H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Shamil Jeppie. *Language, Identity, Modernity: The Arabic Study Circle of Durban.* Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007. 136 pp. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7969-2175-8.

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Published on H-SAfrica (May, 2008)

Inscribing a Circle

Language, Identity, Modernity is a path-breaking and fascinating study of a little-known but, on the author's showing, influential group, the Arabic Study Circle, which emerged around 1950 in Durban, South Africa. Founded by literate Gujarati-speaking Muslims of merchant and professional backgrounds, it had as its seemingly modest goal the encouragement of the study of Arabic for a better understanding of the Koran. Arabic was not then widely known and spoken in South Africa. Indeed, in Durban, the language for teaching and studying Islam was Urdu. Thus in this context, the Circle's mission was innovative and even radical. At that time, prayers at the mosque were led chiefly by Urdu-speaking 'ulama' from South Asia. In this regard, Durban differed from Cape Town, which had an older and different Islamic tradition and whose Muslims were primarily Afrikaans speaking. Thus, although the Circle's purpose was linguistic enhancement, the end was a religious one.

Veterans of the Circle encouraged Shamil Jeppie, a member of the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Cape Town, to undertake this study. Jeppie interviewed several surviving participants and drew on the circle's unorganized archives. He offers an outsider's perspective on the group's personalities and activities.

Organizationally the Circle kept a fairly low profile and underwent few changes in its composition. The same founder members continued to guide it, a "circle of friends," and it had the same president, Dr. Daoud Saleh Mall, for fifty years. Dr. Mall, who was a respected pioneer in psychiatric treatment in Durban, had a non-confrontational style and dealt quietly with the various crises faced by the Circle over the years. Over time, as the author notes, the aging Circle enjoyed diminishing appeal to younger Muslims. Other organizations emerged, and one of the many merits of this book is to show how these entities were inter-related.

The apartheid regime apparently regarded its activities as benign and uncontroversial: indeed the author speculates that it may have been seen as a "showcase" example of cultural diversity under apartheid.

The Circle itself published little, except a short-lived periodical, *al Mu'minum.* The latter is indeed mentioned in Muhammed Haron's excellent *Muslims in South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography* (1997), but there appear to be no further references to the Circle in that publication.[1]

An early and very successful initiative of the Circle was the sponsorship of annual speech-giving contests given in English on Islamic themes. These were very popular and widely attended. There were separate contests for male and female students, later combined. The contests were held in secular halls, and were open to non-Muslim competitors. They were conducted over several decades, and by the 1980s topics had expanded to cover contemporary events, including apartheid-related subjects.

Thus the Circle, as the author emphasizes, had the unintentional effect of also furthering prowess in English ability, as well as that in Arabic. Indeed its very name was in English, and its records were in English.

The Circle also encouraged the adoption of Arabic and Islamic studies courses at the University of Durban-Westville, initially an Indian-only institution under South Africa's university apartheid scheme. By the mid-1970s, both Arabic and Islamic studies were launched there and thus a major purpose of the Circle had been achieved. Enrollments grew rapidly. Ironically none of the founders ever became proficient in Arabic or notable Islamic scholars.

The sponsoring of distinguished Islamic scholars as speakers was also a Circle priority. Visitors were invited from the Lebanon, Egypt, France and especially Pakistan. None came from India because of the Indian government's boycott of the South African regime. Perhaps the most controversial of these was Joseph Perdu, already

resident in South Africa, and active in Cape Town. Invited to Durban in 1954, "Monsieur" Perdu proved to be a persuasive and charismatic speaker, a challenging gadfly, well-versed in the Koran and *hadith*, drawing large numbers to his talks. He later offered *tafsir* classes. But, the unorthodoxy of his views soon drew opponents and he was attacked in pamphlets. His critics were indeed justified, inasmuch he was an undercover Baha'i missionary. With the exception of a few of Perdu's converts in Cape Town, the Baha'i religion was unknown in South Africa and the true nature of Perdu's beliefs were not readily recognized, even by his critics. Suspicions were verified by Mall, who visited Baha'i headquarters in Bombay where he learned the identity of Perdu, who was an Iranian and who had already proselytized in several other countries. The Circle then quietly distanced itself from Perdu, but this episode tainted the group for decades with its critics. Perdu left South Africa in 1959, having been excommunicated by his hierarchy. Jeppie has also published a separate article in the *Journal of Islamic Studies* on this influential figure.[2]

Language, Identity, Modernity offers a fresh insight into the history of the Muslim community of Natal, and amply justifies its full title. The author and the HSRC Press are to be commended on its publication. There are copious endnotes, and a useful bibliography.

Notes

[1]. Muhammed Haron, *Muslims in South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography* (Cape Town: South African Library in association with the Centre for Contemporary Islam, University of Cape Town, 1997), item number 1014.

[2]. Shamil Jeppie, "Identity Politics and Public Disputation: A Baha'i Missionary as a Muslim Modernist in South Africa," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 27 (2007): 150-172.

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Citation: James C. Armstrong. Review of Jeppie, Shamil, *Language, Identity, Modernity: The Arabic Study Circle of Durban.* H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. May, 2008.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14519

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