

Protecting Camden's rural heritage: Rural discourses in the debate over a proposed Islamic school in Camden, NSW

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This article discursively analyses the ways a rural identity was communicated in the fight against the construction of a proposed Islamic school in Camden, Western Sydney. The Islamic school, to be called Camden College, was originally proposed by the Quranic Society in October 2007. The proposal met with immediate opposition from local community members, and was widely reported in the local newspaper, the Camden Advertiser. The debate surrounding the development also received national and international news media attention. The Islamic school proposal was eventually denied by the NSW Land and Environment Court in June 2009. During these proceedings, Camden politicians, residents, and a protest group called the Camden/Macarthur Residents' Group appropriated discourses of Camden as a rural town, generating ideas about heritage and identity as justification for denying the Islamic school. However, in contrast, similar ideas were also used, although in different ways, by other politicians, residents, journalists of the Camden Advertiser (through editorial writing) and members of the Quranic Society to defend the school proposal and to challenge pre-conceived ideas about identity and belonging in Camden. This paper explores the distinct ways this rural discourse was drawn on by a range of discursive participants, for very different purposes, in the Camden Advertiser's coverage of the Islamic school debate.

Introduction

The case study research this article is based on includes a critique of local newspaper reporting by the *Camden Advertiser* on a proposed Islamic school in Camden, a suburb of South-Western Sydney in the Australian state of New South Wales. Camden, which is approximately 60 kilometres South-West from the Sydney CBD, prides itself on its heritage identity. According to the Camden Historical Society, "Since the early days of settlement in Australia the Camden District was the first destination for hundreds of pioneering families starting a new life" (2012, no page). The township also traces its rural history back to the late 1700s, when John Macarthur founded a sheep stud in the area which would become Camden (Camden Historical Society, 2012). The *Camden Advertiser* is a local newspaper, published weekly by Fairfax Regional Media. On its website, the *Advertiser* also highlights Camden's rural heritage, claiming that "Today Camden still remains the birthplace of the Australian wool, wheat and wine industries" (Fairfax Media, 2016).

The proposed Islamic school, to be called Camden College, was instigated by the Quranic Society in October 2007. The proposal was met by immediate and intense opposition from the local community, and a formalised opposition group, the Camden/Macarthur Residents' Group, emerged to voice their discontent. The school debate received national and international news media attention due to accusations that racism and religious intolerance were driving the opposition. The school was rejected by Camden Council in May 2008, and a challenge mounted to the NSW Land and Environment Court was also rejected in June 2009. The *Camden Advertiser* published 323 articles on the debate, including news stories, editorials and letters to the editor.

Literature Review and Methodology

For the purposes of this research, discourse is defined by Paltridge as "an approach to the analysis of language that looks at patterns of language across texts as well as the social and cultural contexts in which the texts occur" (2006, p. 1). Discourse is interested in how some ideologies are embodied in texts, while others are concealed (Kilby et al, 2013). The articles chosen for analysis comprise a longitudinal case

study, wherein the media texts were chosen through theoretical sampling (Altheide, 1996). A search within the *Camden Advertiser*, using the NewsBank database, using the search terms “Islamic” AND “school” returned 216 results. Using the list from the NewsBank database search, the researcher visited the Camden Council Library, and used their archives to locate those texts, as well as an additional 107 texts, bringing the total news items to 323. The decision was made to end the longitudinal case study on 1 July 2008, as after this date the proposed Islamic school was only referenced in passing, and there were no further articles discussing the future of the Quranic Society’s plans for the site. A content and discourse analysis was then conducted on the collected news items.

Research into discursive representations of Islam in Western media, and Australian media more specifically, has repeatedly shown that Islam has been treated unfairly, with Muslim communities often portrayed as strange, inferior and even threatening to Australian society (Abu-Fadil, 2005; Akbarzadeh and Smith, 2005; Al-Natour, 2010; Aly, 2007; Dreher, 2003; Dunn, 2001, 2004; Dunn et al, 2007; Hafez, 2002; Kabir, 2006; McGregor, 2013; Manning, 2003; Pederson et al, 2009; Said, 2003, 1997; Saniotis, 2004). In the case of the proposed Islamic school in Camden, part of the anti-Muslim sentiment was expressed through the perpetuation of a rural identity for the township. Orientalist theorist Edward Said has argued that identity is constructed in a way that “involves establishing opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us’” (Said, 2003, p. 332). In a similar strain, Robins argues that “identity today finds itself in rejection; it hardly has a positive basis any longer” (1996, p.81). Both Said and Robins therefore claim that identity is almost exclusively built as an opposition to something else, a “not” relation, for example “not-Australian”. This paper argues that in the Camden case, the Quranic Society proposing the school and the related Muslim community have been constructed as being ‘not-rural’ and therefore as not belonging in Camden.

Rural Discourses and Politicians

The rural discourse was utilised by politicians to both support and oppose the development. For example, Camden Labor MP Geoff Corrigan used the previous approvals of Christian and state schools in rural zones to support the proposed Islamic school. He said:

I’m sure the majority of Camden residents will welcome additional educational facilities in our area as they welcomed all other schools in rural areas... As I’m sure everyone knows, the establishment of schools in rural zones is allowable and that was shown by Macarthur Anglican School and Camden High School (Corrigan in Bowie 10 October 2007, p. 3).

In this example, Corrigan attempted to use this precedent to demonstrate that educational facilities and rural land could be compatible. The language choices appear to have been made carefully, with Corrigan not using the terms “Islamic school” to highlight the religious group establishing the school, but instead simply says “educational facilities”, which could be considered to be a more inclusive description. However, it must be noted that this omission may have occurred as a result of moderation of the content by the journalist. In either case, the resulting more inclusive sentiment is evident.

However, other politicians, such as Macarthur Labor candidate Nick Bleasdale did not agree with Mr Corrigan. Mr Bleasdale was quoted as saying:

Let me make it clear. I’m totally opposed to the development of the new Islamic school and the community has my full support on the issue. Make no mistake, this issue has nothing to do with race. It’s based on the fact that such a large development will undoubtedly have an impact on our semi-rural way of life, especially without the local infrastructure to support it (Bleasdale in Kinsella 14 November 2007, p. 10).

Contrary to Mr Corrigan, Mr Bleasdale does specifically name the school as being “Islamic”, highlighting this point of difference from other schools in the area, and further implying that this school would negatively affect the “semi-rural” identity of Camden.

A third case in which the identity of Camden is called upon, although without reference to the “rural”, is by Jim Saleem, Party Chairman of the Australia First Party. He talks about the need to preserve Camden’s character and his party called “on ‘local activists’ to ‘fight to preserve the identity of Camden’ but did not specify what that was” (no author 5 December 2007, p. 11). Despite his ambiguity in this statement in regards to Camden’s identity, the fact that this statement was made during the highly controversial debate about the Islamic school, could suggest that preserving Camden’s identity involved rejecting the development proposal.

The rural discourse was also employed whilst politicians were reinforcing the official procedures of the planning development process. Both Camden Mayor Chris Patterson and Liberal MP Charlie Lynn highlighted the importance of focusing on planning issues, however, Mayor Patterson said that “on the school application our heritage manger will probably be involved as well” (Patterson in Kinsella 7 November 2007, p. 9) and Mr Lynn said he would “be speaking ‘purely on issues of planning’ such as traffic, infrastructure, the location of the site on a flood plain and heritage values” (Bowie 12 December 2007, p. 11). It is interesting that these two politicians both considered heritage to be an important planning issue. As politicians are usually seen to speak on behalf of their communities, and reflect their concerns, it is therefore very likely that the community of Camden also consider their rural heritage to be an integral component of their town’s identity.

Rural Discourses in Official Documents

The idea of Camden as a rural locality was referenced in official communications and documents, with these documents eventually being used to refuse the school application in the NSW Land and Environment Court. When the school proposal was rejected by the Camden Council in May 2008, a submission made by the Department of Primary Industries stated that “the proposal encroached on rural resource lands contrary to the State Government’s Metropolitan Strategy” (Bowie 28 May 2008, p. 2). Firstly, the fact that this submission was from the Department of Primary Industries contributed increased authority to the statement; as a government department, the Department of Primary Industries is an institution which issues officially endorsed and privileged statements. Secondly, the reference above to the State Government’s Metropolitan Strategy draws on the authority of government documentation and policy, which could be seen to legitimise the council’s decision to reject the school proposal.

The State Government’s Metropolitan Strategy is also referenced again, this time by Sue Morris, the councils’ director of development and environment, who was defending the involvement of the Department of Primary Industries in the discussion. She “said it was normal to refer development applications ‘for an activity in rural land’ to the department for comment” (Bowie 28 May 2008, p. 2). Again, the rural nature of Camden is drawn on here as the reason for the government authorities to become involved in the school application, seemingly raising the importance of the debate. Additionally, when discussed by Sue Morris, the Metropolitan Strategy is supported by another official document, The Draft South West Subregional Strategy. The naming of both these policies as “strategy” suggests careful planning and foresight by the government, which again implies political and institutional authority, and also trust in the plan. Sue Morris was quoted as saying “The Metropolitan Strategy and Draft South West Subregional Strategy identified the importance of those rural lands [in the Cawdor Valley] given that we’re losing a lot of our market gardens [in the South West Growth Centre]” (Morris in Bowie 28 May 2008, p. 2). This statement could be seen to demonstrate that the concerns about the loss of rural land were not just community concerns, but concerns raised by government, and cemented in policy.

In April 2009, one week after the NSW Land and Environment Court hearing on the proposed school and while a final judgement had still not been made, the Camden Advertiser ran the following headline: “Islamic school hinges on rural traits” (Bowie 29 April 2009, p. 4-5). This headline demonstrates the integral role that the rural nature of Camden played in the debate. The article goes on to explain that

while Camden's rural heritage was prominent in the broader public discourse, it was also firmly embedded in the relevant legislation:

The land [the Quranic Society] has chosen for the school is zoned rural 1(a) under the council's local environment plan (LEP), which governs what can and can't be built in the area. Last week's four day battle in the Land and Environment Court focused on three objectives that a development in that zone must meet to be approved. The objectives are 'to provide suitable land for agricultural use', 'to enable compatible forms of development...in keeping with the rural character of the locality and carried out in an environmentally sensitive manner', and 'to ensure that development does not detract from the existing rural character of the area or create unreasonable or uneconomic demands for provision or extension of public amenities or services' (Bowie 29 April 2009, p. 4).

This article references the policy documents of the Local Environment Plan, to draw on the official planning policy and the authority associated with this. Journalist Alicia Bowie goes on to quote the objectives from the LEP, highlighting their importance to the Land and Environment Court in discussing them, but also bringing this official discourse to the attention of the *Camden Advertiser* readers, who had presumably not engaged with the policy themselves.

The rural zoning of the land the Quranic Society had purchased was the reason that Land and Environment Court commissioner Graham Brown eventually denied the school proposal. "In his judgment, Mr Brown said the school did not meet two objectives of the land's rural zoning so the school application had to be refused" (Bowie 3 June 2009, p. 1). In a summary of Mr Brown's statement, it was reported that "The size and design of the school did not fit with the rural character of the area surrounding the school site" (no author 3 June 2009, p. 4). From these quotes, it could be argued that the dominance of Camden's rural identity in both the public and official discourses led to the rejection of the school application.

Rural Discourses and "Othering"

Some residents of Camden formed a group in direct opposition to the proposed Islamic school, called the Camden/Macarthur Residents' Group (CMRG). This group was formed after a protest meeting about the development in 2007. The formalisation of this group with a president, Emil Sremchevich, who maintained a strong voice in the news media discourse, as well as a media spokesman, Andrew Wannet, contributed to the authority lent to their opinions, due to the privileged nature of statements by a formal entity. In one 2008 article, Mr Sremchevich said: "[Camden] is a beautiful little town and I'll support any place in this country which wants to save some of its character" (Sremchevich in Bowie 23 January 2008, p. 11). Repeated here there is the suggestion that had been made by other residents and politicians; that Camden's rural identity needed to be saved from the negative effect an Islamic school would have on the area.

The CMRG's rural discourse was also frequently mixed with a discourse of "the Other" whereby the Muslim community was portrayed as different and threatening to the Camden community. For example, "Media spokesman Andrew Wannet said the group would object to the school on environmental, heritage, planning and 'cultural and lifestyle' grounds" (Bowie 5 December 2007, p. 11). In this quote we see the issue of "heritage" raised again, but also "cultural and lifestyle grounds". This is despite numerous assertions by CMRG that they were only objecting to the school on planning issues, and that opposition was not related to the religion of the school proponents. In another case, Mr Wannet wrote a letter to the editor, in which he said: "Camden people (those living in and outside of Camden) have fought long and hard on issues that affect the town whether they are Muslim issues or not. You only have to see Camden's enviable ensemble of country town architecture and rural landscapes" (Wannet 19 December 2007, p. 8). It could be argued that this letter suggested that the fact that the Quranic Society is a Muslim group, making the school a "Muslim issue", is at least part of the reason the CMRG is fighting the proposal. The letter also seems to suggest that Camden people have fought change before in order to maintain their rural identity, and have always succeeded in the past, and will do so again in this case. This metaphor of the

fight is continued in early 2008, when the CMRG “sent out a leaflet to Camden households urging residents to ‘join the fight to keep Camden rural’” (Bowie 2 April 2008, p. 16). The phrasing of “the fight to keep Camden rural” suggests that the rural identity is something the Quranic Society is trying to take away from the town. In actuality, as discussed below, the Quranic Society expressed that the rural nature of the area is one of the reasons it selected the site and therefore does not wish to change that.

Camden residents were given a strong voice in the *Camden Advertiser* through the letters to the editor and website comments published on the proposed Islamic school. It is important to note here that whilst letters to the editor are often viewed as being the individual’s own words and a more direct reflection of the community’s sentiment, they are still selected, moderated and positioned by editors, which means they may not be accurate expressions of actual events and/or public sentiment. In the published letters, many residents chose to highlight Camden’s rural character and identity when opposing the school, suggesting that the development would detrimentally change the rural nature of the town. One such letter stated:

Watch out, people of Camden. Once the school is approved the face of Camden will change forever. First a school, then a mosque, then shops with signs you cannot read. For those who remember, Lakemba, Greenacre and Bankstown did not always look as they do now. They were once a population of everyday Australians who remembered the days the land was paddocks and fields (Girona 24 October 2007, p. 2).

To support the idea that Camden will be irrevocably changed by the Islamic school, Girona perpetuates the common fear of “the dreaded Lakemba”. A number of letters to the editor drew on the example of Lakemba, which has become widely associated with the large Muslim Lebanese community settled in the larger Bankstown area. Dunn, Klocker and Salabay argue that “the media depiction of Lakemba has been part of a racialization process identified elsewhere, in which Muslims are constructed as fanatical, intolerant, militant, fundamentalist, misogynist and alien (Dunn 2001)” (2007, p. 576). This reference to Lakemba, and the changes to paddocks and fields, could therefore suggest that there is an incompatibility between rural Camden and the Muslim “Other”.

Many other letters also suggested that the school would lead to negative effects for the Camden township. Narellan resident Preston Rowles was quoted as saying “Camden is still a country town but it won’t be for long” (Rowles in McCowen 21 May 2008, p. 9), while Cawood asked “What will happen to our sleepy township? What will happen to the traditional country feel that the main street of Camden brings?” (2 April 2008, p. 24). Both of these letters seem to suggest that the Islamic school would somehow change the identity of Camden, which is also what Bray feared. Bray’s letter is addressed to “State MP Geoff Corrigan and Camden councillors” (Bray 5 March 2008, p. 4), and suggests:

in not too many years from now, if Camden does have an Islamic school for more than 1200 students built on prime rural land and Camden township is no longer identifiable as a town with history and rural character, and traffic congestion and the resultant pollution is intolerable, you may feel the need to say ‘I’m sorry’ to your residents and voters (Bray 5 March 2008, p. 4).

Bray directly pinpointed the changing identity of Camden as an area of concern, and a reason to deny the school proposal.

Other letters from residents focused on the idea that the school would not benefit Camden. O’Brien asked “How does permitting a large school with 1200 students primarily drawn from suburbs up to an hour away enhance Camden’s rural heritage and benefit the local community?” (O’Brien 31 October 2007, p. 10). The same resident one week later wrote again: “Is it an asset to the rural area it is situated in? No. There is no reason for this school to be in this location. Why would anyone build such an expensive facility so remotely from the majority of people who would use it?” (O’Brien 7 November 2007, p. 4). These letters not only lament the potential loss of a rural identity, but also seem to suggest that there was not an already established Muslim community in Camden. By suggesting that the school is “so remote” from the Muslim community who would use the school, these letters could potentially work to further create boundaries between a Camden “us” and a Muslim “them”.

Later in the school debate, after the council had made the initial decision to reject the proposed development, residents began to write letters that reflected on the negative attention Camden was getting in national and even international news media. Even the journalists of the *Camden Advertiser* acknowledged that “Camden is no longer known only for its quiet country town atmosphere” (no author 4 June 2008, p. 1). However, some residents did not respond well to such criticism. A resident identified as “Get over your selves” wrote: “I bet you don’t even come from this area and you all should be ashamed of yourselves for calling a rural Aussie town racist” (Get over your selves 25 June 2008, p. 4). This letter to the editor is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it plays off the idea of belonging, in that it seems to suggest that if you aren’t from the area, if you aren’t a “true Camdenite”, then you can’t have an opinion on the debate. “Get over your selves” is, here, trying to limit the voices who are authorised to participate in the discourse. Secondly, the idea of being ashamed of “calling a rural Aussie town racist” seems to imply that “real” rural towns can’t be racist. This concept can be linked back to ideas about identity and belonging, suggesting that if the community of Camden is rural then anything that is different to what already exists must be not-rural and therefore problematic.

Rural Discourses and Inclusiveness

However, not all residents who wrote letters to the editor to the *Camden Advertiser* shared these fears about the effect of the proposed Islamic school on Camden’s rural identity. Some were more concerned about other negative identities Camden was being labelled with as a result of the widespread news media coverage of the debate. Lysaught wrote: “If people are so concerned about maintaining Camden’s image, why are they trying so hard to base that image on racist ideologies?” (14 November 2007, p. 18). This letter also hinted at some of the other reasons being used to oppose the school, including the alleged absence of an existing local Muslim community, the idea that the Muslim community should “fit in” with the already established local schools, and that Islam is incompatible with the Australian way of life. In light of such racist ideas being spread through the letters to the editor, Brumby asked those who want to preserve Camden’s identity, “What exactly is it you want to preserve? Parochialism, fear and prejudice?” (Brumby 14 November 2007, p. 18). While these letters did not actually question the rural identity being constructed for Camden during the debate, they do seem to suggest that there are other, more negative, identities being constructed concurrently in the news media discourse.

This idea of other, multiple identities for the township of Camden is supported by another Camden resident who wrote a letter to the *Camden Advertiser*. Youdale wrote neither for nor against the school proposal, but specifically addressed the ideas of Camden’s rural heritage, writing: “Am I in favour of the Islamic school? Not particularly. Am I against it? Not particularly. Am I for or against preserving some idyllic notion of a rural Arcadia that we call Camden? Neither. Change is inevitable” (12 December 2007, p. 20). Youdale here acknowledges the rural history of Camden, and seems to suggest that although this may remain part of the Camdenites’ identity, identities also evolve over time, and that this heritage is not a good enough reason in and of itself to reject the school proposal.

This idea of changing identity is supported in June 2008 by two powerful letters to the editor published in support of the Islamic school proposal. The first of these was published on 11 June 2008, and was written by 40 Camden residents in collaboration. In this letter, the community members acknowledged the rural aspects of Camden’s identity, but also highlighted the need to progress that identity. They wrote: “We are proud of Camden’s rural colonial heritage. It was once a country town but there has been significant change and this is part of a continuum” (B. Shipp et al 11 June 2008, p. 21). This letter was supported and reiterated one week later by another group of 22 Camden residents, who stated that they wanted to support the sentiments of the citizens who had written the previous week. In a very similar statement, they said: “We are proud of Camden’s rural colonial heritage, but recognise that it is becoming part of greater Sydney, as a result of state and local government’s planning” (Roberts-Everett et al 18 June 2008, p. 4). It could be argued that, similarly to Youdale, these two letters to the editor, and the 62 residents involved, argued for a more modern identity for Camden, which acknowledged Camden’s rural past, but also integrates the changing nature of the town, including the growing Muslim community.

This growing community was formally represented by the Quranic Society who had a small voice in the *Camden Advertiser's* coverage of the Islamic school debate. Spokesman Jeremy Bingham attempted to address community concerns, and promoted the rural identity of Camden as a reason the school should be supported. He was quoted as saying: “They want their school to be in a rural area because it is the best kind of place to have a school. It’s best for the children and also best in terms of low impact on neighbours” (Bingham in Bowie 17 October 2007, p. 3). In this way, Mr Bingham did not attempt to dispute the rural identity that the Camden residents and politicians have established for their town. Instead, it could be argued that he used this discourse as a point of commonality, suggesting that the same reasons Camdenites love their town are the reasons the Quranic Society want to build their school there. As such, it could be seen that Mr Bingham attempted to break down the perceived differences between the local community and the Muslim community, through their mutual desire for the rural life.

In addition to the Quranic Society’s use of the rural discourse in a more inclusive manner, Alicia Bowie, journalist and occasional guest editor of the *Camden Advertiser*, also drew on the heritage argument, in order to call for unity and understanding. She referred to letters to the editor which claim that the Islamic school and the Muslim community that would use the school are incompatible with the Australian way of life and the need to maintain our Australian (and/or Christian, depending on the letter) heritage. This was a view put forward by a number of letters as one argument against the school. Bowie, however, suggested that maintaining the Australian heritage is about inclusion. She said:

Within discussion I’m hearing a lot about maintaining our Australian heritage. I always thought a big chunk of that heritage was the Aussie spirit of a fair go for all and mateship. But going off what has been said on our website and in letters, that mateship and fair go only applies to people with the same religion or race as ours (Bowie 9 January 2008, p. 4).

It could be argued that Bowie was attempting to remove the smokescreen of rural and heritage identity being used by some residents to oppose the school, by implying that there are some racist or discriminatory attitudes in the community. In this way, Bowie appears to challenge some of the dominant uses of the rural identity to oppose the Islamic school development, and instead suggests an alternation Australian identity based on equality through the “fair go for all”.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the controversial proposed Islamic school development in Camden, NSW was debated with frequent reference to the rural nature of the township. Some Camden politicians, and residents, as well as members of the Quranic Society and *Camden Advertiser* journalists appropriated rural discourses to challenge pre-conceived ideas about identity and belonging in Camden. However, other politicians, many residents and the main school opposition group, the Camden/Macarthur Residents’ Group, were able to more effectively and more frequently draw on these discourses of Camden as a rural town to generate ideas about heritage and identity to justify rejecting the Islamic school proposal. As such, Camden’s rural identity was frequently established as being in opposition to the Islamic school proposal, and in a larger sense, as incompatible with the growing Muslim community in the area.

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