" were found in: *Cairns Post*, 14 July 1931 and 11 May 1948.
5. Investigation No. 1, Aug. & Sept., 1937. Security Service, Correspondence Files, Single number series: 'Alien Migration-Policy', 1936-38, Australian Archives CRS A373 Item 3075A. p.19.
6. *Ibid.*, p.8.
7. Bureau of Agricultural Economics, *The Australian Tobacco Growing Industry*, (Canberra, 1976), p.12 (Table 5).
8. Investigation No. 1, as above, p.19.
9. Extract of Report by Comptroller-General of Prisons to U.-Sec. of Dept. of Justice, 14.5.1942. The Premier's Department, A/6472 186/1, Queensland State Archives.
10. Report on the Civil Aliens Corps, p.23. Department of Immigration, Correspondence Files, 'Class 6' 'Report on the Civil Aliens Corps Alien Control' 1942-43, Australian Archives: CRS A437 Item 46/6/250.
11. As the Italian Consular Agent in Townsville pointed out to the Ferry Committee in 1925. *Northern Herald*, 22 April 1925, p.17.
12. *Cairns Post*, 12 April 1932, p.12.
13. *Cairns Post*, 11 May 1948.
14. Handbook of the Albanian Association of Queensland and Register of Financial Contributions, Brisbane, 1945.
15. Enclosure to letter from Mr. Hanlon, 30.1.1942. 'Alien Internment Policy.' The Premier's Department, A/6481 190/18 Queensland State Archives.

16. Stavro Skendi (ed.), *Albania* (New York, 1956), p.58.

RELIGIONS OF KORCHA PREFECTURE, 1942

MOSLEM	108,091
ORTHODOX	63,723
CATHOLIC	20