

RURAL MADRASAS OF THE SOUTHERN KENYA COAST, 1971-92

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The past two decades in Kenya have witnessed the opening of a large number of new Muslim educational institutions (*madrasas*), in rural as well as urban areas, in places where Muslim communities predominate and in places where they are a minority. In spite of sectarian differences, the *madrasas* display marked similarities of style and structure. Nevertheless, they address a wide range of particular problems and goals. Nowhere are specific needs and objectives more apparent than in rural village *madrasas*. Though village *madrasas* possess many of the characteristics of their urban counterparts, they have distinct features that set them apart. This essay examines some aspects of *madrasa* education among rural Muslim communities of the southern coast of Kenya.¹

Urban and rural Islam

For centuries Islam was an urban religion confined to the Swahili towns of the Kenya coast. The Swahili lived mainly in Mombasa and in the urban centres of the Lamu archipelago, and in a handful of smaller towns to the north and south of Mombasa (Mambrui, Malindi, Takaungu, Gasi and Vanga). Together with the Swahili lived Arab and Indian Muslim immigrants and their descendants, who more often than not had integrated, at least to some degree, into urban Swahili society.

Though established in the coastal towns, the religion of Islam had almost no impact on the Mijikenda peoples of the rural coastal hinterland north and south of Mombasa until the last decades of the nineteenth century. Even then its influence was restricted to certain areas: a few Mijikenda villages in the northern hinterland and to the south of Mombasa among the Digo, the Mijikenda people who came under the strongest Muslim influence.² The Digo took to Islam slowly, however, and by the end of the nineteenth century only a small minority were Muslim. Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century

¹The essay is based largely on fieldwork done in the Coast Province of Kenya in 1990-1. I am indebted to Khamis Omar Mwandaro and Hamisi Tsumo for their help in procuring data in the field.

²The Digo are one of nine Mijikenda peoples. They occupy the coastal area south of Mombasa in Kenya and northeastern Tanga Region in Tanzania. The Digo are the only Mijikenda people, and the only Bantu-speaking people of Kenya, to adopt Islam on a large scale.

Islam was unevenly spread; the urban centres of the Kenya coast were Muslim, while the rural hinterland was largely non-Muslim. A few Swahili resided in rural areas and some Mijikenda lived in urban centres; commercial and trading relations abounded between the two peoples, but cultural and religious differences distinguished the urban Swahili from the rural Mijikenda.

The influences attracting the Digo (and other Mijikenda) to adopt Islam emanated from the Swahili towns, and so Muslim Digo converts and their descendants came gradually to share in many of the Islamic traditions which had characterized the Swahili peoples for centuries. As the twentieth century progressed, more and more Digo became Muslim. By the 1940s, except for a few isolated pockets of Christians and some persons living in remote areas, the Digo had become Muslim.³ Notwithstanding this common Muslim faith, major differences continued to exist between Swahili and the Islamized Digo. For example, the Swahili were literate and had a long tradition of Islamic scholarship and learning, while the Digo were largely illiterate and had no tradition of Islamic education. Urbanized Swahili society was relatively cosmopolitan; rural Digo society was strongly committed to traditional village life. These differences coloured the attitudes of the Swahili and the Digo towards colonial rule, and towards the new educational opportunities offered by the colonial state.

Colonial rule and western education

The beginning of colonial rule in 1895 facilitated the spread of western education (in both its secular and Christian missionary forms). In providing education for the African peoples of the coastal region, British colonial officials first turned their attention to the Muslims. As early as 1897, Sir Arthur Hardinge, the first Commissioner of the East Africa Protectorate, proposed that *waqf* funds should be used to provide a school in Mombasa "at which young Arabs and Swahili...could receive side by side with their ordinary religious instruction elements of history, geography and science...so as to qualify them for posts in the native political and administrative services."⁴ By contrast, it was not until some twenty years later that consideration was given to locating a government educational

³Details about the spread of Islam on the southern Kenya coast can be found in David Sperling, "The growth of Islam among the Mijikenda of the Kenya coast, 1826-1933," unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1988.

⁴"Report by Sir A Hardinge on the Condition and Progress of the East Africa Protectorate from its Establishment to the 20th July, 1897," *Accounts and Papers* (Parliamentary Papers), LX (1898), p. 25.

institution among the Digo, and when the colonial government opened the Coast Technical Institute in 1921 at Waa, south of Mombasa, its declared purpose was "to educate young Africans in crafts and trades."⁵

Though Hardinge left East Africa in 1900, and nothing came of his proposal until 1912, when the Arab School was opened in Mombasa, his intentions reflected early colonial concern that some form of secular education should be provided for young Muslim children in urban areas as soon as possible. Hardinge had envisaged a school which combined secular and Islamic religious education. As it turned out, religious instruction was not offered at the Arab School in the first instance, and was only added to the curriculum in the 1920s in response to requests from the Muslim community of Mombasa.

In 1919, members of the Arab-Swahili community testified before the Commission of Enquiry into Education in the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya.⁶ Their testimony indicated general concurrence on several issues. Most persons who gave evidence were in favour of secular education, provided it was combined with religious instruction; they urged that religious instruction and Arabic be included in the curriculum of the Arab school, and recommended that English instead of Kiswahili should be the medium of instruction. Many Muslim parents were no longer satisfied with the traditional Qur'an school system which they considered inadequate. Some even went so far as to advocate the discontinuation of the Qur'an schools⁷ and the compulsory integration of secular and religious education for all young boys.⁸

Qur'an schools and the Digo

The concerns and priorities of Digo Muslims were quite distinct from those of the Arabs and Swahili of Mombasa. In 1919, when the Arab-Swahili community was expressing general dissatisfaction with Qur'an schools and a desire for secular education in English, the number of

⁵Kenya National Archives, 1921 Annual Report, Vanga District, DC/KWL/1/7.

⁶The hearings of the Commission of enquiry were, of course, not restricted to the coast. The findings of the Commission of Enquiry are published in two volumes: *Evidence of the Education Commission of the East Africa Protectorate 1919* and *Report of the Education Commission of the East Africa Protectorate 1919* (Nairobi).

⁷Colonial records show that in 1925 there were 23 Qur'an schools in Mombasa with a total of 548 pupils (Kenya National Archives, Coast Province, Deposit 32/466, Inspection of Private Schools).

⁸Several of those who testified before the Commission of Enquiry felt that training in domestic science, together with religious instruction, should be given to girls, and some persons recommended establishing a girls' school staffed by women teachers, but most agreed that the Muslim community was not ready for the general formal education of girls.

Qur'an schools among the Digo was increasing, in response to their desire for literacy and basic instruction in Islamic doctrine.

The Qur'an school (Kiswahili. *chuo*⁹) was among the Islamic institutions borrowed by the Digo from the Swahili. Before the first Qur'an schools were introduced among the Digo, children of early converts to Islam were taught the rudiments of their faith by visiting teachers from Mombasa or near-by Muslim towns. These first "rural teachers" were usually engaged as personal tutors for the children of a single family in a village, though children of other Muslim converts in the village might attend classes as well. Some Digo Muslim converts also sent their children to study at a Qur'an school in Mombasa or in other towns centres.

As the number of Digo Muslims increased towards the end of the nineteenth century, so did the need and demand for religious education in rural Digo villages. The first rural *chuo* on the southern Kenya coast opened in the 1890s in the Digo village of Tiwi, some 13 miles south of Mombasa. The school attracted Muslim children from Tiwi and various neighbouring villages. By 1900, there were two Qur'an schools in Tiwi. By 1910, Qur'an schools had been established in several other Digo villages, and religious education entered a period of steady growth, closely paralleling the spread of rural Islam. In the early twentieth century the majority of religious teachers were from outside Digoland, but as more Digo acquired religious training, the situation gradually changed until most Qur'an school teachers came to be Digo.¹⁰

Closely patterned on the Swahili model, the Digo *chuo* was a single-teacher institution designed to provide instruction in the basic tenets of Islam and in the recitation of the Qur'an. The pace of teaching was determined by the teacher, considering the progress and needs of the pupils. By virtue of having only one teacher, the *chuo* was also a single-class institution.¹¹ The pupils, whatever their age,

⁹The Swahili word *chuo* (pl. *vyuo*) literally means a religious book or text, but has come to have the derived meaning of a school where one learns to read and recite the Qur'an.

¹⁰Certain landmarks of learning are remembered by Digo Muslim teachers. For instance, the first Digo to study *tajwid* (the art of reciting the Qur'an in accordance with established rules of pronunciation and intonation) was Mwinyihamisi bin Abdallah Mwavayema of Ng'ombeni village. In 1916 as a young adolescent boy he was taken to Mombasa where he studied under the Kilindini teacher Ahmad Matano. When Mwinyihamisi finished his studies in Mombasa, he returned to open a *chuo* in Ng'ombeni.

¹¹Whithin the basic single-class pattern, older more advanced pupils could assume the role of assistant teachers or "teacher-students" (Kiswahili, *mkurufunzi*; pl. *wakurufunzi*) and teach groups of younger pupils apart, or help the teacher maintain order and discipline in the larger single class. The *mkurufunzi* had the

would sit around the teacher in a broad open semi-circle, girls on one side, boys on the other, with the oldest at the back. Progress was slow, if for no other reason than that older pupils had to sit through the recitation of known passages by younger pupils.

The teacher usually received a small gift (Kiswahili, *ada*¹²) from the parents of the children on Thursdays (before the Friday holiday) and on the day the *chuo* closed for longer holiday periods. A larger *ada* was offered when a child completed a certain section of the Qur'an or finished his or her studies. Teachers also received remuneration by requiring their pupils to perform various chores; girls would fetch water and firewood or clean around the compound, and boys might help clear a field for planting.

Western education and the beginning of rural village madrasas

During the colonial period, western education had little impact on the majority of rural Muslims in the coastal region. Few missionary or government schools were started in the Coast Province, and the schools that existed catered mainly for non-Muslim children. At the time of independence (1963), there was only one government secondary school, and no missionary schools (primary or secondary) among the Digo south of Mombasa. The absence of schools among the Digo can be attributed, at least in part, to their own negative attitude towards western education. Apprehension about the secular influence of government institutions was expressed by Digo Muslims as early as 1921, when the Coast Technical School was opened at Waa; in that year, the District Officer noted in his Annual Report that there was a "poor local response" to the school, and that the Digo could be induced to send their children to the school "only by constant exhortation."¹³ At the end of the next year, the District Officer wrote:

The establishment of an industrial school at Waa is not appreciated. This in part may be due to the Mohammedan element who fear that their children will receive religious instruction; even the pagans are

authority to punish younger pupils, and was usually given due respect by them. Though not paid directly, he was remunerated by being exempted from customary payments and was occasionally allowed to keep gifts given to the teacher by parents of the pupils he taught.

¹²The Kiswahili word *ada*, derived from the Arabic word *ada'*, is not easily translated by a single English word. Though the *ada* is a kind of customary payment, the word "payment" implies too commercial a relationship between family and teacher. In giving the *ada*, parents would periodically express their appreciation to a teacher for his work, but the *ada* could vary in amount or kind and was not a fixed fee.

¹³Kenya National Archives, 1921 Annual Report, Vanga District, DC/KWL/1/7.

holding back for the same reason, as they are naturally imbued with Islamic ideas.¹⁴

By 1924, less than one-quarter of the 134 pupils enrolled at the Technical School at Waa were Digo.¹⁵ Two years later, at a meeting of the Joint Chiefs' Council, the District Commissioner tried to persuade the chiefs to encourage parents to send more children to the school, but the President of the Council, a Digo headman, openly opposed the suggestion. Eventually the school was closed down and relocated to a site north of Mombasa. The negative stance of the Digo towards western education coincided with their favourable disposition towards Islamic schooling, the demand for which increased steadily throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The number of Qur'an schools proliferated, and eventually Qur'an schools came to exist in nearly all Digo villages.

The Qur'an school system of education continued basically unchanged among Digo Muslims until the 1960s. Beginning in 1964, however, the government of newly independent Kenya embarked on a massive programme to expand education throughout the country. In the Coast Province, primary schools were started in rural villages where previously no school had existed, and large numbers of young Muslim pupils found themselves in government schools, learning secular subjects for the first time. Since few Kenyan Muslims had completed secondary education or teacher training courses by the 1960s, most of the classes in these new government schools were taught by Christian Africans.

With the rapid expansion of the government school-system, Muslim parents began to feel that their children needed a deeper, more comprehensive training in Islam to counteract the secularizing Christian influence of government schools. In the early 1970s, the first rural village *madrasas* began to appear. Though outside influences played an initial role in this new development,¹⁶ the building of rural *madrasas* became a grass-roots movement promoted by village communities.¹⁷ Parents and village elders were quick to recognize the benefits of having their own *madrasa*. A sense of village identity and

¹⁴Kenya National Archives, 1922 Annual Report, Vanga District, DC/KWL/1/8.

¹⁵Kenya National Archives, 1924 Annual Report, Digo District, DC/KWL/1/10.

¹⁶One model for rural *madrasa* education was brought into Kenya in 1973 by Mwalim Muhammad Ali Mwamboga from Tanga, Tanzania. Influences from the Tanga region were also important for the initial spread of Islam in southeastern Kenya.

¹⁷New village *madrasas* continue to be built in the area and existing ones to be expanded, and the trend shows no sign of abating. Indeed, the expansion of *madrasa* education is one of the more dynamic features of current rural development in the area.

competition contributed to the movement as well. The opening of a new *madrasa* in one village encouraged neighbouring villages to take steps towards starting their own *madrasas*.¹⁸

The curriculum and activities of the new madrasas

During the 1970s, most parents viewed the new village *madrasas* as religious-training institutions complementary to government schools, and few opted out of the government system of education in order to send their children to a *madrasa* for full-time instruction.¹⁹ More recently a number of *madrasas* have added nursery classes (government nursery schools do not exist in the area), and some have introduced the study of secular and technical subjects in higher classes. This latter development is still in the experimental stage and is the subject of debate. Some parents feel that their children will benefit by studying religious and secular subjects together in a Muslim environment, for in theory they will then no longer need to attend government or Christian institutions to gain the knowledge and skills required to compete in the modern world. Other parents argue that due to lack of materials and qualified teachers, most *madrasas* are unable to offer as high a standard of secular education as is available in government schools.

The curriculum of the village *madrasa* is more structured and more advanced than that of the *chuo*. Pupils are grouped into classes according to age and academic progress, and are thus introduced to a variety of subjects (such as *tarikh*, *sira*, *hadith*, *fiqh*, *nahau*, *akhlaq*, *qasida*, *tajwid*, and *tawhid*) in a systematic way. In order to offer a range of subjects to different classes, the *madrasas* employ several teachers. The daily time-table resembles that of a government school, with fixed class-periods, breaks for recreation etc.²⁰

One of the more important subjects is Arabic language. Pupils learn Arabic from their first day in school. Arabic is also used as the language of instruction throughout the *madrasa*. In the lower classes,

¹⁸A similar spirit of village rivalry (often based on clan lineages) fostered the construction of rural Digo mosques in the 1920s. See Sperling, "The Growth of Islam," pp. 125, 130.

¹⁹The role of Muslim parents in determining the kind and amount of religious education their children follow is well documented by a recent study in the Philippines: Abdulrahim-Tamano M. Pandapatan, "Factors Related to Muslim Students' Decision to enroll in Madrasah or Other Schools," in *Muslim Education Quarterly*, Vol. 7, no.3 (1990), pp. 47-64.

²⁰For a study of the impact of western methods on *madrasa* education, see Thomas Owen Eisemon and Ali Wasi, "Koranic Schooling and its Transformation in Coastal Kenya," *International Journal of Educational Development*, Vol. 7, no. 2 (1987), pp. 89-98.

where pupils have not yet acquired enough Arabic to understand what the teacher is saying, the teacher will nevertheless still speak to the class in Arabic and then repeat what was said in Kiswahili. In this way the importance of Arabic is stressed from the beginning, pupils are motivated to learn it and are helped to do so in a practical way.

Some village *madrasas* have adopted modern teaching methods and other western-style activities such as prize days and parents' days, including a kind of graduation ceremony complete with certificates signed by the Chief Qadi of Kenya. Several *madrasas* have introduced extra-curricular activities such as games, choir and drama; a few provide boarding accommodation, thereby offering educational opportunities to Muslims from more remote areas who might otherwise not have access to higher Muslim education. One *madrasa* has recently begun an adult studies programme through evening classes.

The categorization of rural madrasas

Rural *madrasas* can be classified in several ways, for example as day or boarding schools, or on the basis of curriculum in order to distinguish those which offer only religious education from those offering secular or technical subjects as well. Another distinction can be made between *madrasas* which have evolved out of a pre-existing *chuo* and those which have been built as entirely new institutions. In practice, as might be expected, there is a mixing of these categories, and one finds various combinations ranging from the day *madrasa*, which offers only religious education, to the boarding *madrasa* which offers religious, secular and technical education. In general, the more funding available to a *madrasa*, the more facilities and options it is likely to have introduced.

However, it is the nature of management and control which best characterizes the essential differences among rural *madrasas*: some are self-governing village institutions and others are controlled by outside sponsors. Whereas the self-governing village *madrasas* are rural in origin and ethos, those controlled by outsiders tend to be rural only in location. In fact, the largest foreign-sponsored rural *madrasa* on the southern Kenya coast is not located in a village.

The management of madrasas: the village committee

Most rural *madrasas* are of the self-governing type, and are managed or supervised by village committees. Even when a village *madrasa* has been founded mainly through the initiative of a single individual, that person almost always calls together other villagers to gain broader community support for his efforts. Thus, from the outset a village committee is usually involved in the establishment of a new *madrasa*, and in recruiting teachers and marshalling the financial and material means with which to begin.

Such a committee may approach the head-teacher of an existing *madrasa* for help in identifying a possible head-teacher for the new *madrasa*. At the same time, the committee must discuss the siting of the *madrasa* (the promoter of the project or a leading member of the committee may offer land) and assess the resources at its disposal.

The village *madrasas* have many possible sources of finance, none of which is sufficient in itself. All member of the committee pledge help in one way or another, and all villagers are expected to contribute in some way, with their labour, with materials etc. The *madrasa* committee may also ask a prominent local trader to donate expensive items such as building blocks or tin roof-sheeting. And they may approach prosperous Arab or Indian businessmen in Mombasa or other towns who are known for their religious philanthropy.

The committee works out not only how to build the *madrasa*, but also how to run and sustain it, particularly how to meet the main expense of teachers' salaries. In this regard the committee decides the amount and frequency of fees to be charged, which are usually set quite low so as not to exclude the children of more needy families. Since the fees rarely cover the teachers' salaries, the committee seeks to raise additional funds for this purpose. In one village, for example, the local fishermen's cooperative society meets part of the monthly deficit by paying two-thirds of a teacher's salary. In a number of *madrasas* teachers work as volunteers without receiving any salary.

Autonomy and relations with foreign donors

Very few village *madrasas* receive funds from overseas donors. When asked why this is so, the reply may be that they do not have contacts through which to ask for such funds. On further discussion, however, attitudes emerge that reflect deeper issues.

Foreign donations can have strings attached. In one of the village *madrasas* receiving overseas funds, applicants for teaching positions must go to Mombasa to be interviewed. In another *madrasa*, the donor

sends his agent to sit in on class-lessons in order to evaluate the teachers. Thus, the village committee finds itself subject to outside checks and constraints. Not having the authority to appoint the teachers (including the head-teacher), the committee lacks ultimate control over the *madrasa*.

Scepticism exists regarding the motives of urban-based donor agencies. One head-teacher described how some time ago representatives of a donor agency based in Mombasa came to his *madrasa* offering to help by raising overseas funds. They took photographs of the *madrasa*, even a video-tape recording, and went away with grand promises. The head teacher later saw the photographs of his *madrasa* (which was, however, not named) on the notice-board of the donor agency supporting an appeal for funds, but he has not seen or heard from the representatives again. He is now convinced that his *madrasa* was used to raise money that he will never receive.

Suspicious are further raised by the secretiveness with which foreign donations are received and distributed. One of the major boarding *madrasas* of the area is sponsored by an overseas donor. The teachers are paid generous salaries, and the pupils receive monthly allowances, but neither the teachers nor the pupils have been told the name of the sponsor. In view of such occurrences, village *madrasa* communities seem to have little interest in asking for or receiving foreign funds, lest they lose their autonomy and freedom to run their *madrasa* as they wish. They express the view that they would prefer to struggle along on their own without foreign donations.

In defense of popular Islam

Underlying the desire of village committees for autonomy is the fear of outside doctrinal influences which threaten the very nature of rural Digo Islam. This point is best illustrated by reference to *maulid*, a long-standing feature of Islam in the area, and indeed of Swahili Islam. The custom of *maulid* celebrations is seen to be the object of criticism mainly by foreign (or foreign-trained) teachers who preach against it as *bid'a* (religious innovation).²¹

Maulid first became popular among the Digo in the 1930s. It is more than just a popular custom, however, for the practice of *maulid* played an important role in the growth and consolidation of Islam. During the decade of the 1930s, many Digo became Muslim during or immediately after attending *maulid* celebrations. Regular *maulid* celebrations now occur throughout the year, with specific villages

²¹Of course, not all foreign or foreign-trained teachers consider *maulid* to be *bid'a*, nor are all foreign-trained teachers opposed to the practice of *maulid*.

having their own set days as part of an annual "*maulid* calendar." The importance of *maulid* is recognized in the curriculum and activities of most village *madrasas*. Students may learn a whole *maulid* text, or learn to recite certain verses and to sing appropriate responses. Village *maulid* performances which were once organized by the *imam* of the local mosque are now organized by the teachers of the *madrasa* with the full participation of the parents and pupils.

Networks and rural solidarity

More than fifty per cent of village *madrasas* belong to a formal network of one kind or another, and those which do not tend to cooperate informally with other *madrasas* and thereby gain benefits similar to those of a formal network. Foreign-sponsored rural *madrasas* tend to operate in isolation (though, of course, they may belong to a broader external network of their own), and do not belong to village *madrasa* networks. Formal networks originate in several ways: through the creation of "branch" *madrasas* dependent on a senior *madrasa*, through an "old boys" network (personal bonds between head-teachers who have gone through a course of studies at the same institution), or simply because of geographical proximity.

A good example of a network of branches is the one created by Muhammad Ali Mwanboga, the founder of the Shamsiya Kibarani *madrasa* in Kinondo location.²² Since founding his original *madrasa* in 1973, Muhammad Ali has created eight other "Shamsiya" *madrasas* in the area, usually at the request of village elders. Most of the teachers of the Shamsiya *madrasas* have been educated by Muhammad Ali. He continues to look after their professional training by making periodic visits to the various Shamsiya *madrasas*, and advising them on teaching and administrative methods.

The *madrasas* of the Shamsiya network help each other in many practical ways: by exchanging ideas about teaching and other problems, by sharing books and teachers of specialized subjects, and by giving each other support during important activities such as fund-raising, parents' days and *maulid* celebrations. The Shamsiya *madrasas* also cooperate by exchanging teachers for exam supervision, or by supplying replacements when the teacher of a *madrasa* is sick or absent. The village *madrasas* of other formal (and informal) networks cooperate in ways similar to those of the Shamsiya network. Through such cooperative efforts, of course, village *madrasas* are able to

²²The Shamsiya *madrasa* movement originated in Tanga (Tanzania) in the 1960s under the impetus of Shaykh Muhammad Ayub, who trained Muhammad Ali Mwanboga.

overcome their difficulties and deficiencies much more effectively than they could ever do on their own. The various networks have not only improved the quality of village *madrasa* education, but have also created a genuine spirit of rural solidarity.

The significance of village madrasas

In broad terms the village *madrasa* movement can be viewed as a modernizing attempt to counter Christian influence and to meet the challenge of secularization; at least the village *madrasas* seem to have first emerged in this context. The transformation now taking place, however, appears to be much more than a simple process of modernization. Though only entering its third decade, the *madrasa* movement has already brought about significant change. The rise of *madrasas* has meant the virtual disappearance of the traditional one-teacher Qur'an school. More importantly, the impact of village *madrasas* has gone well beyond the sphere of formal education. All informants agree that by increasing religious knowledge the *madrasas* have brought a greater awareness of the importance of religion to young and old alike. Consequently, more people are practicing Islam than before. More people attend Friday (and daily) prayers, and more women are praying than in the past. Thus, village *madrasas* have more than fulfilled their purpose of providing the younger generation of Muslims with a deeper religious training. By bringing about a general religious renewal, the *madrasa* movement has had a profound influence on daily village life.

The *madrasa* movement also demonstrates the resourcefulness and resilience of rural Islam. Not only can village Muslim communities with limited resources actively fashion their own institutions, but they can do so in a creative and dynamic way, thereby asserting their common cultural and religious identity.