

Islam in the African Townships of the Cape¹

Masakhane Muslim Community

The presence of an organized body of Muslims in the African Townships can be traced back as far as the Sixties. Most of this generation of pioneers came into contact with Imam Abdullah Haroon (May Allah have mercy on him). The Imam and a few dedicated Muslim defied the Apartheid government's ban on teaching Islam in the African Township by secretly entering the African areas and spreading the Word of Almighty Allah. This decade marked the reversion to Islam of a number of prominent men and women such as the late Hasan Gila, one of the founding members of the Pan African Congress (PAC), the late Shamil Kula Achmat Gqamane, Imam Dawood Lobi and Mohammed Ali Ngxika (both who are still with us).

The Seventies

During this decade, many youth began accepting Islam and following the leadership of the pioneers, especially Imam Dawood Lobi of Langa. Muslims began to engage in open activities and dedicated Muslims from other parts of Cape Town established classes. Organisations such as *Al-Jihad* became highly active and organised youth camps. This new activity had a powerful influence on the growing Muslim community.

The Eighties

This decade was a period of consolidation and construction. Formal structures such as the *Jihad Centre* in Guguletu and informal structures such as Jamaat Khanas were put up in different parts of the Townships. The *Jihad Centre* was controlled by the *Al Jihad* movement, a pro-*Shia* organisation. Other organisations such as the Muslim Hospital Welfare in Langa and the Muslim Assembly in Guguletu represented the main stream *Ahlu-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah*. In 1981, Abdullah Nonyana became the first Black South African of the Western Cape Townships to receive a scholarship from a Muslim country (Kuwait). The Langa Muslim youth took the lead among the African Muslims and pursued their visions by forming the Langa Muslim Movement.

The Nineties

This period witnessed the rise of umbrella organisations that united the active members of the entire African townships. The first was the *Al Murabitun* movement that introduced a vibrant African oriented form of Islam. Through the teachings of Imam Malik and a strong centralised leadership, African Muslims united with Cape Malay, Indian and European Muslims for the first time under one Amir. This noble effort was torn apart by power struggles but the movement gave way to a local umbrella body formed in 1993 by the youth of the Townships. This broad-based organisation was called *Ikhwanul-Muslimeen* and included representatives from all of the Township areas. Meanwhile, a number of dedicated Muslims formed Islamic schools and study circles such as those developed in Guguletu by Hadji S. Bayat and Mrs. Faika Kriel. Islam was now spreading, especially in the Khayelitsha area. The *Shia* were also able to interest a few of the despondent Muslims and opened up their own centre in Philippi. During this period Shaykh Ismail Gqamane and Shaykh Jamiel Kobus were accepted at Madinah University and graduated in 1997. Their presence raised the quality of Islamic teaching and consolidated the Township with major Islamic organisation in Cape Town and outside of the country. In 1997, the *Ikhwanul-Muslimeen*, then the only fully representative body, changed its name to the Masakhane Muslim Community. The stage was set for new developments.

The Rise of The Masakhane Muslim Community

During the period of the Nineties, a number of local and international Islamic organisations began enquiring about Islam among African people. The end of Apartheid as a prohibiting force meant that Muslims in the Townships could freely travel and reach out to their fellow Muslims throughout the world. The Masakhane Muslim Community echoed this new sentiment. Masakhane means “building one another” in the Xhosa language and is used to unite people of all religions in the Townships. The M.M.C continued to unite Muslim individuals and communities in the Townships, provide coherent leadership, mature arbitration and qualified education to African Muslims. It was intended to officially represent Township Muslims and convene Islamic activities in the Western Cape. On June 13 1999, a General Meeting of the M.M.C. and the leadership of the entire African Township areas met at the Jihad Centre in Guguletu and officially confirmed the M.M.C. as the sole representative, umbrella organisation for the Townships. Through a process of

election, confirmation and selection, a new executive committee was formed and the community pledged to support its leadership. The united Township Muslim community confirmed Cassiem Gqamane as the President (Amir), Faiza Lebaki as the Vice President, Shaykh Jamiel Kobus as the General Secretary, and Ashraf Zantsi as the Treasurer. Five additional members were elected to serve on the executive. Their names were Shaykh Ismail Gqamane, Kareema Quick, Ahmed Stulweni, Nadia Masinini and Dawood. The Community also requested Dr. Abdullah Hakim Quick, the Director of the Da'wah Department of the Muslim Judicial Council to serve as a Special Advisor to the executive committee and to any Muslim in the African Townships. This was accepted. Since the General Meeting of 1999, Faiza Lebaki had to resign for personal reasons and was replaced by Ismail Ngqoyiyana as Vice president. Ahmed Stulweni and Dawood also resigned. The M.M.C. has now been recognised by International and Governmental Islamic bodies throughout the Muslim world and is poised to take Islam in the Townships to a new stage of development.

M.M.C. Achievements

The year 1999 witnessed a number of historic events. For the first time in Cape Muslim history, major Islamic functions are being organised inside of the African Townships by the African Muslims themselves. These humble efforts represent a step toward empowerment. May Allah increase the numbers of Muslims in the Townships and unite them with their Brothers and Sisters in the International Muslim Ummah.

A historic Fund raising luncheon was held in the Khayelitsha community centre. Over 500 Muslims from all over Cape Town (including a number of major personalities) joined to celebrate the presence of Islam in the Townships and to raise funds for the developing of a strong central leadership.

A successful womens' collective was established in Khayelitsha site B. An Islamic studies program coupled with life skills and empowerment training was used for the first time. The women were able to raise funds for themselves and to begin a sewing project. With the help of Muslims from the outside of the Townships they were able to secure sewing machines and fabric, undergo basic training and produce clothing. The clothes were sold at the function to support the collective.

The M.M.C. launched an innovative three-month teacher's training course. The program enabled five selected women to attend regular classes in Surrey Estate. They were trained in Qur'anic Arabic reading skills, Tajweed, and basic Fiqh. Each student received a stipend and all transportation expenses were covered by the M.M.C. All five students graduated and are now working in their community.

The M.M.C. opened up an administrative office in Guguletu NY1 in the fall of 1999. Three Islamic centres were established for Islamic education. The M.M.C. purchased three Wendy houses and is now presently upgrading these facilities and hoping to add bathrooms.

¹ This is an edited version of an article that first appeared in *Al-Muwahhidoon* (issue 2: vol. 1, March 2000), the newsletter of the Masakhane Muslim Community.