

# Moon sightings and the quest for Muslim solidarities in twentieth century Natal

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## ***Abstract***

This article examines local contestations over Ramadan moon sightings among Muslims in twentieth century Natal, South Africa, as a window to debates about authority, identity and Muslim unification. The issue was the question of whether – in terms of the rulings in the Qur’an and the practices established by the Prophet Muhammad – the basis for determining the beginning of the lunar month should be vested in local physical sighting of the moon crescent or in astronomical calculations. While sighting the moon with the naked eye has historically been the practice of most Muslims, some have considered the project of Muslim unity served by knowledge derived from astronomy. The “moon controversy” provides a lens through which to examine the broader debate in Islamic societies around the role of science and technology in Islam, “traditionalism” versus “modernity”, authority in Islam, and Muslim unity.

**Keywords:** Eid; Moon sighting; Lunar calendar; Astronomy; Shariah; Islam; Modernity; South Africa.

## **Introduction**

NOW they want to use scientific calculations. If they had started the month according to the scientific calculations, as we had always asked them to, then the whole UMMAH would have fasted the 30 days together, in unison, and [would] not [have] divided families. Bloody stubborn idiots.

AR Latib

On Tuesday 6 August 2013, one AR Latib circulated an email to a list of Muslim recipients voicing his frustration that Eid-ul-Fitr,<sup>1</sup> the festival ending

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1 Muslims celebrate two Eids annually. *Eid-ul-Fitr* (literally “breaking of the fast”) is observed on the first day of *Shawwal* which follows the month of *Ramadan* (ninth month of the Islamic year) during which Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. *Eid al-Adha* (“Festival of the sacrifice”) commemorates the readiness of the Prophet Ibrahim to sacrifice his son Ismail as an act of submission to God. Muslims with the financial means sacrifice an animal on this day.

the Ramadan fast, had not been decided in advance through the application of astronomical knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Saudi Arabia and North America had generated a date for Eid, and Latib was expressing one frequently raised point of view that Muslims in different regions of the world should be able to celebrate concurrently.

The belated “scientific calculations” to which Latib referred indicated that the new moon would be born that evening (6 August) at 23:51. Because the moon crescent is generally expected to become visible some 16-17 hours after its birth, for South Africans this meant that by Wednesday evening 17 and half hours would have elapsed in Durban and a couple of hours more in Cape Town. Yet, as the moon was predicted to be too faint to see with the naked eye (*ruya* in Arabic), Muslims in southern Africa were prompted to prepare for a Thursday Eid. On Thursday, however, the crescent had still not appeared and festivities took place on Friday, 9 August.<sup>3</sup>

Latib’s disgruntlement was echoed around South Africa, but not necessarily for the same reasons. Conspiracy theorists relayed their belief that traders had organised to make Eid fall on this particular Friday, which coincided with a national public holiday (Women’s Day), in order to avoid losing custom on two consecutive days. Others raised practical considerations – the work of food preparation takes planning, as does the travel to family or taking leave from work. For others, a common date for Eid is regarded as important as a symbol of Muslim unity.

Contingencies or ambiguities involved in sighting the moon, an event which for Muslims begin each 29- or 30-day lunar month,<sup>4</sup> are not infrequent. They necessitate extended debates also between Islamic scholars (Ulama), whose authority is crucial in legitimating a moon sighting. In South Africa, as in

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2 Goolam Vahed was a recipient of the e-mail dated 6 August 2013.

3 The age of the moon (usually around 17 hours) is not the only criterion for sighting the moon. The orbit of the moon is elliptical and the angle between the moon, earth, and sun also determines visibility. The moon becomes visible when the angle reaches nine degrees and the time that it takes for this to happen depends on the speed at which the moon is travelling (available at [http://www.moonsighting.com/faq\\_ms.html](http://www.moonsighting.com/faq_ms.html), as accessed on 24 March 2014).

4 The Islamic calendar consists of twelve months of 29 or 30 days each. The first day of the month begins with the sighting of the crescent (*hital* in Arabic). If the *hital* is not observed after the 29<sup>th</sup> day, the new month begins at sunset after the 30<sup>th</sup>. The moon has to be sighted by several individuals considered “honest” and “reliable”. There is a difference of 11 or 12 days (354.37 days against 365/366 days) between the Western and Islamic calendars. The birth of the new moon occurs when the moon passes between the earth and the sun. As the moon passes either north or south of the earth-sun-moon line, the birth of the moon takes place when the earth-sun-moon line is perpendicular to the plane of the earth’s orbit around the sun (available at [http://www.moonsighting.com/faq\\_ms.html](http://www.moonsighting.com/faq_ms.html), as accessed on 24 March 2014).

other regions, formal organisations of Islamic scholars have been created in different historical moments to declare with authority on these matters, including the United Ulama Council of South Africa (UUSCA) and the Crescent Observers Society (COS) in Cape Town. Yet differences regarding the criteria for what constitutes a legitimate sighting, and by whom, can reflect wider disagreements or positions within the Islamic community in South Africa.

For example, earlier in 2013, on 11 February, in the absence of moon sightings – even with the moon 34 hours old – caused the UUSCA to declare 13 February the first day of the month of *Rabi'us Thaani*. This created the likelihood of a 28 day month, an impossibility in the Islamic calendar.<sup>5</sup> The dilemma was resolved, however, when UUCSA was able to announce the following day that the moon had in fact been sighted in Venda on 11 February. The country's leading Ulama conferred seven times before UUCSA announced on 20 February that the start of *Rabi'us Thaani* was now being pushed back to 12 February. Meanwhile, the COS – formed in 1936 to sight the moon from Signal Hill each month for the Western Cape region – had not sighted the moon. UUCSA's decision to belatedly accept the word of an unnamed Maulana “undermined the integrity of COS and threatened to divide the community”. Morton accused UUCSA of ignoring “decades of protocol and procedure” and of “violating longstanding agreements”.

Debates about moon sightings have a long genealogy in South Africa. This paper examines the disputes as they played out since the early twentieth century. The “moon controversy” provides an opportunity to examine broader issues concerning Muslims: claim-making on the basis of “traditionalism” versus “modernity”; the role of technology as a basis for practices of faith; the impact of reformism; the meanings and contestations about Islamic authority; and calls to exhibit global unity among Muslims.

### ***Muslim settlement, Eid observances and moon contestations in Natal***

People of Muslim faith make up less than two per cent of the population of South Africa and, despite extensive heterogeneity are often sub-classified by geography and history into two groups: “Malay” Muslims living in the

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<sup>5</sup> E Moosa, “South African Muslims face potential moonsighting dilemma”, Cii News, 12 February 2013 (available at <http://www.ciibroadcasting.com/2013/02/12/south-african-muslims-face-moonsighting-dilemma/>, as accessed on 20 August 2013).

Western Cape, whose ancestors arrived from regions of South Asia, Indonesia and East Africa as slaves (or freed slaves) from the seventeenth century; and Muslims from India who arrived in Natal and the Transvaal from just over two centuries later.<sup>6</sup> In relation to this later migration, Indians arrived in South Africa in two occupational streams. Between 1860 and 1911, 152 641 workers were brought to Natal as indentured immigrants. Entrepreneurs followed them, overwhelmingly from Gujarat on the West coast of India, arriving from the mid-1870s. After indenture contracts ended, most Indians took to hawking and market gardening and settled in and around major centres like Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Ladysmith, and Newcastle. Indian migrants of Muslim faith, both indentured and free, established mosques, madrassahs and festivals in the region.<sup>7</sup>

Eid celebrations took place in Natal from the earliest days of Muslim settlement. While indentured Muslims initially embraced the local festival of Muharram, in which large numbers of Hindus also participated,<sup>8</sup> the Islamic tradition of traders centred on the two festivals of Eid. Aboobaker Amod of Porbander, in his testimony to the the Wragg Commission of 1885-87, argued that “Mohammedans should have a holiday” at the time of their two festivals – “the Ids of Rammadan and Haj”.<sup>9</sup>

Knowledge about Eid, and about the special ways it was being celebrated in the colony, was spread locally through the print medium of the newspaper. In the early twentieth century, a flurry of newspaper production was being directed to Natal readerships, overwhelmingly specified by language, race or ethnicity. *Indian Opinion*, the newspaper launched by Mohandas K Gandhi in 1903, and the *Indian Views*, started by MC Anglia in 1914, regularly

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6 According to the 2001 census, which has utilized apartheid-era racial constructions despite the ending of apartheid, there were 246,433 Malay and 236 315 Indian Muslims in South Africa. While race has no biological validity, the historical categorisation of people according to race has been and continues to be a social fact in South Africa. “Indian” is used to describe Muslims whose ancestors arrived from the Indian sub-continent over a century ago; while Malay is used to refer to those of the Muslim faith who during apartheid were attributed the race classification of “Coloured” in the Census. See S Jeppie and G Vahed, “Multiple Communities: Muslims in Post-apartheid South Africa”, J Daniel, R Southall and J Lutchman (eds.), *The State of the Nation: South Africa, 2003-2004* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2004), pp. 252-286. The term Malay is heavily contested, and nomenclatures like Cape Muslim and Cape Malay have historically been used to describe them. M Haron, *Conflict of identities: The case of South Africa's Cape Malays* (Paper, Malay World Conference, Kuala Lumpur, 12-14 October 2001).

7 G Vahed, “Mosques, Maulana’s and Muharram: Establishing Indian Islam in colonial Natal, 1860-1910”, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXXI, 2001, pp. 3-29.

8 G Vahed, “Constructions of community and identity among Indians in colonial Natal, 1860-1910: The role of the Muharram Festival”, *Journal of African History*, 43(1), 2002, pp. 77-93.

9 YS Meer, “Examination of Aboobakker Amod, Wragg Commission 1885-1887”, *Documents of indentured labour, Natal 1851-1917* (Durban, Institute of Black Research).

reported on Eid gatherings. For example, in 1907, *Indian Opinion* explained to its Muslim readers what the borough laws were regarding *qurbani* (animal sacrifice),<sup>10</sup> while Muslim-owned shops closed for the day.<sup>11</sup> During Bakri-Eid 1908, there was a performance by the Star Dramatic Company in Durban's Victoria Street Theatre. During Eid-ul-Fitr 1911, the Point Mahomedan Society handed out prizes to its outstanding students<sup>12</sup> and, further inland, Eid-ul-Fitr prizes were distributed in Dundee.<sup>13</sup> The Mahomedan Theatrical Group performed on the night of Eid-ul-Fitr in Durban in 1912.<sup>14</sup> In August 1914, MI Seepye of Pietermaritzburg published his explanation of the significance of Eid and the manner in which it was observed.<sup>15</sup> An editorial in *Indian Views* in 1916 by Mahomed Doolarkhan on the occasion of "Idul-Fitr" called for Muslim unity globally and a prayer for British victory in the First World War,<sup>16</sup> even though Ottoman Turkey was on the opposing side.

Natal newspaper reports in this early period do not reveal about how the day of Eid was determined, or what issues around moon-sightings were being discussed. Some indication is offered from interviews. In a changing and modernising landscape, GM Randeree<sup>17</sup> recalled that when the first "high rise" buildings were built in Durban, moon watchers would climb to the upper story in hopes that this might increase their chances of sighting the moon. According to Randeree, during the 1920s and 1930s, decisions related to the sighting of the moon were made by prominent traders, men whose wealth and community positions were linked to their roles as Mosque trustees. These included EM Paruk and Syed Fakroodeen who were attached to the West Street and Grey Street mosques respectively, and Maulana Fateh of the Grey street mosque.

Until the 1930s, word of mouth was the only form of news of the moon sighting considered legitimate. On 4 November 1934, when two leading Islamic scholars, the brothers Mohammed Abdul Aleem Siddiqi and Ahmed Mukhtar Siddiqi of Meerut visited South Africa, Maulana Abdul Kareem of South Coast Junction in Durban, convened a meeting. Attended by the

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10 *Indian Opinion*, 19 January 1907.

11 *Indian Opinion*, 2 February 1907.

12 *Indian Opinion*, 9 September 1911.

13 *Indian Opinion*, 17 September 1911.

14 *Indian Opinion*, 26 October 1912. Some of these *Indian Opinion* references appear in S Bhana and G Vahed, *The making of a political reformer. Gandhi in South Africa 1893-1914* (Manohar, New Delhi, 2005), p. 75-77.

15 *Indian Views*, 28 August 1914.

16 *Indian Views*, 28 July 1916.

17 G Vahed (Parlock, Durban), interview, GM Randeree (Retired salesperson interviewed in his capacity as a "community elder"), 22 April 1999. Randeree passed away in 2002.

Ulama of Natal, the purpose of the gathering was to discuss whether it was permissible to accept news of the sighting of the new moon by telephone, telegraph or wireless. After much debate, the group passed the following resolution:<sup>18</sup>

Basing our judgement on authoritative books of Muslim jurisprudence and the ruling of various Ulamas in India, we have come to the conclusion that information appertaining to Ramadan, the Eid-ul-Fitre and Eid-ul-Adha new moon received through the agency of a letter, a telegram, a telephone, or a wireless message could not be deemed valid evidence in terms of the Muslim law and should not be relied upon.

Scholarly rulings, however, did not necessarily go undisputed or unchallenged. In the 1940s, laymen, led by progressivists, community patrons and trading elites, formed Muslim organisations to influence the position of Muslims in relation to local issues within a climate of exclusionary or racist governmental policy rulings. The first such umbrella organisation in Natal was the Natal Muslim Council (NMC), formed in April 1943. It was the brainchild of London-trained Advocate Ibrahim Bawa and included mainly professionals and traders: only one member of the Ulama fraternity, Maulana Bashir Siddiqui, was on its executive committee. In this same period, but mainly comprising members of the Ulama, a special Durban Hilal Committee was formed to regulate moon sightings.<sup>19</sup> Faultlines between views about authoritative Muslim knowledge sometimes emerged. Disputes (between organised, powerful Muslim laymen and religious scholars, many whom were temporary migrants serving in Natal mosques and madressas for fixed terms) were also frequently geographical (between Natal and the Transvaal).

This can be highlighted through two examples. In August 1948, a group described as “respected Durban Muslims”<sup>20</sup> submitted a report to the *Indian Views* explaining how the Hilal Committee came to declare Thursday 5 August as the day of Eid-ul-Fitr, when many other Muslims had observed Eid a day earlier. The Hilal Committee had ruled at 7.45 p.m. on Tuesday evening that Eid would not be on Wednesday, as the moon had not been

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18 The following Ulama attended: Abdul Rehman Ansari, Pietermaritzburg; Mahomed Abdul Kadir Afriki, Durban; Imam Abdus Samad, Durban; Sayyed-ul-Huqq, Verulam; Mahomed Yousuf, Umzinto; Sayed Serfuddin Vaesy, Durban; Hazrat-ud-Deen, Stanger; Sayed Abdul Kadir, Durban; Abdul Vahed Punjabi, Durban and Sulaman Mohammed Kafletvi, Durban. See *Indian Views*, 7 November 1934. Details also provided by Munshi DM Khan of Umzinto to *Indian Views*, 15 May 1957 when this issue was being debated.

19 G Vahed, “Indian Muslims in South Africa: Continuity, change and disjuncture, 1860-2000”, *Alternation*, 7, 2000, p. 73.

20 They were MA Motala, AH Moosa, AM Moolla, EM Randeree, and SM Paruk; traders, some of whom were mosque trustees.

sighted. Yet information was subsequently conveyed to Durban-based traders, presumably by telephone, that the new moon had indeed been sighted at Waschbank in Northern Natal as well as in several Transvaal small towns and that most Muslims in the Transvaal and some in Natal would be observing Eid on Wednesday.

At 11:00 pm, the concerned Muslims who had learned about this discrepancy visited the home of Maulana Aboobaker of Mayville, where they found AS Kajee and several members of the Hilal Committee. They informed the committee that the moon had been sighted and Kajee resummoned the full Hilal Committee, including some of the leading Ulama of Durban, such as Maulanas Gulam Mustapha, Bashir Siddiqui, and Sayed Sarfoodeen, to his office in Leopold Street at 12.30 a.m. Although Maulana Sema of Waschbank and IM Coovadia and Hoosen Jazbhay of Johannesburg confirmed the moon sightings, the Durban Hilal Committee announced at 1.45 a.m. that the information was not *mowtaber* (reliable) and reaffirmed that Eid would be on Thursday. Motala and company described the decision as “surprising to us because we know that in the past information of lesser strength had been accepted and acted upon with the concurrence of learned Moulvis”.<sup>21</sup>

Another dispute occurred in 1949, when most Muslims in the Transvaal – and some in Natal – celebrated Eid on 27 July, whilst the Durban Hilal Committee ruled that Eid was on 28 July. Expressing his ire at what he portrayed both as a rejection of science and a legal violation, MO Seepye of Pietermaritzburg distributed a cyclo-styled circular dated 28 July under the above caption “This is your Eid”:

It is habitual of Durban to sacrifice the Eid on the altar of ignorance, but this is the first time where Maritzburg has followed suit. It is regrettable that the people are misled by the “Hilal Committee”. The name “Hilal Committee” signifies a body which is qualified in the astronomical science of the moon. But, on the contrary, the so-called “Hilal Committee” acts on the reverse: they discredit all evidences and informations regarding the moon. Some time ago the “Hilal Committee” had chartered an aeroplane to see the moon in the air. Had they been sincere they would have again flown to places where the moon has been actually seen and verified the facts instead of sitting and rejecting the phone-message. “Muslims! Consider for yourselves. Would it be legal for you to say the Juma (Friday) Namaz is on Saturday? Then how do you legalise the Eid Namaz on the day when the Eid is past?”

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21 Statement by MA Motala, AH Moosa, AM Moolla, EM Randeree and SM Paruk on the Hilal Committee's Decision, *Indian Views*, 11 August 1949.

The chartering of an aeroplane, which Seepye's pamphlet refers to, was also mentioned by several individuals interviewed.<sup>22</sup> Ismail Manjra, who arrived in South Africa from India in 1946, recalls that the experiment took place a year or so after his arrival. As he remembers it, the moon was easily sighted that year and he and his contemporaries considered the joke very much on the Hilal Committee. Zuleikha Mayat, who arrived in Durban from Potchefstroom in 1948 after her marriage, just missed the event but was told of it by the family of her husband. Moosa Paruk recalled that his uncle, Mamoojee Paruk, as well as Maulana Bashir Siddiqui and MS Badat were amongst the actual passengers on that plane.

By mid-century, and reflecting global trends, the growing faith in modernism by many South Africans included many middle-class and elite Muslim residents of Natal, whose embrace of progressivism was also aligned to political claims for full citizenship. This was increasingly reflected in the binary discourses of tradition and modernity. The uses of science and the implication of new technological inventions were key to contemporary debates about lunar knowledge and the criteria for being able to declare an authoritative sighting. How scientific innovation could be resolved with religious orthodoxies was a matter of interests to religious scholars but also to Muslim publics. Such questions were fueling another new development: the growing interest by Durban Muslims in studying arabic and Qu'ran for themselves.

### ***Sputnik and the moon controversy, 1957***

The 1950s saw important changes in the Islamic landscape in Natal. Ulama were establishing local centres of learning to promote a traditionalist vision for Islam in the region in the same period that a generation of young, educated Muslims demonstrated their readiness to challenge traditional conceptions of Islam. In Durban in 1954, Daud Saleh Mall, a medical doctor, along with a number of his peers (mainly among the Gujarati trading classes) formalised into an organisation an initiative begun four years earlier. Their Arabic Study Circle sought to promote the general study of Arabic so that Muslims could consult the Qur'an directly, without dependence solely on the Ulama for interpretation of key texts. It also invited dynamic Muslim thinkers outside the Ulama fraternity to introduce new ideas. Among the most controversial was Frenchman Joseph

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22 Interviews?, Ebrahim Jadwat, 15 August 2013; Moosa Paruk, 18 August 2013; Ismail Majra, 18 August 2013; Ebrahim Moosa, 16 August 2013; and Zuleikha Mayat, 16 August 2013.



Perdue, a convert to Islam, a long-term guest of the Arabic Study Circle, offering seminars on Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and African faiths and advocating religious tolerance.<sup>23</sup>

The Durban and District Muslim Association, led by trader EH Ismail, tried to create dialogue across religious and racial barriers. For example, when the annual celebration to commemorate the birthday of the Prophet was held on 31 October 1955, Ismail invited the Mayor of Durban, Vernon Essery, Professor Leo Kuper of Natal University and MB Naidoo, vice-principal of Sastri College, as guest speakers. After garlanding the Mayor, Ismail told the audience: "Our desire is to live in peace and to share our heritage with our fellow subjects who sympathise with these".<sup>24</sup> The Iqbal Study Group, named after Muslim thinker Sir Mohamed Iqbal, was made up of young Muslims who met to discuss issues affecting the Muslim world more generally and organized an annual Iqbal Day. They were especially critical of the Ulama. At the 1965 Iqbal Day celebrations, one of its members, Abdullah Deedat, who had studied in Egypt, was quoted as saying, "Moulanas are good for nothing." A writer to *Indian Views*, GH Bhabha, took exception to such views and asked: "How can we expect our children to respect the Moulanas when such slanders are being hurled by mature men?" A letter from Cassim Abdullah complained that "the day was a monotonous sing song of hurling abuses at the rich, and slurring the molvies".<sup>25</sup>

During the 1950s, the *Indian Views* was often a vehicle for challenges around doctrinal authority within Islamic southern Africa. Editor MI Meer<sup>26</sup> was sympathetic to the Arabic Study Circle's reformist enthusiasm and published notice of their activities and advocated a similarly enthusiastic position on modernity and reform. In editorials and articles, the *Views* leveraged global scientific trends and to religious expertise from the geographical centre of Islam against local traditionalism and traditionalist clergy. Frequent accusations by the Durban literati that the Ulama were parochial and "behind the times" – expressions which often extended into bald insults and vitriolic caricaturing – reflected the writers' confidence that the position they took was dominant

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23 S Jeppie, *Language, identity, modernity: The Arabic study circle of Durban* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2007), pp. 67-71, 84-95.

24 *Indian Views*, 23 November 1955.

25 *Indian Views*, 30 August 1965.

26 MI Meer was born in the Surat, India, and came to South Africa as a young boy. He took over editorship of *Indian Views* in 1928. He had a liberal interpretation of Islam. See T Waetjen and G Vahed, "Diaspora at home: *Indian Views* and the making of Zuleikha Mayat's public voice", *Africa: The Journal of the International African Society*, 81(1), pp. 23-41, for more on Meer and his interpretation of Islam.

and widely shared. In 1957, in an editorial titled “The Curse Called Hilal Committee”, Meer himself suggested:<sup>27</sup>

The time has come to put an end to the tyranny of the Molavi Moulana who are the controlling force in the Hilal Committee of Durban and whose disgusting antics make a laughing stock of Islam and Muslims on the occasions of Ramadan and Eid every year. Some of these Moulanas are no doubt honourable men but the majority who rule the roost are either stupid, ignorant people whose understanding of Islam and its laws is that of backward primitives or mischievous people who willfully create mischief in order to gain limelight – mischief to them is a means of enhancing their high mighty importance; of becoming the cynosure of the public eye and drawing public attention to themselves as a fearfully wonderful lot of exalted learned men who have drunk deep at the fount of Islamic learning. It is to be admitted that they do succeed in providing themselves to be people who have drunk deep – but only at a fount of ignorance and stubbornness and not at any fount of Islamic knowledge.

Meer added that anyone who thought his criticism harsh should consider, as an example of the Ulama’s “incomprehensible antics”, certain circumstances he then proceeded to recount. The birth of the moon for Ramadan was at 11.19 a.m. on 31 March. Officials of the Egyptian Government Observatory at Cairo and the Mufti of Al Azhar saw the moon through their telescope, visible for eighteen minutes, and proclaimed 1 April as Ramadan. The Hilal Committee in Durban rejected these findings both because the moon was not sighted locally and because of the use of a telescope. When All India and Pakistan Radio announced that the moon had been sighted on 1 April and that Ramadan would commence on 2 April, the committee discounted that news as well, and, in what *Indian Views* described as a “sorry – and laughable – spectacle”, ruled that Ramadan would commence on 3 April. Telegrams from India and Pakistan testifying that the moon had been sighted did not revise the date chosen by the committee. It was Meer’s view that while “our primitive Maulanas” could argue that Islam’s important religious and historical texts made no mention of radio and astronomical telescopes, “[written] letters existed even in those days and their validity as evidence is recognised by the ancient authorities”.

According to Meer, the controversy did not end there. The birth of the moon at the end of Ramadan month was at 1.54 a.m. on Tuesday 30 April and was seen that evening in Durban and other towns in Natal. At least ten

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<sup>27</sup> *Indian Views*, 8 May 1957.

people informed the Hilal Committee of the sighting. Despite this evidence and the fact that most Muslim countries celebrated Eid on Wednesday 1 May, the Committee ruled that the Eid would be observed on Tuesday 2 May.<sup>28</sup> If the committee had accepted the moon sighting evidence, argued Meer, then Muslims would have only completed 28 fasts whereas the Islamic month has a minimum of 29 days.

In relating this instance, Meer was not only conveying his opinion of the historical relativity of technologies utilized in surveiling the skies and communicating the lunar calendar to the faithful – thus aligning and unifying their practices – but also underscoring a political reality about Islamic authority. Located at one of the southern-most port cities in the Indian Ocean and Islamic world, assurances of connection and alignment with societies regarded as the centres of Islamic learning was – for the cosmopolitans like Meer – perhaps also a feature of geographical anxiety. Some Muslims in Durban were identifying Egypt rather than the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent as the source of modern Islamic authority. MAH Moosa, a businessman serving on many community trust projects, sponsored three students, Abdullah Deedat, Hafez Timol and Sulaman Omar for religious study in Egypt.

In the months following the launch of Sputnik 1 by the Soviet Union in October 1957, debates about the application of science in religious practice affecting Muslims resident in the southern hemisphere intensified even further. Like many at the time, the idea of a “man-made moon” floating above the earth caught the imagination of Zuleikha Mayat, who made space her *Indian Views* women’s column “Famida’s World” to engage with wit and sense of humour a matter becoming the source of fraught contestation among local religious and patriarchal expertise.<sup>29</sup>

Our learned Ulamas can still bicker over the birth of the moon despite the stupendous findings and forecastings of scientists. Let us play a prank next Ramadan Eid by getting a scientist friend to launch a crescent shaped satellite in [sic] the horizon say two days before Eid and see whether they observe it.

The so-called “New Moon Controversy” appeared as a series of articles in the *Indian Views* early in 1958, triggered by the fact that half of Durban’s Muslims began fasting on 11 March and the other half on 12 March. The debate, once again, focused on whether an orthodox sighting of the crescent

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28 MI Meer, “The curse called ‘Hilal Committee’”, *Indian Views*, 8 May 1957.

29 *Indian Views*, 16 October 1957.

moon by leaders situated at the geographical centre of Islam, procured by telescope, could subsequently be conveyed by means of radio and telephone to clergy in the global South. At stake was nothing less than the modern globalization of Islam and the centralization of its clerical authority.

An article titled “The Crescent Moon”, translated from Arabic to English, appeared in *Indian Views* on 8 April 1958. The author was Dr Abdur Rahman Taj, whose views and analysis the editors roundly endorsed, assuring readers of his expertise and qualifications: he was “no less a person than the Rector of the great Al-Azhar [University in Cairo] whose orthodoxy, piety and authority to speak of the *Shariat* laws could not be questioned.” As summarized by the editors, the article:<sup>30</sup>

... stresses the importance of demonstrating unity of Islam by commencing Ramadan and observing the important festivals like the Eids on one and the same day everywhere. The radio and progress in astronomy make it possible for us to do so to-day and there is nothing in the *Shariat* of Islam which could operate as a superstitious taboo to deprive us of the benefits of either.

Following the quoting of the Qu’ran on the Prophet’s injunction to begin and end fasting at the sighting of the crescent, the author first explained the current dilemma as one of geography. The “serious difference to reconcile”, he explained, emerged from the fact that the sighting of the new crescent in some regions was “impossible”.<sup>31</sup> This raised the question of whether those regions should “be allowed to rely on the information received from the regions that have sighted the crescent and commence to fast with them, thereby showing unanimity in the performance of one of the most important religious duties”.

Taj related that according to the “opinion of the Mazhabs”, the “Imams from the four schools of thought”, time zone differences should not impede a unified global fast. Moreover, the article argued, the “spirit” of the tradition to fast with the sighting of the moon was in no way affected. He concluded that this evidence should be:

... amply sufficient for the fast to become obligatory on the people of one region when they receive news of the sighting of the moon from another region. There is no difference between one region and another when it comes to the sighting of the crescent, just as there is no difference between one town and another in the same region.

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30 MI Meer, “The crescent moon”, *Indian Views*, 8 April 1958.

31 The author provides an example that demonstrates the capacity of Astronomers, as well as “Hijazis and Egyptians”, to sight the new crescent just after sunset when those further East “e.g., India and Indonesia” do not see it until the next night “bigger in size and higher on the horizon” and therefore not a new crescent.

Maulanas in Durban were not in agreement with Taj. Nor, quite naturally, did they represent a united front in agreement with each other. *Indian Views* acted opportunistically to publicize dissent. In the same issue that Taj's article appear, an article in the *Views* announced that Maulana Abu Baker Katieb, Imam of the Grey Street Jumma Mosque, and Maulana Abdur Rehman Ansari, the Imam of the West Street Mosque, had "agreed before a large gathering of Muslims in Durban... that news of the new moon broadcast [by specific radio stations] should be accepted".<sup>32</sup> However, this was a somewhat misleading representation of much more reluctant and concessionary statements. The meeting had been organized by the Arabic Study Circle and the Maulanas had appeared as panelists to provide answers to specific questions – or rather, to an argument – laid out carefully point by point by the chairman in regard to the issue at hand: if it "was acceptable to the 100 million Muslims of the Indo-Pak subcontinent" why not to Muslims in the Union? If the answer was proximity, this was invalid as "nearness in no way affects the validity of news about the new moon". Nor was the "clarity of reception" of radio communications going to be accepted as a valid objection the Maulanas might offer. Further, it was "true that in Cairo the new moon is seen through the telescope of the Government Observatory of Halwan, but no authority has as yet declared that there is anything wrong about doing this". Finally, the Maulanas were reminded:

... of the Fatwa most of them signed in 1934 declaring it as absolutely illegal and sinful to accept any news of the new moon conveyed over the telephone, by telegrams, letters or wireless. It now transpires that they were wrong in their judgment then and by their conduct to-day they tacitly acknowledge that their Fatwa of 1934 was a blunder. Before they answer the questions asked them to-day, we would beg them, in all humility, to ponder deeply and carefully lest they commit another such blunder.

Maulana Katieb's response was that the matter was out of their hands since the Ulamas in India had refused to accept telescopic sightings and "we in this country are subservient to them". While the Indian Ulama were decreed to be "very much advanced" in their "piety and strict observance of religion", Maulana Katieb suggested that perhaps they had not become "independent of thought to the requisite extent". He hoped that they would "become a trifle more progressive" but thought this would be a matter of time and patience. For his part, Maulana Ansari indicated a willingness to act on the matter if certain conditions were complied with. Committees of investigation "should

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32 MI Meer, "Important statements by Maulanas", *Indian Views*, 8 April 1958.

be appointed not only in this country but in the countries broadcasting the news” made up of people who “loved their religion” and who were sufficiently “trustworthy” to determine whether “those who claimed to have seen the new moon are people with some degree of faith; people with some fear of God; with some fear of what they are saying”. He was clear that the Durban Ulama “cannot accept such news in the ordinary manner. To accept news of the new moon heard on the radio in the ordinary manner is against our Islamic tradition”.

The issue of sensory knowledge was taken up in different ways in subsequent articles. The editor of *Indian Views* published his disagreement with Ansari’s declaration that manners of hearing could be deemed contrary to tradition. In an editorial appearing first in Gujarati and later in English, new scholarship was offered. Mediated ways of sighting and hearing of the new moon were not only not against Islamic tradition<sup>33</sup> but:<sup>34</sup>

... in perfect consonance with those traditions because it is written in that authoritative book of Islamic jurisprudence, the *Dur-e-Mukhtar*, Vol. 1, page 503: “The clear fact is that it becomes obligatory for people in the villages to commence fasting when they hear reports of canons fired in the city, or see the illumination of lights there, because such signals convince them that the new moon has been seen and anything of which one becomes convinced must be acted upon”. Similarly, Maulana Mohammed Abdul Hai has written in his *MAJMOO-E-FATAWA*, page 396: “If it be customary in a town to fire a canon on Eid day, and the sound is heard in the villages, the villages must break their fast [...], For similar reasons, it becomes obligatory to commence fasting when one hears canons fired to announce the Ramadan new moon”. If even in regard to things like canons and illuminations it is not required that acceptance of their testimony must depend on investigations carried out by two separate committees composed of semi-saintly personages, what right has anyone to impose such conditions on radio news?

On 20 May 1958, Dr Taj encouraged Muslims to accept the authority of astronomical science and not the naked eye:<sup>35</sup>

Why don’t the Muslims the world over accept the calculations of astronomers as an aid to minimize their task of sighting the moon. Their special knowledge

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33 *Radd al-Mukhtar ala ad-Dur al-Mukhtar* is a book on Islamic Jurisprudence [*Fiqh*] by eighteenth Scholar, Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Ameen ibn `Aabideen ash-Shaami. It means “The Answer to the Baffled” over “The Exquisite Pearl”. *Radd al Mukhtar* is a super commentary on Imam Ala’ al-Din al-Haskafi’s Islamic Jurisprudence book *Durr al-Mukhtar fi sharh Tanweer al Absaar*. It is widely considered as the central reference for fatwa in the Hanafi Madhab.

34 MI Meer, “The new moon controversy”, *Indian Views*, 22 April 1958.

35 MI Meer, “The Crescent Moon”, *Indian Views*, 20 May 1958.

can indeed assist them in ascertaining the correct position of the crescent and the period of its visibility on the horizon. For it often happens that without this people are looking for the crescent at random to the right and the left while the moon has already appeared and disappeared within a few minutes. Indeed Allah has made it easy for us in this age to sight the moon because of the modern scientific inventions that are at our disposal...The Shariat does not prevent us from utilizing [scientific] means which not only make it easier for us to sight the moon but which also make it possible to commence our great religious duty unitedly.

On 7 May, in a special text box, *Indian Views* published a letter from Moulvi Abdul Qadir Afriqui, Principal of Madressa Mazahir-ul-Ulum in Durban, which conveyed that after long and careful consideration, “it is best for us here in the Union to follow Egypt”. South Africa, he argued, was located along the same longitudinal meridian as Egypt and, further, “the *new moon* is personally sighted by the Shaik-ul-Azar by means of a telescope. News of the sighting of the new moon could be heard over “Cairo Radio” or “Voice of Arab”, and I assure you that it is authentic.”<sup>36</sup> With an appeal that connected the authority of technology to the trustworthiness of its users, he urged his colleagues to follow his lead.

In the months following the launch of Sputnik, the “new moon controversy”, as it appeared in *Indian Views*, comprised a challenge to local religious authority (conservative or traditional Ulama) by a sector of the Durban-based Muslim public (modernist members of the economic elite), waged through an opportunistic deployment of the alternative source of authority offered by innovations of space science. It raised theological issues and questions about the authenticity of evidence and of visual and aural verification, as well as highlighting a contest between regional loci of clerical power and authority in a context where South Africa was in the position of peripheral “village” in relation to the signals of the Islamic metropole. Into the next decade, however, local Ulama began to forge a platform of authority through the constructions of local institutions of Islamic learning. While this did not resolve the ambiguities around moon-sighting, it began to build leverage for local orthodox voices.

In 1962, Ismail Manjra of the Arabic StudyCircle, writing in the Cape-based *Muslim News*, again called for steps to be taken to stop this “useless controversy and confusion.” There was, he said:

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36 MI Meer, “Follow Egypt on Moon Question” (Italics original), *Indian Views*, 7 May 1958.

... only one solution to this problem and this is [that] we should accept Astronomical calculations in determining the appearance of the New Moon.... This appears to be the only sane solution to this unwarranted problem and a way of bringing about unanimity about Muslims.

Manjra argued the Muslims were pioneers in Astronomy and that the Qur'an did not forbid the use of Astronomy for calculating the months. The three madhabs (Schools of Law) of Islam that forbade Astronomical calculations (Hanafi, Malik, Hanbal) did so only because they did not believe that Astronomy was reliable. Since Astronomical calculations were now reliable, there was no reason not to use them. The fourth madhab, Shafi, was prepared to rely on astronomers as Imam Shafi considered computation as definite.<sup>37</sup>

The "moon problem" surfaced again in January 1965. Ismail M Meer, who replaced his father MI Meer as editor of *Indian Views* (now rebranded as *News and Views*) lamented the reality, as he saw it, that annually Muslims:

... are invariably subjected to humiliation, arising out of what is commonly known as the "Moon Controversy" [which] has on more than one occasion made Muslims not only laughing stock in the eyes of others but have created unfortunate incidents and dissension in the Muslim community itself.

Meer hoped that in the absence of a central national Muslim organisation, the Jamiat-Ulama in each province would make prior arrangements to arrive at a uniform decision and they should arrange with the national broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) to broadcast their decision during the 11 p.m. nightly news as well as the early morning news. If the Jamiats were incapable of such action, they should "readily admit their difficulties so the Muslim community may appoint a Hilal Committee for the purpose of this important work".<sup>38</sup> From this we can gather that the old Hilal committee had ceased to exist.

Despite Ismail Meer's warning, "unhappily the same old MOON STORY was repeated" as South African Muslims celebrated Eid on two different days in February 1965. Meer blamed the "narrow reasoning and interpretation of Hadees"<sup>39</sup> and the "refusal by Ulama to accept science for this chaotic state".

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37 IA Manjra, "The problem of sighting the new moon," *Muslim News*, 16 February 1962, p. 4. While most Muslims only seem concerned about the moon during Eid, Manjra is a man of his conviction and during an interview (18 August 2013) showed Goolam Vahed a book in which he meticulously records, at the beginning of each Islamic year, the birth of the moon for each month and compiles his own Islamic calendar. In 2013 he observed Eid on Thursday 8 August while the rest of his family observed the festival on 9 August.

38 IM Meer, "The moon problem again", *Views and News*, 29 January 1965.

39 Hadiths or traditions of the Prophet.



Meer thought it hypocritical that Maulanas accepted the word of astronomers for all purposes except moon sighting, when they “are so ‘moonstruck’ that we want to follow the rule of the word – ‘See the moon and observe your fast’ – and ‘see the moon and end your fast’”. Meer argued that it was not necessary for each Muslim to see the moon personally:<sup>40</sup>

It simply means if you are satisfied that the moon has been sighted or given birth then you should observe or end your fast. The moon could only be sighted if it has given birth and if it has given birth then it must be seen if not by you then by somebody else, if not in Durban then somewhere else. But the important thing is that it must have been visible – thus the most logical thing would be to base our reasons on birth of the moon, unless our Moulvies can prove to us that the Science of Astronomy is open to doubts.... The means are available in this modern age, and they must be employed instead of keeping hundreds of people waiting anxiously well past mid-night.

Several people wrote in to complain about moon controversy. One from “Muslim from Chatsworth”, the apartheid-created Indian township generally composed of working-class residents outside Durban, emphasized the:

... great difficulties the poorer section of the Muslim community have to undergo because of the unorganized manner in which the Jamiat Ulama carries on its activities in connection with the Eid and Ramadan moons. During the last Eid the maulanas made us wait until midnight before they decided that there was no moon anywhere to be seen and Durban would celebrate Eid-day on Thursday.

The letter urged the Jamiat to adopt the astronomical view in the interest of cross-class solidarity and a sensitivity for the different material conditions within contexts of poverty:<sup>41</sup>

The poor man must be taken into consideration, unlike our rich men in the community we do not have fridges in our homes, and in this time of summer all the food that our family prepares just goes waste. I do not know if my wealthy friends can appreciate this; but sir it is a fact that we save up months ahead for our Eid dinner, and when the Moulvies tell us past midnight that there will be no Eid – the food does not only go waste but we just don't have any more money to buy afresh for Eid. This is not any individual case, but the cases of many, and if our Molvie Sahib can take the trouble for coming to Chatsworth they may easily ascertain the position.

Two months later, in the 15 April 1965 issue of *Views and News*, Ismail Meer described the latest moon controversy as “little more than maddening”

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40 IM Meer, “The Moon,” Editorial, *Views and News*, 15 February 1965.

41 IM Meer, “Moon and the poor,” in “Express your opinion” column, *Views and News*, 15 February 1965.

because Muslims celebrated Eid on three different days for the festival of Bakri Eid: “This is indeed a sad reading for the followers of a religion which stresses more than any other religion uniformity and brotherhood.” He cited the example of an individual in Cape Town who sent his “Eid Mubarak message” to his brother in Durban. While the brother in Cape Town was celebrating Eid, his sibling was not. “Such is the ridiculous level to which we have carried our interpretation of perhaps the most simple, straight forward and common sense religion”.

During the mid-1940s, explained Meer, the Ulama had passed a ruling that only phone messages up to 500 miles away could be accepted, so even though messages were received from Kimberley and Cape Town that the moon had been sighted, this was not accepted in Natal. On this occasion the Ulama stated that they would accept a sighting from Cape Town, but when the news was received they described it as “unreliable”. Meer argued:<sup>42</sup>

If Kimberley and Cape Town had accepted the news of the sighting of the moon surely the molvies there must have taken all the care to see that the news was reliable. There are molvies there with turbans big and small and surely they would not accept any news that had a shadow of doubt. Then what were the reasons our molvies refused to accept the reliability of the Cape and Kimberley messages?

Meer was drawing attention to the suspicions about the “authenticity” of Malay Muslims held by Indian Muslims of Natal. Regional prejudice was indeed a factor that continued to inform these debates. In 1986, for example, the editor of *Majlis* an Eastern Cape newspaper, accused the Cape Town Ulama of lacking *Adl*, which is defined as “one who is devoid of habitually committing sins”, and of not being *Mastural Haal*, appearing to be pious but “whose character is now known”. They were accused of, among other things, shaving their beards, dressing in Western garb, watching television, and listening to music.<sup>43</sup>

Moon matters were again raised during the 1966 visit of Professor Yusuf Ibish,<sup>44</sup> a guest of the Arabic Study Circle from the American University of Beirut, who attracted large audiences during his stay in Durban. Ismail Meer called on his readers to “ponder over some of the Professor’s observations on subjects that have become controversial in our midst”. In particular was

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42 IM Meer, “The confusion around us on Eid and Ramadan,” *Views and News*, 15 April 1965.

43 Anon., Editorial, “Cape Town Ulama no good,” *Al Balaagh*, November/December 1986, p. 6.

44 Also appears as Ibish.

the “moon question” on which the Professor “made some very alarming observations”. Alarming to Meer Ibish’s adamance that Muslims should see the moon with their own eyes and then celebrate Eid even if this would result in them observing the festival on different days. Meer expressed his disagreement:<sup>45</sup>

The Professor’s dismissing of the importance of uniformity in the celebration of our national occasion is to my mind again not in true Islamic tradition. Islam more than any other religion emphasises the importance of uniformity, oneness, universality and brotherhood. And indeed it would be foolish to deny that in the celebration of our national festivals it would not be better if Muslims throughout the world observed a uniformity.

Whilst modernist maintained a strong position and voice into the middle 1960s, the sentiments of people like Meer became increasingly marginal from the late 1960s onwards. The Ulama strengthened their hold on Muslim society in Natal, through the construction of local institutions of learning and in the context of a larger, global revival of orthodox religious perspectives. There would still be be disputation over moon sightings but now it would not be between “modernists” and “traditionalists”, but between Islamic reformists inspired by Deobandi / Tabligh ideas and followers of what was referred to as populist Islam.

### ***Moon sighting disputes: Post-1970s***

The period from the 1970s saw those representing a ‘modernist’ perspective losing ground as conservative Islamic tendencies took strong root among Muslims. During the 1970s and 1980s, organisations such as the Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) and the Muslim Students Association (MSA), which took the baton from the Circle, had some influence among younger Muslims,<sup>46</sup> but the mass of Muslims became more inclined towards traditional Ulama aligned to what can broadly be termed Deobandi and Barelwi traditions. The former originated in the educational institution established at Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, in the 1860s. Its Ulama responded to British dominance by seeking to transform spiritual life through “purifying” Islamic practices. They sought to eradicate practices located in more mystical traditions such as visitation of saints’ shrines, observing certain public festivals, adopting “Islamic” dress, simplifying

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45 IM Meer, “Editorial, Prof Ibish,” *The Views and News*, 15 July 1966, p. 1.

46 A Tayob, *Islamic resurgence in South Africa. The Muslim youth movement* (Cape Town, UCT Press, 1995).

funeral rites and marriage ceremonies, and other practices that they saw as “ancestral” and populist expressions of religious faith.<sup>47</sup>

However, a populist Islam, referred to broadly as the Barelwi tradition because its intellectual articulation was crystallised in Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh,<sup>48</sup> continued to resonate with large numbers of Muslims. This tradition was given organisational expression through the Sunni Jamiatul Ulama of South Africa, established in 1978 and the Imam Ahmed Raza Academy, formed in 1986. Differences between Deobandis and Barelwis manifested in violence in the 1970s and 1980s, centred around attempts by each group to seize control of mosques. One result is that most towns had two mosques, one controlled by Barelwis and the other by Deobandis. On several occasions during this period the festival of Eid was celebrated on different days, as Deobandis did not accept sightings by Barelwis and vice-versa. One example was 1986, when the moon was sighted by individuals who can be described as Barelwi at Hazelmere near Verulam on the north coast of Natal. While Barelwi groupings accepted the sighting and celebrated Eid, Deobandis rejected the sighting.<sup>49</sup>

These later twentieth century decades witnessed the establishment of local Darul Ulooms and the emergence of locally trained Maulanas, an embracing of neo-Sufi tendencies, and more visible expressions of Islam in all aspects of people’s lives, including diet, education, holiday choices, and finance. While there are many shades and lines of difference amongst Muslims in terms of their practices, in this period there began to be a widespread move towards adherence to the orthodoxy and authority of Ulama.<sup>50</sup>

Disputes over moon sighting reflected this trend. During August 1986, for example, Muslims in KwaZulu-Natal (Natal Jamiatul Ulama) and Cape Town (Muslim Judicial Council) celebrated Eid-al-Adha on 16 August and their counterparts in the Transvaal on the following day. Maulana Yunus Patel, of the Jamiatul Ulama Natal, said that the Jamiat accepted moon sightings anywhere in South Africa and that they had informed their Transvaal counterparts, “but for reasons best known to them, it was not accepted”.<sup>51</sup>

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47 BD Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1982).

48 U Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and politics in British India. Ahmed Riza Khan and his movement, 1870-1920* (Delhi, Oxford, 1996).

49 G Vahed, “Contesting ‘Orthodoxy’: The Tablighi-Sunni conflict among South African muslims in the 1970s and 1980s”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 23(2), 2003, pp. 313-334, 2005, for a detailed discussion of the origins, causes and course of this conflict.

50 A Tayob, *Islam in South Africa...*

51 A Akhalwaya, “Muslim trustees resign over Eid row,” *Post Natal*, 20 August 1986.

There was a repeat of this in 1988 when most Muslims in South Africa began observing the month of Ramadan on 18 April while the Transvaal Jamiatul Ulama ruled that there was no reliable sighting of the moon and began fasting on 19 April. Maulana Basheer Sanjalvi of the Transvaal Jamiat said that his organisation did not follow sightings from the other provinces.<sup>52</sup> The monthly Islamic newspaper *Al-Balaagh* noted the irony that Maulana Sanjalvi, who said that he would stick rigidly to Islamic principles, had no problem accepting provincial geographical borders created by non-Muslims. The article pointed to the anomaly that if the new moon was sighted in Volksrust, which was in Natal but on the Transvaal border, it would be binding on a town like Warrenton, 700 kilometres away, but not on Charlestown, two kilometres away but on the Transvaal side.

Some Muslims argued for unity not only in South Africa but globally. During July 1989, Sheikh Abubakr Najaar of Cape Town, who was president of the Islamic Council of South Africa (ICSA), a body formed in the 1970s in an attempt to unite South African Muslims,<sup>53</sup> called on Muslims to observe Eid on Thursday, in line with the Eid celebration in Saudi Arabia. Sheikh Najaar said that he wanted South African Muslims to “extend our vision beyond the boundaries of South Africa”. However, most Muslims rejected the call, insisting on local sightings, and celebrated Eid on Friday. Sheikh Najaar said he was not perturbed by the lack of support for this call as it would take “time and education” to get the Muslim masses to follow suit.<sup>54</sup> The MJC, led by Sheik Nazeem Mohamed, insisted that they would follow the “traditional way – when the moon is sighted”.<sup>55</sup> In 1990, Sheik Najaar again called on Muslims to observe Eid on the same day as Saudi Arabia. South Africa’s Muslims rejected his call.<sup>56</sup>

In an attempt to unite Muslims and speak with one voice to the post-apartheid state, the major theological bodies in South Africa, such as the Jamiatul Ulama South Africa and KZN, the Muslim Judicial Council

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52 ASK Joomal, “Hilaal controversy. Ramadan moon splits Muslims”, *Al-Balaagh*, May/June 1988, p. 3.

53 ICSA was formed in November 1975 marked when 109 organisations met during a visit to South Africa by Dr Inamullah Khan of the World Muslim Congress and Abdul Muhsin Al-Shaykh of Saudi Arabia. The first office-bearers of ICSA included Advocate AB Mahomed (President), Maulana Ansari (Vice-President) and Advocate I Bawa (Secretary General). Of the major Muslim bodies the Transvaal Jamiat did not join because it held the view that only Ulama, not professionals, could speak for Muslims. The Ulama and professionals disagreed on many issues, which muted ICSA’s effectiveness.

54 F Moodley, “Thursday or Friday? Muslims again split on when to celebrate the festival of sacrifice”, *Post*, 12 July 1989.

55 Staff reporter, “New call in battle over date of Eid,” *Cape Times*, 3 July 1989.

56 S Isaacs, “City Muslims split over Eid celebration,” *Cape Argus*, 26 June 1990.

(MJC), the Sunni Jamiatul Ulama and Sunni Ulama Council, representing both Deobandis and Barelwis, formed the United Ulama Council of South Africa (UUCSA) in 1994. One of UUCSA's aims has been to achieve the common celebration of Eid. UUCSA constituted a Central Hilal Committee comprising of two members from each of its seven affiliate organisations. Yet, there continue to be disputes amongst Muslims.

During 2014 some Muslims objected to UUCSA's declaring 28 July as Eid and observed the festival on 29 July. Dissenters pointed to astronomical bodies suggesting that it would be impossible to sight the moon; others questioned whether the moon sighting testimony could be accepted. Maulana Afthab Cassim of the Sparks Road Mosque in Overport, for example, stated that testimony could not be accepted by Sunnis (Barelwis) because the witnesses were of Deobandi background. In view of the resulting controversy, including the publication of derogatory pamphlets, Maulana Sulaaiman Ravat hosted Maulana Ibrahim Bham, Coordinator of the Hilal Committee, and Shaykh Taha Karaan of the MJC, on his show on iTV (Islamic Television) on 28 August 2014 to discuss the controversy.

Maulana Bham emphasised that South Africa's Muslims had made "great strides" since the 1980s when the community was divided by ideology. He told Maulana Ravat: "We have come together despite our differences and have made collective decisions for our mutual benefit. It is amazing that we can collaborate despite our differences in the past". He called on Muslims to "put their foot down and shun the extremists who want to fragment the ummah for their own motives". Maulana Bham was pleased that the majority of Muslims had observed Eid on the same day. Three issues were discussed on the programme: Does the moon have to be sighted with the naked eye? Can South Africans accept moon sightings in another southern African country? Should Muslims globally follow a common lunar month for the sake of Islamic unity?

Maulana Bham and Shaykh Karaan were adamant that the moon has to be sighted with the naked eye. They explained the stringent procedure to verify a moon sighting. A person who sights the moon with the naked eye has to testify (*Shahaadah*) the sighting to a local Imam who completes a Shahaadah Form, which is then forwarded it to the regional Hilaal committee. It is verified and sent to the coordinator of the national Hilaal Committee of UUCSA who arranges a teleconference of affiliate members to discuss the sighting. The decision is announced on Islamic Radio channels, via SMS text messaging to

affiliates, written notices on mosque boards, and information on the UUCSA website. New media allows the word to circulate in a manner unforeseen even in the late twentieth century. During the July 2014 Eid, which was disputed, Maulana Ravat and Shaykh Karaan pointed out that the moon was sighted by almost thirty people in seven places in Gauteng - Bekkersdal, North Riding, Mayfair and Lenasia South. Each witness was questioned by Imams and gave written testimonies. Shaykh Karaan added that the process was thorough: “caesarean births of the moon do not exist”.

On the question of moon sightings from other southern African countries, Maulana Bham said that they could not accept those sightings as the procedures to verify moon sightings in those countries were not as stringent as in South Africa. Meanwhile, Shaykh Karaan said that although the world was becoming a global village it would not make sense to follow a common lunar calendar based on Makkah. He said that the call “has merit, unity is good, but striving for unity should not be so absolute that it overrides all other factors. We need a foundation on which basis everyone can unite. Unity should be based on something stronger than the aspiration of leadership of certain countries. We can’t tie the right to lead the Ummah to one country.” Shaykh Karaan described it as “farcical” that people wanted to base the global Muslim unity on something “shallow” like moon sighting when “parts of the ummah was suffering in Burma, Gaza, and other places without any Muslim country raising this issue. This unity (on lunar calendar) means nothing when bigger issues are at stake”.

## **Conclusion**

At this writing, the current consensus amongst the overwhelming majority of Muslims in South Africa is that sighting of the moon with the naked eye is the only legitimate way to determine the start of a new Islamic month. Sightings are accepted within South Africa but not beyond its borders. Given the outcome of past contestations there is a strong possibility that Muslims will one day accept moon sightings beyond South Africa’s borders. It is highly unlikely, however, that most Muslims will accept observatory calculations in order to unify the beginning of lunar months globally, even though the idea of a global Ummah holds great appeal. Air pollution, aircraft and satellites sometimes make it difficult to sight the moon with the naked eye, and Muslims have no problem accepting observatory calculations and making use

of modern technological advances for other aspects of their faith, such as calculating prayer times.

In Natal, over the course of the twentieth century, new technology has been incrementally accepted to convey news of moon sightings (telephone, telegraph, radio, cellphones) while the geographical area in which sightings are accepted has gradually expanded. Key issues continue to be raised and debated. Should Muslims observe festivals and the Hajj (pilgrimage) on the same day globally to reflect Muslim unity? Should Muslims only accept sightings with the naked eye? How far geographically can moon sightings be transferred? Whilst there was a period in the mid-twentieth century when advocates of science and astronomy were vocal, once the Ulama organised themselves institutionally and reformist Islamic tendencies began to make extend their influence, the influence of modernist ideas retreated.

The debates about lunar dates and moon sightings recounted in this article reflect the changing views and bases of authority regarding Qur'anic interpretation in the face of scientific innovation and about the reliability of technologies. The highlight changes in how faultlines have been drawn and redrawn around the sensory trustworthiness and religious authenticity imagined between different groups of Muslims, on the basis of both regional or doctrinal criteria. In this history, we can also see transformations in the sources and nature of authority drawn upon to legitimate claims about Islamic truths, and how these articulate with local and global politics, in a world where the stakes have remained high and are perhaps on the increase.