New Draft Chapter 1: Unedited Zackie Achmat – 22 October 2009

“MY KINDERS DIE DOENJA SKUD!“: MY EARLIEST MEMORIES OF POLITICS AND RELIGION

I hold to no religion or creed,
am neither Eastern nor Western,
Muslim or infidel,
Zoroastrian, Christian, Jew or Gentile.
I come from neither land nor sea,
am not related to those above or below,
was not born nearby or far away,
do not live either in Paradise or on this Earth,
claim descent not from Adam and Eve or the Angels above.
I [try to] transcend body and soul.
My home is beyond place and name.
It is with the beloved, in a space beyond space.
I [try to] embrace all and ... [be a]part of all.

Mawlanah Jalaluddin Rumi

On 28 September 1969, my sister and I fell out of our beds after we had fallen asleep. Desperate with fear we started crying. Mammie spoke to us in Afrikaans. Our home language was an Afrikaans influenced by the Malay language tradition. Her voice always soft, soothing and tragic was no different now as we faced our terror: “My kinders die doenja skud. Dit is miskien is dit die dag van agierat” (My children, the earth quakes. This may be judgement day.) she said and continued: “Maak dua en vra vir Allah maaf vir ons almal se sondes.” (Pray and ask Allah forgiveness for the sins of all of us.)

Our family’s oral tradition told me that Asa Adams born Safireen-Abrahams, (“Mammie” as we called her), my grandmother was the daughter of a former slave and a German immigrant. Mammie’s mother was freed when the British Colonial government abolished slavery at the Cape. As a child, she was forced to accompany her Dutch or Afrikaans masters on the Great Trek to the Transvaal where she worked in bondage. There she eventually married a German immigrant, a worker with the surname Baum that he changed to Abrahams.

Mammie’s maternal grandmother – my great-grandmother was a Masbieker (black Mozambican) slave brought to the Cape under Dutch colonial rule. She married a Malay

slave. Many of the Malay slaves such as Mammie's grandfather had unsuccessfully resisted Dutch colonialism, as a consequence they were exiled to the Cape and enslaved . The tragedy of slavery accompanied my grandmother in happiness and pain as it did on that fateful night when the earth quaked.

Earlier on the afternoon of 28 September 1969 nearly ten thousand Muslims mainly men, and, men of other religious persuasions accompanied the bier of Imam Abdullah Haron to his grave in the Muslim cemetery on upper Rochester Road in Salt River. They passed the corner of our home in Chatham Road and then turned into the Tennyson Street Mosque to perform the Janazah (funeral rites). After prayers they continued with the Takbeer "Allah hu Akbar" (God is Great!) chanted by ten thousand men the only sound in a City that was quiet. Crowds lined the streets and joined their chant. The City's silent mourning continued with communal and solitary prayer into that night until the earth shook.

Midi my younger sister (five years old) and I (aged seven) obeyed Mammie's command to pray. We fell on our knees between her bed and the bed of "Daddy", Ebrahim Adams our grandfather. Midi and I shared the only bedroom in a small flat with my grandparents while my two unmarried aunts slept on the pull-out sofa in the lounge. Later, their husbands and children would also live there. Mammie leads us in prayer: "Kulhuwallah hu Ahad. Allah hu samad. Lam Yalid wa Lam Yulad wa Lam ya Kula hu Kuf wan Ahad." Daddy goes onto the balcony to see what was happening. Tremors and earthquakes shook the Cape Province on that night. The tremors felt like the voice of God as Midi and I got under the beds after the prayer.

Since that day Muslims believed that Allah had punished the apartheid state for the death of Imam Abdullah Haron with an earthquake and tremors. The history cited below from South African History Online is the history of my childhood – it became the subject of the Khutba (Address) on Fridays in mosques across the Cape. Every September for four decades since then it has been retold.

> "On the morning of 28 May 1969 the Imam was summoned by the notorious Security Branch to Caledon Square… the day when the community was preparing to commemorate the birth of their Prophet Muhammad. Once there,

> he was detained by one of the Security Branch's brutal officers, Spyker van Wyk, under Section 6 of Act 83 of 1967, referred to as the Terrorism Act. The Imam was held incommunicado for over four months (123 days) with no opportunity to see his wife and children. That day marked the end of all the activities he had undertaken with such great zeal and enthusiasm since he had assumed the responsibility of Imam. …. After having met members of his congregation, Mrs Catherine Taylor of the United Party raised the Imam's detention ...in parliament .... She received a reply from the Minister of Police, Mr Muller that 'it was not in the public interest' to know why the Imam was detained. Despite these efforts, the Security Branch tortured and eventually murdered him on 27 September 1969. They averred that the Imam had `fallen down the stair-case!'"

These facts were on the minds of every Capetonian that day. Daddy and my maternal uncles Ganief and Mahmood joined Imam Haron's funeral procession. The Tennyson Street Mosque was where I prayed every day and with my grandfather every Friday.

Ebrahim Mahmood Adams my grandfather was born a Muslim with family in India, Pakistan and Malaysia. He was an immigrant to South Africa at the end of the 1890s as an indentured child labourer.

From age six I listened to the radio news every day with Daddy. From the minute I could read the alphabet, I had to spell newspaper headlines to him. I could read before most children and my grandfather asked me to read newspapers to him every day. Ebrahim Adams a man who lived through the first 75 years of the twentieth century, its wars, revolutions, repression, colonialism and freedom could not read English. Urdu was the only language in which he could read and write. From Daddy, I developed an abiding hatred of pride because it promotes ignorance and arrogance. Never afraid to ask when he did not know and never afraid to speak his mind, my grandfather was one of my best teachers.

By the age of ten I learnt a global geography most of my peers would only learn of much later. Daddy may not have heard the word pacifism or belonged to any political movement but he opposed war – all wars – as a matter of principle. He remembered and told stories of the

Anglo-Boer War and he sympathized with the Boers against the English. He always said: “Jy kan ‘n Boer trust want hy is altyd ope met jou maar die Engelse steek jou altyd in die rug.” (You can trust a Boer because he is always open with you but the English always stab you in the back.) During 1971 Pakistan, Bangladesh and India were at war with each other. My grandfather wept because he had family and brothers of faith in all the affected countries. “How can brothers kill each other?” he asked.

My grandfather mourned the wars in the Middle-East. I was fascinated by Golda Meir during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, a woman who stood up to King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt but my Grandfather’s commentary on the war said it all. I did not appreciate it then but today as an atheist, it guides my understanding of, and engagement with the Middle East – he said: “We are all Children of the Prophet Ebrahim/Abraham”.

I am grateful to my grandfather for making me read of the 2 million Vietnamese dead and their victory over the United States of America, the strongest military force in the world. Then I did not understand the significance of the Vietnamese war of liberation beyond the fact that war was wrong, although, as children we played Cold War games – “Russians against Americans”. Later the Vietnamese struggle and its victory encouraged our resistance against the apartheid state despite its military might.

I oppose creationism and I support Darwin. However, the tens of thousands of US soldiers killed and the Vietnamese civilians murdered inspired the greatest war ballad “Masters of War” by Bob Dylan with its line “even Jesus would never forgive what you do”. Dylan’s song confirmed my grandfather’s maxim based on a creation myth on the futility of war – “We are all the Children of Eve”. US power and its might against the vulnerable was always tempered with the songs of progressive artists and titanic struggle in that country. I am a materialist in philosophy and worldview but the echo of Imam Abdullah Haroon’s mourners and their chant “Allahu Akbar” still moves me as a song of resistance and its abuse by fundamentalism carries the pain of war and wrong.

My childhood memory of 1968 was dominated by the martyrdom of Imam Haron but it also recalls a very different embodiment of power and tragedy – Robert F. Kennedy. In 1968, Bobby Kennedy, as my aunt referred to him, visited South Africa. Mia (as I called her) took a full day off work with many of her fellow garment workers to listen to Kennedy speak at the Grand Parade in Cape Town. They spoke of his call for equal rights and his boyish handsomeness even though most of the conversation was taken up with their fascination with Jackie Kennedy – his then absent sister-in-law and the widow of assasinated US President John F. Kennedy.

Senator Robert Kennedy secured the Democratic Party's nomination as their US Presidential candidate. He had come to symbolise the age of civil rights and freedom of the 1960s. One day my aunt came home unconsolable. Bobby had been assassinated. Dermar Fashions – the clothing factory where Mia worked closed early because hundreds of her colleagues broke down in tears together with their bosses. Bobby Kennedy was mourned and the hopes of freedom and peace died with him. The assasination of the Kennedy brothers would be sublimated in the pathos and emulation of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis by their generation.

My mother and aunt would forever be captivated by a distant woman whose style, romances and tragedy remains the foundation of my understanding of the politics of the Kennedy family and their place in the United States. About a decade after Robert Kennedy's visit to South Africa, I related this story to Jack Lewis, my first long-term lover. Jack told me that on that same day that my aunt listened to Kennedy, he was accompanied by his mother Thellie to the same public rally. At the Grand Parade, twelve-year old Jack spoke to Kennedy and obtained his signature – an autograph that is now in our joint library.

My grandparents, my parents, aunts and uncles always insisted that we should read and educate ourselves. Most of my family never started or finished primary school. Until our generation, it was only my baby sister Zubeida in my immediate family who passed matric but all of us value reading and education. From religion, reading and witnessing events as a child, I came to learn that politics tradition, religion, culture and fashion was an integral to learning and identity.

Islam the religion of my family regards reading and learning as a duty of its adherents. The Prophet Muhammad could not read or write and the first verse of the Quran revealed to him was Iqraq (Read) – the verse that commanded him to read. My early childhood was ruled by the twin passions of religion and reading. Religion introduced me to methods that would influence my later political engagement.

My favourite uncle, Mahmood formed my early religious identity and engagement. He was a carpenter, his wife, auntie Mymoena was a nurse and their sons were my favourite cousins. Soon after the death of Imam Haroon, their family became orthodox Muslims, joined the Tableegh Jamaah and gave up their careers. Everyone in our family including my grandparents raised their eyebrows and bemoaned the fact that a man has to work to support his family instead of joining the Tableegh Jamaah. “Jy kan saleegh bly sonder ‘n lang baard en ‘n top” (You can remain pious without a long beard and a....) my aunt Mia intoned as the eldest sister.

The Tableegh Jamaah or Jamiatul Islam was based in India and Pakistan and its members live acording to the Sunnah or lifestyle of the Prophet Muhammad. Frugality, solidarity and charity mobilised an orthodox Islam. They walked in the path of Allah and worked to gain adherents away from secular religion and lifestyle. Women and men were strictly separated and modestly dressed according to Shariah – Islamic law. Modern education was only allowed for boys and girls until puberty. At least annual travel by men such as my uncle to Pakistan or India was essential. They were different.

I was the only member of my entire extended family who partially embraced the Tableegh. At school I was regularly teased for being a “sissy-boy” or “Moffie” (queer) and being a book-worm, joining the Tableegh Jamaah gave me an identity that was unassailable by my peers at Salt River Muslim Primary School or Kipling Street as we affectionately refer to our alma mater. House-visits to Muslim families were an essential part of our missionary activity. Three times a week, I would join my uncle and one or two other members of the Tableegh Jamaah to go door-to-door in Salt River, doors were opened to us and we asked to address all the men and boys of the house. Smells of spices, Malay curries, cakes and incense wafted in and out of the homes we visited. The Tableegh abstemiously placed a ban on accepting any luxury food. We were instructed that every Muslim irrespective of race, nationality or class

belong to a global Umah (global community) because we are human and believers – my understanding of a global citizenship and community was born from my work in the Tableegh Jamaah – the Jamiatul Islam.

When a woman or girl came to the door, I had to speak to her while “averting my eyes” and ask for the men of the house to pass on Da’wah or the message of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad. Everytime, I was scolded (not by Uncle but other members of our team) for not averting my eyes from women and girls. Of course, I could not believe that women could not pass on Allah’s message because Midi my sister became the first girl to recite the Quran in public in the Salt River Railway Institute Hall at the farewell for Mr. Abdul-Latief Schello our primary school principal.

The Tableegh instruction to avert my eyes from women conflicted with my entire education in manners. Politeness by greeting every stranger with a smile was one of the cardinal rules of social engagement and community. This was drilled into us by Mammie, Daddy, Mia and Annie my youngest aunt until their deaths. My family taught us to respect everyone especially our seniors. I became the bane of all children in Chatham Road because I would carry all the bags of pensioners Christian or Muslim and volunteer to do tasks such as shopping or sweeping for them. My family insisted that I accept no reward in cash for this. One of my most important gifts and memories was recieving a crocheted kufiyah (prayer-cap) from a poor Christian pensioner.

The best part of the Tableegh Jamaah was our mosque sleep-overs. We would go to different places and stay over in the mosques – boys and men would converse and discuss the Quran and Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) deep into the night. We were tutored how to address men with our message, to answer their questions and when we did not know an answer to ask one of our senior leaders on return to debrief from house-visits. Once we had the answer, we returned the next evening to discuss it with the person who had asked and we would then be accompanied by a more senior leader. All this time, I continued to read voraciously.

By 1972, I had enough of the Tableegh Jamaah because they indirectly condemned my family’s social activities as influenced by the Shaytaan (Satan). I retreated into my world of

reading and film. The library and cinema became my spaces of privacy, fantasy and enjoyment. The Palace Theatre on Lower Main Road was the centre-piece of our family entertainment. While my grandparents never attended cinema – they would sit in front of the coal-stove as my aunts would tell us stories of Judy Garland, Humphrey Bogart, Montgomery Clift, Charlie Chaplin, Liz Taylor, Ava Gardner, Betty Davis and other Holywood stars. My sister Naeemah was called Betty Davis because of her flair for domestic drama. Midi loved Bruce Lee. My favourites were Liz Taylor, Julie Andrews, Liza Minelli and Alain Delon with whom I fell in love when I saw Scorpio.

Reading was always my first love and the library my temple. I would read everything daily – newspapers, cartoon strips, comics, poetry and books. Photo-romances such as *Kyk*, *See* and *Keur* were among my favourites, I always identified with the waiting woman who desired the unobtainable man. As a child when I entered a library, I was in awe of the shelves of books, the matronly and sometimes stern librarians who insisted that books remain in their correct classification and the system of learning through books catogerised by subject – history, literature, poetry, drama and biography was a different daily lesson in the alphabet.

As my family grew to about twenty people in a one-bedroomed flat, the library replaced the mosque. It provided space from the loud silences and chatter of pain. In our home for most of the adults and myself, our outside toilet provided privacy where my dad, aunt and I often read. The absence of privacy at home remains with me daily and I hurt when I see the absence of private space for people anywhere.

This was also the time that I discovered my sexual desire for boys. At a very early age I became inappropriately sexually active, though I loved every minute of its secrecy and pleasure , I believe that it caused me substantial pain and loss. Fro a very long-time, I struggled with long-term commitment. I tried to address my sexuality with my family who regularly enquired which girls I liked at school. At age ten, I told them I liked boys and they thought a spanking was the appropriate response. At school, boys would pass notes to girls who blushed and they were in turn teased by their peers. I could not flirt with boys as the heterosexual children of my age started doing though girls remained my best friends. At too early an age, I learnt that all children and youth especially working class and poor youth – straight, gay or lesbian lived their romantic and sexual lives in public spaces such as fields,

alleys, deserted cars or toilets outside their homes. For gay men, it was also the only place where we could meet and escape the brutality of the law.

Reading, religion and a humanist education from a family with no schooling are the foundations of my early education. In 1976, I would become a political activist – a calling I have accepted for life. Since then, my heart, imagination, intellect and work was built on seeking *knowledge* and *theory* of the principles, concepts and tools used in struggle. This education can never end because it involves permanent learning from *error* in thought and practice, accumulation of knowledge, theoretical and abstract thinking, as well as experience. The experience of working class and poor people is the best guide in politics. If I could not explain an idea to my mom or aunt, I always went back to basics. I also learnt an approach to political theory from them.

As a descendant of indigenous African and Malay slaves, Asian and European settlers, I have learnt that all identities we carry: American or African, Indian or Israeli, German or Namibian, Mozambican or Chinese, black or white, socialist or capitalist, lesbian, straight or gay, all demand respect and citizenship not pride. All identities contain both good and bad and all tradition have values that are a force for good or bad. Citizenship is our ability to learn the difference.

Uncle Maggie as we called my uncle Mahmood of the Tableegh Jamaah rose very high in the ranks of the Jamiatul Islam thousands mourned his death. From him I learnt that direct contact with people for a cause is indispensable to any political work. Never once did he pass judgment on my personal or political life and with him I had some of the most important political conversations long after my excommunication by the Islamists and the timid traditional Ulamah of Islam. For him, salvation and redemption was based on truth, solidarity, charity and a life of frugality based on belief in one God and his Prophet Muhammad and only god could judge. Apart from religion and its ingrained sexism, I agreed with him about our struggle for an ethical life. The men in long beards I meet on streets in Cape Town and every part of the world do not inspire fear – they remind me of uncle Maggie, his wife and my wonderful cousins. They remind me of a potential to patiently educate ourselves and the most orthodox of a common, enlightened humanity.

My maternal grandmother embodied the good of all our identities. In 1969, Mammie died and her cat Jerry disappeared on the day of her burial at the Rochester Road Cemetery. Her dark floral dresses made with her own hands from material that I helped her choose often flits into my memory. From her I learnt love, compassion and even sadness about tragedies such as slavery and domestic discord could be transformative. Kindness to vulnerable people came first in all aspects of her life. Mammie's favourite treat was a rub of her feet with Zambuk ointment, a task Midi and I never refused. When she laughed, tears came to her eyes and the eucalyptus smell contained in the Zambuk ointment return those memories even now.

Daddy taught me a stern thoroughness with work and sadly I also inherited his temper – a weakness I struggle with to this day. Openness and honesty in personal relationships and public office were the values he cherished and I learnt from him. My love for reading and education came from from an indentured child labourer who crossed a continent to a strange home with an understanding that the human family is one.