
Tayob’s book on Islam and its practice in South Africa have three intertwined objectives. First, it attempts to demystify the monolithic and stereotypical view of Islam so prevalent in much of the western literature. Second, it proposes a conceptual framework that would better elucidate inter-cultural and intra-cultural diversity in the Islamic world. Third, it details a comparative reading of the contrasting practices of two Muslim communities in South Africa: Cape Town and former Transvaal.

*Islam in South Africa* consists of eight chapters. Chapter one challenges theoretical traditions – mostly anthropological – of explaining Islamic practice and politics. Drawing his inspiration from the work of Talal Asad, Tayob narrates an alternative frame that is sensitive to history, geography, social context, human agency, and religious text. Chapter two maps the creation of a particular Islamic tradition centered on the “independent” Cape mosque. Chapter three describes the dynamic but grounded transformation of an exemplar mosque in the Cape: The Claremont Main Road Mosque. Chapter four turns its attention to the evolution of the Indian Moslem community and its religious/social orthodoxy in the shadow of racist governments of former Transvaal Province. Chapter five lays bare how the orthodoxy shaped and was reshaped by a mosque in the town of Brits, northwest of Pretoria. Chapter six returns to the broad themes of earlier chapters and demonstrates how Islamic sermons molded and were in turn conditioned by the physical and metaphorical space of the two mosques. Chapter seven illustrates how the sermons in the Cape and Transvaal mosques are deeply implicated in the extant social and religious traditions in the Claremont Main Mosque and that of Brits. This chapter provides two standard ways of understanding the Quran and by implication other sacred Islamic texts: *tafsir* and *ta’wil*. Chapter eight summarizes the study’s key findings.

Tayob’s preface captures the essence of Islam’s monolithic image in the minds of non-Muslims in South Africa and the west. The icon of white outfitted men streaming in and out of Friday prayers reinforces customary representation of Islam as traditional and militant. These images are premised on erroneous assumption: the existence of a single and global interpretation of basic sacred texts in all Muslim societies. Tayob’s task is to demonstrate, using two communities in South Africa, that a uniform and widely accepted interpretation of the Quran or other sacred Islamic texts does not exist. The case studies reveal how the dialectical interplay between locality history, geography, social relations, mosques, and Imams and sermons (re)produce diverse and contradictory Islamic life. The Muslim community in the Cape was established in the context of Slavery, colonization, apartheid, and freedom. This community was relatively unstratified. Imam Abdullah Kadi Abdus Salaam, one of the convicts the Dutch colonialist from East Asia and who was later incarcerated in Robben Island, established the community’s first mosque and Islamic school in the late 1700s. The Imam’s leadership in the Cape mosque and community has been unchallenged since. The organic bond between each Imam and his community was rooted in his roles in early religious education in the Madrasa, and birth, wedding and death services. These services sustained the Imam’s enduring leadership. Conflicts between founders of the mosques and Imams often led to the Imam’s prevailing. Attempts in the Cape community to develop commu-
nity wide leadership group, such as the Muslim Judicial Council, failed to sideline the Imam. This dynamic history produced the “independent Cape mosque with two salient features that could not be attributed to key Islamic texts: Imam leadership of the community in religious, political and social matters; and community loyalty to the Imam.

In contrast, The Indian Muslim community that immigrated to the Transvaal was highly stratified. Indian traders, who were discriminated against by the white political establishment, took leadership in establishing mosques. Tayob argues that the relationship between the Indian trader and the white political and economic establishment ensured that the former remained unchallenged in community leadership. Traders dominated “Jamat Committee” managed the Transvaal mosques and used their commercial contacts with white state officials to link the community to authorities. They also employed their influence and resources to ensure that “politically oriented” Imams did not find home in the Indian mosque. The committee hired Ulama Imams, who were accountable to them, to guide religious affairs inside the mosques. The Imams’ religious practice remained within the political confines set by the ruling ideas although they acted independently in “no-political” religious matters. The Ulama defined the inner workings of the mosque and the thrust of their sermons sometimes exposed the contradictions between religious piety and wealth accumulation.

The unique historic foundations of the two mosques, the contrasting relationship between the Imams and their followers, and non-religious leaders in the respective communities produced two sharply different interpretation of Islam and consequently lived practice. The “independent” Cape mosques engendered radical Islamic practice and interpretation, such as relatively more “liberal” inclusion of women into the mosque and engagement with resistance and liberation politics than its Transvaal counterpart. The gist of the story is that Islamic life in South Africa is a microcosm of global Muslim diversity. To better understand the Islamic world one must give up the stereotype that lived Islam is a replica of global text that is imported into communities.

Tayob’s analytical framework takes account of objective and subjective conditions in a community. Islam in South Africa gives agency to local institutions, community members, leaders, and text interpretations. Tayob’s Islam is alive instead of being entombed in the seventh century documents. Research from the Horn of Africa confirms that the proposed framework is valuable in elucidating social and religious dynamics of indigenous Islamic communities that are not circumscribed by the South African environment.

Tayob’s wonderful tapestry of history, geography, tradition, mosques, Imams and sermons is thought-provoking and worthy of wide circulation among scholars of Islam and those concerned with community life and political change in diverse Muslim and non-Muslim societies. In particular, geographers and community planners will find a treasure trove of ideas in Islam in South Africa.

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