

Understanding African Women's Conversion to Islam: Cape Town in Perspective

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Perhaps we can begin a broader analysis of African conversion to Islam with one woman's story:

Nonotise, a Xhosa woman living in Philippi township in Cape Town, now answers to the Muslim name Rushda. She converted to Islam in 1990. Her ID still retains her former name, but the passport she acquired when she went to Mecca bears the name of her new identity. She keeps both official documents and uses both as needs require. When she received news that she was going to Mecca, something almost unheard of among recent African converts in Cape Town, she made some umqombothi [traditional brewed beer] to pay respect to the ancestors, an act she chose not to tell her fellow Muslims at mosque. When pressed to explain, she said, 'so then, I can't lose the Xhosa in me, already here. I have to pay respects to the Xhosas because I was born by the people who were not Muslims and now I have to give them what they want.'

Rushda's experience serves as a useful starting point towards understanding how a growing sector of Cape Town's Muslim population have internalised the process of conversion and their new religious identities. For one devout enough to accomplish the final pillar of the Muslim faith, the pilgrimage, Rushda displayed a resilient sensitivity to Xhosa ritual and engaged in some degree of compartmentalisation in order to preserve both sides of her identity harmoniously. Her use of her identity documents

similarly illustrates the changeability of that identity. In light of Rushda's narrative, how can we make sense of her conversion to Islam?

This article seeks to examine the recent rising phenomenon of conversion to Islam occurring in predominantly African townships among Xhosa women. In absolute terms, the scale of this conversion is relatively small. Census figures indicate that there were approximately 3400 African Muslims in the greater Cape Town metropolitan area in 1996,² with the largest concentration located in Khayelitsha township (an unofficial census conducted by the mosque there counted 150 adult members in 1997). We can compare this to the 440,700 Africans in the Cape Town metropole who claimed involvement with a Christian church in the same time period.³

However, despite its numerical limits, I argue that this phenomenon has important implications for the understanding of Islam in South Africa, for several reasons. Firstly, both conversion and the experience of spirituality, in its many organised forms, have to be understood in their gendered and historical contexts. It is clear that African conversion to the Muslim faith, in Cape Town at least, has been led overwhelmingly by women, and largely in the late apartheid and post-apartheid period.⁴ What then is Islam's appeal to African women? Secondly, it is important to look at the very texts of these women's conversion narratives, because they point to fascinating issues regarding identity transformations and amalgamations, and suggest ways in which African women developed an internal logic to comprehend the flood of new influences which came with democratisation and economic and social change. How did these Muslim African women reconcile their Xhosa identity with an Islamic one? This is particularly key given the long association, at least in the Western Cape, of Islam with the Coloured population. Did women fundamentally re-cast their identity in light of their religious

conversion, or was the shift far more subtle? This has profound implications on how conversion to Islam can be ultimately assessed—if the women themselves did not cast their conversions as conversions, then what were they?

These findings are taken from a series of in-depth interviews and two group interviews with Xhosa women in Cape Town who converted to the Muslim faith. Sixteen Xhosa women were interviewed, the majority of whom reside in relatively new settlements in Cape Town—New Crossroads, Philippi, Khayelitsha.⁵ Kareema Quick, a Jamaican-American Muslim woman, was interviewed because of her organisational involvement with the African Muslim community in Langa. Also, two Xhosa men were interviewed—Ismail Ngqoyiyana is an African imam in charge of the only predominantly African mosque in Cape Town, located in Khayelitsha; Ismael Gqamane, also an imam, works for the Muslim Judicial Council of the Western Cape in the propagation department, and helped to establish the Masakhane Muslim Community, which attempts to unite and support African Muslims in the various townships and throughout Cape Town.

Findings: Tribulation, transactions, transition?

Upon listening to stories of these women's conversion experiences and lives in the Muslim faith, one is struck with the profound sense of disillusionment with the Christian church that often accompanied a decision to explore Islam. All the respondents claimed some involvement across the broad spectrum of denominations within Christianity. Perhaps it would overstate the case if negative experiences with Christianity, rather than a positive understanding of the Muslim faith was situated at the centre of these conversion narratives. But it is difficult to ignore the extent to which the

Church had become a destabilising, rather than a stabilising, influence in these women's lives.

One of the first key criticisms concerned the sometimes unattainable demands the Church made on these women's finances. As one respondent succinctly stated, 'with Christian churches, you are the ones taking out the money. If there is something to be done, you pop out the money.' It appears 'popping out' money became a fundamental aspect of church participation. Membership of churches entailed not only a regular physical presence at services, but also a regular subscription. Far from being a voluntary offering, weekly or monthly subscriptions were the key towards full recognition within the church. Some women referred to this subscription as a 'ticket', underlying the contractual nature of this offering. Those who failed to pay this ticket were relegated to the outskirts of the church's membership, and this was felt keenly. Another woman stressed, 'if you don't have the money for the tickets, they would not welcome you'.

It is no wonder, then, that when reflecting upon the various appealing characteristics of Islam which first drew them to the faith, some of these women focused on the refreshing lack of monetary requirements and the giving nature of Muslim members. Rushda related how she met a Muslim woman to whom she told her troubles: 'she told me that there you don't have to pay the tickets'. Another convert, Beauty, observed, 'Nobody is looking at you, whether what you are wearing, do you look beautiful or ugly... if you are a mother, you should be a mother. If you are a child, you should be a child and so on. Everything in Islam goes like that.' She went on to state, when asked what were the better features of Islam: 'Firstly, when I got to Islam, I was a poor person, but as

time went by, I became better. I'm not rich, but at least I do not sleep on an empty stomach.'

Ismael Gqamane, who works with the Muslim Judicial Council, concurred that the material appeal of Islam is strong: 'I have met many women who say, "You know, I was in many churches, but we always had to pay R10 or R5, all these monies. Someone told me about Islam and I go in and I see here you don't have to give anything, rather you get.' Gqamane claimed that for African women in particular, who he saw as more concerned about the welfare of their families than African men, participating in the Muslim faith ensured regular parcels of food and sometimes a chance to learn new skills, such as sewing, in classes run by the Muslim community.

Obviously, the truth of these women's conversions needs to be considered in this light. Is it a true transformation, or just a means to obtain food and vital skills? It is evident that the growth of Islam, especially in the more impoverished black communities in the shack settlements of Philippi, can be charted alongside donations of food. Apparently, Muslims on charitable missions to Philippi brought not only groceries such as bread, rice and meat, but also already-cooked food, so that women could feed their hungry children immediately. Concurrently, the fundamentals of Islam were taught. One female convert explained during a group interview: 'Muslims call all the people and then they give us that bread and after they have given you, they tell you about Islam and also give you the papers.' Other women explicitly connected these regular, charitable visits with their entry into the Muslim faith: 'They used to help us, give us food. They also built this church and we joined afterwards.'

Those working with the small but growing African Muslim community are aware of this aspect of African encounters with Islam. When asked why African women in Cape Town are choosing Islam, Kareema Quick noted, ‘The women, I think a lot of places are surviving. They have to survive, they have the children to deal with, they have their feet planted on the ground. And Islam has been a way of helping them survive.’ Fatima Lobi, a Muslim-born Xhosa woman from Langa active in the Masakhane Muslim Community’s Women’s Project, despaired at the material nature of women’s engagement with Islam, which she felt was detrimental to the spiritual independence of Africans:

At the end of the day, if those food and clothing and money don’t come in and then the people go away, because they believe Islam is all about getting, getting, getting. So people would stay in their Christianity and would come to Islam only to get something. That’s the problem. That’s how the people destroyed Islam within the townships. Not only Langa, if I can tell you, in Gugulethu...

Lobi decided to help run the Women’s Project within the Masakhane Muslim Community, to empower African women with skills in order to be self-sustainable, and in the end be more conscious of their choice to follow Islam. Thus it appears that the generosity of Muslim propagators are both an asset and a detriment to increasing the number of African Muslims—it is often the means by which Africans first choose to expose themselves to any Muslim teachings and then move on to a deeper understanding, while for some it is the only reason to follow the faith.

If we look beyond the material appeal of participation in Islamic ritual and belief, there appears another striking incentive for these women to explore the Muslim faith.

Simply, such an exploration appears a familiar one. Far from entailing a conceptual and cultural leap, shifting to Islam represents a return to already rehearsed rituals and ideologies existing in Xhosa tradition. Many recent converts attested to this continuity in form and belief, and stressed that following Islam allowed them to be truer to their traditional cultural roots than previously. Islam in Cape Town's African communities seems to be spreading more rapidly in areas where there is a stronger, rural Xhosa element embedded in the community, and thus less influenced by Western and even Christian ideologies.⁶

Several respondents explained that one of the appeals of Islam was that its burial rituals bear remarkable semblance to long since discarded Xhosa burial practices in the rural areas.⁷ Gqamane stated that burial rites are a key tool that is used to draw Africans to the faith: 'So every time we bury, everyone says "wow this is how we used to do it"... and if this is a reminder of where you come from, why don't you then come to the ways of your forefathers? So that's how we started debating then, and there were those who were convinced.' A choice to follow Islam then becomes a way to return to the 'ways of your forefathers'.

There are other areas of Islamic ritual and ideology which show congruence with Xhosa tradition, for examples practices of circumcision and animal slaughtering. Gqamane also mentioned theological similarities between the Xhosa deity Qamata and Allah.⁸ Rituals which emphasised cleanliness and order featured strongly in Islam's appeal to respondents. 'Muslims are very tidy and clean,' Rushda proudly noted. Ismail Ngqoyiyana, the imam of Khayelitsha mosque, stressed the history of Islam's introduction to Africa as proof that its very foundation was on the continent. Its lack of European adherents and propagators prevented Islam from acquiring the close

identification with apartheid that has tainted Christian attempts to penetrate into African communities and African psyches. The democratisation of South Africa in the 1990s allowed for an unprecedented influx of African Muslims from the continent, which according to both Gqamane and Ngqoyiyana was instrumental to converts' appropriation of Islam as a truly African faith.

However, perhaps the area in which these African women found the greatest resonance with Xhosa belief and practice was gender relations. Muslim *hijab* and views regarding the separation of the sexes strongly echoed Xhosa practice. Rushda explained, 'Xhosa women back in the day used to wear long traditional clothes, they would not reveal any part of their bodies even the way they would cover their heads with their *doeks*, and Muslims are also like that.' She further added, 'Muslim married couples don't share the same bed... Sleeping with a man is unclean, and it's just like our ancestors don't want that sight of sex.'

Unanimously, the women suggested that there were few personal restrictions placed on them as women, and felt no radical reduction in their mobility or status by rules such as sexual segregation in the mosque or adherence to the *hijab*. Most in fact stated that Islamic law which demands that women are 'respected' was one of the key attractions to the faith. According to one respondent, 'In Islam, a woman is treated respectfully and has value.' Indeed, several respondents noted that as part of the 'respect' women are conferred, is a sense of safety. Respondents in Philippi claimed that 'it is also very rare to find a Muslim girl being raped'. And, 'Muslim men love their wives a lot... They treat them good, they protect their wives.' And another asserted, Muslim men 'don't beat their wives, they talk.' Assurance of protection becomes more important when considering the appallingly high rate of domestic abuse and sexual assault that African

women confront in South Africa.⁹ Again, converts are quick to forge a link to the protection required by Xhosa custom: ‘with us Xhosa, a woman follows behind the man even if they are walking, so that whatever happens should first meet the man.’ However, it is clear that in modern-day South Africa, this custom among Africans has waning relevance in current practice—Imam Ngqoyiyana explained, ‘They [women] are like objects you know, in our black culture.’

Thus repeatedly in these conversion narratives, there is a sense that converts actually returned to something they have always known, suggesting that Islam became the embodiment of a nostalgic Xhosa past that is no longer viable in a chaotic modern world. One convert noted, ‘All that is done at Islam is what was happening in the olden days. There is nothing they [Xhosas] could add but they step in the shoes and walk the way.’ The path is already set out, and Islam is merely a pair of shoes that would help walk that familiar road set out by the ancestors. Indeed, there is no sense that Islam represents an ‘exotic other’ to these women. One respondent confidently summed it up: ‘Islamic is a Xhosa thing’.

It certainly seems that, at least for the majority of women interviewed, converting to Islam involved more a mapping onto an existing framework rather than a fundamental restructuring of that framework. This was true for social networks as well. In general, these women did not lose the relationships they previously had and instead, new networks were added on.¹⁰ Most women interviewed similarly seemed to consider Islam perhaps a progression onwards, not a distinct departure, from the Christian faith. Kareema Quick noted that Islamic conceptions of conversion incorporate such notions of a ‘return’ or a cyclical progression: ‘We [Muslims] don’t do this conversions, really. Actually, it’s actually reversion to Islam... cause really, in every human being within a

soul is created, there's a space there for spirituality, for connection with a higher being of some sort. And so, when you come to Islam, you feel that this space is re-filled, you know, re-enlightened...' Conversion thus becomes 'reversion' to a truth already known, and also in some senses to a set of rituals already 'rehearsed'.

It appears that upon closer inspection, though Islam appeared to offer these converts a radical departure from their previous lives, few chose to view it as such, and even fewer chose to practice it as such. One woman stated, 'At some places you find out that they do go to the Muslim mosque and at the same time they go to their own [Christian] churches as well.'¹¹ An important component of this is the relative absence of Muslim men in the African community. Ismael Gqamane estimated 99% of those African women who become Muslim have partners who are not Muslim. Another woman related, 'I embraced Allah when I was already married to this man and I could not tell him to leave. That is difficult, it is not easy.' Perhaps this disjunction between spiritual and domestic life reinforced the piece-meal nature of conversion. It is evident that those women who more completely followed Islamic code and ritual without recourse to Xhosa or Christian references were those who were married to Muslim men.¹²

In conclusion, African women's understanding of their conversion experiences and their lives in Islam did not necessarily entail a fundamental re-ordering, nor a new set of social and spiritual signs and symbols. Rather Islam was 'mapped' onto, or 'translated' into, existing cultural beliefs and practices.

References

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Interviews: Rushda, 20 October 2000; Eunice, 21 October 2000; Thandiswa, 21 October 2000; Beauty, 21 October 2000; Linda, 9 December 2000; Hawwa, 7 December 2000; Group Interview—Cokiswa, Zonke, No Welcome, Mandisa, Nosiphelele, Nomutle, Zameka and Bulelwa, 21 October 2000; Kareema Quick, 14 February 2001; Fatima Lobi, 15 February 2001; Ismail Ngqoyiyana, 8 January 2001; Ismael Gqamane, 31 January 2001.

Endnotes

¹ This article is a summarized version of a paper published in 2001 in *Social Dynamics*, 27, 2, pp. 62-85 entitled “Conversion Or Continuum? The Spread of Islam among African Women in Cape Town.” The summary is published with the consent of the Editor of *Social Dynamics*.

² Census 1996, Community Profile Databases with GIS, Central Statistical Service. Included in this figure are the Cape, Wynberg, Goodwood, Mitchell’s Plain and Bellville magisterial districts. Comparisons with 1991 Census figures are difficult to draw because Islam was not included as an explicit category for African respondents. The 1991 Census instead provided for ‘other non-Christian churches’ and ‘unspecified and no religion’ as categories. If we were to take the former category as a possible, albeit weak, indicator of an African Muslim population, 611 total Africans claimed involvement with a non-Christian church in 1991; Population Census 1991, Religion by Development Region, Statistical Region and District, Central Statistical Service, Report No. 03-01-05.

³ Census 1996, Community Profile Databases with GIS, Central Statistical Service.

⁴ It is important to note that there may be a generational component to this. Though women do comprise the overwhelming majority of African converts to the Muslim faith, Ismael Gqamane claimed it is women of a distinct age category. Teenage and young adult girls are less likely to come to the faith, possibly because of normal pressures of youth lifestyle which are incongruous with the Muslim faith. Gqamane believed there is an added element, however: ‘the girls most of the time are controlled by the boys,’ and are less likely to be able to refuse a boyfriend’s sexual advances. He claimed most female converts are forty years of age and older. Again, this information is not based on official Census data, but rather unofficial estimates and his own personal observation. No official estimates from within the Muslim community, such as from the Muslim Judicial Council, were available.

⁵ All the women interviewed gave an additional Muslim name, to add to their Xhosa and/or Christian names. Full names of those respondents in official positions within the African Muslim community are used.

⁶ Converts are more likely to be from relatively ‘newer’ areas like Philippi and Khayelitsha, which house a higher proportion of recently arrived migrants from the rural areas than established townships such as Gugulethu and Langa.

⁷ For those women who have witnessed the sky-rocketing costs and complications of Christian funerals in African communities, the Muslim alternative provides financial and spiritual relief. Rushda stated, ‘So now I am a committed Muslim, I will die a Muslim and I don’t want these coffins because the people they get buried in these expensive coffins and then the undertaker at the end of the day they would come and dig the coffins again and take them away.’ In her words is reflected a twin message: the corruption and money-mongering that has become characteristic of Christian funeral procedures, and her assertion of her Muslim identity as a counter to it.

⁸ Further research into the theological and mythological aspects of Xhosa deities needs to be done in order to more closely detail these similarities.

⁹ In 1999, it was estimated that every six days in South Africa, a woman was killed by her spouse; J. Standley, ‘South Africa Targets Domestic Violence’, BBC News web-site, 15 December 1999; also, the South African Police and Interpol issued controversial statistics in 1999, which claimed South Africa had the highest incidence of rape in the world—two rapes occurred every minute totaling more than one million rapes each year; ‘Mbeki Questions South African Rape Figures’, BBC News web-site, 28 October 1999.

¹⁰ Some women reported that embracing Islam allowed them to connect for the first time with non-Africans in Cape Town, as well as interact with Muslims in other cities in South Africa, through attendance at mosque and various sponsored conferences/educational initiatives.

¹¹ Language here is instrumental. The Xhosa word used by respondents for ‘mosque’—*icawa*—is the same as the word for ‘church’.

¹² Interestingly, Quick commented that it is African men who ‘advance more firmly or sincerely’ in the Muslim faith once they made the decision to embrace Islam, whereas African women’s commitment was far more contingent upon material concerns. Similarly, one can see in the conversion narrative of Imam Ngqoyiyana a distinctly different trajectory from that of women—he framed his conversion narrative in theological and political terms. In contrast, most of the women conveyed their conversion experience through the language of familial considerations—ie, to marry a prospective husband, to protect or provide for one’s children. Further research using testimonies from other male African converts would be necessary to probe this line of inquiry further.