

## South African Muslims' Venture into Cyberspace

Muhammed Haron

South Africa's small but religiously vibrant community have always used a number of available structures to express their Muslim identity. In the twentieth century, printing presses such as Ali's Printers, Formset and Impress put Muslim media (*Muslim Views*, *The Majlis*, *Al-Balaagh* and *Al-Qalam*) into circulation. Now, they have ventured into the brave new world of cyberspace where new virtual activities are undertaken and experimented with, and where new virtual communities are created (Slevin 2002; Smith et al 2000). Individuals and organizations from within the Muslim community have set up websites as a method of pursuing a challenging form of sharing and disseminating information.

Multiple reasons for individuals and organizations launching sites may be considered. The most prominent seem to be to make known their own identities; to counter those sites that undermine religious ideas; to share information about themselves and their activities to a wider audience that would not be possible through the usual media; and to become, it may be assumed, influential opinion makers amongst the growing surfing communities. Their willingness to venture into this territory concretely demonstrates their preparedness to undertake activity of a different kind; an activity that disseminates opinions, defends views, and supports ideas on the web in a very challenging and open manner (Whine 1998, Ahmad 2001). In fact, Bunt's (2000) *Virtually Islamic* is an important contribution that offers insights into some of the sites that have been launched in the 1990s in different parts of the world. He demonstrates the nature of 'Muslim Diversity Online,' and plots the shift from the mosque based pulpit where conventional authority used to be vested to the 'Digital Mimbar'. This article complements and expands upon the contribution of Ismail (2001). It briefly records the emergence of the South African Muslim controlled sites as part of a larger effort to maintain their distinct identity, while at the same time seeking to integrate with the development of a global Muslim identity.

### **Websites in Context**

The South African Muslim society seem not to be aware of the policy framework that placed the development of the continent's Information Society at the centre of the UN's economic strategy for the Southern Africa region in 1996. According to this strategy, South Africans were committed to set up their websites based upon the developments that were taking place in the South African society on the whole. Unlike the Muslim community radio stations that had to furnish detailed motivations to the Independent Broadcasting Association (now known as Independent Communications Authority of South Africa) in order to establish their respective stations, the webmasters of Muslim sites were not directly answerable to a statutory body. There was no need to apply for a license to set up a site nor were there any bureaucratic structures that impeded them from devising their own sites. Websites by Muslims and Muslim organizations are increasing rapidly. Some of the Muslims, who created their sites, considered it incumbent to take up this new challenge and fall in line with their fellow countrypersons as well as their co-religionists in Europe and the Americas where this type of activity was initiated and is ongoing (Whine 1999; Bunt 2000).

In Europe and the Americas, Muslim groups pursued their cyber activities to share information about Islam and Muslims. One prominent example is Dr. Allen Godlas' [www.uga.edu/islam](http://www.uga.edu/islam) site that was nominated for the 2002 Webby Award. Then there are other sites that try to counter and respond to inter-religious polemics. For example, the site located at <http://answer-islam.org> is a Christian-based site that tries to answer Muslim perspectives of Christianity; it contains mainly John Gilchrist's criticisms of Ahmad Deedat's views on Christianity. The cyberspace arena has however opened the floodgates to many from within the Muslim society who openly challenge mainstream Muslim interpretations. In the USA Al-Fatihah Foundation (est. 1998) ([www.alfatiha.net](http://www.alfatiha.net)) proudly dedicated itself to the promotion of lesbian, gay and transgender communities, and has linked up with like-minded individuals and organizations across the globe including al-Fitrah Foundation in Johannesburg ([www.alfitrahfoundation.org](http://www.alfitrahfoundation.org) thus far inaccessible).

Many South African Muslims who started out towards the end of the 1990s have been able to remain on course by updating their sites, and keeping surfers abreast on a

regular basis with fresh news. The Pretoria based media advocacy group, Media Review Network, spearheaded by Dr. Firoz Osman has been one of the few active Muslim sites [www.mediaareview.net](http://www.mediaareview.net). He and his colleagues load the latest news that pertains to the Muslim heartlands and supply the surfer with links to other interesting and relevant sites. Other sites have been less active, such as <http://786.co.za> which belongs to members of the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa. They realised the potential of the world-wide-web, but seemed to have overlooked the fact that it needed to be constantly monitored and managed. Visitors will observe that old issues of *Al-Qalam*, the MYMSA mouthpiece, as well as outdated information of *The Voice*, their Fordsburg based radio station, remained pasted on the site. When the researcher visited it on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2003, it recorded 987144 hits with no new or fresh information since the last time it was accessed in March 2003.

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Others such as the Cape Town based *Muslim Views*, which had its own informative [www.muslimviews.org](http://www.muslimviews.org) site for quite a while, was forced to be suspended because of the webmaster's non-compliance to international internet regulations set down by its host based in the USA. The same applied to [www.naqshbandi-sa.org](http://www.naqshbandi-sa.org), a Sufi site managed by the South African Naqsbadiyyah chapter, which was under the leadership of Dr. Yusuf Da Costa and Imam Hassan Walele. The site contained useful information about the emergence of the order as well as other Sufi related information. Since it experienced this problem, some of the data has been shifted to the parent site at [www.naqshbandi.net/haqqani](http://www.naqshbandi.net/haqqani). Lets turn our attention to the lists of sites to demonstrate how active the South African Muslims have been over the past few years.

### **South African Muslim Sites**

In the aforementioned paragraphs mention was made of some of the active South African Muslim sites as well as some that have remained passive or were suspended. Since a number of sites mushroomed during the latter part of the 1990s and first two years of the new millennium, an attempt has been made to classify them into specific categories.

### *Information and Link Sites*

The series of sites that appear below differ from one another in more ways than one. The [www.muslims.co.za](http://www.muslims.co.za) site is basically a directory of various Muslim organizations in the Western Cape. Mr. Ghalib Jonkers, its webmaster, intends to add more information and hopes to eventually cover the whole of South Africa. The lists appear under specific headings so that individuals and organizations may find relevant contact information easily. The [www.islam.org.za](http://www.islam.org.za) is a link site rather than a site that provides information about South African Muslims. The [www.islaminafrica.com](http://www.islaminafrica.com) is a more ambitious one in that it plans to provide information about Muslims in each of the countries on the African continent. Muhammad Amra has been spearheading this project from his base in KwaZulu Natal, and is in the process of constructing an interactive site by loading relevant data as they become available.

Although the African continent has attracted the interest of many Muslim groups in South Africa, the issue of Palestine has always remained high on their agenda. It is for this reason that Muslims and non-Muslims in South Africa decided to develop the [www.safriendsofpalestine.com](http://www.safriendsofpalestine.com) site to draw these two communities closer together. At present the site shares basic information about the respective communities and also encourages members of their communities to correspond with one another in order to forge closer ties amongst themselves. And one of the most recent sites is [www.info786.com](http://www.info786.com). It was launched in 2003 and maintained by the Cape based International Book Services.

The [www.nurulislammosque.co.za](http://www.nurulislammosque.co.za) site is fairly new and only has information about the Nurul Islam mosque. It may be assumed that many other mosque committees will set up similar sites to make known the social history of the mosque and present activities. Organizations such as the Muslim Students Association of South Africa have also ventured into cyberspace to share information about themselves and their activities. The [www.msa.org.za](http://www.msa.org.za) site was created by one of its many campus affiliates but it is not interactive and user friendly. It shares a very limited amount of information on the MSA. However, a community organization that is committed to curb crime, and bring an end to gangsterism and drugs in South Africa's urban and rural towns is the People Against Gangsterism and Drugs. It maintains an informative [www.pagad.co.za](http://www.pagad.co.za) site, which has unfortunately been stagnant because many of its

leaders were apprehended and jailed for criminal acts and due to dwindling financial resources.

#### *Personal Domains*

A number of personal sites have been placed on the world-wide-web. The [www.imamharon.com](http://www.imamharon.com) was established by the Imam Haron Foundation with the intention of sharing specific information about Imam Abdullah Haron who was detained in May 1969 and eventually killed on 27 September 1969. It also contains some general information about the South African Muslim community. Two scholars have thus far ventured to launch themselves into cyberspace. The first one to do so was the North American born Dr. Adullah Hakim Quick. Since he moved to South African more than three years ago, he became intimately involved with the local Muslim organizations and in missionary work in the region. During this time he lectured and published his ideas, much of which have been loaded on to his personal site: [www.hakimquick.com](http://www.hakimquick.com).

The other well-known South African scholar on the web is Dr Farid Esack who lectures in different parts of the world and shuttles between his USA base and South Africa. His site can be located at <http://uk.geocities.com/faridesack>. Some of his writings and other bio-data are found on his site. And more than a year ago Naeem Jeenah developed the <http://shams.za.org> site to highlight the work of his departed wife Shamima Shaykh. She was one of the most active members of the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. She is remembered for her deep concern with the disadvantaged position of the South African Muslim women and dedicated much of her time to rectify these circumstances through socio-educational projects.

#### *Sufi Zawiyahs*

Amongst the growing number of sites locally and globally are the Sufi sites. The Raza Academy created its heavily loaded and informative [www.raza.co.za](http://www.raza.co.za) site for those who subscribe and adhere to its Berelvi doctrines. It also lists an array of links that connect it to like-minded organizations elsewhere in the world. One of these is the US based [www.sunnah.org](http://www.sunnah.org), which, in turn, has links to the Naqshbandiyyah order. The latter, of course, has its own <http://naqshbandi.org> site and used to have the

[www.naqshbandi-sa.org](http://www.naqshbandi-sa.org) site on its linkage page. But since its suspension in 2001, bits of information that appeared on its original site have been partially incorporated into the parent site. Reference may be made to the parent site's audio-visual page, which recorded the events Shaykh Nizam's visit to South Africa during 2000. The Chistiyyah order, which is from amongst the most widespread orders in the KwaZulu Natal region, is connected to those managing the sunnah.org site. Its members in South Africa have created four different but interrelated sites, namely [www.soofie-saheb.org.za](http://www.soofie-saheb.org.za), [www.badsha.peer.org.za](http://www.badsha.peer.org.za), [www.soofie.org.za](http://www.soofie.org.za) and the [www.sabiree.com](http://www.sabiree.com). These sites display a variety of information regarding the activities undertaken by its members. All of them are formally tied to their parent body in India.

The Al-Murabitun was introduced to South Africans in the mid-1980s when Shaykh Abdul-Kader as-Sufi, its spiritual leader, came on an official visit to the country. Since then the number of adherents gradually increased, and he decided to make Constantia, Cape Town, his new place of residence. The official site of the Murabitun is located at [www.geocities/Athens/Delphi/6588/mudial.html](http://www.geocities/Athens/Delphi/6588/mudial.html). Its link page connects the visitor to its South African branch that unfortunately does not reflect much information. Another spiritual luminary who decided to make South Africa his new place of abode is Shaykh Fadlullah Haeri. He migrated to Gauteng in South Africa from California in the USA more than two years ago. Under his guidance the [www.nuradeen.com](http://www.nuradeen.com) site was set up with the idea of making available some of his writings and sharing his ideas on Sufism. One of the South African contacts is Abu Bakr Karolia. Godlas' earlier mentioned website has a non-fixed link at <http://home.pix.za/mf/mfj1/> to the 'Alawi order. Two Cape Town based shaykhs, Sieraj and Ahmad Hendricks, are intimately involved with this order and have also been busy translating Arabic texts written by leading members of this order into English.

### *Media Moguls*

Many media groups have chosen to also open sites in order to attract more readers and listeners. It appears that all the South African Muslim controlled media groups have succeeded in drawing more interest to their activities. Mention was already made of *Muslim Views'* suspended [www.muslimviews.org](http://www.muslimviews.org) site. The two of the most user-friendly sites are those that had been set up by the two Cape Town based radio

stations, namely *Radio 786* ([www.radio786.co.za](http://www.radio786.co.za)) and *Voice of the Cape* ([www.vocfm.com](http://www.vocfm.com)). Both sites have regular news updates and set up chat rooms to allow for greater interaction between themselves and its listeners/surfers/readers. And during 2000 the satellite radio station, Channel Islam International, located in Lenasia outside Johannesburg, offered the opportunity for listeners to view its variety of programmes online at [www.channelislam.com](http://www.channelislam.com). Earlier reference was made to the [www.mediareview.net](http://www.mediareview.net) site, which has been viewed as the most active group online. Another well-known presence in South African Muslim media on the net is (<http://www.albalagh.net>).

#### *Social Welfare Forums:*

South African Muslim organizations have been active in the social-welfare sector for many years. The opportunity to go onto the web has given the organizations world-wide exposure. From amongst the youngest organizations in this group is Waqf al-Waqifin, a relief organization that has been making inroads in different parts of Africa and Asia. Its [www.giftofthegivers.com](http://www.giftofthegivers.com) site is filled with information with its achievements over the past few years. Another interesting site to check out is the one created by Positive Muslims to highlight the plight of Muslims living with HIV/AIDS. Their [www.positivemuslims.org.za](http://www.positivemuslims.org.za) site contains articles about the HIV/AIDS pandemic and articles regarding the involvement of the Muslims in combating the disease. The South African National Zakat Fund's [www.sanzaf.org.za](http://www.sanzaf.org.za) and the Islamic Medical Association of South Africa's <http://ima.org.za> reflect their respective involvement in different parts of the Southern African region. Both of them were established in the 1970s and have since done sterling work in the welfare sector by assisting the poor, needy and others. During October 2002, the Islamic Resource Foundation of South Africa was established with the aim of doing welfare work, and to assist and contribute towards developmental projects (<http://zikr.org/irf>).

Although the Islamic Propagation Centre International, which has a new crop of leaders, does not fall into the social welfare sector per se, it has been occupied with social welfare work. It set up its own [www.ipci.co.za](http://www.ipci.co.za) site with the aim of reaching a wider audience; and during 2003 it has slowly been developing the site into an interactive one. Little is known about the newly formed National Awqaf Foundation of South Africa, but it may also fall within the social welfare ambit. Its site

[www.islam.co.za/sarwari/default.html](http://www.islam.co.za/sarwari/default.html) site tells the surfer nothing about its aims and activities.

### *Theological Bodies*

Theological bodies realised the need to undertake this new form of *jihad* and have been very busy constructing their sites and making them user-friendly and interactive. The Muslim Judicial Council [www.mjc.org.za](http://www.mjc.org.za) site was stagnant for quite a while. During the course of 2003 the site has been revamped and updated at intermittent periods. The two Jamiat sites, namely [www.jamiat.co.za](http://www.jamiat.co.za) and [www.jamiat.org.za](http://www.jamiat.org.za), are pleasing to browse through since they are constantly updated and contain a lot of archived material. These two sites have two other independent sites that are linked to them, namely the Camperdown al-Inaam site ([www.alinaam.org.za](http://www.alinaam.org.za)), and the Question and Answer site from a Mufti Ebrahim Desai that can be located at [www.ask-imam.com](http://www.ask-imam.com). Even though the Majlis ul-Ulama of South Africa – based in Port Elizabeth does not have a site of its own, it has a link via faithweb. This <http://jihaad.faihwab.com> site furnishes information on the arrest of Maulana Sadeq Desai in Bangladesh during 1999 and provides all the papers that were presented to the court to have him freed.

The Jamiats and interested groups created The South African National Halaal Authority (est. 1996) in order to synchronise the issue of Halaal certificates by more than one body in South Africa. They have made inroads in the food and beverages sector and are recognised as a major role player. SANHA's site is piggy-backing on one of the Jamiat's sites at [www.islamsa.org.za/sanha.html](http://www.islamsa.org.za/sanha.html). It should not be forgotten, however, that groups such as the MJC's Halaal Trust, the Majlish ush-Shura and the Islamic Council of South Africa still compete with them in this financially lucrative market.

Alongside these sites there exists the lonely Shi'ite site managed by the Ahlul Bait Foundation of South Africa, a small shi'ite group located in Cape Town with some influence in other parts of the country. Although it might not be viewed as a theological body as such, it has been safeguarding the theological issues of its small number of adherents in South Africa ([www.afosa.org](http://www.afosa.org)). Mention should also be made of Shaykh Shouket Allie's site, a staff member of Islamic College of Southern Africa

and the Hafiz Academy & Quranic Literary Trust. His site ([www.muslimpersonallaw.co.za](http://www.muslimpersonallaw.co.za)) deals specifically with legal issues that affect the Muslim community. Shaykh Allie is a Law and Shariah consultant.

#### *Educational Institutions*

Many educational institutions have emerged during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Islamic schools and madaris have been established. Some of the newer institutions such as the Centre for Training and Development in South Africa situated in Fordsburg, and the Hafiz Academy located in Cape Town have set up their respective sites ([www.ctdsa.co.za](http://www.ctdsa.co.za) and [www.hafizacademy.org](http://www.hafizacademy.org)). Both have so far made unique contributions to the educational arena during the short period of their existence. In the case of CTDSA it was able to offer short educational programmes for individuals from different parts of Southern Africa, and the Academy was able to devise a color coded Quranic text to assist beginners in the reading of the Arabic text with ease. Unfortunately, the sites of both institutions are not very user-friendly. The Masjid ul-Quds committee launched its own [www.masjidulquds.com/quds.htm](http://www.masjidulquds.com/quds.htm) site to reflect the different activities taking place on its premises. It hosts two important and independent Muslim institutions, namely the Islamic College of Southern Africa and the Islamic Library. The latter has been in operation for more than a decade, and the former for a decade. Since ICOSA has contributed over the years towards the training of students, it created its <http://www.icoso.co.za> site to market itself more vigorously in the Southern African region. Recently, ICOSA's webmaster has been updating the site at regular intervals.

The International Board of Educational Research & Resources [www.iberr.co.za](http://www.iberr.co.za) site is an internationally linked site, which is closely monitored and maintained by Maulana Ali Adam of Islamia College. And the Islamic Education Organization of Southern Africa (est. 1985), which is one of the earliest organizational groups in KwaZulu Natal, established its [www.tradepage.co.za/ieosa/](http://www.tradepage.co.za/ieosa/) site with the idea of sharing its activities with the general public. Another prominent educational institution that has been active since the 1960s has been the As-Salaam Educational Institute at Braemer. It has a rich educational history that still needs to be recorded. It has a site at [www.as-salam.za.net](http://www.as-salam.za.net), which seems to be inaccessible at present.

## **Conclusion**

The number of Muslim sites has slowly increased over the past two years. Some have been active in loading the sites with a fair amount of local, national and international content, and others have been struggling to keep up. However, it is expected that the dormant or near-dormant sites will increase their presence alongside the more active ones on the web. The desire to have themselves represented on the web has grown since it offers opportunities for publicity to the cyber world communities and also with those who share common ideas and objectives with them. From the lists of sites recorded above, it shows that the South African Muslim organizations have generally been responsive to the needs of their respective communities. The news media and theological bodies, for example, have made valuable strides in bridging the gaps in time and space with their followers.

Some of the South African Muslim sites have demonstrated that they have been able to maintain good, competitive standards even though they face financial constraints and numerous other obstacles. These sites have, on the whole, been able to concretely show the vibrancy of the South African Muslim community.

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