

Contesting ‘Orthodoxy’: The Tablighi–Sunni¹ Conflict among South African Muslims in the 1970s and 1980s

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Introduction

Muslims constitute less than 3% of South Africa’s population. In a context where divisions of race, ethnicity and class predominated, schisms among South Africa’s Muslims have been largely overlooked in the country’s historiography. Notwithstanding the tendency of outsiders to view Muslims as a cultural and timeless whole, Islam has never functioned as an organic unity in South Africa. The most obvious distinction is between Indian and Malay Muslims with their different histories, cultures and traditions.² Most Indian Muslims are confined to KwaZulu Natal and Gauteng, while the majority of Malays live in the Western Cape; there has consequently been little interaction. But deep differences also exist among Indian Muslims due to distinctions of locality, class, ethnicity and language. This paper briefly traces the genesis of these differences, with particular emphasis on the upsurge of conflict during the 1970s and 1980s as a result of attempts by reformist Islam to eradicate entrenched popular practices. The ensuing contestation of belief and practices led to significant transformation of identity among reformists as well as defenders of ‘tradition’ among South African Muslims.

Migration, Settlement, Divisions

Indian Muslims arrived in Natal in two streams. Approximately 10% of the 152,641 indentured Indians imported to Natal between 1860 and 1911 were Muslim.³ They were followed by traders from Gujarat on the west coast of India who began arriving from the mid-1870s. Indentured migrants, drawn from a large area of India, were divided in terms of religious tradition, caste, language, ethnicity and regional cultures. The diversity of indentured Muslims is illustrated by language usage. Muslims who came via Madras spoke Tamil and Telegu, while northern Muslims spoke dialects of Hindi such as Braj, Bundeli, Awadhi and Bhojpuri.⁴ After indenture, free Indians flourished as market gardeners throughout Natal. Together with traders, they laid the foundation for a strong and visible Indian, including Muslim, presence.

Muslim traders were incorrectly called ‘Arabs’ in Natal because most adopted the Middle Eastern mode of dress.⁵ These traders differentiated themselves from indentured workers because they wanted equality with whites in terms of Queen Victoria’s 1858 Proclamation that asserted the equality of British subjects.⁶ In a confidential report to the Durban Town Council (DTC) in 1885, police inspector Richard Alexander observed that ‘Arabs will only associate with Indians so far as trade compels them to’.⁷ Maureen Swan estimates their number to have averaged 2000 from 1890 to 1910.⁸ The special circumstances of traders enabled them to keep their corporate

character and social distance from other Indians. They saw their immigrant status as temporary and maintained family links by visiting India, marrying their sons and daughters in India, and remitting money to build mosques and schools in their villages of origin.⁹

While social and economic conditions on plantations made it difficult for indentured Muslims to fulfil the many requirements of Islam, Muslim traders, on the other hand, built the Jumuah Masjid (1881) and West Street Masjid (1885) in the heart of central Durban within a few years of their arrival, consolidating Islamic practices around these institutions. The building of two mosques in close proximity reflected ethnic divisions as the Jumuah Masjid represented Memon traders and West Street Masjid represented Surtee traders of Gujarat.¹⁰

Indentured Muslims' primary link to Islam was the festival of Muharram, which commemorated the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, grandson of Prophet Muhammed. Muharram was a major event in the local calendar and was given official sanction from the mid-1870s when employers granted Indians three days annual leave to observe the festival. Although there was strong disapproval from authorities and middle-class Hindus and Muslims, Muharram remained a central part of the practice of Islam among indentured workers and their descendants.¹¹

The arrival of Soofie Saheb from Ratnagir, Bombay, in 1895 had important consequences for indentured Muslims and their descendants. According to oral tradition, shortly after his arrival Soofie Saheb established the shrine of Badsha Peer in central Durban as well as a mosque and *khanqah* (rest house) at Riverside. Over the next 15 years he built 11 mosques and *khanqahs* throughout Southern Africa. These were crucial in establishing a distinct Islamic identity within the disparate working-class Muslim population.¹² In time, practices such as visitation of the tombs of saints, faith in their intercessory roles, celebration of birthdays of the Prophet (*milad un nabi*) and saints (*urs*), Muharram, communal *salaams* (greetings) upon the Prophet and recitation of *qasidahs* (songs) and poems to commemorate '*mawlid*' became central to this Islamic tradition.¹³

Urbanization and Education, 1950s and 1960s

The decades after 1910 were witness to rapid urbanization and founding of education and social welfare institutions among Indians. Most Indians remained overwhelmingly Hindu. In Durban 70,272 (79.64%) Indians were Hindu and 13,009 (14.74%) Muslims out of a total Indian population of 88,226 in 1946.¹⁴ As African labour rendered Indians superfluous in farming, mining and the public sector, Indians flocked to the cities. In Durban, for example, the number of Indians increased from 17,015 in 1911 to 123,165 in 1949.¹⁵ Urbanization was accompanied by more and improved educational facilities. Before the 1950s religious education, comprising the rudimentary teachings of Islam, and languages such as Gujarati and Urdu, had been a priority for Muslims. During the 1940s and 1950s leaders such as A. I. Kajee and A. M. Moolla combined religious and secular education through institutions like the South Coast Madrassah State Aided School, Ahmedia State Aided Indian School, Anjuman Islam State Aided School and Orient Islamic High School.

Muslim organizations were mainly local and took care of parochial needs. The first umbrella Muslim organization, the Natal Muslim Council (NMC), was formed in April 1943. It was the brainchild of Advocate Ibrahim Bawa, a graduate of the University of Witwatersrand, and traders like A. I. Kajee, M. A. Motala and A. M. Moolla. These

Muslim leaders were involved in a host of activities from sports to social welfare and education. Formally trained *ulema* were powerless because they operated as individual employees of mosque committees. Islam was a taken-for-granted aspect of the lives of most Muslims who were tolerant and accommodated wide-ranging practices.

The coming to power of the National Party (NP) government in 1948 had paradoxical consequences for Indians. Segregation was intensified socially, politically and economically. At the same time Indians were recognized as permanent citizens in 1961, and there was an expansion of educational opportunities and economic mobility. The impact of education is reflected in the numbers of Indians who regarded English as their home language. This proportion increased from 6% in 1951 to 93% in 1996. Mass education was critical in reshaping conceptions of self and religion. It gave Muslims direct access to the printed word, thus threatening the special position of traditional *ulemah*; it marked a shift from religion being 'taken-for-granted' to Islam being thought of as a self-contained system that could be distinguished from other systems; it cultivated debate among Muslims and resulted in formulation of clear statements of belief to illuminate sectarian distinctions. Islam became a subject to be 'explained' and 'understood', rather than 'assumed'.¹⁶

Reformist tendencies, conservative and progressive, became manifest among all sectors of Muslim society in Durban from the 1950s, resulting in larger numbers of Muslims introducing Islam into their lives more systematically. Beliefs and practices were transformed, and divisions heightened, as Muslims contested the hegemony of 'their' version of Islam. The clearest divide was between popular or traditional Islam and a 'scripturalist' orthodox tradition. Both laid claim to the 'correct' interpretation of Islam; the proper and authentic Islam taught by the Qur'an and *Sunnah* (Traditions) of the Prophet. As George Joffe points out, while there had been 'an integrated and graduated spectrum of belief between these extremes of religious practice' in the past, the distinction was more rigid from the 1960s.¹⁷ Differences were due to class (trader against descendants of indentured Muslims), regional origins (western against North and South India), and language (Gujarati against Urdu).

A small number of educated Muslims took inspiration from the likes of Hasan al-Bana of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, Burhanuddin Rabbani of the Jama'at-I Islami in the Indian sub-continent and Iranian revolutionary Ali Shariati as they attempted to create alternatives to nationalism, capitalism and Marxism. The Muslim Youth Movement (1970) and Muslim Students Association (1974) were founded by young Western educated professionals and businessmen such as Advocate Abu Bakr, who was one of the main spokesmen during the formative years.¹⁸ The emergence of these organizations must be viewed in the context of a changing international environment. The 1973 oil crisis, the 1978 Iranian revolution, ongoing Palestinian problem and Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1980 radicalized many Muslims. However, the numbers of Muslims who embraced this 'modernist' version was small; Muslim masses remained wedded to traditions that will be termed broadly 'Tablighi and 'Sunni' for the purposes of this paper, though in reality both were part of Sunni Islam.

Tablighi/Deobandi Tradition

Tablighi/Deobandi Islam took root in India when Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi (1833–1877) and Rashid Ahmed Gangohi (1829–1905) opened a *madrassah* in Deoband in 1867. They had fought against the British during the 1857 uprising. Defeated, they remained aloof from political activity and attended to Muslim educational and

religious needs to create a cohesive cultural community. Their main concern was that compromises with Hinduism had resulted in strong syncretistic developments in Indian Islam. Deobandi Islam claimed that only the *ulemah* had access to original Islamic sources and could interpret Islam for ordinary Muslims. They sought to renew spiritual life through teaching principles of early Islam. Deobandis rejected claims of authority by *pirs* (saints) on the basis of descent. Religious authority, for them, had to be earned through knowledge and was not a birthright.¹⁹ Deobandis targeted 'popular' behaviour such as visitation to the tombs of saints, belief in the intercessionary role of saints, and practices associated with Muharram, which they considered to stem from Hindu culture.²⁰

Deobandi's subjected the 'Indian' heritage of Indian Muslims to scrutiny, and advocated a 'pure' Islam that eradicated Indian-ness, including the historical experience of being Indian and Indian cultural survivals.²¹ The gap between 'ideal' and 'actual' Islam was attributed to 'incomplete conversion' or 'religious degeneration'. Deobandi's sought to acquaint Muslims with 'pure and unalloyed Islam, liberated from polytheism and superstition'. Deobandis rejected actions not practised by the Prophet or his immediate successors as innovation or '*bi'dah*' because it was seen to imply that God had not completed the religion for Muslims; further, since the Prophet had said that Islam had been 'perfected' there could be no 'good innovation'.²²

Closely allied was the Tablighi Jamaat. There was little doctrinal difference between Deobandis and Tablighis. Both were committed 'to an unquestioning loyalty to a literal interpretation of Prophetic authority proclaimed to be Sunna'.²³ The word *tabligh* is derived from the Arabic root *b-l-gh*, which means 'to convey' or 'to communicate' a message. The word *jama'at* is translated as 'party' or 'organized collectivity'. The term *tabligh jamat*, very simply, means a 'preaching party'.²⁴ This transnational religious movement was founded in Delhi in the 1920s by Muhammad Ilyas (1885–1944) who had studied at Deoband in 1908.²⁵ From 1916 Ilyas taught at his father's *madrasah* in Nizamuddin, South Delhi, which remains the headquarters of Tabligh activity worldwide. By the time he returned from pilgrimage to Makkah in 1926, Ilyas had concluded that the need to teach basic ritual obligations to the masses of Muslim peasants was more urgent than converting Hindus. He did not regard this as the preserve of trained professional *ulemah*, and attempted to create a grassroots movement whereby all Muslims could generate awareness of Islam among their 'ignorant' counterparts.²⁶ In this way the movement closed the gap between *ulemah* who taught in religious schools and who wrote scholarly works for a small circle, and the illiterate Muslim masses.²⁷ Marc Gaboreau described the *modus operandi* of Tablighi Jamaat:

The invitation (*tabligh*) to Islam is not the affair of religious specialists, but the responsibility of all Muslims who must devote their time and money to it; one should not wait for people to come to hear the preaching, but rather preachers should travel to reach the people; preaching is done by self-financing itinerant groups; the mingling of all social classes is obligatory within these groups; the primary objective is to deepen the faith of those who are already Muslims, proselytism toward non-Muslims being marginal; and the promotion of the unity of Muslims being a primary objective, theological as well as political controversies are prohibited inside the movement.²⁸

The main method of propagation was through 'touring groups' (*gusht*) of lay Muslims who preached Islam by moving from Muslim house to house, from city to city, and from country to country, stressing the need to live a righteous life by following the

commandments of God and example of the Prophet. The cornerstone of Tabligh strategy was that the best way to learn was to teach others.²⁹ This was consolidated through regular *kitaab* (book) readings from the works of Mawlana Zakariyyah, which will be discussed below. The method of communication was oral, and the movement grew through face-to-face contact and movement of groups.³⁰ Members followed an established pattern. They were called out to spend one night a week, one weekend a month, 40 continuous days a year, and 120 days at least once in a lifetime. The objective was to promote religious enclaves of proper practices and beliefs, as opposed to assimilation and multiculturalism. Tabligh aimed at transformation of society by social actors without political mediation. Tablighis have deliberately been apolitical as this allowed them to work in many countries without coming into conflict with authorities.³¹

Tabligh made inroads in South Africa among Gujarati traders in the early 1960s. Goolam Mohammed Padia, a businessman from Umzinto on the south coast of KwaZulu Natal, known popularly as 'Bhai' (brother), was instrumental in spreading Tabligh ideology. Bhai Padia was exposed to Tabligh activities during a pilgrimage to Makkah. Arabia was one of three centres that provided impetus for the expansion of Tabligh, the others being the Tabligh headquarters in New Delhi and London.³² Impressed by what he saw, Bhai Padia visited Tabligh headquarters in Delhi where he learnt its methods and philosophies firsthand. While most early adherents were Gujarati traders, the movement subsequently attracted support from Memon and some Urdu-speaking Muslims.³³ An indication of the growth of Tabligh is that whereas the first *ijtima*, an annual gathering over Easter, attracted 300 people to Ladysmith in 1966, the *ijtima* in Durban during Easter of 1999 attracted over 25,000 people.

The attraction of Tabligh for traders was universal. According to Francis Robinson, the conflict between popular and reformist Islam was between an intercessory and otherworldly Islam, and one that is 'this-worldly', in which human conscience is brought into full play for man to act on earth to achieve salvation. Reformist Islam required Muslims to be literate, and most who embraced reformism were located within the middle class and engaged in aspects of the modern economy.³⁴ It has also been suggested that Gujaratis' centuries-long tradition of migration, heritage of travel and 'international vision' is compatible with Tagligh ethos and modus operandi. According to King, 'their habits as travellers and their international family and business links have naturally led them to be attracted to the similar spreading network represented by the Tabligh, and to be ideally able to serve Tabligh's purposes ...'³⁵ Institutionally, this tradition was represented in Natal by the Jamiatul Ulama (hereafter Jamiat), established in 1952 to 'guide generally the Muslim public in complete consonance with the laws of Islam'. The leadership of the Jamiat comprised Deobandi trained or aligned *ulema*, mainly the descendants of traders, and its support base was initially primarily among Gujarati trading and professional-class Muslims.³⁶

'Sunni' Tradition

While the putative right of Deobandi Islam to convey what constituted 'proper' Islam was strong, diversity among Indian Muslims meant that no group could claim religious hegemony, and that Tabligh activities were forcefully debated and resisted. The strongest challenge was from groupings broadly termed 'Sunni', who took inspiration from Ahmed Riza Khan (1856–1921). Khan's family had migrated from Afghanistan, became attached to the Indian Mughal court, and eventually settled in Bareilly, India.

Khan, born 14 June 1856, descended from a line of noted scholars. His father Naqi Ali Khan and grandfather Rida Ali Khan were distinguished theologians. Ahmad Riza wrote more than a thousand books on tafseer, logic, literature, Islamic jurisprudence, education, history, biographies, philosophy and mysticism. At the centre of his teaching were the Prophet, his descendants or Sayyids, and Saints. In India Khan founded schools in Bareilly, Lahore and Philibit to train *ulemah*. To his large, mainly rural following Khan was a *mujaddid* ('reformer'). Like him, they had no interest in adopting reform or elements of Western knowledge. Khan emphasized rituals and authority and defended orthodoxy in alliance with hereditary *pirs* of the countryside.³⁷

'Sunni' did not refer to a homogeneous entity, but included descendants of indentured Muslims, the family of Soofie Saheb and their following, as well as many trading families who were of the Memon ethnic group. Between 1898 and his death in 1911 Soofie Saheb built mosques, *madrassahs* and cemeteries all over Natal: in Springfield and Westville in 1904, in Overport in 1905, in Kenville and Sherwood in 1906, in Tongaat in 1907, Ladysmith and Colenso in 1908 and Verulam and Pietermaritzburg in 1909, as well as in Lesotho (1908) and Cape Town (1905). In these rural areas they catered to large numbers of Muslims, mainly descendants of indentured Indians.³⁸ Family members were appointed *khalifahs* to administer the *khanqahs*. Soofie Saheb's influence thus extended over a vast expanse, and continues to the present because religious authority has been passed down to family members.

Memon traders also participated in activities associated with popular Islam. Though small in number, they were an influential component of the local Muslim community. They controlled the Jumuah Masjid, the largest mosque in the Southern Hemisphere, and owned significant real estate and businesses in central Durban. Memons traditionally displayed strong faith in *pirs* as an expression of their gratitude to saints for converting them to Islam. They trace their origins to Sayad Eusuf-ud-din Kadiri of Baghdad, fifth in descent from Abdul Kadir Jailani, who is considered the greatest saint in Islam. They believe that Kadiri was ordered in a miraculous dream in 1421 to set sail for Sindh and guide its people to Islam. Once Sayad had achieved this, and received an assurance from the converts that they would not revert to Hinduism, he blessed them and returned to Iraq. Memons believe that this blessing is responsible for their success in trade.³⁹

Foreign Dignitaries, Local Divisions

Visits by overseas personalities from the sub-continent were important in shaping local Muslim opinion in South Africa. The Deobandi-inspired Jamiat invited leading scholars to lecture throughout South Africa. Mawlana Ehtashamul Haq Thanvi, who visited under the auspices of the Jamiat in May 1966, stimulated great interest during his tour, which included visits to Pietermaritzburg, Stanger, Durban and Ladysmith.⁴⁰ Mawlana Mohammed Shafee, who visited in October 1966, was born in Deoband in 1897, son of Mawlana Mohammed Yaseen, an eminent scholar and teacher at Deoband. Mawlana Shafee studied under some of the greatest Deoband Ulema, including Mawlana Ashraf Ali Thanwi, whose *mureed* and *khaliffa* he subsequently became. Mawlana Shafee taught for 26 years at Deoband. During this period he became its chief *mufti*, gave authoritative rulings on over 100,000 issues dealing with Islamic faith, and wrote 150 books in Urdu, Persian and Arabic.⁴¹ His presence gave impetus to Deoband and Tabligh traditions in Natal.

Mohammed Palan Haqqani, who had no formal Islamic education, was arguably the

most controversial visitor. Claiming descent from a family of dacoits-bandits, he said that he was born in prison when his mother was captured following the killing of his bandit father in a skirmish. When his mother was released from prison, the family moved to Ahmedabad where Haqqani became a *qawwali* singer. His life was transformed when he came into contact with a sage. Haqqani felt an impulse to start a revival campaign and dedicated his life to preaching Islam on the basis of the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet. Haqqani's Southern African tour included Mauritius, Zambia, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and Transvaal as well as two weeks in Natal during October and November 1969.⁴²

Haqqani's visit sparked a pamphlet and letter-writing war that sharpened divisions. 'Stop Bickering' was full of praise for Haqqani and felt that critics should have challenged him to a debate over his views rather than criticize after his departure.⁴³ Ehlane Haq replied that there was no point in debating with Haqqani who admitted he was a '*jahil*' (illiterate):

It is senseless and of no value to debate because he is only going to play with words and create a wrong impression, ultimately resulting in violence and the entire situation erupting in flames ... How can one debate with a person who does not know Arabic, Persian and, sad to say, makes a mess of the Urdu language by his rustic accent? What has been the outcome of Haqqani's misleading lectures? Disunity, violence and *fitna*. This happens wherever he goes. Mauritius, Transvaal, Rhodesia and India. Homes have been broken, brother is fighting with brother, husband is quarrelling with wife (some are on the verge of divorce), and congregations are at loggerheads.⁴⁴

Newspapers were filled with similar rancorous correspondence, resulting in the question of what constituted *bidat* (innovation) being thrust in the forefront of religious debate. The Arabic Study Circle convened a 'brains trust' at West Street Mosque in June 1970 to reach consensus on this question. However, as reporter Ismail M. Meer of *Views and News* pointed out, discussion became polemical and failed to clarify what could and could not be practised.⁴⁵ Deobandi Islam's subjecting of many popular practices to scrutiny led to a strong response from those who feared that better-resourced Tablighis were having a discursive effect on Muslim behaviour, and that younger Muslims might not recall traditions historically popular. These Muslims, who termed themselves 'Sunni', formalized the tradition in the local context by building institutions to give coherence to their beliefs and practices. 'Sunnis' promoted themselves as heirs of traditional Islam as they attempted to reverse a situation where reformists were thought to represent orthodoxy, and many of the beliefs and practices of the Muslim masses considered outside the fold of Islam. Tabligh activities inadvertently established a common identity among groups diverse in class, ethnic and language terms.

The 'Sunni' tradition was given organizational expression through the Sunni Jamiatul Ulema of South Africa, established in Durban in 1978, and Imam Ahmed Raza Academy, established on 5 July 1986 by Sheikh Abdul Hadi Al-Qaderi Barakaati, a graduate of Bareilly, in India. According to the Raza Academy, the Prophet had predicted that Muslims would divide into 73 sects, 72 of which would be condemned to Hell. Only the Ahle Sunnah Wa Jamaah, a composite name for Sunnis, 'the only segment of the Muslim community which adheres to that which the Holy Prophet and his Companions adhered to', would be admitted to Paradise. Quoting Ahmad Riza, it branded Deobandis and hence Tablighis as one of 12 cults that are 'worst of all'.⁴⁶ This

tradition was given major impetus with the establishment of the Darul Uloom Aleemiyah Razvia in January 1983, the first Sunni Darul Uloom in Natal. It was funded by the Hajee Ebrahim Tarmahomed Trust, a trustee of the Sparks Road Mosque. At the inauguration ceremony, Mawlana Noorani Siddiqui asserted emphatically and unapologetically:

We are the followers of Badsha Peer and Soofie Sahib, and this Darul Uloom has been built to safeguard their moral preachings. And Hazrath Badsha Peer and Hazrath Soofie Sahib were the followers of Sultanul Hind Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti, who in turn was the follower of the Holy Prophet. Disunity is caused by the new ideas of people who differ from Badsha Peer and Soofie Sahib.⁴⁷

Sunni *ulemah* like Abdul Hadi, Mukaddam, Abdur Rauf Soofi and Mufti Naseem Ashraf Habibi, principal of the Darul Uloom Aleemiyah Razvia, were disparaging of Tabligh beliefs. To carry their message nationally they formed the Ahle Sunnat al Jamaat of South Africa in May 1984. 'Awareness' meetings throughout the country during June 1985 were a huge success and gave followers 'confidence to confront Tablighis'.⁴⁸ By calling themselves 'Sunni Muslims', they were declaring in no uncertain terms that they, rather than Tablighis, were following practices legitimized in the Qur'an and Sunnah; further, that they were in the mainstream of Islam and were not a minor regional sect from the sub-continent.

Struggle for Muslim Hearts and Minds

The 'internal' debate between Tabligh and Sunni Muslims covered issues such as the nature of Prophethood; concept of hereditary saintly power; *urs* of Badsha Pir, Soofie Saheb and other saints; validity of reading extracts from the works of Deobandi scholar Mawlana Zakariyyah; activities associated with Muharram; relationship between God and believers, and primary sources of authoritative knowledge, all of which intensified rivalry and antagonism. Some of the key differences between Tabligh and Sunni Muslims included the following.

Nature of Prophethood

'Sunnis' associate doctrines of pre-existence, prescience and intercession with the Prophet Muhammad, who is seen as the archetypal 'Perfect Man'.⁴⁹ Some believe that the Prophet preceded his own human existence, and that creation came into existence for his sake. This doctrine, known as *Nur-i-Muhammad*, holds that the Prophet was the first manifestation of God's Light that brought creation into existence,⁵⁰ and possesses Knowledge of the Unseen, *Ilm al-Ghayb*. They also view him as intercessor. In Islam, intercession (*shafa'a*) is regarded as *tawassul*, which means 'seeking a means' to get closer to God and surrender to His will. Seeking the Prophet's assistance (*istighatha*) through his intercession is regarded as the most valuable form of *tawassul*. This belief has given rise to practices such as celebrating his birthday (*Moulood*) and offering salutations (*salaami*) in a prescribed manner communally.⁵¹ While Sunnis accept that the Prophet is not an object of worship, they believe that he shares in the quality of the divine. Every gathering is marked by invocation of praise and blessings for Him, while those who oppose these practices are considered 'unbefitting'.⁵² Tablighis, on the other hand, hold that the Prophet is not omnipresent and cannot be invoked to intercede in

everyday situations while they are still alive, though he will intercede on behalf of his entire following on the Day of Judgement. They regard the Prophet as a human being, and believe that while Muslims should love and respect the Prophet, they should not elevate him to a divine status.⁵³

Saints and Pirs

Sufism originated in the change of emphasis among many Muslims from fear to love of God around the end of the ninth century. By the twelfth century large Sufi orders, *tariqas*, developed, led by *shaikhs* who adopted distinct methods to achieve closeness to God. The *shaikhs* appointed representatives or *khalifas* to spread their teachings. Sufi centres were established over a vast expanse within the overall *tariqa*. The *silsila* chain linked *shaikhs* through a lineage to the Prophet, thus guaranteeing the legitimacy of individual *shaikhs*. As *tariqa* networks spread, *shaikhs* and *pirs* numbered in the thousands, and attracted groups of followers. A cult of saints developed in this way. Sunnis hold that Muslims have always sought *shafaa* (intercession), *istighatha* (assistance), *tabarruk* (blessings) and *tawassul* (means), through saints.⁵⁴ As Jones explains, in Riza Khan's notion of Islam, saints retained a bodily existence after death:

Saints could both hear prayers and grant requests from the grave. This position led him to accept the celebration of *urs*, revere saints, tombs, and the rituals associated with these powerful figures. The Prophet, saints, *pirs*, and *shaikhs* could all act on behalf of Muslims who sought their assistance ... Ahmed Riza wanted to preserve Islam unchanged; not as it was idealized in the texts or the historical past, but Islam as it had evolved to the present.⁵⁵

Deobandis, on the other hand, argued for the absolute transcendence of God without intermediaries. *Majlis*, a strong voice of Tablighi Islam, condemned as *shirk* (disbelief) the notion that saints like Badsha Peer and Soofie Saheb had the power to 'answer and attend to one's supplication'.⁵⁶ It referred to those visiting gravesites in derogative terms as the 'Qabar Pujari Jamaat of Durban' ('Grave-Worshipping Brigade of Durban'), and branded them an idolatrous cult.⁵⁷ Ulema embracing these practices were accused of allowing hemp-smoking and merry-making festivals and exploiting ignorant Muslims in the name of dead saints.⁵⁸ Barbara Metcalf has suggested that for Tablighis the missionary group itself replaced saints:

The holiness associated with the Sufi *pir* was in many ways defused into the charismatic body of the *jama'at* so that the missionary group itself became a channel for divine intervention. The kind of story typically told about a saint—overcoming ordeals, being blessed with divine illumination, triumphantly encountering temporal authority—was in fact told about a group engaged in a mission. Thus, it was not necessary to choose between the devotional power of Sufism and the conviction of reformist imitation of prophetic teaching.⁵⁹

Moulood

Observing the Prophet's birthday (*moulood*) was celebrated annually by most Muslims until the 1970s. In Durban, the occasion was marked by a procession (*julus*) through the main streets of the city. Leading *ulema* participated in the festival and usually delivered the main address outside the Jumua Masjid. Tablighi doctrine proscribed

celebration of the Prophet's birthday. Bhai Padia, head (*amir*) of the Tabligh Jamaat, explained that *moulood* was not observed during Muhammad's Prophethood or reign of the four Caliphs, and traced its origins to a Persian pagan festival, passed on to India, where the 'poorer Muslims observe it mainly because of lack of education'. Padia condemned 'sinful' practices such as the mixing of men and women, music, singing (*qawwali*), consumption of intoxicants like hemp and neglect of prayer which had become integral to festivities.⁶⁰

Sunnis, on the other hand, strongly defended *moulood*. Mawlana Hamidi countered that *moulood* comprised of recital of poems (*naat*) in praise of the Prophet, which 'filled the hearts of Muslims with love for the Prophet'; lectures on the character and life of the Prophet for Muslims to emulate; and feeding large crowds with wholesome food prepared with *halaal* (legal) income. 'What is wrong with this?' he asked rhetorically.⁶¹ Mohammed Makki, editor of *Muslim Digest*, argued that *moulood* sacralized public space and demonstrated allegiance to Islam to a wider, non-Muslims population, thus playing a positive role by promoting *da'wah* (invitation to Islam) among non-Muslims in the new South Africa.⁶²

Salutations to the Prophet

Sunni gatherings were marked by invocation of blessings (*durood*) from the vast body of poetry and songs composed in praise of the Prophet, and which are aimed at increasing love for him. The main bone of contention was the practice among Sunnis to stand and read salutations to the Prophet communally. Tablighis argued that this was blasphemous because of the underlying belief that the Prophet was omnipresent and that the presence of his soul made it obligatory to stand as a mark of respect. In rejecting this argument, Sunni *ulemah* argue that the Prophet's contemporaries often stood as a mark of respect. Further, they argue, it is common courtesy to stand in deference to elders and learned people. Why, they ask, should similar respect not be accorded to the Prophet?⁶³ According to *Al-Balaagh*:

In courts of law we stand up to show respect to a judge—an ordinary human being—when he enters the courtroom from his chambers; when a person of importance comes to our home, we stand up to receive him. So why cannot we send Salaam to the GREATEST among men, the Beloved of the Almighty, in a standing position! To remain seated shows arrogance, bad manners and contemptuous disregard for elementary courtesy.⁶⁴

Kitaab-Reading

Sunnis underscored the irony that while the Tablighis condemned innovations, they themselves introduced customs such as *kitaab*-reading, *ijtima* and *tabligh*, which had not been practised during the Prophet's time. Sunnis sought to abolish a key component of the *tabligh* programme, the reading of extracts, usually after communal prayers, from *Fazail-i-Amal* and *Hikayaat-e-Sahaabah* (*Stories of the Companions of the Prophet*) by the late Mawlana Muhammad Zakariyya, a nephew of Ilyas and chief ideologue of the movement after his death in 1944. Maulana Zakariyya (1898–1982) was a graduate of Deoband who received his Khilafat from Mawlana Khalil Ahmad in Madinah. He subsequently taught at Mazahire-Uloom in Saharanpur, India. Towards the end of his

life he was granted permanent residency by the Saudi government. Mawlana Zakariyya died in Madinah in 1982 and was buried in the Prophet's cemetery.⁶⁵

Fazail-i-Amal has been published many times over in numerous languages and is considered the most widely read book in the Muslim world after the Quran.⁶⁶ The first volume of *Fazail* consists of stories about the companions of the Prophet, rewards of reciting the Quran, offering prayers, remembering God, participating in *tabligh* and observing the Ramadhan fast. *Hikayaat-e-Sahaabah* consists of stories relating to the rewards of charity. These works became the central ritual act in Tabligh education.⁶⁷ While reading extracts from *Fazail* and *Hikayaat* seems innocuous, taken together the stories portray a picture of how the Prophet and his companions lived. The book constructed the ideal Muslim-type: men wearing beards, adopting loose Middle Eastern garb, women wearing a veil, shunning the visitation of tombs, wearing the pants above the ankles, and so on. They served as a major incentive for members to strengthen their own faith. As Metcalf has pointed out,

... in invoking and embodying those traditions, participants felt themselves part of dense networks of Muslims, both dead and alive, and aspired to reliving the Prophet's own time when he too was part of a faithful few among a population sunk in ignorance. Participation thus gave meaning and purpose to everyday life. Participants in principle made a 'lifestyle' choice; they found a strand of cultural dignity; they opted for a highly disciplined life of sacrifice; they found a moral community of mutual acceptance and purpose. That community would be re-invented and reformed in the course of missions.⁶⁸

Sunnis viewed *kitaab*-reading as endorsement of Deobandi ideology, and were determined to stamp it out, by force if necessary. *Kitaab*-reading was seen as 'a front to recruit members ... This is instigation and provocation in any language'.⁶⁹ Why, Sunni critics questioned, should extracts be read from the Mawlana's work instead of extracts from the Qur'an? Such critics feel that the importance placed on the narration of stories has given *Fazail* greater practical importance for many Muslims in South Africa than the Qur'an itself. *Fazail*, incorrectly and dangerously, is assuming the status that rightfully belongs to the Qur'an.⁷⁰

Ijtima

From 1966, Tablighs organized annual *ijtima* (gatherings) over Easter. Sunnis fervently denounced this practice. Mohammed Bana of the Ahle Sunnat Wa Jamaat of South Africa branded the *ijtima* an 'insidious tool' to recruit members: a 'picnic and carnival atmosphere is created through setting up stalls to attract unsuspecting Muslims to this Den for the purpose of destroying the original and true Islam'.⁷¹ *Al-Balaagh* criticized expenditure of 'astronomical' sums on bringing to South Africa:

... propagandists from the Asian sub-continent to dispense dogmatic beliefs without batting an eyelid to the starving millions of Africa ... One has yet to witness a speaker condemn the use of chemicals in Iran or plight of Muslims crushed by autocratic rulers and despots ... Will those in command of Easter gatherings continue to manipulate and feed the opium to the masses to numb and drug their facilities?⁷²

The Badsha Pir Mazaar Committee described the *ijtima* as a 'picnic': 'their [Tablighis'] only enjoyment in life was to hold this annual *ijtima* where they put up huge *de'gs* (pots) of food. They have their four days of enjoyment, all under the pretence of propagating

Islam'.⁷³ A leaflet by 'Sunni Mujaddid' in April 1979 urged Muslims to boycott the *ijtima* because it was a plot by the CIA to destroy Islam in South Africa. Thousands, however, attended.⁷⁴ Critics of Tabligh internationally argued similarly that the CIA promoted the 'otherworldly', 'world-renouncing' Tabligh in order to stop Muslims challenging American hegemony. Tablighis staying aloof from worldly affairs were considered to be playing into the hands of the 'enemies of Islam'.⁷⁵ In the local context, a publication ironically titled *The Tableegh* (1 May 1976) accused Tablighis of being CIA agents because their members were granted visas easily:

Have you ever wondered that whereas important Muslims find great difficulty in coming to this country, every *chango mango* Tablighi of this Jamaat from overseas gets a visa to enter this country with total ease? The reason is that because the top Tablighis are paid members of the C.I.A. The main motive of the C.I.A. is to break and destroy Islam—and they will stop at nothing.⁷⁶

Tablighis were heavily criticized for their apolitical stance in the context of apartheid in South Africa. In August 1982 Tabligh *ulemah* implored Muslim youth not to support the revolutionary government in Iran, and condemned Muslim students at the University of Witwatersrand who had clashed with Zionist students. Muslim university students, in turn, labelled the Jamaat and Tabligh supporters as 'sterile puppets' of the apartheid government, who failed to condemn apartheid and forced removals, or give support to students during anti-government boycotts in 1980 and 1981, failed to condemn Zionism and the oppression of Palestinians and Lebanon.⁷⁷

Escalating Conflict

The struggle for Muslim hearts and minds erupted into open conflict during the 1970s and 1980s as reformist Islam, questioning heritage produced over centuries, made headway among local Muslims. There was a conspicuous relationship between power and dominance as the minority Gujarati trading classes controlled many of the mosques, and thus were in a strong position to monopolize Islamic discourse. The emerging middle class of lawyers, accountants and other professionals among descendants of indentured Muslims challenged trader hegemony and institutional authority. Muslims became deeply polarized as they increasingly came to commemorate the same events in different ways and for different reasons, resulting in a 'war' of words, physical confrontation and flood of booklets and pamphlets in defence or denunciation of each other's beliefs and practices.

Control of mosques was central to the conflict, as Sunni leaders attempted to organize their followers into a self-conscious movement to minimize the power advantages of reformist Muslims. Clearly identifiable 'Sunni' and 'Tabligh' mosques emerged. This was exemplified in central Durban where the Jumuah Masjid was deemed the spiritual home of Sunnis and West Street Masjid that of Tablighis. As dispute intensified, the affiliation of trustees was questioned. In July 1977, Chairman of the Jumuah Trust, Aboobaker Ismail, terminated the Annual General Meeting (AGM) when members of the congregation labelled Mawlana Omarjee a 'tablighi' and threatened to cut off his beard if he did not withdraw as candidate on the Trust.⁷⁸

In February 1978 Yusuf Butler was prevented from speaking at Jumuah Masjid by worshippers led by Muhammad Bhana, secretary-general of the Ahle Sunnat Wa Jamaat of Durban, who objected that he was using the mosque to propagate Tabligh ideology. Bhana told reporter Khalil Aniff that 'under no circumstances must they

[Tablighis] be allowed to lecture at our mosques'.⁷⁹ Use of 'our' and 'they' highlighted the divide. Sunnis were determined that the largest mosque in the Southern Hemisphere should remain a powerful and visible symbol of Sunni power. 'Militant Sunni Musallees' distributed a pamphlet in March 1980 warning 'fence-sitting' trustees that unless they stopped *kitaab*-reading at Jumuah Masjid, they would be responsible for 'lighting a fuse that would eventually explode into an inferno ... the happenings in Iran would seem like a normal day'. According to the pamphlet:

It is indeed a very provocative scene to watch our erstwhile enemies, huddled in a corner of OUR OWN SUNNI MOSQUE and committing this abhorrent Tablighi innovation ... These enemies have the downright cheek to make OUR MOSQUE a haven for dubious activities ... Kitaab-reading is violating the sanctity of our beloved mosque and polluting the purity of our musallees ... The relationship between Tablighis and Sunnis is highly explosive. Sunnis and Tablighis are like water and oil, and will never mix. In their own interest Tablighis should be advised to conduct their *kitaab*-reading at their own mosque in West Street. All hell could break loose and then we will be compelled to take matters into our own hands to an example of these *munafeqs*...

A petition bearing 500 signatures called on trustees to ban *kitaab*-reading. Trust Chairman A. B. Ismail refused because, as he explained, Jumuah Masjid was 'an international mosque'. Sunnis questioned whether

Qadianis, Bahais, the Khojas and the rest of the deviated sects will be welcome to do their thing at the mosque? We wonder if A. B. Ismail realizes that on the one hand he wants to make Allah happy and on the other hand he wants to make the Devil happy. This is not Islam.⁸⁰

Tensions were further inflamed when Mawlana Zakariyya spent the month of Ramadan (June/July 1981) in Stanger on the north coast. The Mawlana, 83 years old at the time, had a magnetic effect on an estimated 100,000 visitors from all parts of the country, and gave impetus to the Tabligh movement. According to one report, the mosque in Stanger had been transformed into a 'mini Mecca'.⁸¹ Sunnis vented their frustration by attacking worshippers reading the *kitaab* at Jumuah Masjid on 16 July 1981. Swaleh Gaffur, Mohammed Rafick and Ahmed Raffick Deedat were allegedly part of a group of 10 who entered the mosque and attacked seven worshippers after the morning (*fajr*) prayer with *sjamboks*, *pangas* and batons. However, the accused were acquitted in September because of insufficient evidence.⁸² Abbas Khan, spokesman of Sunni organization Jamiat-E-Ulama, defended the attacks:

The cause has to be condemned more than the incident. Prior to 15 years ago there was no conflict. Since *Kitaab* reading was started in mosques, the Muslim community became the victim of controversies and split into two groups. The Sunnis are infuriated by the fact that mosques have closed to them the holding of Milad-Un-Nabie (Prophet's birthday) and other practices. Since the time of Hazrath Soofie Saheb Muslims held to these practices and mosques were open to everybody. Mosques under Tabligh control are closed to Sunni scholars and their practices. Sunnis are forced outside the mosques to hold their functions. If *kitaab*-reading is stopped Sunnis will not be provoked.⁸³

Such incidents continued. In September 1985 'Concerned Sunni Followers' issued a

pamphlet castigating Jumuah Masjid Imam Ahmed Saeed for performing his *zuhr* (midday) prayer behind a Tabligh Imam in Umzinto on 7 July 1984. They considered the prayer invalid because Riza Khan had decreed that Deobandis were *kafirs* (non-believers) and those who did not accept this ruling were themselves outside the fold of Islam. Hafez Saeed was branded a 'sell-out' and implored to clarify his position rather than 'sit on the fence'. The pamphlet also called on Muslims whose marriage (*nikah*) had been performed by Tabligh ulema to re-perform their marriage, and those who had prayed behind Tabligh Imams to repeat these prayers. Another pamphlet warned that Tablighis constituted a greater threat to Islam than Christians, Jews and Hindus.⁸⁴

Tensions were not confined to Jumuah Masjid. In Mooi River in the Natal midlands, when Mawlana Nazir Ahmed spoke out against the reading of *salaami* during his Friday sermon, members of the congregation hit and kicked him 'relentlessly'.⁸⁵ In January 1980, 20 men entered Sparks Road Mosque in Overport 'with knives sticks and bicycle chains' to prevent the pro-Tabligh Mawlana Tauhid of India from delivering a lecture. Tauhid was hit on the head and arms and stabbed twice in the back. Four organizers Iqbal Moosa and Ismail Bux were also assaulted. A lecture scheduled for Jumuah Masjid the following evening was cancelled. An assailant told a reporter that Tablighis controlled mosques in Newcastle, Port Shepstone, Ladysmith, Stanger and all over the Transvaal:

We do not wish to go to their mosques and they must not come to ours. Previously we dished out leaflets and newsletters, but the Tablighis are not prepared to stop their activities. This is just the beginning of things. Worse is to come.⁸⁶

Sunday Times ran a story headlined 'Unmasked: The Mosque Mafia', which suggested that an organized clique was orchestrating the campaign to disrupt Tabligh activities. Reporter George Mahabeer described them as 'a fanatical group of young men who are determined to make an impression on the Muslim establishment, which they say is under the control of businessmen'.⁸⁷ Gujarati trader domination of mosques and institutions was being challenged. A conference of the Ahle Sunnat Wa Jamaat at Sparks Road Mosque from 14 to 16 January 1983 condemned 'constant attacks on the personality of the Prophet not only from those who are non-Muslims but also those who claim to be Muslims'. Delegates resolved that:

- This gathering expresses its gratitude to their beloved Prophet whose birthday is celebrated with full dignity, honor and favor. Therefore we Muslims belonging to the majority group demand that the Government declare the 12th of Rabi-ul-Awwal as a public holiday, so that Muslims of this country can easily perform their religious functions.
- This gathering is of the firm opinion that Wahabism, Deobandism, Tablighism are menace to the true beliefs of Islam. These sects are penetrating into various countries especially in this hemisphere. Petro-dollars are used and spent freely for propagating these isms among old and true Muslims.⁸⁸

Tablighis reacted forcefully to the challenge. In April 1977 Tablighis tried to prevent Dr Jamal Badawi of Canada from delivering the Friday sermon (*khutbah*) at the Soofie Masjid in Ladysmith because he did not have a beard. Tabligh worshippers insisted that it was mandatory for a Muslim to have a beard at least four fingers long to lead the congregation in prayer. Tablighis issued pamphlets imploring Muslim males to grow beards, and warned those who did not wear their trousers above the ankles that their ankles and feet would burn in hell.⁸⁹

A *moulood* celebration being held by Ahle Sunnah Wal Jama'ah at the Civic Centre in Azaadville, Transvaal, on 7 March 1987, was disrupted by the Tablighis, led by Mawlana Eshaq. In the weeks preceding the occasion Tablighis declared the celebration *bida'* (innovation) and *shirk* (idolatry), and urged Muslims to boycott it. A petition containing 1500 signatures, calling on the local city council to ban the ceremony, was turned down. While the *moulood* was in progress, several hundred Tablighis entered the hall and disrupted the function. During the altercation 55-year-old Sheik Mohideen Saib was killed and six others badly injured, while food was thrown onto the floor.⁹⁰ A protest meeting in Durban by the Ahle Sunnat Wa Jamaat drew 3000 supporters. Following condemnation of the violence, the Sunnat Jamaat sent a telex to Law and Order Minister Adrian Vlok, bearing 7000 signatures, asking for a judicial inquiry into the incident.⁹¹

Mosques: Separating Sacred Spaces

Spiralling conflict moved *Al-Balaagh* to comment that

... these same people on both sides who go to the *masjid* and use their tongues to glorify Allah's Holy name and the Prophet's sacred name, use that same tongue to hurl abuse at one another! One wonders how a Muslim can house good and evil in the same mouth!⁹²

Without common ground to resolve differences amicably, many Muslims reached the same conclusion as A. Raof, who wrote to *Leader* in March 1983 that 'with both groups pointing their goals in different directions, there is only one solution if peace is to prevail among the Muslim community; and that is to have separate mosques'.⁹³ Separate mosques for Sunnis and Tablighis became reality as Sunnis used their numerical superiority to oust traditionally dominant trading elites from mosque trusts at places like Verulam and Lodge Grove in Overport. The response of trading elites was to build new mosques, usually a short distance away, even though population numbers did not warrant this. Examples include Verulam and Westville.

The standoff in Verulam was typical of the larger story. The Gujarati trading class predominated on the Trust of the Verulam Sunni Mosque in Wicks Street. It was not spared the tension that plagued other mosques during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1979, for example, beetle-leaf growers of Cottonlands applied for permission to hold a *moulood* (Prophet's Birthday Celebration) on Sunday, 27 May 1979. Permission was initially refused but Board Chairman Ahmad Akbar allowed the function to be held in a tent in the parking area. After the Friday prayer, irate Sunnis vented their frustration by attacking the Tablighis.⁹⁴

There was another confrontation on 13 September 1981 when trustees declined a petition by members of the congregation that Sunni speakers be allowed to lecture at the mosque. A clash erupted after the night (*isha*) prayers when the deputy *imam*, Cassim Amajee, was attacked by a man wielding a broken bottle. The attacker was overpowered but the *imam* collapsed from shock while many worshippers were forced to flee for their lives.⁹⁵ Explaining the cause of the dispute, a Sunni member of the congregation told a reporter that 'trustees hold office for life and the congregation wished to see capable men being elected to trusteeship every few years because a change is required urgently'.⁹⁶

Trust Chairman Ahmed Akbar received death threats in November 1981 for not allowing Sunnis to lecture at the mosque.⁹⁷ In December 1981 Imam Moosa Amajee

and his son and deputy Cassim Amajee threatened to resign if a proposed change in the constitution took away their right to determine who could speak at the mosque.⁹⁸ In June 1982 some certain members of the congregation objected that the agenda of the AGM on 4 July 1982 did not make provision for 'free discussion' on general matters. Item 6 on the agenda provided for obtaining 'views of the congregation for consideration to alter and update the constitution ...' However, the Sunni faction referred to a clause in the constitution that allowed AGMs to 'obtain the views of members of the congregation in any matter affecting the mosque or trust'. They felt the original clause in the constitution had been amended on the agenda to restrict discussion to the alteration and updating of the constitution, and thus suppress discussion on urgent contentious issues. They demanded the agenda be further altered to address their grievances which included:

- people who did not live in the area held the position of trustee on several institutions;
- trustees failed to reply to registered letters addressed to them by members of the congregation;
- a special general meeting scheduled for 13 December 1981 was adjourned but not reconvened despite numerous reminders and requests;
- AGMs were not held in April of each year, as required by the Constitution; and
- Powers of Attorney were delegated by trustees to persons who did not enjoy the support of the majority of the congregation.

While congregation members wanted to discuss issues before the meeting, Solly Mahomed, acting-Chairman of the Verulam Sunni Mosque, said that 'anyone who has any grievances must bring them up at the meeting'.⁹⁹ A meeting called by Sunnis aimed at changing the constitution to reduce the powers of the *imam* and restrict trusteeship to permanent residents of Verulam was called off on technical grounds when Cassim Mahomedy, former mayor of Verulam, objected that the mover and secondor of each amendment was not listed. He insisted on a postponement until this had been resolved.¹⁰⁰ Matters came a head on 25 February 1983 when trustees placed four armed guards at the mosque doors at 9:30 a.m. to prevent the Mount View Urs Committee from holding an *urs*, which was to be addressed by leading Sunni *ulemah*. Although trustees gave instructions for the doors to be opened at 1:00 p.m. for midday prayers, the key could not be found and the prayer was held by the majority of the congregation in the open grounds adjoining the mosque. The *urs* was held in a hall adjacent to the mosque and was addressed by Mawlana Al-Qadri of Rawalpindi, Pakistan.¹⁰¹ Mohammed Bana of the Sunni Wal Jamaat said that the incident 'made the name of Verulam stink in the nostrils of all true Muslims throughout South Africa and even abroad'.^{102/sp}

Farouk Shaik of the Mussallees Committee called on trustees to hold elections so that 'the will of the majority' would prevail. Solly Basha, Chairman of the Urs Committee, complained that attempts to call a general meeting to change clauses in the constitution regarding the election of trustees had failed. 'The majority of Muslims want all the trustees to resign and stand for re-election. If they have public support and are returned to office there will be no problem.'¹⁰³ The 12 trustees of the Verulam mosque filed defamation claims against five members of the Musallee Committee for R325,000 in July 1985, arising from publication and distribution of pamphlets. The Musallee Committee gave notice through its attorneys Vallarman and Partners that it would defend the action.¹⁰⁴ The case was settled out-of-court in September 1986. This

was followed by an application against E. A. Kathrada and 12 trustees by Yusuf Buckus and two other congregation members. The main issues discussed during arbitration by Advocate A. J. Buys were the validity of the constitution registered in 1983, the process of electing trustees, five-year limitations on trusteeship, trustees giving Power of Attorney to others to act on their behalf, holding birthday celebrations of the Prophet and the right of *imams* to decide who could speak at the mosque.¹⁰⁵

Both sides agreed on 24 September 1986 to (i) utilize and preserve the funds of the mosque for the benefit of the members of the congregation and (ii) reinstate the 1969 constitution until a meeting was held to vote on amending the constitution. It was 'acknowledged and recorded that in agreeing to compromise the dispute, neither the applicants nor the defendants must be taken to have admitted the correctness of the contentions of the opposite side'. D. A. Gordon represented Yusuf Buckus and two other applicants while A. I. Chadwick appeared for E. A. Kathrada and 12 trustees who were the defendants.¹⁰⁶

During a conciliation meeting on 14 December 1986 two men came to blows and were ordered out by Advocate Buys. The new trustees were M. Haniff Buckus, Aziz Razack, Sheik Hoosen kassim, Mohammed Gora Aziz, Mohammed Ali Essop, Aboobaker Osman, Suleman, 'Baboo' Maiter, Ismail Essack and Habib Sayed. Five trustees resigned and they and other *musallees* began praying at a privately-owned *madrassah*.¹⁰⁷ The mosque was eventually taken over by Sunnis, with Tablighis building another mosque a short distance away.

This formal separation between Tablighs and Sunnis via the building of separate mosques was criticized by the Muslim Judicial Council which, though sympathetic to Tablighis, commented that:

We find a situation where a group of the Sunnah intends to set up its own Musjid because the ahl-e-Bid'ah in control of the existing Musjid disallow our Ulama from lecturing in the Musjid or prevent Kitaab-reading or other Tableegh activities in which the people of *Haqq* are involved ... This is not a valid reason for setting up an opposition *Musjid*. The purpose of the *Musjid* is *salaat*. As long as *musallis* are not hindered in their duty of *Salaat*, there is no need to set up another *Musjid*.¹⁰⁸

The Muslim Youth Movement was equally critical, and viewed the conflict as squandering of valuable time and energy:

Both groups have been trying to gain control over the two percent Muslim community, fighting for control of the mosques and territory within that laager. If only they could adjust their vision and commit themselves to the mission to liberate the rest of the country from man-made ideologies. The debate has been imported from the Indian sub-continent ... The sooner we export this divisive theological nitpicking back to the Indian Subcontinent, the better our chances of getting on with the task of building our country into a land where all the children of Adam will be honoured and their rights upheld. Our dilemma in South Africa is that our leaders have let us down.¹⁰⁹

Bridging the Divide

Tensions between Sunnis and Tablighis began to ease as non-racial democracy dawned in the early 1990s. This was partly due to each group having its own mosques and thus being able to practise Islam according to its interpretation with minimal confrontation.

The easing of tensions was also connected to rapid political and economic changes locally and internationally. In the local context, negotiations between the African National Council (ANC) and National Party ushered in a new non-racial democracy in 1994. The ANC government legalized abortion, prostitution, pornography and introduced other measures considered undesirable by Muslims, it adopted affirmative action policies and tied South Africa's progress to an African Renaissance. Internationally, globalization and the 'war of terror' since September 2001 heightened social and economic uncertainty.

As a result of these changes Muslim religious and secular leaders advocated working closely to present a united Muslim front to secure political and religious rights as South Africa moved towards democracy. The search for composite 'Muslim' identity was formalized in 1994 when a number of organizations formed the United Ulama Council of South Africa (UUCSA). In its Mission Statement, UUCSA pointed out that political transformation 'brought new challenges ... In seeking to address these UUCSA endeavours to provide unified and competent leadership that will address the contemporary problems facing Muslims at all levels in South Africa'. UUCSA was formed 'to unify, co-ordinate and represent Muslims of South Africa on a national and international level'. Its objectives were to 'protect and promote Islamic Law', entrench 'Muslim Personal Law', and 'co-ordinate Muslim activity'. Significantly, UUCSA included the Muslim Judicial Council, which enjoys the confidence of the majority of Muslims in the Cape, the Natal and Transvaal Jamiatul Ulema, which represent the Tabligh school, and the Sunni Jamiatul Ulema and Sunni Ulama Council. Although UUCSA, some critics feel, has been an empty shell, it is symbolically important as a structure that was put in place for greater cooperation.

Rapid political and social changes resulted in behavioural change among many Muslims. The 'resurgence' of religious piety has included things like women embracing the veil, children attending Islamic schools, observing 'regulations' about diet; more Muslims going annually to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage, rooting out televisions from Muslim homes; Muslims are marrying younger and eliminating lavish ceremonies; there is a de-Westernization of dress; many Muslims have given up insurance, including personal and car insurance and medical aid, Islamic banks such as the Al-Baraka Bank are patronized by larger numbers; and there has been a dramatic growth in Muslim and Islamic schools.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

According to Tzvetan Todorov 'only dead cultures remain intact'.¹¹¹ This is manifest in our study of Natal's Indian Muslims, which shows that there are multiple Islamic voices and traditions, which have continuously reinterpreted and redefined beliefs and practices about what it means to be a Muslim, what Islam is about, how the Qur'an and the *Hadith* should regulate one's life, which practices are acceptable and which are taboo. Reinterpretation is integral to all Islamic traditions, though adherents see their beliefs and practices as normative, and view Islam as a unique and timeless whole that is the sum total of divinely ordained beliefs.

Muslims were polarized by the arrival of reformist Islam from the 1960s, which sought to eradicate practices considered remnants of Indian culture. Differences had always existed but became more pointed as reformist tendencies forced adherents of popular Islam to articulate their practices and beliefs as a clear and coherent set of dogma justified by the Qur'an and the *Hadith*. This led to the rise of institutional Islam

amongst both factions. The conflict was more than theological. It was about re-configuring power relations among Muslims in South Africa. The 'official' Islam of *ulemah* and mosques, controlled by economically dominant trader elites, was given symbolic prestige by the fact that the Wahhabi movement, where the roots of reform Islam are to be found, controlled Islam's holiest places, Makkah and Madinah.

Muslim identities have never been fixed. Social, economic and political changes from the late 1980s drew Muslims together and widened definition of the salient community. Though deep differences remain there is greater tolerance. Whereas in the past every event became an occasion to question each other's 'truth', divisions have been narrowing. International events have also drawn Muslims together. The September 11 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, the Bali bombing in October 2002, regime change in Afghanistan (2002) and Iraq (April 2003), and continuing 'war on terror' have kindled the 'clash of civilizations' thesis in which Muslims are treated as 'the same' on the basis of their common belief. This is providing the common 'axis of equivalence' of a new Muslim identity. For Stuart Hall 'this is an example of the positional and conjunctural character of identities (their formation in and for specific times and places).¹¹² In the face of a common 'other', competing elements are being subsumed under the rubric 'Muslim'.

More fascinating is that a new form of syncretism seems to be emerging among South African Muslims. As Robert Hayden has shown, while syncretism is most obvious when it involves synthesis of practices belonging to different religions, it can also be applied to 'varying forms' within a world religion.¹¹³ There has certainly been synthesis, with beliefs and practices overlapping, and certain practices being reinvented. For example, those who once condemned communal *salaams* as an innovation now engage in communal *zhikr*, without seeing the contradiction. This, however, is very much a process in the making and it remains to be seen exactly how it will unfold. For the moment, despite the synthesis in practices and greater accommodation, members of both groups differentiate among themselves as Sunni or Tablighi, though the sharp edge to the conflict has been blunted.

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NOTES

1. Both 'Tablighi' and 'Sunni' traditions are part of Sunni Islam. However, in the South African context those who adopted practices associated with visitation of tombs, communal salutations to the Prophet and so on have appropriated the classification 'Sunni' to demonstrate that they rather than Tablighis were following the practices legitimized in the Quran and Sunna. This, of course, is contested by those labelled 'Tablighi', who argue that that their practices are modelled on the traditions of the Prophet. Mawlana A. S. Desai, for example, felt that Sunnis '... had no right to call themselves "Sunni". They are Bidati's or grave worshippers. The overwhelming majority of the Muslims of the world belong to the Ahle Sunnat Wa Jamaat but not the Bid'ait group in spite of its false claims that its members are Sunni' (*Sunday Times*, 10 January 1982). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper the nomenclature 'Sunni' and 'Tabligh' will be used with the understanding that both traditions constitute Sunni Islam.
2. According to the 1996 Population Census, there were 553,585 Muslims out of a total population of 40 million. There were 246,433 Malay and 236,315 Indian Muslims. While the category 'Malay' may not have a foundation in social science, it has been widely internalized by most South

Africans to refer to the 'Coloured' Muslims of the Cape. Under the apartheid government the Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950 divided South Africans into Whites, Indians, Africans, and Coloureds; it defined the latter as 'not a white person or a native'. The Coloured group was further sub-divided into 'Cape Malay', Other Coloureds, Khoisan, and so on. Most of Western Cape's Muslims were placed in the 'Cape Malay' category. The origins of this group lay in the importation of slaves by the Dutch in the seventeenth century from the Indonesia, Malaysia, Java, Ceylon and India to work at the Cape. Robert C-H Shell (1983) has argued that Cape Muslims came to be called 'Cape Malay' for linguistic rather than ethnic reasons since Malay was the lingua franca at the Cape during and prior to the nineteenth century. 'Malay' identity was open. Group membership was not ascriptive; individuals from diverse cultural and racial categories, who embraced Islam at the Cape, identified with the 'Malay' community. Shamil Jeppie has argued that Malay identity was given impetus by the work of anthropologist Dr I. D. du Plessis' whose work from the 1930s to the 1960s as researcher, academic and administrator reinforced 'Cape Malay' ethnic identity as a natural consequence of political developments within the country. Du Plessis reinvented Malay identity by creating bodies such as the Cape Malay Choir Board (est. 1939). See Shamil Jeppie, 'Historical Process and the Constitution of Subjects: I. D. Du Plessis and the Reinvention of the "Malay"', BA (Hons), University of Cape Town, 1987. See also, Robert C-H. Shell, 'The Establishment and Spread of Islam at the Cape from the Beginning of Company Rule to 1838', BA (Hons), University of Cape Town, 1974.

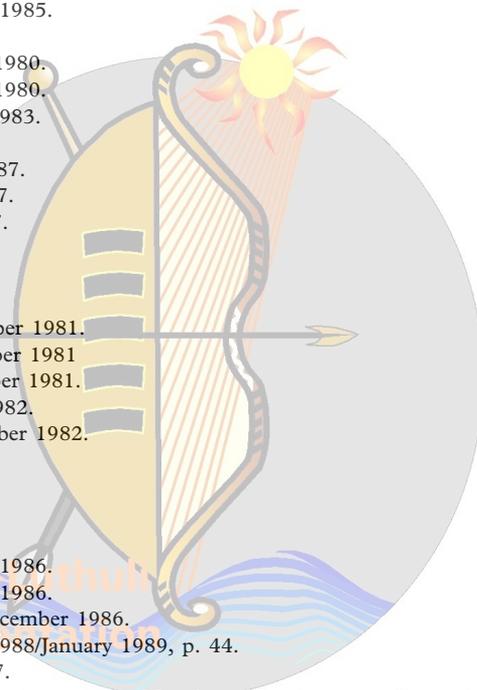
3. Figures supplied by Tom Bennett and Joy Brain who are compiling an inventory of indentured Indians. Of 130,000 immigrants analysed thus far, 7874 were Muslim, comprising of 4958 males, 2418 females, 233 girls and 248 boys.
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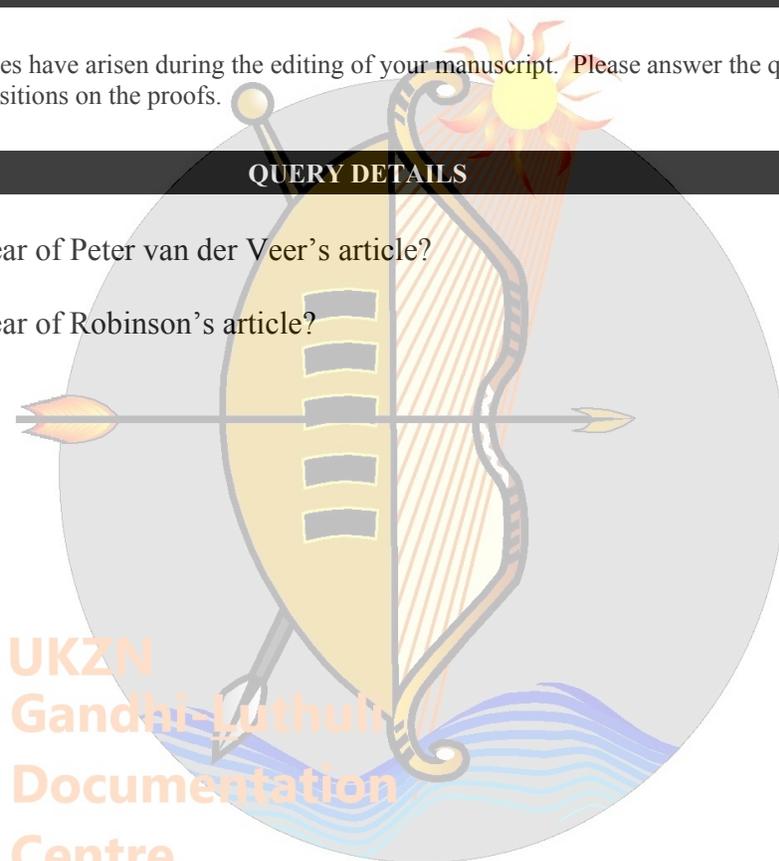
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