

Introduction

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In this special issue of our Annual Review, we are happy to present a collection of essays arising from the research project *Religion, Culture and Identity in Democratic South Africa*. The project was funded by the South Africa Netherlands Projects for Alternative Development (SANPAD) which supports research projects with a particular development angle. Furthermore, it is also a project that encourages partnerships between South African and Dutch researchers.

Our focus has necessitated a slight amendment to the usual format and the reader will notice that the brief editorial of past issues has been replaced by this detailed introductory essay that locates the research findings within the theoretical framework of the discourse on identity. We have also chosen to open this year's Review with the *In Perspective* section, which sheds light on the life of Edward W. Said. Professor Said tragically succumbed to cancer this year after a prolonged illness. He was a scholar that lived by the dictum that the task of the intellectual is to speak the truth to power. Shamil Jeppie's article gauges the debt that all people of conscience owe to this unique man. Beginning a volume that focuses on issues of identity by paying homage to Edward Said is not in anyway unjustifiable. As a Palestinian driven from his Homeland, he experienced first hand the agony of muted existence. He devoted much of his energy and phenomenal capacity as a scholar to giving voice to his people and all others denied similar expression.

The SANPAD research findings follow Jeppie's essay and have all been grouped together under the *Media & Society* section, which aptly frames the material under consideration. We must now pay specific attention to explaining our research findings and will deliberate over the articles that were initially presented at workshops all over the country in some detail. We begin by considering emergent identity constructions from 1994 onward, thereafter attempting to map out key markers and constructions. We conclude our analysis of the research findings by exploring issues of identity in democratic contexts.

SANPAD Research Findings

Identities since 1994

This particular project tried to map Muslim identities in South Africa since the first democratic elections in 1994. We believe that the 1994 elections was a major event in the history of the country that has had a definite impact on how South Africans see themselves. With our focus on Muslim identities, we wanted to suggest emerging identities in a democratic context. We were particularly keen on seeing how the various social and political changes taking place in the country affected how Muslims saw themselves and saw others in the country, and possibly the world.

But we were not simply interested in standing on the side of these developments, and recording the changes as they unfolded from a safe vantage point. Identities, as you will notice from this collection of findings, are constantly being processed and constructed. They change in one individual's lifetime, and differ across a particular

community no matter how tightly such a community may be defined. What is unique about the project is the extent to which it tried to share the dynamic nature of these constructions. Using a variety of public media, we tried as much as possible to make South Africans in general, and Muslims in particular conscious about the changes that we were looking for. The research project, then, was not simply an opportunity to know and understand what was happening. More importantly, it was an opportunity to share with the wider community and society the kind of changes that we were observing and the identities that were being negotiated.

We hope that this collection of essays presents a mirror of identities of and for Muslims in South Africa. The collection of essays is certainly not exhaustive, but it presents some sense of the dynamic changes in the country over the last decade. It highlights the kind of new Muslims identities that have been taking shape, some of them will be better known and others less so. For Muslims, particularly in South Africa and elsewhere, it holds up a self-image for further reflection and consideration.

Key Markers and constructions

The project has been able to reflect and discuss a number of sites where Muslim identities are under construction. The first such site has been the phenomenon of Islamic schooling throughout the country. On one level, Islamic schooling reflects the growing trends towards a greater awareness and consciousness of being Muslims. In Fataar's essay, this particular trend in Cape Town has come under the spotlight. Going beyond the surface, he records the variety of schools carrying the banner of Islamic schools. Management styles and ideological trends undermine the apparent

unity and highlight the actual variety of Islamic schooling experiences. Moreover, Fataar focuses on the interaction that exists between the greater South African society, the school management and the teachers at the school. For many observers (including Muslims), the schools tend to stress the successful way in which Muslims are withdrawing from society. In actual fact, this insularity cannot be sustained. Fataar shows that Islamic schools, the models of Muslim identity and exclusivity, grapple with the links. More generally, some serious questions arise about the viability and desirability of building schooling systems on this conservative ethos.

Also contributing to the greater degree of Islamic markers in society are the newfound opportunities in community radio stations and cyberspace. Munadia Karaan from the Voice of the Cape gives an interesting insight of the opportunities and challenges from an insider perspective. She attributes the success of the radio to raising awareness of global issues among Muslims as well as issues affecting them on a day to day basis. But her essay also highlights the limitations of these newly acquired identities. She complains about the lack of real debate and the selective nature of these identities. In some way, Muslims are interested in the Bosnians, Palestinians and Afghans because of the international attention. Muslim attention to Rwanda and other local issues is as short as the general media's attention.

Haron's essay adds another dimension to ways in which historical identities in South Africa are being extended into cyberspace. He documents the proliferation of sites from South African based organisations that connect with other international sites. Cyberspace demonstrates the ability of local organizations to better represent

themselves to their audiences. Representation is one important aspect of identity, and Haron's essay opens the possibility of examining this feature of Muslim identity. For example, where the radio would not be able to extend equal time and space to all, more than the Friday *mimbar* (pulpit), the Internet is only limited by the abilities and resources of the organizations concerned. The (re) presentation of Muslim identities on the cyberspace merits further reflection.

Gender is one marker in South African society that cannot be easily ignored. And the issue became important for many of our projects as well as a number of other researchers that joined us during the course of three years. Somaya Abdullah's research of Islamic counseling services in the Cape Town region highlighted the conditions under which women suffer the ravages of apartheid and the patriarchal condition of Muslim homes. Women who were abused and abandoned in all sorts of ways, seek desperately for a dignified resolution to conflicts at home. The statistics in Abdullah's essay are staggering for a community that prides itself in maintaining stable and happy homes. The identity of the Muslim home, it seems, often rests on the suffering of a compliant wife, sister and mother. When she refuses the abuse, however, there seems very little dignity and respect given to her at institutions of counseling. It is not as if religious institutions are unaware of the problems. Most representatives, however, seem ambivalent. On the one hand, they want to uphold an image of Islam, but also address the practical issues that arise. The image of Islam in general wins over addressing real needs.

Taking another angle to the same problem, Tayob's interviews with women who experience Muslim personal law also reveal aspects of women's identities and places in Muslim communities. Part of the problems stem from the usual breakdown in marriages, and part of the problem arises from a greater degree of religiosity in Muslim communities. It is difficult to distinguish between the two, but a fair number of problems arise when men think it their right to take on second wives without any consultation with their first wives. It is difficult to attribute this trend to a greater sense of individual religious consciousness. Second wives are sometimes justified religiously and sometimes just indulged in as part of the new Islamic trend. What passes for religious observance in this area leaves much to be desired.

On a social level, the family in Muslim communities has come under a lot of strain. The extended family continues to make a significant demand on couples, while women have greater expectations in the new opportunities available in South Africa. Muslim religious institutions try to cope with the problems that arise. However, what was significant in the interviews conducted for this project was the degree to which women were becoming keenly aware of themselves and their possibilities. While women seeking Islamic counseling in Cape Town seem to see no solution in sight, women in Durban became more aware of their sense of dignity and self-worth as their husbands tried to deny them this very sense of self.

Dauids' interviews with a selection of women in Cape Town on their wearing scarves revealed the same tensions between being Muslim and being female. The tension lay not with the women, but with the society of men and women around them. In frank

interviews about the social pressures and choices, Davids gives us a fresh glimpse of how women react to being the symbols of Islamic identity in Cape Town. The scarf has become such a highly emotive issue in almost all parts of the globe. It has become *the* symbol of being Muslim or being secular for countries as diverse as Iran and France. It is refreshing to read the testimonies, the weighing of decisions and the reflections in Davids' essay. Hassim takes us to women's voices in a different part of the country. Here, we grapple with Muslims of Indian origin who carry the burden of culture and home. Her metaphor of precious diamonds captures the feelings of value and possession that women have to grapple with.

The emergence of African Muslim identities is the last but certainly not the least aspects of Muslim identities in South Africa since 1994. African Muslim identities are not new, but they have been neglected or hidden for some time now. Under the new democracy, it is no longer considered unpopular to be *native*. Two essays document the struggle to be African and Muslim. Sitoto interviewed a number of prominent African Muslims and discovered how they dealt with being the outsider casting from within and without the Muslim community. The endemic *othering* was different, but not absent, in Soweto where Mathee conducted interviews at the Shahada Centre. Both Sitoto and Mathee's interviews reveal a fascinating balance between African culture and Islamic culture that did not compromise on the critical sense of being Muslims. Mathee argues for a greater degree of Islamization, but Sitoto is more ambivalent as he tries to find a more complex mix.

Identity in Democratic Contexts

It becomes clear that the essays in the collection do not take identity at face value. Where Muslim identity seemed clear and unequivocal as in Islamic schools, nuances and ambiguities cropped up. Where Islamic identity was vulnerable as in women in marriages that were breaking up, a clear sense of self and society revealed itself. Against the stereotypes that dominate discourses within and without the Muslim community, we hope that the collection will raise more questions and more reflections.

In almost all cases, Muslim identity seems to have been negotiated and reconstructed in the context of demands and conditions created by the society at large. The particular issues of being African and being female that has dominated the public debates in greater South Africa have affected how Muslims relate to a sense of self and others. To a lesser extent, but equally clear, the demands for democratic schooling have been felt within Islamic schools as well. One of the suggestions we have for further reflection and consideration is the extent to which an Islamic identity can or should be created in isolation. It seems that a greater awareness of identities in South Africa highlights the greater degree to which identities are constructed in relation to the other.

We have also focussed on the multiple identities within Muslim communities. Muslims tend to define themselves in relation to other Muslims in terms of gender, race and ethnicity. There is a significant degree of inter-Muslim *othering* on a number of levels that is often obscured. General observers often see Muslims as one indistinct

whole, while Muslims believe that it should be so. We hope that this collection puts the spotlight on the diversity within the Muslim community. We cannot stress enough its importance for all those interested in Islam and Muslims.

However, there is a blind spot in our collection. Much needs to be done about how Muslims see the *other* as non-Muslim, disbeliever and heathen. Some of this *othering* is coming through with African Muslim identities. But there is a whole lot of work to be done with critically investigating the degree to which Muslims see themselves in relation to other race and ethnic groups, and other religions. In multicultural contexts such as South Africa, such notions merit a greater degree of critical reflection. A systematic study of this topic would be a welcome addition to this collection.

Finally, the collection calls attention to the importance of thinking about the place of identity in a democratic context. Identity seems important but what is so important about it in a democratic society? Why are we so concerned about identities? During the course of our research project, we began to think about the need and justification for identity. This reflection led us to the modern history of the concept of identity. Going beyond the latter part of the twentieth century when identity politics and identities have been highly contested, we came across Charles Taylor who suggested that identity was first highlighted by the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, who suggested that the identity of a citizen was important in order to replace the fixed status assigned to people during the feudal era. Identity implied the self-worth shared by all people in such a way that each and every person was unique in her own way, but regarded to be of equal value by all concerned. There lies a tension between the

demands of equality and individuality. Identity construction in a democratic society demands that both be respected. Cultural identities sometimes demand to be considered unique but hide a desire for inequality. On the other hand, states want equality but tend to neglect individual worth. If we take this insight more seriously, we might better appreciate how identities in democracies need not be seen as the fixed values given by accident of birth or culture or religion, but by dignity respected by self and others. The essays here certainly provide much room for reflection on this tension between equality, individual worth and cultural images.

Images of Self in Art and Literature

While the essays collected in the *Art & Literature* section did not form part of the SANPAD research project, they are certainly an extension of the main theme of identity construction and portrayal. This is most evident in Govinden's review of Aziz Hassim's first novel, *The Lotus People*. Although it is a work of historical fiction, it very effectively shows how identity construction is influenced by a multiplicity of social factors. In her review, Govinden argues that the novel can be read as an interesting study in the formation of masculinities in a racially divided society. The brutality of Apartheid serves as central impetus for violent opposition. It is exactly this type of reflexivity that informs identity construction and Hassim's novel explores such emergent self-images through richly textured characterisation.

Chris Barron's article on the life and works of Tatamkulu Afrika is an account of the multiplicity of identities that have been inscribed upon a single person. Afrika was a paradigm case example of the hybrid subject. He constantly renegotiated his own identity in response to the challenges thrown at him by everyday existence. His was a

struggle of reconciling his self-imposed Islamic identity with the vagaries of an unjust society. This is no more passionately reflected than in his poetry and novels and Barron provides an apt orientation to anyone wishing to experience Afrika's writing.

Shathley Q's review of Zubeida Jaffer's *Our Generation* exposes the influence of emergent genres of literature upon the writing of an autobiography. In the process, the challenges of capturing the complexity of a single individual in an extended narrative are poignantly brought to the fore. It becomes evident that we are caught up in constantly re-negotiating our very own identities. Such self-awareness does not perhaps dawn upon us all and exploring this process of re-negotiation in the novel is quite possibly an effective corrective for the perceptive reader.

Rayda Jacob's latest novel is also primarily concerned with negotiating identity. More specifically, it is concerned, as Manuel suggests in his review, with reconciling religious doctrine and actual practice. *Confessions of a Gambler* is however not only about the contradictory tensions within the individual; it is also concerned with making a space for the other within the orbit of one's self-professed religious and moral sphere. As Manuel notes, it is not coincidental that the author tackles issues such as polygamy and homosexuality so frequently in the book.

In the final piece in the section Gabeba Baderon reflects upon the construction of images of the other. She does so by examining landscape portraits and images that capture Muslim subjects in early South African art. She tries to show how pictures seek by over-determining the meaning of figures to elicit their discursive collusion in a certain vision of the world. This implicit form of "othering," masked by the veil of

the aesthetic is just one powerful example of how even art colludes with regimes of power in order to subjugate the subject and strip him or her of all agency.

Writing & Research

The final section of ARISA remains quite unaltered by the dictates of our special focus. We do however once again salute Edward Said by providing an extensive web guide to his works. The list is a good resource for anyone with Internet access interested in exploring Said's work first-hand.

The Said Web Guide is followed by a review of Ahmed Essop's recent book on the life of Suleiman Nana. Savant's article explores the way in which Essop has attempted to innovatively re-write Nana's invaluable contribution to South African politics and society back into the book of history.

Our final article, as usual, is simply a list of recent bibliographical references on Islam and Muslims in South Africa. As always, all views expressed in this issue are not necessarily shared by the editors, the Centre for Contemporary Islam or the University of Cape Town.