
THE HISTORY OF MOSQUES IN AUSTRALIA

1. Introduction

Mosques (*masajid*, plural of *masjid*) are central to Muslim religious and community life. They function as places of worship, education, social welfare, and cultural connection.

In Australia, the history of mosques is closely tied to:

- early Muslim contact long before European colonisation,
- the arrival of Afghan cameleers in the 19th century,
- post-war migration,
- and the establishment of diverse Muslim communities across cities and regions.

This handout explores **how mosques developed in Australia**, what they meant to early communities, and how they contribute to Australian society today.

2. Early Muslim Contact Before British Colonisation

A. Makassan Trepang Traders (1600s–1800s)

Long before the First Fleet, Muslim fishermen and traders from Makassar (in Indonesia) travelled annually to the northern coast of Australia.

Key points:

- They harvested **trepang** (sea cucumber).
- They interacted peacefully with the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land.
- They exchanged goods such as metal tools, cloth, and rice.
- They introduced **Islamic words** (e.g., “balanda” for white person).
- They performed their daily prayers and built **temporary prayer shelters**.

Although no permanent mosques were established, these interactions form the **earliest evidence of Islamic presence** in Australia.

3. Afghan Cameleers and the First Permanent Mosques (1860s–1930s)

In the mid-1800s, thousands of Muslim workers—commonly called **Afghan cameleers**—arrived from Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province.

Their Importance:

- They opened inland transport routes.
- They supported explorers (e.g., Burke and Wills).
- They carried supplies across deserts.

- They built railways, telegraph lines, and postal routes.

Wherever cameleers lived, they established **prayer rooms and mosques**, forming the foundation of Islamic worship in Australia.

4. The First Mosques in Australia (Detailed Overview)

A. Marree Mosque (South Australia) – c. 1860s–1880s

Significance:

- Considered the first mosque built in Australia.
- Constructed from mudbrick, timber and corrugated iron.
- Served as a religious and cultural centre for cameleers living in one of the harshest regions of the continent.

Historical Features:

- Built facing the qiblah (towards Makkah).
 - Included simple wudu (washing) areas.
 - The original structure no longer exists, but a replica stands today.
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B. Adelaide Mosque (1888–1889)

Location: Little Gilbert Street, Adelaide

Significance:

- The **oldest surviving mosque** in Australia.
- Built by a diverse community of Muslims: Afghans, Indians, and Malays.

Architectural Features:

- Four distinctive white minarets added in 1903.
 - Simple prayer hall with traditional layout.
 - Still an active mosque and major historical landmark.
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C. Broken Hill Mosque (1887)

Location: Broken Hill, New South Wales

Significance:

- Built by cameleers working in mining and transport routes.

- Made from corrugated iron and recycled timber.
 - Today functions as both a heritage museum and a place of prayer.
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D. Other Early Regional Mosques

Many small mosques appeared wherever cameleers settled:

Queensland

- Cloncurry Mosque
- Townsville prayer rooms (late 1800s)

Western Australia

- Perth Mosque (1905) – serving cameleers and Malay pearling workers
- Coolgardie Mosque – linked to goldfields communities

New South Wales

- Bourke Mosque (c. 1890s)
- Wagga Wagga prayer areas

These mosques were crucial to maintaining religious practice in isolated desert regions.

5. Post-World War II Migration and Mosque Expansion (1940s–1970s)

After WWII, Australia received large waves of migrants due to labour shortages and new immigration programs.

Muslim communities arrived from:

- Lebanon
- Turkey
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Albania
- Cyprus
- Pakistan and India
- Indonesia and Malaysia

These new communities established **larger urban mosques** with more permanent structures and community facilities.

Important post-war mosques:

Lakemba Mosque (1960s–1977, NSW)

- Built by the Lebanese Muslim Association.
- One of Australia's largest mosques today.

- A hub for education, charity, community activities and interfaith events.

Holland Park Mosque (QLD)

- Established 1908, expanded significantly in mid-1900s.
- Known as one of Queensland's earliest community mosques.

Perth Mosque (WA)

- Built in 1905 but grew substantially due to post-war migration.
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6. Modern Mosques in Contemporary Australia (1980s–Present)

In recent decades, the number of mosques in Australia has grown considerably. Today there are **200+ mosques** and hundreds of musallahs (prayer rooms).

Modern mosques often include:

- Large prayer halls
- Domes and minarets
- Libraries and classrooms
- Qur'an schools
- Youth programs
- Community kitchens
- Funeral services
- Women's prayer spaces
- Multipurpose halls

Examples of Modern Mosques

Auburn Gallipoli Mosque (NSW)

- Opened in 1999
- Ottoman-inspired architecture
- Symbolises Turkish-Australian heritage

Melbourne Madinah (VIC)

- Known for its educational programs and modern design.

Canberra Islamic Centre (ACT)

- Functions as a community centre, school, and prayer space.

Islamic College Mosque of Brisbane (QLD)

- A major mosque connected to a school.

Mosques today are **multicultural hubs**, reflecting the diversity of Australian Muslims.

7. The Social and Cultural Role of Mosques in Australia

Mosques serve both religious and civic purposes.

A. Religious Role

- Daily prayers (Salah)
- Friday congregational prayer (Jumu'ah)
- Ramadan programs and Taraweeh
- Eid prayers

B. Educational Role

- Qur'an classes
- Arabic lessons
- Islamic studies
- Homework clubs
- Lectures and seminars

C. Community Role

- Family support
- Funeral services
- Matrimonial services
- Youth camps and outreach
- Open days for schools and the public
- Charity programs and food banks

D. Interfaith Contribution

Mosques often participate in:

- interfaith dialogues,
- school visits,
- public events promoting social harmony.

They help build understanding between Muslims and the broader Australian community.

8. Architectural Features of Mosques

Even though early Australian mosques were simple, modern ones often include traditional Islamic architectural elements:

Dome
Symbolising the vault of heaven.

Minaret
A tall tower historically used for the call to prayer.
Mihrab
A niche in the wall indicating the direction of Makkah.
Minbar
A raised platform where the Friday sermon is delivered.
Wudu Area
A space for ritual washing before prayer.
Prayer Hall
Open space without furniture, allowing worshippers to line up in rows.
Courtyard
Used for gatherings and overflow prayer.

9. Timeline of Mosques in Australia (Comprehensive)

Period	Key Developments
1600s–1800s	Makassan Muslims visit northern Australia for trade
1860s–1880s	First permanent mosques (Marree, Broken Hill) built by Afghan cameleers
1888–1889	Adelaide Mosque built (oldest remaining)
1900–1930s	Expansion of small regional mosques and prayer rooms
1940s–1970s	Post-war migration leads to large urban mosques
1960s–1977	Lakemba Mosque constructed
1980s–Present	Over 200 mosques established across Australia

10. Primary Sources Related to Mosques

Students can explore:

A. Photographs

- Marree Mosque replica
- Adelaide Mosque minarets
- Early cameleer camps

B. Diaries and Letters

Cameleer letters describing Ramadan, Eid and prayer routines.

C. Government Records

Railway employment files referencing Afghan workers.

D. Newspaper Articles

Reports on early mosque openings and community events.

Primary sources assist students in writing **accurate historical recounts**.

11. Extended Glossary

Adhan – Islamic call to prayer.

Afghan Cameleers – Muslim camel drivers from Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan.

Architecture – The design and structure of buildings.

Balanda – Yolngu word (derived from Makassan) meaning “white person”.

Cameleer Route – Transport paths travelled by camel teams.

Community Centre – A place offering programs and services for local residents.

Dome – Rounded roof structure symbolising the heavens.

Eid – Festival marking the end of Ramadan or the pilgrimage season.

Interfaith Dialogue – Communication between different religious groups.

Makassan – Muslim traders from Makassar, Indonesia.

Mihrab – Niche in the wall indicating the direction of prayer.

Minaret – Tower used historically for the call to prayer.

Minbar – Platform for delivering sermons.

Mosque (Masjid) – Muslim place of worship.

Multiculturalism – The presence of multiple cultures in a society.

Musallah – A small prayer area or room.

Ottoman Empire – Islamic empire that controlled Turkey during WWI.

Prayer Hall – Open area for congregational prayer.

Qiblah – Direction Muslims face in prayer (towards Makkah).

Ramadan – Islamic month of fasting.

Recount – A factual retelling of historical events.

Trepang – Sea cucumber harvested by Makassan traders.

Wudu – Ritual washing before prayer.

12. Student Activities

Activity 1: Timeline Construction

Create a timeline showing the development of mosques in Australia from the 1600s to today.

Activity 2: Historical Recount Writing

Write a historical recount titled:

“How Afghan Cameleers Shaped the First Mosques in Australia.”

Must include:

- past tense

- time connectives
- 5 factual details
- explanation of significance

Activity 3: Compare and Contrast

Compare the **Marree Mosque** (1860s) with the **Gallipoli Mosque** (1999).

Consider:

- design
- purpose
- size
- community role

Activity 4: Glossary Quiz

Students match words from the glossary to their correct definitions.

Activity 5: Map Skills

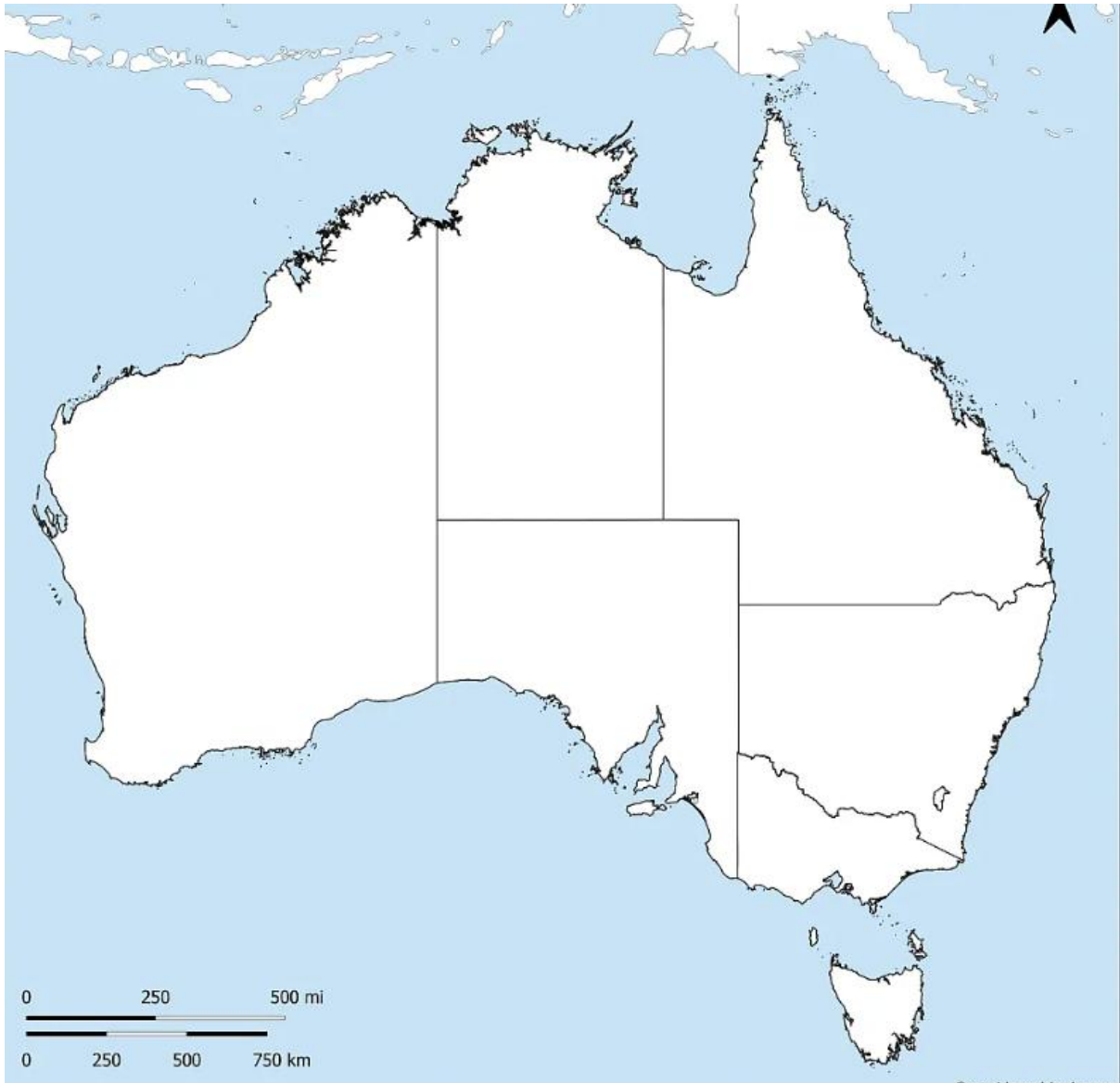
Mark the locations of Australia's earliest mosques:

- Marree
- Adelaide
- Broken Hill
- Perth
- Cloncurry
- Bourke

13. Conclusion

The history of mosques in Australia is a story of migration, resilience, contribution and cultural diversity.

From the mudbrick mosques of Afghan cameleers to the grand structures of modern cities, mosques reflect the **growth of Islam in Australia** and the **enduring role of Muslim communities** in shaping the nation.



Maree Mosque:



Adelaide Mosque



Broken Hill Mosque:



Perth Mosque



Cloncurry Mosque



Illustration of the Cloncurry Mosque by Patricia Coates in her book *Outback Queensland: A Narrative of Defiance*

Bourke Mosque

