

Towards Making a Documentary on the Late Imam Abdullah Haron

By Khalid Shamis ('the Imam's grandson')

INTRODUCTION

In this article I will be discussing the process and pitfalls of the production of a documentary around a South African icon – Imam Abdullah Haron. A temporal and spatial account of the Imam's context will serve to introduce the man, his ideals, his generous gifts to the community and his death. I then pose the questions which have been most pertinent in the process of developing and editing the documentary. I will attempt to explain the reasons for venturing into such a project and the obstacles and rewards associated with it. Furthermore, I will talk about filmmaking in South Africa and what I believe should be the Islamic response and contribution to this field.

THE CAPE MUSLIM HERITAGE – A LEADER IS BORN

Eleven years on from the fall of the unjust Apartheid regime in our most turbulent century to date, South Africa now speaks of freedom, progression and pride. Also, because of its somewhat isolated history and geographical location, South Africa is hailed, unofficially, as a fairly insular society. Within this rainbow nation is a unique community borne of oppression, long before Apartheid officially clenched its ugly fist. The 'Malay' Muslim community of Cape Town emerged from noble roots in Java, Indonesia. Enslaved artisans and craftsmen were brought over by the Dutch and tried as insurgents and political prisoners. Prince Yusuf of Macassar, although not the first Muslim in the Cape, led the fight against oppression. This was to pave the way for a history of uprising against injustice by a powerful minority people who, along with their chains and hopes, also brought their culture to the Cape.

Born in 1923 in Cape Town, Abdullah Haron grew up an orphan in the shadow of Apartheid. He and his multitude of siblings lived with their stern aunt in a "conservative" Islamic community. He became the youngest and most forward-looking Muslim cleric in South Africa in 1955. He introduced politics into the religious arena, allowed women to play a role in the running of his mosque and empowered the youth with a conscious platform. Haron was also an avid cinema-goer and lover of stylish fashion and music - having bought a piano for his daughter.

Influenced by his teachers and with a strong compassion for the suffering around him, he worked tirelessly in the townships, fostered friendships with activists and revolutionaries and began speaking out against the regime in 1961, one of the only dissenting voices from his community. Along with thousands of others, Haron and his family were forcibly moved from their homes in the relatively affluent suburb of Claremont when the notorious Group Areas Act was introduced. On his return to South Africa in 1969, from a journey to Mecca and Europe, Haron was promptly arrested by the security services under the Terrorism Act of 1967. He was held, incommunicado, for 4 months before being pronounced dead on the 27th of September 1969. Thousands mourned his death at the largest funeral ever seen in the Cape at the time.

QUEST AND QUESTIONS

The documentary, which I am in the process of compiling and editing, attempts to explore the relationship the Imam had with his contemporaries, as well as the myths surrounding his personality and death. Given that the Islamic community of the Cape has always been close-knit and supportive of each other, why did the Imam feel the need to reach out overseas to get help from people such as the late Canon Collins in the UK? What was the reason for the lack of support from his community? Why did he not stay abroad when he was warned time and again that going back to South Africa could mean death? What exactly did he travel for in any case; was it funding or perhaps even training individuals for 'jihad'? And to what extent did the Imam know he was being followed on his travels by the notorious Special Branch?

The film will explore the dynamics of the Cape Muslim community. It portrays a community that has had to consistently bear the brunt of the oppressive stick since its inception. In the Apartheid years, due to forced removal, this community was relatively unable to integrate. It could be argued that this was a cause of discriminatory attitudes towards the whites, blacks and underprivileged of the time. It shows how, although Islamic ideals towards integration and 'colour-blindness' are essential to the foundation of the religion, the embedded racist attitudes of Apartheid were, and are, still prevalent in the Cape Muslim community today.

A staunch James Bond fan, an avid sportsman and a great lover of music, we will look at how Haron married his position as a husband and a father with his role as religious and political leader and the consequent impact that this had on his wife and family. How does one sustain such relationships as well as striving to literally save the world with a smile on one's face?

A VISUAL DOCUMENTATION

The film will visualise the legacy of the Imam as well as exploring the role played by the late community leader during his life. The goal is to produce a portrait of a man who contributed to the anti-Apartheid struggle and with whom many people in and around Southern Africa are not familiar. I shall discuss how the film will explore the roots of the Imam's heritage from the inception of Islam in the Cape and the legacy of rising up against oppression throughout their tumultuous history. I will explain the impact this had on Haron's theological and political stances. In addition, I will look at the global situation at a time when the recurrent theme was precisely revolution and why his voice was not heard on the world stage.

The documentary will be made up of interviews from his family and friends who were closely involved in his life and work. As well as recording the opinions of contemporary academics and leaders, I will construct a picture of the times in which he lived through with archival footage and photographs sourced from the British Film Institute and the Mayibuye Centre, as well as personal collections from the community of the Cape.

When discussing the legacy of the Imam I will address issues such as appropriation and misappropriation, issues of martyrdom, the role, or lack thereof, of the Cape Muslim community during the struggle against the Apartheid and where they stand today. I will place the Imam amongst all this and attempt to understand the role he plays in the present day.

As well as the numerous opinions of people conveying their experiences of the Imam, the film will aim to paint a picture of the man within the social context of struggle and the global context

of revolution. An aim of the film is to jog the flagging memory of him in the minds of the youth of South Africa and to transmit his story to new audiences around the world.

Boeta Cassiem Sadan, a close friend and brother-in-law of the Imam, tells us that the Imam had an uncanny knack of cooling people down. He would get through to you in a quick and easy manner. He recalls a time when Imam Haron was called to arbitrate between a husband and wife. When the Imam arrived, the husband used him as a human shield against his wife. On a visit to the township he told Sadan that, “the people here are not interested in Allah, don’t give them religion, give them food, these people need food.” Subsequently, some of the township folk accepted Islam.

The foundation of Sadan and Haron’s relationship was friendship. The security police cited them as ‘the boys who go around with Imam Haron’. On his various visits to the shrine of a local Cape saint, Sadan would often accompany the Imam. Rather than telling his friend that he should join him in the shrine, the Imam would leave him to sleep in the car while he would go about his business. On a political level Sadan would support him in any way he could. He recalled that the Imam’s religious contemporaries would not support his ventures towards helping the people of the townships. They held the idea that the blacks were separate from them, and ‘if they were oppressed, it was not our problem.’ Imam Haron took the stand that all men have dignity and should be treated as such.

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

I had a good, relatively secure job in the broadcast industry in London. For a long time life was comfortable, interesting, inspiring. I was getting paid on a monthly basis. But there was always this great shadow looming just around every corner. I set out in 2001 to come to the Cape and begin research into making a visual documentary on my late grandfather. Working alongside my uncle, Muhammad Haron, we set out to capture many of the last voices that intimately knew the Imam. Any independent filmmaker will tell you that filmmaking is not just about placing a camera and editing footage. As an ‘artist’ of sorts, one has to grapple with becoming a business man, negotiator, fundraiser and many other things that seemingly have little to do with the creative process. I just want to tell stories with film, I never set out to become a businessman but in some ways those are the rules that I have had to adhere to.

In order to get things going, one needs cash as well as passion. In South Africa the usual routes for funding are through official bodies or broadcasters, the NFVF, SABC and others. The problem being that sometimes the bodies giving financial support have agendas of their own that conflict with or constrict the artist. Losing even a small percentage of creative control is a great compromise, and for me, a last option.

My original intention was to garner funding from the Islamic community of the Cape for the production of the film. After all, the Imam was a prominent member of the community, well known and loved - most people that I have met and interviewed claim him as their best friend. I have found that everyone is supportive of the project in principle. However, it has been extremely hard to get funds of any sort from the late Imam’s community. It seems that when the hand goes into the pocket, it stays there.

I believe that there is genuine support and love for the Imam and this kind of project. For me, the issue is twofold. The first lays in the fact that filmmaking, documentary and any other form, especially in South Africa, does not reap great financial rewards for investors and producers. It is not a viable commercial venture for business-minded people who, quite rightly so, should not have to risk a portion of their earnings gathered through their own sweat and toil. The second is that as the South African film industry is still trying to find its feet and to develop an industry that can challenge others on the world stage; we are an industry that is still very much colourless. More than that, it is Islam-less. The lack of participation by Muslims in the 'arts' is not confined to South Africa; it is a worldwide phenomenon. History tells us that when a nation excels in the arts it is an indication that they have reached the peak of their social growth. Perhaps it could be said that it would be wiser for individuals in the Islamic community to focus their attention on the prominent physical problems at hand, such as drought, famine, war, gender issues and, dare I say, badly drawn cartoons? (Whether or not we are even doing that is another documentary.) Why should we be messing around with cameras while all around us people are suffering? But unlike any of the traditional arts, filmmaking blurs the boundary between art and social commentary in a more powerful way than painting or sculpture. It can actually help ease the suffering. My point? Awareness is half the battle. We, as Muslims in the new South Africa, need to fully grasp this idea.

This reminds me of why I got into the filmmaking business in the first place; to draw attention to the Muslim people and to show our beauty to others, but more importantly to ourselves. If our real beauty as Muslims lies in the noble character traits that we claim to inherit and work towards, then what better way to show this than by telling the story of a character in whom these traits are contained? Now, we are not talking about a prophet or a saint who hails from a far off land hundreds of years ago, culturally distinct and separate from us. We are talking about one of our very own boys. The chorchi Imam, the slamser, the martyr, the dapper Imam. The Imam, who, I believe, not only out of a wholly aesthetic choice, wore his fez at an altogether unorthodox angle as a political expression. Imam Haron was known to be forward thinking, attending and giving talks at events held by non-Muslims. His understanding of Islam and its teachings went way beyond the conservative approach that was prevalent amongst the Islamic clergy. His open-mindedness, particularly towards the role of women and the youth in the community, was also somewhat challenging.

OUPA AND I

For me, the Imam was always Oupa. Although I only knew Oupa from a distance of several thousand miles and more than half a decade, he was still a very personal family member. I could see and speak to him through my mother, brothers and a whole extended family on various visits to Cape Town throughout my childhood and youth. However, after having set out on this project, I now feel I know Oupa as a close friend (even though I am constantly introduced as 'the Imam's grandson'). Apart from fame by association, I am experiencing an intimacy that is felt by the people who were close to him. Strangely enough, my ideas about him have not changed a great deal. Yes, I have been privy to information about his political dealings, his experience in prison, his faults and his strengths, his lasting impression on the Cape. But he is more Oupa now than ever before. My earliest recollections of him were his smile; I had always seen him smiling, on the mantle piece, in photo albums, in frames and on the faces of people when they recall him and smile in turn at the recollections.

INTENTIONS AND GOALS

A stage was reached in the production of this film at the end of 2005, where the majority of interviews had been conducted and captured. The next step toward the completion of the film is the structural assembly through the editing process; arranging, through cutting and pasting all the opinions, stories and points in order to create a story. This is often a laborious task but is the most fulfilling, as it is the process of literally bringing the film to life. I envisage this stage to take three to six months depending on the budget. There are still areas that I would like to film and produce to add to the story. The commissioning and building of an animation sequence based on the famous wood-cut cover of Barney Desai's *'The Killing of the Imam'* 1st edition would be a great use of the medium in order to illustrate aspects of the Imam's life that only exist in photographs and memory.

Upon completion, the third stage of the film process, that of distribution and dissemination, would firstly take place here in South Africa. I will submit the film to the various local film festivals and then submit them to the international festivals. I aim to translate and subtitle the finished piece into several languages, French, German, Arabic, Farsi, Spanish, Malay and English, and will be approaching local and international broadcast channels to purchase and air the film. Needless to say, all of this is dependent on finance issues as such things as submission to festivals usually come at a price.

CONCLUSION

We can confidently agree that within Islam our stories do not solely consist of issues such as the hijab, refugees and terrorists. I believe that we should not be limited within the film medium to constant defending of our religion and sense of morality. As a world community, we should master the art and unite to tell our stories. To this end, we will keep the memory of people such as Imam Haron alive in an age where our modern day heroes are all but confined to mp3s and a silver screen of naïve and unrealistic role models. If we do not grasp the medium for these objectives, perhaps CNN will.

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Quotes:

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