

Islam in the Townships of the Northern Province

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The history of Islam in the townships of the Northern Province can be traced back to the early-to-mid 1900's when Malawians crossed the border into Messina and filtered through the rest of the province to places like Tzaneen, Louis Trichardt, Phalaborwa, Sibasa, Lebowagkomo, Zebediela and Seshego. Since then Islam has grown at a steady rate with numbers dominant in Messina.

Like many people in this beleaguered, poverty-stricken province, the challenges faced by Muslims in the Northern Province townships can best be described as overwhelming. The odds seem to be stacked against them, but in the face of all this there is a steadfast willingness to brave these odds as there is laughter, happiness, acceptance and earth-shattering faith.

A major challenge facing township Muslims in the Northern Province at the moment is networking. Various townships across the province wish to communicate with each other in order to share ideas, experiences and difficulties. There are at present few figures and statistics available as to the number of Muslims in townships across the Northern Province, something these Muslims hope to change in the very near future. Once this is achieved, some say it will bring people from various regions together and unite them in Islam. This will enable the youth to conduct camps and gatherings as well as to open up opportunities for propagation. Once there is co-ordination within the province, contact can be made with other provinces to achieve the same results.

However, a rather ominous obstacle overshadows this. Many Muslims across the townships face poverty and unemployment. Many live a hand-to-mouth existence. Many children go to school and *madrassah* hungry, and hunger will test the faith of a saint.

" There is a very high rate of unemployment in the townships," says one sister.

" Poverty affects the mind. It can be discouraging."

The solution to this, according to many, is not in giving people handouts. This fosters complacency and dependence and is more burdensome than charitable. The solution lies in equipping people with skills that will enable them to earn a living and provide for themselves. The problem of people being forced to go around begging others for food and money can also be reduced this way.

A number of church groups and organisations already have such outreach programmes in place. These are sadly lacking in the Northern Province amongst Islamic organisations. There are some programmes, but these are often held in town and city centres and is inaccessible to many people in the townships who have little money for food and almost none for transportation.

" If we want people to benefit from these programmes," says one brother; " we should take them to the townships. It is better that one person goes to many people, to the majority."

Establishing a sewing class for example, in some of the townships would benefit many women, it would enable them to run businesses from home and even find employment. This would, in turn, benefit their children. Teaching young people basic computer or typing skills is also something that would be of great benefit to them. Many such proposals have apparently been made to various organisations without success. The message that many people in the townships want to get across is give people education and life skills rather than food.

Another challenge Muslims in the township face is prejudice. Being sidelined because of race or poverty is not new to the Northern Province, South Africa, or the world. For many it goes deeper than that as many Muslims are viewed differently because they embraced Islam and were not "born" Muslim.

" It is difficult to be a Muslim among other Muslims in the Northern Province," says another brother. " If a brother is born a Muslim, he thinks he is privileged. I don't think so. I believe it is a matter of faith and belief."

It often happens that Muslims from more privileged backgrounds ignore their co-religionists from the townships. They avoid and view them with suspicion. For some it has come to a point where they avoid representing themselves as Muslims in the town and city centres. For many women, however, this is unavoidable.

" When I walk into a shop wearing my headscarf, they shy away, thinking I am going to ask them for money. The bottom-line is skin colour, " says one sister.

What is also unavoidable in many of the rural areas and townships is a lack of awareness among people about Islam. Many misconceptions prevail. Some people think Islam is a new religion or cult. Others equate Islam with Hinduism! Some even go so far as to call Islam the religion of the Indians and the individuals who embrace Islam as wanting to "be like the Indians." Many of these misconceptions are changing, however, as a result of people acquiring more knowledge about Islam and witnessing the example set by the Muslims amongst them.

There is a serious lack of development of Islam in the Northern Province. Examples of development infrastructures are mosques, prayer facilities and learning centres. These impact a great deal on peoples perceptions of Islam. Development of literacy programmes is also important as many people cannot read or write. Translation of literature into different languages is also important. It makes Islam accessible to the many instead of the few. Many township Muslims are not fluent in English but are in their respective languages. The translation of the Quran into Sepedi, Venda, and Tsonga is particularly important to them as a means of furthering their knowledge of Islam.

" People must read the message of Islam in their own languages, " says one brother. " It is important. The language barrier is prevalent among the youth as much as among the

elders. It doesn't matter that it may take several years for this to happen. What matters is that future generations of Muslims benefit."

Making Islam accessible to everybody is an issue particularly close to the hearts of many people in the townships. They claim that it is easy for traditional African people to make the transition to Islam. Islam is a way of life similar to the African way of life. The problem arises when Western culture infringes on traditional African culture.

Yet, they do encounter many difficulties when cultures clash with Islamic principles and practice. A case in point is in the advent of the death of a Muslim brother or sister. Often, their families, if they are not Muslim, object to them being buried in the Islamic way. Sometimes fellow Muslims face a losing battle in trying to convince family members to accept this as the wish of the deceased. Many families contribute to burial societies and are unwilling to forego the benefits achieved from this. It is now common practice among people who embrace Islam to call on family members and explain the common practices of Islam. It also happens that such persons are often obliged to sign a document stating their wish to be buried in accordance with Islamic practice.

Problems also arise with regard to marriage. *Lebola* (dowry as practised in the African tradition) is a contentious issue. It is a deeply ingrained tradition and it takes much persuasion on the part of Muslims who are entering into marriage to convince their families to do things differently. For many Muslims in the townships, it is also often difficult to find a life partner as there is a lack of available partners and tribalism is an issue. Many are not married.

The birth of children, too, brings some complications. Consulting an *Inyanga* (Traditional Healer) when a child is born is common practice, as is consulting the ancestors of the child. It is a deeply ingrained belief among many people that if the ancestors are not consulted on the birth of a child, the child's entire life will be affected.

" We shouldn't associate the life of a child with that of its ancestors," says one brother. " They are dead. Many people, however, do. They grapple with many cultural issues on a daily basis. It is a problem."

The plight of Muslims in the townships in the Northern Province can be viewed as trying. Their issues are complex and complicated, but as one brother put it: " The work of Allah (SWT) is fraught with obstacles. It requires a lot of patience. That, we have in abundance."