Muslim Identity Constructions in Soweto

Shahid Mathee

The question of identity is of central importance in South Africa after 1994. One reason for this is that South Africa is a country with so many diverse peoples stemming from different cultures and adhering to a plethora of political and ideological tendencies even among the historically oppressed and dispossessed masses. Apartheid had created or inspired a sense of Black 'sameness' among all South Africans who were not White. It is however not true to claim that out of the legacy of a common suffering under Apartheid and the subsequent struggle against it, there emerged a common identity. It is clear that in recent years, the concept of identity has had its corset removed and hangs loosely and precariously in the domain of culture and politics (Bilgrami, 1992: 821).

Muslims in South Africa, whether they see themselves as Muslim South Africans or South African Muslims, are an integral part of an identity search in democratic South Africa. This reality necessitated empirical research to gauge the genesis and growth of Muslim culture and identity in the "new"[1] South Africa. The SANPAD project set itself to this task. As Muslims in South Africa do not belong to a single cultural group or social class, any meaningful research intent on understanding Muslim identity had to be conducted among Muslims from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the context of their rich local histories.

The first "South African" Muslims were Amboyan Mardyckers from the Southeast Asian islands arriving at the Cape in 1658 (Tayob, 1999: 3). The first mosque was established in 1797. The next big wave of Muslims, with a totally different history and culture came in 1860. Thier arrival followed the abolishment of slavery in 1834[2] and they were indentured workers brought from India primarily to work on the sugar plantations in present day Kwazulu-Natal.[3] The British allowed a smaller number of "passenger" traders[4] to follow partly to serve the indentured workers (Tayob, 1999: 61). The earliest mosque in the Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek (Z.A.R.) capital of Pretoria dates to 1887 and by then the traders had established religious structures (ibid, 63).

The indigenous Black Muslim people of South Africa are all converts to Islam over the past forty years. Although there were other Black Muslims in South Africa, they were however not indigenous. Most of them came from Malawi and Mozambique primarily as migrant labourers working on the South African mines. They did not integrate with the local Black population to the extent of propagating Islam to them. They practiced their religious rituals in their small groups as seen in the Mawlid celebrations, for example, held in the forests of the eastern Transvaal (Tayob, 1999: 4).

In the absence of an official and accurate census, it is difficult to say how many Black indigenous Muslims there are and during which period over the past forty years conversion has been the highest.

SOWETO

Soweto is an acronym that stands for South Western Townships. It was established in the early 1960's as the official and racially designated residential area for Black people, primarily to clear up places such as Sophiatown in central Johannesburg for Whites. Over the years Soweto became a home for Black people from all over South Africa primarily seeking employment in the economic hub of the country.

My decision to do research among Muslims in Soweto was both personal and objective. From a personal point of view, I was driven to find out more about Muslims in Soweto because of my own geographical proximity yet cultural remoteness from Soweto. I was born in a small so-called Coloured Township Riverlea, barely ten kilometers from Soweto. Apartheid has been relatively successful in creating boundaries and stereotypes of people. I was reluctant and feared going to Black Townships and had only been twice to Soweto before, twenty-three years ago. Being part of this research project as a Muslim and an aspiring academic I was interested in seeing how Islamic identity was made and shaped in South Africa's largest Township.

Research Locations

I conducted my research – using the interview method – at three different locations in Soweto: the Juma Mosque in Dlamini, the al-Shahādah Center in Emdeni and with a Muslim Family in Greenvillage.

The Juma Mosque

This is the only mosque in the whole of Soweto situated in the Dlamini district just off the Main Road that runs through Soweto. The mosque was completed and inaugurated in 1985. The opening was a big occasion attended by Winnie Mandela,[5] ex-wife of Nelson Mandela. I had planned initially to do the interviews at the mosque only but was deterred by the reception that I encountered. The *imām* was suspicious and reluctant from the onset. The September 11 attacks had just taken place three months earlier and he feared that there were plots against Islam and Muslims of which researchers – even Muslim ones – were part. He did though arrange a meeting with some of the individuals who frequented the mosque. However, an atmosphere of uneasiness, suspicion and mistrust pervaded the process and was clearly expressed by the fact that out of ten present, only two agreed to do interviews. I was told that Muslims of Indian origin – I looked Indian - were always conducting interviews and speaking in the name of Black Muslims. The notion of a global conspiracy against Islam compounded by local Muslim racial tensions rendered research at the mosque somewhat difficult. However, this discussion was important for understanding attitudes among African Muslims towards Muslims of other racial and ethnic backgrounds particularly Indian Muslims.

In addition to the mosque, there are many Islamic centers throughout Soweto. They are found in areas such as White City, Meadowlands, Dube, Orlando, Protea and Naledi[6] and play a much more active and immediate role in the lives of Soweto Muslims than what the mosque does. The reasons for this are geographical, economic and political. Soweto is massive and the mosque being far from many areas makes travelling to the mosque time-consuming and an expensive unaffordable task. It is difficult if not impossible for most

people to go to the mosque daily or even once a week for the Friday prayers. The centers also serve as a base for the different groups with their diverse ideological and theological views and provide them with a platform to articulate their discourse.

Al-Shahādah Center

Given the reception at the mosque I then moved to the al-Shahādah center where most of the research was conducted. Situated in Emdeni the center is about six kilometers from the mosque. The center was established in 1992 and is headed by a very influential woman[7] who is seen as the mother of the center and its children. The reception here was entirely different. From the beginning I was a welcomed and received with enthusiasm, with people ready – even eager – to be interviewed. People were open and co-operative. And yet even in this case the people had defined their Muslim identity in contrast to the Indian Other. Most of the interviews were conducted with people that belonged to the center.

A Muslim Family

Finally, I interviewed a family consisting of a brother and sister that enjoyed a unique history. They – unlike all of the interviewees at al-Shahādah - had not converted to Islam, but were born and raised as Muslims. Their grandfather, the first to embrace Islam, had worked for Indian Muslims. The siblings' attitude towards Indian Muslims was remarkably different and as such they presented very different views from that of the people at al-Shahādah center. As children they had attended school and *madrasah* with Indian children and currently the seventeen year old brother is schooling at a Muslim

school financed, administrated and predominantly attended by Muslims of Indian origin. This does not mean that they had discarded their African culture and adopted "Indian Islam". They lived in Soweto and their social lifestyle in the broader sense was not different from those at the mosque and the al-Shahada center. The sister does not wear *hijāb*.

The consciousness of being different from Indian Muslims was a local reaction. Many of the youth at the al-Shahādah center were much more conscious of their Islam through the literature they read, their religious programmes every Sunday and during Ramadan, and their adherence to religious attire. They wore the "Islamic dress" called *kurta*, *jalabiya* and turbans, read Sayyid Qutb and Mawdūdi and participated in religio-cultural events with Muslims from the Malay community. In this sense, they exhibited Asian traits. The teacher, and official *Imam* at the center, was a Ugandan Muslim and a strict follower of the *Salafī* School. The youth of al-Shahādah criticized and even ridiculed those Black Muslims who were too close to the Hanafī Indians. However they themselves were practicing, both in their discourse and paraphernalia, a well-entrenched South African Islam that is shared by Indians and Malays alike, albeit in different degrees.

In juxtaposing the three case studies it is possible to gauge how the different experiences contribute and influence the shaping and making of Muslim identity. That Black Muslims define their Muslim identity in contrast and perhaps opposition to Muslims of Indian origin is not necessarily indicative of racism and racial hatred. Whatever influenced their attitudes and identities were conditioned by the circumstances of the time.

For whilst Black Muslims have many grievances, rightfully and justifiably so, against specifically Indian Muslims there is no boycott and severing of ties with "the other" Muslims[8]. Rather, there is a strong effort to assert an independent and developing Black Muslim identity deeply rooted within the African culture, history, society and experience. The discourse of Simphiwe Sesanti from the Eastern Cape is a clear example. A committed Africanist and devout Muslim Sesanti espouses an African Islam, spearheaded by vibrant and creative Black Muslims independent of Indian Muslims financially and religiously. His discourse, though very critical of Indian Muslim practice, is not a hostile one, although some Indian Muslims do accuse it of being so.

The development of an independent African Muslim identity is articulated in a plethora of ways both in and outside of the Islamic legacy. For example African Muslims may adopt a different school of jurisprudence (*madhhab*) within Sunni Islam or embrace the Shi'ī theological and legal School. This is in opposition to most Indians, who in the north are followers of the Hanafi School and Malays who follow the Shafi'i School. As an example of diversity within unity, Black Muslim identity may thus be expressed in the adoption of the Maliki or Ja'fari Shi'ī schools, although some Black Muslims also embrace the Ḥanafī, Shāfi'ī and Salafī schools of their Indian counterparts.

Muslim identity constructions in democratic South Africa are therefore both complex and challenging. In South Africa – as elsewhere in the world – questioning Muslim identity generates a multiplicity of responses. Yet, I am confident – from the interviews –

Comment [AKT1]: Are they all becoming South African Muslims? Joking?

that there is a search for a pervasive and all-inclusive Muslim identity in South Africa. It is my view that commitment to Islam will shape that emerging identity. For Islam, as Bilgrami (1992: 832) says: "…has recognizable historical sources and has a vital function in a people's struggle to achieve a sense of identity and self-respect in the face of that history and the perceptions formed by it." In spite of the contrasts between Black and Indian Muslims, there is a type of South African Muslim identity in the making. Not only will Muslims search for that all-inclusive identity but will also, in the words of Rashid Omar, hopefully engage the South African democratic process more positively and strategically (2003: 9).

References:

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Endnotes:

[1] As a Leftist, I place "new" in inverted commas given my ideological and political critique of the new dispensation that was born out of what I regard as a seriously flawed process of negotiations at Codesa which compromised the aspirations of the oppressed peoples of this land.

[2] It could also be argued that people were brought to South Africa as "indentured workers" in the aftermath of the failed mutiny in India against British rule in 1857.

[3] Natal was annexed by the British only in 1843 and thereafter declared a British colony like the Cape. Whites of Dutch descent, after a short stay in Natal, then moved further north and east in order to avoid British rule. For this very same reason, they left the Cape as Voortrekers. In 1852 and 1854 they founded the ZAR and the Oranje Republiek respectively.

[4] Muslims from the first group (labourers) were Urdu speaking and up till today – with many Hindus - are mostly from the working class. The "passenger" traders were in the main Gujarati speaking and played a pivotal role in the articulation and practice of a peculiar political and theological ethic of Islam.

[5] Winnie Mandela's presence at the opening of the mosque was indicative of the identity politics that naturally manifested itself, especially in the domain of religion in the Black Townships. Some of the churches in Soweto had long been symbols of the religious resistance against Apartheid. Whether the mosque was expected to play such a role or actually did is a case study on its own.

[6] In Naledi there is the al-Ḍuḥā center.

[7] Female leadership in poor communities is relatively frequent. Powerful women exercise real influence not only over their families but equally over the extended family, the neighbours and even the immediate community. The lady, called *Apha,* heads al-Shahādah center and played a seminal role in peoples lives even before she embraced Islam. She informed me that before becoming a Muslim she was a reborn Christian. On that occasion she "led" many of her family members and friends with her into that branch of Christianity. On becoming Muslim she did so once again, with many of them following her into her new faith. Her nephew and some of her grandchildren – whose parents are not Muslim – live with her as Muslims and are active members at the center. She enjoys the support of her non-Muslim mother – morally and financially - over and above that of some of her siblings who are committed Christians.

[8] There is a miniscule of Black Muslim voices calling for a severing of ties. However that campaign is headed literally by about twenty individuals whose most serious course of action against Indian Muslims to date was to march on *'Īd* day to the Union buildings delivering a memorandum to President Thabo Mbeki complaining of the poor treatment of Indian Muslims towards Black Muslims. See *Al-Qalam*, March 2000, pg. 3