

**Academic Research on Islam and Muslims in South Africa  
within a Democratic Environment**

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**1. Changing Conditions**

South Africa's Higher Academic environment has radically changed since the apartheid years. Tertiary institutions have amalgamated, the departmental walls in some institutions have come down, and staff members have either been redeployed into other schools/units within the new system or retrenched. Traditional Departments of Arabic and Islamic Studies have been amongst the many that have been affected and this resulted in the disappearance of these water-tight, ghettoized departments. Some staff retired, others were retrenched and others simply assumed newly created academic environments.

**1.1 Structures and Shifts**

At the University of KwaZulu Natal, formerly the University of Durban-Westville, a School of Religion and Culture was formed under Professors Suleiman Dangor and Muhsin Ebrahim, then formed a partnership with colleagues specializing in other religious traditions and cultures which Dr. Ayoub Jadwat, a former colleague was retasked to the School of Languages and Literature. At the University of South Africa Professor Yousuf Dadoo and colleagues, formerly of the Department of Semitics, was moved to the School of Languages and Literary Studies; this new outfit also accommodated Professor Gerrie Lübbe and his fellow staff members. It however appears that their departmental walls were not completely destroyed; only restructured to accommodate a new one that was named the 'Department of Classics, Near and Far Eastern and Religious Studies.' An awkward structure indeed, which leads one to ask why the 'Religious Studies' section has not been housed in the newly established School of Religion and Theology!

At the University of the Western Cape, Associate Professor Yasien Mohamed alone holds the 'Arabic' within the Department of Foreign Languages; two of his colleagues were part of the group entrenched. While changes were abound in the north the south remained relatively under the bed. At the University of Cape Town, Mr. Aslam Farouk-Alli, long time member of the Center for Contemporary Islam, has left academia to take a full-time posting at foreign affairs. The country's north however, met with restructurings felt across the country. As of 2005, the University of Johannesburg, amalgamate of Rand Afrikaans University and Witswaterstrand Technikon, will see fundamental staff restructuring.

**1.2 Challenges faced by the academics and researchers**

The above scenario shows the precarious placement of academics; challenged, but not insurmountably so. Outside restructuring reshuffles an array of other factors affected

performance; demanding teaching loads, the increase in student volume, diminishing budgets for collecting data for research papers and attending conferences and workshops, and the new personal management systems that have been introduced in the academic arena to monitor the output of the academics and researchers, all widened academic output.

Despite these constraints, there has been a outpouring of international recognition, which for some is indicative of this generally high standard. Academics and researchers were invited to write chapters for books or articles for special journal issues and invited to seminars and conferences to participate in panel discussion. **The different academic fora have played a crucial role in linking academics and researchers.** At this juncture, it is prudent to relate some of the academic seminars and conference that had taken place during the earlier years of South Africa's democracy.

## **2. Conferences, Seminars & Workshops**

Before narrating and discussing in brief some of the conferences, seminars and workshops that had taken place between 1994 and 2004, it should be stated that this essay will only look at a selected number of such meetings and that another paper will have to give attention to the nature, structure and results of these meetings over the past 10 years.

In 1994, a few weeks prior to the first democratic elections, the Tricentenary Committee of Islam in South Africa had organized an exhibition to showcase the history of Islam and the contribution that had been made by Muslims. Lectures of a popular nature also took place during and post this event. Later during that year, the University of South Africa's Iqbal Jhazbhai and the USA-based Institute of Peace Studies with the assistance of Tamara Sonn organized a conference in Pretoria; 'Islam and Civil Society in South Africa.' This conference brought together many South African academics and researchers as well as some Americans. Richard Martin, John Esposito and John Obert were among these. This was however, not the first such academic conference, Ebrahim Moosa, Abdul-Kader Tayob and D.J. Dreyer co-hosted an important conference on the 'Approaches to the Study of Islam' in 1991 at the University of Cape Town. And this, in turn, was followed by an International Academic Seminar jointly organized by a delegation from the National University of Malaysia led by Professor Tan Sri Ismail Hussein and myself, then still posted at the University of the Western Cape's in 1993.

**It could moreover be stated that the UNISA-IPS conference was the first to be held during South Africa's first year of democracy. In a sense this reinforced the notion that South African academics and researchers successfully maintained sound academic standards and moreover are still effectively able to contribute at an international level.** This event was later followed by an International Islamic Education Workshop hosted by Maulana Ali Adam – the director of the Islamia College in Cape Town, during September 1996. A few years after another was organized by members of the Centre for Training & Development, a South African Muslim NGO, together with the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Johannesburg during April 1999. Murshid Davids and Ahmad Vawda, the executive members of the mentioned NGO, spearheaded

this significant venture. Throughout the 10 year period many other popular conferences and seminars followed. The annual Hajj conference was organized by members of the Pretoria Muslim community and the Islamic Medical Association hosted its annual conferences in different part of the country.

During 2004, Muslims hosted various types of meetings. Early in the year the National Education Conference was organized in KwaZulu Natal by the Association of Muslim Private Schools. This was later followed by a series of country wide Harun Yahya Seminars. In September the Murabitun Worldwide Movement organized an Islamic Youth conference. Simultaneously, the Islamic Movement held its first national conference. This was also complemented by the Bicentennial of the Unbanning of Islam gatherings in different parts of South Africa. And between the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> November the Centre for International Political Studies at the University of Pretoria under Professor Hussein Solomons organized an international conference around the theme: 'Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> century'. In addition to these South African based conferences and gatherings, South African academics, scholars and leaders have also been invited to participate in international conferences and make presentations. Ms. Fatima Khan, president of the Muslim Women's Federation, for example, made such a presentation at the joint Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and World Islamic Call Society (of Libya) conference in Kampala, Uganda during the latter part of 2004.

Whilst the organizers and coordinators academic events should be lauded for undertaking commendable efforts, a major short-coming has been that most of them have not secured the papers of the presenters in the form of conference proceedings. As such historical record, but for newspaper reports on the event that had taken place, that can help to assist with insight into the nature of the debates that took place during these seminars, workshops and conferences. Some presenters however took the initiative of reworking and revising their papers after these events and had them published in noteworthy national and international journals.

### **3. Researchers & Research Projects:**

The various academic and semi-academic meetings organized in South Africa throughout the 1990s and beyond the millenium, and the various journals have been the crucial fora by which the academics and researchers availed their research for scrutiny. Researchers on Islam and Muslims in South Africa have actively participated not only in specially organized conferences and seminars on Islam and Muslims, neither have they only written articles for journals that specialize in Islam (such as Pakistan's *Islamic Studies* or Britain's *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*). They have been involved in fora organized by other disciplines that have an interest in Islam and Muslims. Here the Political Science and Sociology conference fora and journals such as *Journal for the Study of Religion* and *Canadian Historical Journal* come to mind as alternative avenues via which they were able to make their ideas and findings known.

The research that has been undertaken thus far on Islam and Muslims is diverse and fascinating. **Many new researchers have emerged during the past few years and this**

**gives added support to the idea that ‘Islamic studies’ research is a viable and relevant area to pursue.** Individuals specializing in sociology, political science, history and other disciplines have come on board to investigate issues that are topical, relevant and informative. Whilst it might be important to review the works of some of the more experienced academics and researchers, it becomes necessary to make reference to the new cadre of scholars that have been researching and making their findings known through different projects. In fact, there is a need to critically assess the ‘old guard’ and question the quality of their input and the extent of their influence. For example, one may wish to ask whether Professor Ebrahim Moosa or for that matter Professor Abdul-Kader Tayob’s writings have been influential and to what extent have their research impacted upon local scholarship; then their works can also be compared to those of Professor Suleiman Dangor and Professor Yousuf Dadoo.

This aside, when scanning the broad research canvas there are basically two groups of researchers that come to the fore; the first are those who can be categorized as outsiders and the second are those that can be considered insiders. The latter term is used for those who are born and naturalized South African researchers, and the former term is used for those who are foreigners who have shown a keen interest about Islam and Muslims in South Africa. This essay briefly reflects upon the outsiders and then deals with the insiders. And since it will be difficult to list each and every researcher, the essay will confine itself to a select few.

### 3.1 Outsiders:

South African Muslims are, according to Tamara Sonn, ‘a very visible minority’ (2002). They have been described in this way because of their (full) participation in the all sectors and aspects of South African life; and despite their multigenred nature they have generally expressed with one voice their disdain against the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, the USA attack of Iraq and the atrocities that Israel has meted out against the Palestinians. Their vocal stand against numerous issues in the socio-political and economic arena has attracted the attention of scores of researchers from within the Muslim heartlands and from the Anglo-American and European world. In fact, academics and researchers from the latter world have not just shown an interest but have proactively engaged South African researchers in conducting joint research projects. One such project was devised and spearheaded by researchers such as Ursula Günther and Ingrid Niehaus from the Hamburg University in Germany. Professor Abdul-Kader Tayob and Professor Yusuf Waghid have partnered with these and other scholars in such projects. Results of these joint research projects have appeared in *Journal for the Study of Religion* and other publications. Both Günther and Niehaus have also published articles on Muslims in South Africa in other lesser known journals such as *Al-Fadchr* and books such as the *Yearbook of Sociology*.

Their works have been complemented by the research work of two French-based researchers, namely Eric Germain and Samadia Sadouni. Eric Germaine leads the pack in having done sterling archival work, having published of two lengthy and detailed articles; one that discussed “L’Afrique du sud dans la politique ‘panislamique’ de l’Empire

ottoman” and it appeared in *Turcica* (1999). However, one looks forward to his revised thesis that will appear in book form soon. Whilst Germain looked at ‘Malay Islam’, his colleague researched the ‘Indian Muslims.’ She has however also given special attention to Deedat as a dawah worker and Muslim proselytizer; refer to her article in *Islam et societies du sub-saharan Africa* (1998).

Complementing their contributions is the work of Sindre Bangstad who completed an MA degree at the University of Bergen (Norway) and published two separate articles on the Muslims in the Western Cape; one of these appeared in the *Journal for the Study of Religion in Africa* (2004). From North America, there are the few articles of Tamar Sonn and of late the chapter on South African Muslims by Quinn, an unknown researcher. Two scholars from Malaysia also made their input; the one is AB Mohd Zin and Hanapi Dollah who are attached to the National University of Malaysia; both published their research in Malay based journals, namely *SARI* (1999) and *Jurnal Usuluddin* (1999).

Apart from the foreigners partaking in the research projects in SA or writing about SA Muslims, there have also been a coterie of SA Muslim scholars that have moved abroad and contributing in their capacity as researchers, translators and popular scholars. One of the lesser known from within this group is Muneer Farid (who hails from the well known Soofi family in Durban). He has been involved with scholars such as Hamid Algar in important classical translation projects that are at times not regarded as significant scholarly contributions in certain academic circles. Nevertheless, he has been amongst the few that has quietly been translating texts, for which he has become known within scholarly fraternities that have come to recognize this as an important skill. In fact, one may compare his contributions to the plethora of local efforts by untrained theologians that have tried their hand at translating some of these important and relevant texts. For example, Maulana Desai’s translations come to mind as one such contribution that needs to be reworked to meet the academic translation standards. Rashied Omar joined Notre Dame University more than three years ago and has produced useful work on religious pluralism and other related themes. It is assumed that he will be producing more works during his stint in the academic field. And another lesser-known South African who seems to have done a thorough study of the Islamic sciences is Michael Mumisa, though he has shifted to Birmingham University in the UK. He has written a few books on Islam and commented on and written about SA Muslims. However, it is not only on the academic plane where SA Muslims have been stimulating debates and been taken seriously. A popular scholar, Sa’dullah Khan, has continued to write from his base in California and has constantly kept in touch with SA through his columns in Muslim-controlled media. In writing about these last few scholars, one is reminded that they were once “insiders” operating within the country’s borders. They have now spread their wings to become a part of this cadre of outsider scholars.

### 3.2 Insiders:

As already mentioned, a number of South African scholars have made outstanding contributions in the research arena. Some of them like Achmat Davids have passed on. Others have moved to better job opportunities abroad, such as Professor Farid Esack who

is presently at Xavier University in the USA, as well as a number of others previously referred to. In this section one's attention turns to a coterie of researchers that have slowly been making their mark and produced noteworthy research projects.

When one scans academic research, one name that persists is Associate Professor Goolam Vahed, a historian attached to the University of KwaZulu Natal. He has been at the forefront of historical research based upon extensive and valuable archival research. He has, for example, written a series of related articles on Indian Muslims that have challenged the writings of Professor Suleiman Dangor and others who saw themselves as specialists on South African Muslims. It is beyond the scope of this paper to list all the journals that he contributed to during the past five years; suffice it to say, these were ample. Complementing Vahed's historical excursions into the Indian Muslims' past, is the work of Rehana Ebr-Vally who is a social anthropologist at the University of Witwatersrand. She has tackled the Indian Muslim presence from a different dimension and has also made invaluable additions to the field. Apart from these notable contributors there has been a cadre of postgraduate students whose research concentrated on aspects of Muslims in South Africa. For a list of their names, the ongoing bibliographical compilation of this researcher as well as prior editors of ARISA, may be consulted.

In Cape Town, Aslam Farouk, Sa'diyyah Shaikh, Gabeba Baderoon and Shamil Jeppie have been looking at various issues Muslims in South Africa and particularly in the Western Cape. As already indicated, Shamil Jeppie has been deeply involved with the exciting Timbuctou Manuscripts Project; however, he has made a name for himself on commenting and writing about contemporary aspects of the Muslim community. Aslam Farouk, who has recently completed his MA studies at UCT, has also been roped into the Timbuktu project as an assistant, and has also contributed to Richard Martin's *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Sa'diyyah Shaikh also contributed to one of these volumes and has also been acknowledged by Omid Safi's study titled *Progressive Islam* as one of the progressive Muslims alongside Ebrahim Moosa and Farid Esack. She seems to have made her input on Muslim feminism and is presently researching on the same theme in South Africa. However, she is not the only Cape Townian based female that has been doing some sterling research work; there is also Gabeba Baderoon, who completed her doctorate degree at Sheffield University and had won the Daimler-Crysler Award for her outstanding poetry.

**Comment [A1]:** Give correct title

This discussion would be remiss without mentioning others who have touched on Islam and Muslims. Associate Professor Aslam Fataar and Professor Najma Moosa, who are attached to the University of the Western Cape, have made significant input to the fields of education and law respectively. Their contributions have no doubt built on the works of earlier scholars such as the late Associate Professor Mogamad Ajam and Professor Ebrahim Moosa in the afore mentioned fields.

#### 4. Conclusion

Research both in and outside South Africa about the Muslims within its borders has been ongoing. There has been a resurgence of interest in Islam and Muslims in South Africa.

Scandinavian, American, West European and South East Asian students have done laudable work in publicizing their individual work via chapters, articles and conference papers. However, these scholars have complemented what had been started by individuals such as Achmat Davids and others. It is assumed that research on Islam in this part of the world will remain of interest since South Africa has been playing a significant role on the continent and the region and has shown its mettle in the various international bodies. Since it has a fairly liberal constitution that protects the religious minority rights, others have envied South African Muslims in doing well on the whole, in relation to the new legal system; here and there were hiccups but these were overcome.

Pull Quotes:

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