

Locating the Arabs in Brazil: A Socio-Cultural Enquiry

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to unfold the socio-cultural influence of Arab upon the Brazilian society. In doing so, this study tries to sketch melting pot culture in Brazil, apart from this; it also tries to argue that Arab people are still carrying their socio-cultural identity with them in the host country. Moreover, the new cultural trend is also emerging in Brazilian society; there is a great demand for Arabic dishes that resulted in spreading of Arabic restaurant across the country in such a way that turned some light Arab dishes to a real competitor of Fast Food. There are some Arab organizations that help new Arab immigrants in Brazil and newcomers are thinking that they are direct channels of communication with Brazilian society, and try to change the false beliefs about the Arabs and provide the correct image of Arab culture.

Key Words : Socio-cultural enquiry, Fast food, Cultural bag, Baggage

INTRODUCTION

Immigration is a regular phenomenon in the history of mankind. Human beings were found on all continents from the ancient time, and over the last two millennia, they started colonizing inhospitable regions. The rediscovery of American lands has broadened the horizons of human migration, forming people and establishing new states. It is the new world that is attracting youth from other parts of the world. As there is migration from one place to another place, people are not migrating only with their physical body rather they are migrating with the cultural bag and baggage. In the same way, Arab people also migrated to the host country with their cultural bag and baggage. Having said this, it is worth mentioning that the objective of this paper is trying to sketch the influences of Arab cultural upon that Brazilian society. At this juncture, it is worth mentioning the very famous and comprehensive definition of culture by Taylor as he argued that "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". E.B. Tylor (*Originally in "from primitive*

culture 1871) quoted from Emily Barrosse 2008 Anthropological theory, published by the McGraw Hill companies. So, this study tries to contextualize this comprehensive definition of culture in the host country.

Factors Responsible for Migration of Arab to Brazil:

After having a look at Arabs immigration towards other countries and especially towards Brazil we can find three major factors that contributed to the waves of migration. The first factor is economic. Earthquakes, epidemics, wars and civil strife had a negative effect on the living conditions of the poor and the middle classes. This led to the migration of the Arabs to the host country. The second factor was the political factor. Under this factor, non-Muslim minorities under the Ottoman Sultan, who was officially the "successor of the Muslims", considered that they did not have all the rights of citizenship, and migration was, therefore, an appropriate alternative for them. Put differently, they were forced to migrate to the host country. The third factor is the personal factor that blends the longing for adventure and exploration with the ambition to achieve wealth.

Arab Immigration to Brazil: Mapping Historical Dimension:

Arabs immigrated to Brazil in large number in the second half of the nineteenth century when foreign nationals were encouraged to settle down in the country for certain socio-economic reasons. This migration continued into the twentieth century. Significantly most of the Arab immigrants were Lebanese and Syrians. They immigrated to Brazil fleeing the Ottoman Empire and seeking better livelihood opportunities and opportunities towards a safe future. However, it is interesting to note here that many of these immigrants actually wanted to go to the United States of America, Helmi Nasr, head of the Arabic Studies Center at the University of Sao Paulo said that “Many of these immigrants came to Brazil without really wanting to...” he further said “They had purchased steamship tickets to America, thinking they were heading for North America. After quickly recovering from the initial shock of discovering they had arrived in South America, they started to make the best of it”. *The Washington Times*, July 11, 2005.

It is also said that another reason behind Arab immigration to Brazil is the Brazilian Emperor Dom Pedro II's visit to Egypt in 1871, who had invited the people of Arab countries (especially Lebanon, Syria and Palestine) to settle down in Brazil. Renowned researcher and historian Roberto Khatlab says that:

At the end of the eighteenth century many writers, intellectuals and kings travelled to the Middle East and Eastern European countries such as Greece, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The Emperor of Brazil at the time, D. Pedro II (1825-1891), visited Egypt in 1871, and in 1876 visited Lebanon, Syria and Palestine.

He further said:

The Emperor was in Lebanon accompanied by his wife Dona Tereza Christina Maria and a party of approximately 200 people (Barons, Viscondes, Damas...), coming from Greece on the ship “Aquila Imperial”, with a green and yellow flag. He stayed at the “Belle Vue Hotel” in Beirut, and, armed with a white mare and a backpack, travelled through the land of the cedars. This visit, by a high Brazilian authority at that time, can be considered of great historical value, although it has been of a tourist and scientific nature (*Islamismo Sem Terror*, 06/06/2015).

It is also to be noted that D. Pedro II was a great admirer of Arabic literature and culture, even getting to know the Arabic language when he studied in Brazil with a German who was from Arabic family and during his stay in Lebanon he met with great masters of the sciences and literature, among them there was famous Arabic grammarian Ibrahim Al-Yazigi, who offered him several books in Arabic language.

There are many other stories behind the arrival of Arab immigrants in Brazil, it is said that the Portuguese Muslims who accompanied the campaigns that discovered Brazil, perhaps for their knowledge of the art of the sea, were the first Muslims to enter Brazil. It is also worth mentioning that slaves were brought from Africa to Brazil by the Portuguese colonists, most of them were Muslims. Paulo Farah says:

The Imam Abdurrahman al Baghdadi, who travelled to Brazil in a ship of the Ottoman Empire in 1866, reported that when they reached a port in Rio de Janeiro and disembarked to explore the city, he encountered Muslims of African origin and they greeted him with the traditional Muslim greeting “As-Salamu Alaykum. Paulo Farah (*Originally in Farah 2007, 66*) quoted from “*The Middle East and Brazil, Perspective on the new global south*. Indiana University Press.

Arab immigrants in the first two decades of their arrival to Brazil were thinking that their immigration is temporary and they will certainly return back to their respective countries after a period of time. However, they emerged as one of the important immigrant-communities that directly participated in the modernization and nation-building process of Brazil. Naiva Cunha and Paulo Mello say in their article:

Despite the predominantly economic motivations of this migration, the first generation of these immigrants claimed that they intended to return to their homeland as soon as political circumstances allowed it. Meanwhile, as time went by, they grew accustomed to their new home. As they married and started families in Brazil, returning to the homeland became nothing more than a lost dream. *Rio de Janeiro's Global Bazar*, 2014, 231. Indiana University Press.

It is also a fact that most Arab immigrants to Brazil in Ottoman Empire were Christian and basically, they came from Syria and Lebanon. Oswaldo Truzzi mentioned that the earliest Syrians and Lebanese migrated to Brazil

may be because they could not land in the United States, due to legal or health problems or they were not able to fulfil the more stringent conditions of entry into the United States. Many of them had preferred to stay in South American countries, especially in Brazil and Argentina where there were practically no barriers.

We can divide Arabs immigration to Brazil into many periods and each period features different motivations for immigration, different factors that made Brazil an attractive destination. While talking about the reasons of immigration Montie Bryan says in his article:

Syrian-Lebanese intellectuals frequently offer varying reasons based on their own ideological agenda. Jorge Safady, for example, seeks to deemphasize national and religious differences between the immigrants and claims that Christians and Muslims alike sought to escape Ottoman cultural oppression of Arabs and find liberty in Brazil. While religious or cultural persecution and lack of economic opportunity dominate the collective memory of the Syrian-Lebanese in Brazil today, motivations to emigrate from the Middle East were as varied as the immigrants themselves, with religious, political, economic, and personal situations creating a complex web of stimuli that pushed Syrians and Lebanese away from home. *Montie Bryan 2006/11. Forging ethnic identity through faith: religion and the Syrian-Lebanese community in São Paulo.*

The first phase is from 1870 till 1890 in this decade immigration ratio of Arabs was very less but there were a lot of African Muslims in Brazil. According to Paulo Farah:

In Brazil, there is the report of significant Muslim presence from at least the early nineteenth century. African Muslims led many liberation movements of black slaves in the country. Consisting mostly of

Malês (Malians), who was also labelled by Portuguese-speakers of the time as muçulmis or muçulimi. These Muslims rebels were responsible for black slave insurrections during the first half of the nineteenth century; 1807, 1809, 1813, 1816, 1826, 1827, 1828, 1830 and 1835; this last one, known as the Malians Revolt (Rebolta dos Malê), was one of the main urban uprisings of slaves in the Americas during this historical period. Paulo Farah (*Originally in Farah 2007, 38-55*) quoted from “*The Middle East and Brazil, Perspective on the new global south*”. *Indiana University Press.*

According to census data member of Arabs who came to Brazil in first 20 years (1870-1890) is five thousand and till this phase Arab immigrants were registered as “Turks”, because Turkish Ottoman Empire was ruling, where the Arab countries are locating today; thus most of them held a passport with that “nationality” when they went to Brazil.

The second phase is from 1895 to 1941, this decade had witnessed increasing number of immigrants especially from 1908 and till 1913. In this period, the numbers of immigrants reached to 11000 (Eleven thousand). The census that was conducted in 1920 says that till 1920 there were 19290 immigrants from (Asian Turkish) in Brazil. Moreover, another census (1940) says that Arabs are on the fourth number among foreign community in the country (Table 1, 2 and 3).

The third period covers the time of 1941 to 1970. It witnessed a significant move in immigration and includes the era of World War II and the Lebanese civil war. According to Montie Bryan:

A New generation of immigrants from the Middle East arrived in Brazil after World War II. During the war, immigration had grounded to almost a complete halt, with only ten Syrian, Lebanese, or Turkish immigrants registered at the port of Santos

Year	1900	1909	1910	1919	1920	1929	1930	1939
Nationality	Number	% yearly						
Portuguese	195,586	31	318,481	38	301,915	35	102,743	31
Italian	221,394	36	138,168	17	106,835	13	22,170	7
Spanish	113,232	18	181,651	22	81,931	10	12,746	4
German	13,848	2	25,902	3	75,801	9	27,497	8
Japanese	861	0,1	27,433	4	58,284	7	99,222	30
Middle East	26,846	4	38,407	5	40,695	5	5,549	2
Others	50,640	8	85,412	11	181,186	21	62,841	18
Total	622,407	100	815,453	100	846,647	100	333,768	100

Table 2 : Immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa to Brazil during 1893-1939

Nationality	1893	1903	1913	1923	1933	1939	Total
Algerian	-	-	-	-	1	0	1
Arman	-	-	1	821	4	0	826
Egyptian	-	51	42	190	335	27	645
Iranian	-	-	-	12	107	10	129
Iraqi	-	-	-	-	10	0	10
Lebanese	-	-	-	-	3,853	1,321	5,174
Moroccan	-	192	31	35	47	23	328
Palestinian	-	-	-	-	611	66	677
Furs	-	-	-	-	374	9	383
Syrian	93	602	3,826	1,145	14,264	577	20,507
Turkish	3	6,522	42,177	19,255	10,227	271	74,455
Total	96	7,367	46,077	21,458	29,833	2,304	107,135

Table 3 : Place of the destination of Syrians and Lebanese immigrants in the different province of Brazil

Provinces	1920	1940
São Paulo	19,285	24,084
Rio de Janeiro	9,321	9,051
Minas Gerais	8,684	5,902
Rio Grand De Sol	2,656	1,093
Total	39,946	40,130

Source: *Al Jaliyat Al Arabia* (Silvia M. Montenegro) Nov 2006 and *Census of Brazil, 1920 and 1940*.

between 1941-1945. In 1946, 36 immigrants arrived via Santos, and by 1948, the number had risen to 679, of whom 504, or 74.2%, were Lebanese. By 1952, that number had risen further to 2,228, of whom 2,133, or 95.7%, were Lebanese. *Montie Bryan 2006/32. Forging ethnic identity through faith: religion and the Syrian-Lebanese community in São Paulo.*

The fourth period began in 1971 and continues to the present. It is marked by the Lebanese civil war and constant conflict with Israel and Syria. At the beginning of the 20th century and especially during the First World War many poets, writers and journalists migrated to the banks of the Amazon. These names did not get the luck of fame gained by famous writers who immigrated to the northern Diaspora such as Gibran Khalil Gibran and Elia Abu Madi, but it made a shared cultural memory between two worlds, such as Fawzi, Shafiq and Riyadh, from the Maalouf family, Elias Farhat and Rashid Salim Khoury (known as the poet of the village). The list was not limited to men writers only but there were also many leading female writers such as Mariana Daaboul Fakhoury, editor-in-chief of the magazine "Al-Mataal" in São Paulo and Salwa Atlas, editor-in-chief of Al Karama magazine. This literary vitality was also taken

to Brazil through the establishment of Arab cultural clubs, notably Al-Homsi Club.

Arab writers in South America also celebrated their new home countries in their literary writings and artistic communities in São Paulo and other Latin American cities. It is interesting to know that they remained in close cultural contact, with journals, newspapers, and literary styles circulating intensively between them. Arab-South America literati founded cultural forums such as Al-Usba al-Andalusiyya (Andalusian Association or League, in São Paulo, in January 1933), Annadwa Al-Adabiyya (Literary Circle, in Buenos Aires, at the end of 1947) and Annadwa Al-Adabiyya (literary Circle, in Santiago, Chile, on June 29, 1955). Ilyas Farhat, a noted Arabic poet, wrote:

If we cut all the cedars of Lebanon
 And cedars are sources of inspiration
 And with it erected here a temple
 Whose towers crossed the clouds?
 If we ravished from Baalbeck and Palmia
 Vestiges of our glorious past.
 'If we snatched from Damascus
 The tomb of Saladin,
 And from Jerusalem, the sepulchre
 Of the Redeemer of mankind.
 If we donate all these treasures

To the big independent nation
 And to its generous children,
 We would feel that even then
 We would not pay everything we owe
 To Brazil and Brazilians.

Melting Pot Culture in Brazil:

The Arab families that have migrated to Brazil in the last 19th and early 20th century have become an essential part of Brazilian society. There are millions of Syrian and Lebanese origins, but now they are Brazilians, and they only hear from their parents and grandparents that they are from Arabs and they have no idea about their own culture. They have fully integrated into a multi-ethnic society. Like other races, they have contributed to the crystallization and refinement of today's Brazilian culture. But this integration process has not been easy.

At the same time, some Arabs succeeded in gaining community recognition and even social advancement after having established close relations with the local social elites and after graduating from the university and having mastered the Brazilian lifestyle. Economic success has played a crucial role in the integration of Arabs belonging to the "Old migrants" of Brazilian society.

Carrying Their Own Culture and emergence of a new cultural trend in Brazil:

Though Arab immigrants have integrated into the Brazilian culture in the early phase of immigration but by passing the time they have also maintained their own culture which can be understood through the following stories.

March 25th street of São Paulo, This street is famous for Arab immigrants who made it the largest shopping centre in Latin America and one of the most important tourist attractions in São Paulo. It is so famous that in honour of them it was declared the national day of the Arab community by a presidential decree passed in August 2008 in recognition of the importance of Arab presence in Brazil and their contribution to the development of the country.

Amizade Syrio- Lebanesa, This is a famous statue in São Paulo, Brazil that reflects the importance of the cultural impact of Arabs in Brazil. It is a fifty-foot tall statue named "Amizade Syrio- Lebanesa" or Syrian-Lebanese Friendship. At the top, there are three full-sized figures. One figure is a woman that represents the Brazilian Republic. Another is an Arab maiden and the

third is an indigenous Brazilian warrior.

Legend of the town of Marataízes, There is a story behind the naming of this famous Brazilian tourist place, this name reflects the integration of Arab immigrants in Brazilian society. According to anthropologist Jeffery Lessar:

There once was a group of peddlers who sold their goods in the interior of the city Espirito Santos, going from place to place by mule. One of the peddlers was named Aziz and his wife was considered the leader of the women who stayed as the men went out to sell their goods. These Women went out every day to wash clothes in a place called The "Turkish Basin", over time the town that grew up around the place where the women washed their clothes came to be called Marataízes in honour of the wife (Marat) of Aziz.

Cultural influence also got represented in the educational institutions. This could be substantiated by the fact that for Arab children, they can go to public schools that teach Christian values, but the schools are meeting with the demand of Arab parents that their children be taught Arabic and Islamic religious education.

Brazil became an ideal country for Arab immigrants and they feel like they are in the second home. According to Sayed Ait Ali, a Moroccan who came 10 years ago to work in Brazil "This country does not resemble America or Europe, where the Arab has become a suspect in the security services," he further said "There is a great coexistence and I never remember that I felt strange. Stereotypical about Muslims and Arabs in Brazil." (*Indian Express 31 July*)

In the modern Brazilian society, there is a great demand of Arabic dishes that resulted in spreading of Arabic restaurant across the country in such a way that turned some light Arab dishes to a real competitor of Fast Food. According to Al Jazeera:

The reason behind this mesmerizing attention of Brazilians towards Arabic dishes in the presence of large Arab communities in most Brazilian cities, which contributed to the spread of Arab cooking while others explain the fondness of Brazilian for Arab meals to historical and cultural considerations, including the similarity between Brazilian food and Arab food. "Alessandra Khuneis, nutrition expert, supports the second explanation, saying in an interview with Al Jazeera that both the Arab and Brazilian peoples rely primarily on meat and rice in

their diets” she further said “that Arab food, especially Shami, which is the most prevalent in Brazil, has a special flavor, which makes it very popular among Brazilians. She added that the fact that Brazil is a multi-ethnic country has given Brazilians great love for the cultures of others, which is another factor that led to the spread of Arab food. (*Al Jazeera 11/07/2008*)

The Arab culture has even become incorporated into the simplest things in Brazilian daily life, including the language. Many words that begin with Al, like *alface* (lettuce) and *algarismo* (characters), are of Arab origin. “The Arab culture is very much rooted in Brazil; around 5,000 words from the Arab language have made their way into the Brazilian vocabulary. Some of them are used regionally, including *alfombra*, used by the population of states in the Northeast of the country meaning curtain. Some examples of Arabic words incorporated into the Brazilian vocabulary: *alface* (lettuce), *almanaque* (almanac), *alfaiate* (tailor), *bazar* (bazaar), *mascate* (travelling salesman), *almofada* (cushion), *alcaide* (mayor), *arroz* (rice), *açúcar* (sugar), *alfombra* (curtain). (*Marina Sarruf ANBA 2004*)

Arab’s institutional influence in Brazilian society:

There are a large number of institutions and organizations established by Arab immigrants in Brazil from the beginning. In São Paulo itself, there are more than hundred cultural, religious, charitable and political institutions. These organizations sometimes consist of some people who belong to a particular city. Some organizations did not survive for the long, while some others still running. The reason is evident in terms of merging of some immigrants into local culture or death of the founder of the institutions. At this juncture, it is worth mentioning of the few.

Institution for journalism:

One of the important Arab institutions in Brazil is journalism. Journalism has witnessed a unique development during the first decade of the century. It is interesting to note that daily vendors have played a significant role in circulating of these journals as they were carrying journals and weekly magazines when they go to sell in remote areas. These journals were not containing only news but it also introduced Arab culture and literary works of Arab immigrants. These journals also helped to introduce some aspect of Brazilian culture among Arab immigrants.

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Trade institution:

Trade is another important area in which Arabs played a significant role. It is fact that Portuguese and Italian immigrants were doing street trade in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro before the arrival of Arabs. When Arabs came to Brazil they shaped this trade and then entered some features into it. After getting success as a street vendor some of them opened shops, specialized primarily in textile and in scrap products. In addition to these shops, the Arabs established early commercial bodies. In 1913, the Syrian-Lebanese Chamber of Commerce was established in Brazil. Currently, Arab-Brazil Chamber of Commerce is playing a significant role in strengthening trade relationship between the Middle East countries and Brazil.

Educational institution:

The Syrian and Lebanese focused on educational aspect since the beginning of their emigration to Brazil. In 1897, Syrian-French school has been established in São Paulo. In 1912, the Institute of Easter Sports was established in the same city, and the Syrian-Brazilian Institute in 1917, the Syrian Modern Institute in 1919. Arab schools were also opened in other cities, including the Lebanese Cedar School in Rio de Janeiro and the Arab School in Campos, both established in 1935. There was a great achievement of education of Arabic language within the Brazilian universities as the Center for the Arabic Language at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of São Paulo has been established in 1948 and it was named “The Brazilian Center for Arabic Studies.

Conclusion:

That the relationship between Arabs and Brazil goes back to several centuries and from the late 19th century, Arabs have been immigrating to this region (Brazil) significantly. Most of these immigrants were Lebanese and Syrians. Fleeing the Ottoman Empire and seeking better livelihood opportunities and opportunities towards a safe future are the primary reasons behind this immigration. As these Arabs started residing in Brazil, they integrated with the Brazilian culture and their life style but by passing the time Arab immigrants also got acceptance in Brazilian society with their culture and tradition and these immigrants started contributing remarkably in the nation-building of Brazil.

If the characteristic of the background of the

occupational structure of Brazil is investigated into in detail, then it would be found that many Arabs immigrants are involved in formal (including administrative post) and informal activities which have a significant contribution to the national economy of the country. Apart from these economic contributions, Arabs are also engaged in arts, cultural activities as well as in politics. It is fact that Brazilians are open heart towards Arab immigrants and they like Arab's fashion in (especially for women) and Arabic dishes are very famous in Brazilian society. There are social clubs that are very important to the Lebanese and Syrian communities. For example, there is the Syrian-Lebanese Athletic Club in São Paulo, and this is a place where people come and meet and eat Middle Eastern food and socialize. One of the most popular and established hospitals in Brazil is the Hospital Sirio Libanes in São Paulo.

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