MUSLIM SOUTH AFRICAN FAMILIES

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Introduction

The study begins with an overview of the model family in Islam, followed by a discussion of the family unit in different ethnic, cultural and socio-economic communities comprising South African Muslims. The following issues are then analyzed in some detail: current family structures, gender segregation, gender and role demarcations, marriage, sex and contraception, adoption of piety symbols and Muslim personal law. The conclusion encapsulates the presentation.

One of the most striking features of Muslim society is the importance attached to the family. The family unit is regarded as the cornerstone of a healthy and balanced society. Three factors promote a family bond:

- Kinship, which is the strongest blood tie[i];
- Marital commitments, which define the framework for healthy sexual relations, the nurturing of children[ii] and the spending of resources on the family[iii]; and
- Faith, which provides the strongest link for a common vision and ultimate success.[iv]

The ramifications of the first two factors will be elaborated upon now:

Kinship embraces the extended family members like grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters and their progeny as confirmed by the *Qur'anic* law of inheritance[v].

Parental duties include loving, cherishing, educating and training children[vi]. In exchange, children are required to treat parents with mercy[vii].

This entire discussion can be summarized by the following declaration of the Holy Prophet Muhammad: "The one who does not show mercy to our young ones nor respect for our elders does not belong to us"[viii].

Each member of the family is entrusted with responsibilities towards other members[ix]

We now focus on the broad South African population

South African population

Although the approximately two million Muslims are mainly of Malaysian and Indian origin, an increasing number of people from other race groups who have entered the country are of Muslim origin or have embraced Islam over the last twenty years. It is thus reasonable to speak about religiously established communities as old Muslims and recent arrivals or converts as new Muslims. South Africa is one of the most multicultural countries in the world. In urban areas many different ethnic groups live alongside one another. The population comprises indigenous black peoples of South Africa as well as white Europeans, Indians, Indo-Malays, Chinese and people of other ethnic backgrounds who have arrived either in the aftermath of colonialism or at other times.[x] Over the last twenty years the population has become even more cosmopolitan with the advent of Arabs from North Africa and the Middle East, Turks, Africans and South Asians. Although there is a population of Indian descent settled in South Africa for close to 150 years, the distinction between these two sub-categories exists at the levels of their home languages and general disparity in socio-economic development which impact on the family structure and outlook. The basic unit of South African society is the family, which includes the nuclear family and the extended family or tribe.[xi] Contributing in complex ways to different types of family structures are traditional practices, historical events—especially the racially discriminatory and disruptive effects of apartheid laws, which placed restrictions on movement, provided inferior education and limited employment opportunities, and enforced compulsory shifting of families—and the demands of modern society.[xii] There are four types of racial communities (Black/African, Asian, Coloured and Caucasian/White).

African Communities

They belong to four major ethnic groups, the Nguni, the Sotho, the Tsonga Shangaan, and the Venda. The groups differ in size and origin and have their own cultures, speak their own languages, and have different dialects within the groups.[xiii]

Here, families are traditionally extended and patriarchal.[xiv]   The family unit is viewed as consisting of the husband, wife, and unmarried children, who form part of a larger extended family structure.[xv] Large changes in urban families have taken place primarily as a result of urbanization, housing problems, political factors, and economic underdevelopment coupled with poverty.[xvi] Economic development in the areas of mining, harbours, and industrial growth resulted in the migrant labour system (which only permitted African men to seek employment and earn an income in designated economic activities and thereby contributed to the breakdown of the family structure).[xvii] Although ethnically different, all traditional black families share some characteristics: the importance of children, a happy family life, strong family ties, and the nature and implication of being married.[xviii] In traditional African society, the tribe is the most important community as it is the equivalent of a nation. The tribe provides both emotional and financial security in much the same way the nuclear family does to white or coloured South Africans. [xix]

Asian Communities

Between 1860 and 1911, a total of 152,184 Indians (Hindus and Muslims) came to South Africa from various parts of India to work as labourers on sugar plantations in the Durban area. [xx] They formed a diverse group in terms of language and culture, and their ranks included twice as many men as women. Although in their native lands some of these people would not have interacted because they belonged to different castes, common work and problems (e.g., poor working conditions and health care) resulted in the weakening of the caste system and other traditional practices).[xxi]   The Muslims, many of whose ancestors had been converts from Hinduism, had their own forms of social stratification which has been eroded through pressure of modernity. Nevertheless, social elites are more resistant to these changes. The joint family (the father or senior brother as undisputed head) was originally the norm for Indian families. However, nuclear families are increasing as a result of modernization. Poverty and unemployment affected and still affect many families, making it hard for parents to pass down traditional values in the nuclear family within the context of greater freedom of thought and new opportunities.[xxii]

From extended families (with different generations, interests and power structures), there has been a transition to more nuclear families, especially in the cities. Unlike typical Western nuclear families, traditional values and obligations bind an Indian nuclear family, and its members maintain good contact with the extended family. Nevertheless, there has been a loss of the traditional understanding that promotes cohesion, solidarity, and loyalty in the joint, extended family.[xxiii]   The above remarks are especially pertinent to established communities of Muslims; newcomers from the Indian subcontinent are tracing many of the social patterns of Indian Muslims up to about fifty years ago. Like those people, many of them are culturally ambivalent towards their adopted country.   Generally, although structural changes have occurred in Indian families, many remain conservative, and many traditional values and morals have been maintained. [xxiv]

Coloured Communities

•The coloured people in South Africa (8.9% of the population) stem from slaves, Asians, Europeans, Khoi, and Africans.[xxv]   The apartheid regime classified about half the Muslim population (which stems from a mixture of mainly Malay, Indian and African parentage) as coloureds. Modern family patterns occur to a lesser degree among them compared to Christian coloureds.

The coloured and more traditional Africans cultures consider their extended family to be almost as important as their nuclear family, while the English-speaking white community places more emphasis on the nuclear family.[xxvi]

•The nuclear family is common in the high-income groups, whereas single-parent families, as part of an extended family with a dominant woman, are common in low-income groups.[xxvii]

•Adolescents spend a lot of time with peers of the same gender. In marriages where the relationship between the husband and wife is not one of attachment, the husband spends almost all of his time with his friends, while the wife directs her affection to their children and family.[xxviii]

•Women also hold the families and networks together. They do so on a daily basis, for example, by lending to others or borrowing from others what is needed (e.g., cash, household ingredients) and providing emotional support when necessary.[xxix]

Caucasian/White Communities

Historically, the family life of whites (11% of the population) is similar to that of western Europeans.[xxx]

Although extended families did exist originally, white families were mostly characterized by large nuclear families, with strong family ties, who were involved in their community and church.[xxxi]   The husband was traditionally also the undisputed head of the family.[xxxii] Industrialization and urbanization (especially after World War II) brought about large changes in the family life of white people. The nuclear family became more autonomous from the extended family and began to function independently from it.[xxxiii]

Some issues needing greater exposition are reviewed below:

(a)   Current family structures

The traditional Muslim family is extended, often spanning three or more generations. An extended structure offers many advantages, including stability, coherence, and physical and psychological support, particularly in times of need. In Muslim culture, akin to other traditional cultures, respect and esteem increase with age. Elderly parents are respected on account of their life experiences and their hierarchic position within the family unit. The opportunity to attend to the needs of one's parents in their later years is viewed as a gift from Allah. But in practice, it is usual for a new bride to move into the household of her husband. The change is often considerable, and problems in the fledgling relationship between the bride and her in-laws are common. Many young Muslims have grown up in nuclear families, not having first-hand familiarity with the richness and complexity of living within extended family networks. In addition, despite religious teachings that encourage marriage at an early age and which is rigidly observed by some traditional people, a secular trend to marry late is being seen among some Muslims. Some observers have suggested that increasing age curtails a person's ability to adapt to change, adaptability being the hallmark of youth. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, Muslim youth here are faced with lifestyle choices not available in more traditional cultures. To some, the opportunities with respect to individual freedom offered by a nuclear family structure far outweigh any benefits of living in an extended family, particularly where some of its elders are perceived to be authoritative, selfish and manipulative.[xxxiv]

Nevertheless, the contrary pattern is sometimes evident where newly married couples have opted to live with the parents of either spouse for financial reasons. There are also instances when this choice is dictated by their careerism in which case older family members take care of such couples' children and provide untroubled lodging for all of them. Often, commensurate with the shrinking of families has been the erosion of social support networks which have exposed young people in particular to emotional and psychological trauma resulting in substance abuse, promiscuity and suicide. Nuclear families have sometimes led to the transfer of the elderly to old age homes for accommodation and security due to the reluctance of children to personally care for them.

(b)   Gender segregation

Islam clearly demarcates between legitimate and illegitimate human relationships. Societal laws exist to aid Muslims in abiding by this framework. Segregation, therefore, exists primarily to minimize the chances of illicit relationships developing. Physical contact between members of the opposite sex is strongly discouraged, although these rules are relaxed somewhat if medical treatment is required.[xxxv] This framework explains why many prefer to see a same-sex clinician, particularly in consultations necessitating examination of the genitalia. However, gender segregation norms are spurned by more secularly oriented people.

(c) Gender and role demarcation

Traditionally, the man is considered the head of the family; to many a man, however, this is a poisoned chalice because with leadership comes responsibility. Economic responsibility for maintaining the family falls squarely on the shoulders of the man, irrespective of whether his wife is earning money. Unemployment, then, can greatly affect the integrity of the family, leaving the man in a role limbo. Psychological morbidity in such situations may be high, with ramifications for the family as a whole. But with increased modernity, the situation has become more complex. Many professional women's earnings may be on par with or even exceed those of their husbands. Consequently, the trend among such women certainly favours living in nuclear families. In extreme cases, they discard marriage totally since they are financially independent. Jeenah says that there are also cases of individual families, which, although part of broader patriarchal cultures and while adhering to their paradigms, operate internally as matriarchal cultures.

Besides religious involvement, women have also played a social role to propel the agenda of social and gender justice. Among social functions are programmes for the education of women and children, provide welfare and relief to the downtrodden; encourage women's self-help programmes and counseling. Some may be called women's rights activists. In response to the codification of certain aspects of Muslim personal law (see details below) a group of professional women calling themselves *Shura Yabafazi* (Consultation forum for women) have campaigned for a women-friendly Muslim personal law regime.[xxxvi]

(d)   Marriage

As stated earlier, marriage forms the sole basis for sexual relations and parenthood. In contrast, celibacy and sex outside of marriage are strongly discouraged because they are considered behavioural extremes that are not conducive to a wholesome society.[xxxvii] In many senses, marriage is considered the union of two families, and the parents usually arrange the marriage.

Parental coercion in finding or selecting spouses is diminishing; thereby largely eliminating consanguinity. Some parents are evidently beginning to understand the marital concerns of their children. The practice of choosing marriage partners from within one's larger community, however, continues to be considered important by most traditional people.

(e)   Sex and contraception

Sex in the context of marriage is a legitimate, enjoyable activity—an act of worship that is deserving of Allah's reward. Conversely, sex outside of heterosexual marriage is considered deviant, deserving of punishment in the hereafter. A distinction is made, however, between a homosexual inclination and the act itself. The former is acceptable so long as it is not practiced. Promiscuity does exist among Muslims, although in all probability its prevalence is considerably lower than in some segments of western society. Those who operate outside the Muslim framework often find themselves ostracized and held responsible for bringing the family name into disrepute. Despite the positive outlook toward sex, it is not a subject that is openly discussed. Cultural taboos dictate that sex should remain a private matter between husband and wife. This explains, at least in part, why Muslims are reluctant to seek help for sexual problems and the long time lag before seeing a physician. Regarding contraception, many traditions of the Prophet Muhammad extol the merits of marriage, procreation, and fecundity.[xxxviii] Muslim opinion with respect to contraception is divided, a minority arguing that it is categorically prohibited whereas the majority opinion is that contraception is allowed but discouraged.[xxxix] A small minority, confined largely to academic circles, suggests that effective family planning strategies are essential to prevent the global overspill predicted by many in the West.[xl] To summaries, the average size of Muslim families has decreased with exceptions found chiefly among traditional people who calculate their blessings in terms of family size.

(f)   Adoption of piety symbols and practices

Especially in post-apartheid South Africa, piety norms are actively and consciously demonstrated by individuals and families in an attempt to counter social evils. They include wearing of the veil by women, consumption of food and beverages that comply with Islamic law (thereby making them lawful [*halaal*] according to bodies like the "South African National Halaal Authority"), performing multiple pilgrimages to Makkah, eliminating harmful instruments of technology like television from homes (which are guilty of undermining viewers' morals through screening of *objectionable* programmes), promoting early marriage to eradicate pre-marital sex, supporting Islamic financing and banking, advocating Muslim Personal Law, attending Muslim schools and turning to self-reformation activities.[xli]

(g)   Muslim Personal Law

After the advent of democracy in 1994, the government engaged Muslim religious leaders on the problem of recognizing Muslim personal law relating to marriage, divorce, child custody, polygamy and inheritance. As acknowledged by Rashida Manjoo, there are "tensions between women's equality rights and religious rights, codification of religious personal status laws versus recognition of religious marriages, achieving equal access to justice for all women, and also tensions arising between individual equality rights and group equality rights"[xlii]. She expands: "(b)alancing the rights of women and the rights of religion is at the heart of staying true to the Constitution and overcoming the history of discrimination … (w)here these foundational rights collide, equality of women must take precedence … But cultural and religious rights, unlike equality rights, are subject to limitation …"[xliii]. The state of affairs is detailed by Ebrahim Moosa:

"Some of the ulama groups unrealistically expected the government to accede to a demand that Muslim personal law be exempted from the provision of the Constitution … (t)hey realized that their versions of Muslim personal law, characterized by gender inequality and patriarchy, would not pass the constitutional muster and would therefore not be adopted as law. It was imperative, therefore, to get rid of the yoke of the Constitution. The progressive Muslim groups, on the other hand, argued that the Constitution challenges Muslims to come up with a family law code that includes the best aspects of Islamic jurisprudence. Furthermore, these groups envisaged a situation of no conflict between Muslim personal law and the country's human rights law, provided the approach to both was sensible"[xliv]. At the moment, there are no fresh developments to propel this issue forward.

Conclusion

The heterogeneity of the South African society is reflected in the many different family structures and ways of family life. Traditions (cultural), changing values, political events, economic developments, modernization, and globalization contribute in a complex way to ever-changing family forms and family relationships.[xlv]

Greater economic independence has resulted in more nuclear families, while poorer conditions force families to unite for the sake of survival and to support one another emotionally and economically.[xlvi]

It is worth stressing that the disintegration of stable family environments, which have ensured the transmission of Islamic legal and ethical values through successive generations, have destroyed support networks in some instances and resulted in drug and alcohol consumption, promiscuity and suicides. The last mentioned vice was virtually absent about fifty years ago. From another perspective, the collectivism enshrined in the extended family structure through references given at the beginning of this article has been replaced to varying degrees by the individualism of modernity. But there are indications of a reaction to this dilemma through the adoption of piety symbols and practices, as well as the advocacy of Muslim personal law. Nevertheless, the extent to which they will succeed in combating the vices sketched above cannot be confidently predicted. Despite these setbacks, Muslim family life continues to evoke the admiration of many other compatriots who have lost moral and spiritual values to an even greater degree. It may be deduced that the family forms the basic building block of Muslim society. Despite the many pressures it faces, the family institution remains strong. The future of the extended family, however, is under considerable threat.

ENDNOTES

[i] *Qur'an* 4:1, 25:54.

[ii] Al-Bukhari, Muhammad bin Isma'il. 1978. *Al-Sahih.* Lucknow: Kitab Bhavan, 78:23 (Hereafter referred to as Al-Bukhari).

[iii] *Ibid,* 69:2.

[iv] *Qur'an* 23:1-10.

[v] *Qur'an* 4:11-12.

[vi] *Al-Bukhari* 23:79, 78:1-2, 18; Al-Tirmidhi, Abu 'Isa Muhammad. 1978. *Al-Jami'.* Cairo: Rabbani, 25:3, 11, 12, 15 Hereafter referred to as Al-Tirmidhi); Abu Dawud. 197-. *Sunan.* Beirut: Al-Maktabat al-'Asriya 40:144-5.

[vii] *Qur'an* 17:23; *Al-Bukhari* 78:2; *al-Tirmidhi* 25:1-3.

[viii] *Al-Tirmidhi* 25:15; Ibn Hanbal, Ahmad. 1985. *Musnad.* Beirut: Al-Maktabat al-'Ilmiya, *(*in the Musnads of Abd Allah bin Abbas and Abd Allah bin Amr bin al-As*);* Al-Hakim, Muhammad bin 'Abd Allah. n.d. *Al-Mustadrak 'ala l-Sahihain.* Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa (numbers 196 and 385); Al-Tabarani, Sulaiman bin Ahmad. n.d. *Al-Mu'jam al-Kabir (ms).* Damascus: Al-Zahiriya, chapter 2, part 7, number 7603; chapter 3, part 9, number 10920; chapter 3, part 10, number 12110; Ibn Habban. n.d. *Sahih.* Cairo: Dar Al-Ma'arif, 2:459.

[ix] *Al-Bukhari* 11:11.

[x] http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/south-africa-country-profile.html South Africa: Guide to Language, Culture, Etiquette and Customs (Accessed 3 February 2009).

Observations relating to this section and the following one have been adapted to suit the needs of this presentation.

[xi] http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/south-africa-country-profile.html South Africa: Guide to Language, Culture, Etiquette and Customs (Accessed 3 February 2009).

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[xiii] http://family.jrank.org/pages/1613/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-Black-Communities.html South Africa - Family Life in Black Communities (Accessed 4 February 2009).

[xiv] http://family.jrank.org/pages/1613/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-Black-Communities.html South Africa - Family Life in Black Communities (Accessed 4 February 2009).

[xv] http://family.jrank.org/pages/1613/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-Black-Communities.html South Africa - Family Life in Black Communities (Accessed 4 February 2009).

[xvi] http://family.jrank.org/pages/1613/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-Black-Communities.html South Africa - Family Life in Black Communities (Accessed 4 February 2009).

[xvii] http://family.jrank.org/pages/1613/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-Black-Communities.html South Africa - Family Life in Black Communities (Accessed 4 February 2009).

[xviii] Viljoen, S. (1994). *Strengths and Weaknesses in the Family Life of Black South Africans.* Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council Publishers.

[xix] http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/south-africa-country-profile.html South Africa: Guide to Language, Culture, Etiquette and Customs (Accessed 4 February 2009).

[xx] http://family.jrank.org/pages/1614/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-Asian-Communities.html South Africa - Family Life in Asian Communities (Accessed 5 February 2009).

[xxi] http://family.jrank.org/pages/1614/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-Asian-Communities.html South Africa - Family Life in Asian Communities (Accessed 5 February 2009).

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xxix http://family.jrank.org/pages/1615/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-Colored-Families.html South Africa - Family Life in Colored Families (Accessed 6 February 2009).

xxx http://family.jrank.org/pages/1616/South-Africa-Family-Life-in-White-Communities.html South Africa - Family Life in White Communities (Accessed 7 February 2009).

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