

Multiple Communities? Muslims in Post-Apartheid South Africa

In letters to newspapers and call-in programmes on radio stations, but also among many journalists and political commentators, South Africa's Muslims are largely viewed as a monolith. That very many among them turn daily towards Makkah in prayer seems to be sufficient to conclude that Muslims constitute a unitary bloc. This, of course, is not the case, as we argue in this paper. We explore change and continuity, conflict and harmony, both among Muslims, and between them and the wider society, as well as the competing voices of authority among Muslims, and the multiple narratives of what it means to be a Muslim, in the context of rapid social, political, and economic changes during the past decade. This paper is divided into three parts. The first section profiles South Africa's Muslim population; the middle section provides a historical and contemporary perspective on Malay, Indian, and Black African Muslims; while the final part focuses on significant developments affecting Muslims during the past ten years, national and global, and how they have responded to these challenges. Throughout, we the fashioning and re-fashioning of Muslim identities.

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Islam is a minority religion in South Africa. Muslims, numbering 654 064, comprised just 1.46% of South Africa's population of 44.8 million in 2001. Even among Coloureds and Indians, Muslims are a minority, constituting a quarter of the Indian population and 8% of the Coloured population. But as Tayob has observed, statistics do not reflect the qualitative experience of being Muslim in South Africa. Residential concentration of Indian and Coloured Muslims in racially segregated urban areas has meant that many of them live in proximity to mosques and madrassahs, and have a strong sense of being Muslim (Tayob, 1996).

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Statistics reflect the perception that Islam is a 'foreign' religion. However, while Indians and Malays make-up the bulk of South Africa's Muslims, Africans constitute the fastest growing segment, having increased by 52.3% since 1991 when they numbered 11 986. The proportion of Muslims who are African increased from 3.5% to 11.42% during this period. There are many markers of differentiation besides race. Class differences are stark. Class differences are due to discrepancies in education levels, unemployment, and income levels of the employed. Work status is influenced by level of education. Africans were at a huge disadvantage. Language is another marker of differentiation. Given the importance of English in the economy, proficiency in this regard has given Indians an important advantage. Given these profound differences, Kramer's (2000: 57) observations are germane. Islam and Muslims, she contends, should not be seen as a ...

... distinct and homogeneous entity that is essentially defined by normative texts, i.e. the Qurán as divine word and the Sunna, or tradition of the Prophet Muhammad. For the unreformed orientalist, Muslims are sufficiently defined by their being Muslim.... They are overdetermined by Islam....

'Imagined Community?' Contingency of Malay-ness

The notion of being Malay is heavily contested. In the South African context 'Malay' refers to Coloureds of the Muslim faith who, until the twentieth century, were referred to as 'Mohammedan', 'Malay', 'Mussulman' or 'Coloured Muslims' in official records. Adhikari has shown that 'Malay' identity was open, and embraced individuals from diverse cultural and racial categories, including descendents of slaves from South and Southeast Asia and Mozambique, Arabs, and Khoi-San (1989: 20-25). The Population Registration Act of 1950 formally divided South Africans into four race groups, Whites, Indians, Africans, and Coloureds, who were defined as 'not a white person or a native', and sub-divided into 'Cape Malay', 'Other Coloureds', Khoisan, et al.

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The hardening of apartheid during the 1960s and 1970s, and emergence of a political climate in which there was widespread support for internal and external liberation movements, resulted in Coloureds and their sub-categories attaching 'so-called' to their ethnic labels. Politically, younger coloured Muslims, opted for the label 'Black', while the religious label of choice was Muslim (Haron 2001: 5). Social historian and radio presenter Achmat Davids (1938-1998) influenced a generation to use the term 'Cape Muslim' rather than Malay, which he saw as filled with racial bigotry (Davids 1980: 12). But as the political situation became fluid in the early 1990s, Davids reverted to the nomenclatures 'Malay' and 'Indonesian' instead of 'Cape Muslim'. Assertion of 'Malayness' during the post-apartheid period must be seen in the context of the 'rainbow nation' concept put forward by former president Nelson Mandela, which encouraged people to seek their own identities. Ward (1996) locates the resurgence of 'Malay ethnicity' post-1990 within the framework of globalisation and political change in South Africa, which fragmented identities.

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Since re-connection between Southeast Asian and Cape Muslims via a seminar in April 1993 on 'Evolving Muslim Identity at the Cape', there has been a flurry of activity between the regions, and the formation of organisations like the Cape Malay Chamber of Commerce, the South African Malay Cultural Society, and the Forum for Malay Culture in South Africa. The project to reinvent Malay identity has been opposed in many quarters. Jeppie, for example, warned that 'If

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representatives of the new-found ethnicity, with its wealthy connections, contribute to the type of isolation, insularity and belligerent communalism rampant elsewhere in the world ..., they ought to be scorned and rejected by South Africa and its Muslim population' (Jeppie 1994: 3).

Historical background

The majority of Indians arrived between 1860 and 1911, either as contract indentured workers or traders who came on their own accord. Aside from obvious differences of class, traders and indentured migrants were divided by religious tradition, caste, language, ethnicity and culture as they were drawn from a range of ecologies and modes of production (see Vahed 2001, 2001a, 2002). The most important identity in the political realm was 'race' because the emergent white state separated Indians legislatively into a discrete racial category.

The coming to power of the National Party (NP) in 1948 had paradoxical consequences. Although segregation intensified, Indians were finally recognised as permanent citizens in 1961. The expansion of educational opportunities led to younger, better-educated Muslims challenging traditional conceptions of Islam at the same time that conservative Ulama began to emerge as an influential factor shaping local Muslim communities (Vahed 2000). Residential clustering through the Group Areas Act allowed Muslims to practice Islam in a value-friendly environment (Vahed 2000). Free and compulsory education from the 1960s transformed Indian society. It gave Muslims direct access to the printed word, and cultivated debate and formulation of clear statements of belief that illuminated sectarian distinctions. Differences became cemented as Islam became a subject to be 'explained' and 'understood' rather than 'assumed' (See Eickelman 1992).

Islamic revivalism manifested itself among all sectors of Muslim society in Durban from the 1960s. Three broad traditions emerged, modernist, Deobandi and Sunni. Organizations like the Muslim Youth Movement (1970) promoted an intellectual approach in order to make Islam meaningful in the day-to-day lives of Muslims. They enjoyed support among students and some professionals (Jeppie, forthcoming). The Muslim masses, however, embraced conservative tendencies that came to be termed 'Deobandi' and 'Sunni' (Vahed 2000).ⁱⁱ

Post-apartheid period

Non-racial democracy resulted in massive social, political and economic change. The new ANC government did not support an Islamic worldview, but legalised abortion, prostitution, and

pornography. This was compounded by affirmative action policies, the African Renaissance agenda of the ANC, and the impact of globalisation. These changes triggered important behaviour modification among large numbers of Muslims, the most striking being the growth of personal piety and growing tolerance between the Deobandi and Sunni traditions. Theological debate is virtually absent. 'Truth' has become synonymous with the Ulama and to question the Ulama means questioning the truth. Another conspicuous feature of the new Islam is self-reformation. An increasingly number of Muslims are becoming attached to *Shaykhs* (spiritual mentors) in their search for personal stability and guidance (Vahed 2000a).

The last decade has also been witness to the arrival of economic migrants from South Asia. Anti-immigrant discourse among Indians has given rise to xenophobia and stereotypes, particularly against Pakistanis. This includes marriage to African women. It remains to be seen whether these are marriages of convenience or mark the beginnings of a breakdown in race barriers. Themba Ndebele of the Home Affairs in Pretoria was certain that 'most of these men - after getting South African citizenship - go back home to collect their lawful wives, leaving the local ones miserable' (*Pretoria News* 23 October 2003).

Black African Muslims:

The number of African Muslims has increased from 9,048 in 1980 to 74,701 by 2001. Yet they 'remain on the margins of Muslim community life' (Sitoto 2002: 44). This increase is due to factors such as the conscious decision of many township youth to embrace Islam during the 1980s, the going into exile in Malawi and Mozambique of students after 1976, where they came into contact with Islam, and the involvement of organizations like the Islamic Propagation Centre International (IPCI) in townships. IPCI president Ahmed Deedat, for example, translated the *Quran* into Zulu (Fakude 2002: 48). In contrast to other parts of Africa where migrant Arab traders were instrumental in locals embracing Islam, in South Africa Indians have largely remained isolated from Africans, who have historically viewed Islam as an Indian, and exploitative, religion because of its close association with traders (Vawda 1993: 49).

Gender: Making Space for Women

There have been contradictory tendencies in the position of women. On the one hand, far more women are fully veiled and wear loose fitting black garments, even though Muslim jurists disagree

over whether Islam requires women to cover the face. The position of the KZN Jamiat is that 'due to the immorality of the times and weakness of resistance, it is compulsory for a female to cover her face which is the focus of her beauty' (*Al-Mahmood* July 1999). By 'veil', Ulama mean the total seclusion of women from public spaces and not merely the covering of their faces.

The attitude of many parents towards education, particularly in KZN and Gauteng, has changed as part of a gender counter-revolution. They no longer consider it desirable for girls to receive secular education beyond a certain age, if at all. Secular education, according to the KZN Jamiat, was placing 'pitfalls' in the path way of 'sincere Muslim woman, wanting to follow the pure and pristine Islam of the last fourteen hundred years. Girls are either sent to Muslim schools, which combine secular and religious education, or Islamic schools, where the syllabus comprises Arabic, Urdu, and Islamic jurisprudence, supplemented by English and mathematics to grade seven.

A countervailing tendency has been that of some Muslims challenging the authority of traditional Ulama. They are debating issues relating women's rights in Islam, including MPL and attendance at mosques. One of the leading activists was Shamima Shaik (1960-1998), who authored *Journey of Discovery: A South African Hajj*, a personal story of her pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Makkah. The book examines issues of gender and power in Islam, and the attempt to reconcile social activism with traditional faith. Sadly, Shamima Shaikh died of cancer in January 1998.

Another recent example was the 'FAMILY EIDGAH', a prayer on an open field during the festival of Eid, which was held on the Durban beachfront in November 2003. The KZN *Jamiat* informed organizer R. Snyman on 29 October 2003 that women should not attend because it would be impossible to meet stringent conditions such as the complete separation (*purdah*) of men and women, and women abstaining from the use of perfume in the presence of men. The *Jamiat* had no doubt that if the Prophet had 'seen the condition of women today, he would have prevented them from attending'. Snyman responded to the Jamiat on 7 November 2003 by challenging it to a 'public debate once and for all on this issue'. He cited Islamic sources to argue that women were permitted to participate in prayer at mosques and accused the Ulama of 'attempting to enforce your oppressive Indo-Pak, male dominated, cultural norms on the Muslim community under the guise of theological legality!' Though, clearly, elements among Muslims are willing to challenge the authority of traditional Ulama, the birth of the 'new' Muslim woman and the end of patriarchal ideology are not in immediate sight.

| **Seeking an Autochthonous Voice: Black African Muslims**

African Muslims are wrestling with the notion of being African and Muslim. Recently arrived refugees constitute a nascent grouping; others like Advocate Dawood Ngwane of the IPCI and Cassim Modise of the IDM are working through existing organizations to bridge the gulf between Muslims in the 'centre' and 'periphery'; a third and growing tendency has shunned the paternalism of existing organisations, and is seeking to forge an independent identity rooted in Africa. Sitoto has noted that South Africa is the only country in Africa where Islam is not 'in concert with the socio-cultural experience of the African Muslims, in tune with the local environment...' (2002 :47). He feels strongly that African Muslims should not be regarded as a 'charity case'. Those living in poverty in townships, he said, are like millions of township dwellers across the country for whom poverty is the norm. Sitoto rejected 'condescending discourse' about African Muslims and called for a 'Muslim identity that has its home in Africa rather than seek shelter in a misplaced pan-Islamic rhetoric' (Sitoto 2002: 45-46).

The Organisation of African Muslim Unity (OAMU) was formed in KZN in 1997 to achieve 'self-empowerment and assist African Muslims to become organized and focused' (*Muslim Views* July 1997). Auwais Rafudeen, Vice Rector of the Islamic College of South Africa, called for Islam 'to be Africanised'. He wanted Muslims to 'be thoroughly aware of African history and traditional African culture'. He said that Muslims existed in particular cultural milieus, and while they should shed those beliefs considered 'un-Islamic', the cultural aspects of identity should be maintained. A pristine 'Muslimhood' remains elusive. To 'Africanise' Islamic identity did not mean wearing Madiba shirts, but changing mindsets to understand African culture and worldview, and incorporating it where there was no contradiction with Islamic law (Rafudeen 2002: 58).

Rafudeen wanted Islamic schools to teach African languages and culture. He called on the Ulama to circulate pamphlets, arrange lectures, and circulate information campaigns that underscored Islam's abhorrence of racism (Rafudeen 2002: 59). Some organisations and individuals are addressing this problem. During the latter half of 2003, for example, the KZN Jamiat published articles such as 'Combating the Monster of Racism', 'Islam and Racism', 'Smashing the Idol of Racism', and 'Racial Equality' on its website.

Muslims, Politics, and the ANC

Muslims have long debated whether to embrace the broader democratic movement or constitute an independent force. The Port Elizabeth-based *Majlis* ('Voice of Islam') condemned co-operation

with non-Muslims in anti-apartheid structures during the 1980s because it meant working with 'polytheist priests and godless communists' (in Moosa 1989: 76). This was not the majority view.

In the Cape, the *Call of Islam's* Moulana Faried Essack and Ebrahim Rassool were senior members of the UDF, and encouraged Muslim cooperation and participation in anti-apartheid organisations. Pressure from these activists resulted in the MJC declaring participation in the 1984 tricameral election juridically forbidden.

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The debate over Muslim participation in the political process resurfaced during democratic elections in 1994 and 1999. The Islamic Unity Conference (IUC), which claimed to represent 600 Islamic organisations, called for Muslims to boycott the 1999 election under the argument that to vote in an un-Islamic state would make Muslims partners to legalised abortion, gay rights, prostitution, and other un-Islamic practices (*Daily News* 20 May 1999). However, the majority feeling, articulated by mainstream Muslim organisations such as the Jamiat, MJC, UUCSA, and MYM, was that Muslims should vote in the elections for a party of their choice (*Al-Qalam* May 1999). Incidentally, Muslims voted for predominantly non-Muslim parties (*Al-Qalam* May 1999), but Muslims, whether practicing or nominal, have featured strongly in representative institutions since 1994, far out of proportion to their numbers.

This was not matched by support for the ANC in 1994 and 1999. Voting patterns among Indians and Coloureds suggest that many voted against the ANC despite the long history of oppression. Habib and Naidu attribute this to class rather than racial 'electoral homogeneity'. While affluent Indians and Coloureds supported the ANC, lower-income individuals voted against the ANC because of economic rather than racial considerations. Since these classes constitute the largest single bloc within these communities, the class divide has the potential of manifesting itself as a racial divide' (Habib and Naidu 1999).

The 2004 election was marked by three important developments: the absence of debate about whether Muslims were permitted to participate in the democratic process; for the first time there was no Muslim party; and Muslims voted in large numbers for the ANC. Locally, largely because of the stability of the past decade, and economic prosperity of the middle and upper strata, Indian and Coloured minorities are generally optimistic about the future. Globally, events since 9/11 has given rise to Islamophobia in many parts of the world. Across the mosques in South Africa, Ulema regularly acknowledge the absence of such Islamophobia locally, and also recognise with pride that South Africa takes an independent line on world issues. As a result, religious leaders have openly and subtly, advocated support for the ANC.

Ebrahim Rassool became the first Muslim provincial head when he was appointed premier of the Western Cape by President Thabo Mbeki. According to a delighted Rassool, 'the fact that the president of this country could elect a Muslim as premier even though most people in South Africa are not Muslims, says a lot for the respect Islam has in this country' (*Al Qalam* April 2004: 5). This statement very succinctly captures the feelings of the majority of Muslims in present-day South Africa.

Conclusions:

This paper has argued that South Africa's Muslims are 'complex and sociologically diverse' (Roy 1994: vii). They are divided along lines of race, class, gender, ethnicity, language and beliefs, and it is highly simplistic to collapse them into a monolith, on the basis of their being Muslim. There are multiple Islamic voices, traditions and identities. As Wasserman and Jacobs point out:

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The challenge is to speak about Islam without reverting to binary thought.... [Islam] is made up of a diverse range of competing elements. Amongst these elements are contested meanings of Islam, its role in a plural society, party-political legitimacy.... Islamic narratives are being constructed using global and local symbols, which produce specific and hybridised Muslim identities. They are intimately connected to the 'routes' of these symbols produced within colonialism, globalisation and the post-apartheid period. It presents us with an assemblage of tensions that are intensely internal and local, while at the same time being external and global (2003: 26).

Muslims often have more in common with non-Muslims than Muslims elsewhere in the country. Working class Muslims in the economically depressed Cape Flats, for example, share common experiences with their Christian neighbours, around issues of poverty, drugs, and gangs, which differs from that of wealthier Muslims in the north of the country, or indeed in the upmarket parts of the Cape southern suburbs.

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Indian Muslims mostly lived as 'Indians' under apartheid where race was central in defining existence. Uncertainties created by majority rule in 1994, the far-reaching impact of globalisation and the 'War on Terror' have resulted in many Muslims retreating into an imagined, essentialized Islamic identity in their private and communal lives. Identification with Muslims internationally is deepening as a result of new media, particularly the internet and radio stations. These are forging 'Muslim' identity at the expense Indianness. While the growth of personal piety features across class lines, it is mainly the affluent who are able to fully embrace most aspects of the 'liberated zones'.

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Black African Muslims show the fastest growth, though they face many difficulties as a result of their geographical dispersion and lack of resources. It is expected that over the next two decades they will constitute the largest segment of the Muslim population. It remains to be seen to what extent they are successful in re-imagining an indigenous Islam. The nascent refugee Muslim communities may have an important role to play in fashioning an autochthonous voice because many speak Arabic and a few are formally trained in Islamic theology. The challenge for Indian and Malay Muslims is to bridge the race and class divide. If they fail to do this, Muslims will remain peripheral, which might be dangerous as stereotypes and envy intensify in a climate of poverty and struggle over scarce resources. Indian and Malay Muslims need to take a leaf out of President Thabo Mbeki's book and have their own *iimbizo* across the townships to forge a spirit of genuine partnership, what Mbeki calls 'the spirit of *vuk'unzenzele*', between the Muslim 'centre' and 'periphery'.

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ⁱ The terms used in this paper are problematic to the authors, who hold that the division of people into biological groups differentiated by colour ("race"), to which we can attribute specific features, has no scientific validity or explanatory value in social science. However, the categorisation of South Africans according to race is a legal and 'social fact' even in post apartheid South Africa. Census 2001, for example, categorised South Africans as either 'White', 'Coloured', 'Asian' or 'Black African'. Further, these categories are in continuous use in everyday life, whether one is applying for a job, an identity document, a research grant, or filling in government documentation pertaining to Skills Training or Employment Equity. For this reason, the authors have in most cases not placed these terms in inverted commas.

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... real social phenomena. The act of studying them does not 'construct' them; they are part of the basic facts of British [read South African] society and their study is a well established activity. They are 'given' to us by British [South African] society and an on-going research stream (Modood et al. 2002: 41-43).

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To avoid confusion, and despite our deep reservations, we will adhere broadly to the terms used in the Census and generally in public discourse. Thus, 'Indian' is used to describe Muslims whose ancestors arrived from South Asia over a century ago; 'African' is used to describe individuals whose mother-tongue is a language indigenous to Africa, and who are described in Census 2001 as 'Black African'; while 'Malay', a heavily contested term, will refer to those of the Muslim faith who are part of the category 'Coloured' in the Census. There is urgent need for South Africans to begin to engage with the notion of African identity. We regard all the above categories as African, though this is not the classification employed in this essay. We also contend, with Modood, that 'the act of studying them ['race' groups] does not 'construct' them: they are part of the basic facts of British [read South African] society and their study is a well-established activity. They are 'given' to us by British [read South African] society and an on-going research stream' (Modood et al. 2002: 43).

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ⁱⁱ Deobandi Islam took root in India when Muhammad Nanautawi and Rashid Gangohi opened a madrassah in Deoband in 1867 after their defeat by the British in the 1857 uprising. They remained aloof from political activity and attended to Muslim educational and religious needs to create a cohesive cultural community. Their concern was that compromises with Hinduism had resulted in syncretistic developments and they targeted practices considered to stem from Hindu culture, such as visitation to tombs and belief in the intercessionary role of saints. The gap between 'ideal' and 'actual' Islam was attributed to 'incomplete conversion' and they sought to acquaint Muslims with 'pure and unalloyed Islam' (Metcalf 1982) Deobandi Islam was popular among the Gujarati trading class. According to Robinson reformist Islam required Muslims to be literate, and most who embraced reformism were located within the middle class and engaged in aspects of the modern economy (Robinson 1997).

The Sunni tradition has its origins in the work of Ahmad Raza Khan (1856-1922) of Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, India, who sought to maintain the *status quo* (Sanyal 1996). In South Africa this tradition

found expression mainly among descendants of indentured Muslims. Differences between Deobandis and Sunnis are due to class (trader against indentured), regional origins (western India against North and South), ethnicity (Gujarati against mainly-Urdu) as well as differences in belief and practice. As descendants of indentured Muslims acquired education and economic mobility from the 1970s, they challenged trader hegemony, leading to numerous altercations, even violence, which was particularly marked during the 1970s and 1980s (Vahed 2003).