Charting Leadership Institutions on Expanding frontiers

Tayob

Nineteenth-century Islam in the Western Cape may be symbolised as the century of charismatic imams, but the twentieth century will be remembered as the century of organisations. Structures, offices, and constitutions have proliferated in the Muslim community like never before. Every town or locality boasts some organisational structure to serve both general and specific Islamic needs. Whether it is welfare, mission, education or leadership, an organisation somewhere sees to its need.

Taking a long view of the organisational structure of the Muslim community, we may want to ask how these organisations contribute to the ethos of Islam in South Africa. Apart from the nitty-gritty of presidents, secretaries and members, what palpable and tangible quality can we think of as the product of Islamic organisations? How do they shape Islamic life in South Africa? What kind of institutional legacy are the organisations building for Islam in South Africa?

The questions are complex and cannot be fully answered in a short review. However, the questions provide a framework for reviewing leadership as an important aspect of the Muslim community in South Africa. Like welfare and education, scholars, imams and ulama are located in organisations which determine what they do and what is expected of them. This review takes a broad look at leadership organisations to measure and evaluate their activities in the light of institutional establishment. The survey includes a short review of two organisations interviewed, and then tackles one general question that challenges leadership organisations in general.

Muslim leadership organisations are primarily concerned with providing guidance and leadership to Muslims. By itself, we can here list a list of important functions like teaching the fundamentals of Islam, providing moral and ethical guidance in the form of *fatwas*, and managing and leading the important religious activities in the Muslim community. In each of these major areas, leadership organisations provide an important service. Educational facilities would be impossible to conceive without the assistance of the various Jamiats in northern regions of the country. Likewise, the *fatwa* committee of Muslim

Comment [AIT1]: includes leadership organizations in the Western Cape, but also considers events and challenges that have transpired elsewhere in the country. The concern is not to present a detailed summary of each and every organization, but to capture the salient features of Islamic leadership organizations and their challenges as a whole.

Comment [AIT2]:

Judicial Council is always working at one or the other query. Most importantly, these and other organisations provide necessary leadership in mosques, sermons, marriage ceremonies, and Sufi gatherings. These common activities indicate the broad-based framework which motivates and justifies a leadership organisation. They are the primary reason for their existence.

However, the institutional basis of leadership organisations is also driven by other concerns. There is also both healthy competition and acrimonious disputation between different organisations. From one point of view, they all seem to be performing the same functions: leading worship, issuing *fatwas*, and the like. On the other hand, some claim greater authority because they have more organizations affiliated to them (the Islamic Unity Convention) or they represent the greatest number of mosques (the Muslim Judicial Council in the Western Cape) or they are more rational (al-Shura in the Western Cape) or more authentic (Jamiats in the north). These are claims made by the organisations, and have become the social characteristics by which they are identified and distinguished from each other.

The Muslim Judicial Council (est. 1945) represents most of the *imams* in the Western Cape. Two major issues occupy its attention presently. It intervenes and makes major inputs at a state and government level. It is called upon to open official functions and to submit contributions on moral and ethical issues facing Muslim in particular. The MJC regards itself as the most favoured Muslim organization as far as the ruling government is concerned. It sees itself first and foremost as a religious organization representing the interests of Muslims. The MJC's self-definition of being religious is a major step in South African Islam. Unlike most organizations, the MJC has clearly defined the field and focus of religion in the present dispensation. The South African government's critical engagement with religions has opened the way for such an approach.

The second concern of the MJC is what it perceives as the major attack upon its leadership legitimacy from the Islamic Unity convention (IUC). It accuses the IUC of surreptitiously introducing Sh`ism in the country, and sowing confusion and discord among ordinary Muslims. Representing over 336 organizations and boasting a National Ulama Council for itself, the IUC seems to be vying for an alternative Muslim leadership. The contest over leadership is part of any society, but events in the past two years have critically affected ordinary Islamic life in the Cape flats.

Since 1996, a battle for leadership has been raging in the Western Cape which has taken on violent proportions. The homes of the president of the MJC, Sh. Nazeem Mohamed, and UCT academic, Prof. Ebrahim Moosa, have been bombed. A leader of another prominent leadership organisation, Sh. A. Gafieldien, was shot when he answered a knock on his door. Sh. Muhammad Moerat and Sh. Ahmed Sediq (MJC) was insulted and attacked at the Muir Street and Gatesville Mosques respectively. Scores others have been threatened. It seems that in the midst of the battle against gangsterism and drugs, another war has been stoked. An alliance of organisations and institutions including the IUC, PAGAD, Qiblah, Radio 786, and Muslims against Illigitimate Leaders (MAIL), have repeatedly and openly accused religious leaders of being religious gangsters, hypocrites, CIA agents, and the like. It does not appear that the Sunni-Shi`ite conflict as claimed by the MJC is the real issue involved here, nor the level of competence of the MJC members as claimed by its opponents. This is a proxy war over the particular relation between Muslims and the new South African state. The MJC wants to preserve the Muslim community in a democratic South Africa, while the alliance courts confrontation and battle with the new state. The MJC fails to register change in the Muslim community, while the alliance exploits the problems and challenges of change.

The other organization that I had the opportunity to interview was the Majlis ash-Shura al-Islami which commands the loyalty of a number of mosques in the Cape Flats. Since 1997, it has offices in the Shurah Ikhlas Institute where it conducts a morning crèche, afternoon Islamic classes, a clinic for circumcisions, and evening adult classes. Once a month, it also convenes a court to determine family legal cases. In these functions it is not any different from other leadership organization in the Western Cape, and must be a serious contender for leadership as such. However, ash-Shura's distinctive focus remains its explicit desire to develop a `rational' understanding of Islam. This goes back to the particular outlook of its founder, Shaykh Shakir Gamieldien, who taught his students and the present leaders of the organization to understand Islam in an open, rational, and critical way. The rationalism of the ash-Shura seems to have given it a distinctive identity, perhaps one that even shelters its followers from other trends.

If we move from the organisations to religious issues, we can appreciate the question of leadership in the light of changing social conditions. In doing so, it becomes clear how leadership issues affect Muslim life in general. One of the major issues that have confronted Muslims in this country for a long time is the issue of consuming proper *halaal* meat slaughtered in terms of the Shariah requirements. From a sociological point of view, eating

halaal is a boundary mechanism that includes Muslim abattoir workers, Muslim butchers and *halaal* authorities. These boundaries coincided with the racial boundaries of apartheid. The opening of the racial boundaries in democratic South Africa has led to some interesting changes, and some challenges.

More than ever before, Muslims are eating out and expecting to do so in accordance with Shariah requirements. Students at universities, in government, in the corporate world, are concerned about what they eat and drink with fellow South Africans. More restaurants and food suppliers have recognised this need, and many are prepared to obtain the necessary *halaal* certificates. However, a few problems have emerged over the last few years. Firstly, there are too many authorities issuing *halaal* certificates. Each and every Muslim leadership organisation is prepared to act as an authority issuing a *halaal* certificate, sometimes in open competition with others. Exploiting the proliferation of authorities, some non-Muslim businesses in Kwazulu-Natal have reportedly put up signs claiming *halaal* status as well. In response to these anomalies, the South African National Halaal Authority (SANHA) was formed in 1996 by most leadership organizations and Muslim butchers associations. In its attempt to control the proliferation of *halaal* certificates, it even wanted to register the *halaal* as a private trademark. This would prevent the abuse of *halaal* certificates.

SANHA has a few problems which it must still overcome. The Muslim Judicial Council of the Western Cape (MJC) has resisted joining the new body, and so did the IUC. There is widespread suspicion that the MJC is concerned about the possible effect that a national body like SANHA would have on *halaal* certificate revenues. Secondly, many food outlets claim that the MJC charges a fee for the certificates without carrying out proper inspections. For its part, SANHA claims that it does not want to prevent bodies like the MJC to issue certificates, and so there appears to be some miscommunication or undue suspicion. The suspicion refuses to disappear even though the MJC has challenged members of the public and organisations to scrutinise its accounts for any misappropriation. The claims and counter-claims seem poised to engulf *halaal* certificates in the political leadership battles discussed above.

It appears that SANHA is taking the first step in the right direction, but the issue has raised some issues that need to be solved. Firstly, *halaal* certificates are issued on the basis of the religious credentials and knowledge of the organisations. This accounts for their proliferation. But they must also deal with the question of jurisdiction, regional or otherwise. This is not covered in the moral and legal requirements of the Shariah, but the question

emerges when say when, both the MJC and SANHA issue or negotiate halaal certificates in a region like Kimberley. Thus, Muslim leadership will have to establish transparent policies that clarify their methods and their jurisdictions. Any criticism must be dealt with in an open way that does not force those dissatisfied to establish rival *halaal* authorities.

Secondly, if the question of competing and conflicting *halaal* certificates has been exacerbated with the breakdown of South African boundaries, then globalization will throw its own challenges. It is widely known that many Arab countries follow a definition of *halaal* that differs from South African Muslims. It is only a matter of time before this issue reaches South African shores. Will we see Muslims asking questions which some religious leaders have avoided for some time? The lack of progress and internal conflict on the *halaal* issue will hasten the issue of eating meat slaughtered by people of the book.

Thirdly, the *halaal* issue has raised the question of the financial stability and strength of some leadership organisations. From one point of view, the MJC is justified in using revenue raised for its own religious activities by issuing *halaal* certificates. The danger lies in that it seems to have become dependent on this revenue, which is presently affecting its judgement on the way forward. The MJC is certainly not alone in this regard, as other organisations also raise funds through the certificates. SANHA will have to deal with this is an open, transparent and responsible manner.

Muslim leadership organisations are also working out their relationship with the country as a whole and the new government in particular. This question provides an important indicator as to the broad trends shaping leadership organisations with regard to local political organisations. The question is not confined to politics. Social change in South Africa affects how ordinary Muslims react to Islamic issues. In particular, the *halaal* issue is a paradigmatic one for Muslim leadership organisations in the country. It raises questions about the social mobility of Muslims and its consequences for practising religion. Secondly, it raises questions about the particular extent of religious leadership and their competing jurisprudence. Thirdly, it raises questions about globalisation and which symbols Muslims will take into the future.

Sources

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank the following for their time, cooperation, and willingness to be interviewed: Shaykhs Achmet Siddiq, Ebrahim Gabriels and Mr. Yayha Adams (10

November, 1998); Ihsaan Behaardien (17 November, 1998); Goolam Logday (discussion 22 November, 1998). Several unsuccessful attempts were made to contact the IUC.

Turning to the core: Sufism on the Rise?

The broad story of Europe is familiar to us. With the rise of science, rationalism and industrialization, the Church lost its undisputed authority in society. From the time that the sixteenth-century Polish student Copernicus demonstrated a competing theory of the earth and the solar system, the Church had to give way to other systems of truth. This did not, as it is popularly believe, lead to the immediate elimination of religion. Rather, religion was redefined as a private and personal matter. With the progressive secularization of society, moreover, some Europeans and Americans turned increasing to the mystical and spiritual foundations of religions, particularly eastern religions.

Thus, it is not suprising to find that for most of the 20th century, Western scholars of Islam were fascinated with Sufism at the same time as Muslims rejected it, or at least suspected that it was the root cause of our problems. Since Muhammad Abduh characterized Sufism as an innovation (*bid`ah*), many others have followed. Generally, Sufism was regarded as the source of superstition among Muslims and their continuing disrepute in the modern world. This rejection was matched by its popularity among those in the West looking for spiritual fulfillment.

It seems that we are beginning to see a reversal among Muslims, which is now palpable in South Africa as well. Sufism has always been around, but the proliferation of books on Sufism is quite remarkable and likewise the increasing number of circles of *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah). In the Western Cape, in particular, the two community radio stations have had regular and open discussions on Sufism. The hosts on these programmes are deeply involved in promoting Sufism in the Cape, and offer advice and guidance over the air. Dr. Yusuf da Costa and Imam Hasan Walele, to name only the most prominent, have become the mentors for many seeking spiritual guidance. Both are now Naqshbandi teachers, even though Dr. da Costa previously also had permission (*ijazah*) to initiate into the Qadiri order.

The Internet has also witnessed a proliferation of sites too many to mention. However, Cape Town's Azzavia webpage celebrates the long Sufi tradition of the mosque, as well as the 1997 visit of Shaykh Alawi Maliki from Medina. Like the Jamiat website mentioned elsewhere in this review, the Azzavia is worth a visit (home.pix.za/mf/mfj1/). It seems that quite a number of people are turning to the Web to satisfy their mystical quests.

The Web is supplementing the regular means of attending *dhikr* circles, and pledging allegiance to the Sufi master.

It must be mentioned, of course, that Sufism has never completely disappeared from Muslim society. In order to understand its present appeal, however, it is important to remember that Sufism enjoyed a particular location and appeal in the immediate past. This is true of other Muslim countries as is it is true of South Africa. In South Africa, Sufism was the mainstay of Indian Muslims who continued their links with the great saints in the past. In this regard, the Qadari-Ashrafi under the leadership of Qasim Zalgonker order in Grassy Park provides both a spiritual link and an ethnic identity for its followers. Also, the Barelwi tradition in India had tenaciously held on the celebration of the Sufi saints against the criticisms of Deoband-linked ulama. In South Africa, this meant the popularity of Sufism among prominent Memon traders and working class Muslims, particularly around the celebration of the death anniversaries of Soffie Saheb and Basdha Peer. The appeal of Sufism was thus restricted to ethnic identities and particular advocacy groups. According to Hasan Walele, this particular focus of Sufi politics, and its overtly Indian character, had not endeared him to it.

In the Western Cape, Sufism had a grand list of visionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries and the pilgrimage to their shrines nurtured the link with the mystical tradition of Islam. However, here too, one may speak with difficulty about a truly mystical tradition. Sufi practices had become part of the identity of the community in the throes of slavery and second-class status. Qadiri practices pervaded Muslim practices on Thursday night *dhikr* meetings, but without the spiritual linkages of shaykh and murids. In fact, a person attending a particular mosque was called a murid of the mosque. This shows to what extent Sufism had become integrated into the general religious life of Islam in the Western Cape.

The quest for spirituality in the new Sufism seems different, but not easy to define. What is certainly true is that, throughout the country, Sufi practices are no longer criticized for being bid`ah (religious innovation). Certain individuals from South Africa have come into contact with a variety of orders and have founded circles and in some cases small lodges. Whereas previously, the Sufi family in Durban with the Chisti order was the most prominent, we now have Naqshbanidis (Da Costa and Walele in Cape Towns), Qadiris in Johannesburg (Chopdat), Durban (Mawlana Palmer) and Cape Town, and two Alawi groups in Cape Town (Mahdi Hendricks and Seraj and Ahmed Hendricks). There are many others as well, too many to mention in a short review.

The proliferation of orders does not mean the emergence of distinctive traditions. There is a general trend of sharing and participating in the conventions of the orders. This has broken down barriers and also the identities promoted by the various orders. If one looks at the popular books of Shaykh Fadlullah Haeri, for instance, the focus rests on consciousness and awareness on one's spirituality, and very little on the identity of the group as such. At a public level, moreover, a teacher would often put together *dhikr* formulas from a number of groups, depending on the needs of the audience. A second new trend noticeable is that Sufi initiation does not make the almost legendary demands on initiates and even the principal disciples (*khalifahs*). Waiting three years at the door of the Shaykh is not the usual prospect of a would-be seeker. It seems that the Sufi teachers and orders are doing everything in their power to make their spiritual disciplines accessible to Muslims in general.

There seems to be a tendency to break the old boundaries, and a general awareness that the earlier rigours of Sufi discipline should be relaxed. However, from a broad sociological point of view, we also notice some other developments at work. The increasing turn to Sufism comes at the back of a resurgence of political and social interpretation of Islam which began in earnest from the 1970s. Is this a sign that the tables are turning against this more sociological and political approach? Is the turn to Sufism matching the Western turn to mysticism? I would venture to suggest that is precisely the case, even though many Muslims would not like to admit it. The primacy of experience helps to overcome the individual and social problems.

There is certainly a turn towards the experiential dimension of Islam. Even the arch opponents of certain forms of Sufism, the Deobandis, are now **publicly** embracing aspects of Sufism. *Dikhr* circles are not uncommon as religious scholars hear the needs of ordinary Muslims. Many who had been at the forefront on the social and political mission of Islam are turning toward the mystical core of Islam, the relation with God and true self. The most prominent person in this regard is Dr. Yusuf da Costa, but there are others in Kwazulu-Natal as well. This does not mean, of course, that there is a conflict between mystical Islam and political/social/legal Islam. What is clear is that there is an implicit re-ordering of priorities and emphases.

This reordering of priorities and emphases is matched by an unwillingness to deal directly with the earlier suspicions and criticisms. The great control of the shaykhs over blind followers, the irrationalism of some of the religious claims, are examples of issues that have not been dealt with. In fact, we may even see their re-emergence in unlikely places. In this

regard, it seems that the turn to Sufism may be less conscious than I have given it credit. The awareness of symbols, their elusiveness, and the search for the core needs a greater sense of alertness. The return of Sufism is populist, avoiding the difficult questions that face Muslims at the end of the 20th century. In this regard, it is following the tradition of the early Sufis. One exception, certainly in South Africa, is the approach of the Shaykh Siraj Hendricks. In his address to the recent Sufi conference in Washington DC, he challenged the gathering to the plight of women in Islamic societies. Let us hope that this is a good sign for future developments.

There is a palpable turn towards Sufism in South Africa today. Such a turn should be applauded for the hope that it provides for individuals and societies in the throes of change. The tradition of Sufism has much to offer in this regard. However, it is an option that should be taken with both eyes open, and not in a blind leap of faith in the unknown. The Prophet is told in the Qur'an, "This is my way: resting upon conscious insight accessible to reason. Iam calling you all to God - I and they who follow me. (Qur'an 12: 108).

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Imam Hasan Walele for his inteview conducted with him on 16 November, 1998. I have also used material from previous intereviews conducted with prominent Sufi personalities in the country, including: Prof. Yusuf da Costa, Shaykh Siraj Hendricks.