Muslim Presence in Alberta:

Contribution and Challenges

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The Ismaili Jamat Khana and Centre, Calgary, Alberta. Photo by Navroz Mitha, provided by Fiaz Merani.

Muslims are being represented in the North American media through a myopic stereotypical lens that lacks both breadth of understanding and depth of knowledge that Muslims comprise some 1.4 billion souls who live in almost all habitable corners of the world among diverse cultures (Kassam *et al* 2002; Karim 2000). It is not surprising that this 1 400-year-old faith has a history of contact with the Americas. Recent scholarship indicates that Zheng He, the Chinese Admiral of the Ming Emperor Zhu Di and a devout Muslim, made a voyage of exploration to the Americas in 1421 when he circumnavigated the World. He predates Christopher Columbus to the Americas by 70 years (Menzies 2002). The historical connection and dependence of Christopher Columbus or Giovani Caboto (John Cabot) on science and navigation of Muslim civilizations remains virtually unexplored in most textbooks used in schools. For instance, the reliance of Columbus on the astronomical, geographical, maritime, and philosophical sciences of the day came primarily from scholars who were Muslim. Despite being a Christian

living during the intolerance of the Spanish Inquisition, he openly acknowledged his dependence upon Muslim intellectuals for his knowledge (Chapman 1992; Colón 1992). Nonetheless, this is largely unknown to most Canadians, leaving us in relative ignorance of the contributions of Muslim civilizations to humanity in general and the settlement of the Americas in particular.

There is an even more direct link between the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Muslims caused by the ostensible discovery of the "New World" in 1492. When Columbus "sailed the ocean blue" and landed in the Americas, he thought he had found India. He maintained this belief till his death. The diverse Native peoples of the Americas suddenly were cast into one monolithic rubric called the "Indian," much like Muslims in the media today. The cultural and linguistic diversity of the Aboriginal peoples of the Americas was largely ignored. The year 1492 precipitated cultural genocide of staggering proportions on the peoples of the Americas (Casas 1971; Wright 1993). However, these events had a previous history across the Atlantic in Spain. After living there for 800 years, Muslims and Jews were being expelled. The ingredients of cultural genocide began in Spain with the burning of books (entire libraries), followed by restrictions in religious practices, use of language, clothing, and even bathing (because it was considered sensual). The stereotype of the savage infidel sodomite Moor (Muslim) was then transposed onto the variety of indigenous peoples of the Americas. Having initiated the recipe of cultural annihilation in Spain, it was soon implemented in the "New World." We have our residential schools, in Canada, as more recent examples of this recipe. Aboriginal peoples in the Southern Americas were even tried as Muslim or Jewish heretics despite no knowledge of Moses or Muhammad. As Spanish and Portuguese power waned, but not soon enough to prevent the brutality, the French and British in North America followed suit. Except now the model of cultural cleansing had been perfected in the Americas and could now be applied to another "savage" in Africa and South East Asia. In fact, the signs on British social clubs in the 1930s in East Africa read "No dogs and Asians allowed." The negative image of the Moor applied to the North American Indian was now applied to Muslims and others in Africa and Asia. As long as the Moors or North American Indians were thought to be savage sodomite infidels, they were worthy of domination and to be "civilized" if possible (Matar 1999). Many of those who lived under British rule in Africa and Asia later immigrated to Canada and Alberta in particular. They carried with them a memory of this history.

In 1854, 13 years before Confederation, the first Muslim, James Love, named after his father, was born in Ontario to a teenage bride, Agnes, of Scottish descent. The Loves went on to have seven additional children, the youngest, Alexander, born in 1868, one year after Confederation. Similarly, another couple, Martha and John Simon, described in government documents as *Mahometans,*[1] settled in Ontario in 1871 coming from the United States. Like Agnes, Martha and John were of western European extraction. Martha was French and John, English. The first national census in 1871 counted 13 Muslims in Canada (Hamdani 1997; 1999).[2] Muslims began arriving in Alberta at the turn of the twentieth century.

The length of Muslim presence in Alberta spans approximately the age of this Province. The early Muslims in Alberta originated from the Levant (modern day Lebanon, Syria, and occupied Territories), which was then part of the Ottoman Empire. Their arrival in Alberta was facilitated by a small but resourceful network of previous immigrant Arabs of both Christian and Muslim background who had settled in Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, and parts of the United States. These early immigrants to Alberta in the 1900s also sought to avoid being drafted into the Ottoman army. They began as laborers laying tracks for the Canadian Pacific Railway, building grain elevators in southern Alberta for the United Grain Growers, and working in sawmills to eke out a living (Baker 1976; Fahlman 1995; Hamdani 1996). As soon as they had saved enough funds to set up small enterprises, they quickly turned to work as *peddlers* – a term used at that time to indicate a social class of peripatetic merchants who sell easily transportable goods (Duncanson 1978, 1970; Fahlman 1995).[3] In fact, self-employment through peddlery was well-suited to the early immigrants from the Levant as their homeland was geographically the bridge between the east and west and the centre of mercantilism in the Mediterranean (Abu-Laban 1980). As they became more established and proficient in the English language, these pioneers began to engage in the fur trade – buying and selling fur, and trading in dry goods and food. They travelled Northern Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories bartering for fur to be sent to southern markets (Baker 1976; Duncanson 1978, 1970).

Harold Adams Innis, the eminent Canadian economic historian, observed that in order to survive in the environment of the New World, the early European settlers had to seek the help of the indigenous peoples of this land. This meant the Europeans had to adapt their cultural traits to suit the cultural and geographic terrain. The fur trade could only

succeed with Aboriginal support. Their thorough knowledge of animal habits and close connection to the land, their ability to traverse a vast geography, and their capacity to secure sources of food for the Europeans, all speak to fundamental and often ignored roles the indigenous people of this land played in facilitating European settlement (Innis 1995, 2001).

Similarly, early Muslim pioneers in Alberta depended entirely on the Aboriginal peoples of Northern Alberta and Northwest Territories. They learned Native languages such as Chipewyan and Cree to become skilled at and thrive in the fur trade. Many of them travelled by dog team to Aboriginal camps and settlements loaded with dry goods and food items to trade (Baker 1976; Duncanson 1978; 1980). Sam (Esmeil) Jamha, who emigrated from the Levant to Canada at the tender age of 14 and began fur trading in 1907, before his 16th birthday, relied on and was trusted by Aboriginal peoples. An unpublished biography at the Glenbow Museum Archives describes his relationship with them:

> He spent considerable time with the Indians. . . . He spoke Cree like a native and had no difficulty with other Indian dialects. The natives are his friends, they delight in teaching him and show genuine affection for him. Furs begin to fascinate Sam and the learning process of his future as a fur buyer begins as he learns the difference between a rat [Muskrat] and a mink and the various other pelts of otter, beaver, fox, martin, skunk, weasel, fisher, squirrel and rabbit. How to distinguish prime from poor pelts and many native secrets of catching and preparing the skins. (Duncanson 1978: 29)

Sam Jamha not only lived amongst indigenous peoples for the purposes of trade but learned to sing with them in their language. In later life he describes with almost lyrical reverie, a passage of love with a beautiful young Aboriginal woman on a spring afternoon during his youth. He searched but could never find her again, as if she had vanished with mythical splendor (Ibid: 82).

However, survival in the fur trade was not easy. Often jealousy from white fur traders led to considerable difficulties. The success of individuals like Peter Baker, a Muslim from the Levant who emigrated after Sam Jamha, caused the Hudson's Bay Company to take notice. He was in direct competition with them. At Fort Smith the manager, with the help of the District Inspector, conspired to spread rumors about Peter Baker in order to stop Aboriginal peoples converted to Christianity from trading with him.

> When [Willy] Lyall moved over he started talking nasty and mean . . . he told people all about the 'Jew' and made up a name for my place, the 'Jew's store.' The people, Indian, Metis, and whites [sic] came and told me that he was spreading false propaganda about me. Along with Lyall, a young Scotch policeman, McIvor, was also annoying me. Before Lyall came to [Fort] Smith I had never heard anybody mention such a word as 'Jew'. . . . In those days, when anybody was called a 'Jew', it meant outcast and despised, because a 'Jew' was a 'Christkiller'. I was called that most often. (Baker 1976: 38)

It is noteworthy that Peter Baker, a Muslim Arab, does not deny being a 'Jew.' In fact he accepts it (Baker 1976:38-39). The conflation of Muslim with the Jew is revealing. The prejudice against being a "Muslim" probably meant nothing in the north but being a "Jew" had currency particularly as a result of the work of missionaries.

Peter Baker's religious identity mentions his birth name, Bedouin Ferran, only once early in his posthumously published autobiography. In 1909, he was given the name Peter Baker by a Catholic priest at the Holy Cross College where Peter worked as a laborer before immigrating to Alberta (Baker 1976:12). While he indicates that he had been described as a "Moslem infidel" (Ibid. 144), Peter Baker's Muslim identity was established through the obituary notices in the *Edmonton Journal* which indicated that his funeral took place at the Al-Rashid Mosque in Edmonton on November 13, 1973.[4] Indeed the majority of early Muslim settlers Anglicized their first names or changed them altogether (Awid and Haymour 1973; Ali 1999). A lot of pressure must have been exerted on these early Muslims to fit in (Abu-Laban 1980). While winning friends and engaging in trade, prejudice in business, at times motivated by outright jealousy, was always prevalent and took on legal manifestations. Baker relates how the Minister of the Interior, Charlie Stewart, in 1926, at the urging of the President of the Northern Traders Company, amended Territorial Trading and Trafficking Laws at ministerial discretion without an Order-in-Council. In order to obtain a Territorial Trading and Trafficking License, merchants like Baker would no longer be able to travel to the camps of the trappers but fur trading would have to be confined to permanent posts. When Baker confronted the Minister in Edmonton, Stewart replied: "It wouldn't be necessary for the new rule if it was not for those damned Syrians and Jews going around fooling the poor Indians!" (Baker 1976: 192).

Peter Baker later went on to represent a mostly Aboriginal constituency in the Legislature of the Northwest Territories (1964 to 1967) and produced a serialized version of his life as a fur trader in "News of the North" in Yellowknife.

The story of Muslim settlement is not limited to men in the fur trade. Women, too, played a significant role in Muslim settlement in Alberta. Their contributions were not limited to their families, rather they extended to all those who were their neighbors irrespective of creed or color. For instance, Mary (Rikia) Saddy's family homesteaded and ranched in Southern Alberta and she fed the crews that worked in their fields (Ali 1999). The early roles of Muslim women were affected by their arrival and adaptation in a new land and their contributions were fundamental to community building in Alberta. In addition to their reproductive roles of child care and domestic labor, early Muslim women were also involved in community management that included the collective aspect of organization, production, and consumption of resources (Moser 1993; Kassam 1997). A prominent example of the contribution of Muslim women is the establishment of the first Muslim place of prayer in Canada to be built for that purpose alone: a Mosque located in Alberta.

In the 1920s, the Muslim community in Alberta began to think of a place for congregational prayer (Duncanson 1978, 1980; Ali 1999). The idea of a mosque was a major milestone in the thinking of these early settlers as it represented a sign of their permanence and confidence in Alberta. The province would be their definitive home now and into future. In this home they needed a place that marked the births, deaths, and marriages of members of the community in addition to observing religious obligations and meeting their spiritual needs. These early Muslim pioneers were now becoming citizens contributing to the common good of Alberta. While the founders list names both women and men, it was really the women who were the prime movers behind the Al-Rashid Mosque through fundraising (Lorenz 1999). In 1938, a mosque was finally built in the City of Edmonton with the support of Muslims from across Alberta and Saskatchewan. In keeping with the cooperative sentiment of the prairies that "we are all in it together," Christian and Jewish Albertans also contributed. (Ali 1999; Duncanson 1978, 1980; Lorenz 1999; Khattab 1969). A Ukrainian Albertan architect drew up the original plans for the mosque. The thirties were a difficult time to raise funds as the country was in the ravages of an economic depression. Fundraising from shopkeepers on Jasper Avenue, dances, teas, dinners, and card

parties gradually raised the $5 000 necessary to build the Al Rashid Mosque. These early Muslim women established the organization infrastructure that sustained a fledgling community of Muslims in Alberta.

Al Rashid was not just a place of prayer but contributed to the life of the Alberta Muslim community. Some of the Muslim women who contributed both to the establishment of, and the cultural life of the Alberta Muslims at the mosque were Margaret Ailley, Hilwie Hamdon, Vera Jamha, and Miriam Teha (Awid and Haymour 1973). Some of these women were converts to Islam, born European Christians and married to Muslim men, but they supported the religious and cultural well-being of the community. The mosque was home to religious festivals such as Idd, community gatherings, music and traditional dances, visiting church groups, and cultural clubs (Al-Ati 1963; Khattab 1969; Lorenz 1999).

In the late 1980s, as the fiftieth anniversary of the Al Rashid Mosque approached, it was threatened by imminent demolition to make way for a parking lot for the Royal Alexandra Hospital. A group of Albertan Muslim men failed to raise the funds needed to save the first Canadian Mosque. The Canadian Council of Muslim Women stepped in, led by the granddaughters of the pioneer women. Karen Hamdon, granddaughter of Hilwie Hamdon; Mahmuda Ali, granddaughter of Mary Saddy; and Lila Fahlman, descended from Sufi healers and staunch English Methodists, engaged in a vigorous campaign much like their women kinfolk before them. They successfully raised the money needed, restored the mosque to its original glory, and had it located among other historical buildings at Fort Edmonton Park. This was achieved at a time when there was pronounced anti-Islamic sentiment spurred on by the Gulf War. On May 28, 1992, the restored Al Rashid was officially opened (Ali 1999; Fahlman 1995, 1999; Lorenz 1999).

According to the Statistics Canada 2001 Census Data, there are 49 045 Muslims in Alberta. Muslims comprise 1.7% of the total population of Alberta. Between 1981 and 1991, the population of Muslims increased by 84% in the Province. The percentage increase in the decennial period 1991 to 2001, slowed to a 58% increase in the population of Alberta Muslims. The population of Muslims in the city of Calgary is 25 900, representing nearly three percent of the City's total population. Between 1991 and 2001, Calgary's Muslim population increased by 86.5%. The population of Muslims in Alberta is significant. Following the various Christian denominations, Alberta Muslims comprise the largest non-Christian religious group in the Province.

Unlike the early Muslim settlers in Alberta who were largely from the Levant, post-war Muslim immigration to Canada is noteworthy for its cultural and linguistic diversity. Between 1991 and 2001, 15% of immigrants to Canada were of a Muslim background (Statistic Canada 2003b). The cities of Calgary and Edmonton respectively have the fourth and fifth largest proportions of visible minorities in metropolitan centres in the country. In 2001, Alberta was home to 11.2% of Canada's visible minorities (Statistics Canada 2003a). The ethnic origins for Canadian Muslims ranges from Africa (especially East and North Africa), China, Central Asia (including the southern States in the Russian Federation, the newly formed republics and Afghanistan), Europe (both Eastern and Western as well as the Balkans), Iran, the Indian sub-continent (Bangladesh India, and Pakistan), the Middle East (particularly Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt), Philippines, Turkey, and so on (Abu-Laban 1983, 1995; Buchignani et al 1985; Palmer 1985; Rashid 1985; Hamdani 1999; Statistics Canada 2003a). While some of these post-war immigrants fled political, ethnic, and religious persecution, many migrated seeking gainful employment based on their professional skills or entrepreneurial opportunities (Abu-Laban 1983; Nanji 1983; Rashid 1985; Hamdani 1999). Thus, unlike the early Alberta Muslims, who began as peddlers and then expanded their entrepreneurial functions into the fur trade, the relatively more recent Muslim immigrants have a diversity of skills and professions.

Alberta Muslims are not only ethnically diverse but represent a plurality of interpretations of Islam (Abu-Laban 1983). Among the early Alberta Muslims religious diversity was present. The family of Sied Ameen had a strong Sufi heritage (Fahlman 1995). The Sufi tradition tends to focus on the spirit of the Quran rather than its literal interpretation. At the heart of Sufism is the tendency towards the inner and mystical aspects of the faith (Lings 1975). It is therefore not surprising that one of the sons of Sheikh Sied Ameen, King Ganam, grew to become Canada's uncrowned King of Fiddlers, inspiring and being a mentor to the likes of Billy Jones and Tommy Hunter. Music is closely linked to Sufism. Sheikh Ameen, in typical rural Canadian fashion, ordered his five-year-old son's first violin from an Eaton's catalogue (Fahlman 1995). Today in Alberta the various schools of Sunni Islam are found. The variety of Shia interpretations such as Ithna'ashari, Ismaili, and Druze are also present. For example, the Ismaili interpretation of Islam makes up approximately a quarter of the total Muslim population in Alberta and a third of the population in the City of Calgary.

Ismailis vary in ethnic origin from Arab, African, Central Asian, Indo-Pakistani, Persian to European. Muslims in this province, like their fellow Albertans, are heterogeneous in terms of their ethnicity, professional background, and religious interpretations.

The Mosque and Jamat Khana, both places of assembly, prayer, and cultural life of the community, are symbols of the definitive presence of Muslims in Alberta. These are the physical manifestations of institutions that support the life of the community (Abu-Laban 1983; Nanji 1983). In addition to being sacred places of prayer, these institutions enable religious solidarity, provide religious education, facilitate performance of marriages and funeral ceremonies, give space for mediation and dispute resolution, act as points of reference to interact with fellow Albertans on important events, are a focus of religious festivals, and are an architectural feature of Muslim permanence and commitment to this land. Based on online searches and counts in telephone directories, there are at least 25 Jamat Khanas, Mosques, and Muslim centres in Alberta.

Like the early Alberta Muslim women and men who came to this Province as young people seeking to make a better life, today's median age of Canadian Muslims is 28 years, lower than any Christian or non-Christian religious group in the country (Statistics Canada 2003b). With youth comes the opportunity to build anew based on a strong heritage. The tradition of Muslims in Alberta is one of hard work, where women play a prominent role in the life of the community overcoming racial and religious prejudice. It is a tradition of religious and ethnic survival and adaptation with strong linkages to the Aboriginal peoples of this land. Finally, it is a heritage of ethnic diversity and variety of religious interpretations. Muslims in Alberta are a microcosm of Canadian society, mirroring the desires and needs of a multi-cultural nation. Canada's multicultural history began with the diversity of First Nations. Cultural and religious pluralism are the foundations of Canadian society. Institutional structures and civil society in Alberta offer Muslims opportunities to practice Islam with a plurality of interpretations suited to the twenty-first century and with a security perhaps not found in any other nation in the World.

The challenge for Alberta Muslims will be to produce leaders who are as comfortable with their faith as they are with the cultural ecology of Canada. The historical adaptation of Muslims to Alberta is an opportunity for Muslims to break down facile media representations of a global community that spans 1.4 billion people living in diverse

lands and cultures. Soon, Alberta Muslims may be able to export leaders that are raised in a civil society that both represent the humanistic values of Islam as well as Canada.

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Notes

1. This is a term used especially by the British to describe Muslims as the followers of Muhammad (Mahometans) like Christians are followers of Christ. A term considered offensive by many Muslims as they do not follow an individual but a message conveyed to him by God.

2. In the period 1911 to 1931, 22 percent of Canadians were foreign-born immigrants entering the country to settle in the Western provinces (Statistics Canada 2003a).

3. The Hudson's Bay Company referred to independent traders as "peddlers." In a society that stressed sedentary life as a mark of Godliness, at a time when Aboriginal communities were forced into settlements, peddlers were seen as a threat particularly to established businesses.

4. It is noteworthy that in the Notices of Deaths in the *Edmonton Journal*, Saturday, 17 November 1973, Peter Baker was identified as Faron Ahmed, 62.