

South Africa
ABDULKADER TAYOB

Until recently, observers were generally unaware of the Islamic presence in southern Africa. It was assumed that Islam, in its southern spread, stopped somewhere around Lake Malawi. Little was known about the arrival of Muslims in the slave hulls of colonialism and during nineteenth-century international trade in sugar, gold and British manufactured goods. This obscurity changed dramatically when groups of Muslims joined anti-apartheid demonstrations in the 1980s, which the international media beamed across the world. Since then, Islam has taken its small but influential place in the media mosaic of southern Africa. In some cases Muslims are important social and political leaders in the region, emerging as champions of dramatic campaigns.



Imams in Capetown, 1991

Islam in South Africa consists of a number of communities that together constitute a broad Islamic presence in the region. In spite of the 'universal nature' of Islam, one which Muslims certainly espouse and experience, plural identities are deeply inscribed in religious institutions and rituals. Muslims in South Africa constitute a cosmopolitan group consisting of a variety of ethnicities, language groups, and social classes. These were formed by a combination of willing and unwilling immigrants during various periods of colonial rule and apartheid, and more recently, indigenous peoples who have converted to Islam. These identities are historically unequal: The economic support of Indians for mosques, in alliance with a particular religious outlook, dominates Islam in South Africa, but other identities continue to thrive. Ironically, the particular history of South Africa, especially its apartheid conundrum, gave concrete shape to an Islamic universalism with two broad tendencies. One supported the nation-building exercise of the new South Africa; the other espoused an exclusionist Islamic position. Both, in one way or another, placed an emphasis on relationships among the local communities, the nation and the international Muslim *umma*.

Muslims first arrived on the southern tip of Africa in 1658 from the Indonesian archipelago. For the next 150 years, a steady stream of political exiles, convicts and slaves from the

Transitional Islamic Identities in Southern Africa

islands of Southeast Asia and some parts of India, established the foundations of what came to be called the 'Cape Malays'. Shaykh Yusuf, a political exile banished to the Cape in 1694, has become a founding symbol for this first Muslim community in South Africa. However, Muslims were only allowed to establish mosques and schools in the nineteenth century, over a hundred years after Shaykh Yusuf's landing. Since then, however, they have become one of the most significant groups in Cape Town. A second distinct group of Muslims arrived from India from 1860 onwards as British indentured labour on sugar plantations, and a little later as independent traders, merchants and hawkers. The latter contributed to the building of mosques, schools and cemeteries, and have since lived mainly, but not exclusively, in the northern and eastern regions of the country. Muslims from further north, particularly Malawi, but also Zanzibar, form the third component of South African Muslims. Although less influential than the Malays or Indians, they have also contributed to the particular ethos of Islam in South Africa. Finally, conversion has formed another distinct group: During the nineteenth century, the Cape Town region witnessed significant conversion of indigenous people who were assimilated into the Cape Malay community. Missionary activity since the 1950s has led to a more distinctive and notable presence of indigenous African Muslims in the townships of South Africa. They constitute the fourth visible group of the heterogeneous Muslim presence.

South African Muslims represent only 0.2 percent of the total population. While Muslims themselves had given their numbers as close to one million, the last government statistics published in 1991 recorded only 324,400. Nevertheless, Muslims in South Africa are a highly visible urban group concentrated in the major cities of Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg. They are now well represented in government and in professions such as medicine, accountancy and law. The economic base in the past had been business and trade among Indians, and building and craftsmanship among the Cape Malays. They have come a long way from being slaves, indentured labourers and hawkers. Muslims from Malawi, however, have been less economically successful as labourers in factories, farms, and forestry.

In 1922, the Jamiatul Ulama Transvaal was formed to represent the aspirations of imams and religious scholars. Since then, similar associations have followed, representing different regions and religious orientations. These have played a significant role in promoting Islam. A number of welfare and youth groups also serve the community and express a variety of orientations among Muslims. Sometimes, they represent particular political approaches, such as with the Claremont Muslim Youth Association of 1957 or the Call of Islam in 1983.

The role and place of Muslim women in South African society should be mentioned separately. In the western Cape, they contribute significantly to the financial well-being of the household. This was the case in Durban and Johannesburg as well, but most often in the context of family businesses in which women's contributions were not clearly reflected or acknowledged. Most Muslim homes do

not strictly define gender spheres, but men and women generally gravitate around living rooms and kitchens, respectively. The religious sector, however, does not reflect this more liberal social space. Women experts in religious sciences are rare. In the western Cape, there exists a more egalitarian understanding of women's rights within Islam. Women play a large role in religious organizations including anchorpersons at community radio stations, women's movements and more traditional Mawlid organizations. However, under the tutelage of the powerful mosque imams and the dominant interpretations of Islam, a more egalitarian approach to the woman's place in South African Islam is severely limited. The overwhelming majority of religious leaders have resisted any explicit change in this respect, even as Muslim women make progress outside the mosques.

In a forthcoming book from University Press Florida entitled *Mosques, Imams and Sermons*, I have explored the meaning of Islam through some of its enduring institutions, notably the mosque and the imam. These latter are regarded, in the study, as patterns and institutions that shape expectations and future directions for Muslims. A mosque is not simply a building within which religious obligations are performed. More than that, it is an institution developed in the context of a specific history by individuals who make a variety of religious and political choices. In this regard, the history of colonialism and apartheid and a particular understanding of the Hanafi, Shafii, Ashari, and Deobandi approaches have shaped mosques and imams in South Africa.

One can say that Islam in South Africa, and particularly its institutions, reflect the tenacity of a religious group that has been able to withstand a long history of prejudice and denial. Against all odds, they built mosques, schools and welfare organizations and maintained their religious obligations in tightly knit communities on the margins of the greater society. Thus, in spite of their small numbers, there is a mosque in almost every town of South Africa. From the 1950s onwards, however, many Muslims in South Africa began to make tentative moves in the broader social space. Greater and more widespread exposure to modern education led to greater mobility, which has led to an intense debate on how to relate to Islam in the modern world. At the time, the modernization of society was enmeshed with the challenge of apartheid and the debate on how Muslims should respond to it. Not many Muslims openly supported apartheid, but there were many that placed the preservation of the community above the need to stand up for justice. As apartheid drew to a close, the difference between traditionalists and modernists widened, and continues today.

In post-apartheid South Africa, Muslims are redefining themselves in relation to the nation-state, democracy, and human rights. These are the challenges thrown by the State to Muslim individuals and communities as the greater South African society enters the global community. The country's constitution makes provisions for Muslim personal law, which must be in conformity with the bill of rights. Some Muslims, led by the *ulama*, insist that the right to freedom of worship takes precedence over the equality clauses. A small group of Muslims believe that Islamic law may be inter-

preted in such a way that the basic rights of all are not violated. This is but one example of issues facing Muslims today.

This change since the first democratic elections is not restricted to social and political issues. One can even suggest that Muslims are beginning to rediscover their religious roots because apartheid had cast a shadow on the social and political responses of all religions. There is a visible and palpable increase in Sufi groupings in the country.

Muslims in South Africa can be compared to the recently formed communities in Australia, Europe and North America. Their institutions reflect a modern history of Christian or European dominance of over three hundred years. Some of the choices that Muslims have made during this time may be seen in the contemporary struggles and challenges they face in these regions. Perhaps the history of South Africa may provide interesting ideas for reflection. On the other hand, the politics of apartheid has produced a particular relation with modernity and globalization. It has tended to insulate, and isolate, Muslim communities. Muslims in South Africa can learn a great deal from these much newer communities in more open, democratic societies. ◆

Abdulkader Tayob is Associate Professor at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa.

Further reading

- Esack, Farid
1997, *Quran, Liberation and Pluralism: Towards an Islamic Perspective of Inter-Religious Solidarity Against Oppression*. Oxford: OneWorldPublications.
- Tayob, Abdulkader I
1995, *Islamic Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement*, Cape Town: UCT Press.
- 1999 (forthcoming), *Islam in South Africa: Mosques, Imams and Sermons*, Gainesville: University of South Florida Press.