

Review Forum

New histories of education in South Africa: in conversation with Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen's *Schooling Muslims in Natal*

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Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen's *Schooling Muslims in Natal* is an achievement on multiple levels. Over some 400 vividly-illustrated pages, it details the origins, struggles, and significance of a Durban institution that has become a regional centre of social life for South Africans of South Asian descent and for other Muslim South Africans. The Orient Islamic School officially opened in 1960, on an attractive modern campus just outside Durban's Botanical Gardens. It has since educated over 8,000 men and women, many of whom went on to become doctors, lawyers, business leaders, and educators (Vahed is himself an alumnus). The Orient School was a progressive institution: a place where teachers devotedly provided instruction in both Islam and secular subjects, preparing students of colour to engage confidently with a world beyond, at the height of apartheid. Its history is worth telling as an end in itself. But taken together with other recent histories, this study becomes even more interesting, explaining differences and illuminating unexpected similarities between 'Indian' and 'African' education in KwaZulu-Natal's history.

Vahed and Waetjen are among a growing number of scholars who are looking beyond familiar narratives of black student resistance, to also examine *how* and *why* increasing numbers of black youth were going to school in the apartheid years. Most of us have addressed this question for African students, and many of us have approached these questions through institutional studies.¹ Here, I briefly place *Schooling Muslims in Natal* in conversation with my 2013 study on another major school in KwaZulu-Natal: Inanda Seminary, the Congregationalist boarding high school that

has educated African girls from 1869 through the present.² Together, these studies suggest a more expansive approach to the history of ‘student politics’: organised protest was not the only means of subverting apartheid visions of education. Through institutional histories that stretch before apartheid, we see the longer community and individual histories of striving for education that both strategically worked within and quietly challenged apartheid categories.

Schooling Muslims tellingly begins with a scene from the school’s April 1960 opening ceremonies, when businessman AM Moolla addressed a crowd of parents, Muslim dignitaries, and government officials. Moolla described the long history that had produced the Orient School, explaining how the Orient Islamic Educational Institute that he chaired had struggled for decades to fund and find a site to build their dream school, facing growing discrimination against Indians. Moolla and his peers – also men from entrepreneurial South Asian Muslim families who had emigrated to South Africa in the late nineteenth century – were inspired by the Aligarh model that had developed in Victorian India. As Vahed and Waetjen explain, this model combined Islamic instruction with a British public school curriculum, by which Muslim men could ‘secure high posts in government and the professions so that they could contribute to policy-making, shape their destiny and meet the British as political equals’: in other words, its graduates would work through colonial structures to empower themselves and their communities (9). Turning to officials, Moolla made clear that the Orient School also intended to work through state structures rather than rejecting them: he asked for an increase in state aid for this and other schools in the ‘Indian Community’, and even hoped that government officials would ‘eventually take over the whole responsibility of this work that is so essential to the ordering of a sound society’ (quoted on 5).

This scene surprised me at first glance, as contemporary dynamics between state officials and school leaders at Christian mission schools for African students were so different. Under the terms of the Bantu Education Act of 1953, most of the mission schools that had fostered a tiny and tenuous African elite for the past century were forced to close, or were taken over by the state. The American Board, which ran Inanda Seminary, resisted this policy forcefully at its schools, as leaders feared that the end of mission schools would mean the end of the visions of Christian equality and black achievement that they had nurtured. While the

American Board lost its coeducational flagship Adams College to state control, officials allowed them to operate Inanda Seminary as a private institution through the apartheid years. This was a symbolic victory for liberal Christians, attracting girls from progressive families across the country to Inanda. These students included not only Zulu speakers, but also students of all major African ethnic groups and some mixed-race students, and members of all denominations; faculty were ethnically, nationally, and religiously diverse.

These different stakes of state funding make sense in light of how Indian and African citizenship figured very differently in apartheid visions of ‘separate development’. Bantu Education reflected the idea that Africans did not belong in ‘white South Africa’ except as workers; schools would principally be built in the rural ‘reserves’; as these developed into ethnic bantustans, Africans would be alienated from South African citizenship. Apartheid was about denying that African people belonged in white-controlled South Africa. Yet as the Orient School opened, government officials were newly beginning to assert that Indians were South Africans: the Department of Indian Affairs was formed a year after the Orient School, following a major official assertion that “‘Asiatics’ were a permanent part of the South African population’ (278). Moolla may have been sensing that Indians could use state funding to their own ends, in their efforts to make claims to South African citizenship.

By the 1970s, the Orient School and Inanda Seminary had basically similar relationships with state officials, which both schools used to advance the interests of students of colour in a racist state. Orient was a public school on private property, while Inanda was a private school on private property. But both were subject to frequent school inspections and meddling. At Inanda, KwaZulu leader Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi became a regular presence: he sent his daughters to the school and served on Inanda’s Governing Council, even as the school was never run by his bantustan. He personally raised funds from American corporations to support Inanda. Both schools thus used state-derived aid – formal or informal – to support their institutions. And both campuses countered apartheid ideologies, even as they worked through state structures. In both cases, this was possible because histories of community defined by diversity and visions of social uplift survived from the years before apartheid, and adapted to subvert a changing racist state.

Both of our books devote about half of the manuscript to the years before apartheid: this is particularly striking in Vahed and Waetjen's case, as the school was founded in 1960! Their long pre-history demonstrates not only how difficult it was to access physical space for the school in segregationist South Africa, where powerful whites did not want Indians to belong – but also how Indian South Africans forged a complex shared identity rooted in religious, regional, and class diversity. Because of the continuing paucity of educational opportunities for Indians, and the calibre of the Orient School's secular curriculum, the school attracted Hindu and Christian Indian students from its start. Its enrollment in 1960 comprised 148 Muslims, and 109 non-Muslims (300). This reminded me of Inanda's diversity.

As at Inanda, Orient's diverse students, and their families, were united by a desire for the uplift – moral and political – of Indian South Africans, working toward an anti-racist world. This desire, rooted in a long history of civic mobilisation as emblematised in the Orient Islamic Educational Institute, was expressed in the Orient Primary School prayer, which asked Allah to '[...] Increase us in knowledge and wisdom and cause us to light the torch of learning./Grant us the strength to be true to you, to ourselves and our fellow men, irrespective of race, colour or creed' (231). This prayer resonates strikingly with Inanda's school motto, which emerged in the segregationist years and endures today: 'Shine where you are'. That motto resonates with Philippians 2:15: 'That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world'. Importantly, both schools' calls for black students to be torchbearers, shining the light of knowledge in a racist world, reflect deep community histories in which education represented a transcendent, transformative force.

Vahed and Waetjen, like me, see such educational commitment as political – subverting apartheid ideas of internally-divided and incomparable Indian and African communities, by instilling a commitment to pluralism with an underlying universalism. This commitment to diversity extended to gender. Certainly there were major differences between our schools here: Inanda was modeled on Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in the United States, which promoted women training girls from modest backgrounds as Christian teachers; Orient was, as we have seen, rooted in a more elitist model of education, conceived of by male entrepreneurs. The Orient School comprised a coeducational primary school and an all-

male high school until 1984, at which point its high school went coeducational (288). But both of our studies show how girls' education was seen to transform families, thereby changing society. Both studies highlight how the apartheid years were the period in which, for the first time, significant numbers of girls matriculated and entered university, often training as teachers and medical professionals (320-6).

The rise and endurance of both schools raise questions about, as Vahed and Waetjen write, 'what counts as political struggle' (398). Orient did see some engagement in what we might call 'Politics with a capital P'. Some students supported national protest movements, participating in boycotts against Bantu Education early in the school's history, and accelerating this activism after 1976 (318-20). There was the case of a banner for the 1971 celebrations of Republic Day that went conspicuously missing (316). But it seems that most Orient students were far from firebrands. For one thing, at the height of student protests and boycotts in the 1970s and 1980s, they generally stayed in school: reading, writing, debating, and praying together. Yet Vahed and Waetjen suggest that while most Orient students were not explicitly political in the way of the students who led the Soweto protests in 1976, their education enabled them to think more critically about the society around them. As alumnus Saleem Badat put it, his favourite history teacher 'subverted apartheid by making us think of history in other ways' (316). Such pedagogy could have potential for students' future engagement in politics with a capital P: Badat, for instance, became a prominent activist at university. But students' engagement in critical thinking within apartheid-era institutions does not only become politically interesting when it manifests in later expressions of organised protest.

In the histories of places like the Orient School and Inanda Seminary, we see vividly the everyday politics of schooling under apartheid: staff, students, and families drew on strong community identities, at tension with the definitions of community proffered by apartheid officials, to create new generations of leaders. We need more comparative studies that explain how this everyday form of politics worked through and beyond differences of class, race, and region.

Notes

1. Recent studies include Daniel Magaziner (2016), Clive Glaser (2015), Mark Hunter (2014), and Sello Mathabatha (2005). See also for instance, Baruch Hirson (2016). On protests, see also Mokubung Nkomo (1984), Jonathan Hyslop (1999), and Julian Brown (2016).
2. See Meghan Healy-Clancy (2013).

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