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**I. L. M. ABDUL AZIZ**

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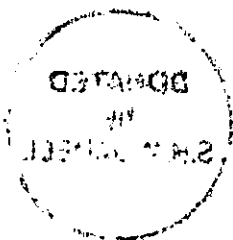
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## I. L. M. ABDUL AZIZ

31st December 1905 was a red-letter day in the history of the Muslims of Sri Lanka, in every sense of the word. That day was the turning point of what was then and subsequently known as the Fez Question. On that day, over thirty thousand Muslims were present at a meeting held on the Mardana Mosque grounds, to voice their protest against the order that had prevented the first Muslim advocate, Mr. Abdul Cader, from appearing before the Supreme Court with his head covered by a fez. The meeting, presided over by the Hon. W. M. Abdul Rahman, Member of the Legislative Council, was addressed by two principal speakers. One of them was Moulavi Rafiudin Ahmad, barrister, Privy Council lawyer and known as, the 'Lion of the Bombay Bar' on account of his forensic eloquence. The other was a young man of thirty-eight years called I. L. M. Abdul Aziz. The late Mr. A. M. A. Azeez, in recounting this episode wrote that I. L. M. Abdul Aziz "delivered an able address, forensically worthy of an accomplished advocate long practised in law and quite successful with both judge and jury. In the first part of his speech he gave a resume of "the main facts of this vexatious question which is now agitating the mind of every Ceylon Muhammedan in whom there is love of his own religion and custom,"

## HIS EARLY LIFE

Idroos Lebbe Marikar Abdul Aziz lived from 27th October 1867 to 1st September 1915. Into this life time, he had compressed a host of achievements - those of educator, educationist, publicist, polemist, literary journalist, mosque trustee, genealogist, literary historian, historiographer, novelist and social reformer. Though these are a variety of disparate activities, I. L. M. Abdul Aziz was able, because of his unremitting energy and acumen, to fuse them into a satisfying whole.

Abdul Aziz's father was Idroos Lebbe Marikar, who functioned as a shroff in the Government and his grandfather was O. L. M. Shaikh Abdul Cader Marikar. He was also called Sekadi Marikar. Shaikh Abdul Cader Marikar appears to have been a man of substance for he was appointed Head Moorman in 1818 and subsequently made a Notary Public in and for the Four Gravets of Colombo. The post of Head Moorman, though largely ceremonial, was sometimes used by British authorities as a sounding board for minority opinions. Legal minded readers would have noticed that some authorities regard the 'Laws and Customs of the Mohamedans' otherwise called the Mohammedan Code of 1806 which formed so much of the bedrock of Law in Sri Lanka till eroded by statutory enactments of Muslim Law, as a codification of the religious usages of the Muslims of Colombo and acknowledged by the Head Moorman.

I. L. M. Abdul Aziz had the independence of mind which most children who are youngest in their families seem to have. Besides, he was a precocious child. The earliest education he received from his father, from whose hands he passed into a private school at the age of ten. Some years later he joined the Government 'Pettah Boys'

English School, whence he completed his Sixth Standard. That was the culmination of his academic educational career. Some of his contemporaries were apt to argue that a higher academic or professional education would have equipped Abdul Aziz for greater things, But a higher education gives only a collection of arranged facts and a schemata for the arrangement of further facts. But Abdul Aziz, being an inveterate reader and writer, was an avid collector of facts. Besides, he was instinctively and almost compulsively, systematic. As a polemist he crossed swords with the highest in the land including Governors, members of Legislative Council, theologians, lawyers, other professionals, and Civil Servants and was not worsted. One suspects, therefore, that Abdul Aziz did not lose much by not having a higher academic education.

Be that as it may, Abdul Aziz was in the wider world of the adults before he was well out of his teens. The late Mr. A. M. A. Azeez wrote of his namesake as follows: 'When he (Abdul Aziz) was compelled, by circumstances of finance and family, to prematurely terminate his schooling Wapche Marikar helped him to a place in a friend's firm; this gave him the security that helped him to self-educate himself and cultivate his taste for the service of his co-religionists.'

Since Colombo formed so much of the back-drop of the activities of I, L, M, Abdul Aziz, it would not be out of place to summarize briefly the place and role of the Muslims of Colombo. The historical foundations of the Muslims of Colombo had been noticed by early writers like the Arab scholar of the fourteenth cent-

tury, Ibn Battuta. No subsequent historical writer fails to mention them. The deprivations they suffered under the Portuguese and the Dutch were gradually removed by the British. The British Regulation No 2 of 1832 was particularly useful. It repealed a proclamation of the Dutch (when they ruled the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka) that the Muslims should not own houses and grounds within the Fort and Pettah in Colombo. By that time, however, the Muslims were in significant numbers in the areas outlying the Pettah. When in 1865, the Proclamation constituting the Municipal Council of Colombo bounded on the north by the San Sebastian Canal to its junction by the Maligawatte branch of the Caltura Canal up to the north and south Baseline; the north and south Baseline up to its junction with Cotta Road and the Cotta Road from Borella to its junction with Bullers Road near the Fourth Milepost, and on the South and South-east by the Kirillapone Canal and Bullers Road extending from the point where it touches the Cotta Road to that where it is joined by the road from Bambalapitiya and by the Bambalapitiya Road - by that time the Muslims were in substantial numbers in Colombo. Today, it has the second largest concentration of Muslims in Sri Lanka. Besides Colombo has a special Islamic 'tone'. Any one who glances through the plates in Edward Lane's 'Modern Egyptians' published in the forties of the last century, cannot fail to be impressed by the fact that so many of the Middle East houses looked strikingly similar to those of Colombo as were then in existence (as seen in drawings of those times). Even today, to anyone who walks along New Moor Street and Messenger Street, the impression of the Saracenic architecture of the houses is unmistakable.

Abdul Aziz's involvement with social welfare activities began from his twentieth year. In the words of a competent observer, 'Wapche Marikar found in him an ideal person, young, able and zealous, to shoulder the burdens of the El Jamiathul Islamia, a society to promote the religious, social and political advancement of the Muslims which was later superceded by the Moors' Union. He persuaded his colleagues to choose Abdul Aziz as Secretary even though he was only twenty years old.' El Jamiathul Islamiah was established with the idea of helping the Muslims of Colombo by informing the authorities of their needs and grievances so that appropriate actions might be taken. In one action, at least, El Jamiathul Islamiah achieved signal success. During the eighteenthies and earlier, it had been the practice of the authorities in the hospitals in Colombo to allow the medical students to dissect the bodies of the Muslims dying there and then to have those dissected bodies to be buried without benefit of religious ceremony. Rightfully indignant, El Jamiathul Islamiah sought the assistance of the Governor. As a result, the earlier infamous practice was discontinued and the bodies of the Muslims dying in hospitals were delivered to an Allim; designated by the El Jamiathul Islamiah and burials took place according to proper Islamic rites.

### **ZAHIRA COLLEGE AND THE WAY THITHER**

One of the crucial roles which I.L.M. Abdul Aziz played was in the establishment and maintenance of the early Zahira College. The deplorable condition of education among the Muslims in the last century is a tale that has, perhaps, been told too often. So, we need look at only one statistic as a sample. In 1869, in Government English schools, the total number of Muslim pupils

were: in Western Province, 62; in the Southern Province, 24; in the Central Province, 22; in the Eastern Province, 22. In the North-Central Province, where there were vernacular schools only, there were 7 Muslim pupils in those schools. The Muslim leaders could not look upon this state of affairs with any satisfaction. Nevertheless, some of their efforts did not meet with success. The late Mr. A. M. A. Azeez, reviewing that situation wrote 'Wapche Marikar, who had since 1867 entertained the idea of sponsoring a Muslim English school in Colombo bemoaned the fate that had overtaken the Anglo-Mohammedan school that was so enthusiastically started in 1884 and was so full of promise. It did not however endure long for want of unity among the founders and the lack of financial support. Siddi Lebbe himself, finding his mission failing, had left Colombo in 1887. Wapche Marikar with the active collaboration of Abdul Aziz succeeded in prevailing upon Siddi Lebbe to pay a special visit to Colombo and address a jumma gathering in the Maradana Mosque in the year 1891... (Abdul Aziz) was the inevitable choice as Secretary of the Colombo Educational Society that was formed immediately after the moving address of Siddi Lebbe. Wapche Marikar was unanimously requested to assume the offices of manager and treasurer. Due to the efforts of this new Society, Al Madrasathul Zahira was formed in the following year, 1892. From its outset, Zahira College was welcomed with praises from all sides, both official and private. The Department of Public Instruction (as the Education Department was then called) in 1892 spoke of it in the following terms, '... the classes were well arranged the work was being carried on in an orderly and systematic manner and good discipline obtained. The Managers have since applied for registration under the grant-in-aid system. It received adequate notice in the local press.



For instance, 'The Ceylon Observer' noted it on 28th January 1892 under Local and General' news and again on 15th March in its 'Notes and Comments'.

Contemporary opinion held that the success of the Colombo Educational Society and its educational institutions was mainly due to the energy displayed by Abdul Aziz in creating effective Muslim public opinion by means of his articles and speeches. Wapche Marikar, in particular, spoke in fulsome terms of the assistance he had received from Abdul Aziz in this regard. No wonder, then, that Abdul Aziz was described by a Muslim lawyer in one of the prize givings at Zahira College then, as the fulcrum of Zahira.

He did not confine his interest in education to the management of Zahira College. A fine intellectual as he was, he was driven to study the state of his community and came to the conclusion that lack of education was at the core of all the ills of his community. He took upon himself to use the platform and the periodical to propagate the cause of education. In his addresses delivered at the Prize-givings of Zahira College and the Hameediah Boys' English School and in his presidential speeches to the Moors' Union (which had replaced El Jamiathul Islamia), he did not fail to impress his audience on the need for education. In his speech at the Moors' Union in 1892 he deplored the level of education that prevailed among the Muslims and suggested the establishment of a committee for the writing of new readers, textbooks and translations in the Tamil language. It might be remembered that even in 1910 the rate of literacy among the Muslims was very low. The national percentage of male literates was 40.4 whereas the percentage of Muslim male literates was only 6.5. Similarly, the national percentage for female literates was 10.6 while the percentage of Muslim female literates did not reach 2,

Abdul Aziz's attack on the educational backwardness of his community was two-pronged. On the one hand he called for the education of the general Muslim public. On the other, he insisted on the need for English among Muslims. A born idealist, Abdul Aziz was no less a realist. He grasped the significance of the three stages through which a paramount language (in this case English) passes in a colonial country. Briefly, the first stage is that of the interpreter of words. This is a mere knowledge of the equivalents of words in the foreign and the indigenous tongues. The interpreter does the translation and is done with it; the foreign language does not affect his customs or habits of thought. He is just a communicating medium. The next stage is somewhat more complex. It involves the systematic study of the English language (or any paramount language) or Western habits of thought. In its nuclear aspect it at least involves the attendance at schools organized on Western lines. There is more than the absorption of facts, there is the probability that new and different ways of thought may seep in. While at lower levels this may lead to the assimilation of ideas, new and incongruent to the existing ethos, at the maximum level it may lead to complete surrender of existing values and the acquiring or imposition of a new life style. This perhaps explains the Muslims' almost total opposition to attendance at Government schools and the mainly Mission-run grant-in-aid schools. The third stage of the acquisition of the foreign language occurs when the acquisition of Western education or Western-oriented education becomes merely the learning of a technique. This happens because the impact of the British (or the original possessors of whatever the paramount language is) has ceased to be overpowering.

It was Abdul Aziz's foresight that made him realize that at his period of time the English language had become a technique without over-powering cultural overtones. A technique which it would be foolish to be without. In an article in 'El Muslim,' Journal which he edited, he dealt feelingly on the subject of English education. He noted the various advantages which a knowledge of English confers. A knowledge of English was necessary for commercial prosperity for it was the language of international trade. A training in book-keeping and kindred subjects was, then, available in English only. For good citizenship English was essential for at that period of time, all laws were passed in the English language. Abdul Aziz deplored that there were only two advocates and five proctors in a Muslim population of three lakhs. Further, for the same reason that English was language of state, higher education and government employment were impossible without a knowledge of that language. So Muslims were innocent of specialised knowledge and administrative experience alike. There were no doctors or engineers or civil list officers among the Muslims. Looking from his standpoint of the first decade of the twentieth century, Abdul Aziz argued that political progress was impossible without a generalized knowledge of English among the Muslims. He thought that the Legislative Council would be reformed by the removal of communal representation by means of nominated members to be replaced by territorial and professional representation through elected members. And that would need highly qualified professional Muslims.

## THE LITERARY LIFE

Abdul Aziz used the platform and the periodical as vehicles for his ideas. Of these, obviously, the periodicals were the more regular and systematic. Besides, the Little Magazines had an impact on public opinion which can only be imagined in the present day when so many mass media compete for the attention of the people. In the early years of the twentieth century, when there were no glossy magazine, no radio and no television and when the few regular papers were in the English language and when there was enough leisure about, the Muslim periodical had a continuous and ever-widening impact. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Muslim leader, Siddi Lebbe had conducted a periodical called 'Muslim Nesan'. When Siddi Lebbe relinquished the editorship in 1889, Abdul Aziz was persuaded to become the editor, though barely twenty two years of age. The editorship of Abdul Aziz was not long-lasting, however, for he resigned owing to differences with the new management. Soon afterwards, Abdul Aziz launched upon editorship on his own. By 1900, he had become the editor and publisher of an Arabic-Tamil periodical called 'As-Sawab'. It was a short-lived paper. But in the next year, Abdul Aziz had come out with another periodical named 'Muslim Guardian' (Muslim Paadukaavalan). Though it lasted scarce eight years, ceasing in 1908, it carried some of Abdul Aziz's most influential articles and is required reading for anyone who would know the intellectual milieu of the Muslims in the early part of this century. Abdul Aziz also edited a periodical called 'El Muslim'.

In a life that was financially constrained as Abdul Aziz's was, the editing and publishing of periodicals could only be called a labour of love. The publication of Little Magazines is scarcely a profitable venture. And when the audience to whom the periodical is intended, contains a large number of individuals who dislike bitter home-truths being dinned into them, the financial viability of the periodical is not to be thought of. Abdul Aziz, in an issue of the 'Muslim Guardian', wrote feelingly of his travails (which reads from its original Tamil as follows).

Readers are aware that we conducted "the Muslim Guardian" from January 1901 to May 1905 and that its publication was suspended after that period. We established and conducted it as a matter of social service. Though we did not intend to profit by it, we had to obtain the funds for carrying it out from the subscriptions that were collected, since there was no common fund to finance it. Besides, we did not make it a practice to collect deposits from subscribers. The paper had to fall into difficulties because some subscribers failed to send in their money. This paper would not have lasted four years if we had not received funds from our well-wishers. We have already published the names of our defaulting subscribers.

After declaring that his periodical was of great use to the general Muslim public and that it carried learned and informative articles and that it was unique among Muslim periodicals in that it carried photographs, Abdul Aziz went on to write:

It would cost a lot of money to print this magazine as well as the photographs. Hence, it will not be possible to distribute it free. It will be sent monthly only to those who pay the year's subscription in advance. Those who wish to obtain copies may get them from news agents or from our office.

Also as has been done in this magazine, there will be two pages in English language where news concerning the Muslims will be discussed so that the Government will be aware of these facts.

Those who subscribe in advance need not fear for their money. We guarantee that in the event that the magazine is discontinued before the expiry of the due period, the balance money will be returned.

One of the interesting features of the 'Muslim Guardian' was the passionate interest which Abdul Aziz displayed in the events of the outer Islamic world. The late Mr. A. M. A. Azeez ascribed the deep-felt interest of Abdul Aziz in current Islamic history to the influence Arabi Pasha exerted on him. The late Mr. A. M. A. Azeez wrote

'Arabi Pasha left Ceylon in 1901. In the farewell speeches Abdul Aziz described him as a kind father and affectionate friend to the Muslims for whose benefit and progress he worked assiduously and successfully during all the years of his stay in Ceylon, which lasted nearly two decades, in such terms did Abdul Aziz appraise Arabi Pasha. Arabi Pasha was his hero. In Arabi Pasha, Abdul Aziz saw the practical expression at its best of the high concept

of Islamic brotherhood—a quality which he naturally endeavoured to emulate. This explains his involvement in the affairs of the Sultan of Turkey, who was the Khalifa of Islam...through the columns of the Muslim Guardian he invited and encouraged donations for the Hedjaz Railway, intended to connect Damascus with Madhina; as a result the fortunes of the Railway were followed with fervour and its completion in 1908 was celebrated enthusiastically in Colombo.'

Abdul Aziz was not content to publish news and reviews of the outer Muslim world, adulatory in every sense of the word. He was too sophisticated and intelligent for any such simplifying act. He had, instinctively, the true historical gift—the ability to probe behind events; the ability to find out the underlying causes. In his essay on the then King of Afghanistan, Amir Habibullah Khan, after discussing the historical evolution of kingship in Afghanistan, the nature of the terrain, the condition of the people, the role of the Great powers, he relates these to the Asian Muslim scene, as follows,

'On the arrival of the Amir, in India, all come to understand that the Amir was a reforming king and that Afghanistan was steadily developing. It has led to the change of mind among British editors in that while they believed formerly that Afghanistan was an unreformed land, they now believe otherwise. Moreover, they give more attention now to Afghanistan affairs. At the same time, the importance of the Amir, who is a principal prince of the Muslim world, was now known to all the Muslims

of the world. If the Amir had not visited India, there would have been no way for Muslims outside Afghanistan, to be aware of the Amir's ability, reforming spirit and culture. As the Muslims are now fully aware of the Amir, the way has been made possible for Muslims to be ever sympathetic towards the Amir and for relations to develop between Afghanistan and other Muslim countries. The advice given by the Amir in India, at Aligarh and other places, to Muslim students and others will be remembered for all time.

In the same periodical, Abdul Aziz published articles (it should be remembered that he was the publisher and writer as well), on a series of related historical topics. There was the series on the history of Arabia and another on the history of the Ottoman Empire, and yet another on the British Interference in Egypt. He introduced a series of Muslim personages to the public in Sri Lanka. Among them were the Khedive Abbas Hilmi Pasha, Sheikh Abdullah Qwillam, Syed Ahamed Khan, S. Ameer Ali and the Egyptian nationalist, Moustapha Kamel Pasha. In particular, Abdul Aziz emphasised the place and role of the Sultan of Turkey, Abdül Hamid. The Khalifate for him represented the visible symbol of the brotherhood of Islam. Abdul Aziz looked at the history of Islam as an organic, unfolding phenomenon. Among his studies on the comparative interpretation of history was his justly famous speech on the Conflict between the Cross and the Crescent. The late Mr. A. M. A. Azeez, when he came to discuss this, wrote in admiring terms.

On the 29th of October 1912 under the Chairmanship of Hajee Mohamed Macan Markar Effendi,



Consul for Turkey, Abdul Aziz delivered an illuminating address on the theme of the Conflict between the Cross and the Crescent. On reading the full text today in the light of subsequent events, one is truly amazed to find that Abdul Aziz, who at school had not gone beyond the sixth standard, had such profound knowledge of world history and such fine and clear grasp of international affairs.'

To bring the full flavour of Abdul Aziz's style, his innate ability to marshal his facts, his logical power, some brief quotations seem necessary, here. Like most of his speeches and articles intended for his co-religionists, the original speech was in Tamil but the printed version is in English. At the outset, Abdul Aziz sketched in the antagonism shown by the Great Powers against Turkey and he reviewed the agitation in Macedonia at that time asking for reforms from Turkey, the paramount Power. Then he went on to say,

'The question now being asked is whether Macedonia is actually in need of the reforms asked for, or is the present upheaval due to the intrigues and machinations of the Balkan Committee or Macedonian Committee, which is working with the ulterior object of accelerating the disintegration of the Turkish Empire. Reforms are no doubt good in themselves but a country that wants to have them must be ripe enough for them. Otherwise they would be the cause of its own ruin. At least this is the principle which guides the European nations in granting reforms to their own dependencies. I may invite your attention to India and Ceylon as

examples. The British Government has refused and still refuses to give these countries certain reforms for the reason that they are not ripe enough to have them. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Hence there is no wonder in Turkey desiring to be guided by the same principle. What else can be her reason for refusing to grant to the Macedonians the reforms asked for if it is not their unsuitability. At the present moment the Government of Turkey is constitutional and hence it cannot be regarded as blind to the political rights of its subjects. Her only possible reason for refusing to grant autonomy to Macedonia is the incapacity of that province of the Turkish Empire to be benefited by it. Not only Turkey but the Powers as well have entertained that view.

Abdul Aziz went on to sketch the history of Bulgaria, the origins of the Ottoman Empire, the early history of Islam and all this with topical citations of authority. He ended on this sad note which summarized the reasons for his attachment to the Turkish Sultanate. He wrote,

The Great Powers are looking calmly at the destruction of the Mohammadan Power in Europe. Empire after Empire has risen and fallen in the past. If it is the will of God that the Muslim power should now disappear from Europe, there can be none to prevent it, but the Muslims all over the world will have the consolation that it has withstood there, the jealousies and hatred of its numerous and powerful enemies for six centuries

and its defeat is only occurring in an uneven contest in which four states are fighting against one, with the moral support of the Christian world at their back.

## TOWARDS MUSLIM LAW REFORM

One of the pivotal roles which Abdul Aziz played was his enthusiastic espousal of changes in Muslim law as it prevails in this island. The foundation-stone of Muslim law in Sri Lanka, it might be said, was the Mohammedan Code of 1806, suitably modified by legislation. It has been held to be a rough codification of certain parts of Islamic jurisprudence. The Code's lack of comprehensiveness makes it necessary for it to be read, as an amalgam, together with the general principles of Islamic law. Sometimes the Code might differ from the general principles of Muslim law as stated in standard text-books. In those instances it has been judicially held that it is the duty of the courts to give effect to the provisions of the Code. In the nineteenth century, the British Government, according to its lights, wished to make changes in the Muslim law of this country. One of the glaring omissions was that there was no official record of Muslim marriages. So, matters came to a head in 1886, when the British Government deemed it expedient to regulate Muslim marriages. Accordingly, between 1885 and 1886 the then Acting Attorney General moved an ordinance to amend the Code of Mohammedan laws and to provide for the registration of Muslim marriages. Expectedly, this met with uniform resistance from the Muslim middle classes, it being understood that the ordinary Muslim did not know enough English to appreciate the tenor of the Ordinance; in particular,

the Muslims were opposed to clause 20 of the Ordinance, which enacted that no marriage contracted hereafter by Muslims shall be valid unless registered in the manner and form provided for them.

When analysed with some care, the opposition to the Ordinance reveals three factors in the thinking of the Muslims. First, that the registration of Muslim marriages was an unnecessary importation. Secondly, that the registration of Muslim marriages was an unnecessary intrusion into what was essentially a private matter. That the names, ages and other details of the parties to the marriage should be recorded and made available in a public office, was insupportable to the generality of Muslim public opinion. Thirdly, some of the procedural laws which affected Muslims, had a way of being sidestepped by not a few Muslims to their ultimate inconvenience and discomfiture. This was as much due to ignorance as aloofness from the British. Even in the administrative sphere, there is a sorry tale of Muslim aloofness at that period. Under-enumeration of Muslims at the censuses, large-scale avoidance of small pox vaccinations, imperfect registration of birth—these were some of its results. Though the Ordinance for the registration of Muslim marriages was passed it was subsequently watered down by recourse to the Secretary of State for Colonies.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the social and economic conditions of Sri Lanka had changed. The increase in money incomes resulting from the expansion in the export cash crops had generally increased the standard of living of the people. At the same time, it had helped in ending the isolation of

villages. Speaking of Muslim villages in particular, the informal social control exercised by the village elders seemed to be breaking. The dangers of non-registration of Muslim marriages were becoming explicit. Seeing this problem, Abdul Aziz returned to the attack. He wrote.

... We are now in a position to judge the amount of good, it (The Mohammedan Marriage Registration Ordinance of 1886) has done to the community to benefit which it was enacted. From our experience we are able to say that it has failed to a very large extent, if not entirely, to achieve the object with which it was brought into existence. It was enacted to rectify a defect which existed not among the better class of Mohammedans but among the poor class of those people, whose daughters were exposed to many losses and injuries owing to the fact that the registers of their marriages were insecure at the hands of the irresponsible and unscrupulous levvas who had the opportunities to make alterations in them, or destroy or suppress them, for gratifications received by them, to the great prejudice of those women and their children and who availed themselves of those opportunities not infrequently. By making the registration of Mohammedan marriages under the said Ordinance optional the Government have made it almost useless for it has lost the power of rectifying the said defect... This matter is being considered by the Mohammedans of Colombo and we can now say only this much, that registration under the said Ordinance must be made compulsory...

By 1907, M. L. M. Abdul Aziz, who did not believe in letting grass grow under his feet, had been instrumental in setting up the Mohammedan Marriage Registration Ordinance Committee. This Committee, consisted besides himself some of the leading Muslims at that time including Hon. W. M. Abdul Rahman MLC, and Messieurs Mohamed Macan Markar, Turkish Consul, S. D. Abdullah Alim, I. L. M. Sinne Lebbe-Marikar Alim Hajjar, M. L. M. H. Zainudeen Hajjar MMC, S. L. Mahmood Hajjar JP, I. L. M. H. Noordeen Hajjar, I. L. M. Abdul Careem, M. Abdul Cader BA, Advocate, A. C. Mohammed, Proctor, N. D. H. Abdul Cader, Proctor, S. L. Naina Marikar Hajjar, S. L. M. H. Abdul Azeez Hajjar, N. D. H. Abdul Cafoor Hajjar, I. L. M. H. Mohladeen Hajjar, A. L. Abdul Careem, S. L. Noohu Lebbe, A. R. Mohammed Ismail Mudaliyar, C. L. M. Meera Lebbe Marikar, N. D. H. Jalaldeen Hajjar.

Despite opposition from a section of the Muslims, the Committee proceeded on its work. On its behalf, Abdul Aziz drew up two sets of laws. One was to amend the existing Ordinance on Muslim marriage; the other was to provide for Muslim divorces. The Tamil translations of these drafts were published in the Tamil journals of that time. Abdul Aziz did not fail to utilize his journal, 'Muslim Guardian' to propagate his views. However, by that time, the energies of Abdul Aziz were taken up by the Maradana Mosque case, and his attempts at legal reform had to be given up for want of time.

## STUDENT OF ISLAM

Abdul Aziz was deeply interested in the study of Islam. He was a much sought after lecturer. He had

the singular capacity of making his subjects interesting without making them any less detailed. Being a naturally deep-thinking person, he was involved early in his career with questions of Islamic philosophy which seem to have agitated some Muslims in the latter part of the last and the beginning of the present century. The late Mr. A. M. A. Azeez inimitably summarized the situation in the following words.

'In a series of booklets entitled "Chattin Gnana-rtham"—the metaphysical meaning of Force—he affirmed the views relating to Force and Matter contained in Siddi Lebbe's "Asrarul Alam", his magnum opus—a volume on Islamic philosophy. The salient aspects of this burning question, the chief topic of his day, are found in a series of four editorials written by Abdul Aziz with the title "Asrarul Alamum Alukarulla Alimum" appearing in the fourth volume of the Muslim Guardian. There he controverted point by point, the many polemicists, some of them ill-equipped in knowledge and virtue, some much wanting in character and capacity and all of them ranged posthumously against Siddi Lebbe. These polemicists had flooded the market with their fatwahas, handbills, pamphlets, booklets and even a book or two. Abdul Aziz dealt with them all, with the dialectical skill of a scholastic long trained in disputation. Such was his able defence. So completely were they worsted.'

Abdul Aziz was not content to remain a polemicist merely. In his journals he advocated a series of proposals which he believed would regenerate the Muslim way of life. He sketched his proposals in various articles

In Muslim Guardian. In one of these, he divided the Muslims of this country into four kinds of personality structures. The first kind of Muslims were those who were only concerned with their material wealth and its accumulation and conservation. The second group were those who without proper knowledge interfere in matters of general interest and prevent the social welfare activities of others. The third kind though they are educated do not use their learning for the greater glory of Allah or the welfare of the people. The last group are those persons conscious of their duties to Allah and man and who do their duties conscientiously. In the same article, Abdul Aziz suggested a method of preventing religious disputes. He advocated the establishment of a Religious Council, consisting of Alims and laymen, in the ratio of ten laymen to 20 Alims. The purpose of the laymen, every one of whom was a well educated and well informed person, was to advise the Alims on matters on which these laymen had expertise. There was to be a secretary for this council. A journal in which the decisions of the council would be made public; a printing press for the journal and a specialised library of Islamic books were important aspects of his proposals. The finds of this Council would be binding on all Muslims. He also proposed the establishment of an Organization comprising representatives of Jamaths of every mosque in this country. This organization would choose quazis. Some of his suggestions appear astonishingly modern today, though some seventy years have passed since they were put forward.

## **STUDENT OF HISTORY**

One of the bed rocks of Abbul Aziz's enduring fame was his work on the history of the Moors of



Sri Lanka. The question of the ethnology of the Moors had been hanging fire from the end of the nineteenth century. Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan in the course of the speech in the Legislative Council during the debate on the Mohammedan Registration Ordinance in 1885 had made a remark to the effect that a vast majority of the Moors of Sri Lanka were a class of Tamils professing the Islamic religion. This statement was countered by Siddi Lebbe who wrote a series of articles in his periodical 'Muslim Nesan', controverting the views of Sir P. Ramanathan, and proving that the Moors of Sri Lanka were, in the main, the descendants of the Arab colonists who had settled down in Sri Lanka centuries ago. A political overtone was added to this controversy in that at that period the Moors were campaigning for a separate nominated seat in the Legislative Council. The political nature of the controversy ceased with the creation in 1889 of a Mohammedan nominated seat in the Legislative Council. Nonetheless, the controversy continued in the pages of the papers at that time as for instance the 'Ceylon Standard'. Abdul Aziz had already adverted to the problem in his letter (under the nom 'de plume' of 'A Moor') in the Times of Ceylon of 9th September 1889. In his journal, 'Muslim Guardian' too, he had written several articles on the same theme and all characterised by his careful marshalling of facts and detailed documentation. In one of his articles, Abdul Aziz translated and commented on the communication regarding the Moors written by Sir Alexander Johnston, sometime Chief Justice of Ceylon, and read at the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain on February 3rd, 1827. In this article, there are notes on the history of the Moors of this country from the ninth century onwards and particular references to their abilities as medical

men and traders. By 1907, Abdul Aziz had published his book—'A Criticism of Mr. Ramanathan's Ethnology of the Moors of Ceylon'—surely the opus classicus on the subject. The care and dedication he showed in his articles he displayed all the more in his books. He cited a large number of authorities; he utilised epigraphic evidence, then unlike now rarely used. He carefully analysed his facts; he came to unshakable conclusions; he completely refuted the arguments of Sir P. Ramanathan. No wonder then that a distinguished writer on those times spoke thus. 'If today no doubts are being entertained on the question of the nationality of the Ceylon Moors, a large measure of credit should go to Abdul Aziz.'

If Abdul Aziz looked upon the ethnology of the Moors with a critical sense of history, he looked upon their foibles, too with a critical eye. He was conscious of the fact that the Muslims were a minority in Sri Lanka.

As Governor Sir West Ridgeway put it deftly that in the Census of 1901 out of every 10,000 persons 6537 were Sinhala, 2669 were Tamils, 639 were Moors, 66 were Burghers and Eurasians; Malays were 33; Europeans were 18; Veddahs were 11 and others were 27. Abdul Aziz was particularly conscious of the fact that such a small community should not waste its wealth in unnecessary expenditure. Then as now, it was the custom to hold mowlid, kandoori and other ritual celebrations. Abdul Aziz, while whole heartedly welcoming the intention, deplored the unnecessary expenditure which these, more often than not, entailed. Again and again in the pages of his periodicals he felt bound to criticise

these practices. He suggested that people should be more interested in the recitations at these functions than in the food which went with these. He suggested that the money spent lavishly at these functions should be given as scholarships to those students who were capable of going abroad for higher studies. His view-point, though it irked some of his contemporaries, seemed always eminently reasonable. He wrote for instance in one of his articles which reads (when translated from the original Tamil)

Those who attend kandooris are both the rich and the poor. As the poor assuage their hunger, the rich who give these kandooris earn merit. It is certainly true that it is an excellent thing to give food to the hungry. But those who give food should not forget that it is far better to make it possible for a poor man to earn his living rather than giving him a meal. It is not allowed in our religion to beg. Nevertheless, in this country there are proportionately more Muslims depending on alms, ... We think that one reason for such a situation is that the rich men in our community are not carrying out their duty as they should, ... It is not correct to give free food to those who could earn on their own. It should not be thought that our view is that the rich should tell the indigent poor to earn by themselves and that the rich should wash their hands off them. The reason why, in this country, those who cannot trade or work as labourers become mendicants is that these people do not know any other handicraft. Building work is among our community, the principal artisan craft. However, there are other excellent crafts. But, these require training and education. It should be the duty of our rich to make it possible for the poor to learn and practise these crafts.

Abdul Aziz also insisted that the Holy Quran should be taught not only to be recited but also to be understood. He suggested that the Muslims in this country should study, along with the Holy Quran in Arabic, its translations in Tamil so that recitative ability as well as lexical understanding is obtained. He advocated that Tamil should be used in the imparting of religious knowledge. Another of his proposals was the preparation of special text books and supplementary readers. He suggested that the Quranic schools, then as now a principal source of Muslim primary education could be reorganized and re-vivified. He urged, too that a Muslim Educational Conference, based on the Indian model should be established in this country so that Muslim education could be systematically organized and regulated. Regarding female education, he suggested that the strict purdah system be modified in such a way that while safeguarding the woman-hood of Islam, enable our females to advance socially, intellectually and spiritually like their sisters of the palmy days of Islam.

The striking modernity of Abdul Aziz's views is unmistakable.

## **THE FEZ CONTROVERSY**

Reference has been made in an early part of this essay, to the Fez controversy and Abdul Aziz's role in it. Yet, a rehearsal of the events both precedent and subsequent seems necessary in view of its impact personally and on his community generally. The Fez Controversy revolved around the late Mr. M. C. Abdul Cader who was the first Muslim graduate and the first Muslim advocate in this Island. This was a matter of great delight to all the Muslims of Sri Lanka. Abdul Aziz congratulated

lated him in his journal, 'The Muslim Guardian.' Abdul Cader took his oaths as an advocate on 7th October 1904, wearing the dress adopted by the educated Muslim which included coat, trousers and fez. It was the custom, too for Muslim jurors, litigants and witnesses and prosecutors to appear in court, their heads covered with the fez. Abdul Cader practised in the courts for seven months with this headgear. During that time, however, the then Chief Justice, Sir Charles Layard was away in England. When he returned to this island, matters came to a head. On 2nd May 1905, the Chief Justice ordered Abdul Cader either to remove his fez or shoes as a mark of respect. Being unable to comply with his request, Abdul Cader withdrew. The leading Muslims at that time realized that this order affected the dignity and respect due to their religion and culture. The right of covering their heads was a right enjoyed by Muslims on every occasion. So, a group of leading Muslims—Abdul Aziz pre-eminent among them—met and decided to see the Chief Justice. The Chief Justice agreed provided the deputation was of a private nature. Accordingly, the deputation consisting of four leading Muslims saw the Chief Justice on 17th June 1905. Hon. W. M. Abdur Rahman MLC having introduced the deputation, Abdul Aziz explained the views of the Muslims. The Chief Justice explained his position and suggested that Abdul Cader should submit a statement on this issue to the Supreme Court so that it could go into it formally. Subsequently, Abdul Cader submitted the statement. The Supreme Court after considering this statement minuted that Abdul Cader should not come to court wearing the fez. That was on 19th September 1905.

The time had come for the issue to be settled by public opinion. A path-finding committee met on 27th

October 1905. The Committee came to the conclusion that a public meeting should be held, where a resolution would be passed requesting the King to rescind the minute. A Committee for that purpose was appointed. This included Hon. W. M. Abdur Rahman MLC, Sir Mohamed Macan Markar, M. L. M. Zainudeen, M. I. Mohamed Ali, S. L. M. Mahmood, I. L. M. Noordeen, Careemjee Jafferjee, S. L. Naina Marikar, Ibrahim Bin Ahmed, N. D. H. Abdul Cafoor, I. L. M. Mohamed Meera Lebbe Marikar, and P. B. Umbichy. Owing to the determination, efficiency and energy which he had shown on all public occasions, Abdul Aziz was the unanimous choice as Secretary to this Committee. Realising that it was the intensity and strength of public opinion that settled the issue, he applied himself wholeheartedly towards that end. His method of approach was four-sided. First he planned to get Moulavi Rafiudeen Ahmad, who had appeared in the courts of India and elsewhere with his head covered. Secondly, he planned to hold meetings throughout the island and these to send delegates to the mass meeting at Colombo. So he organized and carried out thirty meetings throughout this country and these selected ninety-nine delegates to be present at the Colombo meeting. In the third place, the chosen venue which was the grounds of the Maradana Mosque gave the meeting the needed religious tone. In the fourth place, he used the media with great effect.

The meeting, as had been noted earlier, took place in Colombo on Sunday, the 31st December 1905. The size of the meeting could be gauged by the comment of the 'Times of Ceylon' on 1st January 1906.

It wrote: "There have been mass meetings and monster meetings in Colombo before yesterday. Great princ-

ples and organizations have summoned gatherings of thousands.

It was left to the Mohamedans, however, to summon an assembly together which deserved the name of "monster meeting."

'The Ceylon Independent' of 4th January 1906 spoke of the meeting in the following admiring tones,

... It was not an indignation meeting in any sense. It was a meeting of the most law-abiding and industrious section of the inhabitants of the country to ask for redress of a grievance. Not a single expression disloyal to British rule was uttered. The speakers dwelt with enthusiasm on the justice, fairness and equity of British rule and the willingness of enlightened Englishmen to respect the rights of their fellow subjects. But though the speaking was temperate in tone the criticism to which the Minute of the Chief Justice was subjected was relentless and it was torn to shreds by the various speakers'.

### **MATTERS INCIDENTAL**

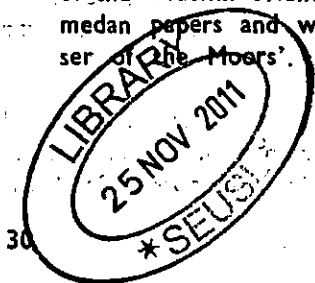
The resolution requesting the King to rescind the minute was unanimously passed. However, the authorities in this country decided themselves to act. The Supreme Court made another minute on 16th March 1906 under which the fez was allowed. The work of Abdul Aziz and his colleagues was amply rewarded.

The energetic efficient man he was, Abdul Aziz could not help occupying positions of responsibility in organizations. From 1900 he held successively the post of President

of the Moors' Union which had replaced the earlier Jamiatul Islamiah. One of his posts, however drained him of energy for more fruitful purposes, for it involved him in litigation. In June 1903, he had been elected Trustee of Maradana Mosque. That was for five years, Characteristically, Abdul Aziz distinguished himself by efficient management, of the institution under his control. His next tenure of five years was stormy, however. The congregation was divided and Abdul Aziz was opposed. It was a tragic situation unexpected and yet inescapable. Three years of litigation ensued. Abdul Aziz conserved his post. But harmony did not fully ensue.

On Saturday, the 11th September 1915, death came to Abdul Aziz. A fever which he had caught, turned worse and he passed away peacefully. It was a life nobly lived. The following obituary in the 'Times of Ceylon' of September 13, 1915 draws attention to some of his qualities,

'By his death the Moorish community has lost one of its respected leaders, for he was a man of education and though not aspiring to Legislative honours, had the confidence of the entire community in everything he undertook for their political, religious and social advancement. He was the Editor of the 'Muslim Friend' and several other Mohammedan papers and was the general friend and adviser of the Moors'.



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