

Islam in the Pacific

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It goes without saying that this paper will, of necessity, present the merest sketch of an extremely complicated topic.

In order to make this manageable, I have concentrated on Melanesia and Polynesia and omitted Micronesia and the metropolitan powers, Australia and New Zealand.

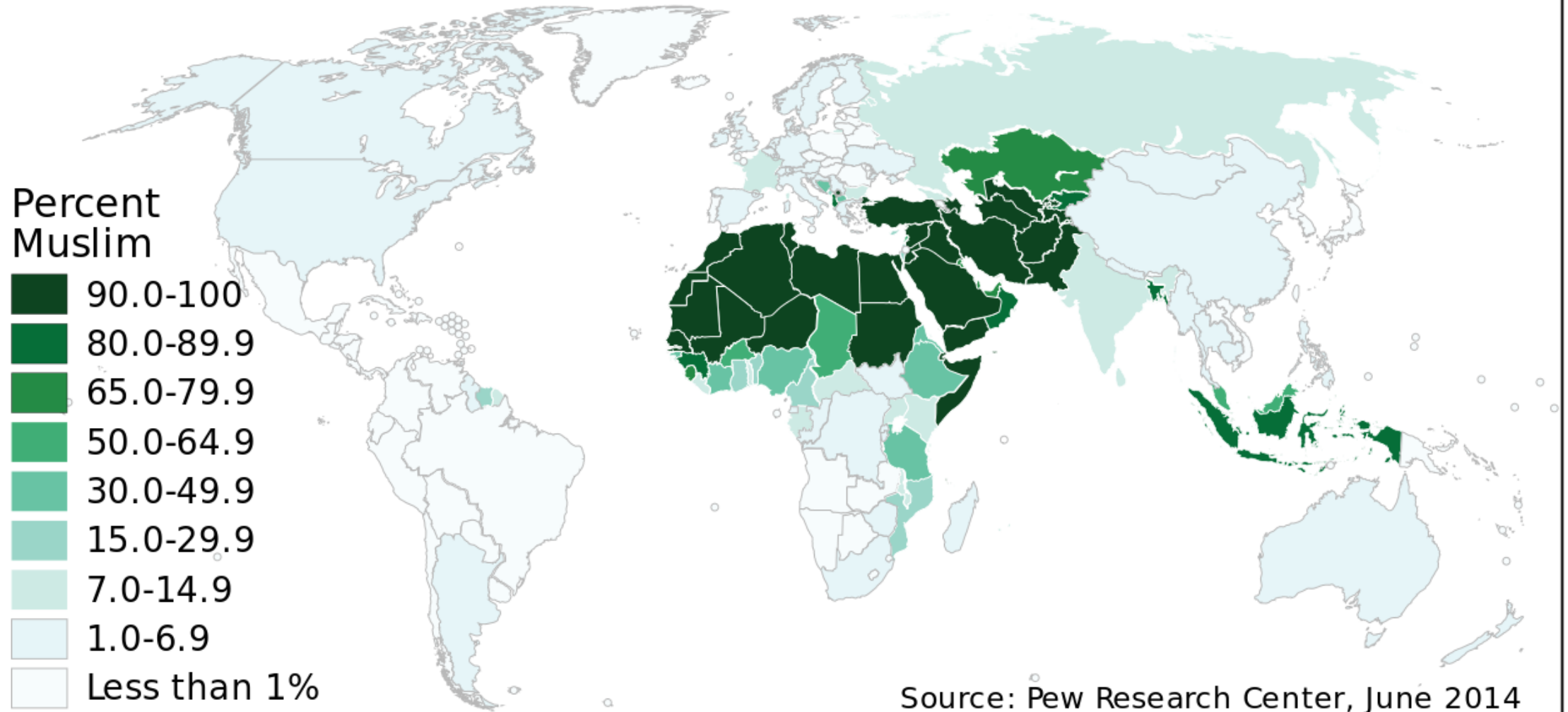
Literature on the topic is scarce certainly in comparison with the libraries of books written about the Christian missions and churches.

Flower's work on Islam in Papua New Guinea is a good example of what might be achieved on a country by country analysis, but even a single volume synthesis of the existing work would be welcome.



Muslim Population

2014



I suggest that we have to consider the idea of Islam in the Pacific of existing in four stages:

- The presence of its adherents as individuals or in very small numbers, functioning essentially as individuals expressing their faith through their daily lives and observances of religious customs
- As a proselytising religion actively seeking converts outside the Islamic community
- As an organised presence centred around a mosque and an Imam
- Self-sustaining locally integrated communities with a clear local identity and evidence of interculturalisation and syncretism.

Dutch and British influence

The growth of Islam since it was first expounded by Prophet Mohammed in the seventh century was meteoric, yet its presence in the Pacific came relatively late.

Its original presence in the Pacific can be traced to the Dutch presence in Indonesia and through the British in Fiji.

However, even the introduction of Islam into Indonesia appears to have been a slow and uncertain process and evidence of how it spread is scarce.

The Dutch appear to have treated matters of religion with benign neglect for most of their rule, even going so far as to build mosques as peace building measures after their colonial wars.

There appears to have been Islamic enclaves in coastal areas of Dutch New Guinea, but traditional animist beliefs persisted until the arrival of Christian missionaries.

West Papua

The spread of Islam in West Papua occurred only after its occupation by Indonesia and the adoption of the transmigrasi policy by the Indonesian government began dumping its surplus population on West Papua.

There is little evidence of any widespread conversion to Islam among the West Papuans.

For most West Papuans, six decades of murder, torture and displacement have made Islam the religion of the oppressor.

West Papuans remains predominantly Christian and Catholic.

New Caledonia

In other parts of the Pacific the European empires clearly facilitated the movement of Muslims within their imperial boundaries.

In the French territories, for instance, Muslims have been present in New Caledonia since at least 1872, with the arrival of Algerian convicts and later on Indonesian Somali and Arab labourers.

The size of the Muslim population in New Caledonia has fallen significantly since the middle of last century.

The British were responsible for the largest single migration of Muslims as part of their shipment of indentured labourers to Fiji for work on the sugar plantations which were used to finance the colony.

Elsewhere in Melanesia, the establishment of Islam did not occur until late in the 20th century.

Papua New Guinea

In Papua New Guinea, it is likely that the first Muslims were African teachers recruited during the 1970s. There were staff at UPNG and also Indonesian and Malaysian diplomatic staff and businessmen.

Flower estimates the number of Muslims in the country as about 120 in 1976. Islam in a formal sense was established in 1976 with the creation of Islamic Society of PNG.

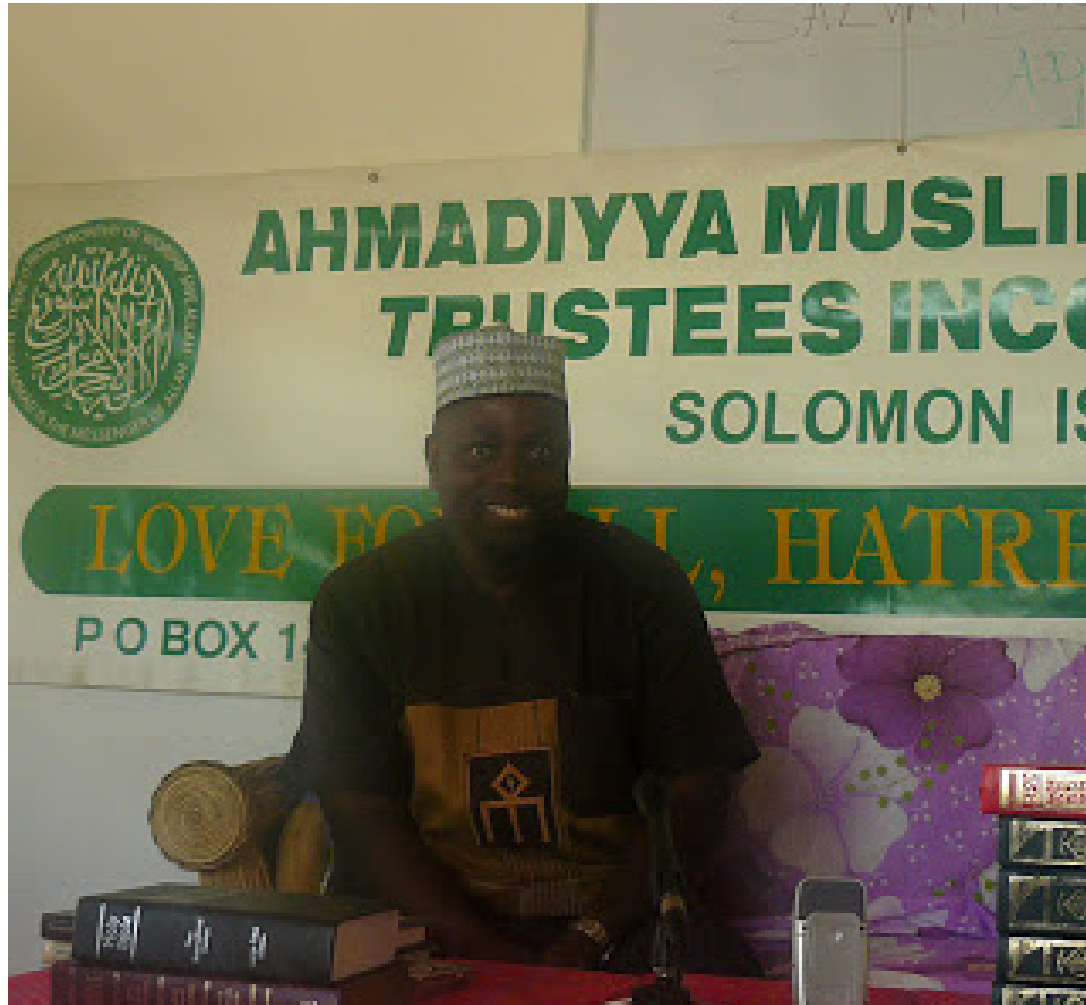
The growth of PNG in the following decades was spectacular, with a 500% increase by 2008 when there were an estimated 4000 Muslims in PNG, with local converts outnumbering expatriate Muslims.

Muslims in PNG received substantial financial support from Gulf nations and missionaries from Australia, New Zealand and Fiji.

Flower argues that: “It is likely that Islamic contact with PNG before and during European colonisation failed to establish the religion owing to this lack of substantial financial, material, political and missionary support”.

“The rise in the number of Islamic conversions in PNG appears consistent with recent increases in Islamic conversions in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, which have also received support of a similar nature. “





Solomon Islands and Vanuatu

In the Solomon Islands, Hafiz Jibrail, a missionary from the Ahmadiyya sect from Ghana arriving in 1987. Jibrail established a community based on Honiara but spread through other locations.

The Solomon Islands had only 12 Muslims in 1998, but a decade later there were reportedly between 2,000 and 4,000 Muslim converts.

There are also Ahmadiyya and Sunni communities in neighbouring Vanuatu. The first ni-Vanuatu converted to mainstream Sunni Islam in 1978.

The country's first mosque was built in 1992.

The Ahmadiyya community did not begin until several decades later, making its first indigenous convert in 2005.

According to Flower there are 500 Muslims in Vanuatu and there have been claims that it is present in all of Vanuatu's main islands.

The political dimensions of Islam were brought to the Pacific when Libyan leader Colonel Qaddafi established an embassy in Vanuatu in the 1980s. This led to speculation by the CIA that he was using it as a base from which to foment revolution in the Pacific.

Fiji

The British were responsible for the biggest single movement of Muslims in the Pacific and the establishment of the largest Muslim community.

Muslims appear in Fiji for the first time in 1879 among the girmits (indentured labourers) taken there by the British to work on the sugar plantations.

Because of their early arrival in the colony, Muslims in Fiji were able to form a community maintain a distinct identity within the broader Indo-Fijian community.

Most Fijian Muslims belong to the Sunni majority, while there is a sizeable Amhaddiyyah minority.

Once the indenture period was over, Muslims began to organise themselves and were active in politics, unions and business.

In recent years the public face of Islam in Fiji has changed radically, with the appearance of Arab dress on the streets and fully veiled women, something never previously seen.

Fijian Muslims have played an important part in spreading Muslims into other Pacific nations and since the ascendancy of Commodore Bainimarama to power, several Fijian Muslims have obtained influential positions, particularly Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum.

The Bainimarama era has also led to an influx of Arab money, with the United Arab Emirates being a major funder. It has also led to accusations of Arab money being used to bribe officials.

The Fiji Muslim community has been responsible for taking Islam to other Islands, notably in Polynesia.

Tonga

The existence of Islam in Tonga can be traced to 1984.

Muslims in the kingdom were originally offered the use of a room at the royal palace for prayers.

The Fiji Muslim League and Fiji Muslim Youth Movement have played a significant role in the development of Islam in Tonga.

Majied (2002) reported that exaggerated reports of the number of converts to Islam in Tonga had led to a lot of money being granted to Tonga Muslim League by Libya and Saudi Arabia.

“Unfortunately most of the money that was given by the Muslim organisations was being abused, mismanaged and unaccounted for,” he said.

“Money was the cause of a lot of the Tongans accepting Islam. Did they accept Islam for the sake of financial benefits or for the sake of Allâh?”

Majied said the absence of an educated, qualified and experienced imâm led to a vacuum in the relationship between the local converts and the immigrant Muslims.

The social culture of Tongans also put great pressure on the converts against practising Islam.

“The Qâdyânis remain a great threat for this community by presenting their false message as a true religion of Islam,” he wrote.

In 2010 there were fewer than 1000 adherents in Tonga. It is believed there are between 50-70 local converts.

Muslims in Tonga have faced hostility and suspicion in recent years as a result of the spread of terrorism.

In 2016 a Tongan convert to Islam, Alo-Bridget-Namoa and her husband Sameh Bayda were arrested in Australia on terrorism charges.

They were allegedly planning to carry out a knife attack.

In March this year a Tongan convert, Mohamed Allah Fatah, was driven away by a royal guard when he attempted to offer prayers for the late Queen Mother.

Samoa

The first local conversion to Islam came in 1985. There had previously been Muslims from other countries working in Samoa for the government or one of the UN agencies.

The first convert, Ilias Vole, later reverted to Christianity.

Another local man and his family converted in 1989.

Majied (2002) estimated there were then 40 Muslims in Samoa.

The number of Muslims to that date had declined because of migration and lack of religious support.

Several students were given scholarships by the Fiji Muslim League to study in Muslim colleges in Fiji.

Majied listed the Qâdiâni and Shi'a Muslims as "a great threat" to the Samoan community.

"The social life and the family ties put great pressure on the new young converts. They have to follow the custom and norms of the society.

"When the young Muslims attain the age of marriage they find it difficult to get a Muslim partner and this result in marrying a non- Muslim. This resulted in them abandoning Islam."

It was announced last month that Turkey had paid for the Quran to be translated into Samoa and 2000 copies have been sent to the Island nation

Last month the Samoan constitution was altered to make the country a Christian state.

Parallels with Christian missions

In interpreting the slow spread of Islam in the Pacific it is useful to make comparisons with the behaviour of Christian missions in the Pacific in the 19th century.

I would also argue that certain parallels may also be drawn with the arrival of Catholicism in India and its attempts to eliminate any trace of the Church of Mar Toma.

The Ahmadiyya Muslims were challenged by the arrival of mainstream Sunni Muslims in 1995. The Sunni community was established as the result of missionary activity by the Tablighi Jamaat.

The Sunni imams regard the Ahmmadiyya as heretics.

Online publications describe the Ahmadiyyas and Qadasis as a danger and make it clear they must be eliminated. It's rather like the idea that there is only one permissible interpretation.

Flower argues that support for Muslims in the Pacific Islands has been necessary for growth, but says it is not enough to explain the success of Muslim missionaries in PNG. This argument can be applied to the growth of Islam in the wider Pacific.

I would suggest this came about as a result of major social, political and religious changes in the region occasioned by or at least following the end of the colonial period.

There was for a long complete disinterest in the Pacific by most western governments. Everybody was focussed on terrorism, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Australia and New Zealand would not engage with Commodore Bainimarama and responded to the Solomons crisis very slowly.

Meanwhile, the religious landscape had also changed.

Changes in the religious landscape

A variety of fundamentalist Christian sects had been allowed into the Pacific Islands, which caused confusion to people who belonged to mainstream churches.

Other, non-Christian groups such as the LDS and Bahais were allowed to proselytise. Both have been very successful, with the LDS creating global networks that connect Mormons from Nuku'alofa, Honolulu and Salt Lake City.

Western clergy left, taking with them 40, 50, or 60 years of experiences in local culture, society and language, often to be replaced by people with no empathy for the local milieu.

Missions became churches, but the original churches changed and became far more flexible in interpretations of dogma and changed to accommodate their own metropolitan societies.

They were no longer highly hierarchical and patriarchal organisation.



Islam as an alternative

For some people, Islam has offered an attractive alternative.

A rigid interpretation of Islam, such as that promoted by Wahabi funded missionaries, offers hierarchy, patriarchy and polygamy, all of which have proved to be very attractive to some Islanders.

Islam honours Jesus (Issa) as the last Messenger of God before Prophet Mohammed and many of the patriarchs of the Old Testament appear in the Holy Quran, so converts need not necessarily feeling they are abandoning Christianity altogether.

In some instances, as in Fiji, existing Muslim communities have been able to take advantage of changed political circumstances to empower themselves by being preferred over mainstream Christians or Hindus.

Islam population figures in the Pacific

Kettani (2010) figures shows that the number of Muslims in the Pacific has largely stayed unchanged.

In fact there has been a marked decline in the number of Muslims in Melanesia from 5.17% of the population in 1950 to 3.43% in 2010.

Kettani tracked statistics for affiliation to Islam against overall population figures from 1950-with a projection to 2020. I have cut him off at 2010, the last year for which he has “real” figures.

Kettani has excluded Papua New Guinea from his calculations for Meleanesia.

Melanesia

Fiji				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 854,098	Number of Muslims: 53,552
Percentage of Muslims	6.53	6.26		Change: - 0.27%
New Caledonia				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 215.215	Number of Muslims: 10,977
Percentage of Muslims	10	4.33		Change: - 5.67%
Solomon Islands				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 535,699	Number of Muslims: 54
Percentage of Muslims	0.01	0.01		Change: 0%
Vanuatu				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 189,723	Number of Muslims: 209
Percentage of Muslims	0.11	0.11		Change: 0%

Polynesia

Cook Islands				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 15,772	Number of Muslims: 9
Percentage of Muslims	0.02	0.06		Change: + 0.04%
French Polynesia				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 272,394	Number of Muslims: 27
Percentage of Muslims	0.01	0.01		Change: 0%
Niue				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 1473	Number of Muslims: 0
Percentage of Muslims	0.01	0.01		Change: 0%
Samoa				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 178,943	Number of Muslims: 72
Percentage of Muslims	0.03	0.04		Change: + 0.01%
American Samoa				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 66,250	Number of Muslims: 20
Percentage of Muslims	0.03	0.03		Change: 0%

Tokelau				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 1116	Number of Muslims: 0
Percentage of Muslims	0.01	0.01		Change: 0%
Tonga				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 104,260	Number of Muslims: 52
Percentage of Muslims	0.04	0.05		Change: + 0.01%
Tuvalu				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 11,140	Number of Muslims: 11
Percentage of Muslims	0.10	0.10		Change: 0%
Wallis & Futuna				
Year:	1950	2010	Total pop 2010: 13,552	Number of Muslims: 1
Percentage of Muslims	0.01	0.01		Change: 0%

Where to from here?

A massive task awaits whoever can synthesise everything available from academic and other sources on Islam in the Pacific into a coherent narrative.

There is a lot that could be done to compare the spread of Islam in the Pacific with the spread of the LDS and to ask why the latter has become acceptable – and, in terms of numbers – more successful than Islam.

There is certainly a lot to be done on analysing the missionary structures behind the current growth of Islam and to tie these to particular trends in the Middle East and the struggle between the different schools of Islam.

This is an enormous topic, the surface of which I have barely scratched. Flower has, to a great extent, shown what can be done with his work on PNG.

The theological, geopolitical, economic and social implications of the spread of Islam make this a task that would be most worthy of our attention.

