Islamic Education in South Africa

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Africa

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Muslims make up about 2% of the 42 million people in South Africa. They were classified under the Apartheid as 'Malays' and 'Indians' and settled in such major cities as Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth, Johannesburg and Pretoria. As the longest surviving religious minority in a predominantly Christian and secular country, the Muslims of South Africa have preserved their cultural and religious identity. This is due, in no small measure, to their Islamic educational institutions.

In 1658 the first Muslims arrived in the Cape. They were the Mardykers from Amboya (in the Indonesian archipelago) and part of the involuntary migration of slaves and political prisoners that lasted until 1834. The Mardykers were the Malay servants of Dutch officials who were returning to the Netherlands from the East but preferred to remain in the Cape. The Dutch East Indian Company, recognizing the Dutch Reformed Church as the only official religious institution, prohibited Muslims from the public practice of Islam. The first most notable exile from Indonesia was the princely Sufi, Shaykh Yusuf (d. 1699) from Maccasar, who was exiled to the Cape in 1694 for his struggle for Bantam independence from the Dutch. As a shaykh of mainly the Khalwatiyyah Sufi order, he was an inspiration to the small Muslim community.

Many slaves came later from the Bengal coast, but large numbers of political exiles came from the Indonesian islands. In all, about 72% of the Muslims came from Asia, particularly India. The first group of Indian Muslims arrived in South Africa from Gujarat and Bombay as indentured labourers from 1860. Indian Muslims are concentrated in Kwazulu Natal, Gauteng and the adjacent areas. Although they respected Arabic as a sacred language, they regarded Urdu as a religious language to be used in sermons and to be taught in madrasas.

The first figure to be associated with Islamic education is an exile from Indonesia, Abdullah Kadi Abdus Salaam (d. 1807), known as Tuan Guru. He became a prisoner on Robben Island until 1793, and after the new ordinance of religious freedom in 1804, he founded the first mosque and madrasa in Dorp Street, Cape Town. He performed the first Friday congregational prayer and paved the pattern for the home- and mosque-based classes in Qur'anic recitation, Islamic beliefs and Islamic law. By 1832 there were about 12 mosque-based schools in Cape Town. These schools attracted a large number of slave and free black children as the colonialists denied them of education.

The foundation of the higher Islamic learning in South Africa dates back to the mid-19th century. In 1860 Shaykh Abu Bakr Effendi (d. 1880), a Turkish scholar who had come to the Cape at the request of the British colonizers, established a school of Higher Islamic Theology. This was different from the mosque-based schools, and judging from Effendi's Arabic-Afrikaans work, *Bayan al-Din* (The Elucidation of Religion), the school provided a more in-depth knowledge of Islam. It was the precursor to the Islamic seminaries and community colleges that followed much later.

Madrasas and schools

The madrasa, whether home-based or mosque-based, remains up till today, an important vehicle for the transmission of a rudimentary Islamic education in South Africa. It is an extension of the home. At home parents set the example of religious practices and children imitate their example; at the madrasa the children learn more about these religious values and practices. But most importantly, they learn to read the Qur'an. However, since the 1960s Muslim parents have become more earnest in having their children pursue a higher secular education, and with the increased pressures of schoolwork, many of these children stop attending the madrasa after primary school.

The development of the madrasa must be understood in the context of the political status of Muslims as 'non-white' and ipso facto part of the second-class citizenry in the land of their birth. This sets them apart from their compatriots who adhered to the dominant Christian culture. Thus Muslim children had to be socialized according to a different set of values; independently of mainstream culture and directed at the acquisition of Islamic knowledge, Qur'anic recitation, and the personal observance of Islamic worship.

Since the Christian mission schools and state secular schools did not accommodate the religious sensibilities of Muslim children, Dr Abdullah Abdurrahman (d. 1940) a medical doctor and popular politician, found an alternative form of education and thus established Rahmaniyah, the first state-aided Muslim mission (primary) school in Aspeling Street, Cape Town. The objective was to provide children with a modern education, but not to neglect the elementary teachings of Islam. By 1957 there were 15 such schools registered with the State Education Department. Recently, one such school, the Habibia primary school, offered Arabic as an examinable subject.

Under Apartheid the schools were segregated, and most Muslim children either went to schools under the Indian Affairs Department (mainly in Gauteng and Kwazulu Natal) or the Coloured Affairs Department (mainly in the Cape). The schools were governed by the Christian National Education Policy, which did not provide for the needs of minority religions. Muslims parents felt that the religious identity of their children was being undermined, and so they demanded that Arabic be offered in the state schools. Arabic was introduced for the first time in 1975 in the Kwazulu Natal and Gauteng regions under the Indian Affairs Department of Education. Parents readily supported Arabic, not merely as a language, but as an important part of Islamic education. The school boycotts of the 1980s disrupted the education of children, obliging many Muslim parents to consider alternative means of education. When the Habibia Girls College was founded in 1985, it gained the support of many parents. The college was inspired by the global trends in the Islamization of knowledge; today there are probably over 40 such private schools in South Africa, known as Islamia Colleges. However, these Islamic private schools have been criticized for being elitist, excluding the poorer segments of society, and for not preparing the Muslim child for integration into the broader society. The madrasa therefore still provides a supplementary Islamic education for the majority of Muslim children in South Africa.

In the 1990s the provisions for Muslims in state schools increased. By 1993, Arabic was offered in 8,921 state primary schools and 1,124 secondary schools, albeit that as a result of the downsizing of schools, Arabic as a subject was also affected. In the Cape it was introduced for the first time at Spine Road Senior Secondary School in 1992. Recently, Islamic studies was introduced as a non-examination subject in the state schools to provide an alternative to biblical studies for Muslim children. Not all schools offer Arabic or Islamic studies, which leaves the madrasa as the one institution which has enduring formative influence on the lives of Muslim children. However, Muslims have now generally acknowledged that madrasas would have to function in tandem with, or parallel to, the secular schools.

More recent educational developments include the establishment of foreign schools, both Egyptian and Turkish. The Egyptian 'Al-Azhar schools' are funded mainly by Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Arabic and Islamic studies are taught in Arabic by Egyptian shaykhs and modern subjects are taught in English by South African teachers. The code of dress is Islamic.

Higher education

The University of South Africa was the first to introduce an Arabic programme in 1955, followed by the University of Durban-Westville (1975) and the University of the Western Cape (1982). The following institutions offered Islamic studies: the University of Durban-Westville (1974), Rand Afrikaans University (1976), and the University of Cape Town (1986). In recent years, due to lack of student numbers, some of these departments have had to close down or merge with other departments. Unlike the Islamic seminaries, the universities have adopted an academic approach to the study of Islam, be it historical (University of the Durban-Westville), social scientific (University of Cape Town) or philological (University of the Western Cape).

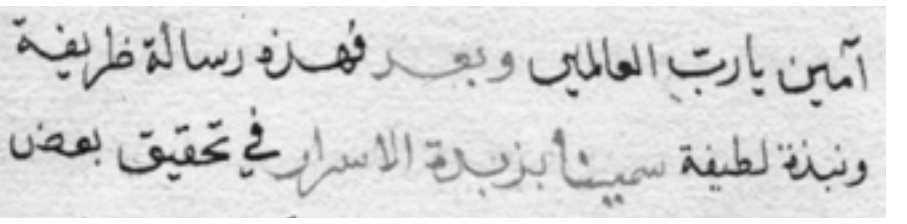
Historically, Muslim religious leaders have graduated in the Middle East or the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent, but opportunities for studies were created locally when in 1971 the first Darul-Ulum was established in Newcastle, Kwazulu Natal. This Darul-Ulum was based on the Darsi-Nizami course from Deoband, India. However, while the Darsi-Nizami course was originally broad and included the rational sciences, the current versions, in India and in South Africa, are confined to the religious sciences only. In Newcastle they offer the following subjects: Islamic history, Islamic creed, jurisprudence, principles of jurisprudence, *hadith*, principles of *hadith*, Qur'anic exegesis, and Arabic language and literature. A significant difference from Deoband is that all instruction is in English.

Less indigenous to South Africa and more in keeping with the Deobandi spirit is the Azaadville seminary, near Johannesburg, which teaches all subjects in Urdu. Even Arabic was taught in Urdu! Today there are many Islamic seminaries in South Africa that aim at conferring Islamic knowledge and preserving Islamic faith. A shortcoming, however, is that because their curriculum is devoid of the rational sciences, they produce graduates that are unable to confront the challenges of secular modernity.

Community-based colleges

The sole institution that tried to overcome the dichotomy between the secular and the religious, and to combine the academic approach of the university with the religious approach of the Darul-Ulums, is the Islamic College of Southern Africa, which was established in 1991 in Gatesville, Cape Town. This community-based college offers a four-year bachelor's degree in theology, Arabic, and Islamic law. The Islamic College has a wide curriculum, including subjects such as comparative religion and Islamic spirituality. The lecturers' backgrounds vary; some are graduates of universities and others of Islamic seminaries. The Islamic College is a feeder for the honours degrees in Arabic and in Islamic studies at the University of the Western Cape and the University of Cape Town, respectively.

To conclude, the above Islamic educational institutions have evolved over three centuries and have contributed to the preservation of the Islamic faith. In the current post-Apartheid period, Muslims are exposed to an open society with new challenges, making it essential for Islamic educational institutions to prepare their graduates to confront the challenges of secular modernity, or come to terms with it, and by so doing, make a larger contribution to society while still retaining their religious identity.



A fraction of Shaykh Yusuf's manuscript, Zubdat al-Asrar (The Essence of Secrets).

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