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From Apartheid to Insularity: Conservative Islam and the Making of Gender and Sexuality in a South African Muslim Community

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Abstract

South Africa is often positioned as a queer haven on the African continent. Interestingly, this extends to practices of Islam and much literature exists on more gender egalitarian and queer affirming Islamic spaces, especially in the context of the city of Cape Town. Imam Muhsin Hendricks, the first openly gay Imam, played a significant role in this as he helped queer Muslims reconcile their faith and their sexuality. However, in February of this year, the Imam was assassinated in what is understood to be a hate crime. In many ways, Imam Muhsin's murder removed the veil that often invisibilises the experiences of those subjected to a more conservative Islam. This time brought a very conservative strand of Islam to light. In this paper, I explore the experiences of Muslim youth, in an Indian community in Pretoria, South Africa to make sense of how their understandings of gender and sexuality have been shaped in light of more conservative understandings of the Islamic tradition. The participant's accounts demonstrated that despite the end of Apartheid, the Muslim community in Laudium continues to exist in the legacy of Apartheid. The Laudium community, although no longer confined to geographical areas, exists in a context that mirrors its history, where insularity is encouraged to create a homogenous Muslim environment (Jeppie & Vahed, 2005: 261; Vahed, 2000: 32). The realities described by participants remain far removed from the discourses in the more progressive spaces. Understandings of gender and sexuality remain rooted in patriarchal understandings of the Islamic tradition where gender roles are prioritised, sexuality outside of marriage is forbidden and queerness is a sin. I argue that in this context, conservative understandings of gender and sexuality become a distinguish factor, maintaining forms of Muslim separation in a multi-racial, secular context.

Keywords: islam, gender, sexuality, conservatism