Post-Apartheid Sufi Resurgence

As the reality of apartheid finally crumbled in South Africa in 1994, many prominent Sufi shaikhs visited the country in an attempt to recruit new disciples into their particular Sufi brotherhoods. Among others, these included: Shaykh Nazim al-Haqqani and Shaykh Hisham Kabbani of the Naqshbandi Order, the late Shaykh Alawi al-Maliki of the Alawi Order, and Shaykh Hasan Cisse of the Tijani Order (who was officially received by President Thabo Mbeki). During their visits, the shaikhs appointed local followers to be representatives of their Sufi brotherhood in Southern Africa. The shaikhs spoke at local mosques where big crowds turned up to join in prayer and listen to their messages. The large numbers in attendance were indicative of the growing appeal of Sufism in the 1990s to the Muslim community of South Africa.

The warmth with which these shaikhs were received can be partly explained by the historical trajectory of Islam in South Africa. For centuries since the mid-1600s, when the first Muslims arrived at the Cape from the Malay Archipelago and surrounding area as prisoners and political exiles, the public practice of Islam had been forbidden and violation was punishable by death. Covert Sufi rituals provided an important substitute at a time when Islam could not be publicly practised. Though these restrictions had long since been lifted, and normative Islam had become the dominant expression of Islam, the collective memory of these historical roots had produced the popular idea that Islam had become the dominant expression of Islam, the collective memory of these historical roots had produced the popular idea that the “founders” of Islam in South Africa had been highly trained in Islamic mysticism and this, in turn, had instilled a favourable attitude toward Sufism among many present-day South African Muslims.

More importantly still the local Sufi leaders who had held a rather peripheral position in the Muslim community during apartheid, found themselves directly juxtaposed to the incumbent ulama. The authority of these ulama had been in decline for some decades. Reasons for this included their rather ambivalent—critics would say collaborationist—positions towards apartheid. Many imams had favoured the preservation of Islamic institutions over the need to stand up for justice, arguing that the apartheid regime had not outlawed Islam and that mosques had been allowed to function—and had this not been the case, they insist, they would have been first to resist the regime, even at the cost of death. Another issue that had recently shaken their credibility in the eyes of many Muslims was that most of the current imams had obtained their training in the finer points of Islamic jurisprudence and theology in the Middle East. Rightly or wrongly, this contributed to them being seen by the community to be either Salafi or Wahhabi orientated. Moreover, many Muslims saw this allegation confirmed in what they felt to be a neglect of the spiritual needs of the local community by the graduates of Middle Eastern religious institutes. Ironically, in this atmosphere the foreign Sufi shaikhs who visited South Africa were seen as more credible than the local Muslim ulama.

The incumbent imams are well acquainted with the appeal Sufism exercises in Cape Town. Their complacent attitude over the past few years stands in stark contrast to their previous attitudes towards Sufi practices during the 1960s and later when members of the MJC came out strongly against certain ideas expressed by the Sulfs. In one such incident, leaders of the MJC called Sufism a “Barelwi Menace” and in another, Sufi practices were labelled superficial and the behaviour of certain disciples unacceptable. In 2001 a well-known imam aligned to the MJC accused the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis of being “shaykh” and “grave- worshipers.” The pro-Sufis, led by Professor da Costa, in turn accused him of being “small minded,” “intolerant,” and not least of all, a “Wahhabi.” The “Sufi-Wahhabi” debate, as these disputes were later known, played itself out in columns of widely read Cape newspapers with letters being written back and forth by the two groups and their respective supporters accusing each other of being outside the fold of Islam.

Nevertheless, this debate was more than an ideological struggle in which each camp tried to vilify the ideas of the other. It was also about winning over the loyalties and the hearts of the Cape Muslim community and an attempt to be seen as the legitimate authority and representative of South African Muslims at the Cape. Predictably, the Sufi camp tried to popularize the idea that they represented the old familiar good (Sufism) versus the foreign evil (Wahhabism). These two traditions were portrayed as incompatible and mutually opposed interpretations of Islam. The pro-Sufi group accused the Wahhabi group, as they had labelled them, of embarking on a “campaign of misinformation” that projects a “wrong perception of Islam.” These blunt attacks had benefitted the pro-Sufis; and as long as the “other” could be depicted as anti-Sufi, the Wahhabi cloak would fit their opponent just fine. In so doing, the pro-Sufi group had hoped to win the loyalties of a Muslim community that was aware of the recent appeal Sufism had because of its Islamic roots. Also, no organization perceived as sympathetic to Wahhabi ideas could ever hope to enjoy majority support from the local Muslim community.

While the above shows that Islam is a more “visible” religion in these areas than crude statistics would indicate, the fact that 47 percent of the Muslims live in and around Cape Town bespeaks the discursive and ideological power that religious bodies there can potentially exert over the entire Muslim community of South Africa. The most influential Islamic institution is the Muslim Judicial Council (herein-after MJC) of Cape Town. It was established in 1945 by a few Middle Eastern and locally trained theologians in order to deal with legal jurisprudential matters. Most imams of the almost 150 mosques in the Western Cape Province align themselves to the MJC. The majority of these imams are not associated with a Sufi order, but they often demonstrate a relaxed attitude to Sufism. This can, for example, be seen in the fact that the two Cape Town Muslim community radio stations, the Voice of the Cape and Radio 786, regularly air programmes on Sufism that are hosted by local Sufi personalities, such as Professor Yusuf da Costa, and local shaikhs of the Naqshbandi and Darqawiyyah brotherhoods.

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The Naqshbandi-Haqqani brotherhood in Cape Town

Discursive struggles about the authenticity of Sufism, centred on historically evolved ideas about foreignness and authenticity, are important to understand the Sufi resurgence in this South African context; they also visibly and audibly underline the renewed importance of Sufi brotherhoods. It is equally vital to look into the everyday practices of specific brotherhoods. The Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order in Cape Town is an apt example of how the Sufi success is sustained through its activities. In 1998, Professor da Costa, a retired Geography Didactics university lecturer from the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town, was both initiated and made khulfa (vicegerent) of the Naqshbandi-brotherhood in Southern Africa by Shaykh Hisham Kabbani when he visited Cape Town. Unlike other Sufi shaykhs who withdrew from communal activity, he has continued to be active through his teaching, his writings, community radio appearances, and talks in mosques at Friday congregational prayers on matters relating to spirituality and the superiority of the divine law. The role of the shaykh and of his appointed vicegerents are central to the brotherhood. Some scholars even go so far as to assert that the shaykh is the brotherhood, his disciples being seen as more attached to him, than to the teachings of the brotherhood. Speaking of Shaykh Nazim al-Haqqani, Professor da Costa mentions that when he is in his company, he feels humble and constantly reminded of Allah. Partly due to the Shaykh’s spiritual magnetism, da Costa and some of his local disciples travel at least once a year to Shaykh Nazim’s zawija (ritual lodge) in Lefke, Cyprus, where they attend talks given by the Shaykh. Even though this is where Professor da Costa was instructed to work amongst the poor people in South Africa, he concedes that there is no structural links between the local Naqshbandi-Haqqani branch and Naqshbandi-Haqqani International. Shaykh Nazim gives him, his vicegerents elsewhere, leverage in aspects relating to local politics and organization.

In August 2005, the Naqshbandi-Haqqani claimed to have over 300 registered disciples. These disciples, known as “the workers,” a term that could also denote their subservient relationship to Professor da Costa, constitute the brotherhood’s sub-structures. These “workers” are responsible for tasks ranging from fund-raising, erecting structures in informal and impoverished townships that would serve as madrasas, and to also leading the Sufi rituals with the jaza’ (permission) granted to them by Shaykh Nazim al-Haqqani. The brotherhood’s sub-structure is dominated by middle-class professionals in the fields of education, law, and finance. This membership provides the brotherhood with a strong and professional social base.

Rituals on the move

As is the case with Sufi orders elsewhere, the dhikr (remembrance of Allah) plays a central role. It leads them from the world of separation and externality to that of union and interiority, ultimately becoming unified with Allah. However, unlike Naqshbandi-Haqqanis in other parts of the world, the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis in Cape Town do not hold their dhikr in a zawija. In 2002 Shaykh Nazim al-Haqqani instructed Professor da Costa to work amongst the poor people. To obtain financial resources they sold their zawija, located in a middle class residential suburb, and used the money for the upgrading and construction of informal religious facilities in predominantly black working-class areas around Cape Town. Thus, instead of attracting the community to the dhikr at their Sufi centre, the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis took their Sufi ritual sessions on a “road show” to the community. Two female-only dhikr groups and the organization An-Nisa (“the women” translated from Arabic) cater for the needs of women in the order. The ladies dhikr groups hold their sessions at mosques on Saturday afternoons. An-Nisa’s primary objective is to empower women through various spiritual and educational programmes. It holds quarterly workshops on current issues affecting women. These range from the rights of women in marriage, to abortion, breast cancer, and HIV/AIDS. As such, the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis in South Africa provide room for active female agency within the brotherhood. This has never been commonplace, but is slowly becoming acceptable.

The past decade has also witnessed an increase of da’wah-related work in the black townships amongst which is the establishment of Sufi centres in Cape Town. In 2004, the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis were invited to upgrade an existing shack into a facility that would serve as a mosque and madrasa to Muslims in Khayelitsha (a township south of Cape Town that houses more than half a million black residents). Since then they have established a few similar structures in the area, serving as a base for their da’wah activities. Such activities, as well as their willingness to address a variety of social problems, have been the source of their apparent success among black South Africans.

From at least the latter half of the previous century, the Muslim Judicial Council has tried to establish an ideological hegemony amongst Muslims. Their interpretation of Islam was based more on their invocation of the Arabic texts and jurisprudence, rather than on providing and teaching an Islamic that also included elements of spirituality. The post-Apartheid era has seen an influx of international Sufi personalities, which has shifted the place of Sufism from the periphery to be juxtaposed alongside, even surpassing at times, the authority of the mosque imams. In the South-African context, neo-Sufism entails certainly more than a personal quest for the divine. It is also an ideological phenomenon that is challenging the very establishment of the national Muslim religious leadership. In the words of Professor da Costa: “Sufism and its Sufi shaykhs are providing the local Muslims with a spiritual freshness that the local religious leadership has … not been able to provide the people with.”

Notes