# Imam Essa Al-Seppe and the "the emerging and unorganised African Muslim sector"[1]: A Contextual Analysis

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The year 2002 will go down in Muslim calendar as the year South African Muslims and South Africa lost an uncelebrated talent and hero, that is, Imam Essa Al-Seppe. Imam Essa passed away on May 29 in Durban's King Edward Hospital. Still in his late forties, at the time of his death he had just completed a Masters in Organizational Development and Management Systems and was about to submit a proposal for a PhD in the same field. His last organizational home, after serving numerous Muslim organizations and other NGO's, was the Durban based regional offices of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth where he was co-coordinating their *Dawah* or mission related activities.

My brief for the current article insisted that I should link his contribution to the development of Islam in the African townships, although I must note that Imam Essa was bigger than Islam in the townships.[2] The township was only one of the many socio-cultural and political spaces that he occupied. To strike a balance then, I propose to approach this article in the following manner: As a form of meditation, I start with an opening quote through a shortened version of a tribute I wrote shortly after Imam Essa's death. This is followed with a brief comment on the status of Islam in African townships. I then move on to highlight how Essa featured within that context. Finally, against the background of Islam in African townships, I attempt to situate Essa's contribution within

the general context of Islam and inter-Muslim relations in South Africa. I begin with the tribute:

*Little did I know that I would soon be called upon to write a tribute for a Close friend and comrade … and this was just within the space of one month after he was admitted to hospital. It is therefore with a sense of numbness in my fingers that I tap these short words of paying honor to the memory of Imam Essa. But what are written words after all? Are they sufficient enough? Can they capture our inner most emotions - especially at moments such as the present one – the pre mature departure to the "other world"? …My association with Imam Eesa goes all the way back to our student days as eager students of "elementary training in Islam". This was at the As Salaam Islamic Institute situated on the hills of the obscure little town of Braemer, in KwaZulu Natal's South coast… The life of Imam Essa can be summarized as being a life of toil, struggle and a courageous voice! A voice that earned him friends and foes! And till the last days the sharpness of his tongue was unyielding … in raising* the *concerns and the plight of those who are on the margins of society… let us then in passing away of the father not forget his beloved ones… for the naked pain of all struggles is that we intentionally bury the families of struggles' heroes with them …Hamba kahle qhawe lama qhawe- we shall meet in "after Africa!" May your soul rest in abundant peace!* [3]

The above quote, though shortened – captures what I scribbled on that fateful Wednesday, on May 29. I deem it appropriate to start by invoking the very words that still resonate in my memory whenever I think of Essa. It is words that best reflect not only an emotional state – for Essa's death, though mourned by the entire Muslim community, for the "emerging and unorganised communities", Essa was a rare treasure- he was in the words of Abdullah Salamntu "our Black African *Muslimhood*" – a sophisticated *imam* and an "emerging" scholar[4] in his own right. Indeed, a very rare species in a community whose lifespan is just over two decades.

**The genesis of a community[5]: A brief background**

Just about twenty years ago, in 1980, a census gave the number of African Muslims from indigenous South African as numbering merely 8000 (Lubbe, 1984:132). However, according to an article in Pace, a popular magazine amongst black readers, Islam continues, "to grow by leaps and bounds" in African townships (June 1997). Though the ranks of these African Muslims are on the rise, they continue to be on the margins of Muslim community life. It is ironic that it takes tragic events such as the recent bombing of the Soweto mosque for the Muslim public and public at large to be sensitized about the presence of Islam in African communities.

While a visible presence of African Muslims in South Africa can be traced way back to the early nineteenth century and also to the arrival of the "Zanzibari community" around 1873 and 1880 in Durban and the presence of mostly Malawi migrant labourers - African

Muslims from the indigenous sector entered Islam mainly through "conversion". Even though by the 1960's in the townships of the Western Cape Islam were slowly making some inroads, it was the 1970's and 1980's that marked a turning point in African conversion to Islam. In particular, these were mostly African youth who undertook a conscious journey into Islam and Essa was part of that generation (Sitoto, 1996).

Today, almost without exception, all the major language groups in South Africa be they Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Sepedi, Tswana, Tsonga, - proudly boast representation in this emerging Muslim sector. For example, protruding minarets into the African sky have now become a permanent feature in some of the major townships. Soweto alone has about two mosques. And as noted, it is one of these mosques that fell victim to the recent spate of bombings that ravaged the Gauteng Province in late October this year. In KwaZulu Natal, near Durban, the sprawling township of KwaMashu boasts one of the earliest Mosques to be erected from the ground in an African township.

Also, in the far corners of the Eastern Cape, in New Brighton, that is, a township near the industrial city of Port Elizabeth and home to ANC stalwarts like Raymond Mhlaba and the late Govan Mbeki - according to Imam Nceba Salamntu a mosque is near completion. Now by African Muslim standards the mere presence of these mosques is viewed as a major achievement in a landscape punctuated by numerous churches that seem to enjoy monopoly of the township sacred space.

With the aforementioned background let me then focus briefly on Imam Essa's role in advancing the plight of African Muslim communities.

**Imam Essa: At the cross-roads between the "established and the emerging and unorganised communities?"**

In characterizing the status of the African Muslims or Islam in the townships the late Imam Essa introduced to Muslim discourse on Islam and inter Muslim community relations the phrase "established and emerging and unorganised African Muslim sector". By "established" the reference was directed towards the historical Muslim communities such as those located within the "Asian Diaspora". On the other hand, "emerging and unorganised sector" was a reference to African Muslim communities in the townships.

Al-Seppe often argued very passionately on the need for the "emerging" communities to be fully integrated into Muslim community life to minimize their marginal status. His logic then was that since Islam was still at infancy in the townships – the emerging communities were in need of tutelage from the more privileged and established communities. A cursory glance at the coverage of Islam in the Townships seems to register Essa's concerns over the perceived marginal status and poor conditions under which African Muslim live. For instance, writing in the last issues of this publication on "Islam in the townships of the Northern Province" Julekha Kalla observes that "like many people in this beleaguered, poverty-stricken province, the challenges faced by Muslims in the Northern Province townships can best be described as overwhelming…many Muslims across the townships face poverty and

unemployment"(Kalla 2001:45). I am often struck, though well meaning, by the constant casting of Muslims or Islam in African townships as a charity case[6].

That the "emerging Muslim communities"- real or imagined- have within their ranks the world acclaimed pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, legendary poets like Don Matera, the SAMA award winners in jazz saxophonist Zim Ngqawane, budding poets like Mphoetlane waBofelo, rising journalists in Simphiwe Sesanti, a former South African junior light weight champion like Hassan Mpisekaya Mbaduli, Educationists, civil servants in local governments like the Sethene's and Ebrahim Khobimpe's, and in national departments the like's of Ike Idris Nxedlana (chief financial officer in the Department of Public Enterprises), successful entrepreneurs, Lawyers and advocates like 'uncle' Dawood Ngwane author of the recently launched Zulu booklet, *Ubhaqa* (light) and Adam Jack who penned the first seminal text in Xhosa on Muslim prayer, librarians like Nafisa Zondi, bank administrators in Faisel Mkhize (ABSA) – these are just few examples that seem to contradict a discourse that only projects the African Muslim community as a charity case. The point here is not to deny that like most African communities that are gripped by poverty members of the African Muslim community are not immune from such a reality. The problem lies in condescending discourses, though well meaning, they constitute the stereotyping of African Muslim communities. Essa's protest then was amongst others a lament about this casting of Islam in exclusive terms and hence his insistence on the imperative to integrate the different Muslim communities.

The problem though with Al-Seppe's integrationist stance is that its was premised on investing more agency in the established communities rather than investing the same agency in the emerging communities thus illustrating that they are capable of charting their own destiny. In fact towards the latter years he seems to have been seriously questioning the merits of the integrationist approach. For instance, he began to assert that though historically the established Muslim communities were numerically strong – judging by conversion rates and through the "Season of migration to the South" (to borrow a phrase from Omotoso), that is, of Muslims from elsewhere in Africa - the scale in years to come was going to tilt in favour of African Muslims. The logic was that given such a scenario, the emblem of the Muslim identity was going to shift away from the traditionally "established Communities" to the "emerging" one as new markers of Muslim identity, that is, an identity that was more at home in Africa rather than one that sought shelter in a misplaced pan-Islamic rhetoric. In lighter moments, especially in the late 1990's - as if pleased that his advocacy was beginning to yield fruits and that his detractors were beginning to accept the historical outcome - he would with ruptous laughter ask in a rhetorical fashion: "have you heard of the new Africans?" The point I am making is that though misunderstood at the time, Essa was still very much passionate about the imperative to forge a common Muslim identity and the collapsing of the binary between "established" and "emerging" communities.

For Al-Seppe, the issues highlighted thus far were not merely polemical and about intellectual posturing – these were issues that he existentially grappled with. For instance, since my early contact with him at As-Salaam in 1981, I was often intrigued at

how he refused to be cast as a township Muslim or convert. And at a very personal level he even crossed the colour line by marrying within the "established" Muslim community in Durban.

The other dimension of Essa's contribution was in the effort of building an alternative leadership in African Muslim communities. This prompted him to accept an offer to return to As Salaam Educational institute as a teacher in Islamic studies in the late 1980's. In particular, this period was marked by a growing consciousness amongst Muslims in the townships to have their own alternative leadership. This consciousness is well captured by *Amir* Yusuf Jakubeni of the Katlehong Islamic Foundation (founded in 1994) when he asserts: "We believe that for too long leadership has been monopolized ... we want to develop our own leadership, our own values and own interpretation"(Pace, June 1997).

At an organizational level, the afore mentioned sentiment found expression in the now defunct formation, that is, *Organization of African Muslim Unity* (OAMU) founded in 1997 in Kwa-Zulu Natal Province. Amongst its main objective it claimed: "was self-empowerment and assisting African Muslims to become organized and focused" (Muslim Views, July 1997).

However, it must be emphasized that initiatives by African Muslims to form their own organizations (national initiatives) and produce their own leadership were not a new development. The first historical meeting can be traced in the early 1980's through the

formation of what was called *Southern Africa Muslim Mission* that was founded at Rockville, Soweto in 1981 at the backyard of Sayed Ali Zange[7]. The Murabitun who surpassed the Rockville initiative was yet another attempt at galvanizing Muslims from the townships (Arabia, May 1985; Tayob 1999: 98).

It is worth noting that though already prominent, Al-Seppe was always careful and would caution against a complete "breakaway" from "the mainstream" or "established community". He would as Suleman Dangor observed "not hesitate to criticize African Muslims when felt obliged to do so"(*Al-Ummah*, 2002).

**An afterthought: A quest for inclusion?**

It is against the foregoing background that Imam Essa Al-Seppe's contribution to the growth of Islam in South Africa can perhaps be better appreciated. What is discernible then, is that in most of his engagement with the "established community" he was constantly calling for a more meaningful and mutual relationship rather than a paternal one. It is this quest for inclusion that compelled some of us to take him to task for what we interpreted as an obsession with the plea for acceptance in a community that was preoccupied with its own problems and challenges.

While no value can be attached to Imam Essa's contribution to Islam in South Africa, and more specifically Islam in "emerging communities" – however, I believe that two valuable contributions are worth mentioning.

First, in accentuating the plight of Muslims in the African townships, though often misunderstood, Essa was driven by a quest to see the collapse of the fragmentation of Muslim identity between the binaries of the "emerging"(or township) and "established" Muslim communities. Put differently, Essa strived to situate Muslim identity in a fashion that would seize to cast Islam as an Eastern aberration or Asian "cultural homogeneity" fostered on misguided Africans.

Second, Essa's contribution will be mostly missed in the "emerging" project of localising Islam to be in concert with the socio - cultural experience of the African Muslims. For unlike elsewhere in Africa where Islam is in tune with the local environment – in South Africa this has not yet materialised.

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[1] This is one of the phrases that were coined by Imam Essa in reference to African Muslim communities in the townships. This phrase soon became frequent in Muslim discourse in South Africa.
[2] For a broader coverage of his other activities see Suleman Dangor 's tribute in *Al-Ummah*, June 2002.
[3] See *Al-Qalam*, May 2002. See also tributes by Nceba Salamntu and Simphiwe Sesanti in *Al-Qalam*, June 2002.
[4] Imam Essa's serious attempt at producing a scholarly piece, though less nuanced was through a booklet titled *Some Points of Similarity: Between Islam, Africa and the African*, first published by the Durban based Islamic Dawah Movement and later by Africa Muslim Agency, n.d.
[5] I use the term 'community' whether real or imagined as an emblem for describing the 'community' of Africans who have embraced Islam in African townships. This notion is taken from those who have embraced Islam in they often perceive themselves as a community of sorts.
[6] In fact when I embraced Islam in the mid 1970's in Kwa-Nobuhle Township near Uitenhage - we had a cluster of successful and self-made entrepreneurs. The very notion of begging was totally unknown and discouraged within this community. For example anyone perceived to be exhibiting a tendency of begging would be pejoratively dismissed as someone *othanda uZaka*, that is, an individual fond of Zakaat (so-called alms to the poor).
[7] Zange is one of the early pioneers of Islam in Soweto and played a central role in the establishment of the Soweto mosque in Dlamini.