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Muslims in Guyana: History, Traditions, Conflict and Change

RAYMOND CHICKRIE

Introduction

The birth of Islam in Arabia and its later spread to South Asia and Africa had rippling effects not only on that region's social and political history, but international ramifications as it spread from there to other parts of the world, including Guyana. Islam travelled to the shores of Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad largely because of the institutions of slavery and indentureship.

Guyana is a multi-ethnic republic situated on the northern coast of South America (see Figure 1). The country is inhabited by nearly one million people who are heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity and religious affiliation. Amerindians are the indigenous people of Guyana. In the seventeenth century the country became populated by waves of immigrants brought in under colonialism which introduced plantation slavery and the indenture system. Thus the Dutch and later the British colonial mercantile interests shaped the socio-cultural environment of the country. Guyana remained a British colony until 1966 when it achieved independence which marked the transfer of political power to the Afro-Christian population. However, the majority are of South Asian descent and form roughly 51% of the population (see Figure 2). Yet, they remained disenfranchised until the 1992 general elections. South Asians, who are mostly Hindus and Muslims, have always had a cordial relationship among themselves. It would seem that these two groups had come to a mutual understanding of respecting each other's space while culturally and even linguistically identifying with each other. In fact, Hindus and Muslims share a history of indentured labour, both having been recruited to work in the sugar cane plantations. They came from rural districts of British India and arrived in the same ships. Furthermore, Muslims and Hindus in Guyana did not experience the bloody history of partition as did their brethren back in the subcontinent. Also, the lack of Hindu/Muslim friction in Guyana may be attributed to the Cold War and to their common foe—the Afro dominated government, which practised discrimination against them (for religious composition, see Figure 3).

According to the Central Islamic Organization of Guyana (CIOG), there are about 125 *masjids* scattered throughout Guyana. Muslims form about 12% of the total population. Today in Guyana there are several active Islamic groups which include the Central Islamic Organization of Guyana (CIOG), the Hujjatul Ulamaa, the Muslim Youth Organization (MYO), the Guyana Islamic Trust (GIT), the Guyana Muslim Mission Limited (GMML), the Guyana United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman (GUSIA), the Tabligh Jamat, the Rose Hall Town Islamic Center, and the Salafi Group, among others. Two Islamic holidays are nationally recognized in Guyana: *Eid-ul-Azha* or *Bakra Eid* and *Youman Nabi* or *Eid-Milad-Nabi*. In mid-1998 Guyana became the 56th permanent member of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). Guyana's

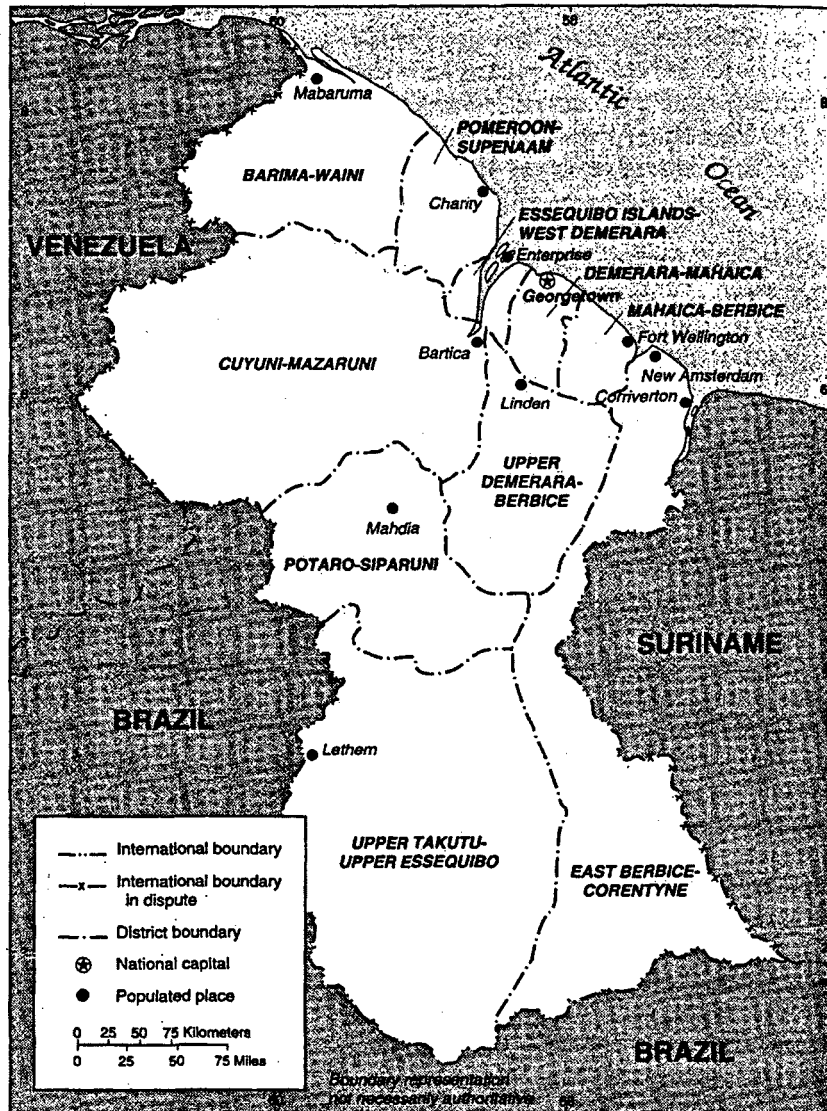


Fig. 1. Guyana: administrative divisions, 1991.

neighbour to the east, Suriname, with a Muslim population of 33%, is also an OIC member state.

The Arrival of Islam in Guyana

Islam was formally reintroduced in Guyana with the arrival of South Asian Muslims in the year 1838.¹ Yet one cannot dismiss the fact that there was a Muslim presence in Guyana even earlier than that date.² There were Muslims among African slaves who were brought to Guyana. Mandingo and Fulani Muslims were first brought from West Africa to work in Guyana's sugar plantations. However, the cruelty of slavery neutralized the Muslims and the practice of Islam vanished until the arrival of South Asians

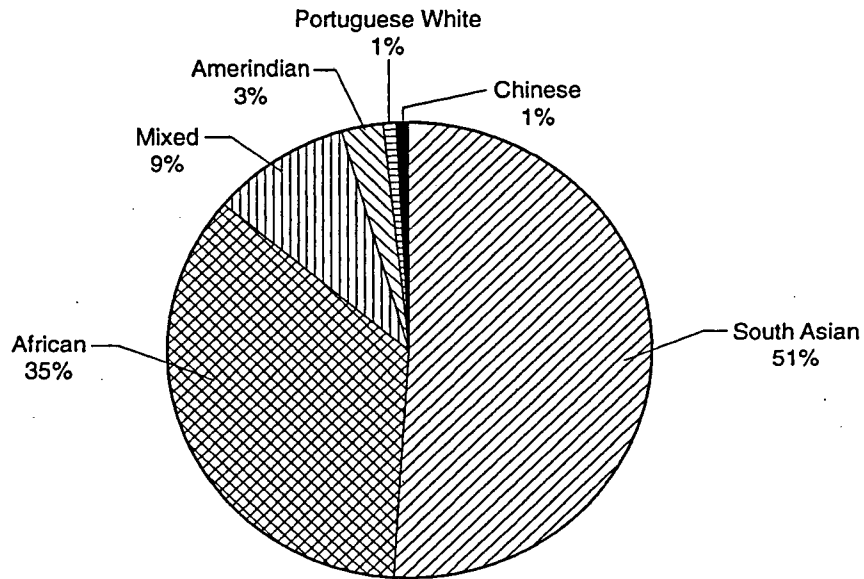


Fig. 2. Ethnic composition.

from the Indian subcontinent in the year 1838. However, to this day Muslims in Guyana are referred to as Fula, linking them to their West African ancestry. Mircea Elida writes that 'from 1835-1917, over 240,000 East Indians, mostly illiterate, Urdu-speaking villagers, were brought to Guyana. Of these 84% were Hindus, but 16% were Sunni Muslims'.³ There has also been a Shia and later an Ahmadiyya presence in Guyana. However, their numbers are minuscule and too insignificant to cause any friction. The Muslims who migrated to Guyana came from many different areas of the Indian subcontinent, including Uttar Pradesh, Sind, the Punjab, the Deccan, Kashmir and the North West Frontier (Afghan areas). In fact, one of Guyana's oldest Mosques,

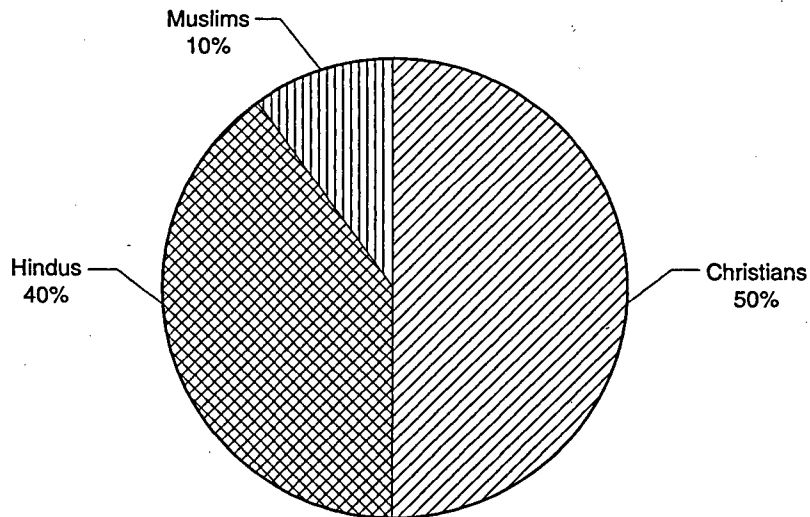


Fig. 3. Religious representation.

the Queenstown Jama Masjid, was founded by the Afghan community which had apparently arrived in this country via India.⁴ Afghan and Indian Muslims living in this area laid the foundation for the Masjid. Thus according to several accounts,⁵ there were educated Muslims among these early arrivals. One Imam reports there were two *hafizul Qur'an* who were 'residing in Clonbrook, East Coast Damerara, bearing the last name Khan'.⁶

The South Asian Connection

The history of Guyanese Muslims is directly linked to the Indian subcontinent, but it is a history that has been ignored by Caribbean scholars of East Indian history. One aspect of this history that has drawn much debate among the different scholars and Islamic organizations in Guyana is the 'Indo-Iranian' connection. When this term is used in this article it refers to the linguistic and cultural aspects that the Guyanese Muslims inherited from West and South Asia (Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Central Asia). Iran and Central Asia played a key role in the history and civilization of South Asian Muslims. The spread of Islam to India is attributed to the Central Asian Turks who adopted Persian as the official language of the Mughal Court in India. If Islam did not travel to the subcontinent it would have never had such an impact in Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad. Persianized Central Asian Turks under the leadership of Muhammad Zahiruddin Babur established the Mughal dynasty and brought cultural ambassadors from Iran, Turkey and Central Asia to India.

Today in Guyana there is much controversy as to the cultural aspects that Muslims brought from the subcontinent beginning with their migration in the year 1838. There exist two camps in Guyana, one comprising the younger generation who prefer to get rid of the 'Indo-Iranian' heritage, and the other the older generation who would like to preserve this tradition. Some link this tradition to Hinduism and a continuous attempt is being made to purge 'cultural Islam' of 'un-Islamic' innovations (*bida'*). Van der Veer notes that these forms, brought by the indentured immigrants to the Caribbean, were heavily influenced by the cultural patterns of the subcontinent, as opposed to those of the Middle East.⁷ Aeysha Khan quotes Samaroo: 'in modern day Trinidad and Guyana, where there are substantial Muslim populations, there is much confusion, often conflict, between the two types of Islam'.⁸ In Guyana today the younger generation who have studied in the Arabic-speaking world prefer Arabic over Urdu and view South Asian traditions as un-Islamic. In the subcontinent Urdu helps to define a South Asian Muslim. In fact, Urdu and Islam for South Asian Muslims define one's cultural identities.

The Language: Urdu

Urdu, a common language developed in the Indian subcontinent as a result of a cultural and linguistic synthesis, was brought to Guyana by South Asian Muslims from the subcontinent where its history goes further. After the Mughal invasion of India, the mingling of Arabic, Turkic, Persian and Sanskrit languages developed into a new 'camp' language called Urdu. The word 'Ordu' or Urdu, which is Turkish in origin, means 'camp' and is mostly associated with an army camp. It was towards the end of the Mughal rule in India that Urdu language was given a national status. The language was nurtured at three centres in India: the Deccan, Delhi and Lucknow. Once Urdu was adopted as the medium of literary expression by the writers in these metropolises,

its development was rapid, and it soon replaced Persian as the court language and principal language of Muslim India.⁹ However, in the 1930s Urdu suffered reverses with the resurgence of Hindu nationalism in India. A new people's language was developed replacing the Persian script with the Devangari script and it was called Hindi.

Urdu, distinguished from Hindi by its Persian script and vocabulary, is today the national language of Pakistan and one of the official languages of India. It is one of the most popular spoken languages of South Asia, and has acquired a wide distribution in other parts of the world, notably the UK, where it is regarded as the major cultural language by most subcontinent Muslims.

In Guyana today, Urdu is popular among the Indo-Guyanese who watch films and listen to music from the Bombay film industry. Contributing to its role as the chief vehicle of Muslim culture in South Asia is its important secular literature and poetry which is closely based on Persian models. However, Urdu is taking a backstage in Guyana due to English language proliferation and the Muslim orthodox movement leading to a focus on Arabic.

Only one Islamic organization in Guyana today, the United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman (which is also the oldest surviving Islamic organization in Guyana), offers Urdu in its instructional programme for teaching the *qasida* (hymns that sing praises to God and the Prophet). They regularly hold *qasida* competitions throughout the country and award prizes to encourage participation. *Qasida* is part of the 'Indo-Iranian' legacy. It is an attempt by the Anjuman to preserve the uniqueness of Guyana's Muslim heritage. Though the students were generally told that they were learning Arabic, it was Urdu that was being taught. Having migrated to New York, an *ustad* (teacher) from a village in Guyana remarked to the author 'the Arabic here is different than that which I was teaching at the *madrasah* in Guyana'. Little did he realize that it was Urdu and not Arabic that he was teaching back in Guyana. Some are embarrassed to say that they were teaching Urdu while calling it Arabic. This is one of many stories that echo throughout Guyana. One remembers hearing the so called Arabic alphabet: 'alif, be, pe, se, jim che, he ... zabar', and 'pesh'. In Arabic there is no 'pe', 'che', 'zabar', and 'pesh'. After familiarizing oneself with Urdu, one realizes that it was Urdu that was being taught in Guyana. Ahmad Khan a trustee of the Queenstown Jama Masjid says that for most Guyanese Muslims their mother tongue was Urdu.¹⁰ However, by 1950 Urdu started fading with the introduction of Islamic texts in English and it has now almost disappeared.¹¹ According to Pat Dial, a Guyanese historian, during the early twentieth century Urdu and Arabic were taught in the *madrasah* annex of the Jama Masjid and the young were introduced to the Namaz. In those early years, far more people spoke Urdu than English.¹²

Some Questionable Traditions

In any civilization, there is cultural synthesis. The usage of Urdu is by no means related to Hinduism. Even though it is indigenous to the subcontinent it remains a legacy of the Muslim period. Other aspects of this heritage include the tradition of *qasidas*, *tazim-o-tawqir*, *milaad-sharief*, the *dua* and the *nikkah*, all performed in Urdu. In Guyana, as in Trinidad, as well as in other countries in the Caribbean, Muslims are saying the *fatihah* over food, celebrating the Prophet's birthday (*milad-un-nabi*) and ascension (*miraj*) and singing *qasida*, all in Urdu.¹³ However, the debate over these very rituals has created deep frictions among Guyanese Muslims. Similar traditions are

prevalent in the subcontinent, as well as in Central Asia, the Caucasus region, Turkey, Iran and other Islamic lands. The different Sufi orders that were responsible for the spread of Islam in many parts of the world had patronized these traditions. Their orthodoxy or unorthodoxy has become the subject of major debates everywhere. We shall review below some of these 'questionable' traditions.

Tazim-o-tawqir

The Urdu term *tazim* is well known among Guyanese Muslims and it constitutes an established practice inherited from their forefathers. However, if one asks what is the meaning of the word *tazim*, one gets many different answers. But if one asks what is *tazim*, they will say it is the standing and reciting of 'ya nabi salaam aleika, ya rasul salaam aleika, ya habib salaam aleika ...' However, *tazim* is much more than standing and reciting thanks and praises to the Prophet. It is about respect, honour and reverence. Supporters of *tazim-o-tawqir* say that it is essential for every believing Muslim, to practice *tazim-o-tawqir* but within a frame work that it does not become an evil *bida'*. *Tazim* has all along been observed in Guyana, but today there is much controversy over this practice. The educated person who is knowledgeable of Islam sees this practice as un-Islamic. Most others see no problem with it and continue with its practice. Still others see the practice as *bida'-e-hasanah* or a good innovation.

Three *maulanas* from the subcontinent who are highly regarded in Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad have all endorsed this practice. Their support of *tazim* carries heavy weight because of their piety, education and unselfish dedication to the upliftment of Muslims. Maulana Noorani Siddique has called upon those who oppose *tazim* to provide the proof why it should not be practised. He has challenged the critics that *tazim* is in accordance with the Sunni Hanafi *madhab* and is not in conflict with the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

Milad-un-nabi

Supporters of *milad-un-nabi* say that the celebration is the commemoration and observance of the birth, life, achievements and favours for the Prophet. Many Sufi orders such as the Chishtiyah and Naqshbandiyah support this celebration. They say that expressions of love of the Prophet by the *ummah* in the form of *milad-un-nabi* is a humble effort by the *ummah* to show gratitude to Allah for His favour of blessing man with such a *nabi* (Prophet), and to the *Nabi* for bringing man out of the darkness of ignorance (*jahiliyah*). The essence of *milad-un-nabi* is to remember and observe, discuss and recite the event of the birth and the advent of the Prophet.¹⁴ Many argue that these practices are all in keeping with Qur'anic directives and assert that great *ulema-e-haqq* such as Ibn Hajar Haitami Hafiz, Ibn Hajar Asqalani, Ibn Jawzi, Imam Sakhaawi, and Imam Sayyuti have regarded *milaad-un-nabi* as *mustahab* (good deed).¹⁵

Opponents of *milad-un-nabi* have called this practice a *bida'* or an innovation. Some argue that there are two types of *bida'*: *bida'-e-hasanah* and *bida'-e-sayiah* (good innovations and evil innovations). Proponents argue, 'if the objection is to the current information [*sic*] that the observance of *milad-un-nabi* takes, and is thus regarded as an evil *bida'*, then there are many other *bida'* which came about after the era of the *tabii taabioon* as well, which given the requirements of the era were necessary.¹⁶ They argue that following this logic the compilation and classification of Hadith is also a *bida'* which originated after the era of the *sahaaba*, *taabioon* and *tabii taabioon* (*quroon-e-*

thalaatah). 'The current form of Hadith is also an innovation. Books of Hadith, principles of Hadith, principles of jurisprudence, the schools of *fiqh* are all *bida'* and innovations which originated two centuries or more later'.¹⁷ However, they agreed that these are good *bida'* from which the *ummah* has benefited greatly. In discussing the survival of Islam in Guyana, Hamid says, 'They were able to do this (maintain Islam) through Qur'anic and *milaad* functions, and other regular social interactions, in spite of distance and the demands of indentured ships'.¹⁸

In arguing for the legitimacy of *milad-un-nabi*, M. W. Ismail refers to several Islamic scholars who have agreed that *milad-un-nabi* is a good *bida'* or *bida' hassanah*. He quotes the following from Imam Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani who in explaining Sahih Bukhari says: 'Every action which was not in practice at the Prophet's time is called or known as innovation, however, there are those which are classified as good and there are those which are contrary to that'.¹⁹ Ismail then made reference to Fatimid Egypt (909–1171 AD) and quoted Imam Ibn Kathir from his book, *Al-Bidaya* (Vol. 13, p. 136): 'Sultan Muzafar used to arrange the celebration of *melaad sharief* with honour, glory, dignity and grandeur. In this connection he used to arrange a magnificent festival'.²⁰ Imam Kathir continued, 'He was a pure hearted, grave and wise *aalim* and a just ruler, may Allah shower his mercy upon him and grant him an exalted status'.²¹ In trying to prove the validity of *milad-un-nabi*, the Sheikh quoted Al-Hafiz Ibn Hajar who when asked about the celebration said, '*meelad shareef* is, in fact, an innovation which was not transmitted from any pious predecessor in the first three centuries. Nevertheless, both acts of virtue as well as acts of abomination are found in it'.²² Opponents argue that the Prophet Muhammad (SWS) said, 'Whoever brings forth an innovation into our religion which is not part of it, it is rejected'.²³ They further quote the Prophet: 'Beware of inventive matters for every invention is an innovation and every innovation is evil'.²⁴ Supporters respond that those who quote these two Hadiths and claim that all innovation is *bida'* and reprehensible have in fact accused Muslim learned men, including the Caliph Umer, of committing 'evil' innovations.²⁵ This would include many other 'innovations' which are widely accepted and practised by Muslims today such as the *tarawih* prayers, the introduction of the second *adhan* during Friday's congregational prayers, the introduction of reading '*bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* before commencing *tashahud*, and sending praise and *salaams* upon the Prophet.

The Qasida

The *qasida* (hymn of praise) has always been a part of the Arab tradition, and it spread from the heart of Arabia to the Islamic periphery. Arabic language impacted heavily on the vocabulary, the grammar and the literary prose of other languages such as Persian, Urdu, Turkish, Bosniak, Hausa and Swahili among others. Its contribution to the literature of these languages helped their revival. Today *qasidas* are written in Arabic but also in other languages spoken by Muslims and have become a part of the Islamic cultural expression.

There are four types of *qasida*, which are characterized according to their evolution. The pre-Islamic *qasida*, rooted in the ancient Arab tribal code; the panegyric *qasida*, expressing an ideal vision of a just Islamic government; the religious *qasida*, exhorting different types of commendable religious conduct; and the modern *qasida*, influenced by secular, nationalist, or humanist ideals. These many varieties of *qasida* greatly influenced the development of public discourse in many Muslim countries.

Guyanese Muslims have only been exposed to religious *qasidas*. However, in Guyana

today there is no formal school of *qasida* teaching. What Guyanese Muslims know about *qasida* is what has been handed down from one generation to another. It is not a written tradition, but rather an oral one which inevitably has lost its scholarly character. No-one today learns the prose and the grammar of *qasida* and there is no-one to question nor to maintain the standard of good *qasida*. *Madrasahs* do not teach *qasida*, but a few Islamic organizations in Guyana do hold *qasida* competitions. The question remains, who sets the standards for winning and what are the criteria for winning? This aspect of cultural Islam no doubt has been influenced by the host environment. Today in Guyana there is a movement among a handful to resurrect this tradition. However, the lack of enthusiasm from the younger generation, many of whom have studied in the Arab world, compounded with its questionable Islamic legitimacy, will soon make these traditions extinct.

The visits of several Maulanas to the Caribbean, notably Maulana Fazlur Rahman Ansari, Maulana Abdul Aleem Siddique and his son Maulana Ahmad Shah Noorani Siddique, provided opportunity to the Guyanese Muslims to seek clarification from these scholars of the Hanafi *madhab* regarding the practice of *tazim*, *milad-un-nabi* and *qasida*. These scholars endorsed these practices and refuted claims that these are evil innovations. They were able to convince the locals that based on the Qur'an, Hadith and the *fiqh*, *tazim*, *milad-un-nabi* and *qasida* were within the parameters of Islam, and if kept within the boundaries of Islam these practices are good *bida'*.

Arabization and the Sunnification Process

Before the 1960s, Muslim missionaries who visited Guyana came almost exclusively from the Indian subcontinent and visited frequently. This influx of missionaries and the Islamic literature they brought with them helped to promote and maintain the Sunni Hanafi *madhab*. It was not until the 1960s that Guyanese Muslims made contacts with the Arabic-speaking world. After Guyana's independence in 1966, the younger generation of Muslims were keen to make these contacts. Guyana established diplomatic relations with many Arab countries. Egypt, Iraq and Libya opened embassies in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana. Many Muslim youths went to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Libya to study Islamic theology and the Arabic language. Eventually Arabic-speaking Muslims began to take an interest in Guyana and many travelled there to render assistance to their Muslim brethren. In 1977 Libyan Charge d'Affaire Mr Ahmad Ibrahim Ehwass arrived in Guyana. He introduced many activities to benefit the Muslim community, especially the youth. Many scholarships were given to young Guyanese Muslims to study in Libya, and in 1978 he was responsible for the formation of the Guyana Islamic Trust (GIT). In 1996 the late President Cheddi Jagan of Guyana toured several Middle Eastern countries and appointed a Middle Eastern envoy. His official visits took him to Syria, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Lebanon. It was also in 1996 that Guyana officially became a permanent observer in the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). This further strengthened Guyana's ties with the Middle East, coupled with its traditional support for a Palestinian homeland. In 1997, during the 8th Summit of the OIC in Teheran, Iran, Dr Mohammed Ali Odeen Ishmael, Guyana's Ambassador to Washington, represented Guyana. Guyana's application for permanent membership in the OIC was accepted in 1998 and Guyana became the 56th member state of the OIC that year.

However, Guyanese Muslims returning from the Arab world to Guyana began introducing changes that irked the local Muslims. They advocated changes that they

believed were more authentic to Islam as well as to the Arab world. Many who studied in Arabia were highly influenced by Wahabism, and thus a new interpretation of Islam was brought to Guyana which confused the locals. Wahabism's interpretation of Islam came in conflict with some aspects of the Muslim culture of the subcontinent.²⁶ One scholar notes that the 'Guyanese have not really benefited from the scholarships granted to students to study in Arabia, India or Pakistan because only a few have returned home, and even of the few who have returned home, an even lesser number have made positive contributions. Some have needlessly raised juristic issues which serve only to create division and confusion in the community'.²⁷

In the 1970s Guyanese Muslims began a movement toward greater homogenization and uniformity. Greater orthodoxy or sunnification accompanied this tendency toward uniformity. Sunnification means the abandonment of local and sectarian practices in favour of a uniform orthodox practice. The position of Muslims as a minority group in Guyana has assisted this process but the emergence of Muslim countries and the work of Muslim missionaries who have visited Guyana have also aided it. The establishment of Muslim colleges to train *imams* and the generosity of Muslim governments to provide scholarships for young Muslim Guyanese have been helping to produce a uniform orthodox practice. In essence, denying one's Indian-ness helps to bring one closer to the 'Arab-ness' of Islam. Arabic and Arab-ness, it would seem today in Guyana, legitimizes Islam, and South Asian 'cultural Islam' is now viewed as un-Islamic and polluted with innovations.

As in Mauritius, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, the process of sunnification in Guyana took place under political competition between Hindus and Muslims. This process of Islamization or the revivalist movement, whose impact has been felt since the 1979 Iranian-Islamic revolution, is an expression of a need for a separate identity. In many of these countries Hindus and Muslims have had an antagonistic relationship. The revivalist movement is an expression of political dominance. Muslims refused to be dominated by Christians or Hindus in Guyana. Some Muslims in Guyana have entertained the idea of forming a Muslim political party for some time. This indeed happened in the 1970s with the formation of the Guyana United Muslim Party (GUMP) by Ghanie. The party founder was hoping to capture five seats in the Parliament. But he was unsuccessful in rallying the Muslim vote. Guyana's two main political parties have always courted the Muslims. Nevertheless, most Guyanese Muslims today believe that aligning themselves with political parties does them no good.

The tendency toward orthodoxy seems to have affected local religious practices, as seen in the gradual disappearance of the observance of *Muharram*, which is associated with the Shia Muslim tradition. The *tazia* or the *tadjah* (a procession of mourners marking the anniversary of the assassination of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet) was an annual event in which Muslims as well as non-Muslims participated. However, orthodox Muslims in Guyana began to see the celebration of *tazia* as un-Islamic. Some agreed that it was just a time to congregate for the sake of socializing. Hindus, it seems, also participated in this festival which later came under heavy criticism from pious Muslims of the Hanafi *madhab*. According to Basdeo Mangru, there was hardly any evidence of conflict between the Hindus and Muslims to suggest a lack of social cohesion which had prevailed between the Africans and the Creoles under slavery.²⁸ However, pressures increased from many sources to end this practice. Muslims wanted the state authorities to recognize the more orthodox holidays such as the two *Eids* and *Youman-Nabi*. By 1996, when Guyana achieved independence, the *taziya* was history. Today Muslim leaders are constantly stressing orthodoxy. Religious personalities both

in Guyana and those returning from overseas preach strongly against what are considered un-Islamic practices. There are many disputes between orthodox and traditionalists in which the former accuse the latter of pagan practices. This is in contrast to the earlier period when, as one scholar notes, 'Guyana did not experience any major juristic problems within the period 1838-1920s. At no time were there more than 750 *Shia* and by 1950 they seemed to have been absorbed into the Sunni Muslim group'.²⁹ However, after the Iranian revolution of 1979 and with the coming to power of Imam Khomeini in Iran, there was a sudden upsurge of *Shiism* across the world. Soon thereafter following the arrival of a *Shia* missionary in Guyana, two groups were established, one in Linden, Demerara and another in Canje, Berbice. However, the impact of *Shiism* in Guyana is yet to be determined.

Beginning in the 1970s, the Guyanese Muslims who returned from Arab educational institutions began a process of reconstructing the past. They tried to de-emphasize their Indian cultural heritage by reconstructing or redefining their history. Much of it was an effort to distinguish themselves from the Hindus in order to promote a separate Muslim identity. Although the majority are descendants of South Asian indentured labourers, they presented themselves as descendants of Arabs. While their mother tongue was Urdu, many claimed that it was Arabic. During the mid-1970s a powerful Arabization movement had emerged, and it became more attractive for the orthodox Muslims in Guyana to be part of this movement than to trace one's roots in Pakistan or India. This movement to create a purer Islamic identity was contested by other traditionalists, especially the older generation. Today in Guyana many Muslims are concerned with the spread of other *madhahib*. The Director of Education and *Dawah* of the CIOG, Ahmad Hamid says, 'As from 1977, Muslims in Guyana saw the introduction of the teaching of other *madhahibs*. These were new to the local Muslims and created some serious problems'.³⁰ A trustee of the Queenstown Jama Masjid, Ayube Khan, is also concerned about this division and regretted that too many dissensions have occurred 'because of infiltration of disruptive elements'.³¹ This same concern was raised by the Imam of the Queenstown Jama Masjid, Haji Shaheed Mohammed, who says that 'With petty misunderstandings, the exuberance of the youths and the need for general guidance to see that the Jamaat remains on the Hanafi *madhab*, being Imam of the Queenstown Jama Masjid can be a trying task'.³²

The shift from Urdu to Arabic and the emphasis to do away with traditional practices illustrates the attempts to emphasize cultural identity. They link these practices to Hinduism, hence, would like to purge Islam of these 'innovations'. The association of Arabic with Muslims is new in Guyana and the demand for Arabic illustrates the emphasis to differentiate from the Hindus. Muslim children are taught Arabic and Urdu during the evening at Muslim schools (*madrasah*). These languages are restricted to religious contexts because all Guyanese Muslims speak English. There has been a movement recently in Guyana to introduce Hindi into the national curriculum. If this becomes a reality Muslims will demand Arabic or Urdu as well. A Hindu dominated government in Guyana will create tension with the Muslims.

Muslims in Guyana are concerned with safeguarding the interests of their own community. They are better organized than the Hindus. Muslim religious associations and mutual aid societies support those in the community who need help. The mosque constitutes the focal point of the local Muslim community and Islamic teachings at the mosque and the vernacular schools aid in the adherence to Islam and its precepts. Guyanese Muslims are an endogamous group; kinship and marriage bonds further support group solidarity. The few inter-religious marriages that do occur are due to the

openness of Guyanese society, the lack of *pardah*, and Muslim women's participation in the labor market.

New elements derived from Middle Eastern culture, such as architecture of the mosque and its dome, have been introduced as part of the Islamization process. Nevertheless, 'Indo-Iranian' architecture is still very pronounced in the style of mosques throughout Guyana. Another influence is the manner of greeting among Muslim men, particularly after prayers at the mosque, which involves embracing and shaking hands. The incorporation of Arabic words and terms instead of Urdu words and terms is very evident today. For example, instead of using the Urdu word *bhai* (brother) many use the Arabic term *akhee*. Guyanese Muslim who can afford it do make the pilgrimage to Makkah. Some men have started wearing the long shirts (*jilbab*) which they acquired after the pilgrimage and sport long beards. Some women have started wearing the *hijab*, or head scarf.

There is a move toward a more literary tradition in conformity with Islam at the expense of local traditions. In this religious discourse, the interpretation provided by orthodox Muslims relying on the scriptural tradition seems to become more hegemonic, creating religious authority itself. There is stronger emphasis on the need to learn Arabic for the *namaz* (daily worship) and on correct pronunciation, as well as the ability to recite, and understand the Qur'an. In Guyana today the emphasis is on practicing orthodox and Sunni Islam. This is voiced by many *imams* who advocate strict adherence to the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet.

However, while the newly returned men tend to convey that they have a monopoly on religious affairs, they have so far failed to institutionalize positive changes. Even their Bedouin garb intimidated the local Muslim population, and drew more fear rather than respect for them. These 'learned' men were soon forced to abandon one mosque for another and an entire realignment took place in Guyana. New organizations were formed which sought to make changes that they perceived were in line with the authentic Islam of Arabia. The cleansing of the 'Indo-Iranian' traditions was high on their agenda, and continues to be so. In 1994 at the 78 Corentyne Mosque, during one Eid, two separate *Eid Namaz* were held. The CIOG's official publication *Al-Bayan* writes, 'For *Eid-ul-Azha* 1994, the Muslims witnessed a very sad incident that clearly indicated that the #78 Jamaat is definitely divided into two factions'.³³ A younger *imam* who returned from Arabia was expelled from that mosque. This division led to the resignation of Al-Haj Mohamed Ballie as *imam*. Today one faction is building a new mosque nearby. *Al-Bayan* cited a similar incident at the Shieldstown Jamat in 1992: 'One brother was physically removed from the *masjid* because he refused to comply with the ruling of the Jamaat'.³⁴

Most Guyanese Muslims agree that it would be wise if the opponents and proponents of the Indo-Iranian tradition seek their answers from the Qur'an, the Sunnah and *ijma'* (consensus), instead of seeking drastic changes. 'Despite their shortcomings and lack of formal education, the early Muslims played a dynamic role in maintaining the Islamic society and paved the way for us to enjoy the benefits'.³⁵

For the younger generation everything that is different from the Arab world is wrong. They fail to contemplate that from Albania to Zanzibar the Muslim world speaks many languages and hails from many different traditions. Here in Guyana, they tried to replace Urdu with Arabic. Instead it would have been easier to build upon what the Guyanese Muslims had knowledge of and that is Urdu. When the Muslims arrived in Guyana their medium of communication was Urdu, and only a handful could read and write Arabic. In fact for the early Muslims Urdu provided the basis for their under-

standing of Islam and the Qur'an. Urdu today is a dying language in Guyana, while in India it is being held hostage by Hindu zealots. On the other hand, Arabic has not made any significant impact among the Muslims in Guyana.

Thus, it would seem unrealistic of the younger generations of Guyanese Muslims who have returned to Guyana from the Arab world to demand the cleansing of established traditions, which has caused great tension in the community. Guyanese Muslims themselves have come to Guyana from a region with a rich history in art, architecture, literature, math, music, science, philosophy and theology, and so, they have a rich heritage of their own. This should be recognized by the 'learned men'. They should strive for unity in preserving the uniqueness of Guyanese Muslim culture. Speaking Arabic or dressing like an Arab won't make one an Arab or a Muslim. It only reinforces low self-esteem and erects a barrier between them and other Muslims as well as non-Muslims.

Muslim Political Participation and the Subcontinent Connection

Muslim missionaries from Pakistan and India have regularly visited the Islamic communities in Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad, where they were often received with euphoria. Consistently they have tried to unite the different Islamic organizations, and have tried to mediate in order to bridge differences among the Muslims in these countries. They have also helped in providing Islamic literature, teachers and scholarships to the Caribbean Muslims. In 1937 Maulana Shamsuddeen visited Guyana. This was followed by Maulana Fazlur Rahman Ansari, Maulana M. Aleem Siddique in 1959 and Maulana Ahmad Shah Noorani Siddique in 1968.

Pakistani missionaries helped to revive Islamic communities in the Caribbean and were particularly successful in Suriname and Trinidad. Trinidad's most popular mosque, the Jinnah Memorial, is testimony of this strong relationship between the Muslims of Trinidad and Pakistan's Islamic community. When Maulana Noorani visited Suriname he was successful in bringing the Surinamese Muslims together. He was there when the foundations were laid to build the Caribbean's largest mosque, the Djama Masjid, a grand piece of Islamic architecture with four towering minarets. The Djama Masjid school is named after Maulana Noorani. The Trinidad Muslim League was founded on Pakistan Day and when Pakistan's first Ambassador to the United Nations, Mr Isfahani, visited Trinidad he received a warm welcome.

However, the tensions and rivalries between the various Guyanese Islamic organizations greatly damaged the general welfare of the Muslims and affected their relationship with the Muslim communities in the subcontinent. In 1934, the Jamiati Ulama was formed as an independent organization but this lasted only briefly. The name was changed in 1941 to Khadaam-ud-din. However, after reaching a consensus among the Imams, the name was changed to Jamiatul Ulama-E-Deen of Guyana. By the 1950s the Jamiat along with the British Guyana Muslim Youth Organization and the Anjuman Hifazatul Islam became aligned with the United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman. Another Islamic organization, the Islamic Association of British Guyana (IABG), was established in 1936 in order to serve the needs of the Guyanese Muslims. In the same year, the IABG published the first Islamic journal, *Nur-E-Islam*.

At Queenstown Masjid on 20 June 1937 during the visit of Maulana Shamsuddeen to Guyana, the Sad'r-E-Anjuman was formed. The Maulana tried to unite the IABG and the Sad'r-E-Anjuman. These two organizations were rivals. They both claimed to represent the Muslims. This antagonistic relationship culminated in the Sad'r-E-Anju-

man's withdrawal of its members from the Queenstown Masjid in 1941. Sad'r-E-Anjuman moved to Kitty where it built its own mosque, the Sad'r Masjid, on Sandy Babb Street.

The United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman was established in 1949 after four years of discussions. The IABG and the Sad'r merged to form the United Sad'r Islamic Anjuman (USIA). Their two journals, *Nur-E-Islam* and *Islam*, were combined. The USIA was the representative of Muslims from 1950 to 1960. Its strong leadership greatly influenced society at all levels—governmental and non-governmental. Sadly, soon after independence the Anjuman succumbed to political intrigues and rivalries.

As Guyana was approaching independence, Muslims were taking positions based on ideologies and aligning themselves with political parties. Muslims were found in both the People's Progressive Party (PPP) and the People's National Congress (PNC), which were Guyana's two main political parties. In 1964, Abdool Majeed, President of the Sad'r, accepted the chairmanship of the United Forces Party. His vacancy was filled by Yacoob Ally who was a PPP Parliamentarian. Naturally this led to division among the Muslim community. This division was obvious on several occasions. On one such occasion in 1967, when Maulana Noorani was coming to Guyana from Suriname the USIA, Hifaz and Ulama-E-Deen sent him a joint cable which read: 'Your visit is most unwelcome. Should you come to Guyana there would be violent eruption'. The Sad'r later aligned itself closely with the ruling PNC government.

The next year when Maulana Fazlur Rahman Ansari from Pakistan visited Guyana, he failed to get any support from the USIA, Hifaz and Ulama-E-Deen when he stated publicly at the Town Hall the Islamic position with regard to socialism and communism. The division of the Muslim organizations along political lines eroded the strong relationship that Pakistan had always enjoyed with the Guyanese Muslims. On the other hand, Suriname and Trinidad were able to unite and take advantage of the generosity from Pakistani and Indian Muslims. After 1969 there has been no other high level Muslim visits from either Pakistan or India to Guyana.

Nevertheless, the Caribbean East Indian connection to the subcontinent is deep-rooted. Brinsley Samaroo observes: 'There has been a marked closeness between the Muslims in this part of the world and India up to 1947, and with Pakistan since that time'.³⁶ In Guyana up to the 1960s, the Muslim leadership came exclusively from Muslims of South Asian descent who had studied in either Pakistan or India. In Suriname the South Asian Muslims referred to themselves as Pakistanis. While referring to Trinidad, Samaroo writes that 'indeed the Trinidad Muslim League (TML) was found precisely on Pakistan Day, that is 15th of August 1947, to underline this connection with the Subcontinent'.³⁷ According to Samaroo, 'From this time not only religious visits continue, but there was great rejoicing when civil or political personalities from Pakistan visited the Caribbean'.³⁸

Pakistan attended Guyana's independence celebration in 1966 and presented an oriental rug to the new nation. A few years later the two countries established diplomatic ties and in the 1980s they exchanged honorary consuls in Georgetown and in Karachi. The Pakistani High Commissioner to Canada, who is accredited to Guyana, frequently visits the Muslim Communities in Guyana. In January of 1994, Pakistan's Deputy High Commissioner to Guyana, Mr Arif Kamal, visited the Secretariat of the CIOG. 'Special attention was paid to the areas in which Muslims in Guyana can benefit from social, cultural and educational programmes of Pakistan'.³⁹ During his visit CIOG sent a letter to former Pakistan Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, requesting places at Pakistani universities for Guyanese Muslims to pursue higher education. In

February of 1997 Pakistan's High Commissioner to Guyana, Dr Farook Rana, met with the CIOG. According to CIOG's official newsletter, *Al-Bayan*, Dr Rana promised to provide scholarships for secular studies, Pakistani teachers to work in Guyana, Islamic books, newspapers, etc. The Dawah Academy International in Islamabad, Pakistan, now offers scholarships to Muslim Guyanese. The Director of the Dawah Academy in Islamabad, Dr Anis Ahmad, visited Guyana in 1995 and promised scholarships to the CIOG and the Guyana Islamic Trust (GIT). He indicated specifically the areas in which the Academy could be of assistance which included *imams* courses, seminars, teachers, training in Pakistan and the affiliation of the proposed Islamic Academy of CIOG with the Da'wah Academy of Pakistan.⁴⁰ To this day Pakistan offers secular and religious scholarships to Guyana in numerous fields of study. However, today among the young people there is greater interest in studying in the Arabic-speaking world.

Conclusion

The movement to purge Islam of Indo-Iranian traditions continues unabated in Guyana today. Friction between the younger and the older generations, or the Arab camp and the Indo-Iranian camp, continue to stifle the full potential of this minority community that has done well for itself in Guyana in the past. Yet another challenge that Guyanese Muslims face in this diverse land is to provide the bridge and reduce polarization of Indians and Blacks. At the same time a rational understanding and appreciation of Indo-Iranian traditions and reconciliation with that of the Arabic-speaking world needs to be reached. The situation is complicated by the fact that a majority of Guyanese Muslims today cannot speak or write either Arabic or Urdu. Thus, the push to make radical changes stems from the lack of balanced education and informed opinion. If Arab-ness legitimizes everything, as the orthodox movement in Guyana claims, then without knowing, they subscribe to the superiority of the Arab world. Hence, the movement to eradicate reminiscences of the Indo-Iranian traditions is rooted more in the intelligentsia's sense of inferiority rather than their appreciation of orthodoxy. It is ironic that the intelligentsia who went to Arabia after the 1960s and returned to Guyana created more friction and disharmony in the community. It turned into a competition of the hegemonic ambitions of a handful of religious zealots. The opponents of the Indo-Iranian heritage would do well to assert Islamic spirituality and put aside hegemonic ambitions.

Guyanese Muslims who are returning from educational institutions in the Arab world are also encouraging the younger generation to study in the Arabic-speaking countries instead of in Pakistan, India or Malaysia. Many Islamic organizations in Guyana today have their preferences of where they wish to send young people to study. Some of these organizations have forged strong ties with Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iraq, Kuwait and Egypt. However, Muslims still have the opportunities to study in Malaysia, Pakistan or India. But the latter countries are not the top choices of the newer generation of Muslims. The once vibrant relationship with Pakistan and India has now withered. The intelligentsia now looks to the Arabic-speaking world for leadership and religious guidance. However, it is ironic that to this day Saudi Arabia and Guyana have not established diplomatic relations. This has to happen before the two countries exchange ambassadors and forge diplomatic and cultural ties. This is despite the fact that Guyana and Suriname are today members of the OIC, whose headquarters are based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

NOTES

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