

The Ugandan Asian Archive Oral History Project

An Oral History with Mariam Habib

Archives and Research Collections

Carleton University Library

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Narrator: Mariam Habib
Researcher: Yasmin Jamal
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Abstract:

Mariam Habib is originally from Tanzania, where she worked as a freelance writer. She immigrated to Canada in the 1970s during the period of tension in East Africa, and during the period of nationalization. The government of Tanzania had begun transferring businesses from private ownership to government ownership, which affected many business owners of South Asian descent, and including her family's printing press.

While she was not personally affected by the expulsion from Uganda, Mrs. Habib was working as an employment counsellor in Vancouver in the late 1970s after the Ugandan Asian refugees arrived. She recounts her experiences with assisting new immigrants in finding jobs and settling in to their new lives in Canada. She also discusses the power of storytelling as a means for immigrant women to find empowerment and articulate life skills.

Question: “What were some of the challenges the Ugandan expellees were facing during their settlement in Canada?”

Mariam Habib: [Referencing another recorded interview with a radio station in 1992, entitled, “Encounters and Arrivals” during the bi-centennial of Vancouver]. “This interview sets the stage to my background. With the Ugandan expellees my role came after the initial influx. But what I went through in my personal life, is very reflective to what the Ugandan refugees were going through. “Post-traumatic stress”, “role reversal”, “lack of Canadian experience” and “transferring qualifications and skills acquired in East Africa to Canadian Standards” were some of the challenges the expellees faced.

- Seniors who had been very active in East Africa as business owners, leaders, professional and government employees suddenly found themselves without structure, roles and maybe for the first time, not contributing to family finances.
- Having lost my own father in law, in Africa because he lost his role after “Nationalization”, I was very much conscious of how this was affecting the seniors’ mental health and of the importance of integrating their skills and making them feel useful.

Fortunately, my first job in Vancouver was with the Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division; to set up a Resource Library that would house and access all mental health resources, services and related information under one roof. At that time, before the internet and computer, this was done manually. This experience proved to be invaluable to me in assisting Ugandan expellees and other East African displaced immigrants and refugees.”

Question: “What else did you do at the Canadian Mental Health Association?”

Mariam: “In 1976, I participated in the World Mental Health Conference. This was the first of the World Mental Health conferences and it was held at University of British Columbia. This conference was attended by the late Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist, Buckminster Fuller of the “Geodesic Domes” fame and many leaders in Mental Health and Social Development fields.”

Question: “Other than mental health issues, what were the other challenges faced by the Ugandan expellees and other immigrants from East Africa?”

Mariam: “Transferring and recognition of their education, qualifications, and skills to fair Canadian equivalencies.

The other challenge was avoiding the “revolving door syndrome” while ensuring that they were receiving on the job or other training, to enhance their vocations and employment. Together with a lot of support and help from our community volunteers, various committees, leaders, pioneers and government agencies, innovating training, job shadowing and mentorship programs were introduced and implemented. For example, “Power Sewing Machine” training for women, computer hardware assembling (main frame computers were just being introduced). Some of these training programs were offered at night at Vocational Schools like Vancouver Community College so our clients could use these facilities which were used by mainstream students in the daytime.”

Question: “What are some of the examples of successful training programs?”

Mariam: “The one that comes to my mind is that women graduates of the power sewing machine program went into successful businesses of their own and in due time, owned dry cleaning and related businesses. Many men who had background in electronic equipment, and small appliances repair were successfully retrained and employed in various computer related fields as computers (mainframes) were just emerging.

Another success story was that in the late 70’s we received an amazing letter from a company called Anatek thanking us for referring clients whom they had trained and employed. Various letters of commendations were also received by the Ismailia Council from the government officials who had received the expellees who first landed, who saw them through their orientation, settlement and integration. Expellees from Uganda were labelled by them as “an upward mobile community”. During the first ever visit by His Highness the Aga Khan, in 1978, some of these officials personally attended the dinner hosted by His Highness and they spoke very highly of the resiliency and integrity of these Ugandans.”

Question: “Any other job placement success stories?”

Mariam: “The one that comes to mind is of an ex-business man who was referred to a convenience store as an employee later ended up owning the store and in turn hiring more displaced people. He eventually ended up buying the franchise.

A lot of support and assistance was offered by successful Ismaili persons to those struggling finding employment, accommodation or who had other needs, for example, one young person was offered an entry level job at such a hotel and is now in upper management and partnership.”

Question: “Tell us more about the challenges the seniors faced and how they overcame these.”

Mariam: “The seniors faced isolation, lack of worthwhile activities and opportunities to connect with their peer group, communicate and be part of mainstream seniors and access resources. Innovative solutions and programs were established at grass root levels often by seniors themselves introducing and running these with encouragement and leadership from community volunteers.

Seniors Helping Seniors: Some Feisty seniors undertook to teach English language communication skills, keeping in mind the cultural values and often translating from Gujerati. It was at this time that they started using and accessing senior Centers such as 411 Dunsmuir Center, Welcome House, etc.

Another very important role these pioneers played was helping others who now qualified to receive Canadian Citizenship. They translated the Citizenship guide book in Gujerati and trained the applicants in giving Interviews. Given the traumatic way they had been uprooted, it was important for them to have mentors who supported them, and holding mock interviews. Community volunteers and Ismaili staff at the Citizenship court also helped. One such Citizenship Court Judge Bruce Howard was greatly impressed by these expellees' courage and resilience.

During the first visit of His Highness the Aga Khan in 1978 to Canada, His Highness was favorably impressed by the training and job placement results, employment and business centres' services and other such unique support that was provided by volunteer committees under the council's leadership.

During this time a group of community volunteers undertook to record the seniors' experiences, both in Uganda and their transition to Canada. This exercise greatly boosted their self esteem and they realized their self worth, their contribution and wisdom.

Because of my own background, I encouraged them to write their stories, which ended up being therapeutic and giving them a sense of achievement. This was the time I was writing about my own 'roots' and encouraged especially women to write their stories by giving them prompts such as "I was born"... This enhanced their English Language Skills and gave them a platform to relate their experiences. Incidentally my collection of African Short Stories, entitled "The Lost Child" was also published in 1978 (New York)."

Question: "Previously you touched upon mental health issues, tell us more about these."

Mariam: "Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, depression, domestic violence, dysfunctional families, the break down of families, role reversals, gender and generation gaps that were experienced by mainstream were more pronounced among these expellees. In addition, they were not discussed or address as these have traditionally been 'taboo subjects'.

The volunteers, various committees and community professionals spent countless hours trying to address these issues. Again, my story writing skills were invaluable by encouraging them to journal or write in a non threatening environment, they could express their feelings.

Another milestone at that time was also the publication of an Ismaili magazine – Ismosaic (forerunner of Ismaili Canada Magazine). Likewise, there were other publications like 'Al-Qasis' the children's religious stories about values, ethics, transitions and changes.

The mid and late 70s were years when cultural, social, religious, economic, academic and professional lives of these Ugandan expellees were greatly improved and enhanced. There were structures in place under the Ismailia Council like the committees, boards and offices mostly run by volunteers that contributed in making the Ugandans and other East African immigrants an established community and leaders who are now not only serving the Canadians but are now serving the global projects as the Aga Khan had predicted during his 1978 visit.

In 1980, when I went to work with the federal government, I was able to help and further settlement training and employment. I was fortunate to work in various federal government offices like Health and Welfare Canada, Employment and Immigration Settlement.

My role in the government offices put me in a unique position where I could guide and deliver appropriate government programs and direct training and settlement funding to appropriate projects initiated by our committees so that the volunteers got resources and funds to further promote these programs without undue stress on their own time and resources. Thus preventing 'burnouts' for, even in those days, I was very conscious of the self care of the caregivers.

The Ugandan Settlement model and example greatly helped other refugees and displaced immigrants such as the Afghans."

Question: "Can you tell us what other role you played with the government that brought meaningful changes as to how the government programs were geared to delivering services."

Mariam: "In 1980, as a Chairperson of BC Association of Social Workers of BC's Multicultural Concerns Committee, I was invited to attend and lead the first ever Immigrant Women's Conference in Toronto. Hosted by the then Prime Minister Honorable Pierre Trudeau, Minister of Employment - Honorable Axworthy and Jim Flemming - Minister of State for Multiculturalism.

During this conference, I co-facilitated a workshop that addressed the barriers and challenges the immigrant women faced to access and retain meaningful employment and training. My experience working with the Ugandan expellees greatly enhanced and allowed me to identify the barriers first hand. At the end of the conference, the resolutions and recommendations were circulated, noted and some were implemented as very significant changes at the federal level to remove some of the barriers immigrant women faced.

Question: "Earlier you mentioned the publications, programs, boards, committees established under the H.H. Aga Khan Ismailia Council; how about Jamat Khanas, or Ismaili prayer houses?"

Mariam: "Jamat Khanas or Ismaili Prayer houses, have historically played significant part in bringing the community together and building networks anywhere in the world as it happened in Africa during late 1800's and early 1900s when Ismailis from the Indian Subcontinent established their Jamat Khanas in East Africa and elsewhere. Jamat Khanas have always been refuge and catalysts for delivering emotional, social, and spiritual support.

In the early 70's in Canada, Jamat Khanas were usually in school gyms and temporary halls and peoples' homes. Then more permanent Jamat Khanas were established culminating in BC having the first purpose built in North America."

Question: "What do you believe helped the Ugandan expellees successfully adapt, settle and prosper in Canada."

Mariam: "Their resilience, courage, determination and faith and helping each other were the factors that made their integration successful.

There were pioneer families not necessarily from Uganda, but primarily from Tanzania and Kenya who came a little earlier than the Ugandan exodus in 1972. These families who were comparatively more settled and in some cases, owning their own businesses, were instrumental in receiving, orienting, settling and in some cases employing Ugandan expellees.

Expellees in better positions were also helping less fortunate Ugandans. An example was a spunky lady who herself had never worked out of the home, not only secured a job for herself but also took an elderly Ugandan lady who too had never worked outside her home in Uganda and placed her in a fish cleaning plant. Then they shortly went to work at a retail warehouse eventually they all ended up as retail cashiers, admin and supervisors. One female even managed to open her dry cleaning business."

Question: "What were some significant problems then and continuing now?"

Mariam: "Seniors housing, independent senior living, care of the care givers.

I continued to advocate for holistic seniors dwellings that would keep them part and parcel of the community and yet give them their independence and self worth. Their care givers would be in a better position to help them.”

[End of transcript].

2nd Interview: Wednesday April 5, 2016

Question: You stated previously, that though you were not from Uganda, your experience was very similar to the Ugandan expellees. Can you elaborate and give us some background as to when you became involved with the settlement of the Ugandans.

Answer: I came from Tanzania in 1974, to Toronto, in 1976 I moved to Vancouver with my 6-year-old young son. Because of my experience, education, counselling and training, I wanted to continue completing my Social Work Degree at the University of British Columbia while I worked as at that time I was on my own supporting my son.

Question: Can you give individual specific examples in the varied way you helped the expellees after their initial settlement period?

As I mentioned in the previous interview, family violence and the 'stigma' attached to mental health issues were the main challenges.

Question: How did you address these issues?

Answer: The best way we felt that this was to be handled as a multi prong approach – whereby volunteers with appropriate background and experience worked as a team and also as being the buffers between mainstream service providers to bring in the cultural and confidential aspects to their delivery.

There were criminal, legal and family court ramifications in one of such first cases regarding domestic violence. This informal team of volunteers came together, some with professional background, some just becoming/training but the case was handled very discretely and sensitive to cultural ramifications. All the family members involved got counselling, treatment, rehabilitation and necessary assistance to face the tremendous burden of being expellees and having to deal with the court systems, etc.

Question: Any other example where assistance was given to Uganda expellees?

Answer: A case that comes to my mind is that of a young Ugandan, 37, was diagnosed with leukemia and needed a bone marrow transplant. This was more challenging in the 70's than it is now. Again a multi prong approach was used. University of BC's VGH specialists and immigration personnel were involved together with our volunteers. The parents were stuck in the UK after being expelled in Uganda. Again a major airline, was approached on compassionate grounds and helped with the tickets for parents from UK to visit. There was special housing need for this patient while receiving bone marrow transplants. This was done and the patient received very good housing where his parents spent time with him making his life comfortable in loving surroundings.

Question: Mariam, you seem to be proactive in your approach and even in the 70s and 80s, you had supportive networks even when you yourself were an immigrant. What was your motivation?

Answer: I believe in paying it forward as I said earlier, you learn best what you teach.

Question: Any other examples?

Answer: Yes, in the late 70s, a young UBC student (Ugandan expellee) was killed by a drunk driver who ran a red light killing the student who was driving his passenger to early morning prayers. Volunteers and professionals stepped in and the family were given all the help and support needed, the whole Ismaili community and the community at large, and government officials (including Senator Mobina Jaffer who was being called to bar) also stepped in to deal with the traumatic situation.

Question: How did you incorporate your experience/training in the mainstream to help Ugandan expellees and other immigrants and what do you believe in? and what is your motivation?

Answer: I believe in empowering individuals especially women and leading by example. Serving on the Curriculum Committee of "**Leadership Vancouver**" further enhanced my leadership skills.

Question: what according to you is the status of the Ugandan expellees now?

Answer: Majority of them have not only settled and thrived and served in Canada, but many of their children and grand children are now serving globally in many different professions and capacities.