

Review Forum

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

Daniel Magaziner

daniel.magaziner@yale.edu

The Orient Islamic Educational Institute opened its doors in 1960, near the Durban Botanic Gardens. Its building had been carefully designed to suit a preeminent institution of Islamic education for Natal's Indian community. 'A building is the image of the character of its builders', asserted AM Moolla, the prominent businessman who had chaired the Orient Institute's long quest to build its home. The building was indeed revealing. Its central and rightmost sections – housing the administration block and the school hall – demonstrate two essential aspects of mid-twentieth century South African modernism. The former is a modern edifice through and through: concrete and glass, a neat, well-proportioned box of strong verticals, framed with a flat, unornamented roof and a sunshade extending above street level. Indeed, the *brise-soleil* of recurring circles that adorns the school's entrance would not have looked out of place in a post-colonial Africa that was then building such structures with abandon. (See, for example, the similarly adorned administration block then under construction at the University of Nairobi.)¹

But it was the low-slung hall, immediately adjacent to the administration block, that revealed the school's distinctly South African modernist credentials. Here, the roofline was rounded and less severe and the cement façade broken up by geometric patterns executed in brick. As Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen describe it in their marvelous new book, *Schooling Muslims in Natal: identity, state and the Orient Islamic Institute*, 'the dramatic frontage of the school hall was designed in a motif of stylized Kufic lettering [...] "reproduced from Persian manuscripts"'.

The homage to classical Islamic antecedents was reinforced within the hall itself. Like the overall building, the hall boasted a state of the art AV system and fixtures, while also proudly proclaiming its sectarian and religious identity on its doors, above which ‘a framed section of *Ka’bah* covering, bearing an inscription [...] with rounded letters from the Qur’an’ greeted students as they filed in for school functions (213). If this building revealed the character of its builders, then it was apparent who they were: proud Muslims, proud Indians, proud modernists, confident that in this artfully designed building future generations of the same would be prepared to face the challenges of their future.

Which is what the apartheid government aspired for them as well. One of the conceits of apartheid modernism was that each community – whether Bantu, European or ‘Asiatic’ – needed to develop ‘modernity’ on its own terms.² As the Natal administrator put it at the ceremony marking the Orient Institute’s opening, the government and the community common purpose was ‘to preserve intact, even if we add to, the legacy of the past’ (185). Over the past few years, education historians have revealed how interwar South African educationists laid the groundwork for the apartheid education system by calling for the country’s mission-derived education system to be ‘adapted’ to the needs of its various population groups. Building off of the work of George Armstrong and Booker T Washington in the American South, as well as experiments elsewhere in the colonial world, educational theorists argued that schools ought not to be homogenising machines, but instead tools with which different communities might preserve their unique ‘cultural genius’ amidst colonial modernity.³ Education for difference was largely abandoned in the wake of World War II, as restive colonised populations began to demand equivalence, not particularism, and only the rare African country pursued such a course in the wake of independence (here Senegal and Tanzania are notable). Yet as apartheid stretched into its second and third decades, its theorists and supporters kept the old dream of sectarian education alive.⁴

This story about African (and to some extent, white) education in South Africa is relatively well known. Vahed and Waetjen’s rich and compelling study considers the Indian and Muslim variant of this story, while also doing so much more. My colleagues (see other reviews in the review forum section of this edition) have already noted that one of this book’s most valuable traits is how carefully and exhaustively Vahed and Waetjen lay out the Orient Institute’s winding path to its opening in 1960. So doing,

they demonstrate how in the first decades of the twentieth century, relatively wealthy and well-positioned members of Natal's Indian community aspired to develop schools where their children might be educated to be 'progressive as Muslims' (23-24). Theirs was a story of colonial aspiration not dissimilar from that woven as close as Dube's Ohlange Institute elsewhere in Natal, and as far away as Achimota College in the Gold Coast or – more apposite to their particular cultural identity – Aligarh College in Uttar Pradesh. Each institution catered to a community wary of seeing its own unique traditions, social mores and practices dissolved in the stew of Empire, while also insisting that theirs were communities capable of co-managing the imperial enterprise.⁵ What became cultural relativism was a progressive form of assertion by the colonised that their distinct values and practices were equal to those of humanity's erstwhile masters.

In this, the merchants, businessmen, religious leaders and others who founded the Orient Islamic Institute stood on firm footing. Vahed and Waetjen guide us as the various parties invested in a 'South African Aligarh', navigated the tricky terrain of race, real estate and spatial segregation (which is to say, white rivalry and jealousy) that saw the Institute relocated from the Bluff to central Durban at the end by the 1950s (101). By the time the school opened its doors to students in 1960, its founders' once-progressive agenda of cultural distinctiveness was marred by its association with the apartheid government's own insistence on preserving difference. The story of the school that unfolds thereafter is thus a story of accommodation and 'negotiations with the state', and only rarely the oft-told tale of students, teachers and a community resisting the dictates of the apartheid education system.⁶ Indeed, *Schooling Muslims in Natal* sits squarely within a vital new historiography of education in South Africa, studies which resist the temptation to cherry-pick resistance and subversion and instead unpack the much more revealing, uncomfortable and hopelessly compromised history of learning under white supremacy. (Along with Vahed and Waetjen's volume, the work of my colleague in this review forum, Meghan Healy-Clancy, perhaps best exemplifies this nascent scholarship. See also Healy-Clancey 2013.)

Which is to say that *Schooling Muslims in Natal* is precisely the sort of study that marks South African historiography's recent coming of age, the 'post-anti-apartheid' historiography for which Catherine Burns has called.⁷ To be sure, there are vital acts of capital 'P' political resistance

here, especially as the narrative moves past 1976 to the stridently contested days of the 1980s, but there is also much that reveals the normal stuff of schooling in an abnormal society: discipline, sport, arts and crafts, religious instruction, pride, nostalgia for when one was young and occasionally made noise during the singing of *Die Stem* or purloined some flags on Republic Day. For better or worse, this is what the daily life in apartheid South Africa was like, a story told here the vantage point of a well-meaning institution, created by history, unable to choose its context or the sympathies of its ideological fellow-travellers.

I have already noted how *Schooling Muslims* bases its analysis of the Orient Institute on the decades before the school's founding. One of the book's great virtues is that this expansive chronology also extends past apartheid to the school's present existence as an independent Islamic school. Vahed and Waetjen detail how since 1994 the Orient Institute has come to emphasise the 'Islamic' in its name by re-emphasising its religious identity as an independent school, for the first time beyond government control. It is both ironic and quite telling that the alliance between the state and the Institute fractured with apartheid's end. From its progressive roots within the British Empire to its insistence that education for Indian children demanded the cultivation and preservation of the Muslim Indian identity, the Orient Institute had long flowed with the current of the South African state's interest and educational goals. Yet majority rule in South Africa cleaved this alliance, with the concomitant ascendance of English language homogenisation, lax discipline, shifting gender identities and sexual mores, and the ubiquity of global media once again threatening to dissolve distinct cultural identities.

The maintenance of difference is no longer the state's concern, but it remains the community's. Vahed and Waetjen's narrative closes with the arrival of the Orient Institute's newest principal – a white man – an Afrikaner – and a conservative Christian: which is to say, another once insider whose traditions and values now make him an outsider. As skilled authors, they embrace this narrative twist as a satisfying ending to a story that continues beyond the covers of their book. It is a testament to Vahed and Waetjen's tremendous talents as historians that this unexpected twist also makes perfect sense.

Notes

1. For a widespread survey of architecture elsewhere in Africa during this period, see Manuel Herz (ed) (2015). For architecture under apartheid, begin with Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavic (eds) (1999). See also Clive Chipkin (2008).
2. For more, see specifically chapters 2 and 3 in Magaziner (2016).
3. Ranging backwards in time, see CT Loram (1917) and Andrew Zimmerman (2012).
4. On Senegal, see Elizabeth Harney (2004); on Tanzania, Andrew Ivaska (2011).
5. On the possibilities of education and co-management, see Gary Wilder (2015).
6. A historiography to which my colleagues have cited, see Julian Brown's (2016) recent book, *The Road to Soweto*, which demonstrates how the anti-apartheid historiography of education is resurgent amidst today's student protest movements.
7. See Catherine Burns (2007).

References

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