

# ISLAND DREAMS AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF SMALL ISLAND CUISINE

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## Introduction

At two very different locations in Sydney, Australia, diners can sample dishes from two little-known island territories, the Cocos Islands and Christmas Island. Both cafés are run by women who have articulated their intention to bring to Sydney the distinctiveness of their island heritage, through menu design, décor and ambience. Nonetheless, I would like to suggest that these cafés are not so much clean snapshots of clearly demarcated cultures. Rather, each café is probably best seen as a complex, protean intersection of agendas, expectations and assumptions. From the interests of the proprietors (driven by a blend of nostalgia, enterprise and cultural pride) to the interests of the clientele (which can stretch from the hungry or curious to the strictly religious), the point remains that to understand how these cafés represent the islands, they need to be culturally contextualised. In turn, given Australia's political climate over the last few years, I will suggest that these cafés demonstrate a most ironic example of Islamic initiative.

## History of Islands

Firstly, though, a few words are required about the history of these islands. The Cocos Islands comprise an archipelago of 27 coral islands, the main two being West Island and Home Island. As of 2004, they share some 629 inhabitants. West Island has a population of about 130, mostly made up of mainland-based employees of various government departments and their families. Most government employees are on short-term postings of one to three years. Home Island, however, is mostly populated by the Cocos Islander community, descended from people brought to the islands in the 1800s and 1900s from Malaya, East Africa, China, Java, India and Ceylon. They speak a dialect called Cocos Malay, 80 percent are Sunni Muslim and they generally lead a traditional lifestyle in accordance with Islam.

The islands were discovered by Captain William Keeling in 1609. However, they remained uninhabited until 1825, with the arrival of John Clunies-Ross, a Scottish merchant, sea captain and explorer. With easy anchorage, safe harbours and no human population, Clunies-Ross saw the economic potential immediately by clearing the

native vegetation and planting crops. One year later, his employer, Alexander Hare, established a settlement on one of the islands with a small, mostly Indonesian crew. While Clunies-Ross settled on another of the islands, both men forwarded claims for ownership of the islands. Clunies-Ross even went so far as to proclaim himself King, a title which, although maintained by his heirs, was only ever recognised on the islands.

The dispute between Hare and Clunies-Ross was finally settled when Hare fell ill and had to leave in 1831, leaving Clunies-Ross to get on with his plans. By that time, many of Hare's mistreated workers (essentially slaves) had defected to the Clunies-Ross camp anyway. These slaves had mostly been Malay people of Chinese, Papuan and Indian descent. Clunies-Ross built up this labour force and brought over more labour from China and Malaysia, cleared more native vegetation for coconut trees and made his fortune trading in coconut oil and copra. The islands were soon producing over 420,000 coconuts annually. From the mid 1800s, official control of the islands passed from London, to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), to Singapore, then finally to Australia in 1955. In 1977, Australia purchased the islands from the Clunies-Ross family for \$AU6.5 million, and established the Cocos Island Council two years later.

The history of Christmas Island is also caught up in the ambitions of the Clunies-Ross family. In July 2005, the population was approximately 1600, with 70 percent Chinese, 20 percent European and 10 percent Malay. The island was named by Captain William Mynors of the East India Ship Company, who arrived there in 1643 on Christmas Day. There were several attempts to survey the land over the following few centuries, but with few conclusive findings. Then, in the 1870s, naturalist Dr John Murray carried out a more comprehensive study. Among the rocks he obtained were many of nearly pure phosphate of lime, a discovery which prompted the British Crown to annex the island in June 1888. Meanwhile, George Clunies-Ross, heir to the so-called Cocos Kingdom, had been a regular visitor to Christmas Island, and had made extensive use of the island's timber. Spurred on by Britain's interest in Christmas Island, Clunies-Ross set up his own colony on the Island, at Flying Fish Cove. In 1896, an agreement was reached between Clunies-Ross and Murray, and they became joint lease-holders in the London-based Christmas Island Phosphate Company (Jameson, 2003:26-27).

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, using cheap labour from China, Malaysia and Singapore, the phosphate mines were returning almost 80,000 pounds per annum. After World War II, at Canberra's request, Britain transferred sovereignty of Christmas Island from Singapore to Australia. By then, a massive expansion programme had swelled Christmas Island's workforce with more recruits from Cocos, Malaysia and Singapore. Christmas Island and the Cocos Islands became Australia's Indian Ocean Territories (IOTs), and since 1997 have shared a single administrator based on Christmas Island.

## The Islands and Australia

For all Canberra's efforts to consolidate Australia's control of and interest in the islands, it is safe to suggest that many Australians remain largely unaware of the country's IOTs. The island populations, however, are highly conscious of mainland affairs. In 1984, under UN supervision, a referendum on Cocos Island found that over

90 percent of the voters favoured integration with Australia. Within a year of the referendum, and armed with Australian citizenship, almost half the island's population migrated to the mainland, mostly to Western Australia. In 1994, a vote on Christmas Island found no support for secession from Australia (Aldrich and Connell, 1998:53).

For many Australians, these territories may well have remained largely unknown, obscure or forgotten, were it not for their implication in one of the most divisive events in recent political history: the *Tampa* affair. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, Christmas Island has received boatloads of refugees, mostly from Indonesia. This had not caused too much fuss on the island. During 2001, Christmas Island received an especially large number of asylum seekers, many from the Middle East. The arrival of the *Tampa*, a Norwegian cargo vessel which had rescued people from a sinking Indonesian fishing-boat in international waters nearby, prompted a diplomatic showdown between Australia, Norway and Indonesia. The vessel held 420 asylum seekers from Afghanistan, thirteen from Sri Lanka, and five from Indonesia. The refugees were eventually transported to Nauru for processing, while another boatload of asylum seekers was taken from Christmas Island to Papua New Guinea, after the erroneous claim that many of the asylum seekers had thrown their children in the water (Marr and Wilkinson, 2003:208-209).

The affair had a major impact on Australia's IOTs. In the final week of parliament in late September 2001, the Border Protection Bill was driven through parliament in two late-night sittings that bypassed customary conventions. Among other things, the Bill excised Christmas Island, Ashmore Reef, the Cartier Islands and the Cocos Islands from Australia's migration zone. This meant that asylum seekers arriving there could not automatically apply for refugee status, and the Australian navy could relocate them to other countries.

This event has been comprehensively critiqued from numerous perspectives, and there is not the space here to do these issues any justice. At the very least, one point bears stressing: the Australian government's hardline response was widely seen as one attempt to take control in a world where the borderless flows of people, goods and ideas actively invoke nationalist concerns. Or as one commentator put it, *Tampa* tapped into "contemporary fears of 'our way of life' being swamped by the appearance of a few hundred Muslim asylum seekers on the horizon" (Perera, 2002).

## Island Dreams Café

The *Tampa* affair was about a simmering discord between a particular image of Islam and a particular image of Australia. My case study rests on this very same current: the way contemporary Australia accommodates and even encourages Islamic initiatives—specifically food outlets that provide halal options, observe traditional Islamic conventions and cater to a growing and increasingly diverse Islamic clientele. That the cafés I am discussing specialise in the traditional foods of the Cocos and Christmas Islands puts, I think, an interesting slant on this process. Firstly, they act as portals, or 'foodways', into Australian territories that numerous Australian patrons are, by their own admission, mostly unaware of. The menu is familiar, with hints of Malaysian,

Singaporean, Indonesian and Chinese flavours, but fused in such a way that evades too close a comparison with any one of these otherwise distinctively marketed cuisines.<sup>[1]</sup> Secondly, these businesses survive by a shrewd negotiation of local Australian conditions: specifically, the micro-politics of Sydney city (cosmopolitan, adventurous and glib); and the micro-politics of Lakemba, the epicentre of Sydney's Muslim communities. I will argue that these two very different locations, or 'foodscapes', have had a decisive impact on how the cafés function and what they signify.<sup>[2]</sup>

### Haldon Street: Little Tripoli

The first Island Dreams Café opened eleven years ago in Lakemba, in Sydney's south west. The café's owner and chef, Hjh Alimah, arrived in Australia from Christmas Island in 1973, but is of Cocos descent and culture.<sup>[3]</sup> It is a significant point that Alimah's culinary knowledge encompasses both Christmas Island and Cocos Island foods, but as Hjh Alimah identifies herself as a Cocos islander, she brings to her café the devotion to the Islamic faith that is typical of the Home Island culture. The café is located on one of the busiest strips in Lakemba, Haldon Street, often described by locals as 'Little Lebanon' or 'Little Tripoli', probably because many of the 10,000 Muslims living in and around the area come from the region around Tripoli in northern Lebanon. Lakemba is also home to the famous Imam Ali Mosque (the Lakemba Mosque). As one visitor describes it, "Haldon Street contains shops which have re-created as best they can the atmosphere of shopping in Tripoli and other Lebanese towns and villages" (Deen, 1995:89). Many of these shops have Arabic names, with signage in Arabic as well as English, and attract Muslims from all over Sydney. For many of these customers, Haldon Street's range of Middle Eastern specialties is incomparable.

So how does the Island Dreams café fit into this picture? Alimah is a Lakemba local, and lives with her immediate family in the house on top of her café. As far as she is concerned, the café's extensive menu has changed little over eleven years, and it retains a bias towards the dishes of Home Island. When the café opened eleven years ago, Haldon Street's selection of restaurants did not stretch beyond Lebanese and Chinese. Alimah's dishes were not just different, they were unheard of. In turn, and perhaps inevitably, the menu has been tempered by the business imperative: on the islands, meats are traditionally served rather dry; in Lakemba, they are saucier; and of the chili dishes served only mild to medium. Perhaps the biggest difference though, between food on the island and food in the café, is the café's virtual absence of fresh coconuts (for lack of both demand and supply).

Customers often quiz the café staff about the islands, and many are shocked to learn of their Australian IOT status. There are detailed maps and photos on the wall, and the staff frequently directs customers to them. This point is worth remembering: one of Alimah's intentions is to extend knowledge of and interest in her Cocos Island heritage. However, this underscores the café's importance as a unique cultural signpost. It punctuates what is an overwhelmingly Middle Eastern precinct with a glimpse into two little-known islands in the Indian Ocean. To do this successfully (which is to say profitably, since it is a business) requires careful negotiation. Firstly, the café needs to affirm what is discernibly different enough about its food to persuade customers to

choose it over a growing range of alternative options; but secondly, it needs to acknowledge, and at times even incorporate, the cultural conventions of its local clientele. So, for example, on one of my visits to the café, I noticed that the music playing was in fact an Arabic '*nashid*' or anthem, praising the prophet Mohammad. This complemented other Islamic features in the café (such as a photograph of a Jerusalem mosque and Koranic scriptures), and helped Alimah with her study of Arabic.

Of course, Lakemba's population is not exclusively Arabic Islamic. Nonetheless, by the proprietor's own admission, and my personal observation, it is a strong cultural presence that any businessperson would be brave, if not foolish, to ignore. As one Lakemba local explains, "finding Arabic-speaking people made us feel at home; [also] the shops were named in Arabic, doctors were Arabic speaking, builders, engineers and painters were all Arabic speaking. When my children had grown up and began to work, we bought a house closer to the Lakemba mosque" (Bouma, 1994:78).

This kind of conflation is common: Lakemba-Muslim-Arab. In Alimah's words, then, her café "broke the barrier" eleven years ago. Although the proprietor was Muslim and the food was *halal*, local resistance was twofold: Arab customers found the food strange (rather than 'exotic'), and many were noticeably aggrieved by the fact that the café was run by a woman, albeit one wearing the traditional *hijab*. Yet, over the last few years business has picked up considerably, which Alimah attributes to the area's growing multiculturalism, the curiosity of a younger and more adventurous generation of Muslim locals, and her own increasingly adept handling of Lakemba's gender politics, confidently using what she calls her "boxing gloves".

## Sydney City/Global Culture

It was on the encouragement of some of these more experimental customers that Alimah opened a sister café in the heart of Sydney city in 2000, at the corner of Campbell Street and Castlereigh Street (opposite Central Station).<sup>[4]</sup> Unlike the years of reticence from the Lakemba locals, the city café was an immediate success. Alimah blissfully explains the contrast thus: firstly, the city customers were generally more familiar with different foods from around the world, and were, therefore, more inclined to add new dishes to their diet. This is less a comment about these clients' sophistication or intelligence than a common observation about city life generally. It is a milieu that rewards diversity and difference, as familiarity with the foreign communicates a kind of globalised, urban, postmodern literacy and glamour. This taste for exotic and ethnic foods reflects a certain kind of attitude, one which is often referred to as "cosmopolitanism" (Bell and Valentine, 1997:117). Sure enough, this was Alimah's experience. Compared to their Haldon Street counterparts, her city customers tended to order with fewer questions about the food and fewer complaints about the prices.

True cosmopolitans happily experiment with the unknown, eschewing the standardised and homogenised for the seemingly unique and authentic. To this end, the Sydney-based Island Dreams Café fares well as it is seemingly more idiosyncratic than neighbouring cafés and restaurants. On the edge of Sydney's so-called Chinatown, the café appears to be what one food writer called "so unique as to be beyond

classification” (Bodey, 2002:32). In an area that is increasingly distinguished by a preponderance of Thai restaurants, Island Dreams Café benefits from a point of difference over which it has a practical monopoly.

On this point, though, it is worth noting the extent to which the Island Dreams Café markets a style of cooking and a range of foods that belong to a particular conception of island food, one that probably owes more to the proprietor’s memories of island life than a studied reflection of island food today. Over the last few years, there has been a relative decline in the amount of seafood consumed on the island, and a rise in the amount of sugar, flour and processed chicken. However, Canberra’s oversights have been at least partly responsible for the changing (if not degraded) consumption patterns on the islands. When the Federal Government reduced the number of weekly commercial flights to its IOTs from five to one in 1998, there was an immediate impact on access to fresh fruit and vegetables. As the space for freight shrank from 4000 kilograms to 600 kilograms, the subsequent reduction of fresh food deliveries was critical and devastating (Contractor, 1998:3).

It was not the last time the Federal Government undermined the islanders’ food supplies. During the *Tampa* crisis, Canberra’s closure of Christmas Island’s harbour had, in addition to blocking journalists (which was the intention), simultaneously prevented islanders from leaving the harbour to fish. According to the president of the Christmas Island Shire Council, “there was total disregard for the dietary needs of people for over a week. Where would that be tolerated in the rest of Australia? Nowhere” (Lewis, 2006:12). Since 2004, the city store has been run (and is now owned) by Alimah’s aunt, Hjh Mebia. Like Alimah, Mebia sees the city café as one way to preserve the traditions that are seemingly threatened by the convenience of pre-packaged foods and supermarkets. The long-term effects of bureaucratic myopia might prove just as consequential.

## Conclusion

I found the Island Dreams Café significant for two main reasons. Firstly, both cafés exemplify the resilience and adaptability of a living culture. There are only about 50 to 60 Cocos Islanders living in Sydney (and these basically belong to Alimah and Mebia’s extended family), but there are two cafés devoted to the islands’ foods. On the other hand, for better or for worse, these cafés intersect with codes and conventions already present in Sydney. Culinary fusion becomes, therefore, less of a postmodern indulgence than a necessary function of business survival.

When the Howard Government excised these islands from Australia’s migration zone in the wake of the *Tampa* affair, it made a crystal-clear statement about border control, and the need to police Australian boundaries, both territorial and cultural. I am suggesting that incursions by our Islamic neighbours (IOTs, no less), are neither predictable nor straightforward. Such interventions invariably escape the control of any one party—and I think the Island Dreams experiment is a case in point.

## Endnotes

[1] This is not to suggest that either of these cuisines is ‘pure’ or free from influence and adaptation; rather, it is argued that, insofar as they are marketed in Australia, they are clearly demarcated.

[2] The literature on ‘foodways’ and ‘foodscapes’ is wide and diverse. A thorough overview of both the various theoretical positions as well as numerous case studies is provided in Bell and Valentine (1997); see also Brown and Mussell (1984).

[3] My interview with Hjh Alimah took place on 1 February 2006 in the Island Dreams Café (Haldon Street, Sydney). Unless stated otherwise, all the information about this site is from this interview, which lasted approximately two hours. There was a follow-up visit a few days later, whereupon I photographed the café and sampled several items on the menu.

[4] At the time of my interview with Hjh Alimah, the city café was being renovated and re-named. As of mid February 2006, it has operated as Mutiara Café. Unless stated otherwise, all the information about this site is from my interview with Alimah (see endnote above). I visited the city site twice in December 2005 to introduce myself (and my project) to Hjh Mebia, and to photograph the café.

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