

## **Engaging *Muslimness* and the making of African Muslim identity**

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We need to attend more to the negotiation of identities by their possessors, recalling always that each identity, however central it is to our self-conceptions, may in some situations not be the one we need. - Appiah and Gates, *Identities*

One of the highlights of my research was the realization that African Muslim<sup>1</sup> *presence* continues to be invisible in South African Islam and scholarship. Inarguably, most works on Islam and Muslims in this country are largely based on experiences and history of the “Asian Muslim community” or Asian diaspora. For example, it is common to find bold expressions, which claim that Muslim “history and demography” is “well documented in Southern Africa”(Esack 1997:20). Naturally, for historical reasons it is understandable that the roots of early Islam in South Africa are located within these historical communities. However, the problem with the rhetoric of *historical origins* of Islam in this country is that it presents us with a fragmented picture of Muslim history and demography where African Muslim presence is either erased or unconsciously ignored.

Of course, this observation should not be interpreted as dismissing recent writings that have begun to pay closer attention to African Muslim presence. For example, Tayob's (1999) recent work *Imams, Mosques and Sermons: Islam in South Africa* makes a serious attempt to locate African Muslims within a general discussion of Islam in South Africa. In addition, a similar trend is discernible in the 2002 issue of *ARISA*. Alarmed by the premature death of Imam Essa Al-Seppe this issue was spiced with a number of articles that focused on Islam in the townships. For instance, Rebekah Lee's refreshing article explored a neglected area in writings about African Muslims viz. the conversion of African women to Islam.

Nevertheless, while these recent writings are welcomed, the perception that Africans as *latecomers* into the fold of Islam are the proverbial *other* is very much alive. Nowhere is this more evident than in the use of terms like *converts* and *reverts* to designate African Muslims. However, as time passed through attempts at self-identification, *convert* and *revert* were deemed inappropriate and were surpassed with terms like *emerging Muslims*. And more recently I read of "developing Muslims" as the preferred label (Fakude, 2002:47).

Now the impulse to name Africans through special identification is by no means limited to the Muslim context. It is also discernible in how during the years of racial segregation most black South Africans were sometimes labeled as *kaffirs*, *natives*, *Bantus*, and *plurals*<sup>2</sup>. This was before Steve Biko and the Black consciousness movement insisted on *Blacks* as the appropriate description. And now with the season of the African

renaissance *African* is back in demand!<sup>3</sup> Of course, this article is not about the history and the politics of naming Africans. As part of a bigger project on *Religion, Culture and Identity in South Africa*, and though still a work in progress, the focus here is on what could be framed as *the making of African Muslim identity*. The article is based on fifteen interviews with “African Muslims” from different backgrounds who reside mainly in the cosmopolitan cities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu Natal. These interviews were conducted at different periods during September 2001 to late November 2002.

My theoretical and methodological approach in this project is largely influenced by what Appiah and Gates (1995:6) call “the need to attend more to the negotiation of identities by their possessors”. What has attracted my attention from these authors’ theorization of identities is the suggestion that we must invest more agency to subjects of research rather than treat them as mere passive objects. Guided by this theoretical insight, I have tried to accentuate the *voice* of African Muslims through their *autobiographical narratives*.<sup>4</sup> However, let me hasten to add that my emphasis on autobiographical narratives should not be confused with a preoccupation with the theme of African *conversion* to Islam. The downplaying of conversion discourse is not arbitrary but underpins the theoretical and methodological stance I have adopted. For to *write* or *talk* about African Muslim identity free from the discourse of conversion saves us from surrendering to the impulse of playing “African as otherness” to borrow an expression from Mudimbe (1997). And by discourse of conversion here, I am referring to a body of writings *on* and *about* African Muslims in South African scholarship and popular writings (see Abrahams 1981; Vawda 1993; Haron 1992)<sup>5</sup>.

To meet the requirements and limits imposed by the scope of the present article, I shall present a condensed version of only two interviews. These interviews will be followed by a brief analysis and then a concluding remark. I start with Ayub Buang Seale who is in his early thirties and currently studying for a BA degree through UNISA. Seale:

*I embraced Islam in the mid 1980s--- not for purely religious concerns but rather as a political statement. In fact, I was conscientised by Ebrahim Mcejwa who juxtaposed Islam with Christianity and pointed out how the latter was used as a tool of our oppression. By the time, I embraced Islam it was already a vibrant presence*

*in our township. Our Muslim community consisted mainly of individuals who were mostly political activists. Thus, the respect that they enjoyed within the bigger community in our township was transferred over to Islam... . Islam was warmly received in our community and as indicated to you---those who first embraced Islam were highly respectable even though they were youth---they were mostly in the forefront of the struggle---mobilizing and organizing the masses. So no, there was no stigma to being a Muslim... .<sup>6</sup>*

Without interfering with Seale's narrative let us proceed and listen to Ncube's narrative. Ncube has been a Muslim for about two decades now. His story in a sense represents the story of those that have matured in Islam. Ncube accepted Islam as a teenager. He is now

in his late thirties, respected in his community, is married and works as one of the senior members of Telkom office in Durban. This is what he had to say:

*As people who grew up in the township --- there was a quest for religious identity. We could not identify with the oppressor's religion. In terms of its teachings Islam was different---it was a political answer. However, as one grows in the religion--- reception was not as good as expected. For example, Twelve years down the line, 'one' is still a convert. This is unlike the early Muslims<sup>7</sup>----the terminology of convert*

*did not apply to them. Also, the other challenge that confronted us in the early years is that the Muslim institutions were not yet ready to prepare and absorb the new Muslims... we had no facilities and no institutions to smoothen transition to Islam. Fortunately, my family was very tolerant. They were also encouraged by my sense of commitment in the new religion. Also, they could notice a change in my general lifestyle. In fact, we had a mutual tolerance. I did not disown my people... . Well as far*

*as the community was concerned at first, the reaction to my being Muslim was one of anxiety. Now, they are aware of Islam and their reaction is different.<sup>8</sup>*

Because amongst other issues, I was keen to investigate how the mediation between Muslim identity and African traditional culture is played out. One of my main questions centered on whether, on becoming Muslims, African traditional customs and rituals were

still observed. The response from both Seale and Ncube was remarkably similar. For instance, this is how Seale responded:

*No, you see my family is steeped in Christianity and does not practice traditional customs---These things were not done at home. In fact, they looked at them as backward practices and almost like barbaric. Well as a grown up person you make choices. Islam is my personal discipline. But I must be honest---I am still struggling with my Muslim identity. A person must grow into the faith---but does not branch off.... However, now I m no longer so defensive-----I am comfortable with my Muslim identity<sup>9</sup>.*

Also, note how a similar thread seems to run through Ncube's response to the same question:

*Christianity did good spadework. Without Christianity and Islam, people would be deeply entrenched in traditional beliefs. I am a Muslim first. If I assert that I am an African first---it would mean that I am succumbing to external pressures. However, You need to take people with you. I do not see any dichotomy between being African and Muslim. Islam is fully African and African is fully Islam---the two are synonymous because the values of African people are similar to Islam. The whole question boils down to the question of definition and central to that definition is the concern for human well-being. The more you go deeper into Islam the more you go back to your African culture. So lets call it home coming!<sup>10</sup>*

As hinted earlier, since I am not writing about conversion *per se*, I will not enter into an elaborate analysis of the reasons why Seale and Ncube were attracted to Islam. I think their narratives speak for themselves. Besides, as a theoretical point of departure, my project seeks to center the African Muslim more as a *voice* and *presence* in South African Islam rather than a passive category fit only to be analyzed and discussed under the theme of *conversion*. Amongst other issues, a critical listening and reading of Seale and Ncube's responses seem to suggest that the very idea of an adjective "African" to Muslim does not sit comfortably. In other words, at first glance it would appear that they are content with being *Muslim* without extra superlatives that single them out from the "pack" or other Muslims! As Ncube retorted: "this question is an imagination of the academics. With us we are simply happy to be Muslims". However, when we return to Ncube's earlier statements, a degree of ambivalence is immediately discernible. This ambivalence seems to stem from the desire to accentuate an untainted Muslim identity. Thus the qualifier: "Islam is fully African and African is fully Islam---the two are synonymous because the values of African people are similar to Islam". But if this is the case, that "Islam is fully African", how does Ncube account for the reluctance to observe some traditional African customs and rituals? The rhetoric of affirming African culture aside, it seems that the ambivalence shown towards African culture stems from residues of an earlier upbringing in Christianity. Arguably, it is this earlier upbringing in Christianity that continues to influence the interplay between the Muslim identity and its encounter with African traditional culture. Thus, both Seale and Ncube responded to the question of whether they were still observing African customs and rituals in a strikingly

similar fashion. For instance, for Seale the response was: “No, you see my family is steeped in Christianity and does not practice traditional customs...”, while Ncube retorted: “Christianity did good spadework. Without Christianity *and Islam*, people would be entrenched in traditional beliefs” (Ncube’s emphasis).

I am particularly struck by this candid acknowledgement of Christian influence in these narratives. For though both Seale and Ncube are unmistakably proud of their Muslim identity, their respect for Christianity provides us with an opportunity to revisit how Christian and Islamic influences on African identities are theorized. For dominant discourses tend to present these two traditions in adversarial terms. In such a context, they are seen as competing for a premier position or monopoly of African identity. Given Seale and Ncube’s revelations, can this old assumption still be upheld? Are their narratives not suggesting something else, that Christianity and Islam are in effect allies when it comes to waging a cultural onslaught on traditional African culture? Or are we *hearing* something else; that a shift to Islam though politically and perhaps theologically marks a distance and discontinuity with Christianity<sup>11</sup>. However, at a symbolic level Christianity as an historical memory, continues to shape the impulse of the new Muslim in his dealings with African culture and that for those Africans who have selected Christianity and Islam, these traditions are not simply imposed on “docile bodies”<sup>12</sup> as Mudimbe (1995) would argue, but are based on a conscious selection as compatible attachments to African identity.

To sum up then, perhaps we can conclude that if anything, these narratives afford us with an opportunity to *hear* and *listen* more carefully to how African Muslims manage to negotiate the interplay between their Islamic and African cultural backgrounds. To appreciate how the *imposed* labels are subverted and given new empowering meanings. That African Muslim identity entails a complex process of a cross-cultural translation that consists of “multiple identifications”(Martin, 1999:188). In the context of these multiple identifications there is often a creative tension that varies from the imperative to uphold Islam and a lingering attachment with an earlier upbringing in Christianity that still influences some African Muslim attitudes towards African traditional culture.

Finally, it is evident that *Muslimness* and *Africanness* are not fixed binaries but play a complimentary role. However, what is still not so clear is the label we shall attach to this collapsed duality between *Muslimness* and *Africanness*, especially when the narratives stress that acceptance of Islam was a *homecoming*? Or are we confronted here with something more complex and illusive? That is, since the very concept of identity is ambiguous and fluid, it is folly to search for neat answers! That the imperative to look for a tag called *Muslim* or *African Muslim* is itself a performance based on the exigencies of the moment.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Given the limited focus of my research project, the term African Muslims is used here in the exclusive sense, that is, referring mainly to those Africans that have come to Islam through "conversion". Thus, for instance I am not including the Zanzibari Muslim community and other Muslims from elsewhere in Africa who through various factors like migration for example have ended up settling in South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> This point was highlighted more forcefully in a recent article in the *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, June 20 – 22, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion on the imperative to "forge" an "African Muslim Identity", see the recent article by Auwais Rafudeen, "Towards forging an 'African' Muslim Identity". *ARISA*, December 2001, pp.57-59.

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<sup>4</sup> I am using the notion of *autobiographical narratives* very loosely here, that is, without paying strict attention to the distinction between autobiography and biography. For a detailed coverage of this approach to research, see Alan Bryman's *Biographical Research* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Of course, I am not dealing with conversion *per se* in this article. My main critique of some of these otherwise useful writings, is that the thrust of their contents tend to focus narrowly on parochial themes like "challenges facing Islamic *dawah*" (Muslim proselytisation) and "impediments" to the growth of Islam amongst Africans rather than treat the African sector as a meaningful presence in South African Islam.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Seale, 3 November 2002

<sup>7</sup> The remark on early Muslims refers to the early Muslim community during the time of Prophet Muhammad in Mecca and Medina.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Ncube, 15 November 2002

<sup>9</sup> Seale, 3 November 2002

<sup>10</sup> Ncube, 15 November 2002

<sup>11</sup> I think Lee in her research on African Women Conversion in Cape Town, though her emphasis is elsewhere, stresses the same point when she observes that a shift to Islam did not mark a total departure from Christianity but "seemed to be a progression onwards". My point though is that in most studies this point is hardly noted. Thus my assertion that this "discovery" needs more probing and theorization.

<sup>12</sup> Deploying Michel Foucault's expression of "docile bodies" from *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Mudimbe offers a daring critique of African "conversion" to Christianity and Islam. See VY Mudimbe, *Tales of Faith: Religion as Political Performance in Central Africa* (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), pp. 50–63.