

THE SYRIAN-LEBANESE DIASPORA IN SAO PAULO, BRAZIL

Brazil is a big country, the largest in geographic size in South America. Brazil is also a place of big culture, flamboyant and robust as its famous coffee. In addition, Brazil is a place of big immigration. Like many South American countries, Brazil is home to numerous cultures of the world, including the largest Japanese population outside of Japan. Outside of the Middle East, Brazil also houses the world's largest Arab colony. It is estimated that upwards of 7% of Brazil's 190 million people are Arab.¹ Most of these Arabs live in the city of Sao Paulo, also Brazil's largest city. The overwhelming majority of the Arab immigrants to Brazil come from either Syria or Lebanon.

It is this extensive Arab-Muslim community that this paper will focus on. A background of historical and cultural information will precede a strategy for reaching the Syrian-Lebanese of Sao Paulo with the gospel. Given the unique situation of Islamic background and present day discrimination, Arabs in Sao Paulo pose a difficult people to reach. This tight-knit community will require fluent Arabic speaking Christians well versed in the immigration history and cultural legends of the Syrian-Lebanese people to be effective in planting churches.

Dates of Immigration

The migratory movement from Syria and Lebanon to Brazil began to be documented

¹Debora Rubin, "25 de Marco, Brazil's Most Crowded Street, Becomes Powerful Brand," *Brazzil Magazine* (September 2007), http://brazzilfile.com/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=9973 (accessed April 19, 2008).

around 1871.² Legends abound, however, among the Syrian-Lebanese population purporting ideas that the ancient Phoenicians and even King Solomon had visited what is today Brazil, establishing early communities. These legends will be looked at below. From the 1890's onward, entry of the Syrian-Lebanese population varied, fluctuating with the political and economic climate of the Middle East. Changing Brazilian immigration policy also contributed to the flux of immigrants.³ Immigration has continued at a somewhat steady pace all the way to the present day. As the Arab community has grown larger and become more successful, more and more Arabs from the Middle East are considering pursuing business opportunities in Brazil. There is potential for another surge of immigration in the near future as civil war again looms on Lebanon's horizon.

Causes for Immigration

The first immigrants from the Middle East came for the same reason the Pilgrims sought asylum in the United States – religious freedom. Records left by early immigrants arriving from Syria and Lebanon to Brazil list religious persecution of Christians by the Muslims as the principle reason for immigration.⁴ During the mid-1800's when the Ottoman Turks were in control of the Middle East a great slaughter of Christians occurred. The bloodiest confrontation, occurring in 1860, involved the massacre of over 10,000 Christians living in the area.⁵ These Christians, fearing similar devastation in the future, decided to flee the Middle East and come to Brazil. Economic oppression of Christians was common in the Middle East as well

²Montie Bryan Pitts, Jr., "Forging Ethnic Identity Through Faith: Religion and the Syrian-Lebanese Community in Sao Paulo", M.A. Diss, Vanderbilt University, 2006, 4.

³Ibid., 5.

⁴Ibid., 6.

⁵Ibid., 7.

and the immigrants found greater freedom and opportunity for commerce upon arriving in Brazil. Thus the first immigrants from the Middle East were Christians.

The vast majority of immigrants since have been Muslim. Conditions in the Middle East became harsh for every person, not just Christians. Muslims began fleeing these conditions in the Middle East after hearing of Arab success in Brazil. Large numbers began pouring in after World War Two, as the war brought increased economic difficulties to Lebanon. A few years later the Lebanese civil war broke out and drove Lebanese citizens of all religions to leave their homeland to escape the chaos.⁶ Being primarily Muslim, they began building Muslim societies in the major cities of Brazil, especially Sao Paulo. In fact, 40% of the entire Brazilian Muslim population is found in the Sao Paulo metropolitan region.⁷ These societies continue to bear fruit today with the building of factories, shops, and even Muslim hospitals as will be examined below.

Population Estimates

The population estimates of Muslims in Brazil vary wildly. According to the official 2000 census, there were only 27,239 Muslims in all of Brazil. This is less than .016% of the country's population.⁸ Comparing this statistic with the number derived from the above source, *Brazzil Magazine*, reveals a great discrepancy. That magazine estimated Arabs to make up 7% of Brazil's population. This figures out to be 13,300,000 Arabs and surely more than 27, 239 of them are Muslim. Why the disparity? Many Muslims may prefer not to identify themselves as Muslim because of the discrimination that occurs in Brazil. One source with the International

⁶Ibid., 58.

⁷Scott Morrison, "'Os Turcos': The Syrian-Lebanese Community of Sao Paulo, Brazil", *Journal of Muslim Affairs*, 25 (2005), 423.

⁸Ibid.,

Mission Board gives a very conservative estimate of 100,000 Muslims living in the Sao Paulo metropolitan area alone.⁹ If one desires to reach the Syrian-Lebanese Muslims in Sao Paulo, a more certain population figure must be determined.

It is relatively easy for immigrants to gain entrance in Brazil as immigrants readily attain short-term visas. Upon arrival, the immigrants are able to locate community, build relationships, and begin business. After five years of holding a residence permit, immigrants are eligible for Brazilian citizenship. Both Lebanon and Brazil allow for dual citizenship, a luxury not afforded by many nations, though most Brazilian Arabs only hold a Brazilian passport.¹⁰ As long as the doors for immigration remain open, there is no reason to doubt that the influx of Arabs will continue to rise. Ministries such as the IMB are beginning to place these Arabs on the radar screen but there is much background work to be done to be effective in reaching this unique population.

Legends of Settlement

The first documented arrivals of Syrian-Lebanese to Brazil occurred in the mid-1860's, as noted above. The Syrian-Lebanese themselves have a drastically different story to tell than that found on paper. Myths and legends abound as to just how early these Arabs set foot on the soils of Brazil. Shortly after the first immigrants' arrival, a myth began circulating around Brazil and was even picked up by intellectuals of Arab descent. Author Junior Amarilio recounts the tale in his book, *As vantagens da imigracao Syria no Brasil: em torno de uma polemica entre os Snrs*:

. . . [A] number of well-respected French crackpot theorists suggested that King

⁹International Mission Board worker, name withheld, email to the author, April 25, 2008.

¹⁰Morrison, 'Os Turcos', 434.

Solomon sailed the Amazon River and that the Quechua and Portuguese languages were offshoots of ancient Hebrew. Such theories were repeated frequently by the most well known Arab intellectual of the 1930's, Salomao Jorge, a prize-winning poet, author and radio commentator. Jorge modified the myth to suggest that King Solomon was the "ancestor of the Syrians" and thus Brazil's indigenous tribes descended from Solomon and by extension Jesus.¹¹

According to this theory, the indigenous peoples of Brazil owe their heritage to King Solomon. There is other evidence to back up these claims. Syrian-Lebanese chroniclers and biographers of the mid-twentieth century place the Phoenicians, the ancient inhabitants of present day Lebanon, in Brazil centuries before Christ's birth. These biographers claim the Phoenicians explored the Amazon, bringing along Israelite shipmates. They then named the upper part of the Amazon "Rio Solimoes," a name still remaining today, in honor of King Solomon of Israel.¹²

There is another story that is often told among the Arab community of Sao Paulo. It is called, "The Legend of the Town of Marataize." Many years ago there was a group of peddlers selling their wares in the interior of Espirito Santos. They traveled from place to place, led by a man named Aziz and his wife. These two stayed behind to sell their wares and wash clothes at a place known as "The Turkish Basin." Over time, a town grew up around them where people came to wash their clothes. The town was called Marataize to honor the wife (Marat) of Aziz.¹³ Keep in mind that these events are not said to be occurring in the sands of the Middle East, but in the jungles of Brazil.

By passing on such legends, the Arabs in Brazil are able to claim more of a heritage

¹¹Junior Amarilio, "O Rei Salomao no Rio Amazonas", in *As vantagens da imigracao Syria no Brasil: em torno de uma ploemica entre os Snrs*, eds. Herbert V. Levy and Salomao Jorge (Rio de Janeiro: Off. Gr. Da S. A. A Noite, 1925).

¹²Tanus Jorge Bastani, *O Libano e os libaneses no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: C. Mendes Junior, 1945).

¹³Claude Fahd Hajjar, *Imigracao arabe: 100 anos de reflexao* (Sao Paulo: Icone Editora, 1985).

than the Brazilian population usually allots them. There are two famous statues in Brazil that support this thought. One of them is in Sao Paulo, a fifty-foot tall statue named “Amizade Syrio-Lebanesa” or Syrian-Lebanese Friendship. At the top are three life-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.

The base of the statue has three corresponding sides, each with a relief denoting some Syrian contribution to world settlement. One side shows the Phoenicians as pioneers of navigation and exploration. Another side contains Haitam the First’s discovery of the Canary Islands and his teaching of the alphabet. The last side depicts the symbol of Arab penetration in Brazil, represented by commerce and prosperity.¹⁴

There is a lot of symbolism in this monument that is very interesting. Arabs have developed these legends to create a greater sense of belonging in their community. These immigrants want a place in society and have worked hard to earn it but they are not always recognized as legitimate contributors by the Brazilians. By developing these legends, the Arabs can claim a greater heritage. This particular statue carries a trinity of meaning with the female representing the Brazilian Republic, whose glory is the glory of the Brazilian fatherland. She faces the Arab maiden who offers a gift to her Brazilian brother, the indigenous warrior with the same love with which she was welcomed upon arrival in a land blessed by God.¹⁵

A famous poem is also written on the base of this statue, further interpreting what it stands for. The message of the poem is clear: Arab greatness has changed the world, even allowing Brazil to have been discovered and helped to prosper. The poem’s writer, Elias Farhat

¹⁴Michael Humphries, “Ethnic History, Nationalism, and Transnationalism in Argentine Arab and Jewish Cultures”, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 16 (1997), 167-88.

¹⁵Ettore Ximenes, quoted in *O Estado de Sao Paulo* (No Publisher: May 1928), 9.

communicates that Arabs were a part of the colonization of Brazil, and because of the “brotherly” relationship between the figures at the top of the statue, the Syrian-Lebanese community has become biologically Brazilian. The poem is written in Arabic and Portuguese and is said to have transformed the Middle East into a region of mobile culture and religious strength. Arabs were at the heart of the settling of Brazil, so these writers want to prove, and have increased the stature of the country by their prosperity and contributions.¹⁶

Anthropologist Jeffery Lasser notes that, “These legends allow the immigrants to purport a more original or authentic “Brazilianness” than the Brazilians of European decent. This is not hard to understand, as Brazil is ruled by the elitist white European background persona. Discrimination has taken place of all non-whites.”¹⁷

In addition, Brazil does not keep a record of the ethnic origin of its immigrants. This practice allows for a more thorough assimilation of citizens, something Brazil has always strived for. Interestingly enough, in the face of this practice stand the Arabs, fighting for distinction and recognition for their contributions to the Brazilian society. Simultaneously the Arabs want to blend with the culture but also stand out for their contributions to in. Aside from legends told in homes and on the streets, there is a record of documented print asserting the Muslim identity. One example of particular note occurred on the 500th anniversary of the “discovery” of Brazil in the year 2000. An Arabic magazine, *Al-Urubat*, was headlined with the following title: “The Arrival of the Muslims in Brazil Five Hundred Years Ago.”¹⁸ Even in the midst of a nationwide celebration of Brazilian heritage, the Muslims distinguish themselves and assert their right to

¹⁶Elias Farhat, *Dinheiro na Estrada: Uma saga de imigrantes*, trans. Afonso Nagib Sabbag (Sao Paulo: T. A. Queiroz, 1986), 3.

¹⁷Jeffery Lesser, “Negotiating National Identity: Middle Eastern and Asian Immigrants and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil”, a working paper presented to The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego, 2000, 4.

¹⁸Morrison, ‘Os Turcos’, 436.

recognition.

Implications

Understanding the significance of this cultural heritage is vital to effectively reach the Syrian-Lebanese community. The Arabs are a very distinct population in Sao Paulo on the one hand but on the other they desire recognition and prominence for their contributions to the settlement and prosperity of Brazil as a whole. A missionary would find immediate opposition upon trying to reach this community if the Arab cultural heritage is not understood and communicated. These legends are a type of creation story in themselves insofar as they explain the origin of the earliest people in what is today known as Brazil. The fact is it is unimportant as to whether these legends are true or not. They have shaped the culture of the Arabs in Brazil and attention must be given to this culture to be effective in reaching the people.

The Practice of Islam in Sao Paulo

In 1929 Muslims organized the Sociedade Beneficente Musulmana to care for the Muslim peoples of Sao Paulo. This society, in addition to the contributions of the Syrian-Lebanese immigrants, raised money from the governments of Arab Muslim countries in the Middle East.¹⁹ The first mosques were built in an attempt to retain the Islamic orthodoxy as found in Syria and Lebanon. Today, Muslims report that there are at least ninety-eight mosques in Brazil, with most of these being concentrated around Sao Paulo. Ninety-four of these mosques are said to be Sunni with the other four being Shiite. Only about half of these mosques have an Imam and due to this shortage of leadership, many devout Muslims complain that most

¹⁹Pitts, "Forging Ethnic Identity Through Faith", 58.

Muslims in Brazil are not aware of the requirements and traditions of their faith.²⁰

Cultural Strain on Formal Islam

Because of the shortage of Imams and the accompanying structure, one of the most difficult questions for Muslim immigrants is to what extent should one adhere to Islamic law in a non-Islamic country? Most conservative Muslims feel that Muslims should follow Islamic law to the fullest extent possible, unless it conflicts with Brazilian law. An example would be that since Brazilian law does not allow polygamy, even though the Quran allows it, Muslims must obey Brazilian law. However, if Brazilian law were to impose some command upon Muslims to do things contrary to the Quran, such as eat pork, they could not obey.²¹ There is not a great deal of regulation (the Ummah society), however, to keep anyone in check. This is causing a great conflict among immigrants, with the divide centering mainly between the new immigrants and the older generations who value a stricter adherence to the law.

The most conservative Muslims tend to be the newest arrivals which makes sense considering Syria and Lebanon are much more Islamic than Brazil. These immigrants, in an interview by Pitts, stated that it is most important for Muslims to follow the five pillars of Islam. They should particularly focus on praying five times a day and observing Ramadan. Next, the Muslims should treat others with respect by having good relationships with their neighbors. They should try hard to retain Islamic traditions like wearing beards and veils.²²

This enthusiasm does not seem to last very long though, once the new arrivals become immersed in the more nominal Muslim culture of Brazil. Pitts recorded another Muslim at the

²⁰Ibid., 59.

²¹Ibid., 63.

²²Ibid., 63.

same mosque stating that Brazilians believe that “what is beautiful should be shown.” From my own experience in Brazil, the culture likes to take this idea to the extreme! It is interesting that a Muslim would purport such an ideal though.

Many Brazilian Arabs, having become more cultural in their faith, make fun of devout beard wearing Muslims. Pitts recorded some humorous statements in one mosque while discussing this topic. The Arabs, upon seeing a beard wearer approaching would exclaim, “Look, Bin Ladin has arrived” or “Here comes the bomb man!” These comments were in jest, as Brazilian Muslims reject this type of extremist Islam, but they do give one a picture of the lack of seriousness in Islamic practice that is more common in the Middle East.²³ These more liberal Muslims have often abandoned the practice of praying five times a day. They stated that they did not even mind if their children were not practicing Muslims, as long as they still had a strong sense of morality and believed in God.

The vast majority of the Muslims in Sao Paulo are Sunni. There is fellowship among other sects of the Syrian-Lebanese community as well. Sunni Muslims are known to invite other members of the non-Muslim community to important events like the end of Ramadan and the celebration after Hajj. These Sunnis state that they have a cordial relationship with the Syrian-Lebanese Christians, maintained with no overt friendship or war but mutual respect.²⁴ The Sunnis also state that they have no conflict with the Shiites but are adamant that Shiites are not true Muslims. If a Shiite visits a Sunni mosque they will not be allowed to lead the prayers or give a sermon.²⁵ The loose bond shared by all Syrian-Lebanese immigrants in Brazil divides

²³Ibid., 59-60.

²⁴Ibid., 63.

²⁵Ibid., 64.

along religious lines just as it does in their homeland.

The Use of Arabic

There have not been studies done on the retention of Arabic among the immigrants except what Montie Pitts observed while living in Sao Paulo researching and writing his dissertation for Vanderbilt University. Pitts was interested in the religious practices of the Muslims in Sao Paulo and visited many mosques for observation. Though not there for evangelical purposes, his research is the best available at the moment. Pitts attended Friday prayers at the Sunni Mesquita de Sao Paulo, the largest and oldest mosque in the city. Pitts notes that Arabic was the language of prayer. Arabic was also the language of one of the three sermons he observed that day. It was also the language in which a large percentage of the faithful conversed before and during the sermons. This is particularly interesting because Pitts observed that in the Arab Christian churches in Sao Paulo, hardly anyone was able to speak Arabic.²⁶

This has important missiological implications, as will be addressed below. It is possible that the Christians are no longer able to speak Arabic because they were among the first immigrants and have been exposed to Brazilian culture the longest. I propose that Muslims retain Arabic since it is tied with Islam so closely. The Muslims in particular do not want to blend in with the Brazilian culture and speaking Arabic instead of Portuguese is the easiest method of distinction. Statistician Oscar Egidio de Araujo notes that immigrant Muslims have an extremely low assimilation rate. The neighborhoods they live in are “frankly Syrian.” There are 211 Sao Paulo state newspapers published and only eleven of them are in a language other

²⁶Ibid., 60.

than Portuguese. Of these eleven, four are in Arabic.²⁷

Immigrant Culture

One man remarked, “Lebanese culture? It doesn’t exist here. It is back there...in Lebanon.”²⁸ The Syrian-Lebanese are in the midst of a cultural quagmire. As noted above, the lack of Islamic pressure and ridgedity found in Syria and Lebanon has allowed for the drifting of Muslim practice and values among the community in Brazil. The immigrant culture has morphed and blended into something that is neither Lebanese nor Brazilian. Two cultural features continue to stand out however: food and entertainment.

Cultural Foods

There are over fifty Arabic restaurants in Sao Paulo, from storefront style to upscale.²⁹ The most well known and visible is Habib’s. Habib’s is a fast food style restaurant serving a variety of Arabish foods, including half of the 1.2 million Arab meat pies sold daily in Sao Paulo.³⁰ One is unlikely to encounter actual Arabs in Habib’s however, as the chain has become very popular with the spectrum of Brazilian peoples. Habib’s is booming, but not all Arabic restaurants enjoy similar success.

Abdullah, who manages the restaurant and store, “Al-Malik” said that, “Business was not too good but it was still better than the business in Lebanon.”³¹ The lunch special on the day

²⁷Jeffery Lesser, “Jews and Turks Who Sell on Credit: Elite Images of Arabs and Jews in Brazil,” in *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America: Images and Realities*, eds. Ignacio Klich and Jeffery Lesser (Oxford: Routledge, 1998), 46.

²⁸Morrison, ‘Os Turcos’, 424.

²⁹Ibid., 425.

³⁰Rubin, “25 de Marco, Brazil’s Most Crowded Street”, 1.

³¹Morrison, ‘Os Turcos’, 424.

of Morrison's visit included lentils, rice, *babaghanouch*, *tabouleh*, *hummous*, *ful-mudamas*, *shawarma*, and other Arabic specialties.³² The fondness of Arabic cuisine is widespread in the community. A magazine columnist joked, when asked what her favorite perfume was, that there were three scents she preferred and then went on to name three different Arabic foods.³³ Food is a linking factor among ethnic peoples and there is no exception among the Middle Eastern immigrants living in Sao Paulo.

Cultural Entertainment

A poster was on the wall at Al-Maliks advertising for an "Arab Night." A local noted that this show was worth seeing as it showcased Arab belly dancing.³⁴ I find this strange as belly dancing seems to move beyond the Muslim view of women as dignified and in need of constant covering and distance from the eyes of men. The Arab Night was held at a popular Arabic club in Sao Paulo called Club Homs, named after the city in Syria.³⁵ This club was established in 1920 and reflects a cross-section of the Syrian-Lebanese community. The club has open membership but the price is steep. Membership is dominated by those from Syrian origin. This club seems to be the melting pot for entertainment among immigrants looking to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh. Aside from belly dancing, one can find hair salons, a gym, swimming pool, video game room, billiards, and a bar.³⁶ In the midst of the very un-Islamic attractions, vestiges of Islam still remain as the hair salons are separated by gender, as are the billiard rooms.

³²Ibid., 425.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., 426.

³⁶Ibid., 427-28.

Juxtaposed in close proximity were televisions broadcasting a fashion show complete with bikini-clad women pacing up and down a catwalk.³⁷

Club Homs is making a deliberate effort to interest the younger generation in Arabic music and entertainment. It sponsored an “Arab-Brazilian Youth Night” intended to

...form a group which is interested in having fun while preserving its Arab roots and vast culture. As a spontaneous call of Brazilians you who do not feel ashamed that they have Arab blood in their veins, and who now show the world the pride they have in their descent from an ancient culture, a culture rich and greatly influential on other peoples.³⁸

Interestingly these Brazilian-Arabs who “do not feel ashamed that they have Arab blood” would be ostracized and even disciplined for attending such a club in their homeland. Again, far removed from the strictness of Islam as found in Syria, these youths are able to live in two worlds; the world of Arab and Islamic heritage mixed with the sensual pleasures common to Brazil. The bar at Club Homs features expensive Black Label scotch prominently displayed and also includes imported *laraq*, a Lebanese liquor.³⁹

Implications

The wholeness and harmony of Islam is strained to say the least among these immigrants to Brazil. One is as likely to find a Muslim at Club Homs as at the mosque on a Friday evening. The lives of the Syrian-Lebanese are much more likely to be compartmentalized in Brazil, allowing room for these normally off-limits practices. There are several magazines devoted to the Arabic community and culture that showcase this compartmental lifestyle. One such magazine, *Al-Chams*, seeks to express the virtues of loyalty, persistence and diligence of Muslim immigrants. Loyalty to individuals, customers and patrons of Arabic business,

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 426.

³⁹Ibid., 428.

community and the countries of Syria and Lebanon is showcased and encouraged through biographies and articles. A willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the community is encouraged. The magazine glorifies modesty in the face of places like Club Homs. Modesty and other sacrifices will lead to success and contribute to the glory of the greater whole.⁴⁰

A battle is taking place in the Syrian-Lebanese communities of Sao Paulo. The old ways of Islam are challenged like never before upon immigration. As noted earlier, the lack of Middle Eastern Imams at the mosques is allowing for a divergence of Islamic form and practice. More immigrants are pushing Islam out of the main view and are even content with their children ceasing to be practicing Muslims. Brazilian culture is so sensual and opportunities for indulgence so great that many Muslims are becoming much more Brazilian than they would like to admit. Certainly this felt cultural strain is a window of opportunity for the missionary.

Industry and Business

The traditional occupation of Lebanese immigrants is clothing manufacture. The textile industry still thrives but immigrants are branching out and seeking new areas for business. Arabs are successful in Sao Paulo because they are willing to live in lower class neighborhoods and in apartments above their factories. They strategically place shops near railway stations so that Brazilians cannot help but pass through these “Arab districts” upon exiting from the commuting train. Impulse buying leads to a great profit.⁴¹ In this way, the immigrants are able to market goods to their fellow Arabs as well as a host of other Brazilians who pass through their neighborhoods on the way to and from work. Some of these textiles are being marketed in the

⁴⁰Ibid., 432.

⁴¹Lesser, “Jews and Turks Who Sell on Credit”, 45.

famous high class shopping districts on Rua Oriente and Avineda Paulista.⁴²

These traditional occupations continue but younger immigrants and the children and grandchildren of previous immigrants are seeking new ways to make a living. Particularly attractive professions include law and medicine.⁴³ Sao Paulo city boasts some of the most prestigious universities in all of South America so educational opportunities are not lacking. In order to be able to study in high class Sao Paulo, a small number of students receive scholarships and stipends to send them to Syria for free undergraduate study.⁴⁴ Education is becoming more common and accessible for these immigrants.

Opportunity for Syrian and Lebanese descent doctors is in high demand. A famous hospital, focused on the Muslim community of Sao Paulo was in the works as early as 1921. At the time Brazil was in the midst of a coffee crisis and a young Lebanese woman, Adma Jafet, proposed the idea of building a Lebanese hospital. A few years later, the vision became a reality. The then extreme minority culture raised funds and finally built the hospital in 1965. Today the hospital has grown dramatically and is operated by the Muslim Benificant Society. The hospital's focus is to reach the poor of the surrounding Bela Vista neighborhood but the quality of service has become so well known that Muslims from all of Sao Paulo seek treatment there. The hospital employs 2700 people, including 1200 doctors. They treat over 5000 patients a month.⁴⁵

Opportunity for business in the primary draw for immigration today. The Syrian-

⁴²Morrison, 'Os Turcos', 434.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., 435.

⁴⁵Isaura Daniel, *Brazil's Syrian Lebanese Hospital: 85 Years of Dedication to Health and Philanthropy*, Brazzil Magazine (March 18, 2006), <http://www.brazzilmag.com/content/view/5831/54/> (Accessed April 19, 2008).

Lebanese are proud of their Middle-Eastern background and are taking advantage of the eclectic nature of Sao Paulo, Brazil. The traditional occupations of textile industry found in Syria and Lebanon are experiencing tension in Brazil. Opportunity abounds in Sao Paulo for those willing to seek education not provided in the Middle East. Education means these immigrants are no longer forced to be factory workers and restaurant owners but can now become doctors and dentists. The wide range of occupations found among the immigrants requires a different approach for the missionary, as will be discussed below.

Strategy for Reaching the Syrian-Lebanese Muslims of Sao Paulo

In recent history it does not seem that many Christians have been concerned with reaching the Muslims of Sao Paulo. In fact, the latest edition of Operation World made no mention of Muslims in the book's section on Brazil, other than in the religion figures. There were no strategies and no prayer points for reaching Muslims in any part of Brazil. To our shame Brazil is seen by many Muslims as the jumping off point for the evangelization of the Americas.⁴⁶ There are a few missionaries however who are burdened to see Muslims come to Christ in Sao Paulo. A strategy for reaching these Muslims will follow, based on the above research on legend, Arabic retention, and unique cultural practices.

As noted above (pages 4-7), the Syrian-Lebanese immigrants have developed a series of legends giving credence to their contribution to Brazilian society. Allotting the Muslims the respect they desire in society will be key to gaining a listening audience. These Muslims seem eager to recount how their ancestors discovered Brazil and helped it to prosper. Being familiar with the tension of discrimination and the Arab's desire to remain independent that drives these

⁴⁶International Mission Board worker, email with the author, April 25, 2008. (I have withheld names due to the sensitive nature of the work with Muslims in Brazil. This conversation will provide the majority of the strategy I will employ for reaching the Muslims of Sao Paulo).

legends is vital. The legends reveal the fight against assimilation into the Brazilian melting pot of culture.

Language Considerations

The main way the immigrants are able to remain separate is by their retention of Arabic. The Muslims, of all the immigrants from the Middle East, have the highest retention of Arabic. This is another key to reaching them. The IMB worker mentioned that of the few groups reaching out to these Muslims, most do not speak Arabic.⁴⁷ I believe that Muslims will shun efforts to reach them in Portuguese for fear of being more assimilated in the Brazilian culture. The people prefer to read and speak in Arabic so the missionaries must speak Arabic and provide Bible study and other materials in Arabic.

Evangelical culture in Brazil is highly hierarchical in structure. Currently pastors control much of what goes on and not many of them speak Arabic. This is resulting in a great difficulty in getting the gospel message down to the street level. There are two Baptist churches doing work in Arabic but the desire is to train many more Arabic speakers to form small groups focused on evangelism.⁴⁸ The small group approach fits well with the community idea present in Islam. Small Arabic speaking groups will guard against the Muslims feeling threatened that they must accept the Brazilian cultural gospel. Arabic is the primary language spoken in the mosques so the missionary must be able to converse in Arabic when visiting the mosque and building relationships. These relationships are vitally important as they allow the Muslims to maintain the Ummah community.

There are several of these groups of people gathered into what is called a MAC or

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

Arab-Christian Ministry. These MACs contain five to fifteen people who are called to reach out to the Muslims around them. They focus on providing a community for interested Muslims to fall into. Upon conversion to Christianity, the person will have an immediate community to fill the void coming from rejection by other Muslims. The MACs are Arabic speaking for the most part and focus on Arab businessmen. An Arabic speaking Christian community is what is needed to reach an Arabic speaking Muslim community.

Cultural Considerations

The more devout Muslims will be found at the mosques but as recorded, many Muslims are becoming more influenced by the loose culture of Brazil. Another approach is needed to reach these Muslims in places like Club Homs. Arabic is still the language of choice but the cultural stigma of strict Islam is reduced. It is highly doubtful that these Muslims are very familiar with the Quran so it is not necessary to use it for evangelical purposes. Missionaries who use the Quran may end up educating the person more about Islam than is beneficial.

These Muslims are more akin to the classical Brazilian citizen who is consumed with the drive for pleasure and entertainment. They are open to conversation and this should be taken advantage of. These sinful indulgences are not enough to fill the needs of the practitioners. Only Jesus Christ can take the resultant burden of sin away and fill the person with a hope and reason to live. These more nominal Muslims are in the midst of the greatest cultural tension, torn between the backdrop of Islam and the sensuous culture of Brazil.

Using this tension and the guilt it produces as a bridge to the gospel would be a strategic point. They are in a position similar to American college students. These students live in a culture that encourages drinking and all kinds of sin. It is very difficult for a college student

to leave that community if they live in the midst of it. In a similar manor to American college students, these cultural Muslims need a Christian community to provide support and encouragement. Again, the MACs are a useful strategy to provide the context one would need to see a disciplined life. Being in contact with Christians who reject the sensuous culture and live to please God would be alluring to a Muslim who has lost connection with the values of his or her faith.

Conclusion

This paper has given the history and culture of the Syrian-Lebanese immigrants to Sao Paulo, Brazil. The unique culture of Brazil has placed a tremendous tension on the immigrants, pushing them to assimilate into the whole of Brazilian culture. Because of the strong Islamic cultural and linguistic ties brought from the Middle East, the immigrants are resistant to this assimilation.

Understanding this tension is the key to reaching the Syrian-Lebanese with the gospel. The immigrants live in Arab neighborhoods complete with Arab food, industry, and language. To the degree they are able in the midst of Brazil, many are attempting to replicate the Ummah community of Islam. This community is resistant to Portuguese, as seen by the Arabic magazines they publish. It will take a community of Arabic speaking Christians familiar with the unique culture of the Syrian-Lebanese of Sao Paulo to reach them with the gospel. Until this strategy is realized on a wider scale, attempts by Portuguese speaking Christians will be turned away.

As far as IMB strategy for reaching Muslims, Sao Paulo is the next city in Brazil to be reached.⁴⁹ Much prayer must be poured into the process, asking for God to raise up Arabic

⁴⁹Ibid.

speakers who see the value of focusing on the Islamic minority in the city. More MACs need to be raised up along with workers to train them to effectively reach their neighborhoods. The Muslims of Sao Paulo are on the frontier of missions with little research currently available on their culture. As more and more information becomes available, I pray more and more Christians will be burdened to give their lives to bring these needy people the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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