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Sadouni, S.

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Integration and Islamic Education in South Africa

SAMADIA SADOUNI

The Muslims in South Africa make up less than 2% of the total population and consist primarily of Malays and Indians. The Indians originated largely from Gujarat, Bombay, and, to a lesser extent, Madras and Calcutta. They immigrated to the British colony of Natal in two migrant waves: the first were Indian indentured workers who arrived in South Africa from 1860 to work in the sugar plantations; and the second were "passenger" Indians who from 1871 paid their own way, some to expand their business in South Africa. Nearly eighty percent of these Indians were Muslims.

The experience of Muslims in India had been marked by their loss of political power. It became imperative for them to know how Islam could be organized vis-à-vis non-Muslim authorities. In South Africa, however, the Indian Muslims confronted a situation even more discriminating. The anti-Indian laws were particularly oppressive and contributed to the reinforcement of community bonds. Their Islamic faith gave them purpose and even sanctuary.

The Indian Muslim community experienced double minority status, first in India, then in South Africa, a factor that contributed to this group's later modes of mobilization in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the late nineteenth century, though, merchants and the ulama took on leadership of this Indian Muslim community. Their political position, most of the time, was indifferent and in a few instances they appeared to adopt a policy of co-operation with the government during the apartheid era. In the 1930's as the merchants took on a changing role in the modern organization of the Muslim community and the education system modernized, the cultural heritage of Indian Islam began to play a role in the specific context of South Africa characterized by modes of integration of the Indian Muslim minority in South Africa.

Merchants and modern organization of the Muslim community

In spite of the low level of education of the first wave of Muslim migrants, they always endeavoured to establish a mosque and a madrasa, two necessary means "to lay the true foundations of a Muslim Community, *jama'at*".¹ Moreover, the construction of places of worship made it possible for Muslims to consider their presence in South Africa as permanent. Muslim Indians in other diaspora communities in Eastern Africa followed

this same process of integration.

The first mosque of Durban, located on Grey Street in the Indian business district, was established in 1884 by the first pioneers of Indian business in Natal, Abubakr Amod and Hadji Mahomed Hadji Dada.² Juma Masjid, which became the largest mosque in Southern Africa³, played a symbolic role for Gujarati Muslim merchants in the absence of the ulama

The Indian Muslim community experienced double minority status, first in India, then in South Africa, a factor that contributed to this group's later modes of mobilization in the early decades of the twentieth century. From the 1930's, as the education system modernized, the cultural heritage of Indian Islam began to play a role in the specific context of South Africa characterized by modes of integration of the Indian Muslim minority in South Africa.

who were not authorized to enter the country until 1880. Through their initiatives to construct mosques and madrasas, the commercial elite legitimated their leadership status and later competed with the ulama. The wealth and connections of the first generation of merchants enabled them to become the principal agents and shapers of Islam in the provinces of Natal and Transvaal. The articulation between commercial and religious networks con-

tributed to the integration of Indians not only in Southern Africa, but also the area of the Indian Ocean.

The madrasa up until the 1950s, however, did not constitute a truly educational system. Muslim children entered the madrasa at seven years and left it at ten, having accumulated a superficial reading of the Quran which they learned to recite by rote. They generally did not understand even the meaning of the Quranic verses recited during the five daily prayers. Anxious to prepare Muslims in South Africa for changes in the economic market, the merchants in the 1940s emulated aspects of the reformist movements in India, in particular that of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), and initiated projects for educational and cultural development. They supported a secular and religious education which would preserve the Islamic minority identity.

Through a negotiation between the Muslim commercial elite and the government, the education system began to be changed in the 1940s by way of introducing Islam with secular instruction. The educational project was built around a policy of accommodation that in particular contributed to religious conservatism. However, a number of Indian Muslims and organizations fought against the policy of apartheid.

Giving to the community

The Indians successfully participated in the market economy where they competed with the whites. Their financing of educational institutions can be seen as an investment which facilitated their integration in the world of capitalism and preserved their proud Islamic identity. Economic integration and identity assertion, both of which depended strongly on Muslim merchants, represent the two pillars of the minority educational policy which characterized each period of South-African Islamic resurgence.

The mosque and the Islamic private school thus became the two institutions guaranteeing the social reproduction of the Islamic identity. Their administrative and financial control still remain nowadays largely in the hands of the middle-class elite with transnational mobility; their organization is not limited to the national borders of South Africa. Moreover, the arrival in the country of preachers and lecturers in the 1950s, contributed to their construction of the Islamic identity. It is again the merchants who employed Muslim scholars from India to organise and oversee their religious activities. The *da' wa* generally spread by foreign Muslim lecturers from India, later from the Arab countries, especially Egypt, the USA (mainly from the 1970s), and Europe, and reflected the need for the Indians to be amenable to the external environment crossed by various Islamic movements. In the context of decolonization, the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, and more recently the conflicts in Palestine, Chechnya and Bosnia contributed to the representation of Muslim life as an integral part of the

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**Nelson Mandela
at Durban's
Grey Street
Mosque,
13 December
2001**

PHOTO BY RAJESH JANTILAL, ©AFP, 2001

umma, or community of Muslims. Indeed, the contemporary Islamization of Muslim territories in South Africa has occurred with the assistance of international Muslim actors through the foundation of mosques and modern Islamic schools.

Opposition of the ulama

Certain forces have resisted modernizing changes within the Muslim community from the 1930s. There exist two theological bodies of Indian ulama in South Africa: Deoband and Barelwi. Beyond the theological polemics, which divided the believers, the conflicts of representation and leadership deeply took root in the recomposition of the Indian Muslim community. These theological schools have jointly diffused an apolitical discourse and have reinforced a religious conservatism. The Deobandis, for example, represented by the Jama'at ulama of Natal, seek to guarantee an orthodox practice and a literalistic reading of Islam. They remain much attached to a religious communitarianism which is built on the principle of political indifference, but which also rejects change of the religious institution associated with a westernization of values. The Deobandis, in other words, thought any form of westernization would threaten the moral basis of the Muslim community.

Since 1940 the ulama have been opposed to several aspects of the new education including the methods of teaching Arabic, the abandonment of Urdu for English in the teaching of the religious matters, and the transformation of the madrasa into a Muslim aided-school which can offer secular and religious teaching. The ulama in South Africa were especially threatened by the introduction of English as the principal medium of teaching because their religious education in India was based solely on Urdu, a symbol of the Muslim identity. Invaded by a feeling of insecurity, the traditionalist ulama could not consider adopting new methods which they associated with a westernization of the madrasa.

It took many years before the ulama decided to adopt English as the linguistic medium of religious instruction. The introduction of English marked the integration of Indian Islam in South Africa. They also succeeded in imposing their leadership within the Muslim community and consolidating it by an alliance with rich commercial families who had a conservative vision of religion. The merchants involved in changing the education system did not intend to upset the traditions of Indian Islam but simply to accompany an "Islamization of modernity." This alliance with rich merchants which included the creation of a network of

madrasas and the development of a religious school syllabus represents until today, for both the Deoband and Barelwi ulama, the way to institutionalize their theological schools.

The merchants in post-apartheid South Africa maintain a powerful supervision in the religious field. They supported the creation of private Islamic schools which are organized by committees built on the same model as the madrasa and mosque. The businessmen who exercise control over these institutions sometimes interfere in the work of the professionals, such as teachers and school administrators, whom they employ. The creation of the private Islamic schools in the post-apartheid era is primarily motivated by the desire of Muslims to preserve their faith and identity. Education, through private schools, seems to remain the major ground of the conflicts for the direction of the Muslim community. Whilst some may regard private Islamic education as isolationist, others see it as solution for the integration of Muslims in the new South Africa.

Notes

1. Fatima Meer, *Portrait of Indian South Africans* (Durban: Avon House, 1969): 188.
2. E. M Mahida, *History of Muslims in South Africa: A Chronology* (Durban: Arabic Study Circle, 1993).
3. The Grey Street Mosque which can host 5000 believers remained until the end of the 1970's the largest mosque in the Southern hemisphere.

*Samadia Sadouni is a political scientist at the Université Montesquieu-Bordeaux IV, Centre d'Étude d'Afrique Noire, (CEAN), Bordeaux.
E-mail: Samsad48@hotmail.com*