A Muslim Woman's (re-)Making of Her Religious Identity through Activism in Qibla[1]

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Introduction

In analysing Muslim discourses in the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s, Farid Esack (1988) identifies three South African Muslim 'strands of justice,' with each one presenting particular forms of political opposition to the state. Scholarship on Qibla has largely focused on its 'militancy' and on the charismatic personality and role of Achmad Cassiem, leader and main ideologue of Qibla,[2] with little or no research conducted on other individuals active in this movement. In this paper, the writer considers the experiences of some of the female members of the Qibla movement who were, and continue to be, ignored in scholarship.[3]

After providing a brief background on the Qibla movement, the writer draws from an interview conducted with Mariam (fictitious name), a female member of this movement. Hans Mol's identity model of religion (Mol 1979) is used as a framework through which to interpret the data. This theory is used to show how political activism is intertwined with, and an aspect of, the quest to develop as a religious being. This paper suggests that by being an activist in an Islamist movement such as Qibla, Mariam, in a very explicit way, reconstructed her religious identity. Thus, activism in the movement can be viewed as a part, and a simultaneous re-making, of one's religious identity. In Qibla's response to the apartheid state and to politically complacent Muslim bodies, Qibla, as an Islamist movement, powerfully contributed to the re-construction of the religious identities of many of its members.

Qibla – An Islamist Movement[4]

Contemporary scholar of 'Political Islam' Salman Sayyid (2003) defines Islamism[5] as a political project. Islamists are people who "use the language of Islamic metaphors to think through their political destinies, those who see in Islam their political future."[6] In essence, Islamists are individuals whose Muslim identity is at the centre of his or her political practice. Thus Islamists, and by extension Islamist movements such as Qibla, could be said to interpret Islam in a manner which places emphasis on its socio-political significance.

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In South Africa, the mid-1970s to 1980s was a period which witnessed Muslims, as a collective, making their most significant contributions to the struggle for socio-political justice. Qibla was established in 1979 because, according to its founding members, no other organisation at the time encompassed fully the values and principles of Islam in its totality: "What we are emphasising is that ideology, and especially the ideology of Islam, encourages and creates social consciousness, identity, solidarity and inspires positive action on a scale which no other ideology has done or can do."[7]

Qibla saw itself firstly as the mantle-bearer of

the first Muslims[8] who arrived in South Africa in the seventeenth century (in particular the political exiles from south-east Asia) and secondly, of Imam Abdullah Haron.[9] Haron was at the time the only member of the clergy who explicitly addressed the question of apartheid oppression, both from the pulpit of his mosque and in his communal activity. He was killed in 1969 by the apartheid police whilst in custody. The fact that the MJC (Muslim Judicial Council), the main ulema body at the time, and of whom Imam Haron was a member, did not see fit to protest against his detention or question his murder, reflected the political apathy of Muslim leadership at the time.[10] By articulating the Islamic revolutionary line, Qibla felt that they were continuing the history of the first Muslims in South Africa as well as the more recent legacy of Imam Haron.

Identity and religion

Hans Mol notes that the processes of individual identity formation commonly influence and inform those processes of group identity formation; the converse is true as well.[11] Drawing from Mol's work, Jeffrey Seul contends that "Religion in general tends to promote the stabilization of individual and group identity by favouring the preservation of old content (in the form of doctrine, ritual, moral frameworks, role expectations, symbols and the like) offering individuals a basis for reconstructing their identities within a stable or very slowly changing universe of shared meaning."[12] Mol further argues for the idea of sacralization; a process through which particular interpretations of reality are emphasised. He identifies at least four (overlapping) mechanisms through which religion operates to sacralize identity. These are commitment, ritual, objectification and myths or narratives.[13] In the section below, these mechanisms are discussed, drawing on the writer's conversations with Mariam, a Qibla member and mother of three children. She identifies herself as a perpetual activist; in her words, "the fights just change."

1: Commitment
According to Mol, being religiously steadfast ensures a sense of psychological stability for many individuals.[14] By committing to socio-political awareness and by extension, activism, Mariam was provided with emotional anchoring and she imparted a sense of fulfilment. This enabled a shift towards the Islamist cause and towards an Islamist identity, which foregrounded socio-political concerns. While religion, albeit a 'ritualistic Islam,'[15] has always played a central role in Mariam's life, it is the aspect of socio-political awareness to which she committed herself.

Mariam explains how, given her upbringing, becoming an anti-apartheid activist was not the norm:

> I didn't come from an activist background. But I was always searching for direction ... I never realized that as a Muslim I needed to be socially conscious. But I knew at some point that I wanted more than this ritualistic Islam. You know, I felt that there was more to being a Muslim than making *salah* (praying) and so on. And I wanted a more active Islam, you know, I was looking for an active and political Islam.

Through her commitment, the process of sacralization is put in motion. Mariam very consciously makes the decision to assimilate this 'ritualistic' religious identity into a new one, which will incorporate socio-political concerns. She further explains that:

> You know, as my mindset changed ... this new Islam that I found ... in my heart I knew this was what I was looking for and I understood that I had to develop spiritually and I still had so much to do and to learn.

She sees this aspect of being socially and politically conscious as being intrinsically linked to her desire for self-actualization; that is, developing her full potential as a Muslim woman. For Mariam, and in line with Mol, this commitment also paves the way for her to become part of a group, where she feels a further sense of affirmation and belonging.

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2: Ritual

Rituals, according to Mol, are repetitive actions, movements or articulations which serve a commemorative and honouring function, and keep what is being objectified visible.[16] Rituals also imbue time with a sacred value. Many Qibla members were introduced to the movement through classes held on Tuesday evenings. The classes provided an entry-point into a movement which embodied the values and ideals which Mariam associated with being a virtuous Muslim; that is, beyond parochial understandings of Islam.

> My first encounter with this 'other Islam' occurred when a friend took me along to attend one of Achmad Cassiem's classes. The lessons we were taught [by Achmad Cassiem] in the classes were more social sciences, you know, to understand the world we live in, and also our role within the South African context ... And I heard people talking about the movement ... But when I went to the classes it was very interesting. In my heart I knew this was what I wanted. This is the way to become more spiritual. But also be active. The funny thing is when I went there I didn't think about the movement at all, like to join it you know. But I just knew that what I heard felt right ... So then I went every Tuesday night to these classes ... with my neighbor.

Mariam relates that the lessons taught in these classes had a clear socio-political message but were rooted in the Quranic sacred text. It seems probable that attending these classes had a ritual-like significance and that individuals developed a group identity through their common aim to acquire specific knowledge. Furthermore, the spaces within which the classes were held took on a sanctified meaning which allowed students to transcend the mundane during these classes.[17] For many members like Mariam, collective and individual practices of activism were rooted within a search for a religious discourse which went beyond the narrow religious elements only, and which accommodated their commitment to being activists within an Islamic framework. This search led them to a socially constructed sacred space where their chosen identity found affirmation through the weekly performance of listening to the lectures.

3: Objectification

According to Mol, ritual keeps what is being objectified visible. Objectification of the movement could be said to allow the individual to visualize ideals through a transcendental point of reference.[18] Thus, as Mol points out, earthly or mundane disruptions can be managed as long as order on a grand scale is ensured.[19]

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In line with this, it seems evident that the movement, by establishing boundaries around itself, dealt more effectively with the changes within society. Consequently, for many members, as with Mariam, Qibla seemingly became an 'entity.' Because the socio-political consciousness that Mariam developed was rooted in the sacred, she came to feel that being part of Qibla implied being on the path to becoming a better Muslim. Mariam reports that:

> For Qibla, Islamic ideology was the core. The base was the *kalima*,[20] it was your direction. You see, as humans we are moral and social and biological intellectual beings. We need direction. And fulfilling your role as *khalifatullah*[21] will then lead to social justice.

Mariam uses the term *khalifatullah*, implying that by being an Islamist, one fulfilled a divinely ordained role. The challenge was to transform the 'earthly' (in the form of injustices) through the 'transcendental' or the 'sacred' realm of Qibla. Objectification of the movement, led to the sacralization of the group within the broader society, and ultimately as part of a global Muslim community.

Qibla is named after the physical direction that Muslims turn to during their ritual prayers. For members, Qibla also *provided* the direction Muslims ought to move in to attain a deeper spirituality. In the words of Mariam: "our motto is 'Qibla does not give direction, it is direction.'"

Qibla thus became a vehicle through which

commitment to a particular cause was actualized. Conversations with Mariam, as well as with other female activists, suggest that Qibla, for most members, also became much more than a movement which occupied a peripheral position in their lives. In this sense, Qibla played an essential role in safeguarding their religious identity: their definition of religious reality, in fact, was interpreted through an 'entity' such as Qibla, and being a part of this movement anchored them as spiritual beings who wanted to serve God.

4: Myths/narratives

Myths, according to Mol, are repositories of community memory and interpret reality, "providing individuals and groups with a cross generational sense of belonging in time as well as a sense of belonging with others in distant places."[22] Drawing from Mol's work, Zander notes that myths or religious symbolism are "narratives, tales or speculations, not just for their own sake, but with the added function of sacralizing meaning and identity."[23] Myths symbolized in religious oral material contribute to identity construction in a myriad of ways. Mariam explains as follows:

> And I used to ask myself, if this had happened (referring to the political situation at the time in South Africa) in the time of the Prophet, what would he have done? Look at what the Prophet achieved in only twenty-three years, and look at the little we as human beings are doing today. And they were also just human, you know, the Prophet and his followers. And see what they could do ... You know, it was the best decision that Qibla ever made, to commemorate the life and martyrdom of Imam Abdullah Haron. His political consciousness has really re-opened the doors of struggle and martyrdom to a community and leadership that was fast asleep. They were like Rip van Winkels.[24] They buried their heads in the sand with regards to the apartheid struggle. He [Imam Haron] really continued the legacy of our ancestors who came here as slaves and political exiles.

Thus, Mariam reflects on the Prophetic community, and those reflections connect with the early Muslim slaves and political exiles in South Africa, then to the memory of Imam Haron and finally to the inspiration found in the words and actions of Achmad Cassiem. These reflections lead the writer to suggest that a mythic relation of continuity or a myth of origins further sacralized and reinforced the identity of Qibla members. This continuous theological narrative found its source or origins in the time of the Prophet, and Mariam creates the link with the early Muslims, Imam Haron and extends, for her, to the leadership of Qibla. This myth provides for stability and continuity, legitimizing the 'conversion' to Islamism. In line with Mol, this sacred narrative is a communally stored memory, and offered individuals a sense of belonging with others which transcended time and geographical space. This notion of being connected and belonging is of particular significance to those who chose to join Qibla, given the alienation they experienced from the (mainstream) clergy and others in the Muslim community.

Conclusion

In this paper it is suggested that, by joining Qibla and adopting an Islamist identity, Mariam reconstructed her religious identity. This suggestion is examined through the lenses of Mol's 'identity model' of religion.[25] By using Mol's four mechanisms, which are commitment, objectification, ritual and myths, it is shown how religion, has sacralised Mariam's identity: safeguarding and preserving it. This 'identity model' demonstrates how political activism, for Mariam, was intertwined with her efforts to develop as a religious being.

Furthermore, the research described in this paper shows that Mariam's new identity as a Qibla activist took her beyond the anti-apartheid struggle to become involved in different challenges in a post-apartheid, democratic South Africa. In line with Mol, assimilating new identity content was not disruptive to Mariam's individual self, since religion ensured stability, anchored her and allowed her the ability to negotiate through the

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new meanings in her identity. Thus, it is suggested, furthermore, that identifying and linking her religious identity with this movement was central to her self-image as a Muslim woman and her shift to an Islamist identity.

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Interview

Mariam [Personal Communication] 4 July, 2012.

Notes

1 This paper forms part of a larger project for an Honours dissertation in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town. Three in-depth interviews were conducted with female members of Qibla, exploring the meaning and significance of religion and activism as experienced and conceptualized by them. For this paper, reference is made only to one conversation. Geographically, this research is located in South Africa and more specifically, in Cape Town.

2 These three Muslim socio-religious movements were Qibla, the Call of Islam (COI) and the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM).

3 See Moosa (1995), Tayob (1995), Esack (1988), Le Roux (1997).

4 Throughout the interviews, none of the interviewees used the terms 'Islamist' or 'Islamism.' Rather, they refer to themselves as 'Muslims,' and to 'Islam' as a complete way of life which *ought* to incorporate all facets of daily life, including socio-political concerns. However, it would seem that their usages of the latter terms are in line with the definitions of Islamist/ Islamism employed for this paper.

5 Sayyid also notes that Islamism as a political discourse is not monolithic, and in this way is similar to other political discourses (Sayyid 2003: 17).

6 Sayyid 2003:17.

7 Cassiem 1992: 14.

8 Cassiem (1992) expounds on the influence of Islam with the arrival in South Africa of political exiles more than 300 years ago in his publication "The intellectual roots of the oppressed and Islam's triumph over apartheid."

9 See Tayob (1995) for a brief history of Muslims in South Africa.

10 There is no explicit historical record which point to the MJC ever having been overtly supportive of the anti-apartheid movement. In a post-apartheid era, influential people within the leadership of the MJC are in the process of re-writing this history and recasting this organisation as being active in the liberation struggle (Fataar & Bangstad 2010: 820).

11 Mol 1979: 16.

12 Seul 1999: 558.

13 Mol 1979: 17.

14 (Mol 1979: 18).

15 Mariam describes 'ritualistic Islam' as emphasising the religious rituals such as praying and fasting, while leaving socio-political issues unaddressed.

16 Zander 2004: 238.

17 In support of this, reference is made to the work of Eliade (in Knott, 2008: 1105 Smith further argues that "… place is more than a natural or material space. It is lived first and foremost in hearts and minds, and is socially organised" (Smith in Knott, 2005: 1105).

18 Mol 1979: 18.

19 Mol 1979: 17.

20 The declaration of faith for Muslims.

21 This term refers to the Quranic notion of the human being as the embodiment of divine representation on earth.

22 Seul 1999: 561.

23 Zander 2004: 19.

24 Mariam explains that the community as a whole was like this fictional character who slept for twenty years and then woke up to a world which was unrecognizable to him. Likewise, the mainstream clergy were seemingly oblivious to what was happening around them within society; it was as if they were asleep.

25 Mol 1979.