From Apartheid to Democracy Islam in South Africa

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Islam in South Africa is characterized by an exceptional diversity that might be compared to that of the Muslim world in general. Despite the relatively low number of Muslims in South Africa (approximately 550000 Muslim inhabitants, or 1.36 per cent of the entire population[1]—one of the smallest minorities in the country—they form an integral and visible part of the society. This is especially true in the urban areas of the Western Cape, Natal, and Transvaal regions.

The marked diversity and heterogeneity of Islam in South Africa originate in the history of migration. During different historical periods, various ethnicities bearing witness to Islam immigrated to the most southern part of Africa either voluntarily or by force, thus shaping the readings of Islam in the country. The different phases of migration correspond to the regional concentration of Muslims of Indonesian or Malay origin and cultural background in the Western Cape, and Muslims of Indian or Indo-Pakistani origin and culture in Natal and Transvaal. Despite increasing mobility, this concentration is obvious even nowadays. Islam in Natal and Transvaal reflects Indian and Indo-Pakistani features, whereas in the Western Cape it corresponds to a cultural synthesis combining elements of Southeast Asian Islam with elements of both the indigenous and African cultures.

Cartoon by Tony Grogan

The visibility of the Muslim community in South Africa and its political and societal participation may be seen as a post-apartheid phenomenon since numerous ministerial offices and other significant positions and professions are held and practised by Muslims. However, even since the nineteenth century many Muslim institutions such as mosques and Qur'anic schools (and also modern Muslim schools and colleges) have been established in the Western Cape, Natal, and Transvaal and contributed to the integration of Muslims in South African society. Ironically the ideology of apartheid reinforced the differences amongst the various groups and simultaneously gave the impulse for changes in organization and discourse. The latter were initiated particularly from the mid-1970s on with the crisis and gradual decline of the political system. Muslims then entered the political arena, offering an Islam-motivated resistance to apartheid.

After political liberation and the relatively peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy, South Africa's Muslims found themselves needing to deal with several challenges in the context of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious society. The new socio-political context is accompanied by a resurgence of differences within and between the various Muslim communities, even more so because alliances linked to the common struggle against the oppressive system became obsolete. Post-apartheid South Africa requires forms of contextualization concerning the readings of Islam that differ from those of the last decades under apartheid. National interests need to be brought into line with the demands of the different Muslim communities, while at the same time mediating in the controversies between them. The current debates with regard to Muslim Personal Law, which needs to be modified according the demands of the constitution (in terms of gender equality notably) in order to be implemented, are but one example that illustrates the tensions between the different communities. They reveal the fragility of the achievements concerning progressive and contextualized readings of Islam during the struggle for democracy. A deeper understanding of contemporary developments must take into consideration the complex structures and fundamental changes in discourse during the last period of the apartheid system as well as the underlying dynamics both within and between the Muslim communities and with the broader society.

Muslim communities under apartheid

Apartheid divided the entire society, artificially segregating groups according to 'racial' classification while referring to already existing ethnic and cultural differences. The specific hierarchy established by this ideology either created cultural entities or fostered those prevailing for the time being and made them permanent. Those originating from the islands of Indonesia and Southeast Asia more generally were classified as 'Coloured', in contrast to those of Indian or Indo-Pakistani origin, who were classified as 'Indians' or 'Asians'. On top of the social pyramid were 'Whites', followed by 'Indians'/'Asians', enjoying numerous privileges in comparison with the 'Coloured' population, whose status was in turn superior to that of 'Blacks'.[2] Unlike the latter, 'Coloured' and 'Indians/Asians' had access to good education and therefore to socially

respected professions in fields such as medicine, law, and business. Religious practices were not affected by apartheid.

At a first glance, the differences between the communities of the Western Cape and those of Natal and Transvaal seem to be cultural, ethnic, and linguistic. However, on closer examination we find considerable differences with regard to questions of theology and religious practices. Both the cultural background and the historically rooted different social statuses shaped—and continue to shape—the corresponding religious institutions, rituals, and symbols.

Three hundred years of coexistence of 'Coloured' Muslims with other communities—both religious and cultural ones—led to the creation of a unique culture with a particular cultural flexibility. The common language, Afrikaans, strengthened the sense of belonging. The communities in the Cape province were also called 'Cape Malays', a term dating back to an ethnic classification by the British in the early nineteenth century and whose meaning, over the course of time, came to correspond to an exclusive identity. 'Cape Malays' were considered to be peaceful and loyal, and were known for their religious parochialism and their unquestioned acceptance of white dominance. This 'Malayism' was characterized as something that '[set] them apart, but also above the other people of colour in their common environment. And though they were subjected to the same forces of oppression they were made to believe that they were the "elite of the coloured" people. This exclusivity and false superiority made it difficult for them to fuse with the other sections of the oppressed, and to develop a common united struggle against oppression' (Davids 1985:6).

With regard to the communities of Indian or Indo-Pakistani origin a fusion with elements of pre-existing local cultures never took place. On the contrary, cultural particularism prevented processes of acculturation. In comparison to the communities of the Western Cape, Indo-Pakistani communities were culturally rigid and fostered conservative positions regarding the relations to non-Muslim communities and the variety of competing approaches to Islam existing in India that came through migration to South Africa.[3] In addition to the regional, cultural, and linguistic differences that discouraged any exchange between the communities, different approaches concerning religious practices and theology contributed to deepening the rifts rather than overcoming them.

Nevertheless the established orthodoxy, i.e. the ulama, of all communities shared two attitudes: they generally were conservative and showed little preparedness for change, and they declared considerable loyalty to the government in power, being responsive to co-optation. For many Muslims there was neither the need nor the capacity to change the status quo or to initiate resistance against apartheid, even more so because religious practice was not restricted. Almost all ulama—and this is true for the Western Cape, Natal, and Transvaal alike—were complacent, silent, even apolitical with regard to the political landscape, especially in the course of the 1960s and 1970s.[4]

Muslim awakening

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a general trend towards an increasing political consciousness and therefore a constantly growing resistance movement against apartheid, especially after the Soweto uprisings of 1976. This also affected the Muslim communities and the organizations that had been established during the 1970s or had emerged as offshoots and transformations of already existing organizations that reshaped their aims and perspectives.[5] In view of the extremely dominant clergy and in the absence of an alternative leadership during their formative years, the new organizations were moulded by the emergence of a progressive counterpart to the traditional ulama. The monopoly of the latter in the area of interpretation and the religious parochialism was called into question. Thus the organizations started as purely religio-cultural movements that were trying to reformulate a Muslim identity that differed from the ulama's version. This process of emancipation of the established religious leadership seemed to lay the foundation that was necessary to examine the possibility and the nature of a cultural, social, and political commitment for Muslims within the broader South African context. The coincidence of such internal development with the unfolding struggle in general and the social crisis of the 1980s created a climate in which practical action and political commitment became absolutely imperative. The organizations underwent a shift of paradigm that can be described as a process consisting of three phases: the propagation of Islam as a way of life, i.e. a purely religio-cultural approach; the replacement of the latter by the ideology of Islamism, the approach being transformed into one shaped by the particular socio-political context of the country; and finally the development of a particular hermeneutics of resistance against oppressive systems like apartheid ideology. Muslim organizations entered the political scene while contributing to the anti-apartheid struggle motivated by a contextualized approach of Islam.

Post-apartheid challenges

Political liberation raised new questions with regard to the identity of South African Muslims. The unifying elements in the course of the common struggle against apartheid do not persist any longer. On the contrary, the relative unanimity during the last two decades of apartheid was not sustainable enough to continue in a different socio-political context. On the one hand, many of the former active organizations nowadays are paper tigers rather than contributors to societal debates. On the other hand, numerous leaders standing for a progressive and contextualized reading of Islam either left the organizations and took other responsibilities or left the country. This explains why rather conservative groups and organizations, such as the ulama umbrella organizations Muslim Judicial Council in the Western Cape, Jami'at ul-Ulema Natal, and Jami'at ul-Ulema Transvaal, could regain considerable influence.

Taking into consideration that progressive theology is a very recent phenomenon in South Africa and particularly linked to the socio-political context of apartheid, it should not be surprising that with the political transformation and the societal and social uncertainties, conservative and traditional forces, i.e. the established ulama, resurge. This is even more so because they enjoy a certain social consolidation for historical reasons and had established a solid infrastructure in contrast to their progressive counterpart. What is striking is that they also enjoy considerable support from the government, e.g. concerning the implementation of Muslim Personal Law, despite massive protestations. The ANC preferred to cooperate with conservative groups and ulama bodies than with what was the new élite of political leaders and thinkers.

South Africa is an important example of the undeniable impact of socio-political circumstances on the renewal of Islam in the context of contemporary societies, both in the course of apartheid and in the post-apartheid past, present, and future. The challenges of a contextualized Islam still continue.

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Notes

1. Haferburg 2000:33, referring to the 1996 Census Database.
2. Although it seems to be problematic to use these apartheid terms, it is important to mention that they have not been substituted by other terms. On the contrary, South Africans appropriated them while changing their racist connotations. See also Erasmus 2001.
3. For further details on the different approaches see Günther 2002a.
4. The reactions concerning the death in detention of the activist Imam Haron in 1969 provide but one example of the complacent attitude of the ulama and their influence on the community. See Günther 2002b.
5. Like the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM), founded in 1970; the Muslim Students Association (MSA), founded in 1974; Qibla, founded in 1980' and Call of Islam, founded in 1984. The latter is an offshoot of the MYM for reasons of dissent concerning the political commitment and the issue of affiliation to non-Muslim anti-apartheid organizations. Qibla is not an offshoot of a former organization, despite its having recruited many members from both the MYM and the MSA.

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