

The story that brought me to Alberta

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I looked out of the window on a stormy, wintry night. The snow was blowing on the empty street ahead. Our street, called Christmas Lane every year, was decorated with bright-coloured lights and decorations.

Every mid-November, our neighbour Greg, dubbed the self-styled Santa, eagerly took it upon himself to remind everyone on the street that it was time to decorate for the festive season. He couldn't care about the mounting power bills, or that some seniors couldn't afford to light up so soon, or that some of us were Muslims and so Christmas had no religious significance to us.

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” I told my family. So in the spirit of good neighbourliness and in the spirit of Xmas, I would religiously – no pun intended – decorate my home. After all, we Muslims do not want more trouble than we already have. Those terrorists have spoiled our names and our religion enough and I didn't want to create another international incident!

I recall our first Christmas in Canada in 1973. We were called new Canadians then instead of Pakis. It was a proud label. “I am a new Canadian from Tanzania,” I used to proudly tell everyone in the office.

. Every immigrant seeking a job in Canada has been asked at least once whether he has had Canadian experience or not. In the 70s, it used to be standard question that every employer used to ask in an interview. This is one commodity – Canadian Experience – that big box stores should consider selling so that poor immigrants can go and buy as soon as they enter the country. Apparently, there is a huge demand for it.

During those earlier days of settlement, we new immigrants would all meet in the evenings, have coffee and exchange our stories and find out if anyone was lucky enough to get a job without Canadian experience. No such luck. Were employers bringing Canadian experience as an excuse to bar coloured immigrants out of jobs? I didn't believe so until I became a victim of Canadian experience myself.

We arrived in our first port of call in Canada, Toronto, with only \$1,000 with which to make a new beginning in our new country and with high hopes to build a great future.

We were among thousands of Asians from East African countries of Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, who were forced out of newly independent countries for simply being what we were –African-born but of Asian ancestry. We were loyal to African countries of our birth, but as it happened in Uganda, dictator Idi Amin, creating an

international outcry, which later on culminated in the largest Asian exodus that the world had ever seen, expelled Asians overnight. Canada, among other countries, took 6,000 Asians from Uganda.

In neighbouring Tanzania, Julius Nyerere had embarked upon an aggressive policy of socialism and had nationalized banks, import-export businesses and properties, which had greatly affected Asians, who were the business class. In Kenya, the Asians were also anxious to leave as majority of them were British passport holders and they were trying to get into United Kingdom before it closed its doors to non-white immigrants. Amin's expulsion of Asians gave an added impetus to Asians to leave Africa as they started mistrusting African leaders and it also acted as a wake-up call for them to leave. Hence most Asian families started sending their professional children abroad.

Armed with seven years of senior editorial experience and British journalism training, I arrived in Toronto thinking getting a job would be easy. I was wrong. I went to see the managing editor of one of the dailies. Instead of looking at my resume, he chastised me for having the audacity to have the aspirations of seeking a job on one of the "best" newspapers in Canada. He advised I would have to work on "one of the smaller weeklies" as a start because I didn't have "Canadian experience."

I was shocked to hear this. My experience and my training were considered to be worthless. I threw him a challenge. Admittedly I lacked the so-called Canadian experience (whatever that meant), but I was prepared to work, as a copy editor for a month free of charge and after one month all he would have to do was to tell me to go away, and I won't question his decision. What I had was journalism experience and that copy editing and layout skills were universal; and that was what I had been doing on English language newspapers in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi, and I begged him to at least give me a chance.

I also mentioned to him that a British colleague of mine, who was copy editor with me on the *Daily Nation* in Nairobi, had been hired by the paper without Canadian experience! Needless to say, I didn't get the job. Fortunately, my wife was lucky and she found a position a week after our arrival.

Adjusting to life in Canada was not easy. We had come from a servant-oriented society, where yes-Bwana (Sir), yes-Mama (Madam), was the order of the day. We had a servant, Juma, who also doubled as a cook, which was unusual, while our son had a fulltime nanny, Elizabeth.

As a features editor of the leading English daily, I was considered senior staff and had the privilege of having a company-provided two-bedroom fully furnished flat (sorry apartment), right in front of the Indian Ocean in a former European-only area. One of the fruits of Uhuru (independence) that we ex-colonized folks received.

In Africa, meals were always ready for memsahib and baby Hanif was pampered from birth till we left Dar es Salaam, translated Haven of Peace, by our indispensable ever-present nanny.

In Canada, the wife became the bread earner, reversing the traditional role. Washing dishes, doing the laundry, cleaning the house, and picking and dropping Hanif from the day care became my chores as Mr. Mom. When Hanif did his first "big job" in Toronto, we didn't know what to do as we had never done the "operation". We had to toss a coin to determine who was going to clean him!

In my search for a job, my strategy was to go to Greyhound bus station every morning, pick an Ontario city and present myself to the newspaper office to see the managing editor of the newspaper. Most of the time I would succeed in seeing the ME or the editor, drop off my resume and indicate to him that I was available for work. I was willing to go anywhere where I could find work. In this regard I had seen managing editors of London, Ontario; Kitchener, Waterloo, Guelph, Windsor and Peterborough, apart from talking to major metro Toronto weeklies.

Toronto also at the time had the head office of Southam newspapers, which at the time owned 13 major dailies. The guy in charge was a pleasant young Jewish fellow who became quite sympathetic to my plight. He interviewed me and sent my resume to some Southam papers. I heard from two of them: Edmonton and Winnipeg, both of whom offered me positions. I chose Edmonton as they offered \$100 more than Winnipeg! That's how I ended up at the Edmonton Journal in March 1973.

Working on a Canadian daily had its ups and downs. There were people who were very friendly and there were some who were not so friendly and one had to tread skillfully between them. Having worked at two British dailies in East Africa, I had no problem working on the copy desk and I got used to the system in no time.

While still a newcomer to Edmonton, I had the privilege to be appointed chairman of Shia Ismaili Muslim community, followers of His Highness the Aga Khan. The appointment, which is voluntary, is considered to be quite prestigious by members of the community as it is directly made by the Aga Khan.

In this capacity, I had to oversee the settlement of Uganda refugees who had just arrived and look after the general welfare of other members of the community, placing a strain on my personal life as a new immigrant who was himself trying to get settled. However, with the help and dedication of other volunteers and members of my committee, I was able to discharge my duties successfully for seven years. The crowning glory of my term came when the Aga Khan paid the first visit to Edmonton, which my wife and I had the privilege to host in 1979.

As far as my career was concerned, at the back of my mind I always wanted to own my own newspaper and in 1976 I got an opportunity to be hired as associate publisher of Bonnyville Nouvelle, a long established weekly in north eastern Alberta. This was the boom time when Imperial Oil had just announced its \$2 billion Cold Lake heavy oil project and without any modesty, under my supervision and with my daily newspaper experience, the paper gained prestige and editorial excellence in its coverage. Having not worked on a weekly in my life, this job gave me an excellent training ground and prepared me for my life's ambition of buying my own paper in 1979. We had zeroed in on our choice as we wanted to buy a paper within commuting distance either from Edmonton or Calgary. We got our wish when we heard that two papers were available: Airdrie Echo and Morinville Mirror.

Our first choice was Airdrie Echo since it was bigger and more established. My wife also had relatives in Calgary. We put in an offer right on the asking price and the offer was accepted, but unfortunately while the lawyers were drawing the papers, a better offer, more than the asking price, was placed on the table, with the result that the seller's lawyer found a loophole to get out of our contract and hence we lost the Airdrie deal.

We went after our second choice, Morinville Mirror, which was losing money at the time and to our accountant's surprise and objections, we bought it. I had full confidence in myself that I would turn the paper around, which I am ashamed to admit, was a rag, into a professionally produced, readable product.

In just a month, the business community saw the difference in the product and it began to support it by advertising in it instead of in the two competitors, one from St. Albert and another from Westlock, both of which freely circulated in our area. Another strategy we adopted was to hire an advertising salesman with specific instructions to make calls to Edmonton car dealerships, furniture stores and other businesses in the west and northern parts of the city which became very appealing to advertisers as our papers serviced most commuting towns and villages throughout Sturgeon Country.

We always had two full time reporters on staff, apart from advertising sales, production, layout and front office staff. The tables were turned now. I was hiring people and many times I felt like asking them if they had Canadian experience, especially those who were straight from colleges and universities, but I never succumbed to the temptation.

In 1980, we established the Redwater Tribune newspaper, serving the northeastern part of County of Sturgeon. My wife and I did our best to survive in one of the most competitive markets in Alberta and successfully published our two papers for 25 years. It wasn't easy. The competitors used every trick to get us out of business as they could. They offered incentives to advertisers and used every gimmick they could think of, but we ploughed ahead, determined to succeed until we celebrated our 25th anniversary.

When I look back, I see a 36-year-old courageous young man confidently walking into a French town 25 years ago, not knowing anyone and investing all of his life's savings into buying a losing business; I also see a stupid non-white young man trying to establish into a community whose acceptance of other cultures were questionable because as soon as it became known that I had purchased the paper, it was brought to my attention that my ancestry and race were being questioned in "certain quarters". Be that as it may, fortunately, majority of the people in the community received us well and as they began knowing us, there were no ugly incidents to speak of.

One of our competitors predicted that we wouldn't last, in his words, "more than six months". Unfortunately, for him, we gave him real tough time, with support from our advertisers, for 25 years. In May 2005 we sold the papers to Sun Media's subsidiary, Bowes Publishers, Canada's second largest publishing group which publishes several weeklies in metro Edmonton. As publisher and editor of these two weeklies, I was satisfied that the papers needed the economic muscle of a chain to take them to its next level of growth and advancement, and that the weekly newspaper industry had reached a stage where it was going to be difficult, if not impossible, for independent publishers like myself to operate. It was time to say good-bye, so long, au revoir, from the Ladhas!

The future of these papers looks bright as I settle in my favourite chair, behind my computer, to begin writing that autobiographical book that I always contemplated writing. Stay tuned...

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