

Outsider and Insider: On being a Historian of Islam and Muslims in South Africa

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Abstract

I am a Muslim born in South Africa. As much as I am an insider practising the faith, as a historian trained in African Studies, I am an outsider to the study of Islam and Muslims in South Africa. I try to stand above the debates that rage, but feel them directly on my body. Being an insider has opened doors into the world of Muslims as much as it has sometimes closed them. Through a semi-autobiographical approach, in this article I present my experiences of studying Muslims and Islam in South Africa. This endeavour has seen me try to negotiate between my identity as a Muslim and my work as a historian, as I focus alternately on the everyday practices of Muslims, and on those who seek to structure Islam, give it direction, and entrench their role as shepherds of the flock. A focus on lived Islam underscores the diversity among Muslims and underlines the idea/fact that Islamic practices are a continuously changing construction both in relation to new theological influences and textual traditions as well as changing social, economic, and political forces.

A walk through what was once the “Indian Quarter” of Durban immediately reveals the impact of the settlement of Indian Muslims in the city. The Grey Street Mosque dominates the skyline, with the Badsha

Peer Mazaar a few minutes away. In-between, on the one side stands the headquarters of the Islamic Propagation Centre International (IPCI) and on the other, the West Street Mosque. In many ways, this tiny area of the city represents both Islam and also its many divides. The Grey Street Mosque was established by Memon traders from Porbandar, India, while the West Street Mosque was founded by traders from Surat and its surrounds. From the 1960s onwards, the West Street Mosque came to represent the ideas of the Tablighi movement, which rejected the centrality of *pirs* (saints) and *mazaars* (shrines) to Islamic practice, while the Grey Street Mosque continued to represent those who favoured the holding of mouloods, Urs, and visitations to the tombs of saints. Badsha Peer was a saint who had arrived in Natal as an indentured worker and inspired popular forms of Islam, while the IPCI marked the arrival of Saudi money in the 1980s and the rise of Ahmed Deedat, who immersed himself in localised and transnational religious debates against mainly Christian missionaries.

I write this article with a deep sense of my own implication in this story. I grew up in the shadow of these mosques, and as a teenager, witnessed the rise of Ahmed Deedat and his now almost mythical debate with the US televangelist, Jimmy Swaggart. Raised in the presence of this history, I have tried as a historian to tell its story, which is at once local and global, sectarian and secular, and changing yet similar.

This article, as mentioned earlier, adopts a semi-autobiographical approach, initially shining the light inwards, and later directing it outwards as the relationship between being Muslim and my work on Muslims is explored.

From a historical point of view, research by ‘outsiders’ may once have been considered objective, and insider research regarded as partial or biased and subjective because of the researcher’s closeness to the subject.¹ However, it is now generally accepted that research is not an entirely innocent undertaking, but instead is influenced by identity and

1 T. Brannick and D. Coghlan, “In defense of being ‘native’: The case for insider academic research,” *Organizational Research Methods*, 10, 1, 2007, pp. 59-74. doi:10.1177/1094428106289253 .

the situated knowledge of researchers; the distinction between insider and outsider is thus a “false dichotomy”². In any case, strict separation is not possible when studying Muslims because there are so many traditions in Islam, such as Barelwi, Deobandi, Sufi, and ‘modernist’, among others, that one may be an insider within one Islamic tradition and an outsider in another.

I did not set out to study Muslims during my post-graduate studies and career as a historian. It was serendipitous that I came across valuable documentation on Muslims in colonial Natal whilst doing research on indentured labour and subsequently secured several academic fellowships to focus on research on Islam. I do not consider myself a specialist in the field of Islamic Studies or Muslim history in the sense of having studied seminal texts or the sociology and anthropology of religion, nor have I attempted to present a comprehensive study of Islam and Muslims in South Africa. My focus has mainly been on Muslims of Indian heritage in KwaZulu-Natal, and this interest arose from my wider interest in the history of Indian South Africans. Additionally, my publications have mostly been in history and social science journals and not ones that traditionally fell under religious studies. It has been a fascinating journey as new angles emerge, old ways return, and new impulses make their presence felt. Islam in KwaZulu-Natal has never been static, so my research has also been in constant motion.

This article provides an opportunity to pause and reflect on the road travelled, and to map the way ahead based on the understanding that history demands a look in the rear-view mirror to make sense of what lies in the present and chart a way forward. Since I believe in self-aware history and the importance of context, I briefly provide some of my background.

2 C. Chavez, “Conceptualizing from the inside: Advantages, complications, and demands on insider positionality,” *The Qualitative Report*, 13, 3, 2008, pp. 474-494 (p. 474). <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR13-3/chavez.pdf>. Also D. Hellowell, “Inside-out: Analysis of the insider-outsider concept as a heuristic device to develop reflexivity in students doing qualitative research,” *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11, 4, 32006, pp. 483-494. doi:10.1080/13562510600874292.

Early Years and Islam

Indians were finally accepted as a permanent part of South Africa in 1961, the year of my birth. For the first century of their stay in this country, the policy of successive white minority regimes was to repatriate them to India. However, the change in legal status did not lead to a respite from the racist onslaught. Indians, Africans and Coloureds were removed from their long-established places of residence and driven into racially defined townships. Apartheid was a double-edged sword. While the Group Areas Act created hardships for large numbers of Black South Africans, racial townships provided space for Indians to practice their religion and culture with few challenges. Political oppression was also ironically accompanied by burgeoning educational and economic opportunities from the late 1960s, which transformed the financial and social position of Indian South Africans.³

I grew up in Durban, where both my parents had been born. In 1932, at the age of four, my father had to return to his ancestral village in India as his father worked as a cook on a ship operating between London and Bombay (now Mumbai). My paternal grandmother died in India and, after the Second World War, my father returned to South Africa with his father, stepmother and two siblings. Just seventeen, he was initially sent to work in Inanda, then a rural area north of Durban. He later worked as a shop assistant in Grey Street in central Durban, now popularly known as the Casbah, until his death in 1985. My father had been educated as far as grade three in India,⁴ but my mother had no formal secular education. She was a housewife, and since retail store assistants were amongst the lowest paid workers in Durban, she supplemented the family income by taking in as table boarders young students from across the country who had come to study at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW). One of these students was Enver Surty, a law student at UDW who later served

3 See Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, *A History of the Present. A Biography of Indian South Africans* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 180-219.

4 Some of this biography is discussed in Goolam Vahed, "An 'Imagined Community' in Diaspora: Gujaratis in South Africa," *South Asian Journal of History and Culture*, 1, 4, 2010, pp. 615-629.

the ANC government as a minister in the post-apartheid period. He wrote about my mother in his memoir.⁵

We lived in Pine Street in central Durban, from where we were forcibly removed at the end of 1976 to make way for the Western Freeway. The West Street and Grey Street mosques, two of the largest in South Africa at the time, were literally a stone's throw away. I attended the West Street Mosque. Although there was an ethnic divide between the Grey Street and West Street mosques, as mentioned before, my attendance had less to do with ethnicity than the fact that my father attended the Grey Street Mosque and I, like most boys my age, wanted to be different.

In my religious upbringing, Islam was taken for granted. I attended the mosque and we did Islamic Studies twice a week at school. The schools where I was enrolled, Crescent Primary and Orient High had been established by Muslim traders, and were among the four or five secular schools in Durban with a special dispensation from the education department to offer Islamic education. The department put a stop to this practice when it began to receive similar requests from other religious groups, but these schools were permitted to continue offering Islamic lessons.

In the 1960s and early 1970s it was common for many Muslims to only attend the Friday prayer and Eid prayer, and fast during the month of Ramadan. Islam was a very public religion, with street processions in Durban around the time of the birth of the Prophet, as well as that of the saint, Badsha Peer, whose tomb is in the Brook Street cemetery. The Muharram festival was another annual public event. On these 'big days', which were a popular feature of city life, a dais was built outside the Grey Street Mosque, from where the band of the Durban Muslim Brigade, with its distinctive white uniform and drums, flutes, bugles, and cymbals, was welcomed by the (white) Mayor of Durban. Some of those who became the staunchest proponents of the Tablighi Jamaat in the 1970s were members of this band and organised moulloods, or participated in these public festivities. The band, the Qawwali, and the recitation of *salaams* (greetings of peace) in honour of the Prophet, all came under attack from

5 Enver Surty, *In Pursuit of Dignity* (Johannesburg: Awqaf, 2019), pp. 22-25.

Tablighi Jamaat members in the 1970s. Organisations like the Arabic Study Circle that attempted to engage with Islam intellectually were deemed 'modernists' by the Tablighi Jamaat, but enjoyed a small following among young educated Muslims.

At the time, there was little serious engagement with Islam on my part. I did not, for example, do *hifdh* classes to learn to recite the Qur'an by rote, or attend the youth camps organised by the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) at As-Salaam on the south coast of Natal. Like most other boys in 'town', our leisure time was spent playing soccer and cricket on the streets, or attending matches at the Kingsmead and Curries Fountain stadia. I was also involved in my local soccer club, D'Alborton Callies. When I registered for studies at UDW in 1979, the thought of doing courses in Islamic Studies or Arabic did not even cross my mind.

Mine was the first generation to benefit from mass education. At UDW, I completed a BA degree with the intention of becoming a teacher, but a series of chance developments (or *takdir/fate*) saw me complete a BA (Hons) degree in history, followed by the award of a Fulbright scholarship in 1985 to pursue African Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, in the United States.

My years at Indiana, where there was a vibrant university community, were important academically and socially. The research-intensive residential campus was host to intellectuals and activists from all parts of the world, and provided me an opportunity to interact with students across race and nationalities for virtually the first time. The campus had several hundred Muslim students, mostly Saudis and Malaysians. There was a small community of Afghan refugees from the Soviet invasion of their country, as well as a sprinkling of Muslim students from other parts of the world. Indiana University had a Muslim Students Association (MSA), and a triple-storey house close to the Student's Union was used for daily prayers.

This was a far cry from the 1960s, when Dr. Jamal Badawi, the Egyptian-Canadian author and lecturer on Islam, first arrived in Bloomington to complete his DPhil. There were no communal prayers then, and he obtained permission from the authorities to hold the first Jumuah prayer

at the university. It was held at Beck Chapel, an endowment to the university by an alumnus to be used for multi-faith prayer and meditation. He recounted that around fifteen students attended that first Jum'ah, but by the mid-1980s it drew a few hundred worshippers, including many women.⁶ The Muslim World League subsequently helped build a state-of-the-art mosque, The Islamic Center of Bloomington, which was completed in the early 1990s. The Muslim community continues to have a strong presence in Bloomington as the Islamic Center remains active, while the establishment of the Bloomington Islamic School (BLISS) points to a Muslim community with roots in the town.

Bloomington challenged Islamic practices that I had previously taken for granted. Communal taraweeh prayers comprised eight rakaats, as opposed to the twenty we had grown up with; the Imam performed taraweeh prayers while looking into the Qur'an; few worshippers wore the 'topi' on their heads during prayer (a practice considered mandatory by Indian Muslims in Durban); most Muslims purchased meat from the local supermarket even though there was a halaal butcher (enough to put one out of the fold of Islam, as we were brought up to believe); and worshippers prayed with their shoes on during the outdoor Eid prayers. Observing the diversity of Muslim practices firsthand made me appreciate the multiplicity found within Islam.

I was not actively involved with Muslim students at Indiana, as my time was spent primarily within my African Studies circle. It still surprises and saddens me that although Bloomington was less than fifty miles from the headquarters of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) in Indianapolis, I never visited it.

Historical Studies and Academic Development

The undergraduate history courses at UDW focused mainly on political history and, with regard to South Africa, reflected Afrikaner and white liberal interpretations. The mainly white lecturers did not expose us to

6 Yasir Qadhi, "Interview with Dr. Jamal Badawi: A Pioneer of Islam in North America," *Shaykh Dr. Yasir Qadhi – Official YouTube Channel*, 15 October 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyJ4rrFV2yg>, Accessed 15 October 2021.

the new social and radical history which was beginning to shape historical research on South Africa. Despite ours being a ‘university for Indians’, there was no coverage of Indian South African history or even Indian history. The focus was primarily on Western Europe and South Africa. Courses in Islamic and Oriental Studies covered Asia and the Middle East.

Indiana provided my first serious exposure to African history, and my reading and understanding of South African history also expanded as we were exposed to the radical reinterpretation of the South African past by academics that subscribed to Marxist historical-materialism. The courses on Africa alerted me to the rich history of Islam in West and East Africa dating back to the eighth century. We read about the great empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhay; exceptional leaders like the Malian Mansa Musa in the early fourteenth century; Timbuktu as the intellectual and spiritual centre of Islamic Africa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; and the early nineteenth-century Fulani reformer and scholar Uthman Dan Fodio, who founded the Sokoto caliphate.

The Islamic tradition in Africa is generally unknown to most Indian Muslims in South Africa, who believe that India is the home of ‘authentic’ Islam. In fact, one respected *Aalim* (scholar) stated as recently as 2013 that it was ‘*fardh* [compulsory] to learn Urdu, especially for those Muslims who are connected to the Sub-Continent’ since ...

“... the most important vehicle for us to acquire Deen [faith] is language. A person’s culture is associated and directly related with language. Our culture is our Deen, and our Deen is written in the language which we have our roots in. For us to get the *Mizaaj* [natural feeling] of our Deen, we will acquire it from our language, and in our case, it is the Urdu language.”⁷

Growing up in Durban, we had little contact with African Muslims. In part this was due to demographics. As J.S. Trimingham pointed out, Islam’s imprint in Southern Africa was so slight “that it may be ignored”.⁸ A group of African Muslims known as ‘Zanzibaris’ (but who were actually

7 M.A. Hamid, *A discourse by Fakrul Ummat Abdul Hamid Ibn Ibrahim Is’haq Sahib* (Azaadville: Akhtari, 2013), pp. 12-13.

8 J.S. Trimingham, *The influence of Islam upon Africa* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 111.

Makhua from northern Mozambique), had arrived in colonial Natal in the 1870s and lived on the Bluff until they were removed to the apartheid-era Indian township of Chatsworth in the 1960s as part of the Group Areas resettlement; we usually met up with them on the soccer field as they had an outstanding team named Real Rovers. It might seem anomalous that a group of Africans were placed in an Indian township, but local Indian Muslim leaders convinced the authorities that because of their Muslim faith, Zanzibaris should not be placed in mainly Christian African townships.⁹

We had little appreciation of the Islamic traditions of African Muslims. Learning about Islam's deep historical roots in Africa was illuminating. I was fortunate to meet the Kenyan-born Professor Ali Mazrui at the African Studies conference in New Orleans, Louisiana, in November 1985, where he was promoting his then new documentary series, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. By "triple heritage", Mazrui meant African indigenous values, Islam, and Western culture. The series focused on these traditions' influence on one another, including the tensions resulting from their juxtaposition. I would later learn of the rancorous debate involving Mazrui, Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, African American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Palestinian-born academic and founder of the field of postcolonial studies, Edward Said, over Mazrui's Africanness. Soyinka described Mazrui as 'less African' and pronounced the documentary unworthy because it was not produced by 'a black African.' Said's riposte was that 'the integrative liberationist African ... in Nigeria has become a nativist, attacking a man for not being black enough.'¹⁰

At Indiana we engaged more fully with new trends emerging in the discipline of history, especially social history and later, cultural history. Social history held great appeal because of its concern with 'ordinary people' and 'real life', rather than with elites and extraordinary events. Cultural history, which came into vogue in the 1980s, drew on literary

9 See Goolam Vahed, "The 'Other Asiatics' of Bayview," in Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed (eds.), *Chatsworth. The Making of a South African Township*, 84-98 (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013).

10 Seifudin Adam, "Ali A. Mazrui, the Post-colonial Theorist," *African Studies Review*, 57, 1, 2014, pp. 135-152, p.143.

criticism, cultural anthropology and postmodern and postcolonial theories to include the study of religion's place in society and everyday life as well as the study of texts, rituals, the arts, food, film, festivals, carnivals, and ceremonies in the search for a fuller explanation of the forces that shape people's lives.¹¹

The discipline of history took another turn in the 1990s when postmodernists argued that the past had no objective reality, since historical work was influenced by the historian's imagination, interpretations, bias, and choice of materials.¹² This may be true, but as Richard Evans reminds us, "some interpretations are more persuasive than others because they achieve a better fit with the evidence, and sometimes, some are actually right and others wrong".¹³ Postmodernists argued by extension that there were no universal truths, religions no longer served their customary functions and that people were becoming disembedded from traditional structures. Modernisation theories, be they western liberal or Marxist, likewise "accepted secularization as part of the modernization process". Peter Berger, the sociologist and Protestant theologian, was adamant in the 1960s that he saw "no reversal of the process of secularization produced by industrialization. The impact is the same everywhere, regardless of culture and local religion. The traditional religions are likely to survive in small enclaves and pockets".¹⁴ Berger would subsequently concede that he was wrong, and it is evident that for most Muslims, Islam has gained in importance in their lives, and that it remains rooted in its traditional context, the mosque. There is little evidence of what sociologists of religion have called 'believing without belonging' in reference to the decline of mosque attendance. Not only are they fuller than a few decades ago, but many more mosques have sprung up all over the country.

11 P. Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (London: Polity Press, 2004).

12 M. Donnelly and C. Norton, *Doing History* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 176.

13 R. Evans, "Postmodernism and History," *Butterflies and Wheels*, 22 October 2002. <http://www.butterfliesandwheels.org/2002/postmodernism-and-history/>. Retrieved 2 September 2017.

14 See Dylan Reaves, "Peter Berger and the Rise and Fall of the Theory of Secularization," *Denison Journal of Religion*, 11, 2012, Article 3. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol11/iss1/3>.

While completing my doctoral dissertation, I worked at a clothing company for almost seven years. Shortly after completing my PhD, I was appointed to the academic staff at UDW in 1996. It was a very different institution from the one I had left a decade before. It had appointed its first Indian vice-chancellor, and would soon have an African one. The racial make-up of students had changed dramatically, with Africans making up the majority at this former 'Indian' institution. Describing the turmoil at the time, journalist Philippa Garson wrote:

"... members of staff have received death threats, had their offices and homes burgled, been at the receiving end of vicious smear campaigns, and have effectively been chased off campus. The conflict is polarising the university along racial lines and bringing the campus to a halt."

Agents of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) were alleged to be operating on campus to marginalise 'Trotskyites' opposed to the new ANC government.¹⁵

Amidst this upheaval, neo-liberal policies began to surface, and UDW underwent restructuring. The Languages and Religious Studies departments were hardest hit, and were forced to merge or close down as a result of recommendations by the university's Strategic Planning Task Team (SPTT).¹⁶ The previously separate departments of Theology, Hindu Studies, Religious Studies, and Languages were merged into a new School of Religion and Culture.¹⁷ Subsequent experience would lead to complaints about theology dominating the School. The history department became part of a school that included sociology and anthropology, and academics had to develop interdisciplinary modules, which undermined the identity of individual disciplines.

A more drastic cost-cutting measure was the merger with the former

15 Philippa Garson, "It's Spy vs Spy," *Mail & Guardian*, 13 October 1995. <https://mg.co.za/article/1995-10-13-its-spy-vs-spy-at-udw/>.

16 P. Gibbon, A. Habib, J. Jansen, and A. Parekh, "Accounting for change: the micropolitics of university restructuring. Part two: changing structures, contesting identities," *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 15,1, 2001, pp. 40-46.

17 Michel Clasquin, "Religious Studies in South(ern) Africa – An Overview," *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 18, 2, 2005, pp. 5-22, (p. 13).

University of Natal to form the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2004. Initially part of the School of Anthropology, Gender and Historical Studies, within a few years the history department was placed in the School of Development Studies which also included Library and Information Science. Academics initially resisted these changes but it was apparent that the forces against them were too strong, and most survived by finding solace in their research.

Studying Muslims

Research for the book I co-authored with Professor Ashwin Desai, *Inside Indian Indenture* (first published in 2007 and republished in 2010 as part of the commemoration of the 150th year since the arrival of indentured migrants to Natal), involved examining thousands of documents in the 196 boxes of the Protector of Indian Immigrants files housed at the Natal Archives Repository in Pietermaritzburg.¹⁸ I spent almost five years going through these documents and was astonished at the abundance of material on Muslims.

Inspired, I applied for a research grant to Sephis (South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development), the International Institute of Social History based in Amsterdam, and was granted funding for 2000-2001, for a project broadly titled 'Indian Muslims in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa'. I successfully applied for the Ernest Oppenheimer Fellowship in the Centre of African Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at London University, and spent four months (January to April 2000) there. Later, an invitation to the International Summer Academy, 'History and Historiography: New Perspectives and Approaches of Research', *Arbeitskreis Moderne und Islam*, held at the Free University of Berlin in September 2000, proved to be of great value.

These developments were formative in my work on Islam and Muslims in South Africa. The Sephis grant allowed and compelled me to do research on Muslims. The Summer Academy, though short, gave

18 Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture. A South African Story, 1860-1914* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2010).

me important conceptual tools for studying Muslims. It provided the academic framework for understanding and explaining what I had observed amongst Muslims in Bloomington, and was now seeing in Durban. The Summer Academy was convened by Gudrun Krämer, then director of the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies. Other senior scholars included anthropologist Dale Eickelman,¹⁹ whose work emphasises the importance of context in the study of Islam; Christoph Conrad, a professor of modern European history who ran a workshop on cultural history; Shalini Randeria, professor of anthropology and sociology at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, who supervised the workshop on multiple modernities; Stephen Humphreys, then 'Abd al-Aziz al-Sa'ud Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and well known for his work on medieval Islamic history; and Suraiya Faruqi, then professor at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, and a specialist on Ottoman history. Around twenty 'emerging scholars' from various parts of the world spent two weeks reading the material provided by workshop leaders, which included the writings of Marshall G.S. Hodgson, Lila Abu-Lughod, Bernard S. Cohn, Samuel N. Eisenstadt, Joan Wallach Scott, Dominick La Capra and Hayden White, then discussing key themes as a group, and presenting our work on places as diverse as Albania, Yemen, Bashkortostan, Tunis, Persia, and Palestine.

The Academy emphasized that notions like 'Islamic society', 'Islamic law', and 'Islamic tradition' should be interrogated and not assumed. As Bernard Cohn puts it, academics should not deny the 'central historical fact that the people he or she studies are constituted in the historically significant situation' and are not 'somehow out of time and history'.²⁰ Cohn advocated that social scientists move away ...

"... from the objectification of social life to a study of its constitution and construction. All culture is constructed. It is the product of human thought. This product may over time become fixed ways

19 Dale Eickelman, "The Study of Islam in Local Contexts," *Contributions to Asian Studies*, 17, 1982, pp. 1-16.

20 Bernard S. Cohn, "History and Anthropology: The State of Play," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 22, 2, 1980, pp. 198-221 (p. 199).

of doing things. It may also be changed. Since culture is always being constituted and constructed, so it is also always being transformed. Cultures and societies are not natural objects. It is only through culture that we construct nature, not the other way around.”²¹

The four months I spent at SOAS were extremely beneficial as its library has a rich collection of material on Islam and Muslims in South Asia, including Hindu-Muslim contestation over the performance of festivals, the establishment of a Darul Uloom at Deoband, and the emergence of the Tablighi movement. I returned with several hundred pages photocopied from various collections. This was indispensable in writing on Muslims in colonial Natal, as our library at UDW had very limited holdings and, at the time, little material was available online. Of special interest were the *Gazetteers*. The British mission in India was essentially to dominate the locals, and they undertook detailed studies of local peoples to assist them in doing so. The East India Company began publishing these gazettes from 1815 and they continued to be published after the British takeover in 1858. While the problem of colonial archives and knowledge in enforcing colonial forms of power has been well documented,²² this series of books contains remarkable information regarding the micro-level of Indian society. It was fascinating to read about the dress, culinary habits, and religious practices of the migrants who arrived in Natal from the villages of Gujarat in the late nineteenth century.²³ The *Gazetteers* certainly aided my understanding of Islamic practices in nineteenth-century colonial Natal.

Among my early publications that arose out of this research were several articles on Islam and Muslims (as well as Hindus) in colonial Natal, roughly covering the period between 1860 and 1914. Around ten percent of indentured migrants to colonial Natal were Muslim. Documentary evidence showed that while living on disparate plantations, often as individuals among a mass of Hindus, indentured Muslims attempted to practice their faith; prisoners even demanded halaal food and took issue

21 Cohn, “History and Anthropology,” p. 219.

22 See, for example, Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1996).

23 P.C. Roy Chaudhary, “The Story of the Gazetteer,” *India International Centre Quarterly*, 2, 4 (October 1975), pp. 259-265.

with the forced shaving of their beards. Due to the scarcity of women, marriages between Hindus and Muslims were common, which some modern-day Muslims would like to erase from their histories; and there were instances of migrants returning to India to seek spouses. Indeed, these demands resulted in planters sending instructions to recruiters in India to avoid recruiting Muslims.²⁴

A remarkable aspect of the colonial period was that once they had completed their terms of indenture and established themselves in poorly resourced communities, migrants invested their meagre savings in building community institutions like mosques and *madrasahs* all over Natal. A history of the colonial period in Natal also reveals the importance of religious personalities like Soofie Saheb and Badsha Peer as well as the latter's tomb in establishing Islam amongst the masses.²⁵ Whilst these practices would be condemned by those who embraced the ideas of the Tablighi Jamaat in the 1960s and 1970s, in the formative decades, they were important to indentured Muslims and their descendants in establishing Islamic practices.

Indian Muslims in colonial Natal had multiple identities. Being 'Indian' was the primary factor that shaped their stay in the colony. The festival of Muharram was the only time in the year that all indentured Indians were granted their three-day annual leave. The majority of the participants in Muharram were Hindus, and this festival was crucial in forging a sense of community, of 'Indianness'. The colonial authorities sought to suppress the rituals of Muharram on the grounds that it was a threat to law and order.²⁶

An article on Muharram in colonial Natal that I published in *The Post* in

24 Goolam Vahed, "Uprooting, Rerooting: Culture, Religion and Community Amongst Indentured Muslim Migrants in Colonial Natal, 1860-1911," *South African Historical Journal*, 5, 2001, pp. 191-222 and Goolam Vahed, "Indentured Muslim Women in Colonial Natal: Mothers, Wives and Work," in Amba Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, 95-110 (Singapore: Springer, 2020).

25 Goolam Vahed, "A Sufi Saint's Day in South Africa: The Legend of Badshah Pir," *Islamic Culture*, LXXVII, 4, 2003, pp. 31-70 and "Mosques, Mawlana's and Muharram: Establishing Indian Islam in Colonial Natal, 1860-1910," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXXI, 2001, pp. 3-29.

26 Goolam Vahed, "Constructions of Community and Identity among Indians in Colonial Natal, 1860-1910: The Role of the Muharram Festival," *Journal of African History*, 43, 1, 2002, pp. 77-93.

about 2000 prompted several Muslims to admonish me for ‘disgracing’ Islam by showing the involvement of Hindus in Muharram.

Hindus, Muslims, and Christians gradually became defined as distinct groups. Arya Samaj missionary Swami Shankeranand, who was in Natal from 1908 to 1912, played a crucial role in this; it was through his efforts that Diwali received official recognition as a Hindu festival. Few Hindus today are aware that for half a century, the majority of Hindus participated in Muharram rather than Diwali. The Hindu and Muslim middle classes also attended each other’s Eid and Diwali festivals. Hindus in South Africa generally look upon the Swami and Gandhi with great reverence: few know that the Swami was scathing about Gandhi during his stay in Natal.²⁷ This long history of close living and co-operation between Hindus and Muslims in Natal is masked by present-day tensions resulting from the rise of Islamic and Hindu nationalism.

Historical research has also shown that Muslims struggled for recognition of Islamic marriages from the earliest days of their settlement in colonial Natal. A Muslim Marriage Officer was appointed in the 1890s but he was dismissed because Muslims attending the Grey Street Mosque refused to accept his appointment as he was affiliated to the West Street Mosque. A historical approach is important when one seeks to analyse and respond to the omnibus legislation discussed in the South African parliament in 2021/2022. Some Ulema describe Muslims who support the Bill as being out of the fold of Islam because some of the protections afforded to women are not as per *Shari’ah*. Discussion around the legislation ignores the vulnerability of women and the damaging consequences for them when Muslim marriages were not recognised in the apartheid era; the context in which the consequences of Muslim marriages, but not the marriages themselves, were eventually recognised in the post-apartheid period; women’s ongoing struggles for redress in post-apartheid courts; the fact that there is no Islamic body with the power to enforce rulings

27 Goolam Vahed and Vinay Lal, “Hinduism in South Africa: Caste, Ethnicity, and Invented Traditions, 1860-present,” *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 4, 1-2, 2013, pp. 1-15; Goolam Vahed, “Swami Shankeranand and the consolidation of Hinduism in Natal, 1908-1914,” *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 10, 2, 1997, pp. 3-35.

on Muslims; and the lack of social welfare measures for divorced Muslim women.²⁸ Cognisance of this history may help to formulate a considered response to the new legislation in searching for the best outcome for Muslims, instead of resorting to name-calling.

Some of my earlier studies focused on the so-called passenger Indians, a category that included a large proportion of Muslims. *Crossing Space and Time in the Indian Ocean* contains biographies of numerous early Muslim migrants.²⁹ The study of the Grey Street Mosque, based on three court cases, underlined the ethnic divide amongst Muslims, which was so great that the courts stipulated that the board of trustees should comprise specific numbers of Memons, Surti, Kokanee, and 'colonial borns' (the latter a term that referred to the descendants of indentured migrants).³⁰ This court challenge revealed the role of the secular court in limiting authority amongst Muslims and further showed that the mosque was not a public space but one controlled by elites who constrained the ideas and activities taking place in that space. Not every trustee (custodian) curtailed debate, but over time it was clear that many are restrictive in what worshippers can and cannot do.

Subsequent work on these migrants showed how identities evolved over time, with the language and ethnic divide amongst Muslims narrowing. This is reflected in changes in their choice of marriage

28 Goolam Vahed, "Muslim marriages, the South African state and the courts: Between limbo, liberation, and the spaces for Limitations and Legacy of the Indian Relief Act of 1914," *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 21, 2003, pp. 1-40; Also Goolam Vahed, "Muslim marriages, the South African state and the courts: Between limbo, liberation, and the spaces for contestation in-between," *Contemporary South Asia*, 2021, pp. 1-15. Forthcoming.

Vahed, "Uprooting, Rerooting", pp. 191-222.

Vahed and Lal, "Hinduism in South Africa," and *Invented Traditions, 1860-present*, *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*, 4, 1-2, 2013. Vahed "Muslim marriages." Forthcoming.

29 Goolam Vahed, "Passengers, Partnerships, and Promissory Notes: Gujarati Traders in Colonial Natal, 1870-1920," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 38, 3, 2005, pp. 449-479; Goolam Vahed, "'A Man of Keen Perceptive Facilities': Aboobaker Amod Jhaveri, an 'Arab' in Colonial Natal, circa 1872-1887," *Historia*, 50, 1, May 2005, pp. 49-74; and Goolam Vahed and Surendra Bhana, *Crossing Space and Time in the Indian* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2015).

30 Goolam Vahed, "'Unhappily torn by dissensions and litigations': Durban's 'Memon' Mosque, 1880-1930," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 36, 1, 2006, pp. 23-49.

partners. Prior to 1953, most passenger Indians sought marriage partners in India. Once the National Party government banned that practice, Muslims tended to marry according to language group; in the post-apartheid period that, too, is gradually falling away with class and religion being important in choosing a marriage partner.³¹

Archival research shattered many other myths about Muslims that ulema tend to disseminate, such as that in the 'old days' Muslims trusted one another and conducted business transactions verbally, or taking each other at their word. The lived Islam of Muslims was a far cry from what the text deemed to be a 'proper' Muslim. From the earliest days, Muslims engaged in transactions that involved interest, while the idea of Muslims 'trusting' one another can be countered by the numerous court cases that Muslims brought against other Muslims.³² There were many marriages across religious lines, most Muslims participated in activities subsequently termed 'populist', and Memon Muslims from Porbandar, although considered 'devout', followed the Hindu law of succession until the 1930s. This underscores the differences between the real and the textual ideal.³³

Transformations within Islam

While this early work was mainly based on the discovery of archival material, subsequent work was motivated in part by an attempt to understand the rapid changes taking place amongst Muslims. During my childhood and adolescence, most Muslims engaged in 'popular' practices such as visiting the tombs of saints and the public celebration of the Prophet's birthday, or they at least tolerated these practices of others'. The arrival of the Tablighi Jamaat movement from the 1960s changed the dynamics, and these tensions erupted into violence in the 1980s

31 See Goolam Vahed, "An 'Imagined Community' in Diaspora: Gujarati's in South Africa," in Nalin Mehta and Mona G. Mehta (eds.), *Gujarat Beyond Gandhi. Identity, conflict and Society*, 210-231 (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010).

32 Vahed, "Passengers, Partnerships," pp. 449-479;

33 Goolam Vahed, "Family, Gender, and Mobility among Passenger Migrants into Colonial Natal: The Story of Moosa Hajee Cassim (c.1840s-1921)," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42, 3, 2016, pp. 505-522.

primarily due to struggles over the control of mosques. The emergence of a strong professional and trader class amongst the descendants of indentured Muslims was crucial in enabling them to challenge trader dominance of institutions.

The rapid changes in the early 1990s leading to the country's first democratic elections in 1994, saw most Muslim organisations from across the theological divide come together to form the United Ulama Council of South Africa (UUCSA). These transformations are captured in several of my publications on the conflict between 'Barelvis' and the 'Tablighis'.³⁴ The 1990s witnessed important changes amongst Muslims. In Durban, many were inspired by Moulana Yunus Patel, whose focus on self-reformation (*tazkiyah*, or purification of the soul) sought to give Muslims a clear identity on the basis of living religious lives. Changes included women covering their hair and later, their faces, girls not attending secular schools; Muslims consuming halaal food; the adoption of Islamic finance; and many Muslims attaching themselves to a shaykh. This focus on the ethics of piety has been termed the ethical turn in the study of Islam. My work sought to locate these changes in the context of the end of apartheid and the Cold War as well as the onset of globalisation, and the challenges this posed for Muslims. In this turbulent context, Islam provided an anchor for many Muslims. An analysis of the neo-Sufi practices underscores the irony that critics of 'popular' Islam (locally referred to as Barelvis) were themselves adopting practices considered by others to be innovations (*bidah*).³⁵

An ethnographic study of Muharram observances in Durban in 2002 discussed the multiple ways in which Muharram was understood and observed in the city. An analysis of the rituals over time show that in

34 Goolam Vahed, "Contesting 'Orthodoxy': The Tablighi-Sunni Conflict among South African Muslims in the 1970s and 1980s," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 23, 2, October 2003, pp. 315-336.

35 Goolam Vahed, "Indian Islam and the meaning of South African Citizenship – A Question of Identities," *Transformation*, 43, (September 2000), pp. 25-51; Goolam Vahed, "Changing Islamic Traditions and Emerging Identities in South Africa," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 20, 1, April 2000, pp. 43-73; Goolam Vahed and Shamil Jeppie, "Multiple Communities? Muslims in post-Apartheid South Africa," in John Daniel, Roger Southall, and Jessica Lutchman (eds.), *The State of the Nation: South Africa 2003-2004*, 252-286 (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2004).

some instances participants either modified their actions or, where the rituals appear to be the same, the meanings attached to them sometimes changed so that they were 'kosher' with current beliefs. The notion of 'authenticity' also transforms as participants' notions of what constitutes correct beliefs and practices changes. The multiple muharrams indicate that the label "Muslim" masks diversity.³⁶

Research projects tend to find me. I was one of the speakers at the launch of Shamil Jeppie's book on the Arabic Study Circle. Zuleikha Mayat, founder and president of the Women's Cultural Group (WCG), was also invited to speak and gave an impassioned talk on the study's neglect of women. She subsequently approached me to consider writing the history of the WCG. I agreed and approached my colleague in the history department, Thembisa Waetjen, to co-author the work. Thembisa trained as a sociologist, and had written on women as well as on Zulu ethnicity. Bringing in this outsider perspective with wider areas of specialisation and publications resulted in a considerably stronger work. The issue of gender and identity among Muslims is an important global issue, and *Gender, Modernity, and Indian Delights* speaks to this literature.³⁷ One of the issues raised in the study is that while the WCG and its founder, Zuleikha Mayat, are renowned for their internationally acclaimed recipe book, *Indian Delights*, these women were early pioneers in demanding access for women in mosques. That struggle continues into the present.

Dear Ahmedbhai, Dear Zuleikhabhen, the published epistolary correspondence between Mayat and Ahmed Kathrada, who was incarcerated with Nelson Mandela for 27 years for his anti-apartheid activism, which Thembisa and I had chanced upon while going through Mayat's archives, provides wonderful insights into the Gujarati Muslim community, the

36 Goolam Vahed, "Contested Meanings and Authenticity: Indian Islam and Muharram Performances in Durban, 2002," *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 19, 2, 2005, pp. 129-145 and Goolam Vahed, "Contesting Indian Islam in KwaZulu-Natal: The Muharram Festival in Durban, 2002," in Preben Kaarsholm and Isabel Hofmeyr (eds.), *The Popular and the Public: Cultural Debates and Struggles over Public Space in Modern India, Africa and Europe* (London: Seagull Books, 2009), pp. 107-140.

37 Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen, *Gender, Modernity, and Indian Delights. The Women's Cultural Group of Durban, 1954-2010* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2010).

anti-apartheid struggle, and the experience of being a prisoner of the apartheid state.³⁸

Part of a growing tendency towards boundary-making in the post-apartheid period is the spawning of faith-based schools, such as my alma mater, Orient Islamic School, which transitioned from a secular government school that included a few sessions of religious studies to an independent (private) Islamic school. This is the subject of *State, Identity and the Orient Islamic Educational Institute*, once again co-authored with Thembisa Waetjen. The book traces how Indian Muslims, as a racial and religious minority living in politically hostile conditions, established institutions of learning that were unique in integrating secular and religious curricula.³⁹ Through this study, we explore transitions among Muslims and within Islamic practices from South Asia in the late nineteenth century, to the post-apartheid period in South Africa.

My publications include several biographies of Muslims, such as those of Ahmed Deedat, and his IPCI. Deedat, who grew up in rural Natal, evolved into a global transnational figure whose fame (or notoriety, depending on your perspective) was built on debating Christians.⁴⁰ His biography underlines the need to historicise figures. He was often heavily criticised by Ulama led by the Port Elizabeth-based Mawlana A.S. Desai and *The Majlis* newspaper. Both Mawlana Desai and *The Majlis* disapproved of many of his actions, such as taking non-Muslims on mosque visits. On 9 October 2021, a non-Muslim listener named Viraj called in to Mufti A.K. Hoosen's radio station, Markaz Sahaba, asking him when Deedat would be live in the studio as he wanted to ask him a few questions. The Mufti, a close ally of *The Majlis* newspaper, surprisingly responded:

“Our brother Shaykh Ahmed Deedat passed away many, many years ago. All his debates are available and you can keep on listening to him, the man who debated with (Jimmy) Swaggart and everybody

38 Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen, *Dear Ahmedbhai, Dear Zuleikhabhen. The Letters of Ahmed Kathrada and Zuleikha Mayat 1979-1989* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2009).

39 Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen, *Schooling Muslims in Natal. State, Identity and the Orient Islamic Educational Institute* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2015).

40 Goolam Vahed, *Ahmed Deedat. The Man and His Mission* (Durban: IPCI Press, 2013).

else and defeated them. My brother, we pray Almighty Allah grant him Jannat al firdous for defending the deen of Islam.”⁴¹

It is ironic that this one-time persona non grata among many ulama is now acclaimed as a defender of the faith. I have also written a biography of Dr. Chota Motala, Muslim medical doctor and anti-apartheid activist, which does not explicitly set out to focus on Muslims, but does provide a peek into Muslim life.⁴² *Muslim Portraits* is a compilation of short biographies of anti-apartheid activists which has proven highly popular but drew criticism from one (non-Muslim) critic who felt that the book suggests that only Muslims participated in the anti-apartheid struggle, which is obviously not the case.⁴³ Biographies are difficult to construct, but I find the biographical approach highly rewarding in the way in which it points to more general developments in society.

The Covid-19 pandemic reinvigorated my interest in the contemporary, as my WhatsApp number was swamped with highly inflammatory messages in relation to the existence of a virus, the closure of mosques, social distancing, and vaccines. It would appear that those who were willing to abide by government directives were motivated as much by theological and scientific conviction as by political concerns which, in turn, raised questions as to whether they were being disabled. On the other hand, those arguing against the directives of government, while drawing on Islamic texts, relied as much on the propaganda of extreme right-wing conservative and racist think tanks to support their arguments. This trading of accusations, character assassination and name-calling added to people’s anxieties, an experience far removed from the imaginary ivory tower in which academics are sometimes presumed to dwell. I wrote about these differences in “The contagious power of words: Muslim South Africans during the pandemic” and

41 Mufti AK Hoosen and Moulana Arafat Hatia, “As Safinatu Ilal Jannaah,” Markaz Sahaba online radio, 9 October 2021. <https://markazsahaba.com/as-safinatu-ilal-jannah/>. Accessed 11 October 2021.

42 Goolam Vahed, *Chota Motala. A Biography of Political Activism in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands*. (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2018).

43 Goolam Vahed, *Muslim Portraits*. The Anti-Apartheid Struggle (Durban: Madiba Publishers, 2012).

“Covid-19, Congregation Worship, and Contestation over ‘Correct’ Islam in South Africa”, which highlighted the growing schism amongst Muslims, with the formation of new bodies claiming authority and even a hardening of attitudes towards the secular government and its alleged “devious” plots against Islam, as some would have us believe.⁴⁴ There have always been differences amongst Muslims, but the use of social media at the present time, the need to garner supporters and hence resources, and the hardening of identities have made the situation doubly toxic.

I have published on other issues currently engaging Muslims in South Africa, unfortunately, it seems, in anticipation of the looting and rioting of July 2021, on the thorny issue of race in Islam;⁴⁵ the Muslim Marriages Bill;⁴⁶ and the Sunni Muslim majority’s attitudes towards Shias in South Africa, whose mosque in KwaZulu-Natal was attacked in 2018.⁴⁷

Islam in Context

My studies on Muslims have been eclectic. The choice of subjects has mostly been unplanned, depending more on the availability of information, outside requests for a study to be undertaken (sans any financial compensation, of course), or an issue of interest, but taken together, it has become a body of work that provides many insights into Indian

44 Goolam Vahed, “The contagious power of words: Muslim South Africans during the pandemic,” *Transformation. Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, 104, 2020, pp. 42-53; Goolam Vahed, “Covid-19, Congregation Worship, and Contestation over ‘Correct’ Islam in South Africa,” *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 34, 1, 2021, pp. 1-30. Online ISSN 2413-3027; DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2021/v34n1a4>.

45 Goolam Vahed, “Muslims in post-apartheid South Africa: race, community, and identity,” *Social Identities. Journal for the Study of Race, Nation, and Culture*, 27, 1, 2021, pp. 44-58. DOI: 10.1080/13504630.2020.1814724.

46 Goolam Vahed, “Muslim marriages.” Forthcoming.

47 Goolam Vahed, “Migration, Diaspora and Transnationalism: The Ismailis/Khojas of South Africa,” *Rāhē Najāt (The Path Of Salvation): Religious And Social Dynamics Of Mercantile Communities In The Western Indian Ocean*, Festschrift for Françoise Mallison. Edited by Iqbal Akhtar, takes a historical look at Ismailis in South Africa, while Goolam Vahed, “Between the Local and the Global: The Iranian Revolution and Sunni-Shia Relations in South Africa,” *Islamic Africa* 13 (2022) 87-114, was inspired by the attack on the Shia mosque in Durban in 2018 and examines Sunni-Shia relations since the Iranian Revolution.

Muslim society, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, which allows for some broad reflections.

The first of these reflections concerns Mufti A.K. Hoosen's response to a listener's question about the Islamic lunar calendar in October 2021 on the former's Markaz Sahaba radio station:

"Our Islamic calendar is from time immemorial. Let us juxtapose and compare this with the Gregorian calendar. There's so many inconsistencies, 28 days, 29 days, 30 days, 31 days ... Islam is straightforward ... You look at the moon on Thursday evening, 29th Safar, crescent is sighted, InshaAllah, we see the month of Rabi' al-Awwal ushered in. If it is not sighted, then Friday is 30th Safar and Saturday the 1st Rabi' al-Awwal. Islam is for all times and all places, the educated, the uneducated, everybody can see it, but your system has many inconsistencies. Everything of Islam is perfect."⁴⁸

This comment is ironic, given the ongoing contestation among Muslims over the start of the new Islamic month, especially because the Mufti himself has been involved in recent moon "wars" with regard to the Eid festival. The article that Thembisa Waetjen and I published on moon sighting demonstrates that what is acceptable as a sighting for the lunar calendar is contested; the boundaries with regard to where a sighting can be made have shifted, and even when the parameters are agreed upon, there are differences over whether the moon was actually sighted, even though Muslims were observing the same sky.

There are similar differences in the attitude of the *Ulama* towards technology such as the print media, telephone, radio, the Internet and now social media. Each of these communication tools was initially deemed haraam (forbidden) by some ulema. As the article on moon sighting demonstrates, it was only in 1934 that Ulama in Durban deemed it acceptable for the sighting of the moon to be conveyed by telephone.

Writing on the Ulama's reluctance to embrace the printing press, Francis Robinson made the following observation that could apply to other technology as well:

48 Mufti A.K. on the lunar calendar, Q&A Programme, *As Safinatulil Jannah*, 5 October 2021. <https://markazsahaba.com/as-safinatu-ilal-jannah/>. Accessed 6 October 2021.

“Orthodox Ulama, ever wary of the possibility of religious innovation (i.e. *bidah*) would have been deeply concerned about the introduction of printing; the one printing press operated by Muslims in Istanbul in the 1730s and 1740s aroused so much opposition that it had to be closed down. More generally, there would have been the doubt which many pious Muslims would have felt about associating with *kufir*, with the products of non-Islamic civilization. Such doubts never lasted for long in the case of seriously useful items like military technology, or significant sources of pleasure like tobacco, but it has been a feeling which has dogged all initial Muslim responses to new things from the West, from clocks to electric lights.”⁴⁹

Robinson implies that interpretations of Islamic texts are subjective, and subtly suggests that some fatwas are self-serving, such as the acceptance of military technology. There is a similar self-interest towards modern technology. While many studies point to the devastating physical and psychological impact of modern technology, Ulama, who likely fear that ignoring modern communication tools will render them irrelevant in the context of the end of apartheid and media deregulation, are eagerly utilising new media technologies such as smartphones, the internet, and social media tools like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp to not only broadcast proceedings from mosques and circulate their lectures, but in some cases to demonise and marginalise other Muslims, spread false narratives, and generally create disharmony and conflict within the Ummah. It is ironic that while most Ulema fervently condemn television sets, they say little about smartphones, which are practically miniature versions of the television.

Issues like Islamic finance, vaccines, the Muslim Marriages Bill, and what constitutes halaal meat, are all heavily contested. This is understandable, given that, as Iranian philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush reminds us, Islam is not “a singular object. [It] is fundamentally a history of different interpretations ... The actual lived experience of Islam has always been culturally and historically specific, and bound by the immediate circumstances of its location in time and space.”⁵⁰ Philosopher

49 Francis Robinson, “Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, 1, Feb. 1993, pp. 229-251 (p. 231).

50 Abdolkarim Soroush, “The Responsibilities of the Muslim intellectual in the 21st Century,” in conversation with Farish A. Noor, *Nawaat*, 8 February 2005. <https://nawaat.org/2005/02/08/the-responsibilities-of-the-muslim-intellectual-in-the-21st-century-2/>. Accessed 22 October 2021.

Safet Bectovic reinforces the point that “differences in ethnic origin and language have a decisive influence on Muslim understanding of Islam. Also, political, psychological and other factors have an influence on the Muslim way of living. In addition to this, Muslims act in the world like other people, motivated by similar needs and interests.”⁵¹ In view of the divisions among Muslims, including contestation over who is a Muslim and what constitutes Islam, it is unsustainable to speak of a community. Muslims run the gamut from secular to fundamentalist, and orthodox to Sufi.

American cultural anthropologist Marshall Sahlins stated almost three decades ago that “an ethnography with time and transformation built into it is a distinct way of knowing the anthropological object ...”⁵² Islamic practices are not fixed even if worshippers believe that they are. The Muslim community in South Africa is almost unrecognisable from a few decades ago. Some question the sense of belonging to a secular state, as they seek to minimise contact with the wider society and strive to create a parallel Muslim one. The boundaries between religious groups, especially Hindus and Muslims, have also become marked in contrast to the past, when they were lumped together as “Indian” by the state and lived and struggled side-by-side. The rise of Hindu nationalism has undoubtedly contributed to this divide. While all individuals are shaped by multiple identities, Islam in its various shades is the most important element in the identity of many Muslims of the present conjuncture. Identity, however, is always in the making, and it remains to be seen how it will evolve.

My studies also highlight the limits of religious authority in a secular state. For example, legal challenges to the composition of the Trust of the Grey Street Mosque in the early twentieth century, contestation over the Muslim Marriages Bill, and the failed Muslim challenges to lock down provisions indicate clearly that secular courts and the secular legal system impose forms of authority on Muslims beyond the *Ulama* and *Shariah*.

51 Safet Bectovic, “Studying Muslims and constructing Islamic identity,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 34, 7, 2011, pp. 1120-1133 (pp. 1122-1123). DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2010.528782, 1122-1123.

52 Marshall Sahlins, “Goodbye to *Tristes Tropes*: Ethnography in the Context of Modern World History,” *Journal of Modern History*, 65, March 1993, pp. 1-25 (p. 1).

These different forms of authority play a role in shaping and limiting everyday practices even though we do not look upon them as influencing the behaviour of Muslims. That said, the post-apartheid state has been far more favourable towards Muslim claims for the public recognition of Islam than was the case under apartheid, when Islam was branded a false religion. It remains to be seen how this relationship will evolve. Will the rising threat of assertive Islamic movements in East Africa create consternation and lead to Islam being perceived as a public threat in South Africa? Can Muslims be good Muslims and good citizens in a secular state? Will the aggressive denunciation of the state as anti-Muslim by some segments of the *Ulama* fraternity lead to greater animosity towards the state on the part of Muslims?

Transformation over time as well as the primary elements that create change may include long-term factors such as political change, education, economic fluctuations, and changes in technology, as well as short-term actions such as the deliberate efforts of individuals or groups to foment animosity, achieve a common purpose, or effect a change in ethical behaviour. These can be tracked through historical studies.

Conclusion

James Baldwin wrote in 1965 that history “is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.”⁵³ I am a practising Muslim. Islam was part of my growing up in Durban, and in my formative years was almost exclusively restricted to Indian South Africans. But as Durban plays host to new streams of African migrants, these experiences have broadened. Congregations have changed. Locally born African Muslims are making their presence felt. Globally, trends in Islam, including the Sunni/Shia divide and rampant Islamophobia across the globe, are part of the environment in which I now practice my faith

53 J. Grossman, “James Baldwin on history,” *Perspectives on History. The Magazine of the American Historical Association*, 3 August 2016. <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/summer-2016/james-baldwin-on-history>. Retrieved 12 August 2018.

and conduct my research. While my insider status often opens doors, my race and variant of Islam sometimes closes them.

One of the great Africanist historians John Lonsdale once said: “Without passionate commitment there can be no dispassionate research”.⁵⁴ In the process of studying how others live and act, my research has deepened my understanding of myself and the role of Islam in my life. My approach has generally been to understand how Muslims comprehend themselves as Muslim; not to question the ‘truthfulness’ of their traditions, nor seek the “true” Muslim, but to represent them as accurately as possible from their point of view, to see how they interact with other traditions, and to ask critical questions of them. I try to be reflexive, making use of as many sources as possible and returning to the field prepared to see things anew.

My experiences in the United States and later, Australia, where I lived for several years as part of a multi-national Muslim community, forced me to think about Muslims in more global ways than I would have if I had never left South Africa. At the same time, as Marcel Proust is popularly quoted as saying, “It is not about new lands, but about seeing with new eyes”.⁵⁵ As Islam has changed its complexion, and as my studies in the archives contest with the present, I have come to see with new eyes. Sometimes wearing multifocals. Seeing far and near. But also looking downwards at the everyday practices of Islam and upwards to those who seek to structure it, give it direction, and entrench their role as shepherds of the flock.

Sometimes I have gone to mosque fervently hoping that the people I pray with have not read anything I have written on Islam. At other times I wish they would. Such is the paradox of the insider and outsider. Such is the power of history even when historians feel at their most powerless.

54 J. Lonsdale, “African Studies, Europe and Africa,” *Afrika Spectrum* 40, 3, 2005, pp. 377-402 (p. 394).

55 This quote from Proust is widely popular but is not accurate. The correct quote is ‘The only true voyage of discovery, the only fountain of Eternal Youth, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is.’ De Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past, Volume 2. The Guermentes Way and Cities of the Plain*. Translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. London: Vintage, 1982, p. 657. However, the paraphrased quote is apposite for the point made here.

As we write history in the present, so we must keep thinking backwards to what we have said. The value of a historical approach is to show that Islamic practices in South Africa, though based on text and tradition, are a continuously changing construction. Put another way, the practice of Islam and ways of being Muslim reflect change over time. This may be due to the percolation of new theological interpretations and ideas; relations between Muslims and between Muslims and others; new ideas about class and gender; shifting demographic patterns; and changing political, economic and social-structural conditions. Whatever the case, change is undeniable.

We cannot walk away from our past since we are influenced by it one way or another. Knowing our history means understanding that there is not just one conceivable future and that we can actively endeavour to shape a better one. There will always be those who ignore the many sides of the past, adopt partisan views to suit their own agendas, and oftentimes subject historians to pressure of all kinds, facilitated by social media, when they are unhappy with the historian's findings. However, persistent historical work is cause for hope and not something one would want to give up, whatever the conflicts and tensions inherent in it – history as faith, if you like.