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**M. Adil Abu Aa-isha.** 2013. *The Imam of Simonstown and His Diary (1904-1928)*. Cape Town: Yipi Publishers. xii-125 pp. Notes, Appendices, & Illustrations \$12.00 (hb.) ISBN: 978-0-9922174-0-2

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Over the past number of decades much has been written about South Africa's Cape Muslims; researchers explored a variety of aspects that uncovered their unique identity within the Cape cosmopolitan society. Whilst some such as the late Achmat Davids looked at the Cape Muslims' socio-historical formation using archival material, others (for example, Sindre Bangstad – the Norwegian scholar) gave anthropological accounts of contemporary developments within this vibrant community. From among these research outcomes, M. Adil Abu Aa-isha's *The Imam of Simonstown and His Diary (1904-1928)* is an interesting contribution that narrated the insights and observations of a relatively unknown Cape Imam, namely Muhammad Ali Saban; the latter was born and raised in Simonstown, which is a town that is located at the extreme end of Cape Town's southern suburbs.

Abu Aa-isha's three chapter publication, which was a spin-off of an MA thesis that he completed at the University of Cape Town at the end of 2011, studied a diary that belonged to the mentioned Imam. In the diary the Imam recorded entries that dealt with events that took place over a quarter of a century. Through Abu Aa-isha's close examination of the diary's contents, he managed to locate the events such as the births, marriages, and deaths within Simonstown's social history in general and that of the Muslim community' social history in particular. Abu Aa-isha thus used the diary's data along with other material in the first chapter (pp. 1-26) to reconstruct the Imam's biography. After having carefully gleaned through this chapter, it was noted that the author offered useful background information about Simonstown's Muslims. He, for example, discussed and described the mosque, the school, the cemetery, and the slave lodge, before he identified the different Imams who served the Simonstown Muslim community.

Whilst this was a fair synopsis, one would like to ask why he did not place the Simonstown Muslim community in a broader socio-historical and political context so that one was able to obtain a clearer idea of how this town's Muslims interacted with the larger non-Muslim community. Nonetheless, with this social historical context, Abu Aa-isha offered a remarkable biography of Imam Saban before he went on to describe the diary's transmission, its preservation and its rich contents. One of the critical issues that one missed in this chapter was the absence of a significant theoretical frame. One was of the opinion that it was important for him to have, at least, brought into this debate, albeit briefly, what was understood and meant by 'biography' and how his reconstruction of an unknown Imam such as Muhammad Ali Saban contributed towards

the process of biographical writing within the ambit of Cape Muslim historiography. In this regard he listed Frank Reynolds and Donald Capps' (dated) *The Biographical Process* (Walter de Gruyter 1976), he did not make ample use of it for his chapter.

In the second chapter (pp.27-68) Abu Aa-isha placed Imam Saban's diary in a broader context by comparing it to other diaries that were written in Simonstown and Cape Town respectively. The idea, he argued, was to, among others, gauge the diary's importance and the Imam's world-view as a diarist. Abu Aa-isha decided to bring into focus five individuals' diaries or travelogues that were written in Cape Town and Simonstown; this was done with the objective of (a) assessing their world-views, (b) noting each one's scope and limitations, and (c) comparing and showing how the Oriental diarists' recordings differed from those who hailed from other regional/national/ethnic backgrounds. After discussing each of these diarists and locating the Imam's contribution alongside theirs, the author examined the Imam's perspectives and motivations as a diarist; he essentially assessed the diary's value as a source of knowledge.

Even though the author made an attempt to define what was understood by 'a diary,' there was a key question that he should have posed and answered, and this was: Can the extant texts of Anne Bernard, Anders Sparrman, Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, Mirza Itesa Modeen, and Omar Lufti Effendi, be labeled as 'dairies' or were they not 'travelogues' or 'chronicles'? From one's understanding of these texts it was necessary for him to have distinguished the term 'diary' from the other concepts since discrete differences exist; and another related question that came to mind was: what criteria were used to consider the 'Imam Saban Diary' as authentic? A special or brief discussion regarding this would have been given greater support to the author's arguments. Besides these questions, another significant issue that the author should have considered was the travelogues and diaries of Europeans who constructed those who came from the East as 'the other' or as 'Orientals' Here he could have drawn from Edward Said's classic *Orientalism* (London: Penguin 1977); a work that would have enriched this study.

Abu Aa-isha reflected on 'The Role of the Imam according to His Diary' in the final chapter (pp. 69-98). For this chapter Abu Aa-isha employed the diary's contents to reveal, inter alia, the reasons for Imam Saban's appointment as Imam and the nature of his position. In the process of doing this, the author addressed how the Imam observed his participation in the Cape ritual activities, his promotion of education, and the relationship that the Imam struck with both the political and religious authorities. Based upon the diary entries, the author correctly concluded that the Imam devoted much of his time to the ritual activities and pastoral care. Even though the author relied for much of his information on the Imam's diary, he drew a fair amount from the extant secondary literature that assisted in beefing up some of the sections that he dealt with in this chapter and the two previous chapters. When he, for example, discussed the 'Appointment of Imams at the Cape' (pp.71-73) and 'His Authority (as Imam)' (pp.74-77) he made reference to Shamil Jeppie's informative 'Leadership and Loyalties: the Imams of Nineteenth Century Colonial Cape Town' (1996). He also referred to other important sources such as Rayda Jacob's wonderful portrayal of the Manuel family titled "Near the Mountain, Near the Sea" which appeared in Paul Faber's edited *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories* (2003), and he extracted from the *Moslem Outlook* (1925-1927) that was circulated at the Cape during the mentioned period.

In winding up this review, one would like to state that Abu Aa-isha succeeded in laying his hands on this unique Cape (Muslim) diary; a diary that was written by an Imam who was intriguingly an unknown religious figure and of whom not much was recorded in the various secondary sources. What makes Abu Aa-isha's research exciting and important is the fact that he

not only resurrected through a process of biographical reconstruction an unfamiliar figure from obscurity but also gave him 'life' through and via the diary's entries, the various archival files, and other secondary literature. Abu Aa-isha's construction of the Imam's biography helped one to not only fill significant historical gaps but it also shed some light on selected historical developments during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Those in the social sciences will find Abu Aa-isha's monograph an interesting read, and, as a matter of fact, it should spark an interest among the linguists to seriously consider exploring Imam Saban's fascinating use of the English language in a generally Afrikaans-speaking Cape Muslim community.

### References

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