

**REVIEW OF “The History of the Claremont Main Road Mosque, its people and their contribution to Islam in South Africa.” By Fahmi Gamieldien. (150 year commemoration edition). Claremont (Cape Town): Claremont Main Road Mosque, 2004, 148pp.**

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We often hear the proverb ‘Do not judge the book by its cover’. This is true with this historical and socio-religious account presented in the book by *Fahmi Gamieldien* on the Claremont Main Road Mosque. It is truly impressive from the mosaic work on the inside cover, the calligraphy, art, photographs and the overall presentation.

This book celebrates 150 years of trial and tribulation and aptly opens with the Quranic verses (Ch.94:V 5–6) – **“Verily with difficulty comes ease; with difficulty comes ease”**. The author presents to the reader a chronology of the history and important events surrounding the Claremont Main Road Mosque, addressing the initial problem of procuring a piece of land by the Mosque committee, the maintenance of the Mosque, leadership problems in the 1960’s, devastating storms, court cases, building renovations, etc.

The Foreword is by the Premier of the Western Cape, Mr. Ebrahim Rasool, who is an ideal candidate as he is well acquainted with the historical events and the significant role players. He brilliantly summarises the issues that were prevalent throughout the various phases of the Claremont Main Road Mosque.

The layout of this book is exceptional. The photographs, captions, excerpts, calligraphy, artwork, maps, excerpts, explanatory notes, biographical sketches on role players throughout the book makes it a pleasurable journey for the reader, from its inception to its conclusion. Added at the end of the book are photographs of some memorable moments at the Mosque and some full blown pictures of the Mosque and a Glossary of Arabic words, a few appendices and a bibliography.

Gamieldien gives the socio-historical as well as religio-educational aspects surrounding the Claremont Main Road Mosque. There are many Mosques that merely serve as places of worship. Here it is commendable that a simple small structure is able to implement the true spirit and role of the Mosque as expounded by the Qur’an and the Prophet (PBUH). The Mosque is the centre of religious, spiritual, educational, political, economic, judicial and recreational activities. These aspects have been presented in a very lucid and captivating style.

The introduction to the book begins with the role of the Mosque (part one); a brief introduction to the building of the Claremont Main Road Mosque in 1854, the motivation to present the history of the Mosque on the occasion the 150 year commemoration, writings available on the mosque, the role players, and accomplishments (part two). The author then clearly plots out the course to be followed in the rest of the work (part three).

The first section gives a historical background of three early Muslim pioneers and their contributions; these are Shaykh Yusuf, Tuan Guru (Imam Abdullah bin Qadi

Abdus Salaam) and Abu Bakr Effendi. This is followed by a socio-religio-cultural background of Claremont from its early establishment to the present.

The author then continues discussing the establishment from the Deed of Transfer, the Abderoef family dynasty, the Family Tree (genealogy) of Imams at Claremont Mosque, biographical sketches, their role and contributions to the Mosque and society. This was followed by a problematic era which saw the downfall of the Abderoef Dynasty, public reaction to the position of an Imam, his claiming ownership, authority, attitude and leadership in society. This led to the mobilising of the community and prominent persons, the MJC ruling and ultimately the legal cases and reluctant compromise by Shaykh Abdullah. However, this intriguing issue with internal altercations and legal battles, ended when the final verdict in late 1978 was granted by the Appeal court in Bloemfontein. The author brings great insight into the problems during the pre-1978 period.

Thereafter began a new era for the Claremont Main Road Mosque. The new administrators had their initial difficulties and became voluntary role players and caretaker Imams. The new Board was re-elected in 1979. Imam Gasan Solomon was officially appointed as the Imam in 1980.

During the term of Imam Gasan Solomon, the Mosque was gradually rejuvenated and given impetus by his innovative ideas and activities. He delivered lectures on political issues and discussed “oppression, exploitation, discrimination, racism, the quest of justice and opposition to the apartheid state were raised from an Islamic perspective.” This led to the Imam and his congregants actively involving themselves in boycotts and contemporary socio-political issues. He attracted the youth to his Mosque and encouraged them to participate in Mosque activities, deliver short talks and thereby demystifying the former exclusive position held by former Imams of that Mosque and the Cape in general. He then joined the Call of Islam and UDF in their struggle. He was detained, banned, forced into hiding and finally went into exile in Jeddah until 1990.

In 1985, Rashied Omar assumed the duties of Imam at the Claremont Mosque. He began by rebuilding the administration of the Mosque, coordinating a number of voluntary Friday speakers (among them the Premier, Mr Ebrahim Rasool), further granting the MYM a more stable base for their socio-political activities. He later invited non-Muslim speakers to the Mosque to enlighten his congregation on inter-faith dialogue and politics. Another incident that received a malicious response from the Imams and various Muslim communities in South Africa was the Friday lecture by a woman, Dr Amina-Wadud, which is extensively covered in this book. It discusses the events that led to this day, the reactions, altercations and the aftermath.

Another issue that this Mosque has persisted in and perpetuated is the celebrating of ‘Id al-Adha with Makkah. There was plenty of confusion and controversy over the celebrating of ‘Id by the different ‘Ulama bodies in the Transvaal, Natal and Cape regions. This initiated discussions and coordination between these organisations for a unified celebration based on the sighting of the moon. In 1988, Shaykh Abu Bakr Najjaar (MJC) called upon the Muslims to coincide the ‘Id celebrations with Makkah, which was not widely accepted. However, the Claremont Main Road Mosque

accepted this decision of 'Id celebration with Makkah and has continued this practice to date.

During the 1990's, the Claremont Main Road Mosque established the '*Saturday Morning Madrasah*' to provide high school Muslim students with the necessary Islamic education enabling them to cope with the emerging global environment. Imam Rashied Omar and his colleagues developed a curriculum to educate the youth and adults in their community.

Gamildien's book is a great contribution to the history of the Claremont Main Road Mosque and documents the position of Imams and the situation prevalent in their respective communities and other contemporary issues. Though the author may have been subjective in his documenting of affairs, as alluded to by himself, he must be credited for recording and preserving them in a lucid and coherent manner. This book is also a continuation of the legacy of recording the history of Islam in the Cape and South Africa, pioneered by Achmat Davids. However, it is disheartening to note that there are no books available on this theme in other major cities and provinces of South Africa. I hope that similar initiatives can spread to the various centres of South Africa.

It must also be conceded that undertaking such research is not easily accomplished, which is borne out of my personal experiences during my own research on Muslims in Pretoria from 1881 to 1899 for a Master's thesis. I was unable to pursue it further due to a lack of finance, interest and support for historical writings within these communities. There now seems to be a keen interest in certain quarters to preserve their history and I hope that research resumes on these regions. With specific regard to the work at hand, I would definitely recommend it to not only students of history, but to the Muslim community in general.