

Obituary: Dr Goolam Mohamed Karim  
30 November 1929 – 13 October 2005  
By Shabbir Banobhai

Dr. Goolam Mohamed Karim, the renowned South African Muslim scholar of Islam passed away on Thursday, 13 October 2005, on the ninth day of Ramadan. A servant of humanity, both as a medical doctor, who fifty years ago set up his practice in the small impoverished rural town of Bethal, and later as a scholar of Islam, he spent his entire life alleviating physical and spiritual illness and distress in others, while continuing to enhance his knowledge of medicine, Islam, and man's spirit.

In the very earliest days of his practice, he hired a driver to drive him from Bethal to his patients in outlying areas so that he could study in the car for the duration of the journey. Dr. Karim's last request in hospital to his son Riaz before he passed away was to bring him a book related to his studies and his computer so that he could continue working on his thesis. He remained ever-committed to his twin passions: to learn and to teach. Riaz is also a medical doctor. His daughter Ruxanna is a part-time facilitator at UCT's Medical School.

The thesis he was referring to was his second doctorate, a D. Lit. et Phil he was on the verge of submitting to the University of Johannesburg. The thesis was based on a study of a book entitled "Prayer as the Miraj of the Believer" – a book written in Urdu by Sufi Abid Mian Usmani, who lived in Ladysmith, South Africa fifty years ago. His own book, (a translation of and commentary on Sufi Abid Mian Usmani's work), "The Meaning of the Salaat", inspired by his wife Sara, was awaiting printing at the time of his death.

Dr Karim had previously obtained, at the age of 70, a PhD from the University of Cape Town for a thesis on the mystical nature of a very early Cape Muslim ritual called the Ratib, which he postulated helped to preserve Islam in South Africa, when the practice of Islam as a religion was punishable by death. The thesis deduces that the zikr chanted by the participants produces endorphins that transform their consciousness, thus protecting them from the physical injury they appear to be trying to inflict on themselves during the performance.

In his lifetime, Dr. Karim attended numerous conferences all over the world: from an international conference on education in Mecca, to conferences on various aspects of psychology, public health, neuro-biology and medicine, including the medicine of the Prophet on whom be peace - known as "Tib-un Nabawi". He played a significant role in renewing an awareness of Prophetic medicine both in South Africa, at the conferences of the Islamic Medical Association of South Africa, and abroad. Dr. Karim was the Eastern Transvaal Chairperson of IMA SA for a number of years and a member of the Islamic Council of South Africa, as well as a member of the Central Islamic Trust, a Johannesburg-based educational and charitable organization.

Dr. Karim was the first black radio ham in the country (ZS6VQ). He had a passion for electronics and in his student days (studying for his Science and Medical degrees) built his own tape recorder. He also made a unique feature film on Hajj in 1971 with the permission of the Saudi authorities, at a time when such movie-making was not only unheard of but the

very taking of photographs in Mecca was forbidden. He had a love of photography and developed his own photographs – this before the time of digital or instant photography. He was proficient in Arabic, Urdu, English and Afrikaans.

He served as the chairperson of the Bethal Muslim Jamaat for over thirty years, helping disadvantaged students by teaching them how to type and use computers, and then finding them jobs. Dr. Karim was instrumental in having a community clinic built in Mzinoni Township, in Bethal, near his home. For these and other services he received the 2001 "Bethaller of the Year" merit award for community service.

He loved children and spent an enormous amount of time with his grand-daughters, teaching them Islamic etiquette, helping them and the neighbours' children with their homework and inspiring endless groups of young students to learn more about Islam, which he believed had no equal as a religion, a way of life, and a light that could lead to inner and outer peace.

He had great compassion not only for the young but also for the old; not only for men but also for women, who, he knew, are often marginalised and discriminated against, both in their local communities and within society at large. He stood firmly for justice, opposing the participation of Indians in the apartheid-regime's tri-cameral parliamentary system. This was a continuation in the struggle for justice that in his early adulthood had resulted in his being imprisoned for ninety days in solitary confinement.

But it was his medical knowledge and his passion for learning that were most extraordinary. Dr. Karim not only had an incredible ability to diagnose illnesses, but because of his deep understanding of medicine and the human body (and human soul) he was able to offer his mostly-poor patients very cheap, yet possibly more effective medication, than that which might have been prescribed by others. As for his desire for knowledge, there is no way to describe his passion adequately. He read relentlessly in his large library, adding more and more books to his collection over the years – books lie sprawling on shelves, work-tops, tables and on the floor. And it was easy to see if the books had been read for he made prolific notes in them as he went along.

Dr. Karim stumbled over his first and only real illness. Knowing his radiant mind, it was not easy to recognize that his body was human after all. Perhaps he had given too much to his work and so much of his life to others that when he needed some reserve of energy to fight a new battle the energy was no longer there. He was in a sense a soldier, not with a sword but with a pen; a fighter who refused to succumb intellectually, but who could not stem the tide of time's final call to his resting place with his Lord. He was a teacher, a mentor, a friend, a doctor, and a scholar - a human being. But most of all, perhaps unknown even to himself, he was a unique Islamic missionary.

Quotes:

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