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

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

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

Whilst some may regard private Islamic education as isolationist, others see it as solution for the integration of Muslims in the new South Africa.

Giving to the community

The Indians successfully participated in the market economy where they competed with the whites. Their financing of educational institutions can be seen as an investment which facilitated their integration in the world of capitalism and preserved their proud Islamic identity. Economic integration and identity assertion, both of which depended on leadership of this Indian Muslim community. Through a negotiation between the Muslim commercial elite and the government, the education system began to be changed in the 1940s by way of introducing Islam with secular instruction. The educational project was built around a policy of accommodation that in particular contributed to religious conservatism. However, a number of Indian Muslims and organizations fought against the policy of apartheid.

Merchants and modern organization of the Muslim community

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

The first mosque of Durban, located on Grey Street in the Indian business district, was established in 1884 by the first pioneers of Indian business in Natal, Abubakar Amodi and Hadji Mahomed Hadji Dada. The Juma Masjid, which became the largest mosque in Southern Africa¹, played a symbolic role for Gujarati Muslim merchants in the absence of the ulama who were not authorized to enter the country until 1888. Through their initiatives to construct mosques and madrasas, the commercial elite legitimated their leadership status and later competed with the ulama. The wealth and connections of the first wave of merchants enabled them to become the principal agents and shapers of Islam in the provinces of Natal and Transvaal. The articulation between commercial and religious networks contributed to the integration of Indians not only in Southern Africa, but also the area of the Indian Muslims.

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

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

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

Opposition of the ulama

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

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

Notes
3. The Grey Street Mosque which can host 5000 believers remained until the end of the 1970’s the largest mosque in the Southern hemisphere.

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