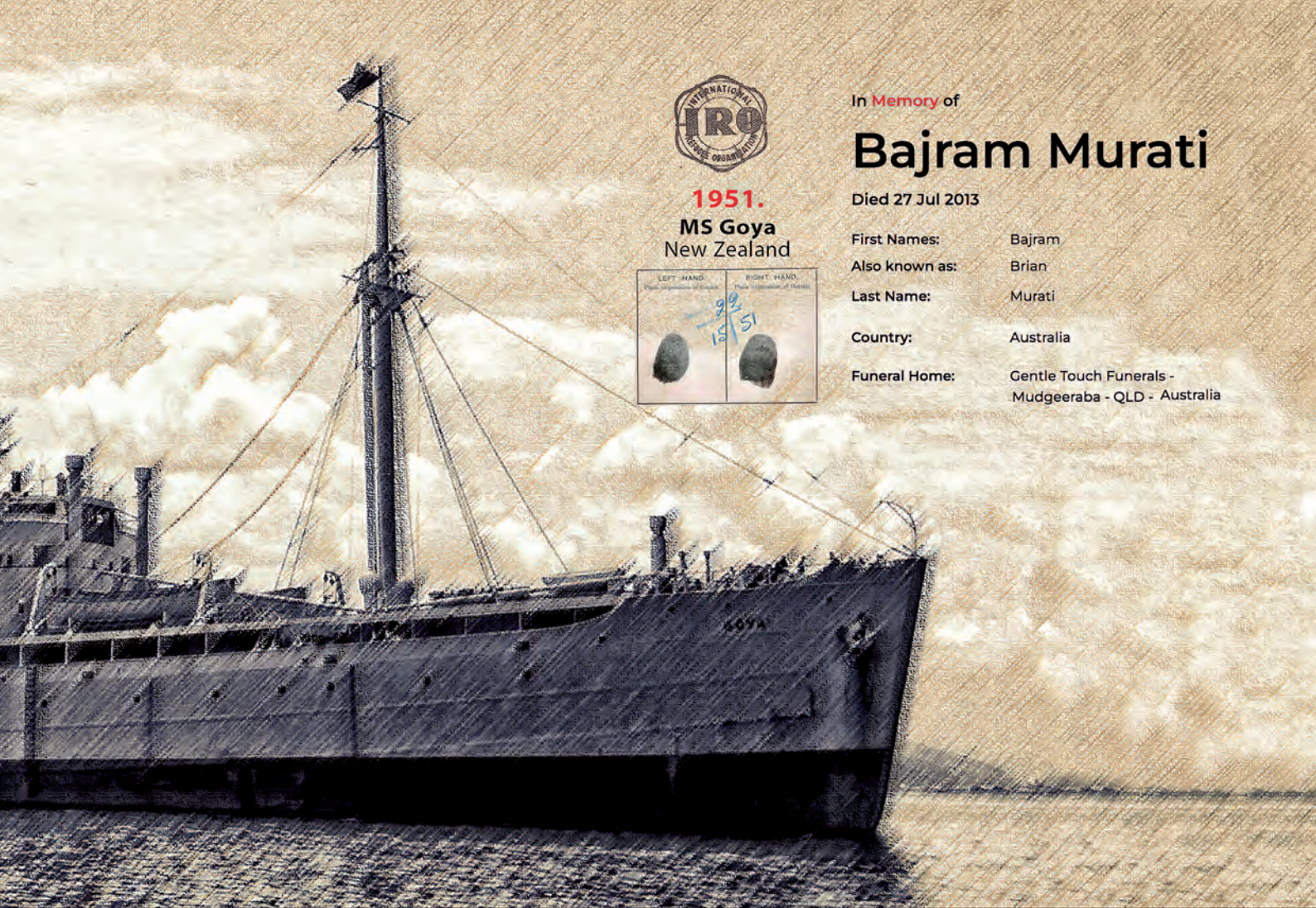


Abdullah Drury je kandidat za doktorat na Victoria univerzitetu u Wellingtonu. Magistrirao je na filozofiji na Waikato univerzitetu, istražujući historiju muslimanske zajednice Novog Zelanda. Također, nositelj je diplome magistra umjetnosti s počastima prve klase u povijesti na Waikato univerzitetu. Služio je kao gostujući predavač u ime dodiplomskog kursa Islam i Zapad na programu religijskih studija na Waikato univerzitetu. Autor je knjige „Islam na Novom Zelandu: kratka istorija udruženja muslimana Novog Zelanda.“ Recenzirao je širok spektar knjiga o temi islam u „Islam i kršćansko-muslimanski odnosi“ i u „The Muslim World Book Review“. Drury je napisao više novinskih i akademskih članaka o historiji i islamu. Jedan je od osnivača grupe „Waikato islamske studije“ i nekoliko godina je uređivao online reviju te grupe. Bio je na poziciji službenika za komunikacije u Federaciji islamskih udruženja Novog Zelanda između 1999. i 2002. godine. Bio je FIANZ-ov halal supervizor za južno ostrvo između 2002. i 2003. godine.
E-Mail: abdullah@xtra.co.nz

Abdullah Drury is a PhD candidate with Victoria University of Wellington and a University of Waikato MPhil graduate, researching the history of the New Zealand Muslim community. He also holds a BA in History and a Master of Arts with First Class Honours in History from the University of Waikato. He has served as Guest Lecturer on behalf of the University of Waikato's Religious Studies Programme's undergraduate course Islam & the West. He is the author of „Islam in New Zealand: A Short History of the New Zealand Muslim Association.“ He reviewed a wide range of books on the subject of Islam in „Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations“ and „The Muslim World Book Review“. Drury has written multiple newspaper and academic articles on history and Islam. He is also a founding member of the Waikato Islamic Studies group and edited the online Review for several years. He held the position of Communications Officer for the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand between 1999 and 2002 and served as the FIANZ's South Island Halal Supervisor between 2002 and 2003.
E-Mail: abdullah@xtra.co.nz



1951.

MS Goya
New Zealand



In Memory of

Bajram Murati

Died 27 Jul 2013

First Names: Bajram

Also known as: Brian

Last Name: Murati

Country: Australia

Funeral Home: Gentle Touch Funerals -
Mudgeeraba - QLD - Australia

datum prijema / date of receipt: 6.9.2023.

datum recenzije / review date: 08.12. / 23.12. 2023.

datum prihvatanja / date of acceptance: 24.12.2023.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52510/sia.v4i2.66>

UDK: 929 Drury A.

28-428.5

Pregledni stručni rad - Other uncategorized works

Abdullah DRURY

**DOBRODUŠNI ALBANAC:
BAJRAM MURATI I ZAŠTITNICI ISLAMA**

• drugi dio •

**A GENIAL ALBANIAN:
BAJRAM MURATI AND THE WATCHDOGS OF ISLAM**

• the second part •

Abstract

This article analyses the biography of Bajram Murati (1930-2013), an Albanian refugee to New Zealand, and the contentions over symbolic spaces and meaning within the New Zealand Muslim community over the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. At the centre of the analysis stand the ongoing negotiations between Murati, as director-general of the New Zealand Council of the World Muslim Congress, and other Muslim community representatives over leadership. Such an examination reveals much about the wider immigrant experience and the nuanced evolution of Islam inside a secular society of Anglo-European Christian heritage. The author contextualizes the cultural and social setting of his life, highlighting both his commercial interests outside the religious organisations and his extensive discussions on faith issues. As should become obvious, the notion of a simple Albanian-Muslim rivalry with Asian-immigrants does not suffice to explain in depth the complex mechanisms at work. Altogether intra-Muslim communal competition, the reshaping of Islamic identities and solidarities across the country, and variegated political discourse have generated differences and loyalties that go well beyond one-dimensional ethnic conditionalities.

Key words: *Bajram Murati, New Zealand, Muslim Community, Albanian immigrants, Islam, Christianity.*

A GENIAL ALBANIAN: BAJRAM MURATI AND THE WATCHDOGS OF ISLAM

● In July 1982 Bajram Murati co-sponsored an open letter to the United States president, with Dr Ron Macintyre (1938-2022), Gordon Dryden (1931-2022) and Alan Graham (1915-1998).^{▼1} It was printed in the New Zealand Herald and whilst it was hardly *To the Finland Station* (Edward Wilson) Murati's newspaper contribution is his most explicit statement, a personal endorsement of practical efficiency and utility. The theme of his column rests on the cruel totality of the republic of Israel and the monstrosity of the oppression experienced by the Palestinians. There was nothing arbitrary about this project, but rather a curious sleight of hand, the same trick as Solzhenitsyn: aligning narrative necessity with emotional payoff. The Albanian refugee emphasized that everyone, in both societies, was a prisoner of a desire for self-determination and self-preservation, and that such a life carried injustices. It was only because each individual citizen considered himself more significant than the rest that they could endure this state of affairs; humans need a gradient of value in order to organise their actions and establish priorities. This perspectivism of the consciousness of the individual proved to be a social immunization against any comprehension of the suffering of the other side of the conflict. What was going through Murati's mind as he was helping to present this column? Did the choice of words hit him all of a sudden, without warning? We have no reason to doubt the details of the text. However, it is difficult to imagine that these ideas came to him abruptly, since there is evidence to indicate that the issue of Palestine was already very familiar to him since the late 1960s. The Albanian refugee recognised the essential fortuity of feelings, and presented his ideas not as wild assertions but as careful deliberations to be set off against other considerations; a good functional identity regulates ones emotions.

▼1. 'An Open Letter to President Reagan and the people of the United States', *New Zealand Herald*, 2 July 1982, p.11



ILLUSTRATION ~ One of the signatories of the open letter to the President of the United States, Bajram Murati, Gordon Drayden and Alan Graham.

Within the text, written in the summer of 1982, there are no real traces of true actual horror, or that which modern observers call 'war pornography'. However we do note soberly argued tentative remarks as to the circumstances under which Palestinian realities could evoke horror and sympathy. So Murati clearly understood the idea of

justice as a propositional truth, but he also applied it as an auto-suggestive, existential and pragmatic aid in structuring an improvement in Palestinian lives. This was an elegant solution. Murati introduced an extra component and bent the rules artistically.

In many ways Murati remained a modest immigrant / refugee, ever hostile to left-wing authoritarianism throughout his life, but he knew how to adapt to his audience with ingenuity. He instinctively knew that to opt out of the quest for intrinsic order was to infer that no such order actually existed. In 1982 he was interviewed by the *Metro* magazine. He stressed his years of personal sacrifice, hardship and toil, and he repeated the narrative of Socialist brutality in his homeland and the murder of his family menfolk, his personal flight to freedom.

The lunchtime atmosphere in the office of Puriri Park Resort, Orewa, is distinctly New Zealand – shorts and jandals, cigarette smoke, friendly banter, mug of tea. A huge black dog, a tabby kitten and a pink galah share the office. Two carnivorous Mexican walking fish in a tank provide a temptation to the fingers of small campers. In control of all this Kiwi amiability is a nugget, forceful, safari-suited Albanian Moslem, Brian Murati, the managing director. ▼²

(His holiday resort bore its own flag – the pigeon enlarged from the back of a NZ\$20 note.)



ILLUSTRATION ~ Auckland's West Coast Beaches.

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Plaže zapadne obale Aucklanda.

▼² 'The Immigrants: Brian Murati', *Metro*, Number 16, October 1982, p.46.

After over thirty years in New Zealand “Murati can now stroll around his green acreage like a trans-located English squire, chatting with his villagers.”^{▼3} He played his various roles with consummate skill and in another life, he might have made an excellent stage actor.

New Zealand is a country I adopted by choice. My loyalties are 100% to it. But I am proud to have been born an Albanian. I have a great feeling for the principles we lived by, for our traditions. I am Moslem, I’m proud to be Moslem.^{▼4}

The interview ends as it began, by reminding readers that society should be arranged according to reliable principles and not fleeting ideological proclivities. His words provide a good view into the mind-set of the Albanian refugee over 20 years after his arrival and how he perceived his adopted homeland.

Brian Murati is active in Auckland’s Moslem community, and is proud that his English-born wife, Gillian, of her own accord, chose to convert to Islam. He is particularly passionate on the subject of Palestinian refugees, for whom he feels deeply. His own experience as a displaced person strengthens his natural feelings of solidarity with these fellow Moslems.^{▼5}

It is a devastatingly poignant understatement, one that pulls the proverbial rug from under the reader, a razor sharp change of tack from the humour, wit and general observations about the human condition that were articulated before.

It is also worth noting that he took the opportunity to reiterate his interest in the Palestine issue. In 1983 Murati made a serious mistake and briefly allied himself with Mohammed Abdel-Al, the Egyptian-born proprietor of the New Zealand Islamic Meat Management Company, an agency involved in halal meat certification. Poorly advised, the Albanian was invited to a few meetings by a senior figure at the New Zealand Meat Producers Board in order to play games with Muslim community leaders such as Mazhar Krasniqi. Abdel-Al had been a lightning rod for disagreement about the *halal* issue and had become a figure of much contempt within the wider Muslim population. Not exactly a smooth operator. Although he did not go into full Disney villain mode, there was a particular animus against him. So this was not Murati’s finest hour. I think it was intended as a piece of political theatre, a ruse employed to enhance his reputation as a man of character and substance who should not be trifled with. He defended his actions, describing the

▼3 ‘The Immigrants: Brian Murati’, *Metro*, Number 16, October 1982, p.46.

▼4 ‘The Immigrants: Brian Murati’, *Metro*, Number 16, October 1982, p.46.

▼5 ‘The Immigrants: Brian Murati’, *Metro*, Number 16, October 1982, p.46.

New Zealand Council of the World Muslim Congress as the “watchdogs of Islam.”^{▼6} In terms of granularity and range, it is a complex and rich image, with a studied and arresting grandeur worthy of Vincent van Gogh painting. It suggests the universality of the organisation’s greatest objective and confers a masculine sense of security, stability and nobility. Above all, his words suggest a boiling admixture of personal and professional accusation, and there may have been deeper anxieties at work. If he articulated such opinions in public, we can appreciate the sense of animosity and outrage that many local Muslims felt towards the man. The tension between Murati and Krasniqi resembled a well signposted fight card at a boxing club and reflected, therefore, real debates that went on during this era within the wider Muslim community – debates made all the more urgent by economic immediacy and the high proportion of immigrants involved. The deeply compassionate optimist persona of Murati, tinted with a touch of pragmatic cynicism, did not work this time; this episode effectively marked the end of his public career, and the reaction to him and his agency was henceforth polarised between a few ardent supporters and many vociferous opponents.

Thereafter, the public documents and newspapers go quiet. Murati retired from community politics and public affairs, especially after the debacle with the New Zealand Islamic Meat Management Company, and focused his last decades on his family matters. Like a Sufi-master of old, he seems to have ended his life in quasi-pious retreat from communal politics, thus consciously reaffirming the ethics and values of his faith. Bajram Murati died in Australia on 27 July 2013 and was buried in Queensland by the unfortunately named ‘Gentle Touch Funerals’ service.



ILLUSTRATION ~ Detail from the funeral and the situation at the cemetery.

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Detalj sa dženaze i situacija na mezarju.

^{▼6} Warren Berryman, ‘Insensitivities created halal meat difficulties’, *National Business Review* (19 December 1983), p.13.

Interpolation

It is difficult for any given individual to guard his or her reputation and personal interests whilst alive – even more so, after death. The fiscal and geographical circumstances of his birth and upbringing conditioned his formation. When it comes to Murati, it is challenging to avoid the electromagnetic pull of polar opposites: the vituperative polemical criticism of his opponents and the complex reality of the situation. Both resilient and malleable, he occupies a curious position in the community history and imagination, at times reviled and praised. How could it be otherwise, given both the scope and scale of this refugee's personal tragedies and accomplishments? He had to exercise a cultural ambidexterity entirely because he was operating within hybrid culture / society. It would be a mistake to treat Murati as a man outside time, isolated from his culture (Albanian, Muslim or that of New Zealand.) On the one hand, the deep grammar of governance was Protestant and Anglo-Saxon, whilst his personal and communal expressions of faith were Islamic and thus ever so slightly foreign to the mainstream. The man was no Tamerlane or *victor urbis*, but the artificiality of the New Zealand Council of the World Muslim Congress was one of the minor ways that Murati compensated for his status in Auckland society and outfitted for himself a persona commensurate with his goals. It is curious and telling that he led an organisation but left no leadership pool – or disciple ? – who could continue his work after he retired from community affairs. For all his disappointments and frustrations in life, Murati's experiences as a refugee was invaluable to his thinking and his work ethic.

There are several characteristics of Murati that challenge what I see as popular preconceptions about Muslim refugees. For instance, throughout his life and career, Murati was always eager to avoid being labelled and dismissed as an intellectual dabbler, or a religious amateur. In this, he failed totally. His caution and reluctance to explicate his arguments in any detail, in the public sphere, only served to obscure the issue and prevent him from contributing to further research in any positive sense. Being competent in one task or at one particular field of employment, speaks little of one's personal abilities and capacities elsewhere. (Fascists may oblige the trains to run on time but they also start unnecessary wars.) Perhaps a more positive critique would be to suggest that Murati's spark of creativity or genius lay in his determination to pursue liberty and to cogitate abstractly about capitalism and religion, to look beneath the surface of customs and rituals shrouded in antiquity, and to ask serious questions about methodologies privately.

What do we mean when we characterise Murati as a man of assiduous enterprise and industry? There can be little doubt that his autobiographical accounts in the newspapers are somewhat programmatic productions, inspired by cultural imperatives that often gave preference to multiple aspects ahead of 'the facts'. Placing events into an oral narrative framework is necessarily reductive and in line with an agenda the interlocutor actively wished to promote or preserve (i.e. implicit and explicit objectives). This was the fine line that Murati walked in Muslim community

politics, never positioning himself as a *mullah* or religious scholar, but simply as an august *primus inter pares* in leadership circles. However this is not to denigrate or dismiss the account entirely. The employment of structural formulae, stereotypes and repeated themes in the composition of oral story-telling does not automatically strangle all creativity, particularity, factuality or accuracy. It is true that oral accounts and *topoi* may construct and distort the past but most of these points can be exposed, accounted for, examined and explained. It is also, then, a subjective perspective – the product of a particular thinker parsing his reading and knowledge in a certain manner.



ILLUSTRATION ~ In the politics of the Muslim community, Murati never positioned himself as a *mullah* or a religious scholar, but simply as an august *primus inter pares* in leadership circles.

The life of Murati is very interesting, filled with intriguing stories and anecdotes. The precise details of his background and early education – so consequential to the Communist Party and the forces of Socialism – have been lost to us now and his youth must be viewed through a somewhat dark glass, the evidence scant, vague and unreliable. Perhaps what is most remarkable about him is what he said and pursued. On the other hand, reading some of the newspaper articles surrounding the man, gives us interesting insights into



ILLUSTRATION ~ Many companies have sought to support local, national and global initiatives under the motto of protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief.

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Mnoge su tvrtke pod geslom zaštite i promicanja slobode vjere ili uvjerenja nastojale podržati lokalne, nacionalne i globalne inicijative.

the ambitions and boundaries of the man. It is hard not to think he may have been a slightly bitter person. An exile, a refugee, he appeared to express a number of problems, some of them self-inflicted, and some of them merely inescapable facets of reality. Full of ideas and plans, acuity and vigour, Murati indulged in the small pleasures of life as well. Particularly in view of his experiences in the Balkans, Murati knew that the intrinsic/inherent logic of religion differed wildly from the logic of business enterprise and politics, but he was also alert to the worth of keeping faith and business separate. Commercialising religious enterprise(s) would be just as deleterious as religionising politics. He was constructive in the sense that he built a modest business enterprise; he was destructive in that his involvement in the wider Muslim community never ended well. Murati was not well educated but he was extremely intelligent and his discourse is predicated on the religious idea *an deus sit*; however one suspects he may have been intellectually frustrated by his lack of formal education. Through contemplative reading and study, plus frequent travel, his mind was self-stored with a vast sum of information, his memory was retentive and his imagination fertile, and from all accounts his conversation was eloquent and graceful. However, he certainly was not educated to a level that his mind would have demanded and in his early years in New Zealand had to accept employment that was probably beneath

him, intellectually. Thus, in his newspaper interviews, he sometimes exhibits a certain mild cerebral arrogance common to smart folk who think that only “smart” really matters and that their talents are wasted; he would occasionally express a cynicism about the foolishness of the people and the nefarious world around him, and the fact that his very real skills were not properly acknowledged or engaged adequately. Strictly speaking his words were neither methodological nor thematic in orientation, but associative – triggered by a single concept and shooting in multiple directions simultaneously, slightly unpredictably. His thoughts appear to have been ordered conceptually rather than chronologically. Obviously this approach, as with any arbitrarily allocated talent, was not overly helpful in his relationships with other Muslims or even other Albanians.

A man of contrasts and confusions, Murati was a controversial figure in the Muslim community over the 1970s and 1980s, and in some quarters he still is today; to an older generation of immigrants he was a loner who undermined quasi-sacred notions of Islamic communal unity, to others he was a preacher of common sense and creative, independent thinking. He did not initiate or leave behind any kind of *Divus Julius* for example. In some respects Murati was an ambassador of Islam, taking the story and religion of Muhammed to an uncomprehending pagan society, sowing the seeds of a new theological paradigm that would sweep through New Zealand and change the course of Anglo-European civilisation here. His use of language throughout his newspaper interviews is interesting. For all his wounded acerbity the most remarkable aspect of the discourse is his wit. Rather than focus on personal relationships between individuals and issues, most analytically minded thinkers prefer to explain matters by assigning particular categories to individuals, objects, or specific cases and situations; these are usually categories connected to explicit properties. (The behaviour of individuals or objects can then be elucidated or clarified by analytical thinkers through their group characteristic.) Though somewhat sententious and grave, his ordinary discourse abounded with apologues, axioms and handy aphorisms. The words and ideas in these newspaper interviews, and the constant upgrade in vocabulary, strongly suggest Murati was a deeply analytical thinker.

For a while he focused on Middle Eastern cultural and political subjects, articulating his autonomous and well-informed perspectives and opinions on the burning issues of the day without any fear or favour. He was not overly impressed with Western policies towards the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular. Needless to say, his knowledge and comprehension of Muslim culture and history was as intimate as it was authentic, which was not always the case with other commentators. With all the fury and fist shaking of a Welshman scorned, he became a vociferous and robust champion of Palestinian rights. Murati’s somewhat contradictory and complicated dealings with the New Zealand Meat Producers Board and the New Zealand Islamic Meat Management company have often been cited as evidence of his untrustworthiness and illogical nature. In reality though, these unorthodox and occasionally erratic tactics reveal an astute awareness of the subtle intricacies of the subject and the era; in that sense he proved to be a remarkable observer of current events and the strategies he employed cannot be said to reflect naïve, parochial, provincial or

antiquated aspect or impulses, but a sophisticated and nuanced syncretism of Albanian, European, Islamic and New Zealand influences in diplomatic acumen. The student becomes the master. His paradigm for power was far broader than critics recognise; all the evidence and primary sources demonstrate his self-conscious abandonment of the archaic features of Islam (turbans and leather socks) and the adoption of a more modernist, European influenced comprehension of the faith and the role of Muslims in New Zealand. Above all, the quintessential nature and content of the negotiations between the New Zealand Meat Board, the New Zealand Islamic Meat Management company and his own agency, illustrate that in the early 1980s Murati was regarded – as he wished to be – leader of a significant *de facto* sovereign cultural group.



ILLUSTRATION ~ Queensland – the place where he was buried in 2013 Brian Murat in the Muslim cemetery.
ILUSTRACIJA ~ Kvinslend – mjesto u kojem je 2013. godine sahranjen Bajram Murati u muslimanskom mezarju.

One thing we can write about Murati with certainty is that he was not bothered by petty conflicts. He was a man of firm convictions and behaviour: he could talk with an imperious tone, he clearly possessed energy and a fanatical drive to accomplish, and he genuinely believed Islam was the one true faith. A relative orthodox and observant Muslim, his critics made their own sense of his claims. His efforts cannot be understood independent of place. His attitude towards other Muslims softened considerably over time and in fact he was persuaded that social tension would only create further distress. It is clear that, in the end, he could still behave in a rational, sensible and strategic manner. Perhaps his damage to the reputation of the nascent Muslim community was attributable as much to miscalculation as design.

Historians frequently argue the merits of the Great Man theory versus the theory of trends and forces. The two conflicting theories crossed swords in the biographies of Mazhar Krasniqi and Bajram Murati. There was an asymmetry to their relationship that was both voluminous and lucid. Talkative, fiercely ambitious and remarkably energetic, Krasniqi was a peaceful but extremely competent mosque leader with a willingness to take necessary risks and a talent at seizing the opportunities presented by happenstance. His newspaper interviews reflected the tone of a man accustomed to getting his own way: his words could be an Ottoman Sultan-Caliph pronouncing from the Divan.^{▼7} On the other hand, Murati had a streetfighter's eye for sizing up an opponent and dancing around the edges until the other party was exhausted. Private communications with the family suggest he did not really like the limelight and just wanted to be in the background, helping people out. (There is a familial anecdote concerning a New Zealand friend who had helped Bajram Murati in multiple ways, died in poverty without family, so Murati arranged to have him buried in the Auckland Muslim cemetery). At the heart of all this was a competition for social hierarchy, prestige and resources. Both Krasniqi and Murati were very pragmatic and could pirouette on the proverbial sixpence when necessary; they shared a long, irascible and at times scrappy friendship.

Yet, the promising direction his life seemed to be taking, and his accomplishments to date, did not fulfil Murati. He was not a bloke to ruminate much, either on past achievements or bad experiences. Rather, he appears to have focused on the present and the future. He was alert to the fact that his talents were not being fully utilised and in typical fashion he chased his own particular passions with renewed vigour. It was his energy/passion, not his reasoning per se, that made his words so convincing. He presented himself as a respectable citizen and developed a taste for smart business suits – there are few public photographs of the Albanian without a tie and an immaculately ironed shirt (often white). His was a particularly New Zealand biography / career – a bio/career that, in many respects, could only have taken place in this country.

Murati appears to have envisioned his own endeavours as a kind of reflection of the relations between the parameters of ideas and life, perhaps not as a paragon of precision in the positivistic sense. He embraced life's dogged pursuit of its own direction and purpose, and looked beyond the narrow subject of ideas and life, however menial the job or trivial the twists might seem. Consciously or sub-consciously, these are in fact deeply philosophical considerations and reactions, reflecting his early education in Albania where it was widely understood that the mystery and beauty of the *dunya* only emerges through attention, affection, compassion, thought and patience. This type of thinking is simultaneously both moderate and immoderate. It is moderate since it foregrounds innate human weaknesses and the basic limitations and relativity of knowledge as such. It is immoderate since it brings forward the unrestrained singular logic of scientific reason. (Knowledge possesses and manifests its own internal dynamics and challenges: although intended to tame or refute passions, clearly it can itself evolve into a new self-righteous, quasi-religious passion.) For Murati, knowledge was more *poiesis* than *mimesis*, an activity rather than imitation.

^{▼7} Abdullah Drury, 'Mazharbeg: An Albanian in Exile', *Waikato Islamic Studies Review* (June 2020), Vol 6, No 1, pp.4-20.

It is widely argued that, ontologically, human consciousness exists on the boundary of order and chaos. The experience of history has consistently established that the advance and arrival of any new phase in human development, or of the unmistakably defined articulation of any new era in philosophy, has ever been preceded and heralded by a distinguishable undercurrent of sentiment paving and preparing the path for its widespread acceptance. Crude ideas and notions that have circulating and percolating for some time been (and perhaps intuitively germinating in the minds and souls of the common folk), but which have failed to affect a tangible or concise form, find unforeseen enunciation in the mouth one who becomes their acclaimed and identified exponent, around whom all action immediately centres (whether due to better communication skills, more precise intuitive perceptions, to greater capacities of concentrated thought, or to other causes.) Launched thus to the frontline of the progressive advance, often with a studied obliviousness to the new possibilities, he or she assumes leadership (frequently involuntarily to begin with); the individual becomes thus conspicuously recognised as the spearhead of the new paradigm, impelled onward on a tidal wave of aspects and forces (the power of which he or she finds totally unexpected), of which he or she rapidly learns that all but the nominal dominion, a mere shadow of control, has ended or transferred elsewhere altogether. Amongst the eminent names of those who have stepped forward to assume such, and to shoulder the prominence and reciprocal altruism of the leadership of human thought throughout the centuries, there are a small multitude who could be justly cited. It can be asserted that many men have made a substantial contribution but also that it cannot be denied that the mere record of their careers did not always chronicle a special age in the history of their society or land, but of the wider humanity as a species. In multiple cases the final effects of their stimulus for good or evil may even yet have failed to have been made apparent or even properly determined, for it is only when bias and prepossession have been dismissed from the narrative or have dulled over time (when the conflict of passions or war have ceased or abated) that a fair and impartial assessment can be articulated of the work of those outstanding citizens who afford conspicuous targets for the channels of detraction, ever orientated towards those who want to impugn the accepted and putative beliefs and customs of others.

Murati was one such.

Reviewing all the extant historical data – especially the newspaper articles and interviews – with the advantage of hindsight, it is easy to see that Murati was a very misunderstood gentleman at multiple levels. His oratory and rhetoric – lofty but witty – captured the public imagination. Perhaps the secret to his success in the 1950s and 1960s lies not in his reasoning powers or raw intellect as such, but in his innate capacity to learn quickly from those around him – his environment – and adapt accordingly. This ability to integrate insights from diverse interlocutors gave rise to an expanded personal repertoire of social skills. Most Muslim and non-Muslim interlocutors were not overly interested in his personal suffering in the past, or that of the Albanian folk generally, at the hands of dedicated Marxists. However it is also easy to see that he sometimes added to the confusion and animosity by employing that same tactics that had helped him accomplish so much. Therein lies the central paradox of his biography.

Whether one likes or dislikes Murati, one certainly cannot ignore him.

Why, until now, has nobody written a biography of Bajram Murati? Whilst this omission may seem surprising, I think the answer to the conundrum lies in how the history of New Zealand Muslims has been researched and composed. In recent decades, local Muslims have struggled with stereotypes in the public arena, invariably drawn from low-resolution media influences inspired by events and personalities abroad: mad mullahs and psychopathic dictators, bearded terrorists and women in headscarves, and worse. Commentators, historians, journalists, politicians and psychologists from Auckland to Dunedin, sought to identify and pigeonhole a specific Muslim ‘mind’ or personality; in part this was to separate the followers of Islam from the rest of humanity.^{▼8} Within this environment, there was little room, interest or opportunity for a full profile, let alone a critical biography, of individual New Zealand Muslim community leaders. Portrayals were limited to diabolical sensationalism. In the 1980s and 1990s, authoritative accounts of authoritarian Islam and Muslims were highly influential in this country. In such analyses, Muslims were a monolith – thoughtless robotic automatons who possessed no particular free will and carried out orders from an alien religious clergy estranged from modernity and reality. In this period, to the extent that New Zealand Muslims and their leadership were mentioned at all in loosely positive tones, it was in quaint depictions of exotica – Ramadan and Eid festivals populated by curious foreigners in strange clothes and eating spicy but outlandish foods and so forth. How to write up a serious analysis of passive cogs in such bizarre machinery, or indeed, why?

Following the 11 September affair in the USA, this study undertook a radical sea change. Instead of a monolith, scholars drew attention to the chaotic and fragmented nature of ‘the Muslim world’, one in which individuals, families, tribes, institutions and multiple hierarchies vied for opportunity and hegemony. Commentators now argued that these structural aspects better elucidated the real dynamics of Muslim societies and immigrant groups. New academic paradigms emerged, suggesting a more complex picture: Islam was theologically very proximate to Christianity and most Muslims were very comfortable with Christians, other factions less so. Given the new significance attached to domestic community leaders, it now made sense for the authorities and media to liaise with local Muslim figures, and undertake biographical studies where pertinent. Since 2001, most government and media reports have emphasized the views of local Muslims over overseas voices.

Two other elements of western scholarship on native Muslim communities still needed change to make a critical biography of Murati possible. For decades (centuries?), western researchers devoted little attention to this religious minority so there is a dearth of expertise. Language barriers persist and the archival material is difficult to locate – this effectively keeps all but the most determined historians from explaining this path. Moreover, when they did, they naturally focused on the largest ethnic minority groups (the Asians, the Arabs and the Africans) rather than the Albanians. Spokespersons for the Asian Muslim community have

▼8 See: Abdur Rahman Khan, ‘Opinion: The Shield of Islam’, *Listener*, 24 October 1987, p.58.

provided much of the available commentary in recent years: the history of Asian Muslim immigrants in New Zealand became synonymous with the history of all Muslims in New Zealand. Murati and the Albanians were virtually forgotten. Similarly, before 2001, scholars downplayed the role of internal ethnic tensions within the community – blinded by the earlier myth of a socio-religious monolith. This was true in spite of the loud evidence for Albanian and Bosnian participation in leadership circles and key decisions at critical points in this wider communal narrative. Following 2001, scholars have been reminded of the potency of ethnic passions and prejudices within faiths. Observers now began to focus attention on the role of ethnic differences in shaping New Zealand Muslim community affairs. In the process, they documented variations in Muslim communal customs and practices, yet in the absence of a serious studied monograph, factual errors about the Albanian Muslims are inevitable.



ILLUSTRATION ~ Albanian and Bosnian participation in leadership circles and key decisions at critical points was not negligible in the larger communal narrative of New Zealand.

By the 21st century, it was high time for a critical biography of Bajram Murati. Time has allowed scholars to access hitherto restricted government papers. At the same time, Murati's activities and affairs proved a compelling topic for a generation of researchers preoccupied with ethnicity and race. Given the upsurge in ethnic cleansing and violence abroad, the pathos of Murati's career as a local Muslim community leader appeared apposite to current events. Then, too, our era has been more attuned to the significance of individual autonomy, agency and responsibility, not to mention human rights and civil liberties. Although most commentators will continue to focus on the broader outlines and features of the wider Muslim population of New Zealand and the associated structural processes that shaped it, a biography of Bajram Murati underscores the role of agency, Men like Murati – with his personal experiences and opinions, his intense ambitions and passions – mattered. A decade after his death, a full scale biography seems relevant and timely.

Conclusion

this paper has attempted to illustrate the nature of some of the communal factionalism that affected the Auckland Muslim populace over the 1970s and 1980s following a focus on the biography of one community leader, an Albanian refugee named Bajram Murati.

So what can one say of Bajram Murati's final legacy? It is important to note from the start that he possessed no *animus dominandi* himself and was largely motivated by very real contemporary political and economic concerns. He wanted to attract folk to Islam by discussing and conveying the inherent truth of its axiomatic precepts. This essay has been a biographical analysis of a trailblazing Muslim community leader whose remarkable life saw him champion the rights of Muslims and confront multiple social boundaries, all the while staying true to his beliefs and his heart. Living at a time of great political violence and much socio-economic upheaval, with death and uncertainty around every corner, the man possessed a remarkable and irrepressible spirit of perseverance that leaves even the more timid observers today enthralled and inspired. Murati – whose name variously means 'desired', 'wanted', 'wished for', 'yearned' or 'goal' in classical Arabic – was a pragmatic political refugee, so his periodic frustrations with the impractical customs of his Muslim brethren should be taken in the context of his responsibility as a community leader. However, the fact that he often went out of his comfort zone gives us a glimpse into the multi-ethnic, many-faceted religion of Islam in Auckland over the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, that one seldom sees portrayed in Anglophone media (even within Islamic circles.) The Albanian was a product of his time and despite any broad theological objections he often had nice things to say about other Muslims, and was quick to give credit and respect where it was deserved. It is something of a cliché to write that he was a man of strong personal faith and never wavered in his trust in divine providence or in his own destiny, but for Murati, this

rings true. Despite his many ups and downs, his biography leaves for posterity a lucid and vivid account of a life well-lived that is still a priceless resource for modern scholars and that is a lesson all contemporary readers might take to heart.

One of my core findings is the remarkable conformity and unity of deliberations and discourse that persisted from the early 1960s to the 1980s. I believe this consistency allows for a holistic reading of the sources, though one does perceive minor differences in emphasis. This period was marked by two concurrent trends. First, whilst it was an era marked by curious novel communal divisions, it was also one of maturation and consolidation within New Zealand Muslim institutions and practices, in the form of the establishment and growth of important religious communities and organisations. Second, it was a period that set the stage for two important historic developments: the growth of Islam in New Zealand, and rise of the halal meat export trade as a feature of this society. In truth, with the evidence available to date, historians will probably never be able to penetrate the depths of Murati's psyche to fully comprehend the calculations, inclinations and proclivities that led him to his highly idiosyncratic conclusions and his behaviour towards other Muslim community figures. His actions and ideas were shaped by his historical context and personal motivations. From his various media interviews, we see a keen interest in commercial affairs but also religious matters. His concerns and quandaries were both numerous and current. It is from texts like these that one observes both the vogue that inspired quasi-spiritual objectives, but also the *realpolitik* that dictated his business concerns. Having stated that point, it must be noted that for all his hyper-articulate intelligence and piety, the director-general of the New Zealand Council of the World Muslim Congress never bored anyone with lengthy philosophical or theological pontifications or musings about the aesthetic preconditions and principles of the mind's receptivity to duty or other complex human passions. Even if the metaphysical quest for tranquillity and longing for communal unity eluded Murati, or failed to satisfy him, he was still able to avoid the humanizing implications of religious imagery and sentiment. At no point in his life did he ever fall apart emotionally in a poignant self-exploration of the loss of humanity in a crisis. He certainly never wrote a book, pretending to rival Immanuel Kant or Dostoyevsky in profundity of insight. So what was Murati's big contribution? What might he have undertaken to assuage his critics?

The man remains difficult to summarize. All this scholarly attention would be a source of great satisfaction to him. His passionate love for his native Albania and his adopted New Zealand were two of only a few consistent themes of his life. One cannot easily demarcate Murati's spoken words and comprehension of events from his media interviews – they are interdependent and inescapably connected. In multiple newspaper interviews, he was always homesick and his faith that somehow the Albanians and Albania would be free of Socialism, and would fulfil some special role in the working out of the world's destiny never wavered. These sentiments only burned brighter as the years progressed, although trying to untangle these authoritative notions but differing statements and narratives is challenging. It appears to me that it was his enthusiasm to work hard and take real risks, challenging the status quo and extant worldviews in

order to improve himself, his standard of living and that of the folk around him. He never used his horrid life experiences during WWII to sink into a self-indulgent alcoholic oblivion. With marvellous oratory, he repeatedly stressed the nobility of Islam and Muslims, their cause and valour. (Although, the notion that Allah guided Murati, comes from reversing the logic to determine a causality from an occurrence. In other words, the contemporary reader must reason that the Albanian never undertook any important activity in the public domain without explicit instructions from above – this seems both unlikely and credulous.) At the heart of his leadership and message was his strict insistence on the concept of unity: the unity of god, community and humanity. By disregarding many social conventions and challenging his place in New Zealand society, he set an example for striving towards excellence that others could follow. He persevered despite the fact that he started with nothing, possessed no education or significant ties to the societal elite (and indeed, adhered to a minority religion.) His biography is worth researching as it illustrates the extent and limits of individual assertions to autonomy within New Zealand Muslim communal institutions which was also claimed or contended by other community figures. It can be difficult to strike a sensible balance between competing social forces and ideological issues in an era of economic growth and political inertia, and the available information is often garbled and embellished. However, being a gifted and innovative thinker, Murati was more than capable of reconciling the conflicting worldviews and philosophies that prevailed around him. Unsurprisingly, his views on God, creation, ethics, politics and so forth, seem to be at one level very traditional and conciliatory, and at another level, unconventional and uncompromising. His was a catholic Islam. He advocated the rights and duties of individuals and highlighted the significance of good conduct and character in the formation of a healthy society. His approach to Islam was theologically sophisticated and nuanced, but socially and culturally ‘progressive’. Murati repeatedly stressed the significance of material advancement, but never at the expense of spiritual development and growth; he expected Muslims to balance the two aspects. It seems that, despite his efforts to break free from the ubiquitous philosophical and religious dogmatism of the era – in his efforts to reconcile the prevailing social and political conventions – he only succeeded in oversimplifying very complicated issues and thus only really succeeded in boxing himself into another corner.

Above all, commentators are divided in their opinions of Bajram Murati: a wise and innovative community leader, or a dubious poseur? In part, verdicts were informed by personal prejudices and how individuals interpreted his motives and accomplishments, not to mention his portentous public mumblings. Murati’s zenith was in the 1970s. His leadership was powerful and sincere, empathetic and genuine, and he represented the best of the Muslim community; flawed yet resilient, this biography tells the story of a man formed by custom and tradition, compelled by innovation and piety, and driven and guided by an instinct for enterprise and justice. In any event, it is important to note that some observers questioned his religious sensibilities and suggested they were primarily guided more by political expediency than genuine spiritual beliefs and values. (His biography is also a reminder, if one was needed, that Islam does not compel or

reference / references

ABDYLI, SABIT R. *Bijtë e shqipes në tokën e reve të bardha*. Auckland: Universal Print & Management; 2010.

DRURY, ABDULLAH. *Islam in New Zealand: The First Mosque*. Christchurch; 2006.

DRURY, ABDULLAH. „Mahometans on the Edge of Colonial Empire: Antipodean Experiences“, *Islam and Christian – Muslim Relations*, 2018;29(1):71–87.

KOLIG, ERICH. *New Zealand's Muslims and Multiculturalism*. Leiden: Brill; 2009.

represent an imperative for Muslims to kill all non-Muslims, or lay waste to their properties. Murati's repeated and unambiguous statements that his religious mission was basically pacifist has received surprisingly little attention given that it flies in the face of popular prejudice about the allegedly violent nature of Islam.) There is no evidence that BM possessed a private lust for power or status, but rather than appreciation for the fact that – since New Zealand lacked a supreme Islamic hierarchy such as a native ulema that could adjudicate communal disputations – he would be obliged to resort to a kind of self-help strategy common to other religious minorities in the country: assuming responsibility for their own confessional welfare, the congregation provided their members with some basic level of theological surety, stability and intellectual security. Murati felt that Islam could only survive if it mastered such realities and tried to maximise autonomy, agency, and even influence in the wider society. Even his detractors acknowledged his commitment to his family and his personable qualities, not to mention his incredible strategic talents with public media such as newspapers. Murati frequently invited friends, family and work colleagues to dinner at his private family home and showered some with presents and gifts. At a personal level, the genial Albanian was known to have been well-mannered and fair in all his dealings with others, and famously courteous and modest. He was certainly a model of reciprocal altruism, a positive aspect in qualitative leadership. Whatever faults or misjudgements can be laid at Murati's door, there is no doubt that he was a key figure in Auckland Muslim communal history during this era, larger than life in many ways and a colourful character. Seen in the context of a politically tumultuous and religiously contentious era and location, Murati's ideas about tribalism, identity, religion and history are even more relevant to pressing, modern concerns. His biography encompassed many dramatic developments and issues, from the growth of the Auckland Muslim population to the evolution of the tourism and hospitality industries. In truth, the menu was rich, vivid and varied.

I think this is a testament to the calibre of his character, his personal generosity, his hard work ethic, and above all, his unique graciousness.

SHEPARD, WILLIAM E.. „The Muslim Community in New Zealand“. *Indians in New Zealand*, K. N. Tiwari (ed.) Wellington: Price Milburn; 1980., str. 139–162.

SHEPARD, WILLIAM E.. „Muslims in New Zealand“. *The Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 1982;4(1–2):60–81.

„Bajram (Brian) Murati“. *Rocket Scienc*. Decembar 2022., str. 13–18.