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# Islamic Schools in South Africa

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Islamic education is one of the key areas identified by the South African Muslim community in their effort to cope with the challenges of a changing society and their wish to preserve a distinct cultural and religious identity. In this context a number of Islamic independent schools have emerged in the last twenty years. Today, South Africa has about seventy five Islamic schools concentrated in the urban areas of three provinces namely the Western Cape, Kwa Zulu/Natal, and Gauteng.<sup>1</sup> They are accredited by the South African Department of Education and they follow the national curriculum. While Islamic studies and Arabic are additional subjects, only Arabic is an official examination subject. Like all other independent schools, Islamic schools get minimal financial support from the government relying on school fees and sponsors. Because their fees are high, a number of Islamic schools are regarded as elite institutions that guarantee high academic standards and above average pass rates. Access to these schools is limited to those who come from wealthy families and a few underprivileged children who are able to secure bursaries.

Interviews with principals, teachers, and pupils show that the discourses taking place within these institutions focus on structural aspects like financial limitations, management, and teachers' qualifications. Nevertheless, educational aims are under revision regarding curriculum development and the Islamic values and norms which shape the religious ethos of the school.<sup>2</sup>

Since the schools are independent they often struggle to meet financial demands and find sponsors. Furthermore, many schools face problems with regard to management: there are conflicts over leadership between the "Board of Trustees" or "Board of Governors" which consists of the founders and the sponsors of the school who have a specific vision for the institution and the principal who has to manage the day-to-day affairs. Tensions often arise over curriculum and teaching practice between the religious teachers and the teachers who have a secular education. While the former are often representing a particular conservative religious school of thought, such as Deoband, the latter are more open to modern

teaching methods and liberal worldviews.

Islamic schools are popular among Muslim parents because they offer an academic education which provides the learners with the skills to cope with the demands of a globalized world, but within a distinct Islamic environment. In these schools Muslim children are able to observe the praying times and fulfil other religious obligations; the school uniform requires girls to wear a headscarf and gender separation is observed by either teaching girls and boys in different buildings or segregating them in the classroom.

By combining secular and Islamic education these institutions differ from the traditional madrasa education and the Darul Uloom where only religious training is pursued. The majority of Muslim children are educated in public schools and attend the madrasa in the afternoons. Madrasa education takes place either at private homes or at local mosques and mainly comprises of learning how to recite the Quran, the basics of the Arabic language, and Islamic history and rituals. To further their religious education, youngsters join one of the numer-

**Over the last twenty years independent Islamic schools have emerged in many countries where Muslims are a minority, among them South Africa. Although these schools differ in religious and pedagogical orientation, they all aim to offer an excellent education and a space where the Islamic identity of Muslim children can develop. While the curricula of some of these schools hardly differ from those of public schools, other schools are Islamizing their teaching materials and methods.**

ous Darul Uloom, where they train to become Islamic teachers or shaykhs. The attempt to merge secular with religious education seems to be symptomatic of Muslim minority discourses, and illustrates their need to fit into a society which is shaped by Western and Christian values while preserving their distinct Islamic identity.

The preliminary results of an empirical study of selected Islamic schools in South Africa which was carried out in

2006 and 2007 help offer a critical assessment of the question whether Islamic schools promote processes of identity formation within a democratic society or whether they rather lead to disengagement from the wider society. Theoretically, the project is embedded in the discourses on the role of democratic citizenship education for the integration of Muslim children and the discourses within Muslim communities regarding the concept of the "Islamization of knowledge." Methodologically the project is divided into two phases. In phase one interviews with principal, teachers, and learners, as well as experts were carried out. In the second phase qualitative questionnaires were distributed to pupils aged fifteen to seventeen, asking about their religious beliefs and practices as well as their attitude towards people of other faiths and their views on the society they are living in.

## The emergence of Islamic education

The pattern of Islamic education in South Africa has to be analyzed within the colonial and post-colonial political and social order. The requirements of an increasingly industrializing society at the beginning of the twentieth century led to the establishment of a modern Islamic educational system. The Muslim community established so-called Muslim Mission Schools in the Cape Province from 1913 onwards. These schools were modelled after the Christian Mission Schools which educated the majority of children at the time. While the Muslim community had to provide the building of the school and work out a curriculum for religious education, the government paid for the maintenance of schools and salaries of the teachers. These Muslim Mission schools were the first institutions to combine secular and Islamic education, and teach Islamic Studies and Arabic. With the advent of the apartheid government in 1948 these schools were either closed down due to the introduction of segregated residential areas or they were absorbed by the apartheid education system and became public schools. After two decades the demand for Islamic schools resurfaced in the 1980s. The revival of Islamic education emerged at a time when the general education system was experiencing a deep crisis. The national school boycotts of the 1980s had led to a situation where hardly any formal education was taking place at public schools as the majority of pupils and teachers had become politicized and engaged in resistance movements against the apartheid system.

Muslim educators and parents were concerned about the influence of secular ideologies on their children but also the educational standard of public schools which saw an increasing number of black children moving into formally "Coloured" and "Indian" schools due to the relaxation of segregation and influx laws. High numbers of pupils per class and the disadvantaged education background of black children resulted in a decrease of the academic results of these schools. Furthermore, Muslim children were exposed to a dual educational system where they would attend a public secular school in the morning and a madrasa in the afternoon to learn about their religion. Muslim educators and academics feared that this parallel system would present contradictory values and norms to children and lead to polarizations

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where pupils would be compelled to choose which knowledge system would be of relevance to them. They desired an integrated education which would combine Islamic studies with the so-called secular subjects.

## Islamization of knowledge

The concept of Islamization of knowledge, which emerged in the context of the First World Conference of Islamic Education in 1977 in Saudi Arabia, influenced the founders of Islamic schools around the world, among them also South Africa. Muslim intellectuals saw Islamic education in a deep crisis as schools and universities in Muslim countries were, in their view, influenced by Western ideologies and secularized to an extent where religion hardly played any role in these institutions. Leading academics like Ismail Al-Faruqi developed the concept of "Islamization of knowledge" which would bring Islam into the secular subjects. Textbooks and the curriculum at schools and universities had to be revised and re-written to make them compatible with Islamic values and norms. Nevertheless, the project stayed an ambitious ideal and did not, in the case of Islamic schools in South Africa, materialize down to the classroom.

Islamic schools are obliged to teach democratic citizenship education as part of the national curriculum within the subject Life Orientation which deals with, among others, diversity, religious beliefs, human rights, rights and responsibilities of citizens, and personal issues. Islamic schools teach these topics from an Islamic point of view and take out issues such as HIV-Aids education and sexual relationships between teenagers. In some schools "Life Orientation" was combined with Islamic Studies to ensure that the subject is taught from an Islamic perspective. Islamia College is one of those schools which combined the subjects, but according to one Islamic Studies teacher most of the teachers found it difficult to teach both subjects together.<sup>3</sup>

## Islamia College

One well established Islamic school in Cape Town is Islamia College. Founded in 1984 it expanded steadily over the next twenty years. Today the school has over 1000 pupils and 80 teachers and is regarded to be among the best schools in the city. It has a Primary School and two High Schools (one for boys and one for girls) and its own mosque. It offers the national curriculum and, additionally, Islamic Studies and Arabic. Islamia College follows a holistic approach of Islamic education: Islam is more than the performance of religious rituals, it is perceived to be a "way of life" which encompasses every aspect of the mind, body, and behaviour of the learner. The college states in its mission that among its objectives is to instil in pupils "a consciousness of Allah as the source of intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical growth." The founders of the school, who are predominantly of Indian origin, represent the conservative Deobandi school of thought.

Like most Islamic schools in South Africa, Islamia College pursues the ideal of "Islamization of knowledge." However, according to the founder and director of the school, Maulana Ali Adam, it has not yet achieved its goal to introduce Islam into secular subjects since so far no textbooks and materials for teaching have been produced which could be used by teachers.<sup>4</sup> However, it remains a top priority to the newly appointed principal, Shaheem Galant; he envisages an ideal situation where Arabic and Islamic studies have the same status as the secular subjects and Islam informs the syllabi of all subjects.<sup>5</sup> To improve the quality of teaching through teacher-training programmes and to realise its goal to "Islamize" the secular curriculum, Islamia College has joined an international research organization called International Board of Educational Research and Resources (IBERR). The London based organization is supporting Islamic schools mainly in England, South Africa, and USA with school management, staff development, and curriculum research. Since Maulana Ali Adam is one of the trustees of IBERR, a large part of the research and the publication of material are taking place in South Africa. Although the organization has not yet published its own textbooks it has produced guidelines on how to teach the main secular subject from an Islamic perspective.<sup>6</sup>

The internal focus of educators on the project of "Islamization of knowledge" raises the question, in which ways is the identity of learners shaped by it. According to the preliminary analysis, learners seem



PHOTO BY INGA NIEHAUS, 2007

**Students at  
Islamia College,  
Cape Town**

to flourish well in the sheltered environment of the school in terms of their spiritual and emotional development, the majority stating that Islam is very important for their personal lives. They appreciate the fact that they can practice their religion at school and that they learn more about Islam in the lessons becoming confident and secure about their role within the Muslim community.

On the other hand, learners' experience with non-Muslim sectors of the society appears to be limited. In spite of the inclusion of citizenship education in the schools' curricula, which is supposed to teach tolerance and understanding between different religious, cultural, and social groups, learners have little knowledge about or contact with people of other faiths. The questionnaires confirmed the distance: hardly any pupil had non-Muslim friends and only a few could recall positive experiences with people of other faith while the majority reproduced negative stereotypes of other faith groups. Nevertheless, most of the learners stated that they would like to learn more about other religions and engage in inter-religious exchange programmes.

Islamic schools in South Africa are sites where concepts of Islamic education are transformed to address the challenges of a multi-cultural democratic society and where curricula requirements of a modern education system are modified to suit Islamic educational goals as defined by the school. In the case of Islamia College, one sees an internal pre-occupation with merging Islamic and secular education to reproduce an orthodox Islamic worldview. Democratic citizenship education and the teaching about inter-religious relations take place within the parameters of a conservative Islamic knowledge system and are viewed critically in terms of which aspects are compatible with Islamic values and norms and which are not. Learners would like to know more about other religions, but within the confines of the school they are not able to engage in a meaningful dialogue with people of other beliefs which is regarded to be a prerequisite of democratic citizenship education within a pluralist society. The question remains, whether the learners are able to become active citizens in a multicultural society, without the experiences of how to negotiate differences and resolve conflicts as part of inter-cultural dialogue.

## Notes

1. According to statistical data from the Census 2001, 585.000 of the 654.000 South African Muslims live in these three provinces, see [www.statssa.gov.za](http://www.statssa.gov.za).
2. The author conducted research in four secondary schools: Islamia College and Darul Islam in Cape Town and Al-Falaah College and the South Coast Madressa in Durban.
3. Interview with Fadlin Ebrahim, 8 October 2007, Cape Town.
4. Interview with Maulana Ali Adam, 28 November 2006, Cape Town.
5. Interview with Shaheem Galant, 9 October 2007, Cape Town.
6. See the IBERR website: [www.iberr.org](http://www.iberr.org).

Inga Niehaus is engaged in a comparative research project of Islamic schools in South Africa, England, and the Netherlands which is part of the research programme "Muslims in Europe and their Societies of Origin in Africa and Asia" co-ordinated by the Centre for Contemporary Islam (ZMO) in Berlin.

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