

The Eid Prayer in South Africa and Muslim Women's Struggle for Sacred Space

Farhana Ismail

Introduction

This article explores the notion of sacred space concerning the Eid prayer and its relationship to the struggle of women in gaining equal access to the prayer. A discussion on Muslim women's exclusion from sacred space must necessarily begin with the mosque, her absence therefrom, marginalisation therein and her muted voice even when granted access. Although this article focuses on women's access to the Eid *Musallah* (place of prayer), the question of access to mosques provides the necessary backdrop.

In Islam, the mosque is the central sacred space. But any area where Muslims come together to pray is sacred space, eg. the Eid Gah (an open space usually on the outskirts of the city where the Prophet preferred to perform the Eid Prayer). The Mosque is the spiritual hub and heart of the community, the place of learning, the place where important social, political, economic and religious matters are discussed; in short, it is the place that moulds and directs a community. This sacred space and access to it therefore has a bearing on an individual's experience of her religion and the extent to which she is involved in its public realm.

The Muslim female is a vital element of the spiritual and moral fibre of the community and a substantial financial contributor to society. However, as Denise Ackerman¹ has argued, until recently she has been excluded from making meaningful contributions in religious structures, especially in the decision-making that directly impacts on her. Unhindered access to sacred space (like the place of the Eid Prayer) is the first step towards this participation. In order for her to get involved in decision-making, these male-controlled religious structures need to develop a more inclusive spirit, ensuring at least basic and consistent access and, ideally, equal access to sacred space.

The Struggle

The access to sacred space for Muslim women in South Africa has not always been simply bestowed on them; often it is won only through hard struggle. The struggle to change established religious practices often begins with questioning why such change needs to take place – rather than simply accepting the status quo and its suggested Divine status. The question in this discussion, then, is why Muslim women would change the status quo regarding access to sacred space. Why not just accept the situation as divinely sanctioned or leave structured religion altogether?

Muslim women experience an ambiguity between the pragmatic system of Islam and its ethical vision. Islam, through the Qur'ān and the example of the Prophet (s), testifies to the absolute moral and spiritual equality of men and women (Quran, Surah 33:35). Amina Wadud-Muhsin² argues that the Qur'ān, especially, upholds values of justice and equality. This egalitarian message has, however, been suppressed in the sphere of gender

relations. Numerous traditions and Quranic verses are subverted by those in religious authority to prop up a second-class status for women. Women are confronted with subordination and exclusion which is not borne out of Islam's ethical message but because of its practical regulations. Leila Ahmed says in *Women and Gender in Islam*, "Muslim women frequently insist... that Islam is not sexist, they hear and read in its sacred text, justly and legitimately, a different message from that heard by the makers and enforcers of orthodox, andocentric Islam."³

It is this need to champion Islam's ethical voice that has driven women's rights activists in the last two decades to embark on campaigns around mosque access and, more recently, campaigning for a just Muslim personal law. Inclusion at the Eid Gah is one element of such campaigns.

A large part of the traditions referring to the day of Eid in the two most often-quoted compilations of Hadith - Bukhari and Muslim - refer to women and attest to their unquestionable presence and involvement. These Hadith compilations form a significant part of the curricula in the learning institutions of the Ulama. These Ulama are therefore not unfamiliar with these Hadith.

Nevertheless, until recently, Muslim women in Durban and Gauteng (and, to a lesser extent, in Cape Town) have been conspicuous by their absence at the Eid prayer. This underlines the fact that the Ulama are reticent about conveying such information through the Friday khutbah or other media.

Abdulkader Tayob explores the Ulama's selective use of religious knowledge⁴, arguing that Imams are selective in what they disseminate because they consider political and financial consequences and sometimes they have vested interests.

It is significant for all Muslims wanting to adhere to the ethical tenets of their faith that the prophetic example and command can be so successfully concealed and obscured. For Muslim women, it highlights the need for them to be more active in Muslim structures to influence decision-making. Inclusion in religious space is the first step towards involvement in decision-making.

The Nature of the Struggle

In Ramadan 1996, gender activists distributed pamphlets in Johannesburg exhorting women to attend the Eid musallah. The pamphlet - *The forgotten sunnah of the Eid Day* - cited various ahadith encouraging women to attend. Many progressive and influential individuals and organisations had endorsed the pamphlet, lending it an air of authenticity. Interestingly, other individuals who had consistently paid lip service to upholding the Sunnah and who had challenged the Ulama in other areas of Muslim life, refused to sanction the pamphlet publicly, although admitting to the irrefutable validity of the argument. This reluctance to be involved in the gender debate is characteristic of a section of influential liberal Muslims; this sector is just as responsible as the ulama in subduing Islam's egalitarian message.

All the mosques in Johannesburg were targeted by these gender activists. Masjid-ul-Islam in Brixton was at that time the only Indian-controlled mosque with women's facilities, albeit in the gallery. The Imam urged women to attend the Eid Salaah - to be held at the mosque. Following the Prophetic tradition of an outdoor Eid prayer, female congregants at this masjid requested an Eid Gah. This would mean men and women praying in an open area, simultaneously occupying the same sacred space, with no veil separating them. Such a notion was atypical for this Muslim community with its confining view on male-female interactions.

The mosque was therefore reluctant to host an Eid Gah, fearing a backlash from conservative congregants who had been angered after a few women - members of the Muslim Youth Movement who were pursuing its Gender Desk campaign of securing *equal* access to mosques - had insisted on praying the Taraweeh in the downstairs male section. National politics intervened: President Nelson Mandela at the last hour decided to address Johannesburg Muslims on the Eid Day and Masjidul Islam organised an Eid Gah to accommodate him. South Africa had just emerged from a liberation struggle and minorities were creating a niche for themselves in the new democracy. Mandela was an icon of the liberation struggle with important human rights and women's rights components. Masjidul Islam saw an opportune way to show Muslims aligning with this new liberatory struggle by presenting an egalitarian face of Islam. The Eid Gah was performed with a block of men and a block of women side-by-side, separated by a thin rope.

Within the sacred space of the mosque, Masjid-ul-Islam has maintained its separate and unequal space policy. However, it continues with its equal space allocation in the sacred realm of the Eid Gah. The Campaign in Johannesburg secured not just access to, but *equal access* to, the Eid Gah, something remarkable in South African Islam. Women appreciate and utilise this space and their numbers at the Eid Gah are constantly increasing. Such equal access has only been achieved in one other South African institution – Cape Town’s Claremont Main Road Masjid, where there was a deliberate campaign to ensure this equal space despite violent protests.

In Cape Town the last two years has seen a shift towards the partial Sunnah. An Eid Gah was organised by Pagad ,was well received and is still ongoing. It was introduced at the 1997 Eid al-Fitr and was described as a political event by some academics. Women participated, although praying behind the men. Notably, there is an older Eid Gah in the Cape, the Kenwyn Eid Gah, with a largely Indian following. Women do not attend this Eid Gah .

It is important to note that the motives for both gender sensitive Eid Gahs were political. Women’s access was just a by-product and not a reason for the Cape Eid Gah; in Johannesburg, it had everything to do with affording women space, but for reasons of political expediency. However, the number of women attending would not have increased as it has if the community had not been conscientised by the Eid Gah campaigns - particularly in Johannesburg.

Cultural Influences

The culturally diverse backgrounds of Muslim women in South Africa largely explains the prevailing differences in attitudes towards access to sacred spaces. These women belong to different classes, races and ethnic groups and face differing life challenges imposed by their social and material world. Their cultural backgrounds condition their Islamic expression and this impacts directly upon their experiences in the community. I will therefore briefly examine the different gender relations in the two sectors of the South African Muslim community mentioned above, i.e., the Cape Malay community and the Indian Muslim communities of Durban and Gauteng.

Cape Muslims do not easily identify with a campaign to gain access to religious space. This is mainly because, as Na'eem Jeenah argues, "Muslims in the Western Cape... [are] more liberal with regards to male female relationships."⁵ This attitude has resulted in women participating significantly in public Islam whether at cemeteries or decision-making levels in mosque committees. However, Tayob shows that these leadership positions are often questioned and threatened. He argues that women have always played important roles in religious structures in the Cape but that their efforts have rarely been recognised. He says of female contributors to early Islam in the Cape: "Women had always been part of the discourse as students and even financial contributors. More importantly, the emergence of Imam leadership in Cape society obscured women's crucial role in early Islam"⁶. Women still fulfil such roles today even though not wholly recognised.

For Cape Muslims the divergence from the Sunnah of the prophet on the Eid day appears to be two-fold. Firstly, the Eid Gah (in the open) was not widely practiced until recently. This is probably because of the strong Cape mosque culture where the mosque is the central focus and where lectures, dhikr and youth programmes and the Eid prayer take place.

The second reason for the shift away from the prophet's example is disconcerting. According to Muslim Judicial Council Deputy President, Shaikh Ighsaan Hendricks, Cape Muslim women traditionally do not attend the Eid Salah and, like their Indian counterparts, spend the morning preparing food. It is not Islam that restricts women's attendance but their self-imposed restriction, he said. Furthermore, Imams have not used the minbar to promote the Sunnah.⁷ As noted, women's attendance at the Eid musallah is not just a Prophetic recommendation, but an injunction.

Referring to Indian Muslims and their attitude to male-female relations, Jeenah notes that "The Muslims in the northern provinces... [have] a more restricted culture of gender interaction."⁸ This sector vociferously enforces segregation. For this reason, the campaign to encourage women's presence at the Eid Gah met with strong opposition in these communities, just as previous campaigns for mosque access had in the past decade. This kind of response – mainly from the ulama – is not unusual; gender activists are not unfamiliar with being labelled "unbelievers and hypocrites".

This sector of South African Islam also produces the most misogynistic Muslim literature in South Africa, resembling similar writings by their counterparts in the Indo-Pak subcontinent. Indian Islam in South Africa is greatly influenced by the Deoband and Barelvi schools which, together with the ahl-al-hadith, are the three types of Sunni madressa found in the Indo-Pak subcontinent. They claim to be based on the teachings of Shah Walli Allah (d.1762). According to Fazlur Rahman,⁹ Shah Walli Allah's orthodox educational system eliminated the intellectual and rational sciences and emphasised the traditional sciences of law, theology, Hadith and, to a lesser extent, Sufism. This system is the basis of madressa syllabi in Indian South Africa today. This does not mean that certain sectors of this orthodox community have not sought to modernise these teachings. However, such modernisation seldom targets the repressive Islam experienced by Indian Muslim women.

We thus witness the marginalisation of Muslim women in Indian Muslim institutions. In these communities there is a strong Eid Gah tradition. But Indian Islam's emphasis on the Eid being held in the open has effectively militated against the other – more important - Sunnah of women's participation. The attendance, then, of women at the Eid Prayer in these communities was, until recently, non-existent.

Conclusion

For women's rights activists involved in the access to mosque campaigns, there are key lessons that can be learned from the experience of the Eid Gah battle.

Firstly, they cannot trust the Ulama – or even progressive Muslim men – to deliver on a women’s agenda. This article demonstrates how they sometimes choose truth over expediency – especially where it concerns women.

Secondly, a clear religious agenda will deliver success. Muslim women *are* able to familiarize themselves with the sacred texts - particularly those aspects that clearly support an egalitarian struggle - and utilise these in efforts to challenge the status quo. The status quo in regards to women’s access to Muslim institutions cannot be expected to succeed if Islamic scripture and basic texts are not employed in the struggle for such access.

Finally, time is on their side. The story of the Eid Gah is a lesson of hope, hope that women *are* able to challenge their relegated space in structured religion and so create new avenues for change. The ultimate demonstrator of success is the progress in Johannesburg where the number of women attending the Eid Gah has tripled over five years. This offers hope that the trend is towards women securing their sacred space.

For many Muslim women’s rights activists, the vision of Muslim women gaining a foothold in the hallowed halls of Muslim community decision-making is not far off.

Endnotes

¹ Denise Ackerman, “Women and Religion”, paper delivered at WCRP National Interfaith Conference, 1990.

² Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur’ān and Woman*, Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn.Bhd, 1992,99.

³ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, New Haven: Yale, 1992, 66.

⁴ Abdulkader Tayob, *Islam in South Africa: Mosques, Imams, and Sermons*, University Press of Florida, 1999.

⁵ Na'eem Jeenah, *The Emergence of Islamic Feminisms in South Africa*, MA Dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Department of Religious Studies, 2001, 30.

⁶ Tayob, *Islam in South Africa*, 41-42.

⁷ Telephonic Interview with Shaikh Ighsaan Hendricks, November 2002.

⁸ Jeenah, *Islamic Feminisms*, 30.

⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an intellectual tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 41.