An Arab Community in the Canadian Northwest:

A PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION OF THE LEBANESE COMMUNITY IN LAC LA BICHE ALBERTA

by HAROLD B. BARCLAY

RÉSUMÉ

Dans l'ouest canadien, la communauté du Lac La Biche, secteur nord-est de l'Alberta, offre des caractéristiques uniques à cause de la forte proportion de musulmans qu'on y trouve et aussi du fait que ce groupe ethnique consacre une bonne partie de ses efforts à l'élevage du vison.

Cette étude décrit les caractéristiques sociales de cette communauté libanaise et musulmane du Lac La Biche, discute sa position sociale, surtout par rapport aux Métis, et étudie enfin les changements culturels survenus en elle.

The Lac La Biche area of east central Alberta is a region of innumerable lakes, muskeg and rolling countryside covered with poplar, birch and occasional spruce and interspersed with some cultivated land[1]. The trading area encompasses close to 3000 square miles and has a population of almost 7000, including about 1650 in the town of Lac La Biche. Probably half the people have Indian ancestry, while persons of Ukrainian, French-Canadian and British extraction each are roughly ten to fifteen percent of the population. Twenty percent of the people, mostly Métis, receive welfare assistance. Small farming operations are the main bulwark of the economy, producing chiefly beef and wheat. Commercial fishing supports close to ten percent of the people, again

[1] The author is most grateful for the kind assistance of the members of the Lac La Biche Lebanese community. He also thanks the University of Alberta, which provided the financial support for this research, and Mr. Douglas Babcock, Community Development Officer in Lac La Biche, for providing him with background materials on the Lac La Biche trading area and community.

mainly Métis, and commercial mink ranching another three percent. The lumber industry is no longer important, most of the commercially valuable timber having been logged twenty to thirty years ago.

In the popular jargon of today the Lac La Biche region is a "poverty pocket". It is also an interesting potpourri of incompletely assimilated ethnic groups. Ordinarily, if the Lac La Biche area is envisaged at all, it is in terms of Indians, but few, if any, towns in Canada or North America have such a high proportion of Lebanese or of Muslims (ten percent). The town of Lac La Biche may well be the most Muslim town in either Canada or the United States. Further, it is likely that Lac La Biche is the only place in the world where a substantial Arab population is engaged primarily in commercial mink ranching and where an *imam* (a Muslim clergyman or prayer leader) is also a mink rancher.

This paper is a preliminary survey of socio-economic characteristics of the Lebanese community and of its general adaptation to the Lac La Biche area. In another paper I focus on the role of Islam in this community.[2] Data were largely acquired by informal interviews with twenty male Lebanese heads of household in Lac La Biche during the author's two weeks' stay in the town in the Spring of 1967.

The Development of the Lebanese Community

In 1905, before the existence of a settlement of Lac La Biche, a Lebanese immigrant and his nephew from the village of Lala in the Biqa'a Valley began peddling dry goods and trading furs in the then sparsely settled lakes region of northeastern Alberta. By 1910 the young nephew had established a shop and when he retired in 1946 he owned three stores in the town. Until 1946 Lebanese immigration into the area was negligible, amounting to four men, one of whom stayed only two or three years. Of the thirty-six Lebanese born heads of household presently residing

[2] "The Perpetuation of Muslim Tradition in the Canadian North", *Muslim World,* January, 1969. (In press).

in the vicinity of Lac La Biche, thirty-five have come into the area since 1946, twenty-one of these during the period 1951-1960 and seven since 1961. Only seven have been in Canada more than twenty years. A majority immigrated directly from Lebanon to Lac La Biche; most of the others originally settled in Edmonton. As a rough estimate the Lebanese Muslim population in the region in 1943 was about fifteen; by 1955 it had jumped to approximately one hundred, and in 1967 my census showed 244, including 160 who reside within the corporate town limits and the remainder who live immediately outside them. In addition to the nominal Muslim population there are three families whose heads are sons of Lebanese Muslims, but neither they nor their families adhere to that religion. Another individual Lebanese and father of two of the above is likewise no longer associated with the Muslim congregation. The early immigrants were from the village of Lala, but since 1946 the bulk of the immigration has been from the neighboring village of Kharbit Ruha so that today of thirty-six Lebanese born heads of household, only eleven were born in Lala, twenty-four in Kharbit Ruha, and one, the *imam,* is from another village. Thus, as in similar immigrant situations on this continent, in any given community members of a nationality group tend to be from one or two natal villages because the initial settlers were from those places and in the course of time encouraged their friends and relatives to immigrate to the new locale. In 1957 twelve men became charter members of an Arabian Muslim Association and a year later they built a small meeting hall which is also used for a *Qur'an* school.

The Lebanese community is young in age; only nine of thirty-six household heads are fifty or over; sixty-five percent of the total community are under eighteen. Marriage patterns of Lebanese indicate a following of traditional endogamous practice. Thirty-one of thirty-six Lebanese-born married men have wives from the village of their birth or wives whose fathers were from that village. Ten of these married within their own lineage, including five who married their father's brother's daughter *(bint al 'amm),* a preferred marital relationship throughout the Arab Muslim world. Of seventeen men who married after immigrating to Canada, nine had their marriages with girls from the natal village arranged for them by relatives in Lebanon. Five others married girls who

had already immigrated to Canada but whose home villages were the same as their spouses. Only one marriage was outside a Lebanese-Muslim context. This was a marriage to a Métis by an early Lebanese immigrant. He and his two sons along with another individual, also born of a Lebanese father and Métis mother, represent the only Lebanese presently residing in Lac La Biche who have deviated from the practice of Muslim endogamy. None of these individuals, incidentally, either belongs to the Muslim Association or has much to do with others in the Lebanese community. Incomplete data on marriages of children of present residents who have left Lac La Biche reveal a similar pattern of endogamy. Of ten marriages, five were with individuals from the same natal village or with individuals whose fathers came from the same village as the spouse. Three were with other Lebanese Muslims, one with another Arab Muslim, and one with a non-Arab, non-Muslim. All four married men under thirty years of age presently residing in Lac La Biche, including one born in Canada, married Lebanese Muslims in Canada; none had marriages arranged for them from overseas. Thus, while marriages continue to be highly endogamous and the number of those to non-Muslims is negligible, marriages arranged from overseas are declining.

Of related interest is the degree to which the Lebanese in Lac La Biche have consanguineal ties. Immigrants from Lala have at least distant ties of kinship and these are often through their mothers or more remote maternal lines. Because of this, they are not considered important and are readily forgotten. An informant typically reports only that he recognizes a distant tie with another from his village but is unable to specify what it is. Immigrants from Kharbit Ruha have similarly recognized interrelationships. Kinship ties, however, rarely cross respective village lines. Thirty percent of the Lebanese in Lac La Biche belong to a single lineage or *'ayla,* while another thirty percent belong to three other lineages. These are fragments of parent lineages centered in the natal village and most have in addition other members living in Edmonton or Calgary. Lineages in Lac La Biche have no corporate character, but members retain some *esprit de corps* expressed by a closer identification with others within the kin group and by the use of the lineage name as a surname. Within

the largest of these lineages, there is one man who is recognized as a sort of informal head, a senior elder of that group, and is referred to as the *kbir al 'ayla*. Although there is, then, a nominal retention of the lineage structure, there is no preservation of any extended family pattern. All Lebanese families are of the nuclear type.

The Lebanese Role in the Local Economy

While the earliest Lebanese settlers were traders, for the past twenty years the main Lebanese endeavor has been commercial mink ranching. Twenty-four of the thirty-six Lebanese-born married men in Lac La Biche are engaged in raising mink. They comprise a majority of the thirty-eight mink farmers in the area. Lac La Biche and the Lesser Slave Lake area are the two main centers for mink ranching in Alberta. The importance of the business in this region arises from the fact that the region has only marginal significance for agriculture, stock raising, and lumber production and it has a developed commercial fish industry which supplies tullibee, a common fish in Lac La Biche waters. Because of its infestation with cysts of *triaenophoras,* tullibee is not fit for human consumption and, hence, provides inexpensive feed for mink. In recent years the demand for this fish by mink growers has exceeded the supply, necessitating the importation of feed. Since all of the fishermen are Métis or Reserve Indians, the supplying of fish has become an important area of economic interdependence of Lebanese mink growers and Métis and Indian fishermen. Although the mink ranchers are dependent for fish supply on the fishermen, the latter may be considered to be on the more precarious side of the relationship in that mink growers are sometimes reputed to buy great quantities of fish when the price is low and store them in freezers, so that under such circumstances fishermen with a large catch of tullibee on hand find they have no place to distribute it. However, in discussing this area of Lebanese-Métis relations with two Métis and a Reserve Indian, all noted for candidness and all having engaged in the fishing industry,[3] this writer could elicit no negative reac-

[3] The author is indebted to Mr. D. Badcock and Mr. K. Hatt for suggesting these informants.

tions in their dealings with Lebanese. Each concurred that their relations were agreeable and superior to those with any other ethnic group in town.

Mink ranching is an unusual occupation to be associated with Lebanese. Yet, given the special circumstances of the Lac La Biche context and the characteristics of the Lebanese immigrants, the association becomes less incongruous. On immigrating to Canada, the Lebanese were ill educated. With two exceptions they had only an equivalent of an elementary school education and all learned English after arriving on these shores. Lack of education and poor facility with the local culture limited their possibilities of employment. In addition, values which prize independence, individual enterprise, and agrarian interests gave further focus to the type of occupations considered desirable. Requiring as it does heavy capital investment, farming was impractical for newly immigrated, moneyless Lebanese. Shopkeeping, another desirable undertaking, is an enterprise which, by its nature, is limited to only a few in any given community. Mink ranching offered several advantages to Lebanese. It already existed as a moderately successful industry in the area and had potentiality for expansion. The original Lebanese settlers, while traders, eventually engaged in the business as an auxiliary enterprise and not without success. Two long-time Lebanese residents in Alberta had taken up the mink business and later encouraged relatives and friends from the home village and elsewhere in Canada to settle in Lac La Biche and become mink farmers. Mink ranching is a business in which each man is his own boss. It requires minimal education and training and ordinarily provides an adequate income. Finally, of paramount importance, is the fact that mink ranching can be entered into with little difficulty and with small initial capital outlay. Only an acre or two of land is required along with such equipment as cages, sheds, feed grinder and freezer. The most expensive item is breeding stock. An individual without money can work for wages for a couple of years and save enough so that he can take a small number of mink on shares. In this system he acquires, for example, fifty mink from another man and at the end of the season returns that number plus an equal number so that by this process he will, if lucky, have a hundred or more mink for himself to start as

breeding stock. He may also obtain advances of credit from a fur buyer by counting the number of young born in the spring and projecting an estimate of the number of pelts which would be available for sale to the buyer in late fall. Barring disaster it is possible to begin with little capital and on a part-time basis build in a few years a mink establishment which can support a man and his family. It is sometimes said in Lac La Biche that Lebanese are able to enter the mink business and build up a ranch with comparative rapidity because an already established kinsman puts his relatives in the business. As far as this writer could determine this is most atypical of the Lebanese. Far more important has been a "scrimp and save" technique of individual enterprise. Lebanese in Lac La Biche seem to appreciate the "Protestant ethic".

One thousand mink are considered necessary to provide an adequate income. According to Ministry of Agriculture figures for July, 1966, thirteen Lebanese each owned 938 or more mink, including one with 2177. (The largest owner in the vicinity had 3256 animals.) The eleven other Lebanese all owned less than five hundred. Of these eleven, five engaged in mink ranching as a part-time occupation. Thus, at least six ranches may be viewed as sub-standard in terms of providing adequate income.

The second major enterprise of the Lebanese is shopkeeping. Of fourteen food and dry goods shops in town, six are operated by Lebanese. In all, nine Lebanese, including a barber, engage in shopkeeping. Three of these are also partime mink ranchers, having more recently opened stores in Lac La Biche. A vague kind of distinction might be made between the "uptown" and "downtown" Lebanese merchants. "Downtown" is the older business section, near the railroad station and the hotel. The major business concerns are located here including those of six Lebanese. "Uptown" is the periphery of the business district which includes three confectionery shops more recently opened by Lebanese. With one exception, the "downtown" Lebanese merchants maintain the larger shops; their relationships with customers are more formalized and more in line with typical Anglo-Canadian practice. The merchants themselves are closer to the business elite of Lac La Biche and, indeed, one is a leader of that elite. The "uptown" merchants operate small, often not

well stocked, shops. Their relation with customers is less impersonal; there is more of the flavor of rustic Lebanon. These merchants are in no way associated with the town elite, nor do they even belong to the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. While in light of the limited stay of the author in Lac La Biche the observation has doubtful reliability, it was his distinct impression that the "uptown" shopkeepers had a higher proportion of the Métis and Indian trade than the "downtown" merchants. The local welfare officer also reported to the writer his impression that Métis, who constitute eighty percent of those receiving social welfare assistance, prefer to trade with the Lebanese.[4] Both of these observations may, in part, be related to the treatment Métis and Indians receive. The Lebanese merchants, as a whole, have a more personal approach. Especially in the "uptown" shops, there is great freedom of movement about the store and behind the counters. Métis can, particularly in the "uptown" stores, stand around inside and not be hustled out into the cold as they are in some other establishments. Lebanese, however, do have considerable contempt for what they feel is Métis lack of initiative. They are shocked by alleged Métis immorality and fear that Métis sexual habits might have an adverse influence upon their own children. To what extent Métis are aware of the prevailing Lebanese attitude was not determined. In any case, it is likely they feel greater ease of interaction with the Lebanese because the Lebanese appear to discriminate less against them than do others and because the interrelationships are more direct and personal. Other factors may also be important. For instance, compared to the English, Ukrainian or Scandinavian population the physical appearance of Lebanese is closer to that of the Métis or Indians and this is coupled with the fact that they are all non-European sub-cultural groups, poorly represented among the town's élite. Finally, while all shops extend credit to Métis and many merchants make small loans, it is likely that these financial arrangements are made more easily and with less formality with the Lebanese. Loans are primarily made to welfare recipients against the vouchers which are deposited with the

[4] Vouchers for groceries are made out to the specific store requested by the welfare recipient. Thus, the Welfare Department has a good indication of where their clients prefer to trade.

shopkeeper. They provide a means by which the shopkeeper can encourage individuals to regularly visit his store and a device by which welfare recipients acquire cash from the voucher slips in order to spend on alcoholic beverages and other illicit luxuries. The author did not learn directly from shopkeepers or patrons the extent to which some form of interest was charged for the loan service. Conflicting reports were, however, received from two outside sources. One was that all merchants make a general practice of granting these loans against welfare vouchers, but they add ten percent to whatever is borrowed. Another informant stated that the *Lebanese* shopkeepers do not charge any interest. They loan money so as to encourage those receiving public assistance to come to their shops. If the latter is true, and it is not completely unreasonable, it is in accord with the Muslim prohibition against charging interest and is also a further reason why Métis would tend more to gravitate to the Lebanese stores.

Aside from mink ranching and shopkeeping, one Canadian-born member of the Lebanese ethnic community operates a construction company. One of the Lebanese-born is a traveling merchant and the remaining engage in wage labor: an auto mechanic, a store clerk, a janitor and a hotel clerk, while the others are railroad section hands, construction and general laborers. Four of these wage laborers are part-time mink ranchers and three are employed outside the Lac La Biche area, returning home on weekends or less frequently. The fact that only two of forty families of Lebanese extraction receive public assistance speaks well for the adaptation and independence of Lebanese in this community. This represents five percent of the Lebanese families, a percentage far below that for Métis, Ukrainian, French and Italian ethnic groups in the area and one on a par with the Scandinavian, British and German groups. In addition, both Lebanese families receiving public assistance do so because the chief bread winner is physically incapacitated primarily because of age.

Rental property, either letting rooms or houses, is another source of income for some Lebanese. This is one more point at which Métis interact with Lebanese, since they have been the main renters. The single adverse relationship with government so far experienced by the Lebanese community was an investigation by

the Welfare Department of the rental properties of Lebanese on the ground that they were inadequate for the amount of rent required.

Because of their recent immigration to Canada and to Lac La Biche, their low level of education and poor facility with English, their non-Christian religious orientation and less prestigious occupational pursuits, it is to be expected that few Lebanese fit into the top echelons of Lac La Biche society. Roughly thirty individuals in town constitute the big business men, professional people and holders of elected public office. Of these one is of Italian birth, another is a Lebanese Muslim and a third, born of a Lebanese father, is not certain that he is a Muslim. The remaining twenty-seven are either of Ukrainian, French or British origin. Thus, while Lebanese comprise over ten percent of the people of Lac La Biche, they constitute less than seven percent of the "upper crust" and the Lebanese Muslims, about ten percent of the total population, are three percent of the élite. As one of the five major ethnic groups in Lac La Biche (Métis, Ukrainian, French, British and Lebanese), the Lebanese have, after the Métis, the lowest proportion of representatives in this segment. However, it should be noted that within the community's élite, the two Lebanese are among its most influential members.

At the opposite end of the social status ladder there is a corresponding under-representation of Lebanese. Here it is the Métis who are overly represented. The discussion of public welfare assistance above gives some indication of the distribution of the various ethnic groups among the lower stratum of Lac La Biche society.

The internal ordering of the Lebanese community itself has more the form of a top, with a pinnacle of two "élite" families and a correspondingly narrow pointed base of two families supported by public assistance. The remaining families fall between these two extremes in what might be termed an "upper lower class-lower middle class" category. A half dozen families in this category are distinctly upwardly mobile. It is interesting to note that of the twelve most prosperous household heads, eight originate in the village of Lala and only four come from Kharbit Ruha. It will be recalled that of the total number of men, eleven come from Lala and twenty-five from Kharbit Ruha. It should be

pointed out in this connection that six of the eleven men from Lala lived a number of years in Edmonton before coming to Lac La Biche, whereas very few of those from Kharbit Ruha did so. In Edmonton, where they engaged in business, they acculturated more rapidly than those who immigrated directly to Lac La Biche and commenced mink ranching, a pattern more characteristic of the Kharbit Ruha immigrants. Because of this background, the Lala men had some advantage over those from Kharbit Ruha.

Further Characteristics of the Adaptation of the Lebanese

Outside the economic realm and with the exception of the most assimilated and the Canadian-born, few adults in the Lebanese community have anything other than minimal interaction with other people in Lac La Biche. The more prosperous business men — and these would comprise a major segment of the most assimilated part of the community — belong to several civic organizations. Indeed, one of the two in the town élite belongs to twelve such clubs and the other, who is Canadian-born, was recently president of the Chamber of Commerce. The remaining "downtown" businessmen belong to one or two such organizations, most frequently the Elks or Chamber of Commerce. Three Lebanese merchants belong to the community's curling league, and other Lebanese have no affiliations other than membership in the Muslim Association or, in the case of mink ranchers, the Mink Association. That Lebanese do not intermarry with non-Lebanese has already been noted. Again, except for the upper status segment and those few adults who are Canadian-born, Lebanese maintain friendships almost exclusively with their own group. Few, also, are ever seen at such community affairs as bingo games or at the local beverage room. Part of the minimal participation in community affairs and with non-Lebanese arises from their poor facility with English and preference for communication in their native tongue. Part of it is also a function of their residence pattern. Nearly seventy-five percent of Lebanese families reside in two almost exclusively Lebanese neighborhoods. It is primarily the "downtown" businessmen, the more assimilated, who live scattered among non-Lebanese. Lastly, the strong negative sanction in Islam against drinking alcohol, gambling and

marriage with non-Muslims also discourages certain types of interaction with outsiders.

Because the Lebanese community is of recent origin, it is to be expected that there would be a relatively high retention of traditional Lebanese practices. Nevertheless, the degree to which acculturation to Canadian ways has occurred is extensive. Only one of twenty respondents indicated a desire to return to Lebanon for permanent settlement. The remainder wished to remain in Canada, although several had misgivings about remaining in Lac La Biche. Fourteen of nineteen Lebanese-born men who have been in Canada five or more years said they were now Canadian citizens. Younger men and especially those who are Canadian-born are discontinuing the practice of arranging marriages from overseas. Fathers without exception denounce the practice of dating, although a few, mostly prosperous businessmen, are willing to yield to arrangements which can be properly chaperoned. Many of their teenage daughters attend junior proms and participate in school activities like other Canadians. With few exceptions informants denied any belief in arranged marriages and looked to a free choice under the parent's guidance in selecting a mate. They feel strongly that their children should marry one of their own faith (as would most Christians or Jews), but realize that they are helpless to prevent an inter-faith alliance if insisted upon by the child. The more prosperous, upwardly mobile men emphasize the similarity between their Islamic tradition and that of Christianity and play down the differences. For them, especially, there is an ambivalence over the loyalty to past ties and the lure of financial success wrought by full compromise with the dominant cultural milieu. It is out of loyalty to kin and confession that they support a *Qur'an* school and want their children to read and write Arabic. It is out of the lure of finance that they increasingly succumb to middle class Canadian values. Those who wish to remain the strictest Muslims will find complete assimilation and, hence, any opportunity to rise to the top in the community, a most overwhelming task because to be completely assimilated means to do "what everyone else in town does". This too often can entail behaving in ways contrary to Muslim teaching, e.g., social drinking, bingo games, poker, parties, dating and "necking", wearing scanty bathing suits. From the point of view of the *imam*

at Lac La Biche it is those Lebanese who are most assimilated who are the poorest Muslims and from the point of view of the local school superintendent it turns out to be the children of the poorest Muslims who are best integrated into Lac La Biche society. In this discussion of acculturation one important point should not be overlooked. We have only the most general way of assessing the likely extent to which cultural change would have occurred among these people had they remained in their home village or merely emigrated to Beirut. Obviously, since the time they immigrated to Canada many changes in the direction of those experienced by the Lac La Biche immigrants, have occurred in rural Lebanon. Thus it is an error to assume that all the modifications of culture experienced by the Lac La Biche Lebanese would only have occurred as a result of their immigration to Canada. Had they remained in Lebanon there is every reason to suspect that many of the features of change discussed above would have applied to some extent in Lebanon as well, as part of the worldwide process of industrialization and Westernization.

Inevitably contrasts between first and second generation in Lac La Biche will widen and become more magnified as the second generation Canadian born mature. All children born in Canada and educated in the public schools acquire English as their first language or at least become bilingual. Many have no facility in reading or writing Arabic. They readily acquire non-Lebanese friends. Three now attend the University of Alberta. As with other immigrant groups, for the second generation the old traditions become identified with the elders and are somewhat removed from perceived reality. As the old generation, already weakened in its allegiance to the past, retreats into the background, the hold of tradition will become feeble indeed. Two factors, however, may prevent a complete disappearance of older ways. Of prime importance is the maintenance and vigorous support of the *Qur'an* school and a formally trained instructor and, secondly, is the continuation of immigration from Lebanon.

In general a successful adaptation of Lebanese to the "strange world" of Lac La Biche is indicated by their economic enterprise, their freedom from dependence upon welfare, their freedom from crime, the relative stability of the group in Lac

La Biche, their respect for learning, and a general acceptance and approval by the bulk of the Lac La Biche community. I would suggest, therefore, that we should have few reservations about the adaptive capabilities of Lebanese immigrants to Canada. Finally, this observation should apply also to the Palestinians, because of their close similarity to the Lebanese.