

Dawood Ngwane and the journey to *Ubagha* ("The Light")

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Dawood Ngwane makes a long and arduous journey, and overcomes many obstacles, to find what he calls 'the light'. While Islam is taken-for-granted by most Muslims, Dawood embraced Islam late in life and his passion for it reflects the deep impression it has made on him. His conversion was a great boost for Islam in South Africa, which is struggling to shake off the image of being a religion of Indians and Malays. This brief narrative of Uncle Dawood, as he is fondly called, traces his tough childhood, determination to achieve his goals, dedication to family, and acceptance of the Qur'anic message. David Gabriel Ngwane was born on 30 March 1930 in Mapumulo in the heart of rural Zululand. The Roman Catholic Church and boarding school at Isitundu, approximately ten kilometres from Ngwane's birthplace, was very active and most Zulu in the neighbourhood were Roman Catholics. David's parents Joseph and Roseta were staunch Christians. Roseta's strength in the face of adversity remains ingrained in David's memory. Joseph was extremely ill and, like many African women, Roseta took care of the family through market gardening. She had nine children but only David and a sister, Veronica, survived into adulthood.

David began attending St Philomena Catholic School at the age of eight. He attended for three years until the family moved to Inanda in search of medical help for his father and siblings. David did not go to school during the first year because there were not any Catholic schools nearby. His parents would not hear of him attending a non-Catholic school. Instead, David did market gardening in Inanda with his mother. He enrolled at St Michael Catholic School in Redhill in 1942. Getting to and from school was an ordeal. **He left home at 3:00 am, walked for two hours to catch the 5:30 am train in Phoenix, disembarked at Redhill Station, where he sold sugar cane to supplement the family income, and was weary by the time he reached school at 8:00 am.** Yet, he topped his class academically. When a Roman Catholic Mission school opened in Ottawa in 1944, David transferred there. He walked ninety minutes to classes daily.

Tragedy struck in 1946 when Roseta died unexpectedly of a heart attack. The strain of looking after her ill husband, providing for the family, and losing seven of her children to tuberculosis, proved too much even for this resilient woman. David had promised his mother that he would take care of his father and Veronica. He left school at the end of 1946 to support the family. David was bright, with a passion for learning, and being forced him out of school depressed him, especially as he was forced to do unfulfilling, menial, jobs to earn a living. David began his working life as a gardener in Umhlanga Rocks. In 1948, he worked as "delivery boy" for a café in Smith Street, delivering sandwiches and fruit to office workers in the Durban CBD. David met many interesting people and was disappointed when the café went insolvent at the end of 1949.

Fortunately David obtained a position at Dunlop, the manufacturer of tennis balls, in early 1950. However, he developed an allergic rash on his right leg. Medication provided by the company doctor failed to cure the rash and David was dismissed

because of agitation by fellow-employees who feared that the rash was contagious. This was a blessing in disguise as David obtained a better position at Venetian Blind Specialists at the corner of Moore and Gale Streets where he first assembled blinds, and was subsequently promoted to spray painting.

David was a staunch Roman Catholic. He attended the mission in Pioneer Road, Congella, called Christ the King, where he conducted the church choir. After marrying church member Emily Ndlovu in 1954, he rented an outbuilding in Clare Estate and attended the St. Paul's Catholic Church in Greyville. David was the founder and first president of the Youth Club and conductor of the Youth Choir. In 1959 David acquired a home in the newly opened Lamontville Township. He and Emily had four children, Thamsanqa (1954), Lindiwe (1957), Msizi (1959), and Busisiwe (1961). There was tension between David and Emily because of his responsibility to his father and sister. They eventually separated and David married a nurse, Christian Mtolo, in 1964. They bore three children, Dudizele (1964), Gcine (1967), and Malusi (1969).

David's career prospects improved when he joined Lewis Furniture in 1958. With the creation of townships like Umlazi and Kwa Mashu, Lewis Furniture opened Danhems in Warwick Avenue to target urban Africans, many of whom owned homes for the first time and needed furniture. David supervised a staff of sixty. He, in his trendy red fiat, and his staff in their three kombis, drove from township to township marketing and delivering furniture, and following-up on customers who failed to pay debts. The company did extremely well and David was highly respected by his White managers and township clientele. As a result of the progress he made at Lewis, David was recruited by British Petroleum (BP) in 1974 as sales representative. He remained with BP until 1985.

David was determined, hard working, and intelligent. His failure to complete school was due to poverty and the lack of educational opportunities for black Africans under apartheid. He was not daunted by these personal and structural barriers and pursued his ambition of becoming a lawyer. Despite working long hours to bring up his young family, David completed matric in 1969 at the age of 39. He enrolled in the B.IURIS program at UNISA and graduated in 1978 at the age of 48! **At an age when most people would be contemplating spending time with grandchildren, David began his LLB which he completed in 1985.** David's daughter Lindiwe completed the LLB at Fort Hare in the same year and there was friendly rivalry between them, he fondly recalls. In July 1986 David Gabriel Ngwane started his own legal practice in Broad Street at the age of 56! David saw education as important to achieve personal growth, overcome White prejudices, and prepare for majority rule, which he believed was inevitable. He provided every opportunity for his children to acquire education. Dudu completed the B.Paed and MBA degrees at UCT; Busisiwe a B.CUR in nursing; Gcine an LLB; Msizi a teacher's diploma; and Malusi a diploma in Music. Malusi works for the SABC as Chief Producer, while Lindiwe Hendricks is National Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry.

David underwent a "life-changing" experience around 1994 when he stumbled across *Crucifixion or Crucifixion* by Ahmed Deedat. David had been a prominent member of the Roman Catholic Church. He was a member of the Home and Family Committee of the

St. Alfonse Church. The Bishop of Marianhill, Bishop Paul Mngoma, made him chairman of the Home and Family Committee in the Diocese of Marianhill, and trustee of the St. Mary's Hospital. When he found the book, his first reaction was to "throw it away" because it was not written by a Christian. He resisted the temptation because the title grabbed his attention. He recalled that "after reading it I was confused. The book had something I did not expect. I kept coming to Deedat to confront him. At first I argued with him. Soon my arguments were less and less convincing".

He visited church elders for clarity. As a "big name" in the Church family he could not "walk out" until he gave them an opportunity to refute Deedat. He visited Father Doucabe at St Wendolin's in Marianhill, a highly respected member of the Church. Father Doucabe made Dawood's decision easier. Before their conversation started, he asked David to agree that they, as Christians, believed in the Bible as well as the doctrine of the Church, because the Church's doctrine was sometimes not found in the Bible. For example, the Father told him, Christians believe that God is the trinity even though this is not stated in the Bible. Dawood was taken aback. **If something was not in the Bible, he asked, how could he accept it with certainty?** Father Doucabe failed to change David's mind.

David was also attracted by the daily prayer (*salah*) which he found comforting. **Even today, he points out, when he takes Christians to visit the mosque, they are captivated by *salah* which, they feel, gives them an opportunity to connect with God in a way that is not possible under Christianity.**

David formally embraced Islam in September 1995, and took the name Dawood. His was not a sudden decision. He had an intimate knowledge of Christianity and read widely to compare it with Islam. Before embracing Islam, he visited all his children to "inform" them of his decision. He was not trying to convert them, he says, but to explain that although he had taught them certain beliefs and practices, he had discovered "something new". He told them about his new faith and left it to them to decide whether to follow him or not. Dawood's embracing Islam has not changed his relationship with his extended family. During the first weekend of September each year, he hosts a "Family Day" at his home in Westville with his third wife Ayesha, which is attended by his children and grandchildren. They respect his decision while he respects their choice to remain Christian. In Dawood's lounge hangs a beautiful calligraphic portrait of a verse from the Qur'an which was given to him by Lindiwe Hendricks.

Dawood has never stopped studying. He completed the LLM at UNISA in 1993 and is currently registered for a Ph.D at the University of KwaZulu Natal, investigating the status of marriage in society. He feels that European powers undermined customary marriage by only recognising marriages resembling the Christian model. Post-1994 the ANC government accepted customary marriages. Dawood is examining the attitude of people towards marriage. The impetus for his study was a conversation in the early 1990s with a priest in the process of getting divorced, who told him that marriage was "useless and that people should just live together". This shocked Dawood who fears that marriage is dying as an institution. He wants to identify why people harbour negative

attitudes towards marriage and what can be done to reverse the process. At a youthful 74, Dawood believes that his study will be valuable.

The 'Grand Old Man' of local Muslim society is optimistic that many more Africans will embrace Islam. However, he points to several hurdles. The first is acceptance by Indian Muslims. The relationship between Indian and African Muslims is very "shallow and superficial". Many African Muslims feel that they are not accepted by Indians as part of the Islamic *Ummah*. He told *Youth* magazine (April 1994: 25) that for most of his life 'Indian Muslims stayed together ... we saw them go to the mosques and perform worship, but we didn't know much about what they were doing because they kept to themselves. For this reason, Islam was known as a religion of Indians'. Dawood has not experienced problems personally, "Let me be honest. I have not had any problems. In fact Baboo Jadwat and Ahmed Saeed Moolla have even visited my Family Day." A more serious problem is the lack of infrastructure in townships. Most Africans continue to live in segregated townships that lack mosques and *madrassahs*. Where mosques have been built, such as in Kwa Mashu, Muslims cannot use them on a regular basis, either because they are dispersed and do not have cars to get to mosque regularly, or because they work long distances from home and return late in the evenings. Umlazi, for example, home to approximately 1500 African Muslim families, with an estimated population of 1.3 million, does not have a mosque. A *Jamaat Khana* in H Section was run by Ali Hadebe but has declined since his death. The nearest *madrassah* was in the Indian township of Isipingo, which a few African children attended. The World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) has been facilitating outreach projects in Umlazi over the past few years and is in the process of establishing school and home-based *madrassahs*. WAMY, Dawood pointed out, also initiated a mosque project in April 2004

Often, part of a family becomes Muslim, creating a new set of difficulties, including issues over diet (*halaal* food, restriction on pork), fasting, and so on. There might even be contestation over how children are raised. Dawood knows of cases where children attend Islamic schools but the home environment does not support what they have learnt at school. Gender imbalance is another impediment because more girls are accepting Islam than boys. Dr. Tootla in Inchanga, the *Islamic Girls Institute* in Estcourt, and Shaik Ramadaan's *Verulam Girls Institute*, cater mainly for girls. The question in the future, according to Dawood, is who these girls will marry. He fears that they will be forced to marry Christians because Indian Muslims will not marry them. A final problem highlighted by Dawood was the lack of finance which has resulted in the decrease in umbrella organisations to cater for African Muslims. For example, the Organisation of African Muslim Unity (OAMU), which was formed in KZN in 1997, remains inactive because of the lack of resources.

Dawood has never doubted his decision to embrace Islam. He points out that he "discovered Islam, and when you discover Islam, you do not have any other choice than to become a Muslim". **When he embraced Islam, Dawood felt he had come to "the end of my search, the end of my destiny. I accepted Islam for Islam, not for other Muslims. I did not expect any position with Muslims."** Dawood left an important position in the Church to become a "Mr Nobody" in Islam. He said at the launch of his book in October 2002:

Even if I remained a “Mr Nobody” I would have been satisfied to be an ordinary Muslim; for my becoming a Muslim was not based on anything but my conviction that Islam is the only religion that is able to give one guidance towards happiness in this world and in the hereafter.... Islam is the only religion which has the capacity to extricate us from our misery in this country and indeed in the whole world.

Dawood launched *Ubhaqa* (‘The Instrument of Light’) on 25 October 2002. The book was written in Zulu because it was aimed at the large Zulu population in KwaZulu Natal. Dawood regretted that Islam’s message has been kept from Africans for centuries. He wants to share his experiences and break the stereotype of Islam as a Malay and Indian religion. He wrote in the foreword:

The book is deliberately written in Zulu; for in my contentment with what I had discovered I thought of my people; the Zulu nation. Knowing the misery into which Western civilisation has plunged them; knowing the poverty in which they languish and knowing the depth of ignorance and deception into which they have been subjected; I feel I have a duty to let my people know what I have discovered; expose them to the knowledge and let those who are eager for knowledge drink from the fountain.

The launch of *Ubhaqa* was attended by many young African Muslims, politicians, and businessmen like Ebrahim Jadwat, Lindiwe Hendricks, Mohammed Dangor, Consul General of South Africa, and Dr. Abdul Wahab Noorwali, Assistant Secretary to the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), as well as poet Don Mattera. King Goodwill Zwelitini was a special guest of honour. Dawood told the King:

I spent many years of my life in darkness. In all those years I was happy and satisfied to be where I was for I knew not the light and therefore did not realise that I was in darkness.... It is for this reason your Majesty that I have invited you to the launch of the book; because his Majesty is the King of a Great Nation; a Nation that will benefit spiritually, morally, and physically by leaning towards Islam and indeed by embracing Islam as their way of life (*Sunday Tribune* 27 October 2002).

Dawood has one regret. ‘Unfortunately, when I embraced Islam it was around the same time that Ahmed Deedat had a stroke and I was never able to share my news with him’. Dawood was referring to the fact that Ahmed Deedat, founder of the IPCI and the man who spent most of his adult life from the 1960s to the 1990s crusading against Christian evangelists, the man who translated the Quran into Zulu, and whose books influenced Dawood, suffered a massive stroke in May 1996. Deedat remains bedridden in his Verulam home and can only communicate through a computer. Dawood is saddened that he never had the opportunity to work with Deedat at the IPCI.

The advancing years have not slowed Dawood or dimmed his enthusiasm. He still practices law from his offices at the IPCI building. He was appointed trustee of the

Inchanga Institute and the IPCI in 1999, and has been president of the IPCI since 2003. His involvement in Indian-dominated organisations is spurred by the fact that he sees this as a means to bridge the 'race' gap and unite the *ummah* in KZN. Dawood is perfectly suited to this task because of his ability to transcend race, ethnic, class, ideological, and religious barriers. This has not gone very well with younger African Muslims who wish to forge an independent path. Dawood is also determined to promote inter-faith dialogue and constructive exchange of ideas. He stresses tolerance, both towards other Muslims as well as non-Muslim. *Muslim Vision 2020's* tribute to the humble and unassuming Dawood Ngwane reflects his impact in the few short years he has been a Muslim:

Uncle Dawood never ceases to fascinate those of us who know him and who find his passion for Islam and his commitment to live and share the message with others spellbinding and affectionate. He has a great sense of humour and his personality is captivating. This passionate, kind hearted, and soul stirring man has entered Islam, our lives, and our community, and has given us all a truer perspective of what our faith really means and the way it should be lived, particularly with his emphasis on its humanitarian appeal and African focus.

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Pull Quotes:

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