Salafism and its Impact on Sufi Movements in the Cape

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Sufism and Salafism in Post-Apartheid South Africa

This paper explores the religious transformation that Salafism has effected in the Cape. It focuses on the diffusion of Salafi thought and its effects on the religious worldview held by the Cape Muslims. Salafism as an Islamic trend is a quest for return to authentic beliefs and practices of the first three generations of Muslims. The goal of the Salafi movement was to purify the religion from the alleged local cultural and traditional practices. The Salafis view themselves as distinct from the *Sufi* groups and censure some of the beliefs and practices of the latter, like the celebration of the birthday of the prophet (*maulud Nabi*), visitation and veneration of the *Sufi* saints (*karamat*) and seeking intersession from them (*tawassul*).

The years after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 seem to have brought about a revival of Sufi-sm, whose foundations in the region are very old, having been established by the very pioneers of Islam in the sixteenth century. Since the late 1990s there has been a growing number of new Sufi movements in the Western Cape.

The geographical area of the Cape may be viewed as the hub of *tasawwuf* traditions in Southern Africa. One finds many functioning Sufi orders, such as the *Qadiriyya*, *Alawiyya*, *Chistiyya*, amongst others, co-existing without major frictions.

The years after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 seem to have brought about a revival of Sufism, whose foundations in the region are very old, having been established by the very pioneers of Islam in the sixteenth century. Since the late 1990s there has been a growing number of new *Sufi* movements in the Western Cape. The introduction of the *Naqshabandiyya*, the *Murabitun* movement and the *Tijaniyya* in the Cape can be traced back to that period. The *Naqshabandiyya* movement in the Cape has further embarked on active proselytisation of their activities in other African countries. The vibrant multiplicity of *Tasawwuf* movements in the Western Cape suggests that globalisation favours the proliferation of Sufi movements in South Africa. The basic idea within globalisation is that social relations become relatively delinked from territorial geography and human lives are increasingly played out in the world as a single place.[1] Globalised Sufism entails the spatial spread of *tasawwuf* thoughts and influence across (and beyond) a given continent of origin.

Turning to Salafism, prior to the advent of the activities of Jameel Adam Muhammad in 2002, globalisation seems to have impacted on the growth of Salafism in the Cape in a different way. In spite of the fact that the Cape Muslim community has had contact with Salafism since at least 1938[2], its proliferation became manifested more in the realm of ideas rather than as an organised Muslim movement. The diffusion of Salafi thought in the Cape is linked to the activities of graduates from centres of learning in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. It is estimated that about 150 graduates from centres of learning believed to be championing Salafi or Wahhabi thoughts and influence have settled in the Cape. However, some of them have either adapted themselves to the Cape Islamic environment or do not openly

identify themselves with a Salafi agenda. It may appear, then, that there is not much to say about Salafism and its effects on the larger Cape religious community before 2002.

However, in this paper we will argue that the absence of an organised Salafi movement cannot be translated into the absence of Salafism from the Muslim community of the Cape. Salafis in the Cape were not much concerned about promoting a strict, sectarian identity, but concentrated rather on instituting an agenda of Islamic reform. Thus, we suggest looking at the diffusion of Salafi ideas and their effects on the Muslim community and its daily practices at large, rather than at the presence or absence of an organised Salafi movement. The materials upon which this article is based are drawn from the views both of graduates from Salafi centres and Sufi leaders who oppose Salafism.

In his analysis of the tension over *Maulud* celebrations between the Salafi-oriented clergy who contested it and the community who defended it, Mukadam Ahmed believes that the consensus of the community in the Cape has proven to be stronger than that of the custodians of theology.[3] For this researcher, however, this position underrates the degree to which daily practices of *Maulud* celebration and other popular Islamic practices have been affected by the views of certain members of the clergy, especially the Salafi-inclined scholars.

Trajectories of Salafi-Inclined Scholars in the Cape

When we analyse the trajectories of Salafi-inclined scholars, it will appear that the diffusion of Salafi tenets and ideas in the community is more influential than the numerical presence of prominent Salafis in the Cape. The only known self-designated Salafi scholar in the Cape coloured communities is Jameel Adam Muhammad, a 2002 graduate from *Darul Hadith* in Yemen. He has been the most active Salafi scholar who explicitly propagates Salafism. In recent times, Jameel's activities have given some impetus to the revival of Salafi interest in the Cape.

The members of Ahlus-Sunnah Society led by Jameel identify themselves as the followers of the Quran and the Sunnah as a mark of distinction from the wider community of Cape Muslims who, they believe, follow their Sheikhs (religious leaders) rather than the sacred sources of Islam. Jameel's activities have been geared towards undermining Sufi traditional Islamic practices, such as the celebration of the birthday of the prophet (*maulud Nabi*), *ratib Attas* (litanies and invocations recited in *Alawiyyah* order) and *Haddads* (Thursday communal litanies), *nisful Shaban* (commemoration of the middle of the month of *Shaban*) and the visitation to the *karamat* (shrines of saints). The thrust of his public engagement is to purge out perceived local traditional influences on the Islamic practices in the Cape.

The major factor for the growth of Jameel's movement is his ability to authenticate the Salafi teachings as rooted in the Quran and Sunnah. The ability of the Salafis to undermine Sufi religious beliefs and practices by assessing them as not conforming to the Quran and the Sunnah has attracted people to the new movement.

The major factor for the growth of Jameel's movement is his ability to authenticate the Salafi teachings as rooted in the Quran and Sunnah. The ability of the Salafis to undermine Sufi religious beliefs and practices by assessing them as not conforming to the Quran and the Sunnah has attracted people to the new movement. Networks of friends and relatives have been another medium through which the movement has experienced growth, especially when Jameel has issued religious opinions (*fatwa*s) which stand counter to the prevailing religious norms. This becomes a subject of discourse among some of his friends necessitating them to seek further clarification from him. Thus, an audience is created which becomes receptive to Jameel's interpretation of Islam. The Salafi movement led by Jameel is well-known in the Cape for its criticism and attack against Sufi devotional practices like the group *dhikr* – a devotional litany made audibly and in unison, and the commemoration of the nights of *Israa* and *Miraaj* (the heavenly journey

performed by the Prophet Muhammad according to the Muslim tradition). His activities have served as a forerunner to the establishment of Salafiyya identity in the Cape public sphere. The new Salafi movement finds its followers mostly among coloured Muslims in the townships of Mitchell's Plain and Lansdowne.

Another important personality who had started a Salafi discourse prior to the advent of Jameel's work is Faaik Gamieldien, a graduate of Al-Azhar in Egypt. For certain reasons, however, he prefers not to identify himself directly as a Salafi. Gamieldien declares that he has much in common with the Salafis and regards them as being closer to the true Islamic spirit. However, due to his concern for the unity of the *Ummah* he chooses not to identify himself with what he perceives to be the potentially divisive nature of Salafi identity. On one occasion Faaik's vocal criticism of the visitation to the *karamat* in the media as anathema to the fundamentals of Islam and a practice tantamount to shrine-worship attracted a spontaneous reaction from the various Sufi groups which labelled him as a Wahhabi.[4]

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There are other Salafi scholars whose activities are limited to the black townships in the Cape, such as Ismail Gqamane who is an African Islamic scholar and a graduate of Madina University. He combines his *Da'wa* activities with the promotion of economic empowerment of his people and thus attracts both local and foreign support (from Saudi Arabia, as well as from the Libyan Islamic Call Society). The primary role of Gqamane, however, has been to attract converts to Islam in the black townships. The dimension of African Muslim consciousness which is part of his activities tends to overshadow his Salafi agenda.

Dr. Abdullah Hakim Quick is another graduate of Madina (1979) with whom Gqamane sometimes collaborates in his activities in the townships. Though identified by other academics as a Salafi (Roy 2004), the negative and narrow meaning attached by the West to the movement discourages him from identifying himself with it.

Duafir Najjar and Irfan Abrahams are both graduates of the University of Madina who have adapted the Salafi discourse to the larger Cape religious community. Both are labelled by outsiders as Salafis or Wahhabis, though they prefer to identify themselves as 'Islamic reformers'. The background of these two scholars is shaped by their dislike of aspects of Cape Islamic traditions connected with Sufism, such as the visitation to the *karamat* and the belief in the intercessory role of saints, as well as the celebration of *maulid*. Their censure and dislike of these rituals and practices is founded on the belief that they lack precedents or cannot be traced to any 'true' Islamic tradition.

The Ambivalent Effects of Salafism in the Cape

It is difficult to reduce the degree of engagement of all the graduates from Salafi centres with the community to a single line. For example, some of them, such as Seraj Hendricks and Benyamin Basheer, have always remained deeply steeped in the local Sufi worldview despite having received education from Salafi centres. Seraj Hendricks in particular, the Imam of *Azzaviya* Mosque, has always regarded his role as a continuation of the legacy of the *Sufi* Islamic tradition handed down to him by his forefathers. In view of their strong familiarity with Salafi discourse through the education they have received, scholars like Seraj Hendricks and Benyamin Basheer have become the most ardent critics of Salafism, and defenders of Sufism, in the Cape. Similarly, some scholars, such as Muhyideen Hendricks (not related to Seraj Hendricks) who travelled to Mecca, the heartland of Wahhabism and Salafism, for advanced Islamic education, ended up by embracing Sufism. This shows the complexity of local and global influences on Muslim scholars in the Cape.

From the perspective of the Sufi groups, the advent of Salafism in the Cape set the tone for questioning certain widely held traditional Islamic practices and rituals for not conforming to the Quran and Sunnah. For instance, discussions were started about whether aspects of Sufi beliefs and practices constitute *bid'a* (religious innovation) and thus ought not to be entertained. Faaik's censure of the visitation to the *karamat* which equated such visits to *shirk* (polytheism) and compared them to "shrine-worship", is one of such instances.[5] This was, however, met with spontaneous reactions from Sufi leaders such as Yusuf Da Costa and Seraj Hendricks who link Faaik's religious agenda to extremism, fanaticism and intolerance.[6] Significantly, these Sufi Ulama connected Faaik's ideology to the negative impact that the Wahhabi uprising in Arabia in 1924, leading to the establishment of the modern Saudi state led by King Abdullah ibn Saud, had on some illustrious sons of the Cape. According to the narration of the Sufi *ulama*, Sheikh Ahmad Berhadien, a former president of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) in the 1970s and described as the doyen of religious leaders of the Cape peninsula[7], escaped from Mecca in his pajamas during the Wahhabi uprising. The teachers of Muhammad Salih of Azzaviya were decapitated in public in Jabal Qubais and prominent representatives of the Meccan religious establishment, such as Muhammad Maliki Alawi[8], were persecuted for holding alternative views.[9] Muhammad Maliki is regarded by many Sufi leaders in the Cape as the symbol of the persecution and resistance of Sufism in Saudi Arabia.

According to the Sufi scholars who have rebuked the Salafi critiques, the implication of the Salafi censure of certain aspects of Cape religious practices is that it runs the risk of sowing aversion and/or confusion among some Muslims, especially the youth. Some local scholars believe that many of the youth have become doubtful of their own religion to the extent of not fasting or praying.

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Another possible effect of Salafism on the religious life of Cape Muslims is that aspects of the community's popular religious activities have diminished or been relegated to the background due to the preaching of Salafi scholars, even when such a Salafi identity is not embraced explicitly.

One example is the Salafi questioning of the legitimacy of membership of Sufi movements. The Salafis' aversion to Sufism and its associated rituals have provided impetus for this. This is exemplified in Faaik Gamieldien's designation of Sufi movements as client-specific groups aimed at harnessing the interests of ordinary Muslims by the leadership. This debate has further been extended to the doctrinal sphere by Jameel, when he questions the appropriateness for 'genuine' Muslims to pray behind a Barelvi Imam, as aspects of their teachings conflict – according to his understanding – with Shari' ah. The Barelvi movement was founded by the Indian scholar Ahmad Reza Khan (1856-1921), and its religious ethos is embedded in popular Sufi practices.[10] A *Fatwa* issued by a committee of Saudi scholars which advises Muslims not to befriend Sufis and to pray in their mosques is used to buttress this position.[11] The fact that many Ulama of Cape Town today depend on Saudi scholars in matters of religious doctrine, also contributes to an overall decrease of interest in Sufism.

Importantly, aspects of Islamic reformism propagated by the graduates from Salafi centres of learning further contribute to redefining and thus introducing different meanings regarding the nature of group *dhikr*, the celebration of *Maulud* and visitation to the *Karamat.* The Sufi belief that the Prophet is spiritually present during the *dhikr* to bless the worshipers has been challenged by the Salafi graduates as amounting to apportioning God's attributes to the Prophet. Again, the celebration of the *Maulud* is perceived by some graduates as socially desirable but not religiously sanctioned and hence deprived of

any religious significance. The visitation to the *Karamat* is given a different meaning as many Cape Muslims, under the influence of the Salafi critique tend today to discard the notion that the buried saint can intercede on their behalf and change people's destiny, but still consider it acceptable.

The Sufi groups attribute the decline of religious activities such as group *dhikr*, *Maulud* celebration, *Ratibs* and the *Karamat* in recent times to the Salafis' constant censure of them. The impact of Salafi graduates on
Cape Islamic practices has been summed up by one Sufi leader as follows: "the kind of Islamic worldview propagated by the Salafis in the Cape is symptomatic to a secular kind of Islam, an Islam without spirituality and a very dried one"[12].

Conclusion

Salafis might have not made any visible impact in the form of a movement or identity in the Cape Islamic milieu, but the same cannot be said of Salafi thought and ideas. The activities of Salafi scholars in the Cape have had the effect of subtly re-orienting many people to their brand of Islamic ideas. This has reshaped the Cape Islamic environment, by introducing different values which stand counter to the established popular Islamic worldview upheld by the community over many centuries past.

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Notes

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2. Abdulkader Tayob, 1995. *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: Muslim Youth Movement*. University of Cape Town Press, p. 53.
3. Ahmed Mukadam, 1990, "Muslim Common Religious Practices at the Cape, Identification and Analysis". Unpublished M.A Dissertation, Religious Department, University of Cape Town, p. 55
4. Faaik Gamieldien "Islam Prides itself on its Monotheism", Cape Argus, 8th January 2001.
5. Faaik Gamieldien "Islam Prides itself on its Monotheism", *Cape Argus*, 8th January 2001.
6. Seraj Hendricks, "Regarding Shrine worship", Jum'ah speech. Undated.
7. Yusuf Da Costa, 1994. *The influences of Tassawuf on Islamic Practices at the Cape,* p. 138.
8. Claiming descent from the Prophet's family, he was a leading Maliki jurist and leader of the Alawiyya Sufi order.
9. Ibid.
10. Goolam Vahed, "Contesting Orthodoxy: The Tablighi-Sunni Conflict among South African Muslims in 1970s and 1980s". *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 23 (2), October 2003.
11. "Deviant groups and Individuals, Praying in the masjid of the Soofiyyah". Issued by the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fataawa. www.Fatwa on line. com. accessed date 14.02.2009.
12. Yusuf Da Costa, interview, 22nd August 2008, Kensington, Cape Town.