

## **Towards forging an “African” Muslim identity**

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There has been a widely publicised call by President Thabo Mbeki for all South Africans to identify themselves with the African continent. As part of the "African renaissance", we should consciously see ourselves as African people. The matter raises pertinent questions for the Muslim community: should they strive to “Africanise” their Muslim identity? And, what does such Africanisation entail? I see “Africanising” our identity to mean two things:

-to be *thoroughly aware* of African history and traditional African culture ;

-to *embrace and involve ourselves in* traditional African culture, traditional African attitudes and behaviour where such active participation does not contradict any Islamic principles.

### **The need for an “African” Muslim identity**

Strictly speaking, a Muslim does not need do define himself/herself in terms of an identity other than their “Muslimhood”. Simply put, a person is first and foremost a “Muslim”- not an “African” Muslim, “Malay” Muslim, “Indian” Muslim etc. And the notion of a pure “Muslim identity” is autonomous and self-sustaining- it is defined as a person’s adherence to the Islamic code of beliefs, values, law and etiquette, wherever they may come from or wherever they may find themselves.

But while such "pure" Muslim identity can exist by itself, the history of the Islamic world has shown that it normally operates in tandem with a specific cultural identity. The acceptance of Islam by diverse peoples did not mean the obliteration of their pre-Islamic social and cultural characteristics. Naturally, characteristics that were clearly "un-Islamic" (relating normally to issues of belief) were shed. But, by and large, social and cultural characteristics that were perceived as "neutral" from an Islamic perspective, or may have even been in accord with Islamic values, were maintained. As a result, people who converted to Islam maintained their specific group identity, and, in many cases, a particular group identity was synonymous with adherence to Islam. In Cape Town, for instance, to be "Malay" is also to be "Muslim".

The reinforcement of Muslim identity by group solidarity is a natural and even positive phenomenon. It is natural to be attached to one's homeland, one's native language, one's kith and kin etc. No doubt, this helps explain why our forefathers were so strongly attached to their group identity, whether it was "Malay" or "Indian". This group solidarity incorporated their Muslim identity, and must have stood them in particularly good stead to weather the ravages of the group-based Apartheid system.

But whatever the positive features of such past group solidarity, it also incorporated negative features as the "cultural" aspects of this identity often took precedence over the "Muslim" aspect, thus reinforcing the strategy of the Apartheid regime. In any case, times have changed. Local Muslims are adapting to life in a transforming South Africa. Group boundaries have been formally demolished, opening the way to greater fluidity in society.

This process has already started with Muslims becoming divided less on racial and ethnic lines and increasingly along class and social lines. The majority of Muslims are at least three and more generations old and have far less attachment to Indonesia or India than their forefathers did. Languages, customs and attitudes of South African Muslims have gradually or radically altered since their forefathers coming to this region and new ones adopted. Muslims encounter social issues and problems that require illumination that is sensitive to the South African context. The unbinding of old group identities has been further facilitated by greater international exposure and travel, as well as a large influx of African and Arab Muslim migrants. The cultural identity of South African Muslims may be described as being in limbo: they have, ever since their arrival, been unconsciously loosening the threads tying them to their ancestral homelands, while simultaneously grappling to carve out their cultural niche in the country. Under the “new” South Africa, this process only accelerates.

In many ways, the time is ripe to define and develop a new cultural solidarity to fill the vacuum and be the bulwark of our Muslim identity. And it is natural that such cultural solidarity is rooted in the indigenous traditions of the South African and broader African people. South Africa must be seen as our physical and emotional homeland and Africa as our continent. The openness of the new South Africa impels us to be more open and responsive to the culture of, firstly, our countrymen and then our continent.

### **How do we “Africanise” our identity?**

The Africanisation of identity does not mean an atavistic return to the rhythm of the jungle, nor does it imply the wearing of Madiba shirts. In fact, the first task towards the Africanisation of identity is countering such myths and superfluous details. The Muslim will have to be taught that, contrary to popular imagination, African culture is not “primitive” or simplistic culture.

Rather, the Africanisation of Muslim identity involves a change in mindset: the African worldview has evolved profound concepts of space, time and matter which orients the individual in his/her relationship to their community, society at large, and the cosmos. This worldview results in a particular value system and implies certain appropriate ways of relating to other members of society. As many of these concepts have originally evolved from revelation-the Quran tells us that the world at one stage or another received divine guidance-they have many traits in common with Islam. Of course, the corruption or loss of revelation means that there are a number of differences as well. The spread of Islam in the continent has shown an understanding and appreciation of this African worldview, and has generally incorporated the common and neutral traits and weeded out those that clash with the Islamic principles. The amalgamation of Islamic religious and African cultural identity has resulted in rich, vibrant cultures such as the Swahili in East Africa and the Hausa in West Africa. The Africanisation of Muslim identity is firstly the consciousness of the indigenous African worldview and its potentialities of co-existence with Islam. It also implies an attitude of tolerance and respect towards African traditions and culture. Secondly, as South African Muslims increasingly practice Islam in an

unrestricted environment, and as the indigenous population increasingly accepts the religion, Africanisation of Muslim identity may also mean the adoption or continuation of African cultural practices that are in accord with Islamic law.

### **Practical measures that can foster Africanisation of identity**

There are some tangible steps that can be taken to foster the Africanisation of Muslim identity:

-Islamic schools and tertiary institutions in South Africa should devote part of their curriculum to the study of indigenous culture in South Africa and the history and nature of Islam in Africa;

-In addition to Arabic, students at such institutions must be compelled to learn at least one indigenous language. At this juncture of our history, languages like Xhosa or Zulu take priority over nostalgic yearnings for Malayu or Urdu.

-To foster greater understanding and integration between the “historically imported” and “historically indigenous” segments of the South African Muslim population, inter-marriage must be encouraged and facilitated.

### **Obstacles**

The basic obstacle to such "Africanisation" is the undeniable racism that pervades Muslim communities. The momentum of integration in South Africa proffers a "natural" solution to this problem. However, it appears that religious leaders must formulate a thorough-going series of short and medium range programmes of community-based discussions, information campaigns, lectures, pamphlets and the like to impress upon the

community the abhorrence of racism in Islam, moving beyond platitudes to a more pointed and hard-hitting tackling of the issue.

A more conceptual obstacle is the argument that an essentialist "African" identity is a phantasm. Identities are fluid by nature and are constantly being negotiated. Globalisation has only accelerated this fluidity of identity. There is some merit in this argument in that it alerts us against formulating romantic images of Africa- an Africa that is static and idealised. Of course, we must be aware that the concept of an "African" identity is contested and malleable. However, I believe the argument is problematic on a number of grounds. Firstly, one can only counter an "essentialism" by another "essentialism". To criticise essentialism *per se* makes logical, mutually intelligible discourse impossible. My point is that identity can only be *in essentia* and cannot be conceived of otherwise. The rest of the criticisms follow from this. Identities are not fluid *by nature* but contingently. By nature they are rooted in specific stable archetypes of language, people, land, history, time and space which constitute the essential elements for the formation of identity. Identities therefore are not negotiated to keep in tow with changing social and historical conditions, but manifest itself in the mediation between essential archetypes and contingent circumstances. We conceive of an African identity because of the existence of such ontological archetypes- archetypes the memory of which a quantitative and tangible globalisation may substantially diminish, but whose existence it cannot obliterate.

## **Opportunity**

Post-apartheid South Africa has offered us a historical opportunity to root our Muslim identity in African culture. But the Africanisation of Muslim identity must be, by its very nature, a gradual process-culture is not imposed but acquired. Identity is formed when the self is in harmony with a culture's archetypes. Thus, we are not talking about a Maoist style "re-education". In any case, a forced "Africanisation" will not result in true identity and may even result in considerable social conflict. We cannot, and should not, convert those whose identity firmly rests on archetypes of non-African Muslim cultures. Our focus is on those who find themselves "in limbo"- between the cultures of their parents and grandparents and the new opportunities of identity that have opened in South Africa. The above stated measures will create a suitable framework towards developing the envisioned identity-first by *knowing* African culture, and then *integrating* it in our Islamic practice. In this, we will only be following the collusive pattern of a large swathe of the Muslim world.