

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

International Symposium on Islamic Civilization in Southern Africa

AwqafSA (www.awqafSA.org.za), a South African Muslim NGO, has been in constant contact with IRCICA (the Islamic Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture: www3.ircica.org), an affiliate of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, for several years regarding possible cooperation. On 18 April 2005, this contact culminated in Halit Eren's (director-general, IRCICA) meeting with a few organizations and their representatives regarding the forthcoming "International Symposium on Islamic Civilization in Southern Africa," scheduled for the following year. AwqafSA and IRCICA, aware of the fact that very little research has been done on Islam in southern Africa, have strongly advocated holding a symposium to bring scholars, researchers, and stakeholders together to share their thoughts on their respective countries and communities. At this meeting, it was agreed that AwqafSA would be the local host in partnership with IRCICA and that the University of Johannesburg would be the third partner in this important historical venture.

The symposium took place between 1-3 September 2006 at the University of Johannesburg. A few months earlier, on 28 June 2006 to be exact, Ebrahim Rasool (premier, Western Cape Province) formally launched the symposium at Leeuwenhof, his official residence. In his short speech, he stressed the multicultural nature of South African society and the importance of holding such a symposium in the country, a symposium that will allow participants – particularly South Africans – to do some "rainbow gazing" and critically assess their position within South Africa. The premier was also one of the keynote speakers at the symposium. Essop Pahad (minister, Office of the President) connected the symposium proceedings to the African Renaissance process as well as to the significant Timbuktu Project (www.timbuktufoundation.org; www.timbuktuheritage.org) spearheaded by Shamil Jeppie (the University of Cape Town). He also touched upon new evidence of the influence of Islam in the Limpopo Valley, northern South Africa. In his concluding remarks, he emphatically rejected Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis.

Although Ihsanoglu (secretary-general, OIC) spoke immediately after Pahad's speech, he made his official delivery on Friday morning while opening the event. In his remarks, he emphasized the importance of culture in international relations and the notion of "civilization" as captured in F. Braudel's work. He stated that the cultural contribution to be presented over the symposium's three days was in line with the OIC's Ten Year Programme of Action and Objectives. At the inaugural ceremony hosted by the Kalla family, Halit Eren, Justice Mohamed Jajbhai (trustee, AwqafSA Trustee), and Zeinoul Cajee (national coordinator, AwqafSA) also made some brief remarks.

The symposium was held to realize the following goals: (1) to increase our knowledge of Islam's history and heritage in southern Africa, (2) make the southern African Muslims' religious and cultural heritage better understood by themselves and other communities both at home and abroad, (3) strengthen affinities and cooperation among Muslim and African nations and peoples by producing and disseminating Islamic and cultural knowledge, (4) promote better understanding and dialogue among Muslims and members of other faith and cultural communities, (5) offer a forum for the true understanding of Islamic culture in the world, (6) contribute to the New Partnership for Africa's Development's (NEPAD) African Millennium Project and the African Renaissance, and (7) produce authentic resources for further research and curriculum development.

The participating academics, researchers, and NGO members came from South Africa and further afield: various southern and central African countries, and even from Norway, Germany, and France. On the whole, there was a wide spread of papers and fair regional representation. Unfortunately, like many other symposia, not all countries in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) were covered. The committee would have liked to receive contributions from Angola and the Congo, two key SADC states. In fact, it would have been quite satisfied if scholars from other areas could have covered these states. That this did not happen was indeed a pity, even though efforts had been made to send invitations to all academic institutions in the region.

The papers varied in quality and length. Some came with fascinating information on, for example, the Limpopo Valley, and others were rather provocative. It is hard to comment constructively on all the presentations; however, each Muslim and non-Muslim presenter felt that he/she was given a fair chance to present, discuss, and debate his/her findings and ideas. The general themes of identity, history, politics, education, socioeconomic development, and *da'wah* were divided into various subthemes: the Muslim

media, racism within Muslim schools, Muslim financial institutions/NGOs, and sociopolitical issues. In fact, the more than eighty papers delivered in parallel sessions attracted a sizeable number of participants and thus revealed the extent of the audience's interest shown until the very last day.

On the whole, the symposium was well managed. At the end of the event, participants discussed some of the resolutions drafted by key members of the organizing committee (AwqafSA and IRCICA). The resolutions were accepted as they were presented, and, before concluding, all participants were given the opportunity to make suggestions and air their views on relevant issues. The next symposium will be held in Malawi in 2009.

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