

AFRICAN AND ASIAN MUSLIMS IN THE DIASPORA IN SOUTH AFRICA

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This article outlines the history and experiences of Muslims of African and Asian origin in South Africa, their current status, and current and future challenges.

History of Islam

The South

Islam has a long history in South Africa; the first Muslims arrived at the Cape in the middle of the 17th century. These were slaves brought from Africa, India, the East Indies, Mauritius and Ceylon to provide labour for the refreshment station established by the Dutch at the Cape of Good Hope (Theal 1905, Bradlow 1978, Boeseken 1977). Slaves were brought by Dutch ships from Batavia, captured from European ships, or purchased from French, Portuguese, and — later — Danish and English ships sailing round the Cape Horn (De Kock 1950).

Slave labour was soon supplemented by prison labour; hundreds of prisoners were transported to the Cape from the East Indies to serve out their sentences. Opponents of Dutch colonization were also exiled to the Cape (Shell 1974). In fact, the first prisoners on the world-renowned Robben Island were Muslim political exiles who included men of distinction and influence (Jeffreys 1936), such as the Princes of Ternate (De Kock 1950), and the Rajah of Tambora (Hoge 1951).

The Statutes of India issued by the Council of India forbade the public expression of any faith other than Calvinism, and Muslims were not permitted to practice Islam publicly (Botha 1962, Lewis 1949). Since slavery was still “legal”, there was little that they could do. Confronting their masters or the Dutch authorities was sure to lead to unpleasant consequences. Records of slavery in the Cape reveal cases of severe punishment of slaves by their owners for acts of omission and commission (Wilson & Thompson 1969).

In this context, it is natural to expect that the Free Blacks or *Vryezwarten* — as the slaves and ex-prisoners came to be known — would seek a discrete mode of expressing their faith. This they found in the *ṣūfī ṭarīqa* (order), which became the locus of religious activity. There is no recorded evidence of *ṭarīqa* activity prior to the exile of *Ṣayḥ* Yūsuf of Makasar to the Cape in 1694 (Dangor 1994), though such activity cannot be completely ruled out. The *Ḥalwatiyya ṭarīqa* established by him at Faure is the first known *ṭarīqa* founded on South African soil. For the next century, the *ṭarīqa* played a pivotal role as the only tangible institution of Islam at the Cape.

The *mağlis* or gathering at Faure, which was to be continued after Šayḥ Yūsuf's death in 1699 by his devoted disciples, apparently attracted many Christian slaves who subsequently embraced the burgeoning new faith (Dangor 1994). There are many recorded complaints in early sources about the conversion of slaves to Islam (Shell 1983). This is understandable in view of the fact that attempts to convert all slaves to Christianity had little success (Shell 1974). Other factors responsible for the growth of Islam in this period were: intermarriage between Muslim men and Christian — including European — women which was a cause of great consternation among sectors of the "White" population (Gordon 1927), and adoption of abandoned children by Muslims.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a number of *ṣūfī* masters made their impact on Cape Muslim life (Da Costa 1994). Two *ṭarīqas* were introduced into the Cape in the late nineteenth Century: the *ʿAlawiyya ṭarīqa* by Šayḥ ʿAbdarrahmān ibn Muḥammad al-ʿIrāqī and the *Qādiriyya* by Šayḥ Sayyid Muḥsin ibn Sālīm al-ʿId-rūs of Makka. The foundation of the *Čištīyya* order was laid by Imām ʿAbdallaṭīf al-Qādī (Kazī). In the first quarter of this century, other *ṭarīqa* which emerged were the *Rifāʿiyya*, *Naqšabandiyya* and *Šādiliyya* (Zwemer 1925).

Imām ʿAbdallāh ibn Qādī ʿAbdassalām, a former prince of the principality of Tidore in the Ternate islands, respectfully called "Tuan Guru", commenced a *madrasa* (school) at Dorp Street in 1793. This was the first time Muslim children were officially allowed to receive instruction in their faith, and marked the beginning of rapid literacy among the slaves. Within forty years there were no less than twelve *madāris* in Cape Town (Davids 1987).

Though the medium of instruction was Malay, reading and writing the Arabic script formed an integral part of the *madrasa* curriculum (Horrell 1970). The Malay rhythmic mnemonics were used for teaching consonants and vowel sounds of the Arabic alphabet. The Qurʾānic text used was handwritten by Tuan Guru from memory (Davids 1990). Tuan Guru's *Maʿrifat al-islām wa-l-īmān* which is an exponent of ʿAšarite philosophy, was the prescribed text for all pupils. Davids argues that this text had the most profound impact on the life of Cape Muslims in the 19th century. His translations (e.g. *Dalīl al-ḥayra*, 1798) were used for teaching *fiqh* (jurisprudence) (Davids 1990).

In 1795, the *madrasa* began to serve as a de facto mosque. This first mosque — not surprisingly — was called the Awwal mosque (Davids 1980), heralding the dawn of a new era. Religious freedom was granted for the first time to Muslims in 1804 by the new Dutch governors (Bradlow 1978). According to reports, when the British invaded the Cape, Muslims supplied two artillery divisions — referred to as the Javaanshe Artilleries — to fight alongside the Dutch against the British in the Battle of Blaauwberg in 1806 in gratitude for a piece of land on which to build a mosque (Davids 1980).

Not only did Muslims acquire a place of public prayer; the mosque became the focal point of community activity. Furthermore, it spawned the emergence of numerous mosques within a short span (Davids 1980), leading to a more institutionalized form of Islam, though practices associated with the *ṭarīqa* – such as the recitation of the *Rātib al-Ḥaddād*, a compilation of hymns by ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿAlawī al-Ḥaddād – survived (Davids 1990). Interestingly, slaves were appointed as *imām* in some of these mosques (*South African...*). Despite this, Muslims were denied basic civic rights. They were denied citizenship rights, their marriages were not recognised, they required permission to live in the Colony, were subject to arbitrary arrest, had to carry passes, and had restrictions on freedom of movement.

By 1854, Islamic education was well organised under the supervision of the superintendent general of education, called *imam mootā* (Mayson 1865). Muslims also conducted their own secular schools, where European converts to Islam gave instruction in English, Dutch, writing and accounting (Mayson 1865). In 1863 the Ottoman Theological School was established by Abū Bakr Effendi, a Kurd sent to the Cape by the Ottoman sultan to resolve disputes concerning the appointment of an *imām*. Ironically, Effendi, an adherent of the *ḥanafī* school of jurisprudence, became the cause of greater disaffection among the predominantly *šāfiʿī* Muslims at the Cape.

While Muslim children could read Arabic, it was not their mother-tongue. Muslims at the Cape spoke Malay and a creolized form of Dutch called Afrikaans (Ross 1983). By the beginning of the 19th century, Afrikaans became the medium of *madrasa* instruction (Davids 1987a). This led to an interesting development: in order to make texts understandable, teachers used the Arabic script to transcribe their Creolized Dutch! This genre of literature is called Arabic-Afrikaans (Van Selms 1951). The first book to have been written in Afrikaans in Arabic script was the *Kitāb al-qawl al-matīn* of al-Iṣmūnī which was printed in 1856 (Van Selms 1953). This was followed by *Bayān ad-dīn* of Abū Bakr Effendi in 1869 (Brandel-Syrier 1960, Davids 1990). Kahler has listed 64 titles in his study of Arabic-Afrikaans manuscripts (Kahler 1971).

The Cape Muslims developed their own lingua franca. In their daily communication, they used many Malay words. Some examples are:

- *abdash*: ritual ablution
- *bang*: call of prayer
- *bacha*: recite
- *puwasa*: fasting
- *terima kasi*: thank you (Davids 1990)

Many Malay words were absorbed by Cape Dutch.

Incidentally, the *madrasa* became an instrument of conversion, by opening its doors to children of all persuasions, who through exposure to Islam eventually embraced it.

...the black man has no desire to enter into the Christian church whose gates have been so long shut against him, he prefers joining with those who have been his

friends in his distress, who invite and encourage him to bring his children to the same school, to attend the same mosque... (Classified Digest 1893)

Among the popular Muslim practices were:

- *mawlid*: the Prophet's birthday celebration
- *gaddad*: recitation in praise of God, prayers and supplications.

Some early Muslim practices bear a distinct hallmark of acculturation, accommodating cultural traits from Christianity, Hinduism and African tradition. These include:

- *rampie-sny*: cutting of orange-leaves on the Prophet's birthday
- *ratiep*: striking the body with swords and piercing the flesh with skewers
- *doopmal*: naming ceremony in which the new-born, with crow-like insignia on its forehead, is carried on a tray decorated with flowers
- *kersoptiek*: ceremonial lighting of candles on 27th night of Ramadan
- *tamat*: graduation ceremony for children who had completed their first recitation of the Qur'an and primary Islamic education.
- placing a mirror behind the bride (Davids 1990).

Today, some of the above practices such as *doopmal*, *tamat*, *kersoptiek*, are non-existent; others such as *ratiep*, *gaddad* and *rampie-sny* are rarely manifested. Factors responsible for the cessation and decline of these practices include: access to Islamic literature in English, return of graduates from institutions of Islamic learning in the Muslim World, visits by international Muslim scholars to South Africa, contact with Muslim organisations abroad and influence of modern Muslim writers and scholars.

A common feature in the 19th century was the use of "spiritual medicine" by the Cape Muslims, referred to by writers as "Malay Magic" or even "Malay Tricks" (Mayson 1865). Among those said to have enjoyed great "mystic powers" was Tuan Guru who used a dice for divination and as a remedy for illnesses. Tuan Guru's book on *fiqh* (jurisprudence) includes instructions for the preparation of the *azeemat* (amulet) and *isharah* (remedy consisting of a brew of lemon water and herbs) for warding off evil and protection against diseases and misfortune (Davids 1983).

So firm was their faith in "alternate" medicine that they resisted vaccination against smallpox, hospitalisation and quarantine during the smallpox epidemic in the 18th and 19th centuries. The measures imposed on them by the Municipal authorities did not consider their special needs. When the Muslim cemetery on the slope of the Lion's Rump, the Tana Baru — in which prominent leaders were interned — was closed for burial in terms of the Public Health Act No 4 of 1883, three thousand Muslims staged a protest march through the heart of the city to bury a dead child in the cemetery (Davids 1985).

Dr. Abdul Rahman played a critical role in the educational and political development of Cape Muslims. Apart from being the pioneer of state-aided primary schools for Muslim children, he was a founder of the African Political Organisation. He also served on the Cape Town City Council, to which he was elected in 1904, and the

Cape Provincial Council (Ajam 1986). In 1927 the South African Indian Congress appointed him to lead a delegation to the Viceroy of India to protest against the government's proposed legislation on Asians (Steenkamp 1979). Abū Bakr Effendi's son, Aḥmad Effendi, attempted to gain a seat in the Cape Parliament but failed (Davids 1980).

The North

Another stream of Muslims arrived in the Natal Colony in the nineteenth century. They consisted of "Malays" from Java (Joshi 1942), slaves from East Africa and Zanzibar (Oosthuizen 1982), indentured labourers, traders and soldiers from India (Kuper 1960, Bhana 1967), and merchants from Mauritius and East Africa (Brookes 1967, Kuper 1960). Among the mine and forestry workers who migrated to the Transvaal from Mozambique and Malawi in the last century were many Muslims (Mohamed, *Da'wah*).

Though these Muslims did not suffer the oppression and persecution experienced by Muslims in the Cape two centuries earlier, they had to struggle for their civic rights. Indian traders — the majority of whom were Muslim — encountered numerous obstacles from "White" traders who resented their intrusion and competitive spirit. There were demands for the expatriation of all Indians to India, and many returned home. After the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa in 1894, the Natal Indian Congress was established in order to fight for Indian civic rights — in particular, the rights to residence, trade and education. Hundreds were imprisoned for their opposition to the apartheid regime. Muslims established schools, hospitals, and funded universities and colleges (Dangor 1991).

Residential integration of Muslim and Hindu indentured labourers in Natal led to acculturation as Muslims imbibed various cultural traits from their Hindu compatriots. The quest of the Muslim minority for acceptability by the Hindu majority also encouraged cultural borrowing. When the Čištī *pir* (spiritual guide), Sufi Sahib of Hyderabad, arrived in Durban in 1895, he observed that the Muslims — most of whom were from South India — had "deviated from correct Islamic practices" (Smith 1970).

Sufi Sahib's contribution to the consolidation and growth of Islam in Natal was phenomenal. It was he who established the *ṣūfī* tradition in Natal where it still enjoys popular support. He was personally responsible for the establishment of numerous mosques, several orphanages and *madāris* (Islamic schools). The *mawlid* (Prophet's birthday celebration) and *'urs* (celebration of the death anniversary of a saint) which he initiated in Durban have become a feature of Islam in the North. His lectures attracted not only Muslims, but also Hindu indentured workers, some of whom subsequently embraced Islam (Dangor 1995).

The Muslims from East Africa and Zanzibar — commonly known as "Zanzibaris" — rejected their classification as "African" on the basis that they would lose their reli-

gious identity. In terms of the Group Area Act, they would have been compelled to reside in an area designated for Africans. Indian Muslim traders intervened on their behalf; consequently, they were classified as "other Asiatics" and permitted to reside in an Indian group area and attend Indian schools (Seedat 1973). There has since been close association between Muslims of Indian origin and the "Zanzibaris". Together, they observed practices such as *dīkr* (chanting), *mawlid* and *rātīb*, and attended each others' social functions, e. g. weddings (Oosthuizen 1982).

Nonetheless, acculturation between them was not very pronounced probably because social contact between them was limited. Unlike at the Cape, there have been few interracial marriages among Muslims in the North. Visiting the tombs of saints to offer prayers for assistance and guidance is a common practice among Indian Muslims. The shrines of Sufi Sahib and Badsha Peer in Durban are the most popular sites of visitation (Dangor 1997).

While Indian Muslims did not observe any special rites of passage, the birth, circumcision, puberty, and last rites of the Zanzibaris reflect the distinct influence of African traditional practices. Likewise, their healing practices which combine herbal medicine, seeking the intervention of ancestral spirits, supplication to God, animal sacrifice and singing and dancing (Oosthuizen 1982). Among Indian Muslims, the use of *ta'wīd* (amulet) is popular; however, there is no strong tradition of herbal medicine.

Both the Indian and Zanzibari Muslims have abandoned many of their traditional practices due to several factors. The establishment of the *madrasa* played a significant role in forging a measure of homogeneity in the expression of Islam. Educational institutions in the Indian sub-continent also had a pronounced influence. Since the middle of this century, young men have been sent to India and Pakistan to qualify as mawlānas who, on their return, have helped shape attitudes and perspectives of the communities they serve. Other factors include visits by Muslim scholars, easy access to Islamic literature, and contact with organisations abroad (Dangor 1997).

The Current Status of Muslims

Due to their involvement in the struggle for justice and human rights, in their individual capacity and as members of liberation movements or political formations, many Muslim individuals now serve in the regional and national parliaments, and some hold high office in government, e.g. the Minister of Justice, Minister of Water Affairs, Deputy-Minister of Foreign Affairs. Since the majority of Muslims belonged to the Indian and so-called Coloured communities, they formed part of the disenfranchised majority. They were either excluded or marginalized from political and economic structures which were dominated by the "White" minority and were subject to racial discrimination and injustice.

In spite of the many obstacles placed in their way: lack of educational facilities, restriction on trading rights, job reservation (for "Whites"), etc., Muslims have made

significant contributions to the economic life of the country. While Muslims of the North have distinguished themselves as traders, those of the South are reputed craftsmen and artisans. Today the Muslim community has in its ranks many professionals and technicians (*Meet the Muslims...*). They constitute a small, yet significant sector of the economy.

Muslims have succeeded in maintaining their group cohesion through adherence to religious and cultural norms and values. There are no less than 400 mosques in South Africa today and it is estimated that there are over 400 Muslim organisations in South Africa, catering for the spiritual, cultural, economic, educational, and social welfare needs of Muslims.

Every town has a *madrasa* which imparts basic Islamic education to Muslim pupils after the normal school hours. Some *madāris* are run by individuals, others by organisations. There are several institutes of Islamic education where full-time students obtain knowledge of the Islamic sciences. A number of Muslim private schools have recently been established throughout the country. Undergraduate and post-graduate courses in Islamic Studies are now offered at several South African universities.

The Muslim community is vibrant; there is a resurgence of Islam among sectors of the Muslim population, including academics and professionals who had in the past remained aloof from the mainstream of Islamic activities. These include: essays and speech contests, symposia and conferences, publication of newspapers and Islamic literature, propagation of Islam, poetry recitals, youth camps, *mawlid* and *iġtima* (Dangor 1991).

Challenges

The new political dispensation in South Africa has brought about new challenges to all its peoples, including minority communities. Reactions to new developments have varied. The following trends are discernable among Muslims:

- isolation: Muslims who are unable or unwilling to cope with the new challenges seclude themselves from the broader society;
- assimilation: Muslims who are absorbed by the new society such an extent that they reject their religious identity;
- integration: Muslims who actively participate in civil society but retain their Islamic identity.

While Muslims have successfully met past challenges and learnt to adapt to changing circumstances, they are faced with many new challenges today. These include the following:

1. adapting to new political realities;
2. asserting their distinct cultural identity;
3. balancing religious identity with national identity;
4. maintaining their institutions and organisations;
5. accepting the reality of an emerging indigenous Islam;

6. developing cross-cultural relationships;
7. participating in national debates;
8. supporting national initiatives of reconstruction;
9. fostering interfaith co-operation on common issues (Dangor 1992);
10. rectifying misrepresentation of Islam by the media.

It is too early to predict to what extent Muslims will be assimilated into a pluralistic South African society.

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