

The Emerging of Islam in an African Township

Shahid Vawda

Introduction¹

While Islam is a fairly dominant religion in Africa,² it is very small and has been treated as insignificant in southern Africa. For example Trimingham, in his survey of the phases of Islamic expansion in Africa, makes the dismissive comment: "Islam's penetration into central and south Africa is so slight that it may be ignored."³

The presence of Muslims in South Africa, albeit a small percentage of the total population, cannot easily be ignored in terms of their social, economic, and political contribution to the country as individuals, as members of an ethnic group, or as a religious minority.⁴

Shahid Vawda is a senior lecturer in the Department of Anthropology, University of Durban-Westville, Durban, South Africa.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was originally presented at the Thirteenth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, which was held in Mexico City, Mexico, 29 July–5 August 1993.

² Over 90 percent of Africa's Muslims live in north, west, and central Africa. Southern Africa has about 11.5 million Muslims, roughly 3 percent of the total. They are concentrated in Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and South Africa. Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland have either insignificant Muslim communities or none at all. For detailed population statistics on Muslims in Africa, see E. Mahida, "Muslim Population in Africa," *al-'Ilm*, no. 13 (1992): 50-51.

³ S. Trimingham, "The Phases of Islamic Expansion in Africa," in *Islam in Tropical Africa*, ed. I. M. Lewis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 111.

⁴ While many individual Muslims have made contributions, mainly as political leaders, not all would want to claim that they did so in the name of Islam or that they had a mandate from Muslims organizations. It would also be inappropriate for the Muslim community to claim that those individuals did so in the name of Islam.

Apartheid has not only prompted a diverse set of responses from Muslim organizations,⁵ but the political and social events of the last twenty years have influenced conversion rates among the nominally Christian African majority.⁶ Although there have been academic attempts to analyze the implications of some of these phenomena,⁷ there has been no ethnographic research at a local level to understand how events in the sociopolitical arena shaped proselytizing work, the conversion process, and the interethnic relationships of the Muslims.

This paper, based on ethnographic research in the townships of KwaMashu-Ntuzuma-Inanda, located near Durban, is a contribution toward understanding the position of African Muslims. The paper is limited to data collected during the latter half of 1992 and early 1993

⁵ F. Esack, in his "Three Islamic Strands in the South African Struggle for Justice," *Third World Quarterly*, no. 10 (1988), has identified three strands of politics among Muslims in South Africa. Two strands, represented by the Call of Islam and the Qiblah movement, were close to the liberation movement in its rejection of, and nonaccommodation with, apartheid. The Call of Islam was close to the anti-apartheid United Democratic Front and, hence, the African National Congress. The Qiblah movement was more sympathetic to the ideological thinking of the Pan-African Congress and the Azanian Peoples Organization. The third strand was represented in a number of different organizations, from the Muslim Assembly in the Cape and the Islamic Council of South Africa, which projected a conservative image of Islam or none at all, to the moderate Muslim Youth Movement, which defined its role in vague social and political terms. In the Durban region, neither the Call of Islam or the Qiblah movement were represented, which left the local Muslim political field largely uncontested, in an organized form, by the new politicized and radical Islamic thought emerging from the Call of Islam and the Qiblah movement in the Cape. See also F. Esack, "Islam in Southern Africa: A Reply to Nkrumah," *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 53 (March 1992): 75-78. Much of the debate by Muslims on their responses to apartheid has been conducted within their organizations and in their newspapers, such as *al-Qalam* and *Muslim News*. For an account of the latter, see M. Haron, "The Muslim News (1960-1986): Expression of an Islamic Identity in South Africa," in *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, L. Brenner, ed. (London: Hurst, 1993).

⁶ L. Brenner makes a similar point by citing the amir of the al-Murabitun movement, Abdurrahman Zwane, a man of Zulu origin, as an example of conversion to Islam under the impact of the 1976 Soweto student uprising. See L. Brenner (ed.), *Muslim Identity*, 4-6. However, as demonstrated in this paper, the rate of conversion is extremely difficult to quantify.

⁷ J. A. Naude, "South Africa: The Role of a Muslim Minority in a Situation of Change," *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 13, no. 1, (1992). C. du P. Le Roux and I. Jhazbhay, "The Contemporary Path of Quibla Thought: A Hermeneutical Reflection," paper presented at a conference entitled "Approaches to the Study of Islam and Muslim Societies," University of Cape Town, July 1991.

and to the following areas⁸: a) a brief statistical outline of the Muslim population with reference to the above-mentioned research area, b) the beginning of systematic *da'wah* in these areas focusing on conversion strategies and problems, c) some of the reasons why local Africans convert, and d) the emergence of relationships between African Muslims and Indian-dominated Muslim organizations.

The Muslim Population

The spread of Islam in Africa resulted from conquest, population movement and migration, trade, and proselytization. Of these, conquest and population movement were not significant in the South African context. As I shall show, briefly, trade, migration, proselytization and political developments within the Muslim community and the state, and national politics were and are important to the emergence and spread of Islam in South Africa.

It is unknown when the first Muslims reached South Africa. There is an unsubstantiated claim that the Lemba were influenced by Muslim practices in the precolonial period,⁹ but this hardly constitutes a minimal definition of being Muslim. The earliest known local Muslims can be traced to the Dutch colonial presence in the Cape and consisted mainly of the descendants of slaves and political prisoners from Indonesia, Bengal, and parts of India. Another significant group, aminly from southern India, came as indentured laborers in the latter half of the nineteenth century and constituted about 7 percent of the indentured labor force on colonial Natal's sugar plantations. They were followed by merchants and traders—"passenger Indians"—largely from Surat, Katiawad, and Kutch in northern India.¹⁰

Local evidence of the propagation of Islam dates from at least the 1950s, although there is some evidence that it might have begun earlier.¹¹ Yet for the period of 1960–80 in South Africa, the Muslim

⁸ Since early 1993, there has been an upsurge of political and criminal violence in the area. I have been advised that entry into and out of the area is dangerous. As a result, my continued research in this area has come to a temporary halt.

⁹ P. Maylam, *A History of the African People of South Africa: From the Early Iron Age to the 1970s* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1986), 53.

¹⁰ F. Meer, *Portrait of Indian South Africans* (Durban: Avon House, n.d.), 187.

¹¹ M. Haron "Da'wah Amongst the Africans in the Greater Cape Town Region," *al-'Ilm*, no. 12 (January 1992): 1-5.

population, made up largely of Indians (mainly concentrated in Natal and the Transvaal) and Malays (mainly concentrated in the Cape), has remained stable at less than 2 percent of the total population.¹² Official statistics to the contrary, there appears to be a growing Muslim presence in African townships in such major urban centers as Durban, Cape Town, and Johannesburg. Table 1 reveals a remarkable stability in terms of the percentage growth of South Africa's Muslim population across all races and therefore as a percentage of the nation's total population. However, regional statistics are difficult to acquire and, when they are gathered, do not always supply data on the number of African Muslims.¹³ Government statistics are notoriously inadequate and open to correction, especially for African religious affiliation.

Table 1: Muslim Population in South Africa (1960, 1970, 1980)

	1960	%	1970	%	1980	%
Whites	240	0.1	945	0.3	1,697	0.4
Indians*	99,068	50.0	125,987	47.0	165,842	47.0
Col'eds	92,130	46.0	134,087	50.0	176,406	50.0
African	5,599	3.0	8,896	3.0	9,048	3.0
Total**	197,127	100.0	269,915	100.0	352,993	100.0
Total SA Pop.	15,943,171		21,794,328		25,016,525	
% of SA Pop.	1.2		1.2		1.4	

* Includes Zanzibaris—descendants of slaves who were freed and brought to Durban.

** Figures have been rounded off and do not add up to 100.

Sources: Bureau of Statistics, Pretoria, 1968; South African Statistics, Pretoria, 1976; South African Statistics, Pretoria, 1988.

¹² Such racially based descriptive nomenclature as "Indian," "Coloured," and "African" are used in this paper because they are unavoidable in the South African context, as, for example, when referring to statistics or where it is necessary, for the purpose of clarity, to make such distinctions. Such usage does not imply acceptance of the racist connotations of such terms.

¹³ The Central Statistical Services published *Religion by Statistical Region and District*, which does provide some information. See Report No. 02-80-06 (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1981). However, the 1991 census figures do not list any African Muslims at all. See, for example, *Population Census: Religion by Development Region*, Statistical Region and District Report No. 0301-05 (Pretoria: Central Statistical Services, Government Printer, 1991).

The total population for KwaMashu-Ntuzuma-Inanda was about 520,900 inhabitants.¹⁴ Although I have been unable to establish the exact number of Muslims in this area, it is clear to me that there are more than five hundred and quite likely between 1,000 and 2,500 Muslims. These figures are based on the comments of various religious leaders in the fieldwork area. Some claim a conversion rate of six per week—a very high estimate—while others claim not more than three per week. One informant mentioned that not more than five people per month convert. If it accepted that Islam really began to spread in these townships during the last decade and that there have been no reconversions, then the most generous figure would be 3,000 and the lowest estimate would be 600 Muslims.

The Emergence of Islam in KwaMashu-Ntuzuma-Inanda

In countries to the north of South Africa, the agents of conversion to Islam were often such leaders as chiefs and kings as well as traders, teachers, and holy men. The circumstances of the conversions had to do with the consolidation, retention, and/or legitimizing of political power and authority in addition to having access to and the ability to accumulate resources. In South Africa, and in the townships in particular, such structural factors are not relevant. Apart from religious and political leaders exiled to the Cape from the East Indies, there were, to my knowledge, no local African leaders or chiefs who embraced Islam and thus paved the way for the (albeit nominal) conversion of their people. As European colonization in southern Africa occurred in tandem with Christian missionary work, it effectively blocked the rapid advance of Islam southwards.

This is not to deny that traders, *maulanas*, or *imams* ignored their role as potential agents for the conversion of the nation's African population. However, these traders were not always well integrated into local African communities because of their exclusiveness as Muslim traders. Muslim traders that came to Natal identified themselves initially as "Arabs" or "Mohomedans"¹⁵ to distinguish themselves

14 J. D. May and S.E. Stavrou, *Socio-economic Dynamics and Growth in the Greater Durban Metropolitan Region* (Durban: University of Natal, Rural-Urban Studies Working Paper No. 18, Centre for Social and Development Studies, 1989).

15 S. Bhana and B. A. Pachai, *Documentary History of Indian South Africans* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1984), 6 and 31. See also M. Swan, "Ideology in Organised Indian Politics," in *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism*. S. Marks and S. Tradipo, eds. (London: Longmans, 1987) for an account of stratification along

from indentured Muslims and from other traders. This was not the case in some other parts of Africa, where traders married local women in order to enhance or legitimize their activities. This exclusiveness was further entrenched through the official apartheid ideology, which bracketed Muslims into racial categories.

There have always been African Muslims in KwaMashu and other townships surrounding Durban. However, conversion resulted from individual conversion drives carried out in various mosques located in the Durban area or at the Islamic Propagation Centre, or similar places outside the townships. As a result, the Muslim population was scattered, which inhibited further the development of a sense of Muslim identity within the township. I was informed that, until the 1970s, there was only one Muslim family in Inanda and a few individual Muslims in KwaMashu. During the early 1970s, there may well have been a growing number of Muslims in the KwaMashu-Ntuzuma-Inanda area, but many individuals apparently did not know that there were other Muslims in their areas. There was no mosque or place of worship to serve as a meeting place.

From the research I have conducted thus far, one person stands out as an important figure in the emergence of sustained *da'wah* work and the subsequent spread of Islam in Inanda and then in Ntuzuma and KwaMashu. This man was Sheikh Abbas Phiri, a Malawian who had come to South Africa in the 1940s to work in the coal mines. He retired from his formal occupation in the early 1970s, after working in the mines, sugar plantations, and on a fishing trawler, in order to take up *da'wah* work in earnest.

There were several factors that predisposed him, instead of others in the Inanda area, to be the first successful agent of the initial conversion process, and to sustain it (albeit on a small scale) until today. Phiri had received a traditional Islamic education in Malawi. He had received no modern western education, for his father forbade him to go to a mission school on the grounds that it would make him lose his Islamic faith or, even worse, turn him into a Christian. When he came to South Africa, Phiri married a local woman and, unlike the Zanzibaris¹⁶ with whom he lived for a while at King's Rest, he set up home in Inanda. It was from his home that he began to convert the local

lines of class, language, and religion that informed the politics of Indian traders.

¹⁶ The African Muslims that I am writing about must be distinguished from the Zanzibaris, who are descendants of freed East African slaves and who now reside in Chatsworth. They have largely kept to themselves, and it appears that they were reticent about carrying out any proselytizing activities in the African townships. As one of my informants remarked: "They come here only when they are looking for a wife."

people. At about the same time, the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) was established, and with its support Phiri was able to devote a considerable amount of energy to spreading Islam.

Now Phiri was not naive. He was well aware of the enormous task he had set for himself and of the problems and the dangers in seeking to convert a mainly Christian population on the outskirts of an urban area. Instead of simply going ahead, he first approached the local chiefs and town councillors to explain what he intended to do and to familiarize them with Islam. This strategy worked, for although none of the councillors or local chiefs converted, he was never hindered by any local authority figure. There were, however, other problems to overcome: a) the identification of Islam as an Indian religion, b) the lack of a centralized place of worship, such as a mosque or *jama'at khana*, and c) an adequate salary.

The identification of Islam with Indians is obvious and understandable. However, there are other implications, for it operates at different levels. First, Islam is viewed as a religion of idol worshippers and so the mosques, believed to be filled with idols, should not be entered by any self-respecting Christian. Second, it is the religion of Indian traders and merchants. Some of their African employees believe that they are not treated fairly and with dignity by Indian businessmen and industrialists. This is an obvious handicap in converting Africans. An additional dimension, particularly among converts, is the perception that Islam is controlled by merchants and professionals (i.e., accountants, lawyers, doctors), despite its nonracial theology and apparent lack of a formal hierarchy. This problem cannot be resolved easily by any proselytizing agent, for it has much to do with South Africa's racial and ethnic configuration and the politics thereof, even if that agent is apparently of the same race.

The other problems were resolved easily, albeit not very satisfactorily, in the long run. He received a salary—later discontinued—from the MYM. Relying on his pension from the KwaZulu authorities,¹⁷ Phiri continued his *da'wah* effort. He obtained a house in Ntuzuma (located close to Inanda) and converted part of it into a *jama'at khana*. From there he ran a *madrasah*. During the mid-1970s, this center produced several young Muslim men who are now serving on the KwaMashu Mosque committee.

Phiri's basic strategy of inviting people to embrace Islam consisted of distributing food and clothing (with the help of the MYM), getting to know the people, and then talking to them about Islam. In this

¹⁷ One of the former self-governing homelands in South Africa.

way, he claimed, he converted well over one hundred people. But he wanted these new Muslims to have more than just a nominal understanding of Islam; he wanted them to acquire a practical understanding as well. He insisted on teaching them the *kalimahs* and the prayer rituals, helping them to read the Qur'an in Arabic, and encouraging them to follow the five pillars, including the rituals of purification for prayer and burial.

This approach of apprising the local chiefs and councillors, engaging in charity/welfare work, inviting people to embrace Islam, and then teaching and training them laid the basis for converting people and then helping them to live Islam as a systematic practical way of life as opposed to producing nominal Muslims. Of course there were those who remained Muslims just in name and others who thought that it would bring them material gain or wealth, or at least access to material resources. A number of informants said they knew of people who converted out of the belief that they would become wealthy, like the Indian shopkeepers. The treasurer of the mosque committee describes this thinking: "You see, people think if you become a Muslim you will be financially rich, without realizing that richness comes from your own efforts, that you have to work hard."¹⁸

Needless to say, no business ventures were financed, as remaining financially viable is a major concern of the mosque committee. Apart from the political and criminal violence that has limited some of its propagation activities and *madrasah* work, the lack of a stable income has meant cutbacks in activities designed to attract people, particularly young people, to the mosque, which also serves as a Muslim youth center. In the past, karate and soccer events were organized at the mosque for both Muslim and non-Muslim participants. Indeed, it is through participation in such activities that some youth embraced Islam. However, these activities had to be dropped, for the related transportation and meal provision costs, as well as that of the sports equipment itself, put an enormous strain on the committee's limited budget. It was necessary to provide transportation for children, especially during the mid-1980s when the violence and abduction of children was at its height. Unfortunately, two African Muslims were killed in the violence: one was abducted and killed in KwaMashu for no apparent reason, and another died trying to alert the South African Defence Force of an Inkhata attack on the *jama'at khana* in Ntuzuma.

There are other organizations explicitly involved in proselytizing, such as the Islamic Propagation Centre International (IPCI), the

¹⁸ Interview, 14/6/92.

Islamic Da'wah Movement (IDM), the Islamic Da'wah College (IDC), and the Al-Ikhwan Da'watulislam Movement (ADM). However, the perception is that their penetration and spread of Islam has been minimal. The largest and most vocal one, the IPCI, is seen as not really dealing with the organizational aspects of *da'wah* work. One Muslim youth observed it handing out Qur'ans at the KwaMashu railway station and commented:

Yesterday they were distributing Qur'ans without telling people what it is all about. That's no good. It's like doing chemistry with a text book.... Somebody comes with a chemistry book and says: "Study and master it," but you don't even know what is an atom. There are no explanations. Nothing. It's just a book. I don't think people even know what the Qur'an is.¹⁹

The IPCI strategy, which includes stinging critiques of Christianity, was also criticized:

They will not work ... because if one looks at the IPCI and the debates Mr. Deedat gets involved in, it is estranging the Christians. You cannot attack someone if you want to win over the person.²⁰

The IDC and the IDM have a different strategy: field workers going into the townships in order to conduct house-to-house visits. However, some of the interviewees do not seem to be impressed with the gains made by the *da'wah* organizations, for they claim that there is no follow-up or, as one of them put it, "there is no maintenance." However, I have not yet observed these organizations at work in the field in order to gain a clearer understanding of their activities.

It seems that the preferred strategy among those associated with the KwaMashu Mosque is to follow the example of Abbas Phiri: getting to know the people, talking to them about Islam, and explaining the similarities and differences between Christianity and Islam. They insist that there is no compulsion to convert and that when someone does convert, he/she must be given a proper education in the Muslim way

¹⁹ Interview, 26/7/92.

²⁰ Interview, 27/7/92.

of life, which, they argue, reduces the chance of that individual's re-conversion to Christianity.

A further reason for this strategy is the realization that conversion, particularly for a young person, involves a considerable amount of stress, such as: a) taunts and teasing that one is following an Indian religion, b) the absence of *ḥalāl* food in the household, c) the lack of privacy when praying, d) the knowledge that meeting one's requests for *ḥalāl* food and privacy will cause inconvenience to others, e) the probability that the family will be unable or unwilling to meet the special needs associated with the fast of Ramadan in terms of prayer and food rituals, and f) that one aspect of your life is no longer shared with other family members, which may cause problems.

Being well aware of these problems, the mosque serves as a meeting place for Muslims, particularly the youth. This allows them to feel less isolated in a township that is, to all intents and purposes, Christian in religious outlook (i.e., there are three churches within a one-kilometer radius of the mosque in KwaMashu).

Apart from these more or less formal proselytizing activities, there is also that of example. In recent times, most of the converts tend to be young people from the primary school, high school, and post-high school age groups. This is clearly reflected in the age groupings that attend the Friday prayers. The *maulana* explains:

The young ones normally come in with a friend to see the mosque. Even if he is not asked to see Islam he will accompany his friend, because maybe they are going somewhere so he has to pass by. They [the non-Muslim friends] end up learning about Islam and getting interested in Islam, and become Muslims even before their friend asks them to become Muslim.²¹

Having gone through the various ways in which Islam is spread in the KwaMashu-Ntuzuma-Inanda area, it is perhaps appropriate at this point to present some of reasons why people decide to convert.

Embracing Islam

Haron has categorized the reasons why Africans living in the Cape convert as "intrinsic" or "extrinsic" reasons. For example, intrinsic reasons have to do with the unofficial adoption of servants,

²¹ Interview, 8/7/92.

conversion of domestic servants, and intermarriage. These are also known as "domestic" conversions. Some extrinsic reasons are personal attraction to Muslim dress (i.e., the skull cap and the long garment worn by men) and Muslim symbols, among them the Ka'bah. He also mentions dissatisfaction with Christianity as a social-political-economic reason, namely, the undermining of one's human dignity.²²

Below I shall outline, very briefly, the reasons given by some of the converts interviewed for this paper. Although this sample may seem small, it represents some of the most important and influential Muslims in the small Muslim population of KwaMashu-Ntuzuma-Inanda, among them the imam and one of the youth leaders.²³ Their experience and discovery of Islam cannot be minimized, as it is upon this experience that later proselytizing activities were conducted. In the case of the youth, their experience of conversion and the politics of Muslims in Durban provided the basis for organizing their own youth movement based in the townships.

1. ZBI: Becomes disillusioned with Roman Catholicism. Studies other religions. Meets an Indian Muslim, Yusuf, with whom he works on a building site. Yusuf recites a prayer and says he prayed for both of them not to be injured on the scaffolding. When asked why he did this, Yusuf explains that Allah is one God for all people, regardless of race. After accepting that Islam is for all people and that there is no idolatry, he is converted to Islam by Yusuf, but receives much of his Islamic training from Abbas Phiri and his own reading.

2. KSR: Not particularly religious. Nominally a Christian. Accepts an invitation to attend Friday prayers. Spends some weeks questioning and finding out more about Islam. Attracted to the doctrine of one God, rather than the holy Trinity. Converts at the IPCI. Learns more about Islam while living among the Zanzibari community.

3. SC: Deeply disillusioned with Christianity. Questions its moral and political basis, authority structure, and the doctrine of the holy Trinity. Reads and discusses Islam with his friends. Notes that it is

²² M. Haron, "Da'wah amongst the Africans in the Greater Cape Town Region," *al-'Ilm*, no. 12 (January 1992): 11-12.

²³ Other interviews have been conducted, including one with the *maulana*. Although his role is important in this small community of believers, he is not directly concerned with the issue of individuals converting to Islam, for he was a born Muslim (he is the son of Abbas Phiri).

present in other parts of Africa. Converts at the IPCI. Attends Abbas Phiri's *madrasah*.

4. PZ: Was a nonpractising Christian. Flees the violence, attends an Indian school, and comes into contact with Islam and Hinduism. He is attracted by Islam's nonracial character and doctrine of one God as well as the fact that it is practised all over the world. However, he is troubled by the gap between what is preached and the actual practice of Islam among Indian Muslims.

5. BBE: Gradually accepts Islam over five years. Acceptance of Islam is a part of growing social awareness. Accepts that Islam, in principle, does not categorize people into races.

6. NI: Becomes aware of Islam through his interest in American boxing, particularly Muhammad Ali. Finds that Islam is practiced in other parts of Africa. Meets a black Muslim in KwaMashu and discusses Islam, the doctrine of one God, and how Islam differs from Christianity at great length. Links the belief in one God to the Zulu notion of Mveligangi, the creator of the universe. Receives his training under Abbas Phiri. Also attracted by the dressing of Muslim men and women as "dignified and respectful."

7. M: Was nominally a Christian. Becomes a born-again Pentecostal. Questions various aspects of Christianity and is particularly interested in the story of Barabas. Meets a black Muslim and accepts the doctrines of one God and that the prophets, including Jesus, are messengers of God.

8. JJ: Was a nominal Christian who becomes disillusioned with Christianity. Discovers Islam at school through research on different religions. Accepts it as the correct way of life.

9. JM: Becomes disillusioned with Christianity. Obtains literature from IPCI. Later converts.

Based on my interviews and observations, it seems that the reasons for conversion among the people of KwaMashu-Ntuzuma-Inanda may be categorized as follows: a) personal, b) the nonracial and nonnationalistic basis of Islam, c) theological, d) disillusionment with Christianity, e) political, and f) the pan-Africanist element of Islam. I do not suggest that these are mutually exclusive categories. Indeed, the reasons given by each of the nine people interviewed

involve a complex interplay of at least two or more of the reasons outlined above.

The intrinsic reasons mentioned by Haron seem to have played no part in the conversions mentioned above. It is interesting to note that none of my informants, as listed above, became Muslim as a result of the direct, formal, and institutionally based proselytizing carried out by an organization. Those that were converted by the IPCI were engaging in the formalities of conversion—a declaration of their faith—because they had already intellectually accepted Islam.

Most of them were not influenced by Indian Muslims. The idea that Islam is an Indian religion was shown to be false by demonstrating empirically that it is a major religion in the rest of Africa. For those who were influenced by Indian Muslims, it was not so much a direct influence but rather a debate with Christianity that was a major factor. In other words, Islam was accepted only after an examination of the implications of accepting it and then living according to its teachings. Some stated that it was fortunate that they had not been converted by Indian Muslims: "If I was brought into Islam by some of our Indian brothers I would have left Islam a long time ago I did not embrace Islam because of **their** Islam."²⁴

The question of whose Islam they embraced cannot be answered in the abstract, for it is not possible to determine which Islam they are following from the professed school of thought or organization to which they belong. The answer, I suspect, lies in the way that Islam was experienced by African Muslims in different institutional contexts, the influences exerted upon the new converts, and the practice of their new religion. One major influence was the practical Islam of Abbas Phiri, as it was taught to the early converts. But it was also influenced by the politics of a Calvinist Christian country, by the official system of apartheid pitted against the oppressed majority, and especially by the youths of the township, who were schooled in confrontation and resistance politics. These factors also intertwined with the accommodationist politics of the local Indian Muslim community.

In this way, politics always intrudes on a decision to convert from Christianity to Islam. For some the fact of conversion, for whatever personal or theological reason(s), was also a political act of defiance:

[We] were in favor of Islam because there were so many things in Christianity that are not correct. It is a white man's religion. The white man brought Christianity but did not prac-

²⁴ Interview, 27/7/92.

tice it. We, the African people, filled the churches in our thousands, and yet there are so many things which are not good are done by Christianity.... Once you say Christianity and the Bible is white man's religion, automatically it's politics.²⁵

For those youth who had been schooled in the politics of resistance and confrontation with the state security forces, converting to Islam was part of a radical rejection of a society based on Christian principles that had no relevance to them. For some of them, it was the militant Islam of Malcolm X that became their Islam:

What I like about Malcolm X is that he was a freedom fighter. Not just a freedom fighter, but a Muslim. As a Muslim he believed in God. He believed in the liberation of the oppressed man in America. He believed in total liberation, not a liberation of certain classes, but the total emancipation of the black man, in equality.²⁶

One mosque committee member argued that what was needed was an organization along the lines of the Nation of Islam. Given these sentiments, it not surprising to hear criticism of Indian Muslims:

As long as Islam is still under the control of the people who are presently controlling it [the Indian Muslims], Islam will never go anywhere. It will never be the religion for all. It will remain the religion for a certain group.²⁷

The next section analyzes briefly several dimensions of the relationship between African Muslims and Muslim organizations in the Durban region.

African Muslims and Muslim Organizations

In the Durban region alone, there are over forty Muslim organizations: associations for professionals (i.e., doctors, lawyers, and accountants), organizations devoted to charity, education and various

²⁵ Interview, 14/6/92.

²⁶ Interview, 21/6/92.

²⁷ Interview, 21/6/92.

welfare concerns, and those concerned with the spread of Islam. The relationships between African Muslims in the KwaMashu-Ntuzuma-Inanda area and other Muslim organizations show the dependency of township Muslims on these well-established Muslim organizations.

While such organizations as the MYM and various educational and welfare organizations have given important support to the activities of African Muslims in the townships, there have been charges of racism and discrimination. Whether these are true or not, the impression exists that Indian-run Muslim organizations can decide, in an arbitrary way, who or what they will support. There are examples of the perceived inequitable relationship between African township Muslims and nontownship Muslims: the withdrawal of funds to transport students from different parts of the townships to and from the mosque, the inadequate accommodation of indigenous *maulanas* and imams as compared to their Pakistani and other foreign counterparts,²⁸ and the criticism that nontownship trustees have little or no idea of how township conditions affect the functioning of the mosque and the youth center, and the lack of response to the burning down of the *jama'at khana* in Ntuzuma (and requests to rebuild it). These are among the more common complaints.

Yet it seems that these are the organizations with the funds and with access to other resources that can assist the Islamic and secular educational advancement of African Muslims. This dependency is illustrated very aptly in the following quote:

Here in the center [the youth center] we are the peasants, the lowest of the low. We are the have-nots. There are the haves, they are the Sunnis ... the ones who support us with food yearly. We have people who support us by paying the electricity, petrol for the cars, and all that.... On Tuesdays you have to be a *tablighi* and wear a long white *kurta* and speak about the hadith. Why? Because you need something from that guy. Then the following day you have to change from *tablighism* to Sunnism. On Sunday, if it was not a violent day, then the *masjid* is full, then you have to go to *Sufi Sahib* to ask for *dhall* and other things [to feed the people]²⁹

²⁸ At the beginning of 1993, a semidetached house for the *maulana* and the imam was being built with funds from the Muslim Jama'at Council. However, the house re-mains incomplete due to a shortage of funds.

²⁹ Interview, 21/6/92.

Although the exact details may or may not be true, it indicates the substance of the relationship between African Muslims and Muslim organizations. This dependency and frustration is seen again in the reply of a mosque committee official to my question as to how the mosque was maintained:

We cannot say that we get direct funds from any organization. But some organizations just give when they feel like it. Anything that is regular has to come from one place. This will ensure that it is there when it is required. What happens is that we may get this month, but we never know if we will get next month. There are no stable funds.³⁰

Despite this dependency, the African Muslims of KwaMashu have exercised independent initiative and judgment. It was they who launched the fight for the right to land on which they could build a mosque with local township bureaucrats, the KwaZulu homeland government, and the relevant cabinet minister in Pretoria. They also conducted the fundraising drive for the mosque's construction. In short, the possibility of indigenous Muslims extricating themselves from dependency is a real one.

Conclusion

The African townships are single most important area for the growth of Islam. However, the propagators of Islam cannot rely only on extreme oppression and such dramatic events as the Soweto uprisings to ensure significant increases in local conversion rates. Nor can they rely on Indian Muslims, as it seems that Africans would rather do the converting themselves. The success of African Muslims undertaking *da'wah* work is clearly illustrated by Sheikh Abbas Phiri. Other *da'wah* organizations may have been less successful. What is important, however, is the implication of how one is engaged in *da'wah* and how this will feed into and structure the relationship between Indian and African Muslims. Given race and class realities, as well as the construction of identities along ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines, the relationship between African and Indian Muslims cannot easily be collapsed into an Islamic principle of a nondivisible community of believers. Indeed, it might be argued that for Islam to grow, an indigenous South African Islam may have to develop.

³⁰ Interview, 14/6/92.