

Islam, Politics, & Gender during the Struggle in South Africa, 1976-1990

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This article investigates the role of Muslim organizations during the transition process in South Africa with special focus on the 1980s. Political strategies and religious attitudes of various Muslim groupings are analysed in light of the changing socio-political context. Two discourses are singled out in order to explore what shaped religious identities at that time. First, political alliances and the influence of secular ideologies on Muslim organizations. Second, the perception of gender issues in the review of the past. Both religious identities and the discourse regarding gender issues were predominantly shaped by the political context and embedded within the specific context of the various organizations.

Introduction

Our research focuses on the impact of Muslim organizations on the transition process during the political struggle in South Africa between 1976 and 1990. As a first step we set out to investigate the different Muslim groups and organizations, paying particular attention to the tensions between reform-orientated, progressive, orthodox and Islamist groups, as well as the inner conflicts within single organizations that ultimately had a religious and political impact on the corresponding organization and on its engagement with the anti-apartheid struggle. This was necessary because existing research on Muslim organizations covers mainly the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) and Call of Islam. Other organizations are rarely taken into consideration. Little is known about marginalised organizations like Al-Jihaad and Qibla. In academic writings they are referred to 'only in footnotes,' if at all. This gives a distorted account of Muslim organizations and their impact on the transition process in South Africa. One can only speculate over the reasons for the specific focus on the MYM and Call of Islam

only. Most of the studies on the MYM and Call of Islam were written by former members of these organizations now working in the academic field,¹ whereas this is not the case for Qibla and al-Jihaad. This fact probably contributed to an imbalance in the field of research.² Besides, Qibla and al-Jihaad are less popular because they do not represent mainstream positions, neither in terms of religion nor in politics. Others argue as follows:

Another reason for Ahmad's [i.e. A. Cassiem, leader of Qibla] relative obscurity on South Africa's national political terrain is because he is at ideological loggerheads with some of the key ideologues of the popular anti-apartheid political movement, namely the United Democratic Front and the African National Congress. For this reason his contribution to the struggle for liberation goes unrecorded...³

Qibla and al-Jihaad might be regarded as having played a secondary role in the struggle against apartheid in relation to the role of Muslim groups and organizations in democratising South Africa, but they still should be taken into consideration in order to reflect a comprehensive representation of Muslim resistance against the oppressive regime. Furthermore, they reflect the diversity within Islam.

Our approach is interdisciplinary, which means that we combine the perspectives of political science and Islamic studies and develop an understanding of particular processes through a wide range of methods like media-analyses of Muslim and non-Muslim newspapers, interviews with experts and members of the different groups and analyses of pamphlets and writings produced by the groups in the particular period of our focus. The major sources for this paper have been our interviews, Muslim pamphlets, unpublished documents and Muslim newspaper articles.

In this essay we will present some of our findings concerning firstly the topic of religious identities within a changing socio-political context, illustrated by the discourse of political alliances and the influence of secular ideologies on Muslim organizations, and secondly, the different perspectives on gender issues as expressed in the interviews.

In the first part of the essay the different positions regarding the particular discourse on alliances is reconstructed. Evidence indicates that there is apparent continuity between the attitudes of Muslim activists in the 1980s and the role Muslims and Muslim organizations have played after the political transition in either supporting the new government or in resorting to opposition. A question that shaped and dominated the discourse within and among Muslim organizations in the mid-1980s was whether Muslims could or should enter into alliances with non-Muslim groups in the anti-apartheid struggle. This more than any other issue should be considered the primary factor that structured the relationship

between religious conviction and political attitude.

The second part refers to gender analysis. We consider gender analysis to be an important tool for understanding the religious and theological discourses within Muslim organizations. Furthermore, the issue of gender is a good example for identifying and analysing continuities and discontinuities within Muslim organizations in the broader context of transition.

The Political and Economic Context of the Research

The period under investigation, 1976 to 1990, was marked by a constantly growing resistance movement against apartheid. Two developments were responsible for this: Firstly, there was a deep economic recession accompanied by high rates of unemployment and inflation. Secondly, a reform programme was introduced by the government in its attempt to find a way out of the political crisis of not being recognised as legitimate. The side effects of this swelling resistance were unintended: a wide spectrum of organizations and movements, especially trade unions and other civil society organizations were created to fight apartheid (Lodge & Nasson 1991: 30).

These political and economic developments affected Muslim communities in the different provinces of South Africa. A large part of the Muslim minority were victims of forced removals which took place in the 1960s and 1970s. District Six in Cape Town, Cato Manor in Durban and Sophiatown in Johannesburg were multi-religious and multi-cultural areas where many Muslim families had lived for generations. Through forced removals many Muslims lost their livelihood since they had to give up businesses and the remote resettlement areas offered little, if any replacements.

It was particularly this consciousness of injustice and the often traumatic experience of such removal which led to the political mobilisation and activism of parts of the Muslim community.⁴ Muslim organizations like the Cape Muslim Youth Movement (est. 1957) and Al-Jihaad (est. 1960) were founded in District Six and showed an early commitment to the fight against apartheid at a time when Muslim communities at large were not yet concerned with politics.⁵ The reasons for the conservatism of the Muslim community at this time and their unwillingness to enter into political activities were manifold (Davids 1985; Lubbe 1994.). Muslims feared the increasingly repressive apartheid regime and opted for a more accommodating approach of negotiations with the state, which suited their primary aims to improve the educational system for Muslims (Tayob 1995: 99). Another factor was the hegemony of the established '*ulamā*', (i.e. religious scholars) who dominated and controlled religious life and dissuaded Muslims from getting involved in politics (Günther 2002: 90-93). This was particularly apparent in Natal and Transvaal where the '*ulamā*', had historically more power within the communities than in the Cape Province.

Nevertheless, the emerging social and political consciousness of this period was the seed for an increasing willingness by Muslim individuals and organizations to get politically involved in the mid 1980s and to affiliate with anti-apartheid alliances.⁶

The political opposition of the 1980s did not form a homogeneous block but consisted of a variety of organizations and groups who had different aims, followed different ideologies and were divided by regional specifics. These differences rubbed off on Muslim organizations: they had to decide on political alliances and various forms of political participation. Of particular importance in this context were two politically significant events: First, the introduction of the tri-cameral parliament in 1983 and second, the subsequent formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF).

Being classified as "Indian" and "Coloured" according to apartheid ideology, Muslims were confronted with the choice to either participate in the elections for the tri-cameral parliament or to boycott them and refuse any such collaboration with the regime. There was unity amongst the majority of Muslim organizations and institutions in opposing the new constitutional dispensation. Muslim organizations often argued against the apartheid policy of segregation as perpetuated in the tri-cameral parliament by referring to Islamic belief and text:

The *Dim-ul-Islam* teaches us that mankind is but a single community and that differences in man on the basis of colour and language are not less than *ayat* (sign) of Allah i.e. proof of His existence and cannot be used as a basis for discrimination between man and man.⁷

But Muslim groups calling for a boycott of the tri-cameral parliament still had to decide whether or not to affiliate to the UDF. As an umbrella body, the UDF consisted of hundreds of affiliated organizations across the country, including religious as well as secular groups. The formation of the UDF marked a decisive turning point in the power struggle between the resistance movement and the apartheid government and enhanced the democratisation process (Lodge & Nasson 1991: 29). The controversies and debates around alliances with opposition groups and non-collaboration with the government deepened the ideological and political fragmentation within the Muslim community.

Political Alliances and the Influence of Secular Ideologies on Muslim Organizations

Muslim organizations in the 1980s were strongly influenced by the regional political context in which they were set up and were acting. Religious and political identities often merged and led to polarisation on both levels.

The secular ideologies of the major political organizations of this period, the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Black Consciousness (BC) Movement, were reflected in the political attitudes of Muslim activists and Muslim organizations. In the Cape Province – the focus of our research – another socialist organization dominated the political discourse of the region: the New Unity Movement, also known as the Unity Movement (Nasson 1991: 210f.). Through its principles of “non-collaboration” and “non-racialism” the Unity Movement had a lot of support from the young, educated generation which was opposed to a moderate political stand represented by the Charterists who supported the ANC. The Unity Movement consisted predominantly of coloured members and as such had a strong influence within the Muslim community in the Cape.

As mentioned above, the question of political alliances and affiliations was crucial for Muslim organizations. It was here where various religious and ideological views surfaced. With regard to Muslim organizations two developments took place. On the one hand, new Muslim organizations emerged with differing political and religious outlooks. These organizations either affiliated to the wider resistance movements or propagated a purely “Islamic fight” against apartheid. On the other hand, already existing Muslim organizations transformed from merely religio-cultural organizations to politically conscious and active ones.

The Muslim Youth Movement, the largest Muslim organization operating nationally, is a good example of the latter development. In the course of the growing resistance to apartheid in the mid 1980s the organization abandoned its apolitical attitude and participated increasingly in the struggle. The original aim to „Islamise“ the society was given up in favour of a contextual position that took the South African political realities of oppression and resistance into account. Therefore, a strategy of “positive neutrality” was developed which enabled the MYM to participate in resistance activities without making a commitment to any particular political organization or ideology (Tayob 1995: 169). Closer examination – including the interviews we conducted with MYM members – confirms the assumption that the MYM opted for this strategy to accommodate the different political convictions within the organization. Being part of a national organization, MYM members sympathised variously with any one of the large political organizations or movements: the ANC, the PAC, the Black Conscious Movement or the Unity Movement in the Cape Province. Besides these different political beliefs represented in the MYM, a number of members pleaded for an apolitical attitude and did not want to get involved in politics at all. These different attitudes and the new option for contextualisation initiated by the MYM General Assembly 1987 deepened the fractions within the organization.⁸

Ebrahim Moosa, reflecting on the divisions caused by the ideological shift of the MYM, argues that the real ideological conflict within the organization

was between an "orthodoxy" who opposed change and "progressives" who were prone to change.⁹ According to Moosa the differences were not purely a matter of attitudes and beliefs but rather "determined by their socio-political, cultural and spiritual realities around them".¹⁰

In time it became clear that the MYM branches in the Cape were taking a much stronger political stand and had less objections to cooperate with secular organizations than the MYM branches in other regions of the country. This increased conflicts and regional divisions within the organization.¹¹ The political commitment of the Cape MYM was due to the popularity and tradition of radical political action in this region, largely influenced by the Unity Movement.¹²

The concept of "positive neutrality" should be considered a pragmatic stand rather than a political strategy. Opposing views within the MYM were taken into account in order not to lose members to other Muslim organizations or secular movements.

The reluctance of the MYM to clearly affiliate to the wider resistance movement was challenged by a number of MYM members who sympathised with the ANC.¹³ A small group of members who wanted to see a clear political commitment in affiliating to the UDF split eventually from the MYM in 1984 and formed the Call of Islam. According to founding members of the Call of Islam, attempts had been made to convince the MYM leadership to change its position and become more politically involved. But, as Call of Islam member Imam Gassan Solomon stated, the MYM's policy was that

the movement will take the Muslim community through the various stages of development, and that unless and until the Muslim community was ready...to take that type of position and would be able to handle themselves and handle the situation, that they should not get involved in practical politics.¹⁴

The Call of Islam moved the Islamic struggle into the context of the wider struggle of South Africans to overthrow the apartheid regime. Therefore, it appealed to the conscience of Muslims to participate in the fight against oppression and to join mass meetings and demonstrations primarily organised by secular movements.¹⁵ Yet, to "sell" their political attitude of forming broad alliances to the predominantly conservative Muslim community, Call of Islam had to emphasise a pragmatic approach on the issue:

For us it is not a question of taking friendship of non-Muslims. People are suffering. We are part of that people who are suffering and together we are going to get our freedom.¹⁶

Another Muslim organization with a clear political aim emerged in the early 1980s, namely Qibla. Inspired by the achievements of the Iranian revolution this group propagated the overthrow of the apartheid regime with the ultimate goal of establishing an Islamic and therefore theocratic state. In line with this aim, Qibla objected to any affiliation with non-Muslim, secular organizations or movements. Yet, there was a loose connection with the PAC due to ideological similarities. Their concepts of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Islamism, as well as their uncompromising attitude towards the apartheid state, had a lot in common. Evidence showed that there was a link between the armed wing of the PAC, APLA, and Qibla in the sense that members of both organizations received military training in Libya in the mid 1980s (Lodge 1994: 122). Still, Ahmed Cassiem, founder of Qibla, denies any affiliation to the PAC.¹⁷

How strongly political affiliations shaped the consciousness of Muslim organizations becomes evident when one compares different groups with similar religious orientations. Qibla and Al-Jihaad were both organizations deeply inspired by the Iranian revolution. Both sympathised with Shi'ism; members of the latter even officially converted to Shia Islam. Both organizations regarded Ayatollah Khomeini as a role model and both viewed the establishment of a theocratic state as their ultimate goal. Even politically, Qibla and Al-Jihaad engaged in the armed struggle to combat apartheid. Yet, the two organizations had nothing to do with each other; there was even resentment expressed from both sides.¹⁸ This might be explained by the fact that Qibla was influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement and PAC ideology and therefore opposed alliances with the mainstream resistance movement.¹⁹ In contrast, Al-Jihaad supported the ANC and did not hesitate to join the UDF after its inception. Nevertheless, both organizations reflect the possibility of on the one hand striving towards an Islamic social order and an Islamic state while being influenced by secular ideologies and of merging these identities in a uniquely South African context on the other.

Interreligious Alliances – Opposition to the Dutch Reformed Church's Stand Against Islam

For Muslim organizations, the question of alliances applied not only to political movements but also to other religions and churches. When the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)²⁰ general synod released a motion in October 1986 referring to Islam as a "false religion", Muslim organizations throughout the country protested vehemently against the resolution. As a result of the widespread protest the conflict was portrayed extensively in the media over the next months (Omar 1989: 10). Interesting in this context was the strong inter-religious solidarity which was shown in support of the Muslim cause. Various church leaders such as Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak openly condemned the DRC resolution. Mus-

lim organizations made a special effort to invite Christian speakers to the rallies and demonstrations organised in protest against the DRC.²¹ This strengthened the inter-religious bonds. At one rally in Cape Town Gerrie Lubbe, a DRC-Minister who was expelled from the Church for his progressive stand, spoke alongside Muslim leaders to an audience that was predominantly Muslim.²² A lot of support came particularly from representatives of the DR Sending Kerk, whose congregations were based in areas where a large percentage of the Muslim population lived.²³

The supposedly religious dispute was very soon transformed into a political conflict. Muslim organizations instrumentalised the issue to mobilise the Muslim community politically. The Call of Islam representative Farid Esack stated in an interview:

We didn't care...about the fact that they called Islam a false religion ... Muslims have been calling Christianity a false religion for 1400 years ... But this was an issue that we could mobilise against the Dutch Reformed Church for the political role that it has played. This was yet another issue where we could mobilise Muslims and Christians: "Before it becomes an issue of division, let's make it an issue of solidarity." There were public meetings, there were marches, there were challenges issued to the Dutch Reformed Church. We had a whale of a time!²⁴

In the end, within the context of the political struggle against apartheid, this issue changed Muslim-Christian relations. Interfaith activities visibly increased in the aftermath. These were supported by the already existing links within political structures like the UDF Muslims and Christians would join in attending funerals of political activists of different faiths. In fact, as Farid Esack stated, funerals of political activists, which were major events facilitating the mobilisation of the community against the apartheid regime at that time, were increasingly conducted in community halls and stadiums rather than in churches and mosques in order to allow all religious groups to be present and feel comfortable.²⁵

Gender and the Presentation or Perception of Gender Issues in the Review of the Past

We work with a notion of gender as a set of social and cultural meanings assigned to biological sex differences. Such a notion assumes that gender identities are socially constructed, learned and internalised and can be recognised, for example, in the notions and expectations of femininity and masculinity of a given society or community, as well as in the more or less hidden assumptions the

community has about women and men and their societal roles.²⁶

Gender is an analytical tool enabling us to probe deeply into our everyday practices as women and as men within the context of our religion, culture and history. Some have not simply misunderstood gender but they have perverted its meanings and uses. Some have politicized gender.²⁷

There are numerous factors shaping the perception of gender-systems within a given society or community. Religion can be considered as one of the major sources for providing prescribed and theologically justified conceptions about women's and men's roles, duties etc.

Our approach is inspired by the following guiding questions:²⁸

- 1) What is the understanding of gender relations before, during and after the transition process?
- 2) Is there a different perception of the transition process between women and men?
- 3) Do predominant ideologies or perceptions exist that have imposed gender roles?
- 4) Does a re-construction of gender in terms of a social category occur? If one assumes that the transition process has been accompanied by several challenges that might have led to cultural or religious alienation, then there will be different ways of coping with this in order to re-establish social coherence or a coherence within a specific community. One current possibility is to refer to "tradition," be it religious or cultural tradition. Needless to say, feminist and gender studies brought out the importance of women who often are considered to be the guardians of tradition and to represent the traditional model of social reality.²⁹ Since the latter should be regarded as part of the realm of ideas and ideals it must not necessarily correspond to the real situation within a given society.³⁰
- 5) Did and does a gender discourse exist? Who led or leads this discourse and what are its characteristics?
- 6) Does a specific notion of gender in the South African Muslim context exist?

The following analysis makes use of a selection of interviews that have been conducted during the last two years with members and leaders of the following three Muslim organizations: firstly the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC), secondly the Muslim Youth Movement and thirdly the Call of Islam.³¹ The major reason for the selection is that these interviews – especially in a comparative approach – show an interesting range of perspectives and might illustrate a phenomenon

that is linked to discourse and the monopoly of interpretation and the difficulties to maintain certain monopolies when general circumstances and frameworks are challenged by transformation.³²

The Muslim Judicial Council (MJC)

The MJC represents the '*ulamā*' and can be considered to be a traditional and conservative body in terms of Islamic values. Furthermore, the MJC claimed and still claims to be the custodian of Islamic principles and therefore to represent the entire Muslim community with the intention of uniting South African Muslims. Although this claim reflects an ideal rather than experienced reality the more traditional and/or conservatively orientated congregations feel represented by the MJC and support the '*ulamā*'s approach to Islam.³³

Against such a conservative background one might expect answers that fit in with a conservative and traditional perception of men and women like for instance division of labour and social duties etc. Indeed, all the interviewees insisted on the fact that from the beginning Islam proclaimed that women and men are not the same but equal, which means that each one has a distinct societal role to play. They referred to the Qur'an, Sura 33:35, that emphasises the equality of all individuals regardless of sex. Furthermore the interviewees stressed that Islam even improved the situation of women on many levels.³⁴ However, the answers of MJC members showed certain diversity within the already mentioned common framework of the organization.

Some quotations might illustrate the MJC's position:

We don't have a problem with our womenfolk. I firmly believe that a nation who one side of it is not working the way it should be working would be a paralysed nation. And in order to move and progress you have to have all parts of your community working together. So as far as the women are concerned, they should participate and contribute in the way best suited, but we also require from the womenfolk, while participating, to dress herself properly and to give account of herself as a woman who is a Muslim.³⁵

As opposed to the general understanding of people that women have got a lesser role to play in Islam, the MJC stance via its convictions and via the Qur'an and examples of the Prophet where he had given equality to women. Women got equality over 1400 years ago, when Europe was still barbaric. The women didn't have the vote in Europe yet, Islam had already said equality between women. It's

only that there's a difference, we say that, for argument's sake, there's an ayah, a verse in the Qur'an, which says that man is the protector of the women. Because you know the one is stronger than the other. And the Qur'an also says in another verse, that man is not the same as women, which means that each one has got a distinct role to play. But it doesn't mean that they're unequal though.³⁶

I don't know whether that was actually part of their agenda to discuss issues like that. I don't think it actually became an issue. And I think the reason it never became an issue because Muslim women never took it up as an issue. I think it's only now that Muslim women are becoming empowered, that they take up these issues. But I think in the early years women never took up these issues. I think Muslim women were satisfied with the situation, with the status they had in the community. It wasn't a bad status really, it wasn't bad at all. But now of course Muslim women are becoming more conscious and more active and more empowered and so we see a lot of changes.³⁷

One needs to stress that the MJC was and still is a male '*ulamā*'-body, there have been no established female religious scholars in South Africa at the time being; as far as we know, they do not exist nowadays. Sheikh Faik Gamiendien emphasises the fact that there "were not any qualified women to serve the Muslim Judicial Council." On the other hand it was not part of the MJC's "policy to admit women members" at that particular time.³⁸

The MJC argues within the theological context that can be characterised more as an orthodox than a progressive one.³⁹ The interviewees refer to the Qur'an and the early history of Islam in order to justify that gender is not an issue in Islam and therefore not a problem for the Muslim community. They do not problematise the fact that the improvements for women due to the rise of Islam and the changes within gender-relations took place on the Arabian Peninsula more than 1000 years ago. Nor do they see it as problematic that the experienced reality of South African Muslims must not necessarily correspond to the ideal of the *golden age*, i.e. early Muslim history. Furthermore, they do not question whether they project achievements of the past on the present regardless of the different historical, socio-political and cultural contexts of Muslims in South Africa. However, the current debates on gender-issues raised by Muslim women and not by the '*ulamā*' are mentioned and this without claiming that the MJC has initiated or contributed to this discussion.

From a gender-viewpoint the context and even the argument of the MJC

representatives is shaped by patriarchal patterns that are legitimised and justified by the exploitive use of religion. In this specific case men speak on behalf of women, men hold the monopoly of definitions – and they do not question it. But – and this will become more important in comparison to other organizations – the MJC members did not allude to any special gender sensitivity, nor to a particular engagement with gender issues. They argued within their specific context without appropriating a discourse that occurred later.

The Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) and Call of Islam

Call of Islam split from the MYM because of different attitudes concerning the political stand and the issue of affiliation to secular anti-apartheid movements. Despite the already mentioned differences they have a lot in common. Both considered themselves as organizations standing for progressive Islam and as being a progressive counterpart to the traditional and established ‘*ulamā*’. Both challenged the ‘*ulamā*’s hegemonic knowledge and the monopoly of definition and interpretation while creating a new interpretation of Islam that is equivalent to a contextualised approach.⁴⁰ The notion “progressive Islam” appeared during the transition process; today it is even more sharply articulated and in fact not only within the South African context. Rashied Omar (MYM) and Farid Esack (MYM and later Call of Islam) had a formative influence on the term. After the transition process Farid Esack continued to use the term while enlarging it over the course of time. According to him progressive Muslims, unlike modernist or liberal Muslims, distinguish themselves by a clear political commitment and engagement and a left-wing or socialist identification. Modernist or liberal Muslims should be located more on an intellectual and academic level while progressive Muslims combine intellectual activity with an activist engagement for the marginalised.⁴¹

There are different perspectives amongst male and female members and persons in leadership positions in the MYM and the Call of Islam: Men – and especially in leadership positions – presented themselves and the organization as having been very gender-sensitive, they even claim having been the vanguard concerning this issue. If one takes into consideration the importance of gender-equality in the new South Africa, then gender-sensitivity can be regarded as a factor that should increase the perception of the organizations’ importance for the transition process.⁴² This is even more so, if one takes into consideration that gender is supposed to have been an issue within these Muslim organizations at a time when it did not play such an enormous role within the general socio-political discourses.

An in-depth analysis of the interviews brings to light that the male members and leaders perceive the encouraging of women’s participation in the activities of the respective organizations on the one hand, and the encouraging of women’s

access and presence in the mosques on the other, as gender activism. In this context it is important to mention that in the early phase of Muslim resistance both in mosques and in meetings the predominant understanding of gender-relations corresponded more to an orthodox and traditional approach of Islam.⁴³ Furthermore, the MYM's first phase was a purely religio-cultural one; the socio-political phase started only in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Against this background the encouragement of women can be considered as part of the counterbalance to the '*ulamā*'s monopoly on religion and as a necessary step in order to initiate changes for women and the perception of gender-relations.⁴⁴ However, the changes that took place did not affect the system as such.⁴⁵

I think the MYM always encouraged the participation of women and they were one of the first Muslim organizations to do that – to actively encourage participation by women in all of its activities and made provisions for that. So I think that was the kind of initiation of gender activism in South Africa among Muslims... I think the MYM did promote women's participation in all of its activities and in most of its events.⁴⁶

Call of Islam came into being at a time when a general discourse about gender issues was established amongst various anti-apartheid movements, like the UDF.⁴⁷ This might explain the fact that in comparison to the MYM the perception of gender issues amongst male and female members is more balanced.⁴⁸

Yes, I mean the gender issues were possibly very sensitive issues within the MYM. I recall I think it was in 1987, we had a meeting of the National Executive (NATEX) committee, in Kimberley. And there were a whole number of women, and there were men. And we in the Cape had already began to rethink this question of women and their place and their location and the space within the organization. Where do women sit, at the back, do they sit in front? ... So it was a big issue.⁴⁹

Yes, certainly. I think so but right from the very beginning the MYM, from its inception in 1970, began to campaign for women to be in the mosque. Right. It wasn't the radical campaigns we had later on but at least they wanted women to be in the mosque, even if it was upstairs. And increasingly, the campaign for women's rights became more and more radical in the 80s, in the latter part of the 80s.⁵⁰

These statements come from men in leadership positions who continued to play an important role within the Muslim community on the one hand and were well known by a broader public on the other, i.e. they are considered to be representatives for Muslims having been engaged in the struggle for liberation. Yet, there are other male voices within the MYM, who qualify these statements.

I think in the early years the MYM would always promote the fight for the equality of the sexes because Islam says so ... But at a very practical level, maybe one wouldn't say there was a real male chauvinism to push a particular grouping at the expense of the other ... The gender issue was never addressed firstly. So there was never a conscious effort to ensure that the composition is right ... But there was no interaction between the gender issues itself ... Essentially the organization was still male-dominated. Whether it was for convenient sake, whether it was just the attitude ... You must understand the community also. In the community it was taboo for a female to even be seen so yes, again your regional dimension comes in ... So basically what I'm saying is that yes, there was underplaying of the gender issue at the expense of male domination in the early years.⁵¹

Interestingly enough the women's perception of the MYM is completely different: women focus more on concrete achievements for Muslim women during the last decade of apartheid like for instance access to the mosques, their participation in the struggle and their engagement within Muslim organizations and the study circles, etc. The study circles, especially, were perceived as a means to acquire religious knowledge on the one hand and knowledge about female role models within Islam on the other. This facilitated the contribution to discourses concerning women and should be considered as a first step to break the male monopoly of definition and interpretation. Furthermore women mentioned the importance of the effects more than the importance of the discourse itself. They did not stress the fact that their organizations have been the vanguard in terms of gender sensitivity. Men describe the achievements for women as much more important than women do, but without giving any concrete example and without referring to the nature of women's claims for change and gender equality. One explanation for the phenomenon of this different perception amongst women and men might be that men, especially former leaders, set greater store on the status of their organization even today than women do.

The automatic principle was that we are all equal that we all have the right to. And we had a strong programme to rid

women of their old ideas. And we definitely realised that women were secondary citizens because of the way they were treated from a very traditional Islamic perspective, the women were still upstairs in the mosque. You will find that women weren't active in Muslim structures. If they were, they were only in terms of fundraisers for the mosque committees but they were never on the Board making the decisions. There were obviously no women Imams, you know, leaders and things like that. So women were given a raw deal on their Muslim personal law issues ... And we articulated the position ... bring them back to hadith, our prominent role players like 'Ayesha and Khadeejah and those women, and we articulated it very strongly ... We were agitating that they become much more prominent role models for women, so that women could see that they don't have to be docile and submissive and play that secondary role.⁵²

... Everything that we did was done under the umbrella of fighting against injustice. So injustice could take many forms and we were acutely aware of injustices against women in terms of patriarchal kind of stereotypes and the way women should be as opposed to what we could be. You know that whole tension, and we were constantly negotiating this whole thing and we actually found, going to the Qur'an and Sunna, it to be extremely liberating. And the fact that you could go to the Qur'an and Sunna was in itself very liberating because hitherto we'd been led to believe that it was the sole preserve of the male environment.⁵³

As the months went on, the women in the Western Cape became very vocal and we organised quite with the men quite well. For example, we said we were not going to organise the teas and the cakes and things for programmes ... We wanted to be part of the programme planning. So there was this emergence coming from the women in the organization because I think our women also worked quite hard ... It was still this mentality that the men must take over and run the programmes and men bring their wives and their children or their sisters or whatever to the programme, and there wasn't this kind of a good interaction ... And also the needs of women were very downplayed. The voices were never heard. What do women really want? And still up to

today, I still have this battle about women's voices. It's men who are running the programmes for women. And men are telling the women how they should run their programmes.⁵⁴

With the exception of the issue of formal leadership, Call of Islam had put gender issues on its agenda.

But women were very prominent and dominant in the Call of Islam and even in our leadership. They played a very significant role. But looking back at it, I still think that the giants in the Call were all men.⁵⁵

I mean I think that the Call of Islam was one of the key organizations in terms of putting gender issues on the agenda, for want of a better word. I mean, we were also very active, the Call of Islam women's group was very active in other women's organizations ... The Call of Islam didn't just have gender as an issue, as an issue, as a theoretical issue. I mean, I think the fact that people like myself, Rashieda Shabodien, etc. did have leadership roles in the organization, illustrated the commitment to gender equality. It wasn't always very easy because you were operating in a, I mean, Islam traditionally is always, you know, the men are the ones in the lead and the women kind of follow. We always tried to, in our media, push issues that are on women, and just, I suppose sometimes you illustrate to people how women are oppressed ... It was both at a level of, within the organization it was an issue that was constantly raised and also I mean at a public level, promoted women's equality.⁵⁶

I must be honest that in terms of gender, we were never looked upon as subordinate within in the Call of Islam, I mean as women, we were never looked upon as subordinate. I think that we had lots of equality in terms of understanding the gender role within the struggle as a whole and I think that that is why there was a lot of respect within the organization.⁵⁷

Yet, the gender sensitivity and the engagement for gender issues reached its limits when it came to the issue of leadership. Formal leadership was men's work or men's space. Interestingly enough, only women mentioned other women holding important positions or having been well-known for their engagement for gender

issues, like Fatima Noordien, Shamiema Shaikh or Rashieda Shabodien.⁵⁸

The MYM didn't fight for that female to become part of the leadership structure. It was incidental; it was seen to be 'she must be on the structure' so she was in the structure, but there was no concrete effort to say that Islam says that and because of that we should have ... There were strong females who could take up senior leadership positions but because of the community and because of perceptions in terms of how the community viewed her and saw Islam in the role of women also ensure that she never took up a more senior position. There were the Secretaries of the organization but they would never become the *Amira* of the organization and they would never become the Western Cape Chairperson.⁵⁹

In this context one should mention the initiative of a female MYM member to open a gender-desk in the late 1980s. This initiative failed in absence of people and capacities. Attempts to revive this initiative in 2000 failed again.

Although male MYM and Call of Islam members emphasised the importance of the participation of women and the gender sensitivity of the organization, they deconstructed their own perception by admitting for example that women had no formal leading positions within the organizations and were often marginalized, for example, because of their role as mothers. Although the MYM and Call of Islam regard themselves as progressive and gender sensitive the discourse on gender issues was predominantly pursued by men and men spoke on behalf of women.

Conclusion

The role of Muslim organizations during the transition process was multi-faceted. Religious identities of Muslim activists in the 1980s in South Africa were fundamentally shaped by the political context in which they lived. The experience of injustice and oppression led to religiously legitimised political activism. The political culture of the different regions where Muslim organizations emerged seems to have had a strong impact on their religious beliefs and the ideologies they followed. Differences in political attitudes were a major cause for divisions within and between Muslim groups, besides other religious, cultural and ethnic differences.

The common struggle against an oppressive regime does not necessarily promote unity amongst a religious minority but can also deepen fractions within the community aggravated by the power struggle over religio-political leadership.

What is more, political participation of a religious community does not necessarily lead to the integration into the broader society and to alliances with other groups of similar political persuasion. As some Muslim groups in South Africa showed, it was possible to pursue a "purely Islamic fight" against apartheid without engaging with the rest of the society.

The discourse of whether or not to enter into alliances with non-Muslim groups and movements shows a fundamental dilemma of the Muslim minority: How can Muslims secure Islamic values and further their particular religious aims if they engage with pluralist or secular groups which might monopolise them? Some Muslim organizations felt their own identity and self-perception to be threatened by the idea of alliances, while other organizations felt comfortable co-operating with a wide range of political and social groups within civil society.

The political polarisation of Muslim groups during the struggle against apartheid was eventually reflected in the positions of these groups during the democratisation process: The democratically-oriented organizations like the MYM and the Call of Islam – defined as "progressive" – called their members to vote for the former resistance movements, either the ANC or the PAC, in the first democratic elections and declared their confidence in a secular and democratic political system.

Qibla, on the other hand, called for a boycott of the elections. In their view the new state would admittedly represent the majority of the population, but a constitution that made provisions for the legalisation or decriminalisation of abortion, prostitution and gambling could not be legitimate in the eyes of Muslims because it contravenes Islamic values and norms.

With regard to gender-issues one can conclude that there has been a sensitivity for the necessity of changes for women, and also for the empowerment of women. However, the perspective was more a women-centred or feminist perspective than explicitly gender-orientated, because empowerment of women was an important issue and also a task that both women and men wanted to fulfil, as expressed in the interviews. If one looks at this particular period in South Africa, the interviews on the one hand, and if one embeds this in a broader context of women's liberation movements on the other hand, there are striking parallels: Women's empowerment takes place while referring to the contextual source, be it religious, cultural or historical. Women are busy with a kind of archaeology, looking for female role models in order to discover important and powerful women in history, in religion, etc. From a feminist and gender perspective this approach is considered to be compensatory. This corresponds to a search for famous women who then are compared and contrasted with famous men.⁶⁰ It was the necessary impulse for women's empowerment and led to another approach, which can be described as the concept of women's contribution to history, religion, etc., in a more general sense. This corresponds to the idea that not only important and powerful women should be reintegrated in history and religion

but women in general in order to create "her-story" instead of history, i.e. to counterbalance the predominant androcentric perspective of history, religion, etc. This approach finally was the impulse for gender studies.⁶¹ Further investigations and analysis embedded in broader gender discourses may produce interesting results, especially if one looks at the last period of the transition and the first decade of the new and democratic South Africa. A lot of discourses have been taken up by several Muslim organizations – even the conservative MJC – and adopted for their own agenda. One of the reasons for this adoption is certainly the general sociopolitical change that created the space for these discourses on a broader level.

It is widely claimed that the general contribution of Muslims to the liberation struggle in South Africa was far out of proportion to their numbers. This claim is however contested. It was only a minority within the Muslim minority that were actively involved in politics. For the most part Muslims were passive during the crucial years of the struggle against apartheid (Davids 1984, Günther 2002, Günther & Niehaus forthcoming). The fact that Muslims currently hold a large number of ministerial offices, and that significant positions and professions are filled by prominent Muslims has often been mentioned to demonstrate the extent of Muslim commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle.⁶² Whether these politicians or public persons were engaged in the struggle with a clear commitment to Islam or not seems to be less important. What counts is the fact that they are Muslims in positions of leadership (e.g. members of parliament and Cabinet Ministers). The particular persons concerned are mostly "secular" Muslims, i.e. they are attached to secular organizations such as the ANC rather than to religious ones. They are integrated into these secular communities and do not engage in specific Muslim politics. Without minimising the contribution of this particular religious and social community, one could regard the obvious presence of Muslims within the South African political and social landscape more as a symbol of their socio-economic position than purely as an indication of the vast contribution of the Muslims to the anti-apartheid struggle. The socio-economic influence and status of this group and the power that is necessarily attached to such wealth (often already established under apartheid) at least in part explains the larger representation of Muslims in high profiled positions.

Notes

¹ Like Dr. Farid Esack, Dr. Shamil Jeppie, Prof. Ebrahim Moosa and Prof. Abdulkader Tayob.

² Needless to mention the difficulty in accessing source material by researchers who were members of a competing organization. Concerning some former and/or still active Qibla members we also faced difficulties in finding enough interviewees. Some of the persons we talked to did not want to be interviewed nor help us to contact

other members. The fact that Qibla is perceived to be a radical Islamist and anti-democratic organization and even suspected of being close to PAGAD (People against Gangsterism and Drugs) might explain the reluctance to be interviewed.

³ *Inquiry* 1988: 56.

⁴ In our interviews the issue of forced removals and the collective trauma it inflicted on Muslim communities was the key-event most often identified as the factor which conscientised Muslims politically. See also (Esack 1997: 2).

⁵ According to Tatamkulu Africa Al-Jihaad was one of the first Muslim organizations to take up the protest against the forced removal of District Six and became very "anti-government" in the course of events. See interview with Tatamkulu Africa, 22.5. 2001, Cape Town.

⁶ One of the first Muslims to oppose apartheid was Imam Haron, who died in detention in 1969 and became a symbol and an icon for the Muslim struggle against Apartheid in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. For further details see (Günther 2002).

⁷ Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa: Muslim Youth Movement Response to New Constitutional Dispensation, Durban.

⁸ See MYMSA Report on General Assembly, Kimberley 1987 and therein the paper by Shamil Jeppie "Some Capital Issues on a Movement that Wants to Land" where Jeppie criticised the MYM leadership for the lack of a guideline for the involvement of the organization in "practical politics". See also MYMSA. 1987. *Towards a Principled Struggle*.

⁹ For detailed explanations concerning these terms, see below.

¹⁰ MYMSA General Assembly Report 1990, Appendix A: Cape Regional Report, p.28.

¹¹ Rushdie Edries stated in his paper "Improving the Movement: Aims and Objectives" that "many members in both Natal and Transvaal were, to say the least, uncomfortable with the 'political' nature of the draft copies [on the aims and objectives of the organisation] which initially reflected a more or less Cape position." See (Edries 1988).

¹² Muslim activists in the Cape came out of particular schools and universities where their "political socialisation" had taken place under the influence of the Unity Movement. See interview with Aslam Fataar, 19.7.2000, Cape Town and Rashied Omar, 14./20.6.2000, Cape Town.

¹³ Like Farid Esack, Ebrahim Rasool and Gassan Solomon.

¹⁴ Interview with Imam Gassan Solomon, 20.3.2001, Cape Town.

¹⁵ *The Call of Islam*, August 1986, Newsletter.

¹⁶ See (Esack 1989: 56).

¹⁷ Interview with Ahmad Cassiem, 15.6.99, Cape Town.

¹⁸ See interview with Tatamkulu Africa, 22.5. 2001, Cape Town and Isgaak Kamaar, 1.6.2001, Cape Town.

¹⁹ See "Annals of South Africa...", p. 55.

²⁰ The Dutch Reformed Church is popularly referred to as the NG Kerk (NGK), which is the Afrikaans equivalent of the name.

²¹ See *Cape Times*, 28.10.1986, *The Argus*, 30.10.1986.

²² *Cape Times*, 30.10.1986, see also the interview with Gerrie Lubbe, 9.8.2000, Durban.

²³ *Cape Times*, 27.10.1986.

²⁴ Interview with Farid Esack, 4. and 7.7.2000, Cape Town.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

- ²⁶ See the chapter *Definitionen* in Lerner 1991: 285-300, especially the entries *sex*, *gender* and *sex-gender-system*. See also Frey 2000.
- ²⁷ Badran 2000: part one.
- ²⁸ It is beyond the scope of this essay to present an in-depth analysis or conclusive and complete results of the gender-focused part of our research. A monograph presenting detailed results of our research is in preparation.
- ²⁹ This is not specific for an Islamic context, it is true for any religion. Especially if women's and/or gender issues are predominantly debated within a theological, ethical-moral context. See e.g. Ahmed 1992, Part 3: New Discourses and Günther 1993: 97ff.
- ³⁰ The idea and ideal of the traditional model of social reality raises the issue of identity, especially in times of rapid societal, political, economic, etc. transformation processes. This issue cannot be elucidated. For further aspects see e.g. (Niehaus 2002) and (Günther & Niehaus forthcoming).
- ³¹ These interviews are part of the research project and have been conducted by the authors.
- ³² Besides the more pragmatic reason that these interviews were already transcribed.
- ³³ See (Günther & Niehaus forthcoming).
- ³⁴ Like e.g. concerning new laws regulating marriage, divorce, inheritance and the abolishment of infanticide, especially confined to girls. For further details see also (Ahmed 1992: 41-63).
- ³⁵ Interview with Sheikh Abdul Hamied Gabier, 3.8. and 4.8.2000, Cape Town.
- ³⁶ Interview with Imam Ali Gierdien, 17.7.2000 and 1.8.2000, Cape Town.
- ³⁷ Interview with Sheikh Faik Gamielien, 14.8.2000, Cape Town.
- ³⁸ Interview with Sheikh Faik Gamielien, 14.8.2000, Cape Town.
- ³⁹ For detailed explanations concerning the notion progressive in the South African Muslim context, see below.
- ⁴⁰ For further details concerning the different ideological phases and shifts that had been part of the process these organizations went through, see e.g. (Günther & Niehaus forthcoming), (Günther 2002), (Niehaus 2002) and (Tayob 1995).
- ⁴¹ Conversation with Farid Esack, 17.5.2001, Hamburg.
- ⁴² A detailed analysis and deconstruction of gender discourses compared with other sources and embedded in the broader context of the struggle against apartheid on the one hand and the actual debates about civil society and the construction of a new South African identity on the other may reveal indicators or elements for a reconstruction of the past. This is a phenomenon that occurs often in the course of rapid societal transformation. This topic needs to be elucidated separately. For further details concerning the concept of invention of tradition with respect to reconstruction of the past see (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983: 4f.). The legend of Imam Haron and its impact on consolidating Muslim resistance is another example for this phenomenon, see (Günther 2002).
- ⁴³ Interestingly enough the male interviewees did not mention this, although several females described the situation of women within the organizations, during meetings etc. in order to illustrate the achievements for women but without denying the prevailing patriarchal patterns. See e.g. the interview with Firdouza Waggie, 26.9.2000, Cape Town. Furthermore, Waggie insists on the conspicuous regional differences in terms of a conservative and patriarchal perspective on gender relations, i.e. the differences between the MYM branches of the Western Cape and those of Natal/Transvaal.

- ⁴⁴ The religio-cultural commitment of the MYM and the expressed need for a counter-balance to the established '*ulamā*' is reflected in the interviews with regard to gender issues in the sense that the argumentation for women's encouragement is based on theology, i.e. on interpretations of the Qur'an. See e.g. the interview with Mahdi Samodien, 19.10.2000, Cape Town. The references are the same like those of the MJC, i.e. the proclaimed equality of men and women as emphasised in *sura* 33:35.
- ⁴⁵ Firdouza Waggie stressed e.g. "I felt there was a patriarchy in the organization. I think then it was patriarchal and it still is up till today." See the interview with her, 26.9.2000, Cape Town. See also Fatima Noordien's statement below.
- ⁴⁶ Interview with Farid Esack, 4. and 7.7.2000, Cape Town.
- ⁴⁷ Although the Call of Islam intended to become a mass movement this organization kept on being small in terms of active members. This and the fact that nowadays the organization is no longer active resulted in difficulties to find enough interviewees.
- ⁴⁸ However, it was striking that despite the small number of members, some of the leaders were not able to help us with contacts, especially concerning female members or women in leadership positions. Some of the female interviewees expressed astonishment that they have not been mentioned.
- ⁴⁹ Interview with Ebrahim Moosa, 2.8.2000, Cape Town. Shu'aib Manjra, another MYM-member emphasises the organization's promotion "of women's participation in all of its activities and in most of its events". See also the interview with Shu'aib Manjra, 23.10.2000, Cape Town.
- ⁵⁰ Interview with Rashied Omar, 14. and 20.6.2000, Cape Town.
- ⁵¹ Interview with Mahdi Samodien, 19.10.2000, Cape Town.
- ⁵² Interview with Fatima Noordien, 16.8.2000, Cape Town.
- ⁵³ Interview with 'Ayesha Manjra, 26.10.2000, Cape Town.
- ⁵⁴ Interview with Firdouza Waggie, 26.9.2000, Cape Town.
- ⁵⁵ Interview with Farid Esack, 4. and 7.7.2000, Cape Town.
- ⁵⁶ Interview with Mastura Sadan, 12.11.2001, Cape Town.
- ⁵⁷ Interview with Fowzia Achmat, 1.11.2001, Cape Town.
- ⁵⁸ See e.g. the interview with Firdouza Waggie, 26.9.2000, Cape Town or the interview with Mastura Sadan, 12.11.2001, Cape Town. This is even more striking if one takes into consideration that the husbands of the two latter have been interviewed as well and they did not make any reference to the engagement of their wives.
- ⁵⁹ Interview with Mahdi Samodien, 19.10.2000, Cape Town.
- ⁶⁰ See e.g. (Lerner 1991: 29 ff).
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² See e.g. the interview with Ebrahim Rasool, 15.8.2000, Cape Town, who states: "If I was to look back I would basically say that an organization like Call of Islam was a fig leaf in the Adam and Eve sense for the Muslim community. It created the impression that Muslims were strong in the struggle against apartheid and it's a good impression to maintain." Faried Sayed, the editor of Muslim Views, shares Rasool's estimation. See the interview with Faried Sayed, 4.8.2000, Cape Town.

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