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Igshaan Higgins, *The Cape Muslim Heritage Art Exhibition*. Cape Town: Castle of Good Hope. Period: December 2020 – September 2021.

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### **1. South Africa's Castle of Good Hope: Towards Decolonizing its Space**

The Castle of Good Hope (<https://castleofgoodhope.co.za/>) is South Africa's oldest building and it was declared a historical monument since 1936. In post-apartheid South Africa, the Castle - that is situated on the fringe of Cape Town's city centre - has become an important iconic location for many activities since South Africa became a democratic state in April 1994.

Since then and as part of the twin processes of de-racialization and decolonization, the Castle Control Board (CCB) that manages its affairs took the necessary steps to not only open this building's space to overseas tourists but especially to South Africa's multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities; particularly those who formed part of the disenfranchised oppressed communities. When the newly appointed CCB members took charge of the Castle's affairs, they chose to bring about a radical face-lift by giving it a friendly and welcoming image.

During the apartheid past (circa 1948-1994), it was, inter alia, the South African Military's headquarters for those stationed in the Western Cape. Two and a half centuries before South Africa became a Union in 1910, it served as the seat of government of the respective Dutch and British colonial powers. Besides these, the Castle - as a historical structure - was closely associated with Cape slavery. So, the memory of colonialism and slavery remains etched in the subjugated communities' memories

Because of its colonial past and its association with the slaves, the CCB used the Castle's spaces to destigmatize it from both its colonial cum racial past and slavery. Despite the challenges that the CCB encountered, the management worked towards decolonizing all the spaces within its precincts; this it did, by employing various strategies and devising educational methods. For the CCB to however achieve its goals, it reached out to former subjugated communities to assist with its projects. At present, some sections have been set aside for the Cape

Town Highlanders Regiments and another part housed the Castle Military Museum.

On top of these, the CCB invited individuals and organizations to use the Castle's facilities for, among others, conferences/seminars/meetings. More importantly and as part of the decolonization process, it encouraged and supported those that planned to organize relevant exhibitions for short and long periods. From among the most recent developments according to its CEO, Calvyn Gilfellan, 'the CCB joined forces with artists, performers, community organisations, religious leaders, and exhibitors to launch a series of thought-proving exhibitions' (see for this quote online: <https://castleofgoodhope.co.za/>).

## **2. Castle's Muslim Managed Exhibitions: Owning the Space**

Many months before the Castle's CEO was approached to consider two separate proposals in staging two unique exhibitions, the respective organizers gathered several artefacts that they wanted to share with the public; and they sought out a suitable venue to do this. Since the CCB embarked on their decolonization project, the CCB executive welcomed both proposals and thus supported the CEO to grant the two groups the necessary space for a period of three months during which these artefacts would be on display.

So, it meant that they will be using the facilities from mid-December 2020 until mid-February 2021. Anyhow, both exhibitions opened their doors on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2020; and this was also known as the Day of Reconciliation; the purpose of the two exhibitions was aimed at informing and educating the South African public about past happenings.

While the one that was organized by the Imam Abdullah Haron Foundation (IHF est.2018 <https://imamharon.com/>) only displayed photographs that focused on Imam Abdullah Haron who was killed in Cape Town's prison on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1969 because of his anti-apartheid activities, the other organized by Attorney Igshaan Higgins (<https://dkvg.co.za/the-team/directors/igshaan-higgins/>) who curated his personal collection of artefacts. Anyone interested in getting an idea of these exhibitions may go online and watch two video clips: the first one was produced by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and the other was produced by the Faizal Sayed Foundation (<https://faizalsayed.com/>).

Even though this review would like to have elaborated on both exhibitions, the reviewer felt that it was best to confine himself to the Higgins' exhibition; there are two reasons for this: the first was that the IHF exhibition

had a limited amount of information on display as compared to the Higgs exhibition; and the second was that it was curated for a shorter period than the Higgs curated exhibition.

Setting that aside as one turns the focus to the Higgs exhibition, it was observed that the Higgs' exhibition had a wide range of artefacts on display; according to the Faizal Sayed TV clip that is available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yVKymBEQY0>, Higgs revealed that he had more than 150 pieces on display. Each of the items vividly captured aspects of the Cape Muslims' social history; while some covered events during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, others captured prominent historical – past and present - personalities (such as Shaykh Yusuf al-Makassari [d.1699] and Tuan Guru [d.1807]) and issues such as photographs of events that occurred during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The list of artefacts for this exhibition included, among others, portraits of Muslim personalities such as those mentioned, special art works of well-established mosques in an area known as the Bo-Kaap (also known historically as the 'Malay Quarters'), and books that provide the history of the Cape Muslims. Although it was called 'The Cape Muslim Heritage Art exhibition', the Faizal Sayed TV show referred to it as 'a visual expression of the unedited history of slavery and South African Muslims.'

Though this was a catchy title for such an exhibition, one cannot agree with the full title. One disagrees because much of the exhibition illustrated very vividly the Cape – not the South African - Muslim community's social history using objects and pieces. And one also cannot agree that some of the artefacts revealed aspects of slavery; in other words, none of them – except perhaps for two or three items – demonstrated how Muslims who were captured as slaves or who had been brought as political exiles endured their time at the Cape from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Though the Higgs curated exhibition neglected the mentioned aspects, one should commend it for having put on display a plethora of items that educated one about the status of the Muslims throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It would have been great if Higgs had exhibition boards; something similar to what the IHF exhibition had on display. These boards could have included summarized notes that covered selected historical periods of Cape Muslim history; these 'educational' boards would have helped to contextualize many of the items on display.

Be that as it may and drawing this brief review to a conclusion, it should be stated that the exhibition portrayed a rich socio-cultural history of a

community whose social history has been airbrushed – almost out of existence - in South Africa's history textbooks; this is indeed an issue that should be corrected. Mention should also be made of the fact that the Higgens curated exhibition made a unique contribution to Cape exhibition history.

It brought to life aspects of the Cape Muslim community that were and still are unknown to many South Africans. While one cannot ignore and overlook the fact that previous exhibitions such as the Islamic Library Exhibition during the mid-1990s took place and displayed related artefacts, this is the first time that an exhibition - on the Cape Muslims - has been on show on an historic site where one could connect the present with the distant past. And instead of the exhibition being there for only three months, the CCB graciously granted Higgens an extension for it realized the educational cum cultural impact that it has had over the many months. In fact, the Higgens curated exhibition took temporary ownership of the space at the Castle; and this is, by and large, a positive outcome for all; the CCB, Higgens, and the community!

#### **Research Africa**

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