

A *Da'wah* [Invitation of People towards Islam] movement in Mauritius:

a study of the *Jamaat-UL-Muslimeen* [Assembly of Muslims]

by

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In The Name Of Allah The Beneficent, The Merciful

All praises are due to Allah, the Creator and Sustainer of all mankind; Allah, the All-Powerful, Glorious, All-Wise. Nothing happens except by His will. Peace and blessings be upon the prophet of mankind, Muhammad. I take refuge with Allah from the accursed devil.

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May Allah Azzawajal reward them with the best of rewards and may He accept this humble work from me.

## ABSTRACT

'*A da'wah movement in Mauritius: A study of the Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*' is based on qualitative research and its objective is to examine the socio-cultural factors that may hinder the processes of *da'wah* in Mauritius. The study is placed in the context of a well-known national Islamic organisation, the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* whose founder is Mr. Muhammad Cehl Fakeemeeah, a Member of the National Parliament. The movement is also associated with a political party, the FSM (Front Solidarité Mauricien) or the Mauritian Solidarity Front.

The *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* seeks to propose an alternative *da'wah* program in order to promote understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims and to accelerate the progression of conversion in Mauritius. The movement is involved in politics and mass media in order to reach the maximum number of people in the island. Emphasis is put on the urgent need for each individual to understand the concept of God as well as reading the Qur'an in order to avoid falling into the traps of traditional *da'wah* which has prevailed in Mauritius for decades. The present thesis analyses data provided in face to face interviews with a number of Mauritian converts as well as observation and discussions with other born Muslim members, all adherents of the said organisation.

The Mauritian society is well-known for its multi-religious and multi-cultural background, influenced mainly by the majority, the Hindu community which consists of more than 50 % of the whole population. According to Soonita Kistamah <sup>1</sup>, the percentage of Muslims is only 17, 3 % of the whole Mauritian population and this demonstrates a large gap concerning the work of *da'wah* in the island. Therefore the

thesis will investigate factors that hinder *da'wah* by focusing on one particular movement – the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen*.

After having scanned the available literature, no specific study on *da'wah* in Mauritius was found. There is therefore a gap in the knowledge of *da'wah* especially issues such as socio-cultural factors that may affect *da'wah* progression within the Mauritian context. This thesis is a contribution to filling this gap.

Since the thesis wishes to understand the socio-cultural factors which hinder the progress of *da'wah* in Mauritius a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate to explore this issue.

The thesis begins providing my motivation for writing on the topic of *da'wah*, a statement of the problem, research objectives, significance of the study, and the theory and methodology applied. Chapter II provides an overview of Mauritius and its history. Emphasis is given to the events of the 12<sup>th</sup> March 1968, that is, the civil war which occurred between Christians and Muslims which led to ethnic tensions. Another communal crisis which occurred in February 1999 between Black Creole and the Hindu community is also examined. Chapter III will provide a biography of Cehl Meeah, the founder of *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*, his broader religious and political outlook and the history and *da'wah* methodology of his organization. Chapter IV examines this methodology in the light of certain theoretical considerations with regard to *da'wah*. Chapter V discusses and interprets the results and findings that emerge from interviews and discussions with converts belonging to the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*. Chapter VI concludes the dissertation and lists recommendations with regard to *da'wah* methodology in Mauritius.

## END NOTES

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## GLOSSARY, ABBREVIATIONS AND ABSTRACT WORDS USED

Ahmad Deedat: South African Muslim preacher renowned for his interfaith skills and debates.

*Al Ikhwan Al Muslimun*: known as “The Muslim brotherhood” of Egypt.

*Aqeedah*: Islamic concept

Bagarre raciale: French word which denotes a racial war in Mauritius in 1968

Black Creole: Dark skinned Christians

Centre: Referred to the local of the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen*'s headquarter

Dhikr: remembrance of Allah

Free coloured people: neither white nor black

General Population or Creole: Those who originated from Africa, and are Christians in faith

*Imam*: Islamic Clergy; normally one who guides Muslims in prayer

*Islam*: Submission to the will of Allah

*Jama'at*: Group of people, community.

*Kafir*: An unbeliever who rejects the Oneness of God

*Khutbah*: Sermon which is normally held on Friday during the congregational prayer

*Kufr*: Reference to the rejection of the Muslim belief in One God, the denial of the prophecy of Muhammad [pbuh] and the Qur'an as God's revelation

*Lascar*: It comes from the word 'lascar' and the first Muslims were called Lascars by the French authority

*Muslim*: A proper designation of an individual who submits to Allah and adheres to Islam

*Namaz*: The Arabic word is Salah. In English, it is well-known as prayer

*Qur'an*: It is the Word of Allah, verbatim, revealed to Prophet Muhammad [pbuh]

*Ramadan*: The month of compulsory fast for Muslims

*Ramzan*: Common word for Ramadan, probably Urdu.

*Rasta*: hairstyle normally worn by some Mauritians of African origins to demonstrate their appurtenance and love to the well-known Rasta singer, Bob Marley.

*Salafi or Salafist*: This Islamic organisation is in operation in Mauritius since 1999 after the graduation of some students from Madina.

*Shirk*: Sin of idolatry, deification of the One God, giving 'partners' to God or associating anything to God.

*Sino-Mauritian*: Immigrants of China, either Buddhists or Christians.

*Sunnis*: The large number of Muslims in Mauritius is the Sunni. Today, there are different types of Sunnis, those who are traditionalists/conservative and those who consider themselves more rational, in the sense that they abide strictly to the Qur'an and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad [pbuh]

*Tablighi Jamaat*: It is an example of apolitical Muslim missionary movement which is concerned with reforming the beliefs & practices of existing Muslims by inviting them to come to the Mosque and participate in Mosque activities

*Tafseer*: Explanation of the Qur'an

*Tarawih*: Supererogatory prayers during Ramadan, performed after obligatory night prayer

*Tawheed*: Belief in the Oneness of God.

*Waqf* (plural *awqaf*): The donation of a property for Allah's cause; property which is movable or immovable, by a founder(s) and the dedication of its usufruct in perpetuity to the essential services of the society. It can also be described as the voluntary and irrevocable dedication of one's wealth or a portion of it - in cash or kind (such as a house or a garden), and its disbursement for shariah compliant projects (such as mosques or religious schools).

White people: Those who come from Europe; France or England. They are Christians

*Wu'du*: Ablutions, small ritual washing performed by Muslims prior to prayer.

Zamzam and Dar Ul Hikmah: These are two Islamic organisations which aim at educating the Muslim community and are known as the 'tawheed' group among Sunnis; emphasizing on the importance of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

FSM: The acronym of the political name of Cehl Meeah's party called the Front Solidarité Mauricien. [Mauritian Solidarity Movement].

LALIT: A political movement whose aim is to militate against all forms of injustices in Mauritius.

J.U.M: Abbreviation for Jamaat-UI-Muslimeen

PBUH: Peace be upon him

## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

### 1. Introduction

Religion affects many areas of society in a profound way. It is multifaceted. Kile Jones sees religion in the following way: "It is apparent that religion can be seen as a theological, philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and psychological phenomenon of human kind. To limit religion to only one of these categories is to miss its multifaceted nature and lose out on the complete definition." <sup>1</sup>

Sociologists, in particular, such as those who embrace the functionalist <sup>2</sup> theory, tend to focus on religion as a source of social solidarity, integration and harmony. The functionalist is primarily concerned with the contribution religion makes to meeting those needs. Emile Durkheim<sup>3</sup>, a functionalist anthropologist, believes that religion reinforces the collective conscience whereas Talcott Parsons <sup>4</sup>, another functionalist sociologist, affirms that religion is part of the cultural system. According to him, religious beliefs provide guidelines for human actions and standards against which people's conduct can be evaluated.

Based on the above, it is clear that religion should be seen in a much broader sense than its spiritual aspects. Religion has the ability to shape the moral standards of individuals and shape the collective conscience of society which in turn influences the nature of that society and the world in a far-reaching way.

We believe that it is only possible to fully understand the methods, techniques and worldview of the the Mauritian *da'wah* organization, the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*, and of its founder, Cehl Meeah, by employing the wide-ranging view of religion as described by Jones, and specifically of its social functions as described by Durkheim and Parsons.

Cehl Meeah and *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* implicitly operate on a similarly extensive understanding of religion and its social function. In other words, they do not see religion in a narrow, purely spiritual, mostly individual sense but as a phenomenon that should fully involve itself with all aspects of life. This is the distinguishing mark of the organization in Mauritius and it explains why it approaches *da'wah* in the way it does.

The present thesis deals with Islam within a specific context, Mauritius. In Mauritius, Muslims are a minority and constitute 17, 3 percent of the population. During the last two decades, the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* organisation has sought to present a rationally based understanding of Islam based on the two Islamic sources agreed upon by the majority of Muslims. Its purpose is to develop awareness of Islam at the spiritual, socio-cultural, and political levels among both Muslims and non-Muslims alike through education and social work. Its educational component comprises its teaching programmes and its school structures. Its social work component consists of such actions as assisting the poor, caring for the sick and the elderly; and sheltering the homeless because religion is considered by the organisation as one of the major tools in the society that ties people together and can be used to promote welfare and wellness among individuals.

### 1.1 My motivation for writing this dissertation : a personal journey

Allah says in the Qur'an: "It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth to manifest it over all religion, although those who associate others with Allah dislike it." [Surah At Tawbah verse 33]

Muslims interpret this verse as a command from their Lord to invite humanity to Islam. Since the Qur'an is the primary Book of reference to all Muslims, it is understood that the Qur'an addresses Muslims in particular and appoints them as vicegerents to carry out the mission of *da'wah* that is, calling others to Islam.

Having been born a non-Muslim in a non-Muslim country, I realised that *da'wah* faces many challenges. Islam is not easily acquired; rather, it involves hard work to bring the message of the One God to people.

I was born in Mauritius at a time where the country was considered an underdeveloped one. I was brought up by a Roman Catholic family who believes in ethical values of life and who understands the need to pray one God.

It was a normal thing to live among people with different cultures, religions, religious practices, languages and physical appearance.

I attended a primary school where I was the only Christian child and the rest were Sunni Muslims. I could see that Muslims were different to me, by their names, their dress codes, the food they eat and the attachment they demonstrated towards their religious rituals. Words such as *Ramzan* [the prescribed month of fasting] or *Namaz* [the daily prayer] were common to me though I did not understand the deeper dimensions and the objectives behind them.

At secondary level, I attended a Christian school where the majority of students were Christians, with a minority of Muslims and Hindus. I noticed also that many Muslim students seemed delighted to freely take part in Christian religious school activities. For example, during the morning assembly, they would recite the Christian prayer, they would attend school mass and sang the Christian songs though they were not obliged to do so.

At that time, I was proud to be a Christian, with solid values while I, together with my Christian friends tended to look at Muslims as uncouth. Besides, they had difficulties

expressing themselves properly in French, something which could not be tolerated within the circles of educated Christians and the White community.

I noticed as well that the Muslims I knew did not have an adequate knowledge of their religion since they could not provide me with answers to my queries about Islam. To me they simply appeared formally attached to the religion.

Several years after having left school, it happened that I met a group of Muslims who were more conversant with Islam. It was the first time I was in front of knowledgeable Muslims. As I was a practising Christian, I was interested to interact with them on religious basis although I still considered Muslims less refined.

Day by day, they would provide me with proofs about the Qur'an being the Word of God and that its message was revealed to the whole mankind as a means of guidance. I felt my soul was being nourished each day and I was more and more convinced of the truth of Islam. I was given a copy of the translation of the Qur'an in French which I read with much enthusiasm and deep love. I was moved by its style and the way God addresses the believers. I wanted God to address me in that same way.

I therefore supplicated God to show me the path of truth and to guide me towards His Mercy. I remember hearing the Muslim call for prayer; I covered my hair and bowed down in prostration towards Allah. I then converted to Islam and immediately started praying five times daily and changed my whole lifestyle according to the commandments of Islam. And from that moment, those whom I previously considered uncouth became my new family, so dear to my heart.

This is the reason I have opted to write on the topic of *da'wah*, a topic which is so important to me, to my family who is not yet Muslim, to the Muslim community as well

as all those who form part of Mauritius's multi-religious society and who need to understand the universality of Islam.

Among my general research objectives, I want to ask basic questions such as: what were the processes leading the converts of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* to accept Islam? What are their backgrounds? What socio-cultural explanations can be given for their conversion? And beyond the conversion process, how did these converts interact with the Muslim community in terms of acceptance, guidance, support and integration?

In exploring such questions, I wish to highlight not only on the positive experiences which drew these members to Islam, but also the difficulties and obstacles they faced in their journey - difficulties and obstacles which can shed light on the socio-cultural factors that impede the progress of *da'wah* in Mauritius.

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

Da'wah activities appear to be considerably hindered by socio-cultural factors in Mauritius. The *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* movement seeks to present an alternative *da'wah* program to counteract these factors. The thesis examines the extent to which this goal has been achieved as well as the issues involved in seeking to achieve this goal.

Data was obtained through primary sources from interviews of converts within the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* movement; through observation, informal discussions with Cehl Meeah and other members; and through secondary sources in the form of videos, compact discs, books and the like.

Besides an extensive interview with the founder Cehl Meeah, eight female and two male converts were interviewed. While they are of different social backgrounds, ethnicity and

ages, they are all born and bred in Mauritius. The study is largely dependent on the honesty, sincerity and integrity of the respondents.

In brief, the broader purpose of the study is to shed light on processes of *da'wah* in Mauritius. Specifically, it asks the question: What are the socio-cultural factors that hinder the progress of *da'wah* in Mauritius?

### 1.3 Research objectives

The major objectives of this thesis will be summarised as such:

- Identify challenges hindering the progress of *da'wah* in Mauritius
- Examine how the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* movement has addressed these challenges in its own *da'wah* activity
- To assess *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*'s achievements in the sphere of *da'wah*
- To provide insight into the experiences of converts to Islam in Mauritius

### 1.4 Significance of the study

This project is significant to developing a body of knowledge around *da'wah* and conversion to Islam in Mauritius. The result will help the Muslim community in Mauritius assess their current position in this sphere and so better strategize for the future.

### 1.5 Theory and methodology

There is no specific academic literature on *da'wah* in Mauritius. There are, of course, some general studies on Islam in Mauritius and these have been utilized in this

dissertation. However, as far as the study of *da'wah* activity on the island, ours appears to be the first such study.

To understand how *da'wah* is being managed in Mauritius, a qualitative research methodology was used for this study. A qualitative approach was selected since the data analysed are texts. The “text” that qualitative researchers analyse is most often transcripts of interviews that the researcher examines. To quote Michael Quinn Patton (2002)<sup>5</sup>, “Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation. Guidance, yes. But no recipe. Direction can and will be offered, but the final destination remains unique for each inquirer, known only when—and if—arrived at.” Moreover, Stake (1995) states that “Qualitative data analysis is an iterative and reflexive process that begins as data are being collected rather than after data collection has ceased.”<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, our methodological approach was based on continuous in-depth understanding through interviews, observation, informal discussions and secondary sources such as books, magazines, videos and Cds. Questions in the interviews were semi-structured so as to foster such exploration and understanding rather than the stilted replies that may be generated by over-structured questions. Such in-depth understanding was also aided by the fact that the interviews were face to face and conducted as personal conversations.

The value of personal interviews has been highlighted by several scholars. Kvale (1996) argues that a qualitative research interview “seeks to cover both a factual and a meaning level...”<sup>7</sup> According to Patton (2002:114), interviews help to impart the richness of real social experience. Moreover, a hermeneutic perspective is applied to texts - that is, a perspective that views a text as an interpretation that can never be judged true or false.

“The text is only one possible interpretation among many”<sup>8</sup> Kvale also says the qualitative research interview seeks to describe the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say (Kvale, 1996).<sup>9</sup> Mc Namara (1999) explains that interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant’s experiences. The interviewer can pursue in-depth information around the topic. Interviews may be useful as follow-up to certain respondents to questionnaires, for instance, to further investigate their responses.<sup>10</sup>

As such, personal interviews enable a deeper understanding of converts’ views explained in their own terms. The informal, conversational nature allows respondents to freely narrate their experiences and own stories.

The interviews conducted in this study were adapted to the interviewee’s personality and level of literacy. However, the approach chosen still ensured that the same general areas of information were collected from each interviewee in order to maintain focus on the research problem. Thus the interview techniques used allowed for a degree of freedom and adaptability but were still structured with the larger problem in mind.

Three main concerns informed the interviews with converts:

- (1) How the condition of the convert before Islam differed from his or her condition after Islam
- (2) The reasons for their conversion
- (3) Their relationships with fellow Mauritian Muslims and the role socio-cultural factors played in this relationship

Interviews were carried out separately for each interviewee while their responses were recorded electronically as well as by hand. The language spoken by all interviewees was Creole. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the responses were translated into English and made available as an appendix to the dissertation. While these interviews naturally form the basis for our own analysis in this dissertation, they are independent in their own right and so we hope that the appendix may also prove a valuable resource for scholars studying other aspects of conversion to Islam.

As indicated, informal discussions with members of the movement and observation of their activities also played a role in gathering the data for this study. I had the opportunity to talk to Cehl Meeah on several occasions in order to clarify certain issues arising from the study. I also keenly observed the movement's prayer activities and attended their seminars and weekly evening lessons. Such observations and informal discussions not only served to deepen my understanding of their activities but also served as a way of cross-checking the information I was gathering.

The selection of the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* was based on the fact that it is a long-standing *da'wah* organization and is involved in promoting Islam in various fields: socially, economically, politically, educationally and spiritually. Moreover, it counts around 10,000 members around the island, including some abroad, meaning that it has a considerable and significant presence. In addition, I was also given permission to speak freely to its members who readily availed themselves in this regard. I was also allowed to participate in their gatherings and prayers. As a female myself, I also had ready access to the female members of the group.

## 1.6 Outline of chapters

As was seen, this chapter has discussed the motivation behind our research, the research problem, the core objectives of the study, its significance and the research methodology employed. In order to set the context of the study, Chapter two provides a historical overview of Mauritius, it discusses the issue of religion and ethnicity on the island, and it provides a sketch of the Muslim community of Mauritius with regards to schools of thought, organisations, the role of mosques and inter-Muslim rivalry. Chapter three provides a detailed biography of Cehl Meeah, the founder of *Jamaat-ul-Muslimeen* and discusses the factors that led to the formation of the *Jamaat-ul-Muslimeen* movement and that shaped its methodology of *da'wah*. Chapter four is concerned with *Jamaat-Ul-muslimeen's* method of *da'wah* in the light of certain theoretical considerations around the concept of *da'wah*. Chapter five presents and interprets the findings and results of interviews and discussions conducted with converts to Islam belonging to the movement. Chapter six concludes the study and presents recommendations with regard to the methodology of *da'wah* in Mauritius.

### 1.7 Summary

This chapter has presented the object, scope and methodology of this study as well as the motivation behind it and its potential significance. The study will examine how *da'wah* is conducted by a significant Islamic organisation in Mauritius. In so doing, it seeks in particular to shed light on the factors that inhibit the progress of *da'wah* in Mauritius. Thus, among other things, it is hoped that this dissertation can act as an educational resource for those conducting this activity in Mauritius.

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## CHAPTER 2: An overview of the island of Mauritius

### 2. An overview of Mauritius Island

Mauritius is a small island situated to the east of Madagascar. It is found in the Indian Ocean, off coast to the African continent and counts diverse types of emigrants coming from China, India, Pakistan, Africa and Europe.

Mauritius is well-known for its diverse culture, ethnicity, religions and races.

Uninhabited before the 16th century, Mauritius has become home to a variety of ethnic groups who came to it as colonists or traders, or were brought as slaves or indentured labour to the island. Rosabelle Boswell notes that before its independence in 1968, the island of Mauritius experienced three centuries of colonization by the Dutch, French, and English respectively. Under this period of colonial domination, slaves, indentured labourers and traders from Africa, India and China were brought to or settled in the country. Consequently, it developed into a plural society where people of diverse origins and faiths coexisted. <sup>1</sup>

As a result of this complex history, Mauritians speak a variety of languages, such as Creole, French, English, Urdu, Hindi, Tamil, Bhojpuri, Mandarin and Cantonese - although Creole has become the vernacular and English the official language. It is also because of this diversity that the British Council of Mauritius has considered Mauritius a “rainbow nation”. <sup>2</sup>

According to the U.S library of congress, the 1968 constitution recognized four population categories: Hindus, Muslims, Sino-Mauritians, and the general population. <sup>3</sup>

Wikipedia acknowledges that Muslims constitute 17, 3 % of the whole population and the majority of Muslims are *Sunnis* [those who claim to follow Prophet Muhammad's practice].<sup>4</sup> Both Hindus and Muslims originate from India and therefore both have inherited Indian cultures and traditions. Other faiths consist of Christianity, Buddhism, Jehovah's Witnesses and small percentages of other religions. Those who are originated from Africa and Europe are mostly Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses. Buddhism is practised by a large majority of Sino-Mauritians.

It is interesting to note that there is a strong correlation between religion and ethnicity in the country. For example, those of Indian descent are mostly Hindus or Muslims, whereas those of Chinese descent are mostly Buddhists. Creoles and white people are mostly Christians.

Economically, Mauritius is often cited as a model to be emulated in the region with an efficient water and electricity supply, and widespread, low-cost internet access. In addition, Mauritius provides free health, free education and old age pensions to its citizens, mentions Sheila Bunwaree.<sup>5</sup> The level of literacy is high and there are equal opportunities in education for both genders at primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

Talking about the economic situation in Mauritius, the article "Mauritian - Sociopolitical Organization" says the most powerful group is the landowning Franco-Mauritians, who have dominated the island's economy for more than two centuries. Others with great economic power include Muslim merchants and Sino-Mauritian industrialists and merchants.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.1 Aspects of Mauritian history

Wikipedia <sup>7</sup> explains that the first French settlers arrived in Mauritius in 1722. After the previous attempts of settlement by the Dutch had failed, and the island had once again become abandoned, the French settled and lived prosperously on the island, ruling it until the British invasion in 1810. However, the terms of capitulation allowed the settlers to live in the country as a distinct francophone ethnic group for the next 158 years under British rule before Mauritius attained independence that is until 1968 (Wikipedia, July 2014).

It is not clear when exactly Islam arrived in Mauritius. However, according to the book *Mosquée Al Aqsa* the presence of Muslims in Mauritius can be inferred from the days of Dutch colonization. During the two abortive attempts at settlement by the Dutch (1638-1658) (1664-1710), slaves were brought from Bengal, the Malabar Coast and Indonesia. It is well-known that by this time most of the coastal population of these areas was Muslims. But it was during the French colonization from 1710 onwards that the Muslim community can be traced with precision. <sup>8</sup>

The book *Mosquée Al Aqsa* also mentions that the pyramidal society of Mauritian society had been apparent for many centuries, with the Whites occupying the apex and the slaves at the base with the Free Coloureds and Indians in between. Race was the fundamental factor in this hierarchal society. Rigid social graduations fixed by Europeans were readily adopted by one and all. Muslims were considered as ‘lascars’, a pejorative French expression. They were subjected to a variety of civil and political disabilities. Despite all this, they also held value for the authorities as they mostly worked in the port area and in government offices as “pions” [French word designated for attendants]. The lascars lived together with the other members of the Indian population but kept themselves distinct due to their different religious beliefs. <sup>9</sup>

With the passage of time, the numbers of the indentured labouring community increased and began to outstrip the number of other population groups. Houbert (1981) states that in 1853 Indian indentured labourers formed a tiny fraction of the population of 100,000, of whom 80,000 were slaves, but by 1861 they made up two-thirds of the inhabitants.<sup>10</sup>

Mauritius sought its independence in 1968, from the British. A man from the Hindu community, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam led the fight to the independence. Describing the situation Bunwaree says that: “Bouts of violence sparked off both in the period preceding independence and the immediate post-independence period. Violence flared in May 1965 between Creoles and Hindus. Several people were killed and the British sent in troops which remained until the end of the year.”<sup>11</sup>

A civil war broke out post-independence on the ground of ethnic inequalities and this time, the Christian Creoles and Muslims fought each other, giving rise what is commonly called the ‘Bagarre raciale’ (‘Race Riot’). While the Hindu community did not fight, the Christian population including the Creoles and the Whites were dissatisfied with the election. The White people feared the after consequences of the Independence where a man of Indian origin would rule over them and many of them left the country. Many houses remained abandoned or eventually sold. To better understand the pre-bagarre raciale and the post-bagarre raciale, Norbert Benoit spoke about Plaine Verte (the now Muslim quarter of Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius) in these terms: “Until 1968, it was home to a heterogeneous community of Muslims and Christians. This closely intertwined community of two ethnic/religious groups who co-existed for over a century found itself at the centre of the riots which took place in that year.”<sup>12</sup>

Shawkat Ally Gozeer, an eye witness of the ‘bagarre raciale’, narrated that the atmosphere was tensed after the Independence Day but the reason behind it is still not very clear. According to him, the Muslim community was divided regarding politics but people are still afraid to talk about this conflict and they prefer to “forget about it”-“not because it is not important, but rather because of the fear that it might engender” He said: “After the riots, some Muslims who did not live in the Plaine Verte region before, came to live there - not all at once just a few. When people learnt that some Christians had killed a Muslim, Muslims from Plaine-Verte would kill a Christian until the situation degenerated.”<sup>13</sup>

Sydney Selvon commented on the same event, saying: “Every day we had reports of killings, horrible killings on both sides. I pray God this never happens again in Mauritius. The 1999 riots [discussed below] were nothing in comparison. In the media we all cooperated with the government and the police whatever our political angle, to help bring back peace and this eventually worked.”<sup>14</sup>

After the ‘bagarre raciale’, socio-cultural interrelationships were strained in the country. Hatred and animosity were present among Muslims, Christians and Hindus. The Hindus moved to Triolet [the North], the Black Creoles to Roche-Bois and Cité La Cure [two suburban areas of Port-Louis], the White people stayed in the district of Plaine Wilhems in Curepipe while Muslims settled in Plaine-Verte and the neighborhood that is Vallée Pitot.

Rajen Suntoo says that much progress in nation building has been done after the ‘bagarre raciale’ incident. However, a lot of tensions still exist among the different cultural, ethnic and religious groups. He believes that not all people are comfortable with ‘Mauritian’

identity. Many prefer to be recognized by their ethnic identity first. He says that the tensions and conflicts that occurred in 1968 and 1999 had nearly paralysed the island. Suntoo explains that though there appears to be a high level of tolerance and social solidarity among the different and diverse groups which contribute largely to make social life possible, yet the population is aware that ‘it is walking on an ethnic bomb which may explode at any time causing damage to all development made.’<sup>15</sup> Suntoo & Hemant B. Chittoo claim that “Although there is the growing belief that we have been able to develop the sense of ‘Mauritianism’ yet the majority of the population is of opinion that we are facing much difficulties to sustain and consolidate a true Mauritian nation where everyone would put their national identity before the ethnic one.”<sup>16</sup>

Amenah Jahangeer-Chojoo (2010) agrees with this assessment claiming that the Mauritian approach to democracy has brought stability to the multi-ethnic state and has favoured its economic emancipation. However, she said the system has showed its limits and needs to be improved. According to her, the local political system has favoured the development of ethnic /sectarian identity to the detriment of a national identity. More public and private resources are devolved into cultivating differences than in building commonness.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the ‘bagarre raciale’ of 1968 has left indelible marks on Mauritian society. Subsequent generations have trodden the way of previous ones by refusing to merge with ethnic groups which they labelled as ‘others’.

Another racial conflict occurred in 1999 when a Creole Rastafarian singer was arrested and killed in police custody. Bunwaree<sup>18</sup> confirms that the violence of February 1999 occurred after a public meeting was organised by the ‘Mouvement Republicain’, a small

political party which was asking for the ‘depenalisation of gandia’ (ganja/cannabis). Police had subsequently arrested some participants of the said meeting for smoking banned substances. Among those detained was Kaya, one of the country’s leading Creole singers. She says that Kaya’s arrest and death in ‘police custody triggered a series of protest marches, amid allegations that he had been beaten to death by police officers.’ According to her, this conflict arose due to the ‘malaise creole’ – a term which has been frequently used to describe the economic hardship suffered by the Creole population of Roche-Bois. The ‘malaise creole’ has led to many violent acts in the country and has created more tension with other ethnic groups, especially Hindus who are a majority in the country. Bunwaree points out that in a period of ‘growing inequalisation and wealth getting concentrated in the hands of a few, inter-culturality is under great strain.’ Concerning the ‘malaise creole’, Piat (1993:2) argues: “if the suffering involved in the Malaise Creole is not addressed, there might come a day when it will explode into violence.”<sup>19</sup> The violence of 1999, with its looting and burning of houses, can be seen as a confirmation of Piat’s argument. Bunwaree says that although the strife of February 1999 degenerated ‘into some form of communal attacks between the creole community on the one side and the Muslims and the Hindus on the other,’ yet some people have interpreted those actions as an indication of the frustration of the working class and that Kaya’s death was simply the trigger. In other words, there was both an ethnic and a class dimension to the conflict of 1999. These divisions, particularly the ethnic division, form the background against which *da’wah* is carried out in the Mauritian context and shape the way *da’wah* is received by the various Mauritian communities.

## 2.2 Religion and ethnicity in Mauritius

Mauritius can be considered a religious country due to the variety of beliefs and practices professed by its inhabitants. Religious belief is one of the most visible aspects of society as can be seen by the number of mosques, churches, pagodas and temples throughout the island. Rajiv Malik, an Indian Hindu, speaking about religion in Mauritius notices that ‘people of all the faiths are constantly striving to learn and grow according to their capacity’ and ‘what they learn, they practise’. He paints the general Mauritian picture as follows: “Hindus go to temple on Thursdays. Marriages take place on weekends. Fridays are for Muslims to visit their mosques. Christians go to church on Sundays. Everyone is religious.”<sup>20</sup>

In fact, religion affects many areas of society in a profound way and there is a fairly high degree of religious tolerance as well. According to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, (21.02.2013) Mauritius attached great importance to the protection of ‘freedom of conscience’ and the ‘right of citizens to practise their religion’. Also, it is the only African nation where the largest religion is Hinduism although Christianity and Islam also have significant populations.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, Mauritius is renowned for the celebration of some popular religious festivals and the calendar is full with religious events. Pilgrimage sites can be seen such as the Pere Laval shrine at Sainte Croix for Catholics and Lake Bassin for Hindus. Besides, Mauritius counts many national public holidays in its yearly calendar - among them are the Chinese Spring festival; the Festivals of Light, Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Christmas and the celebration of *Eid-Ul-Fitr* [Muslims’ festival which occurs every year after the prescribed month of fasting] which marks the end of a one-month fasting. Religion, then, is a very significant feature within the Mauritian context. Thus *da’wah* takes place against a backdrop in which society has given religion a prominent

place. It has to take into account the sensitivity around religion in a complex society. At the same time, its own activity assumes a heightened importance precisely because of the prominence given to religion.

### 2.3 The Muslim community and its various organisations

The history of Muslims in Mauritius can be traced back several centuries though it is almost impossible to document the first Muslim arrival on the island. “The Muslim community, like the Hindus, descends largely from Indian indentured labourers, but some Muslims immigrated to Mauritius during the 19<sup>th</sup> century to establish commercial trading ventures, forming a private sector elite” (Eriksen 1998) .<sup>22</sup>

Islamic associations or movements are accepted by the Government and are free to operate as long as they dwell within limits set by the Constitution of Mauritius. A Registry of Associations exists at the level of Government. This freedom of religion as well as associations has given rise to plenty of mosques in the island as well as Islamic organisations and Islamic schools.

According to the magazine Al Aqsa, the freedom to believe, practise, propagate, assemble, associate and educate is embedded in the Constitution of Mauritius. It says that the Muslim Community of Mauritius has enjoyed the privilege of setting up and running organisations in the country for the purpose of practising religious obligations, propagating Islam, educating the community and providing welfare ever since the arrival of the first Muslims on the island. Thus as far back as 1805, the first mosque was built and today there are about 200 mosques operating on the island. These are managed usually by committees set up by the organisations formed for that purpose. They are

registered officially with the *Waqf Board* [board which discusses donation of a property for Allah's cause], which is a body appointed by Government.<sup>23</sup>

The author of the article "Muslims in Mauritius"<sup>24</sup> writes that the early Muslim business community had set up organisations grouping its people on the basis of ethnic origin rather than business type or enterprise. Organisations such as the *Cutchee Meiman Sunnee Mussulman Society* (1852) and *Surtee Sunnee Mussulman Society* (1890) are still in existence. The community had striven to set up schools for religious studies in the first instance like the Muslim High School, Madad Secondary School, in addition to *madrassahs* [Islamic schools] which are traditionally attached to mosques. The same article continues: "Today, the country is somewhat inundated with Islamic organisations which unfortunately have thrived on the differences in schools of thought, exacerbated by the influx of students who have studied Islam at various universities in India, Pakistan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Signs of intolerance have unfortunately appeared in the Mauritian Muslim scenery."

While the *Sunni jama'at* [Muslims of Indian and Pakistani descent who follow traditional practices such as the veneration of saints] is the largest Muslim community in Mauritius, the *Tablighi Jama'at* on the other side which is an apolitical movement also counts many adherents in Mauritius. While the *Tablighi Jama'at* is engaged in preaching and missionary work, this is targeted solely to the existing Muslim community. As Egdunas Racijs says the *Tablighi Jama'at* pursues *da'wah* 'within the Muslim commonwealth'.<sup>25</sup> He claims that revivalist movements in the world have used *da'wah* to counteract the effect of Christian missionaries and to 'call back fellow believers to the true path of God from which they are seen to have gone astray (such as *Salafi da'wah*, or *da'wah* of the *Tablighi Jama'at*).'.

Other Islamic organisations also appear to be concerned with reforming the beliefs and practices of existing Muslims rather than addressing non-Muslims. The *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* is the only well-known organisation that addresses *da'wah* on a national level, preaching to non-Muslims and being actively involved in politics as part of its *da'wah* effort.

Unlike the traditional *Sunnis* and the *Tablighi Jama'at*, the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* believe in adhering only to the Quran and Hadith and steering clear from practices that they see as polytheistic (*shirk*). They may best be referred to as 'tawheedi. There are other groups of Muslims who consider themselves '*Tawheedi*' though they are not members of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*. Among such groups are the *Zamzam movement* and the *Dar Ul Hikmah*; whereas those who claim to follow the companions of the Prophet [pbuh] are called the *Salafs*. The *Salafs* are in conflict with all the other Muslim groups and claim to be the only group which is professing the true Word of Allah.

The *Ahmadiyyah* sect as well as the *Shites* are insignificant in number and are thus disregarded by the majority of Muslims.

It is against this background of inter-Muslim rivalry that the *da'wah* activity of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* takes place. The *Jamaat* and its founder, Cehl Meeah, are however players within this rivalry and, through their *da'wah* and other activities, project a particular vision of Islam that may compete with those of other players. It is to this vision of Islam that we now turn and we trace its emergence in Mauritius by examining the life and philosophy of the founder of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*, Cehl Meeah.

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## CHAPTER 3: The founder of *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*

### 3. Introduction

The views of Emile Durkheim continue to strongly influence the sociology of religion. Though he did not believe in God, he was interested by the power religion holds in people's lives.

As previously stated, Durkheim's theory of religion provides an example how functionalists examine sociological phenomena. According to Durkheim <sup>1</sup>, people see religion as contributing to the health and continuation of society in general. Thus, religion functions "to bind society's members by prompting them to affirm their common values and beliefs on a regular basis". <sup>2</sup>

The statement implies that there is a close connection between religion and politics since politics plays a critical part in maintaining a society and religion helps affirm the values of that society. This argument finds an echo in the ideology of Cehl Meeah, founder of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*, who believes that involvement in politics is an important means by which to spread the Islamic message among non-Muslims. However, Cehl Meeah does not see religion in purely social terms as does the functionalist; rather he sees religion as an integral aspect of both personal and social life. He believes that all human individuals and collectives can benefit from Islam through *da'wah*, whether they are born Muslims or non-Muslims. Thus he believes that the fundamental mission of Muslims is to islamize the world, and in so doing fulfil Allah's command. <sup>3</sup>

This is Cehl Meeah's vision of Islam. How did this vision emerge and how successful has he been in implementing it in Mauritius? This chapter will address this question by an

examination of Cehl Meeah's biography, his methodology of *da'wah* and the mission of his organization.

### 3.1 Cehl Fakeemeeah: a biographical sketch

Muhammad Cehl Fakeemeeah is commonly known as Brother Cehl Meeah. As for those who know him personally, he is respectfully known as Bhye Cehl or Ameer Cehl. In this dissertation, he will be called Cehl Meeah.

Cehl Meeah is born in 1958 in Port-Louis, the capital of Mauritius. He was brought up in a poor family. As he mentioned in his book 'I did not even have a pair of sandals to attend school.'<sup>4</sup> His Qur'anic education started since his early childhood and soon he developed awareness for Islam. Cehl Meeah (2003) says that his initiation to religion and spirituality was innate in him from an early age, citing: "It was a 'Godly blessed' nature orientating and moulding of my personal character for a well-planned purpose, unknown to me till now."<sup>5</sup> He said he was brought up in a religious family and his grandfather was a congregational leader in different mosques for more than forty consecutive years. He says that he was influenced by his grandfather's religious endeavor. "This explains how I found myself fluent in reading the Qur'an since I was eleven years old. I was even made to stand as a teacher of Qur'an for children when I was 12-13 years of age."<sup>6</sup>

He says that this religious and spiritual disposition very soon became his personal behaviour and visible traits. He narrated how at the age of 16-17, he was already involved in preaching at study circles. He was also leading the Friday congregational prayers in one of the mosque of the capital city, Port-Louis. He firmly believes that all these involvements were undoubtedly the Divinely Decreed training – aiming at preparing and moulding his disposition and shaping his character to carry out some well-designed

purpose. He obtained a scholarship after his primary education and attended the Royal College of Port-Louis. At that time, the Royal College was meant only for the elites and those who could afford the fees. Since he was poor, it was clear that he would not have been able to attend the Royal College if he had not obtained scholarship. After his School Certificate, he joined the John Kennedy Secondary School in Beau-Bassin, another Star school. He explained how with some struggles, he was afforded a special place of worship, especially for Friday prayers.<sup>7</sup>

He excelled during his secondary studies at the John Kennedy College. After he completed his Higher School Certificate, he was not interested in taking a conventional job. He says that his ambition was not to earn a living for this world; rather he wanted to become a fully engaged *da'ee* for the sake of Allah. He continued to preach those he was accustomed to until he won another scholarship at the age of 21 and this time, it was to the University of Umm Ul Qura, Makkah. He studied *Islamic Jurisprudence* [law] for twelve years and during university holidays, he would deliver Islamic speeches to a group of students among his own friends and relatives. He motivated them to acquire Islamic knowledge by reading the Qur'an and ahadith. He brought many Islamic books from Saudi Arabia, England, South Africa and France so that his friends could make good use of them – books which were not available in Mauritius. Among the books he brought were those concerning the life of Muhammad, the history of Islam, hadith and the companions of Prophet Muhammad [pbuh], stories of prophets, Fiqh, Malcom X and many French books. Cehl Meeah also explains that many opportunities were opened to him once he was in Saudi Arabia. It was easy for him to perform *Umra* and *Hajj* [pilgrimage to Makkah] and he had the opportunity to engage with many *sheikhs* [religious leaders] and *da'ees* [those who invite people towards Islam] in Saudi Arabia.

He says that he gradually strengthened his understanding of Islam and the quest for Islamic knowledge became deeply-rooted in him. Along his journey he became fluent in five languages - Creole, French, Urdu, Arabic and English - as well as a *hafiz* of the Qur'an (one who has memorized the whole Qur'an). After completing his studies, he finally returned to Mauritius in 1991. Upon his return, he built and developed his *da'wah* organization, the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* (which was founded in 1990) and also became involved in Mauritian politics, first as the leader of the *Hizbullah* Party (founded in 1992) and then of its later incarnation, Front Solidarité Mauricien [FSM] (founded in 2004). His involvement in politics has come at a price and in 2000 he was arrested for alleged involvement in a plot to kill political opponents. He was detained for three years but eventually found not guilty and released. In 2010 he won a parliamentary seat as a member of the FSM. We will now discuss his involvement in both areas.<sup>8</sup>

The study of *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* movement [1990-2014]

The *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* is a religious movement with a socio-political character. Cehl Meeah founded this movement in 1990 and his main objective 'was to free his Muslim brethren from the slavery of the then socio-economic and political realities that prevailed in the Mauritian society.'<sup>9</sup> Taking the view of Sayyid Qutb that 'To get rid of the *jahiliyya* [ignorance], one must stop governance by man and return to the governance of God,'<sup>10</sup> the movement was determined to get rid of what it saw as the *jahiliyya* period which has prevailed for decades. What Sayyid Qutb has termed as "modern *jahiliyya*" was also seen as such by Cehl Meeah; the latter would refer to the young intellectuals as having a '*jahiliyya* mindset' – they would attend universities, study a secular, atheistic philosophy, imitate popular culture and thus become dependent upon a materialistic lifestyle.<sup>11</sup>

Cehl Meeah who, as we previously noted was himself born into poverty, was determined to provide education to the masses through this movement in order to uplift the poor, especially the Creole of Roche-Bois also known as the Black Creole.

The initial stages of the movement started with a few friends of Cehl Meeah who dedicated their time and money to his cause. Spreading the word by mouth, these friends would invite their friends and relatives until the movement grew substantially. Those who were considered sincere and dedicated were given responsible positions within the organisation.<sup>12</sup> This can be compared with what Özlem Tür Kavli says concerning the movement *Al Ikhwan Al Muslimun* [the Muslim brotherhood] which began its initial stages by recruiting new members for the organisation who were generally selected ‘from close friends, university students or new graduates’. He explains that after the base was formed, recruits were chosen from mosque worshippers. “Those that appear to be deeply religious and regularly attend the mosque are invited to religious discussions after prayer during which the consciousness and political awareness of the potential recruit is assessed.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed there is correlation between the principles of *Al Ikhwan Al Muslimun* with Cehl Meeah’s methodology of recruitment.

Encouraged by his father and friends, Cehl Meeah soon rallied a larger group of *Muslims* and *Muslimahs* [Muslim women] who were interested by his interpretation of the message of Islam. It was a message which emphasized tawheed and strongly condemned what it saw as *shirk* [adding partners to Allah in terms of worship] and *kufur* [rejecting Allah’s command]. It was also a message that emphasized going back to the Qur’an, the need to repent for one’s sins and the need to *Islamize* [to practice Islam] one’s self. Women, for example, were urged to adhere to the *hijab* and cover their hair, rather than just their body. At the same time, Cehl Meeah strongly encouraged women’s education

and participation at mosques. The message appeared to resonate with a number of Mauritians who were further impressed by his command of the Arabic language and the ease by which he translated Quranic expressions into Creole. He travelled through the island on a motor bike to propagate his message of Islam to all those who would listen to him.

During these years, Cehl Meeah earned a living through organizing *Hajj* [pilgrimage to Makkah] groups. Every year he would take Mauritian pilgrims to Makkah and Madinah, taking care not only of their physical requirements but also giving appropriate lectures and guidance. In this way, he believes, he succeeded in making his livelihood a means to please Allah.

Convinced of Cehl Meeah's intentions and message, a fellow-Muslim donated an old garage to Cehl Meeah in order that he might convert it into a centre of Islamic knowledge. This centre was to eventually become the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* and is situated in the heart of Plaine Verte in Port-Louis. The place is still known as 'Centre' with a French accent.

From its headquarters in Plane Verte, the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* expanded and eventually incorporated various sub-branches, a Quranic institute in Rose-Hill, and primary and secondary schools. Its membership also increased with all these developments and the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* now has approximately 10,000 members. Cehl Meeah also developed small businesses to improve the socio-economic conditions of the people. The organisation is now active in several fields such as education, religion, finance, society, and politics. Many men and women are involved in social activities. Most of them are not remunerated for their services, working on a voluntary basis.<sup>14</sup>

The role of women in the movement needs to be emphasized. Women attend daily prayers at the mosque, listen to the sermon on Friday, and attend *tarawih* [supererogatory prayer] during *Ramadan* [the prescribed month of fasting]. They are active in Qur'an study circles, mosque-based activities, and door-to-door *da'wah*. Activist women take care of divorced, widowed and orphans in the society. They hold a *Da'wah* Academy Centre at Plaine Verte that responds specifically to the social problems faced by women. The organisation counts women educators, journalists, translators, doctors, clerks, managers, lecturers and social workers among its members.

According to Cehl meeah, the organization is not funded by any national or international organization. The organisation takes *zakat* [prescribed alms] from its members and other parties willing to do so. The *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* distributes goods and provisions to the needy in various areas of the country as well as “to win the hearts of converts”.<sup>15</sup>

The Centre is well-known for its morning *Tafseer* [explanation of the Qur'an], its Friday lectures, and its *Tarawih* prayers during the month of Ramadan and spiritual programs are held throughout the year. Cehl Meeah together with some of his followers assist students in educational lessons on a daily basis. The main purpose of its teaching activities is to ‘consciously conceptualize the worship of Allah for which reason they have been created’. [Reference, Qur'an 51 v 56]

Political meetings and mini seminars are also held at the centre. Food is given to the poor every month irrespective of religious affiliations. The movement also operates detoxification programmes.

In the month of *Shaaban* [8<sup>th</sup> month in the Islamic calendar] it is the custom of the *Centre* to have a family outing. Every Sunday night during the month of Ramadan, a

dinner is served to all Muslim families. On the night of *Eid* [Muslims' festival after the completion of one month of fasting], a party is celebrated at the Plaine Verte Public garden where gifts are donated to all children, Muslims as well as non-Muslims.

The youth branch [YET] organizes specific programs such as spiritual nights, sports, social activities and seminars. During school holidays, they camp in different areas of the island where they are also trained on how to become committed Muslims.

Regular activities are conducted for the dissemination of knowledge to non-Muslims. Street *da'wah* and door-to-door activities are new forms of *da'wah* scheduled by the movement. In 2014, his idea of propounding an interfaith group has emerged but the project is still under review.

During his rise to prominence, views also brought him into conflict with groups such as the traditionalist *Sunnis* who espoused different interpretations of Islam. As a result, he at times found himself in debates with such groups. But aside from issues of doctrine, one of the most significant areas where Cehl Meeah diverged from other Muslim groups was through his unapologetic involvement in the sphere of politics.

### 3.2 Cehl Meeah and politics

The leader of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* firmly believes that politics and Islam are one entity. His purpose in entering the political arena was to represent Muslims at the election and to free Muslims from the hands of non-Muslim political parties. The following quote of Amenah Jahangeer-Chojoo confirms Cehl Meeah's concern about politics. "Nobody denies the fact that at least 2 large minorities, the General Population and Muslims, are

regularly underrepresented in all elections after direct polls despite the above mentioned measures to ensure minority representation.”<sup>16</sup>

Wikipedia comments on his political entrance in 1992 as follows: “Here he decided to enter the political arena, and his members suggested the name *Hizbullah* [the party of God], which could best describe his convictions”.<sup>17</sup> This was its name till 2004 when it became the FSM.

According to Wikipedia, Cehl Meeah ran for the elections in 1992. He had a sizable percentage of votes, but failed to be elected. In 1995 however, Hizbullah won one seat in the Parliament by the late Imam Beeharry, a preacher at the *Noor-e-Islam* mosque in Port Louis. However at the legislative elections of 11 September 2000, the party lost the seat. In the general elections of 2010, one seat was won by Cehl Fakeemeeah.<sup>18</sup>

Cehl Meeah says that those Mauritians who were unaware of the media bias together with those Muslims who hold a different Islamic creed were against him. Media propaganda used subversive tactics against the name *Hizbullah*. It was in the month of *Ramadan*, in the year 2000 when Cehl Meeah was arrested by the police and accused of giving an order to kill three rival Muslim political activists. The media reported that the leader of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* was fasting while he was beaten. He was tortured until the international human rights took hold of this affair. He was incarcerated temporarily at Al catraz, one of the worst prisons in the country which was later closed.<sup>19</sup>

The shock was enormous for his family and members of his organisation and they were greatly saddened by the news of torture and other inhumane acts. Cehl Meeah was almost beaten to death as he himself explained. Cehl Meeah was jailed for three years from 2000-2003. He was imprisoned in one of the toughest prison called La Bastille where he

was secluded during twenty-three hours. There, he wrote three books and became a full memorizer of the Qur'an. He was then released in 2003 after charges were dropped by the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Cehl Meeah believes that his political opponents had orchestrated a plot to imprison him. He said that his political opponents and detractors paid two former hard drug addicts to level a false allegation against him – accusing him of having Babal Joomun murdered, whom until this day, he had never known and never met. He believed that the government wanted his head at all cost to banish the ‘Islamic Party’ that defeated them twice in their stronghold. Their persons, their motives and their plots were brought to light by several witnesses during preliminary hearings of the case, officially referred to as the ‘Gorah Issac Killings’.

Cehl Meeah, however, drew profound spiritual lessons from his ordeal. He said that his body suffered agony in the hands of the enemies of Allah but his heart was tranquil due to the fact that he was divinely assisted. He also said that prophets and pious companions had been threatened to death and imprisoned but that patience and constant perseverance are important for success because Allah is Ever-watching and this present life is nothing except illusion. His ordeal also gave him the certainty that only Allah has the ability to change the hearts of people. He was convinced that Allah would prove him innocent and that Allah wanted to test his sincerity through this severe trial.<sup>20</sup>

Dany Marie (LALIT 15th July, 2002) wrote that the statement made by Cehl Meeah concerning his torture is very detailed and ‘sadly rings true’. ‘There is a clear indication that he has been tortured’. She pointed out that Cehl Meeah’s statement also reveals some of the very same methods outlined by other reliable witnesses who have suffered police

brutality. ‘Some of these witnesses have recounted the torture to the Press, and others to LALIT members and other people present at the Conference on Human Rights Violations by Police Officers held at the University of Mauritius on the occasion of Human Rights Day, 10th December, 2001.’ She wrote: ‘These methods involve nearly suffocating people in thick hood, involve hitting on the head and on the soles of the feet, involve kicking, involve death threats. Torture is a “method” used by groups of police officers in Mauritius. This cannot go on with impunity.’<sup>21</sup>

Wikipedia <sup>22</sup> reported that after the Chairman of the Human Rights Commission took hold of this case and Mr. Cehl Muhammad Fakeemeeah was pronounced innocent after 3 years of alleged tortures in detention. Thousands of people, Muslims as well as non-Muslims, were gathered on the day of his liberation at Plaine-Verte. A rally was organised in his support and his popularity appeared to increase. However, Cehl Meeah <sup>23</sup> reviewed his political strategy and decided to change the name of *Hizbullah* to Mauritian Front Solidarity in order that people may not see his movement as a communal movement. He also undertook to have interreligious communication with Muslim *imams* among the traditionalists. One of the positive actions was to attend prayers and other celebrations at the Jumma Mosque, the Sunni mosque of the traditionalists. He also invited the traditionalists to join him in *Eid* gatherings, thereby putting an end to intra religious problems.

The MCIT [Major Crime Investigation Team] once again plotted against Cehl Meeah while he was performing Umra in Makkah in June 2005. Junaid <sup>24</sup> voiced out on his weblog “The leader of the FSM tried to negotiate with the government’s Minister of Justice, Rama Valayden, for his return, but the Prime Minister Dr N.Ramgoolam did not agree with the terms.” He said Cehl Meeah’s lawyer insisted that Inspector Radoah could

not handle the case as a complaint against Radoah had been made to the International Human Rights Commission for torture. But the Prime Minister insisted that no one except Radoah would handle the case.

### 3.3 The Exile of Cehl Meeah

The leader of the FSM was offered asylum in Saudi Arabia, the UK and Japan where he stayed for almost one year without his family, his wife and his two little sons.

Junaid <sup>25</sup> related on his weblog that everyone in Mauritius thought that Cehl Meeah would never come back and the media mentioned that it was the end of his career. During his stay abroad, Cehl Meeah went to many countries to deliver lecture, such as Brazil, Peru, Chili, England, South Africa, Senegal and Brunei. Under his motivation and with the assistance of Allah, an Islamic academy was founded in Manchester and an Islamic school is actually being constructed in Nagoya, Japan. He had also been very active on the Islam channel in UK.

However, Cehl Meeah did not expand on his own feelings concerning all these injustices. From his perspective, it was a trial of Allah and his concern was how he passes the Divine test. He believes that the prophet [pbuh] was appointed as a warner and his mission was only to deliver the message while only Allah can change a heart. Cehl Meeah said he was convinced that he would eventually come back to Mauritius in order to continue his mission. <sup>26</sup>

### 3.4 Post liberation of Cehl Meeah

Once he was found innocent from all accusations and released from prison, and upon his return from exile, Cehl Meeah continued his mission of *da'wah*. He adopted a milder

approach and decided to review his attitudes towards the traditionalist *Sunnis* and endeavoured to promote brotherhood relations with them. However, he was more than ever convinced to pursue his political activities.

### 3.5 Member of the Parliament

In the general election of 2010, Cehl Meeah was elected as member of the National Parliament for a number of five years, according to the constitution, unless re-elected. His objective is to bring Islam to the general public. As part of his milder approach, he changed the name '*Hizbullah* party' to 'Mauritian Solidarity Front' in order to show that his party caters for the whole population and was not a communal one.

According to Mr. Cehl Meeah, <sup>27</sup> his entry into Parliament is a miracle. He has been elected in order to show to non-Muslims the correct way of living according to Islamic rules and principles. His party is not involved in any unislamic ways and he is not interested to be one of the non-Islamic parties. His objective is to give non-Muslims a chance to hear the words of the Almighty Creator. For example, his address on homosexuality in the Parliament was meant to lecture to all the intellectuals present, that the Creator of all mankind is against homosexuality for specific reasons. He insists that his presence among them in the Parliament is a clear invitation towards Truth and Truth is Islam and Islam is the gateway to paradise.

### 3.6 The outlook and activism of Cehl Meeah

Cehl Meeah <sup>28</sup> puts great emphasis on education. For him, education is the key to a good Muslim life. In education, knowledge of the self is of prime importance. He advises his followers to meditate profoundly upon the verses of the Qur'an and to stick to a humble

life because he believes that the greatest and most important event in a life of a human being is death. Therefore, an individual lives his life to prepare for his death.

In Cehl Meeah's opinion, both men and women are ordered to seek knowledge, both religious and secular. Based on this view, the *Jama'at Ul Muslimeen* believes in the act of disseminating education to both men and women of all ages. Cehl Meeah teaches in Port-Louis at his Centre, in several mosques, schools and *madrassahs*. He is the manager of primary and secondary school in Curepipe, namely, the Dar Ul Ma'arif and L'Oiseau du Paradis schools. He teaches *Tafseer* [Explanation] of the Qur'an in Creole, the science of hadith and the understanding of hadith in Creole; he explains the concept of God and its importance in the life of a believer. All his lessons are recorded and available to the public. Many of his lessons can be viewed on You tube and the social networks on the internet.

Cehl Meeah says he values books and one of his main pastimes is to read books from different authors. Among the books he proposes to his members is a booklet known as 'morning *dhikr*' produced by Hassan Al Banna from Egypt. It is used as a spiritual upliftment by his members. Cehl Meeah has studied the biography of Sayyid Qutb, Malcom X and Al Maudoodi among other authors and he recommends his followers to study prominent authors worldwide though he admits that many books are not available in Mauritius.

As indicated earlier, women feature prominently in his movement. The reason is because Cehl Meeah believes that the social illnesses within the Muslim community are the fact that many women are not allowed in the mosques and this creates a huge gap between men and women in the Muslim society. Many women remained at home, unprepared for

their religious, socio-cultural lives. Women, he said, have the same duty as men, to serve Allah and to establish Islam on earth through *da'wah*. The ideology of the group is that the home is the first pillar upon which rests the societal health. If for some ignorant reasons, women are deprived of Islamic education and children stop the Madrassah at ten years old, then there is a severe regression in the society.

When asked about his political program, Cehl Meeah says that the Qur'an is his way and that Prophet Muhammad [pbuh] is the best model for mankind [*uswatun hassanah*]. He says that Allah is directing him towards the right attitude and right manner to conduct the affairs of the Muslims and how to tackle the Mauritian situation with wisdom. His role in parliament can facilitate such a vision. [Extracts from Cehl Meeah interview January 2014]

This view is similar to that of *Al Ikhwan Al Muslimun* who, when asked concerning their program for the society, they said quoting Özlem Tür Kavli,<sup>29</sup> “they say they have the most perfect plan and strategy: the Koran “where all the details relating to life are cited”. They believe that even if each detail is not openly given, the road to take is shown in the interpretations. Islam is taken as “a mission”; it is a *da'wah*, which all Muslims are ordered to undertake. The function of man in society is to spread Islam and serve God within this context. Manmade laws are seen as “leading humanity to decadence”, while the God-made laws will “lead humanity to peace and eternal truth”. [Özlem Tür Kavli]

As to society, Cehl Meeah holds that only a Mauritian can understand the situation of Mauritian people. According to him, the Pakistanese and Indian *da'ees* had indeed done a great job based on sincere intentions but in the contemporary world there is urgency to implement Islam in its originality.<sup>30</sup>

In the same way, Shamim A Siddiqui<sup>31</sup> explained that he met late Maulana Al Maudoodi, an Islamist reformist from Pakistan who advised him concerning *Da'wah* work in America in mid July 1979. Maulana Al Maudoodi categorically advised that to start an Islamic Movement in America, a literature addressing the people of America in their own language was deemed important together with keeping in the forefront the mood, the temperament, the psychology of the people and the needs of this country. He categorically advised that the literature produced in the Pakistan-India perspective or in the background of the Muslim countries of the Middle East will not and cannot serve the *Da'wah* purpose in America.

Cehl Meeah deeply believes that social and cultural change can only happen through educating the masses. He believes that the minority groups such as Muslims and Creoles alike are victims of post colonization in its socio-cultural, economic and political manifestations. His standpoint is similar to that of Rosabelle Boswell, who in her article about the 'Malaise Creole' in Mauritius, notes that in many postcolonial states today, dominant standards on culture and identity emphasize the boundaries of identity, "thereby ignoring that social change and globalization make these boundaries between human groups rather fluid."<sup>32</sup> Cehl Meeah's Islamic ideology is that of a *Sunni* who acknowledges the importance of *Tawheed* [oneness of God] and whose determination is to rid all the traditional and ancestral practices which are in opposition to Islam; to spread the message of Islam among all religions, based on the sources of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet [pbuh], the *sunnah*.

The majority of *Sunnis* in Mauritius, as explained by Cehl Meeah<sup>33</sup> are traditionalists who follow the religion of their forefathers without understanding the core concepts of Islam. According to him, these people indulged in *shirk* [associating partners to Allah in

terms of worship] due to religious ignorance. Cehl Meeah, who claims to be from the *Ahl-Sunna wal Jamaa'ah* [the congregation of Muslims who follow the prophet's path], believes that the two sources of law, the Qur'an and the Sunnah are ample guidelines for Muslims. According to him, the understanding of *tawheed* which is the concept of the Oneness of God can solve all human problems because the knowledge of *tawheed* will bring submission and peace to the heart and mind if it is rightly applied in intention as well as actions.

He believes that all Muslims should agree upon these two sources: the Qur'an which is the Word of God and the second source is the practice of the Prophet [pbuh]. He believes that all cultural and traditional practices that contradict the essence of the Qur'an and the Sunnah should be banned. He explains how the past generation of Muslims had over exaggerated in allowing ancestral traditions to overlap religion. These people are known as the traditionalists. For example, they believe that it is obligatory to prepare a dish called *halwa* [sweet dish] during *Shab-e-barat* [a celebration which is commemorated by some Muslims] while these same people may give less importance to daily prayers. Those who prepare *halwa* may take it an offence towards those who do not cook *halwa* and thus create unnecessary dispute within the community. Another example which he gives, is what he believes to be the overly exaggerated celebration of the Prophet's birthday which many Muslims celebrate with pomp, loud noise and mounting horses in the capital of Port-Louis while these same Muslims are often ignorant concerning the *Sunnah* [practice] of the prophet [pbuh]; practices such as good manners, generosity, good relationship with other Muslims, respect for women and caring for the elderly are often neglected.

But in order to preserve the unity of Muslims, he also says that some of the traditions can be practised in the home or specific groups in order to avoid problems. By so doing, Muslims will provide an image of peace, order, brotherhood, love and unity to non-Muslims. [Extracts from Cehl Meeah's interview, January 2014]

Cehl Meeah invites people towards a "rational" understanding of Islam, and advocates it as a comprehensive model for individual and social life. It is this "rational" message of *da'wah* that he takes to the whole Mauritian population, Muslim and non-Muslim, rich and poor, government and civilians. In his book, *Face à l'indifférence*<sup>34</sup>, he says that the foundation of cultural life lies within the firm conviction of a spiritual reality. According to him, culture is founded on the basis of the teachings of the Qur'an and culture is possible only if there is mutual understanding, respect and love for one another. Culture creates a harmonized social order which eventually brings peace and a sense of well-being. Harmony among cultures is the key idea that his organisation promotes and he believes that people have been indifferent over the years concerning the feelings and frustration of marginalized people within the Mauritian society. This is why he believes that Muslims need to accept the Creole as their own brothers and sisters and to welcome them within the Muslim community.

### 3.7 Conclusion

Cehl Meeah and *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* follow an activist, reformist interpretation of Islam modeled along the lines of the *Ikwanul Muslimeen*. As an activist he believes that Muslims must be actively involved in bettering society. As a reformist, he believes that Islam applies to all aspects of society, and is not simply spiritual or personal. It is this activist and reformist conscience which explain his involvement in the political sphere as

well. But his involvement in politics and the difficulties and persecution he encountered have also mellowed his views. Originally, when he started his movement, he was involved in a difficult relationship with traditionalist-minded Muslims because of his views and activism. But while his views and activism have not changed, he is now more accommodating towards such Muslims and puts an emphasis on Muslim unity in Mauritius. He has also grown more conscious of promoting national unity and not just Muslim interests. He has increasingly become concerned about the broader social issues affecting all Mauritians and the need for communal harmony and fraternity, irrespective of religion.

Today as indicated, Cehl Meeah's movement enjoys a wide following of some 10, 000 Muslims coming from different strata. Many non-Muslims, as well, are sympathetic to Cehl Meeah's message of fraternity and social change.

Through his life and activities, Cehl Meeah has certainly contributed to the greater prominence of Islam in the Mauritian public sphere. The members of the movement believe that with the advent of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*, they have had the opportunity to express themselves more openly, to educate themselves, and to dress islamically. They have a greater access to the Arabic language and thus to the original sources of Islam. Moreover, Muslim women, in particular, have been given greater opportunities to be visibly involved in the religion.

In his own way, then, Cehl Meeah and his movement have started addressing some of the complex socio-cultural issues that hinder *da'wah* in Mauritius. They have emphasized the use of the Creole language thus cutting across language distinctions. They have made considerable outreach to all communities in Mauritius, as well as to various socio-

economic strata, thus cutting across ethnic and class divisions. And they have involved themselves in the political, one that is not normally associated with religion, and in so doing has given Islam a national recognition that cuts across communal boundaries.

But what are the specifics of the *da'wah* methodology employed by *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*? And how do its members experience the conversion process? These are the questions that will be addressed in the next two chapters. Chapter four provides a broad framework for understanding the process of conversion as well as the movement's methodology of *da'wah* in general. Chapter five is a study of the experiences of *Jamaat – Ul-Muslimeen* converts.

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## CHAPTER 4: *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen's* method of *da'wah*

### 4. Introduction

In order to better grasp the experiences of the converts associated with the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*, we need to understand the processes at work in conversion as well as why *da'wah*, and in particular the *da'wah* of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*, was able to reach them. This chapter discusses a framework for understanding the conversion experience as well as *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen's* methodology of *da'wah*.

#### 4.1 Definition of conversion

Conversion on the basis of religion is to leave a religion and to accept another faith. In our context, conversion means to leave one religion or way of life and to enter the fold of Islam.

Researchers have given various explanations as to the meaning of conversion. On one hand, Goring (1992: 118) <sup>1</sup> defines conversion as a change in affiliation from one religion to another, or the transition from non-involvement to belief in a religion. It also designates a change involving a transformation and reorientation affecting every aspect of a person's life, which can occur suddenly or gradually. On the other hand, Lewis Rambo (1993) <sup>2</sup> views conversion as a process of religious change that is affected by an interaction of numerous events, experiences, ideologies, people, institutions, and how these different experiences interact and accumulate over time.

According to Walter, (1987:234) <sup>3</sup> conversion entails a radical re-adjustment of thoughts and actions and an entire personal transformation of the social structures in society.

However Nock (1933:7), <sup>4</sup> in his study of Early Christianity and the Roman Empire,

noted that conversion means the re-orientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another; a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved and that the old was wrong and the new is right.

Rambo (1993: 2) says concerning genuine cases of conversion:

“I see 'genuine' conversion as a total transformation of the person by the power of God. While this transformation occurs through the mediation of social, cultural, personal and religious forces, I believe that conversion needs to be radical, striking to the root of the human predicament”<sup>5</sup>

The Oxford University Press (2010)<sup>6</sup> said “Proselytizing is the act of converting, or attempting to convert, people from one religion or world-view to another.” The same faith-based ethics that motivate missionaries to engage in development can generate a desire and sense of duty to spread their faith and convince others (Bornstein 2002; De Kadt 2009).

There is a common idea that is repeated among all the researchers concerning conversion – the idea of progression, of performance and transformation. As will be seen, these ideas are important to bear in mind when considering the conversion experiences of *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* members.

#### 4.2 Reasons for conversion

Lofland and Skonovd (1981: 373-385)<sup>7</sup> provides a well-known model known as the conversion motifs model which assumes that for conversion to take place there are six motifs: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalistic, and coercive. Among

the motifs they propose, the intellectual motif is when an individual seeks knowledge about religious issues through books, videos or such means that do not involve social contacts. Another motif was affective, when an individual decides to convert on the basis of marriage or related social relations. It will be seen that the intellectual and affective motifs play the most dominant roles in experiences of the converts that we have studied.

We also believe the fact that conversion can take place because of a variety of reasons should provide food for thought for those preaching Islam. Carefully considered, an understanding of these motifs can help a *da'ee* sensitively navigate the complex socio-cultural setting in which he or she finds himself or herself.

The affective factor is very important. The rejection of a prior religion is often associated with a breakdown of family relationships. As such, emotional turmoil and conflict result.

The resultant emotional upheaval, loneliness and a need to belong can motivate an individual to convert. This desire for an identity and recognition plays an important factor in conversion as seen through the interviews. Conversion is not purely an intellectual affair.

The importance of the affective factor is brought out in an article, "Muslim converts" (May 18th 2013).<sup>8</sup> Here it is said that people embrace Islam after years of contact with Muslims. The reasons may vary. "Some, mostly women (who make up around two-thirds of new believers), want to marry a Muslim. Others are fed up with the bawdiness of British society." Batool al-Toma, an Irish-Catholic convert who runs the New Muslim Project in Leeds, was attracted by the spirituality of Islam and the warmth of relationships she saw among Muslims.

We believe it is important to understand the conversion experiences of *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* members in the light of such factors.

#### 4.3 The effect of conversion

In her thesis on Dutch and Romanian Muslim Women Converts, Daniela Stoica discusses the effect that conversion produces in the individual's religious, cultural and social setting. According to Stoica, Islam imprints new rhythms on daily lives, as well as a precise structure in what concerns religious observance. She says that Islam 'stimulates the adoption of new knowledge perspectives and the new Muslims' involvement in circuits and networks of religious learning and practice, prompting lifestyle transformations and biographical rearrangements.'<sup>9</sup> As we will see this clearly occurs in the case of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* converts.

#### 4.4 Definition and aspects of *da'wah*

The Arabic word *da'wah* is derived from the root word *da'aa* [dal, ayn, alif] which means to call and to invite. In the Islamic perspective, the word *da'wah* means to invite people to the way of the Creator, Allah and to His way, that is, Al Islam.

Muslims find references in the Qur'an to confirm the mission of *da'wah*. For example, the Qur'an says:

“Say: this is my way and I invite to Allah with certain knowledge.” [Chapter Yusuf Verse 108]

Sheikh Yusuf Estes <sup>10</sup> from California says that the word *Da'wah* in Arabic simply means to invite to something. When it is used in conjunction with Islam it is understood to mean "Inviting to the Way of submission and surrender to Allah."

Estes understands *da'wah* as an order from Allah to stand up and invite the non-Muslims to Islam. He cites chapter Al Imran verse 110 of the Qur'an to demonstrate his point.

“You are the best of people raised up, for you call to all that is right and righteous and you forbid the evil, and you believe in Allah.” [Qur'an Al Imran verse 110]

In other words, in the Islamic context, *da'wah* means to invite and call those who have not yet entered the fold of Islam, towards knowledge, understanding and finally, towards its acceptance. As for those who engage themselves in inviting others to Islam, they have obeyed Allah and His Messenger. Allah declares in the Qur'an:

“Who is better in speech than one who calls to Allah, and does righteous deeds and say truly I am among the Muslims.” [Qur'an Al Fussilat 41: 33]

According to the above, Muslims must engage themselves in the path of Prophet Muhammad [pbuh] in order to spread the message of Islam on earth and invite those non-Muslims who have not had the opportunity to listen to its message.

In brief, traditionally *da'wah* is an invitation, a call, or a solicitation that is generally addressed to non-Muslims only. The word *islaa* (Arabic: *islah*) which means to reform, is more appropriate to use for reforming existing Muslims.

The primary objective of *da'wah* is to bring humankind to the recognition of the one Lord that they should serve. The Qur'an states in Surah Al Hujurat verse 13

“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted”

The Qur’an says in surah An-Nahl verse 125

“Invite (all) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for your Lord knows best who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance.”

But this recognition of the Lord is only properly and fully accomplished through submission to the Message of Allah’s Last Messenger, Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him]. It was the duty of the Prophet [PBUH] to deliver Allah’s last Message to humankind and in so doing usher in an era of love, cooperation, support, protection and peace that is generated by submission to this Message. It is a Message that is believed to touch all areas of life: the spiritual, educational, economic, socio-cultural and political aspects. As we have seen, these principles of *da‘wah* clearly inform the philosophy of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*.

The scope of *Da‘wah* according to Ghulush (1987)<sup>11</sup> covers three basic elements of Islam namely: faith (*aqeedah*), Islamic law (*shari‘ah*) and morals (*akhlaq*). These basic elements are applicable to humans. The system of brotherhood created by Islam has as objective to eliminate all types of discriminations among countries, regions, cultures and humankind. Thus an Arab is not superior to a non-Arab; the white and the black are considered equal and the rich and the poor are also considered equal. The only degree of superiority allowed by Islam is the level of piety which one develops towards the Creator. In other word, superiority in the divine perspective is based on a person’s piety. This

Islamic principle plays a very prominent part in the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*'s methodology of *da'wah* which seeks to foster outreach to all Mauritian communities, especially the Black Creole community.

Jamal Badawi (June 2012) <sup>12</sup> extends the idea of *da'wah* in the contemporary world by suggesting that *da'wah* is not exclusively to seek more converts to Islam, rather it is a means of promoting better understanding between Muslims and other faith communities around the world, with the hope of more cooperation in what is beneficial to all. As we have seen, the idea of *da'wah* as promoting better understanding between Muslims and other faith communities has also been promulgated by Cehl Meeah, especially upon his release from imprisonment. *Da'wah* is thus not simply conceived as a proselytizing activity but one that fosters communal harmony.

It is also instructive to compare Cehl Meeah's view to Shamim A Siddiqi's <sup>13</sup> understanding of *da'wah*. For Siddiqi the meaning of *da'wah* is encapsulated in the term *Da'wah Illallah* which means an invitation to Allah. In his opinion, calling people unto Allah means 'to surrender to Allah who is the Creator, the Lawgiver and the Sustainer'. *Da'wah* according to Siddiqi is to submit to Allah's authority in its totality in every walk of life. It advocates that sovereignty belongs to Allah alone and denies all authorities besides Him. "Allah alone has the right to ask loyalty and obedience from a Muslim." Siddiqi further argues that *da'wah Illallah* is incumbent upon all Muslims irrespective of gender, 'whether he/she is free or in prison, at home or abroad, in a friendly environment or on foreign lands.' He sustains that *da'wah* is a 'lifelong assignment' and mentions a verse of the Qu'ran to support his arguments.

"And who is better in speech than one who calls (the People unto his Lord and does good deeds and (declares) Lo! I am of those who surrender (Muslim) unto Him." (Qur'an 41:33).

The aforesaid statements of Siddiqi widen the scope of *da'wah* making it clear that *da'wah* is incumbent upon all and applies to any situation in life. Cehl Meeah would certainly agree that Muslims must invite others to Allah, and that this will be a life-long activity, but he does not imply that *da'wah* is the duty of each and every Muslim. In fact, during informal discussions, Cehl Meeah has made it clear that *da'wah* is the duty of those who are capable of doing it and does not concern everyone. Cehl Meeah's emphasis is about educating the masses through a group of qualified people.

Another question to be addressed is whether *da'wah* is only intended for non-Muslims, or should Muslims be included under its ambit as well? While traditionally the term *da'wah* has been used for non-Muslims and the term *Islaa* (reformation) for Muslims, there is a growing tendency to use the term *da'wah* in relation to Muslims as well. Thus Sheikh Abdallah Kheir <sup>14</sup> argues that the exercise of *Da'wah* can be defined as any activity aimed at spreading Islam among non-Muslims or any Islamic work intended to increase the Islamic commitment among Muslims. Thus, Islamic *Da'wah* can be done to both Muslims as well as non-Muslims. The major aim of *Da'wah* is to bring the people out of darkness and take them to the light by guiding them to the truth until they hold on to it and get saved from the hell fire and the Anger of Allah, irrespective of whether they are non-Muslims or Muslims. As so, as Egdunas Raciun <sup>15</sup>, Muslim missionaries' efforts in the contemporary era are once again turned towards winning converts to Islam, "while the calling back of fellow Muslims has not ceased either." Cehl Meeah would certainly agree with this perspective. According to Cehl Meeah as well, *da'wah* is addressed to

both Muslims and non-Muslims. There is no difference between *Islaa* [reform] and *da'wah* [invitation].

According to him, the word *islaa* cannot be used for Muslims as the majority of Muslims are Muslims by name only. They have by chance been born into a Muslim family and they therefore accept Islam automatically.

According to Cehl Meeah, Mauritian Muslims are traditionalists rather than convinced believers. This is why he believes that Muslims and Non-Muslims both need to be educated in order to become Muslims by choice. <sup>16</sup>

Cehl Meeah's assessment of traditional Muslims is confirmed through the statement of Balogun Kamaldeen who says that: "Many Muslims grow up with blind faith. They acquire very little or no knowledge of the faith" <sup>17</sup>

Many Muslim *da'ees* [those who invite people to Islam] in Mauritius were aware of this and that is why they were more concerned about reforming existing Muslims within the community rather than inviting non-Muslims towards Islam. This is evidently clear for example in regard to the activity of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the country. However, according to *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* this must not be done to the detriment of *da'wah* in its most basic sense, namely, to invite non-Muslims to the message of Oneness of God.

Another element of *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*'s methodology of *da'wah* is the founder's involvement in politics. As was seen earlier, Cehl Meeah has said that his entry in the political arena was motivated by the absence of Muslim voice to convey the message of Islam to the whole nation. His involvement in this sphere is to create more avenues through which *da'wah* can be conducted. In this sense, one can say that *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* has employed an innovative *da'wah* strategy. One can see it, in fact, as a

response to some of the concerns about traditional *da'wah* methods raised by some writers. For example, Fathi Yakan's criticises Muslim movements for their use of dreary traditional methods of *da'wah* which may impact on the effectiveness of *da'wah* delivery. Yakan, in fact, considers the approach of some Muslim movements in *da'wah* as a kind of suicide and exhorts Muslim workers to review their *da'wah* experiences of the past forty years and to re-evaluate their intellectual contributions.<sup>18</sup> Qaradawi as well reflects in his work entitled *Khitabuna al-Islami fi 'Asr al-'Awlamah'* (Our Islamic Discourse in the Age of Globalization) on the need to embark on the propagation of *da'wah* with due consideration to changes in time and space. Qaradawi discusses a number of new methodologies, skills and techniques for the betterment of *da'wah*.<sup>19</sup>

Based on the foregoing, it seems Cehl Meeah's involvement in politics in order to target the masses, is an important *da'wah* strategy. However, as was said earlier, this involvement in politics may not be appreciated by everybody, especially some fellow-Muslims.

*Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* also believes that *da'wah* is inhibited by the perceived social habits of some Muslims. These include vulgarity, loudness, backbiting, husbands ill-treating wives and over consumption of food within the Muslim community. Thus Muslims do not present a positive model to other communities.

To offset this factor, Cehl Meeah has through his writings presented a model to the young generation that emphasizes the *Taqwa* of Allah [spiritual fear or God consciousness] plus *adaab* [the complete set of behavioural manners] that makes a believer complete. He terms the model as *Al Insaan Al Kamil* - the complete human being.

Finally, Cehl Meeah and the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* also convey the importance of external appearance in *da'wah* activity. Men and women should be clean, well-dressed and well-groomed in general. They need to present an acceptable face to the modern world without compromising their principles and spiritually. The outer must be done in conjunction with an inner transformation. For example, all the women in the movement wear Islamic dress. But this outer aspect must be accompanied by inner change which by its nature is a long procedure.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter examined aspects of the methodology of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* movement as well as providing a framework for understanding the experience of conversion. We have seen that for the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* *da'wah* is a multi-faceted phenomenon that does not simply mean inviting non-Muslims to Islam. It is a means to promote inter-communal harmony as well without necessarily expecting people to enter the religion. It is also an activity directed to Muslims who are believed to be simply Muslims by birth but who have not, in *Jamaat-Ul-Mulimeen's* estimation, truly understood the religion. It is in addition an activity that focuses on both the outer and inner and a formal profession of Islamic faith is not considered sufficient. While it is believed that it is the duty to spread Islam to the world, this duty must be carried out by a qualified group of people.

If *da'wah* is successful, conversion to Islam can result. Conversion must be understood as a profound experience that implies progress, transformation and a radical readjustment of one's worldview. While there are various reasons for conversion, the intellectual and affective reasons feature very prominently. In particular, the affective reasons must be

sensitively and carefully understood since conversion often entails a radical break with one's previous life and family environment and the adoption of a totally new such environment and a different way of life.

In the light of this framework for understanding the conversion event, we are now in a position to examine the experiences of the converts themselves. This is the subject of our next chapter.

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## CHAPTER 5: Interviews with *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* members: Findings

### 5. Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation was to shed light on processes of *da'wah* and conversion in Mauritius through an examination of the activities of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*. Specifically, it asked the question: What are the socio-cultural factors that work as hindrances against *da'wah* progress? We can now explore these concerns by examining the experiences of converts.

In this chapter, data which was collected through interview, informal discussions and observations of converts, are reported. The chapter first provides a description of the population sample; it then presents an account of pre-conversion experiences; this is followed by an account of post conversion experiences; finally, we present an interpretation of the findings.

#### 5.1 Description of the population sample

There are eight female interviewees and two male interviewees among the converts. All of them had grown up in Mauritius and possessed a Mauritian identity. Ages varied as from 22 to 58. All are married except one [Zainab]. All respondents speak Creole as their mother tongue. All of them can read French except Parweeza who can read with difficulty. Some of them are fluent both in English and French. Four respondents have studied up to primary level; three have studied up to secondary level while three possess either a diploma or a degree. They come from different social strata such as Creole, Hindu and Sino-Mauritian. There is no convert from among the white population. The level of education varied. The majority of converts are literate, some more than the others while a few are hardly educated such as Ameen, Mariam, Parweeza, and Layla. Their social positions also varied from street vendor to company officers and managers. Some

are not well-off; others are middle class or upper middle class. They come from various areas in the city.

There are five Christians of mixed origins. Mariam's father was a Sino-Mauritian and her mother from African-Indian origin; Muhammad's father was a Chinese and his mother is from African origin; Zainab's parents are Hindus; Ameen's father was a Muslim whose origin is from India and his mother is Creole. Shariah's parents are Christians who have mixed origins; Rabidah's parents are Christians with mixed origins; Layla's parents are Christians whose origins are from Africa; Shaheen's parents are Hindus whose origins are from India; Parweeza's father is a Hindu while her mother is a Christian.

#### 5.1.1 Pre-Conversion

1. Most of the converts said they were acquainted with Muslims either at primary school or secondary school but according to them those Muslims whom they met were not knowledgeable enough to invite them to Islam. Their conversions had taken place in adulthood when interviewees were employed or after they had left school.
2. Six respondents had embraced Islam through members of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* while four of them had already converted to Islam prior to their meeting with the members of the movement.
3. Respondents who met members of *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* prior to their conversion explained how impressed they were about the way these members spoke concerning Islam. Although some of these members may have had lowly ranked positions such as 'cleaner' or "attendant" [French word 'pion'] they had a deep knowledge of Islam. Rabidah said: "I was surprised by such a deep knowledge coming from a cleaner."

4. Cases of family conflict were found among some of the converts. For instance, Mariam explained her parents were divorced and her mother married a second time and because of this, she felt a stranger in her own house. Zainab explained that she left her family since her teenage to live with a friend because she could not get along with her parents. The search for happiness was also mentioned by respondents.
5. Zainab mentioned that once she interacted with the members of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* at her workplace, she wanted to prove to them that Christianity was the correct religion. In order to prove her point, she had to read the Bible and it is through the Bible that she understood that there were many discrepancies in the Book. On the other hand, she was given a Qur'an with a French translation which she appreciated. She said that the members of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* knew the Bible better than her. Her intention to convert them into Christianity was unsuccessful rather she embraced Islam when she heard that the name of Prophet Muhammad was written in the Bible.

#### 5.1.2 Findings concerning post-conversion progress

1. When Rabidah (27) was asked concerning her relationship with Muslims after she converted to Islam, and what she noticed as the tense relationship between born Muslims and converts, she said: "Many Muslims are jealous about converts. They want to show us that they are superior, that their backwardness in terms of traditions and cultures are islamically approved. But I don't think so." She said "there is a kind of rivalry between Muslims and Converts but if we are strong, then they cannot belittle us."

2. Many respondents said they were either happy or were on the way to find happiness or had found peace after they converted to Islam. For example, Zainab said: “I am very happy about my present situation.” After her encounter with the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*, Mariam concluded that she was happy. This clearly indicates the positive effect Islam had on the converts, especially those who embraced Islam through the movement and its knowledge-based *da'wah*. Islamic knowledge plays a definite role in shaping, moulding people and giving them a sense of peace and happiness.
3. Shariah [40] described how she recalled her reaction towards Muslims before she embraced Islam. She said she considered them as unruly, unrefined and fanatical and they [meaning the Christians] were conditioned to think that they are better than Muslims but after conversion, this attitude saddened her. According to her, this attitude was based on ignorance of the afterlife. This is an indication that she has acquired a deeper awareness of the teachings regarding the hereafter once she has embraced Islam and this knowledge has changed her point of view about Muslims and she no more believes that work status can determine social statuses among human beings.
4. When asked about the differences that exist between the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* and other Muslims, Mahdiyah said: “I have met other Muslims but *Subhan Allah* [Glory be to Allah], they just don't care...they have a Muslim identity; they do some rituals that's all”.
5. All the respondents have a favourable view of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*. Many have either praised Cehl Meeah or have shown gratitude towards him.

6. Cehl Meeah did not accept conversion if candidates did not show signs of knowledge. Rabidah said: “He [Cehl Meeah] checked my knowledge through questions and he was apparently satisfied.” Muhammad [46] experienced the same while he wanted to embrace Islam. Cehl Meeah gave him books as well as some guidelines prior conversion. Muhammad explained that Cehl Meeah also advised him concerning his religious marriage.
7. Muhammad raised concerns about the general state of Muslims, ‘who are hesitant’ and do not have enough Islamic knowledge. This is an indication that traditional Muslims lack spiritual consciousness and confirms the concern of Cehl Meeah about the Muslim community. Zainab compared the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* to other Muslims. She said: “Even outside this *jama’at* [congregation], Muslims are not committed”.
8. Zainab also raised an important point concerning post conversion problem. “Well, they [Muslims outside the J.U.M] do not consider us as real Muslims and also they think we are inferior to them”. Zainab’s statement confirmed Mariam’s situation after she converted to Islam.
9. Many respondents spoke about the importance of education. Zainab said: “Education is the best thing a person can possess. Education makes a whole difference”. Muhammad realized that he did not possess Islamic knowledge and in front of Cehl Meeah, he felt he was nothing but after one year of conversion, he became the director of the J.U.M’s publication.
10. Muhammad raised an important point concerning the effectiveness of *da’wah*. He said: “It was a fabulous way of doing *da’wah*, very casual, very smart and very persuasive” while talking about Muslim attendants who were his

subordinates. Muhammad's reaction is very surprising. Everything is positive about Islam and the people he met. His meeting with Cehl Meeah is narrated with emotion, humility and simplicity. Though both Cehl Meeah and he had been schooled at the Royal College, he said: "after listening to me, he [Cehl Meeah] simply told me that I need to go back and learn more." He said humbly: "You know, it is somehow funny; as a Christian, I considered myself an intelligent and successful man, having been schooled at the best primary and secondary school, working in the most renowned company, having a fiancée of the same status, all the glitters of this material world....yet in front of him, I was nothing." Cehl Meeah refused to let him read the *shahadah* [the testimony of faith] because he lacked knowledge. He said: "Brother Cehl tried my patience and my sincerity. Several times, he sent me back home, saying that I was still not prepared." This is a clear indication that conversion is taken as a serious matter and requires patience, endurance and tacit knowledge of Islam, otherwise, Cehl Meeah does not agree to take the responsibility. This also explains why the members of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* are knowledgeable about Islam even though they had hardly attended schools. The encounter with Parweeza [39] provides clear proof that knowledge is of primary importance when the lady from the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* advised Parweeza to seek knowledge.

11. Rabidah raised another problem of 'superiority complex' which she noticed among born Muslims. This demonstrates an aspect of fanaticism and ignorance from the traditional Muslims and can be considered as a form of hindrance to *da'wah*.

12. The case of Mariam is indeed a sad case and concerns many Muslims who convert through mainstream Islam, that is, through the Mauritian traditional way as explained by Cehl Meeah. Mariam is not supported by her husband, in-laws and Muslims in her neighbourhood. Her in-laws consider her as a 'Creole' even though they have arranged her religious marriage and have brought an Imam to convert her into Islam. Her unfair treatment is due to the lack of knowledge of traditional Muslims who believe that born Muslims are superior to converts; and this has been clearly stated by Rabidah above who mentioned their 'superiority complex'.
13. Mariam explained that the only things which she was asked to do were 'to wear long dresses, to grow (her) eyebrows and to cut (her) nails very short.' She further added that "apart from this, (she) did not know much about being a Muslim." This explains her post-conversion reality. After thirteen years of religious marriage with a Muslim man and living among Muslims, she did not possess any religious knowledge. She was Muslim only by name and identity as is the case with the rest of traditional Muslims. Her case can even be considered worse than the traditional Muslims since she was not accepted by them as a Muslim. In other words, her conversion to Islam does not sort out any of her problems which she mentioned in her interview. She came from a broken family where her parents are divorced and she felt like a stranger in her own house. After conversion and marriage, her husband started beating and ill-treating her. She is rejected by her in-laws. Therefore, her situation is an example of what Cehl Meeah has explained concerning the type of *da'wah* which is prevalent in Mauritius. Some *Imams* or *Maulanas* [Muslims scholars] accept to convert non-

Muslims to Islam without taking the care of explaining to them what Islam is all about and they also do not take into consideration post-conversion realities, such as their full integration in the Muslim society, their Islamic knowledge as well as their confusion or doubt which they may have after conversion. These *Imams* have a different view of *da'wah* and the end result of conversion proves to be a failure in the Mauritian society. This can explain one of the reasons why *da'wah* is not successful in Mauritius and why converts are not happy with their new situation, that is, to form part of the Muslim society. Moreover, asking a person without Islamic knowledge to change her dress codes and to stop plucking her eyebrows can be considered as an act of exaggeration especially if the person has not been given any reason behind such practices.

14. Mariam spoke about the way her husband and in-laws live as Muslims. They do not pray and do not read the Qur'an which means that they do not practise Islam and the husband does not like the idea that Mariam acquires Islamic knowledge. She explained that her husband 'gambles and drinks alcohol' and at times she was left without food. The outcome of this is that Mariam would continue to call Allah 'father' according to the Christian's concept of God – God the father. The concept of trinity which says that God is divided into three: the Father, Son and Spirit in fact nullify the *shahadah*, that is, brings an individual out of Islam. In a way of conclusion, she said: "Since I could no more practise Christianity, I did not have any religion." She explains that her meeting with the members of the J.U.M was decisive. She finally understood the situation in which she had been living for more than thirty years. Once she

joined the J.U.M, she was integrated in the Muslim society; she was supported and given Islamic knowledge and financial care.

15. Mariam's decision to change her life occurred when her teenage son died. She was in search for answers about life and the reasons why she has been created. She therefore decided to pray God and to supplicate unto Him. According to her, her supplications were answered when she met the members of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*. She said: "Through them, my life has changed. I did not know why I was living, why God created me....now I know...." This once again concludes that the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* showed her the truth through Islamic knowledge and she was made aware of the reality of this present life through Islamic education. The contact with the movement changed her life. She started praying, reading the Qur'an in the language that she understands and joined a free course to increase her knowledge.

16. Zainab's situation gives us a clue that the leader cares for the new members of the group. Once Zainab decided to embrace Islam, she was advised by Cehl Meeah to live at a Muslim's house and to follow Islamic classes. Zainab explained that she decided to wear the Islamic headcover and commented that "Anyway, all the ladies wear hijab in the *Jama'at*." This shows that the environment plays an important role in the construction of the self. When asked whether she was satisfied with the movement, Zainab explained that she had not encountered such a strong solidarity and sincerity before. When asked concerning her relationship with Muslims in general, she said that "they do not consider us as real Muslims and also they think we are inferior to them. They are happy when we say we want to convert but after conversion, they do not

care much to help but here [meaning the movement] the reaction of both men and women are unique, if I can say....”

17. The capacity of Zainab to quote a verse from the Qur’an through memory in order to emphasize on the importance of education, shows that she has been convinced by the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* in acquiring religious knowledge and she has put into practice what she has learnt. She also mentioned that education has transformed her as well as it has transformed the other members of the group.

18. Muhammad’s life changed completely after conversion. His wife and himself embraced Islam through the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* and decided to learn and participate in night lectures. Muhammad said that after one year, he was given responsibilities within the organisation and key position such as the director of the movement’s newspaper. He also raised an important point concerning converts when he mentioned: “You know the ability to change depends mostly on yourself, your desire to change, your desire to acquire knowledge and your intellectual capacity to respond to that change.” According to him, the ability to change depends mostly on the self. Each individual is therefore responsible for his own self and the way he uses his intellectual capacity to change his life.

19. Shariah mentioned that after conversion, she decided to change her lifestyle and left her job because she was not feeling happy ‘among superficial people’. She decided to study Islam at a higher level and to work in an Islamic environment.

20. Mahdiyah [58] explained how her life was transformed after she met Cehl Meeah and the ladies at the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*. She became conscious of her

material as well as spiritual differences. Her frivolous nature changed little by little and she gained insight of the religious world while she was seeking Islamic knowledge. Her feelings towards the ladies are the same as Muhammad [46] felt in front of Cehl Meeah. She said: “In fact, I felt poor, horribly poor in front of these women. How to tell you? I felt ashamed....they knew so much yet they were intellectually poor....I mean it seems that they had hardly gone to school. At the same time I don’t have their Islamic knowledge....I could hardly make any conversation with them...While I am quite wealthy, I think they pitied me...”

### 5.1.3 General comments

There was no indication that the movement was working towards a specific project to eliminate some international media propaganda about Islam, nor to get rid of some stereotyped images about Muslims and Islam.

No one among the respondents spoke about the Civil war of 1968 or the riots of 1999. No one was concerned about the September 11th attack and what the media say about Islam.

Ameen [53] is the only member of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* who has raised a problem concerning the movement. He has mentioned the lateness of Cehl Meeah to start Friday prayers and related issues.

Shariah [40] mentioned that Christians do not have a positive view about Muslims.

Mariam mentioned that marrying a Muslim was not an easy thing in her previous community [the Christians].

### 5.1.4 Data Interpretation

We follow Creswell (2003, 2007) in seeing data interpretation, as making “sense” out of what was just uncovered and compile the data into sections or groups of information, also known as themes or codes.”<sup>1</sup>

1. It is clear that the complex socio-cultural of Mauritius shapes the way converts are viewed by other Muslims. In turn, many converts see born Muslims indifferent towards Islamic knowledge and its practice and rather concerned with tradition and culture.

Converts favour a more ‘Quranic’ approach and in this they have been clearly influenced by the worldview of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*.

2. There is a lack of White people as converts. This can be explained by two reasons. The first reason is the unavailability of White people who reside far from the cities and who have established their own ‘territory’ in the outskirts of Tamarin and Black River.

Secondly, they speak French while existing Muslims within the organisation are normally not conversant with French [except a few]; not to mention dress codes and food preferences which can create additional problem to accommodate Creoles and White people within Muslims’ community. Therefore this clash of cultures can be a reason for the lack of White converts within the Muslim society and explains one of the reasons for the low rate of converts in general.

3. Researchers such as Wilber (1980) and Gelpi (1989)<sup>2</sup> have found that converts are in a very weak position, that they must take great care to keep the new commitment alive, and that the converts need a community with similar beliefs to encourage and care for them.

This aspect is confirmed after having heard the story of Mariam who said she did not understand anything during her conversion and was not supported by her in-laws and her husband post-conversion. In other words, she converted to Islam so that her marriage

could be validated within the Muslim community. But no one was interested to make any follow-ups; rather her husband refused her request to attend Islamic sessions and her in-laws constantly nagged her about her previous religion and ethnic group in which she belonged. Mariam said: "I was a Muslim for people's eyes only." Due to this, she became morally fragile until the death of her son which was a turning point in her life. She was given a second chance when she met a group of Muslim women who are involved in *da'wah* and this confirms the statement of Wilber (1980) and Gelpi (1989) mentioned above, that is, she needed a community to care for her. The fact is that the inbuilt prejudices of members of the Muslim community in Mauritius - prejudices caused by the complex history of Mauritius as well as the focus on tradition and culture - made her feel unwelcomed within the Muslim community.

4. Adherents of the movement are content to seek knowledge and to propagate Islam individually either at their workplace or in their surroundings; thus *da'wah* is established through face-to-face communication. While this is an effective, ad hoc way of doing *da'wah*, at the same time, it appears *da'wah* is not done on a macro level. Converts mention that they have come across *da'ees* at their workplace prior to conversion. This can help explain the low rate of conversion.

5. The search for happiness and fulfillment also features prominently in convert's experiences. One respondent [Rabidah], for example, spoke about the emptiness of life before Islam, how she was in need for someone to support her. She found that people were superficial and she was not happy about this state of affairs. Islam had closed this vacuum in her life. Islam therefore is seen as a means of fulfilment and a way to solve familial and societal problems. Mariam felt she was a Muslim after her encounter with

the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*'s members and showed signs of happiness and expressed her happiness in words once she was supported morally and materially.

6. Rabidah raised the issue of familial/societal reaction towards conversion, by mentioning her fear to convert due to her parents' attitude towards conversion. "I was upset. I thought about my parents and the fragile cocoon I had been living in.... They would never agree to my conversion." Even though Rabidah was convinced about Islam, she had a last issue to tackle – her parents. The video of Ahmad Deedat gave her enough grounds to cross the path of Christianity and she converted to Islam. In her case, knowledge persuasion won over socio-cultural impediments.

7. Happiness was felt through material support as well as through spiritual endeavours. One interesting event mentioned by Rabidah is the gift which the cleaner gave her. She said: "These gifts rejoiced my heart. I felt as if I was born again." Other interviewees have mentioned donation and gifts from Muslims. But what seemed peculiar here is the fact that a 'cleaner' would donate to a female employee whose work position is higher than his.

8. Historical factors such as the 'bagarre raciale' and international problems such as 9/11 had not been mentioned by any converts. This is an indication that not all people are concerned with media perceptions of Islam. Rather, many are more concerned about their immediate personal and spiritual welfare. General social opinion does not affect them greatly. Besides, those who embraced Islam on the 'affective' motif did not speak about international events mentioned in the media. Therefore, these perceptions did not impact on the effectiveness of *da'wah*. Rather, what seemed to affect *da'wah* delivery are inherent limitations which means *da'wah* cannot reach a considerable mass of people.

Seen through this angle, the White people are not reachable because there is a lack of commitment and training among da'ees that can interact with the White. In other words, it means that the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* had not yet projected any *da'wah* program which can reach the affective, rational or mystical needs of the White community. However, among the intellectual Creoles, Mr. Muhammad and Mrs. Shariah could be selected to preach Islam within the intellectual circles.

9. My impression is that the delegation of work within the movement is not clearly defined. There is no central organizational structure to act as a hub for broader communication. For example, no one has been officially appointed to take care of the converts and there is no official database for converts. Therefore poor communication strategies can work as a hindrance for *da'wah* progression.

10. However, the movement has two solid bases: free education and support to its members and the public. These 'assets' have rendered the movement popular.

Unanimously, all agreed to promote education and believed that education is of primary importance. All agreed that their life changed through education. All those who were in need of affection, moral or financial support agreed to say that the movement had helped them. Mariam clearly explained how the support of the J.U.M contributed to her positive change. She mentioned that the J.U.M provided her with Islamic knowledge and financial support which in turn made her forget her problems of thirty years among the traditional Muslims.

11. The comparison between those who converted within the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* and those who converted through the mainstream *da'wah* is tangible. The latter lack Islamic awareness and encountered many difficulties within the Muslim community. We notice

the spiritual transformation of those who embraced Islam through mainstream *da'wah* after they joined the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* movement. Mariam confessed: “Through them my life has changed. I did not know why I was living, why God created me...now I know...” Therefore, we can say that the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* program is highly effective. Shamim A Siddiqui<sup>3</sup> argues that if a da'ee [someone who calls others to Islam] is satisfied with an individual's conversion and believes that his duty stops there, then *da'wah* becomes ‘an end by itself’. Siddiqui argues that if *da'wah* is ‘not extended and pursued to the ultimate goal, i.e. to establish Allah's *Deen*, the job of a *Da'ee* [someone who calls others to Islam] is incomplete’. This argument is in line with Cehl Meeah's methodology of *da'wah* which stresses on a lifetime support and guidance. This is why the converts remain attached to the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*.

## 5.2 Conclusion

From the results, it is seen that all the converts socialized with Muslims before embracing Islam. This means that during their childhood or adulthood, they have met Muslims and they have converted through Muslims' intervention, either on an intellectual basis or an affective basis. This is in contrast to what Maha Al Qwidi (2002) says when analyzing conversion in Britain, “The degree of interaction with Muslims prior to conversion varied enormously. In all cases there had been some contact but it is not found possible to state that such contact was necessary for the conversions to take place.”<sup>4</sup>

There were affective as well as intellectual reasons for conversion. For some, the need for emotional fulfillment and for a sense of belonging played a prominent role in their conversion. Others were motivated by intellectual reasons, such as, for example, what they saw as the stronger arguments in Islam against Christianity. But it is important to

understand that both affective and intellectual factors are combined in the conversion experience, though the influence of the factors may differ from case to case.

Converts generally had a very positive experience of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* movement and of its founder. They were sometimes especially touched by the competence and generosity of ordinary members of the movement. They particularly appreciated *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*'s emphasis on education which they felt has empowered them in relation to other Muslims. *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*'s programme of education deepens and solidifies the sense of belonging to Islam and averts the danger of apostasy. At the same time, because of what they see as the 'cultural' nature of Islam in Mauritius, prejudices still exist and there is an unwritten divide between converts and born Muslims which create a certain amount of tension. However, they have by and large felt the fulfillment and happiness they sought through the adoption of Islam. This also accounts for the reason they are not swayed or perturbed by the image of Islam in the media - for them Islam ultimately is a personal quest through which they seek intellectual, emotional and spiritual fulfillment.

## Conclusion

There has been much research on *da'wah* and conversion at the international level. But no research on *da'wah* in Mauritius has been done before. In this regard, this study aims to be a first step in this direction. In particular, this study wanted to examine the socio-cultural factors that affect the smooth functioning of *da'wah* in Mauritius.

What are these socio-cultural factors? Mauritius has experienced a complex history, giving rise to a multi-ethnic society that has sometimes uneasily co-existed with one another. Communities are divided by race, language and culture. All communities place a high priority on their religious identity which makes incursions in this sphere a sensitive matter. It appears, then, that *da'wah* activity in Mauritius faces specific socio-cultural obstacles to its smooth functioning. This complexity is compounded by the existence of inter-Muslim rivalry.

How do Cehl Meeah and his organization address these factors? Cehl Meeah and *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* follow a model of Islam that appears to be patterned on that of the *Ikhwanul Muslimeen* in Egypt and the *Jamaate Islami* in Pakistan. In other words, it is an activist organization that calls back to the Quranic teachings in particular. Like these organizations, Cehl Meeah does not believe that religion is separate from politics and his involvement in politics is an extension of his *da'wah* activity; an activist, reformist interpretation of Islam modeled along the lines of the *Ikwanul Muslimeen*.

The activism and reformism of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* put it on a collision course with the more conservative, traditional and apolitical elements of the Mauritian Muslim community. The tension between his vision and that of the traditional one was exacerbated by Cehl Meeah's strong attacks on what he saw as "polytheistic" elements in

the traditional vision. But his political involvement came at a price and he was persecuted in controversial circumstances. However, his political ordeal mellowed him somewhat and when he came out of prison he adopted a more conciliatory attitude to the traditionalists. He now prefers advocating Muslim unity. But it is not just Muslim unity that he is interested in. He has also increasingly advocated national unity and the need for harmony between the different communal and religious groups in Mauritius. In fact, as we saw, this call for harmony is also a form of *da'wah* in its widest interpretation. As a member of parliament, his stated goal is to address the injustice and poverty that afflicts many Mauritians.

Cehl Meeah's movement, the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*, now has a membership of some 10,000 coming from different strata in society. His broad message of social change and communal harmony has also resonated with many non-Muslims.

But the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* remains essentially a *da'wah* movement with the aim of bringing the message of Islam to society. In carrying out his activities, Cehl Meeah has contributed to a greater prominence of Islam in the Mauritian public sphere. The members of *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* believe that they now have the opportunity to express themselves more openly, to very importantly educate themselves about Islam in a systematic way, and to dress islamically as distinct from 'cultural' Muslim dressing. They have also been given greater access to Arabic and thus to the original sources of Islam. Very significantly, Muslim women play a key role in the movement and have been given greater opportunities to be visibly involved in the religion.

Thus Cehl Meeah and his movement have started addressing some of the complex socio-cultural issues that hinder *da'wah* in Mauritius. They have emphasized the use of the

Creole and the English language thus cutting across language distinctions. They have made considerable outreach to all communities in Mauritius, especially to the Black Creoles, thus cutting across ethnic and class divisions. And they have involved themselves in the political sphere, one that is not normally associated with religion, and in so doing has given Islam a national recognition that cuts across communal boundaries.

For the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen da'wah* is a multi-faceted phenomenon that needs to be extended to both non-Muslims as well as Muslims. As we have noted, it is a means to promote inter-communal harmony as well without necessarily expecting people to enter the religion. In its most basic sense it remains the means by which non-Muslims are invited to Islam. But, importantly, it is also an activity directed to Muslims who are believed to be simply Muslims by birth but who have not, in *Jamaat-Ul-Mulimeen's* estimation, truly understood Islam. *Da'wah* also focuses on both the outer and inner and a formal profession of Islamic faith is not considered sufficient. Again, this is why the group focuses so keenly on education so as to deeply instill and reinforce the faith of a new convert. And while the group firmly believes that *da'wah* must be given to all, it must be carried out by a group of qualified people.

Upon successful *da'wah*, conversion to Islam can result. Conversion must be understood as an intense experience that implies a radical readjustment of one's worldview. While there are various reasons for conversion, the intellectual and affective factors are particularly important ones. While a person may convert because he or she is intellectually convinced by Islam, the act of conversion means a profound affective change in relation to one's family and environment. Similarly, while one may convert affectively for reasons of marriage or for the need to belong, one must still understand the

purpose and objectives of the religion and its rituals. Conversion is simultaneously affective and intellectual.

When we look at the experiences of converts associated with the movement, it is understood that all the converts socialized with Muslims before embracing Islam. This means that during their childhood or adulthood, they have met Muslims and they have converted through Muslims' intervention, either on an intellectual basis or an affective basis. For some, the need for emotional fulfillment and for a sense of belonging played an important role in their conversion. Others were motivated by intellectual reasons. But, as just indicated, it is important to understand that both affective and intellectual factors are combined in the conversion experience, though the proportional influence of the factors may differ from case to case.

Cehl Meeah, the philosophy of the movement and its ordinary members have made a favorable impression on the converts. They are especially keen on the movement's educational activities which allow them to gradually solidify their understanding of the religion and make them confident Muslims. However, they still feel they are not fully accepted by many born Mauritian Muslims. This prejudice, they believe, arises from the fact that for them many born Muslims are still 'cultural' or 'ritual' Muslims. However, in general, these converts appeared to have achieved a good measure of intellectual, emotional and spiritual fulfillment via their involvement in the programmes and activities of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*.

## END NOTES

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- 2 M Al-Qwidi, "UNDERSTANDING THE STAGES OF CONVERSION TO  
  
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- 3 Shamim Siddiqui, "METHODOLOGY OF DA'WAH"
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## APPENDICES

### Appendix I

Letter of approval from Brother Cehl Meeah

June 2012,

I, Brother Muhammad Cehl Fakeemeeah, I am giving full permission to our Sister Ammaara Uddeen to write her Dissertation, by interviewing some of our followers from the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen*, to enquire about our policies on da'wah and to write her thesis by taking our organisation as a sample for *da'wah* in Mauritius.

I wish her all the best and I pray Almighty Allah, the Creator of all, to assist her in her work.

I entrust to Allah our religion, our obligations and the outcome of our actions. May the blessings of Allah be upon us and may His safety accompany us. *Ameen*

*Cehl Meeah*

## Appendix II

Interviews carried out for the purpose of my dissertation. The following interviews are those who embraced Islam either through the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* organisation or who joined the movement after conversion.

### First Interview

Name: Mariam Dilmohamed, Age: 52, Family status: married, Previous religion: Roman Catholic, Educational level: primary school, can read French and English, Profession: part-time cleaner

My name is Mariam and I am 52. I am actually married to a Muslim man for some thirty years. From this marriage, I have two children, a son who died some few years ago and a daughter who is now nineteen years old.

My life has always been a big mess. I was married at the age of fourteen, as I was pregnant from a man whom I thought I loved but of course, at this age, I did not know anything about love or life. It is so sad. Although everybody advised me not to marry, I felt some pressure on the part of my parents and anyway, I was pregnant! You know, let me tell you that I come from a split family. My parents are divorced and my two brothers were taken away from my mum since my early childhood. From my mum's second marriage, she has two children a son and a daughter. Somehow, I felt like a stranger in that house and I wanted to have my own house.

In fact, there was so much confusion within me. My parents did not really care about me. I could feel it. From my first marriage, I soon realised that I was not happy at all. I felt like a prisoner who was forced to live. I had two children, a son then a daughter and at the age of eighteen I ran away. My mum knew where I was and she came to pick me up.

Since then, I was totally convinced that I would never go back to my husband's, never again. But I have lost the guardianship of my two children and I can count on my fingers how many times I have seen them....I have lost them forever....Living again with my parents, was another hard reality because they were poor and I had to sleep on the sofa in the living room. I could not find any solution except to get a good marriage proposal. After a few years, I met my second husband who is a Muslim. Hanging around with a Muslim, was looking for some big problem especially some thirty years ago!!! But anyway, he seemed serious enough to want to marry me. Once I was introduced to his family, they gave me a new name, Mariam. From this time, I was asked to wear long dresses, to grow my eyebrows and to cut my nails very short. Apart from this, I did not know much about being a Muslim.

During my conversion, I did not understand much what was being done and what the imam told me at that time. I was totally ignorant of their culture and religion. Anyway, my husband is not a practising Muslim at all. He does not pray, he does not fast rather he gambles and drinks alcohol. The whole family does not care much about reading the Qur'an and understanding its commandments. On rare occasions, my mother in law would pay an imam to perform *Fatihah* [reading of the Qur'an] at home....In fact, I continued to call Allah 'father' as I have learnt during childhood.

As I said, I have suffered a lot throughout my life. My second husband used to beat me, to offend me and to leave me and my children without food. My mother in law hates me too. Whenever she gets angry she would call me names and reproach me being a convert. For her, I am not a Muslim. My husband's relatives are very rude against me. They would have preferred a Muslim woman rather than a convert, even my Muslim neighbours used to look at me as a curious creature...

Despite all these problems, I was determined to stay with him because I have no other place to go. Since I could no more practise Christianity, I did not have any religion.

I was a Muslim for people's eyes only....until the sudden death of my son. It was a shock for me. I started pondering about whom I was, what I was doing and where my son was now....I realised that I was far, very far from God, the Creator. I was a beggar, I would beg from my relatives for money and I wanted to get out of my situation at all cost...so I started praying and supplicating God until I met a group of women who are involved in Da'wah program. I could not explain how I met them. It was Allah's wish. While talking to a woman one day, she told me that there was a course for converts and she proposed to bring me there. I accepted. It was almost one and a half year before. They give tuition for converts in *Tajweed* [method of reading the Qur'an] and *Aqeedah* [the concept of Islam]. I decided to join them every Sunday in order to get some solace and to free myself from the home atmosphere.

Through them, my life has changed. I did not know why I was living, why God created me....now I know....These women belong to the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* group. I am very happy, you know. I feel very, very happy inside myself. I feel peace. I am no more alone with my problems. I like to be there even if my husband continues insulting me and calling me names every Sunday. I am fed up with him but these women told me to leave him alone, not to bother about him, to make a blank in my mind about him and to continue striving for me and my daughter. This is what I am trying to do....and I have started working whenever I can. I clean the house of some women and I get some money to survive. You see, I was so thin, now I have taken some kilos.... [smile]

I do *namaz* [Islamic prayer]. I am reading the Qur'an in French, thanks to the great work of these women da'ees. They gave me a free copy of the Qur'an in French and Arabic, books and magazines. They taught me how to supplicate Allah. They are so patient you know and the course is free. If the course was not free, I would never have been able to learn. Now, I am a Muslim by choice. I like to be a Muslim. Allah...Allah is good. He has accepted me. I have hope. I pray. I want to live a peaceful life. Every month one lady brings a pack full of provision for me, so I hope I will not have to stay without food anymore. I am happy.....

## SECOND INTERVIEW

Zainab: 25 years old, Single. Previous Faith: Hinduism. Languages: can read both English and French, Working situation: Factory worker; Embraced Islam two years ago through the intervention of her friend.

My colleague talked to one of the member of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* and the latter brought me there. I met bhye Cehl and he welcomed me in his office and there were two women dressed islamically sitting there. He asked me about my interest and also asked me about my present situation. And I told him that I was living with a Christian female friend. And he did not like this idea.

He said that if I am seriously interested in Islam, it is better that I stayed in a Muslim family and that I should have a proper environment. He said he would arrange something for me and within one week, a member of the group phoned me. I was told to pack my things and they brought me to a Muslim house where a widow was living alone and needed company. She had the duty to look after me and to give me appropriate security and protection.

I attend the night lecture of bhye Cehl once a week and I have decided to wear the *hijab* and to change my life accordingly. The *hijab* [head cover] is my choice. Anyway, all the ladies wear *hijab* in the *Jama'at*.

I am very happy about my present situation. I am very happy that Almighty Allah has guided me to Islam especially to this group. Everyone seems so keen to help me. I have not seen in any other community where people are strongly united; this feeling of solidarity is so strong and so sincere. Even outside this *jama'at*, Muslims are not committed. Well, they do not consider us as real Muslims and also they think we are inferior to them. They are happy when we say we want to convert but after conversion, they do not care much to help but here the reaction of both men and women are unique, if I can say....

Education is the best thing a person can possess. Education makes a whole difference. Bhye Cehl emphasizes so much on education!!! Allah says in surah 39 v 9: "*Are they equal those who know and those who do not know.*" How much this is true!!! I can feel it so deeply. Education has transformed me as it has transformed all these people in the group. I have not heard one person talk about *dunya* [this material world] in this group. It is as if they are not affected by the problems and difficulties of this life. They are all interested to learn, to help and to prepare their lives for the hereafter. This is incredible – women of all ages, old *nannies* [old women] are learning Islam, sitting on a chair or on the ground for hours at night!!!

This group has helped me so much. I was in a ghetto. No one can ever imagine! I am breathing again, *Al hamdulillah*. My only wish is to marry a Muslim man so that I can continue to live according to Islamic law, and I have already a marriage proposition.

As I said, my life before Islam was a nightmare. There was a lack of understanding at home, even in the society; everywhere...I decided to leave my parents and to stay with a friend because I was in love with a Muslim guy. He said he wanted to marry me but in fact, he obeyed his parents who wanted to find a good Muslim girl for him. At the beginning he used to come and see me regularly but after some times, he came less and less. In fact, because he had many problems, he started taking drugs...I rather not talk about this situation. It was the worst period of my life. I could not go back to my parents, and I felt so lonely. I wanted to be happy but how? I didn't know...then bad companions can make your life hell.... Even Muslims who do not have proper knowledge of Islam, are unruly, ill-hearted and they might not care for the converts. I mean, for them converts are not Muslims. Why? Because I think Muslims believe they are superior creatures so they look down upon us. His mother did not want me as her step daughter. You know when a person has African origins, with curly hair and a brown skin, they don't like...they want a girl with fair skin and straight hair.

No, I think they are just ignorant people but now I think I can manage life....

### THIRD INTERVIEW

Structured questions: Mr. Muhammad. Age 46, Gender: Male, Languages: fluent in reading and speaking English and French, Previous religion: Roman Catholic, Post occupied: Marketing Manager, Situation: Married.

My life before Islam was quite normal. I was born in a Roman Catholic family with one sister and two brothers. My mother is a Creole and my father a Chinese. I have been brought up in a 'chic' region of the capital. We used to be very involved with the church. At secondary school most of my friends were Muslims. In my neighbourhood, my friends

were also Muslims. In brief, I was surrounded by Muslims. I learnt some Islamic terms like *wudu*, *namaz*, *roza*, *hajj* etc without being fully conscious of their true meanings.

At that time Muslims themselves were practising Islam without fully understanding the core concepts. I embraced Islam some eighteen years ago, to be precise, in 1996! I am so proud to be a Muslim, to walk on the earth as a Muslim. I have been a Muslim for so many years now and still I study Islam [smile].

When I look back, I sometimes ask myself why Muslims are not conversant with their own religion. They were hesitant while they have the most beautiful religion of all. Anyway, I like to reflect and analyse things on my own. At the age of 17, 18...I already realised that I did not want to be a Christian. I soon realised that whatever the priest was saying, did not match with reality...the true God was not found in the church; neither the idols around me nor the mystery of trinity could solve my confusion. Very soon, I stopped all connections with the church though all my family continued their religious practices as before. I did not have any religion though I believed in God. I had a natural inclination towards Islam. For example, being a student of Arts, I once saw the calligraphy of the name *Allah*, it really appealed to me and I kept on practising it until I mastered it [smile]

As an adult, working in one of the biggest company, I soon met a lady who would become my future wife and who is my present wife. She too was a Roman Catholic. At the company there were several attendants who were Muslims. They used to speak about Islam and when they interacted with us, they were much thought provoking people who would push forward some religious questions to us. My wife-to-be and I had a natural inclination towards the miracles of creation and love of God. Often we discussed about

religion and we soon realised that we both shared the same feelings. We were both in need of a religion which could provide us peace of mind and heart; in brief, a religion which can answer our queries and satisfies our quests and removes all confusion in our minds. Being more aware than she of what I wanted, I proposed her to watch the movie *The Messenger*. My fiancée was very moved by such a deep reality. As she was studying the bible on her own, in search of truth, I think it was the beginning of awareness for her....On the other hand, those Muslim colleagues were definitely a turning point in our lives. They motivated us, pressed us to think further and one day my fiancée told me that she wanted to become a Muslim. I felt relieved. I don't know why I could not and I had never had the will power to change...but when she told me she had taken her decision and nothing could stop her, I was so relieved!!!

Those Muslim colleagues were in fact members of this group [smile]. I mean, the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*. It was a fabulous way of doing da'wah, very casual, very smart and very persuasive. You will not believe that these people had hardly gone to school!!!They were daring because talking about religion in companies, is not an easy thing, especially some fifteen years back! So, when I told them I wanted to embrace Islam, they arranged a meeting for me with brother Cehl.

I was very excited about the idea of this meeting as I knew him through the media. When I saw him in person, I was profoundly touched - a young man with such deep awareness. He is only some years older than me. And we studied at the same school – the Royal College of Port-Louis but I did not know him....

You could see his eyes and face shining like the full moon. And he hardly raised his head when he talked, as if plunged in some spiritual thoughts. Each word was a kind of

revelation for me. We were in two different worlds yet sitting at the same table, in the same room!!!

I do not recall much what he told me [smile]; after listening to me, he simply told me that I need to go back and learn more. You know, it is somehow funny. As a Christian, I considered myself an intelligent and successful man, having been schooled at the best primary and secondary school, working in the most renowned company, having a fiancée of the same status, all the glitters of this material world....yet in front of him, I was nothing. He made me feel that way. He said that I had not enough knowledge and that I need to study more and be more convincing. He was right. I really felt that I was empty, you know, the spiritual emptiness. But I was hoping that at the next meeting, I was going to read the shahadah so that I could marry... [smile]. Brother Cehl tried my patience and my sincerity. Several times, he sent me back home, saying that I was still not prepared. He gave me books to read and some guidelines to follow. I did as he said and never disappointed him. Then, one day, after our meeting, he accepted my *shahadah* and I soon prepared myself to marry according to the Islamic rituals. There also, he gave me specific guidelines about the *nikkah* [marriage] – a simple and strict celebration [smile]. Yes, I agreed because this is what I wanted.

In fact, I was impressed by his knowledge and analysis. Whatever he said, he quoted from the Qur'an and everything made complete sense to me. And being myself a man of reflection and analysis, I could see sense in his words. By listening to him, I wondered to myself that Allah is so Perfect... He did things rightly. Surely, if I had met some so-called *Maulanas* [scholars] with exaggerated convictions and asking me to pray the dead or to worship some graves etc, I would never have followed!!! While I was a Christian, I never believed in those superficial and strange things....so, Allah knew my inner

thoughts and he sent a 'messenger' to me that would speak words of truth to take me out of darkness to light. I tell you, sitting in front of him, for only 10 to 15 minutes, was as if, I had been to a six-month university. His knowledge of Islam is outstanding, his rapidity of thoughts and precision of words....for me he was and is still the right person for conveying the message of Islam. And by the way, let me tell you, he will never accept the title of *Sheikh* or *Mufti* [scholars]...he has always declined any title though everybody respects him and loves him.

The organisation offers night lectures every week on aqeedah. We did not learn Islam in *Madrasahs*. Brother Cehl himself took the responsibility to send us to one Arabic teacher who would teach us the Arabic alphabets and the easiest way to learn the Qur'an within weeks. Though he had a busy agenda, he agreed to teach us how to write Arabic. So, within a year, we were so knowledgeable, in fact, we 'mastered' the *aqeedah*, both in theories as in practice. We learnt all the concept of *Rububiyyah*, *Uluhiyyah* and *Al Asmaa was sifat* [terms used to learn concerning Allah]. We knew how to read the Qur'an completely with full *tajweed*, we knew how to write Arabic letters and to understand the Arabic meaning of many meaningful words of the Qur'an. Then the next year, I became the director of the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* newspaper, newsletters, magazines, together with my wife. I also became member of the IRO, Islamic Resource Organisation [a branch of the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen*] and became active in many events, such as the national *Eid* festivals of the group, school holidays program for the youth...

You know the ability to change depends mostly on yourself, your desire to change, your desire to acquire knowledge and your intellectual capacity to respond to that change. My wife was a very determining factor in this change. She always does everything very fast. Once she is convinced about something, she never lets go. So having her by my side was

a determining factor. Again, it is Allah's Will. Allah puts her on my way. He gives me Islam and He gives me the means to follow Islam. This is how we dedicated our whole life for the cause of Islam.

There are many people who have left him after he was imprisoned. For various reasons, upset, fear of the police or lack of conviction....Allah always tests people's sincerity and faith when we don't expect it to happen....Anyway...As for me, nothing has changed. I may not have the time to be involved as before. I have moved from Port-Louis, so I do not have enough time to perform *salaah* [prayer] at the *Centre*, but my heart, my conviction, my determination, my gratitude are all for him and for what he has done for me....he knows that he can count on me anytime.

Allah has given me life after I was dead through his endeavour. For Allah's sake, I need to be thankful towards those whom Allah has guided me...and brother Cehl showed me the way. I pray that Allah give him *jannah* [paradise].

#### FOURTH INTERVIEW

Interview with Brother Ameen, 53 years old; languages: can speak broken English and French, Self-employed and previously sailor. Married with three children.

I was born in an ignorant family. My father was a Muslim and my mother was a Christian. Now they are dead. My brother and I led a free life, wandering here and there like vagabonds. I had no religion as my father was never interested to instruct us as he himself did not practise Islam. Besides, we were very poor. My brother also married a Christian woman...I stopped school at the age of 11 and had to work to earn a living!!! Life was very hard for me....

As I said, I did not have any religion. Only my father named me Ameen, that's all. I was completely ignorant. Can you understand this? Completely ignorant!!! I knew nothing. Nothing at all. I was like a vagabond and I was a sailor, always travelling from country to country. This is why I can speak French and English [smile].

I did not decide to change my life because I did not know that my life was not good.

One day, while I was sitting with some friends onboard a ship, they were discussing some religious issues and I listened indifferently. Then, when the time for salaah came, they automatically told me to get prepared. I looked at them, they looked at me. I was surprised and they too were surprised. I did not know how to practise this. And they used a strange word for me "Salaah". I know *namaz* [prayer] but I could not do it because I had no *ghusl* [the Islamic ritual of bath], did not know what to read. I was confused and angry.

I was very angry but where to go? If I didn't talk to them, I would be bored; so many days onboard!!! So, I met them again in my free time and of course, they discussed many issues, not only religion. But they had the habit each time, to include some religious matters and when the time for salaah came, I had no alternative. I started doing salaah. Subhan Allah! I remember, one of them told me: "Ameen, look, how can you stay on Allah's earth, you breathe His oxygen, you feed on His rain, yet you do not thank Him!"

I felt very ashamed but I did as if I did not care....He then said to me: Look at your face! You have no *noor* [light]. You look always weird; it is because you have no *ghusl* and no *wudu* on you". I remember looking at the sky one night, thinking about this conversation, I felt so much ashamed. It is true, their faces were shining and mine was not. Once we came to the island, I wanted to accompany them to the mosque.

But what a mosque! They brought me to a garage [big laugh] run by Cehl Meeah. I learnt to perfect my *salaah* [prayer] there and at night, they told me to dress properly to listen to his lesson. [Serious tone] When I came, the garage was full. Everybody was sitting on the floor. Old men, young children and small children! At the back, all the women were seated on the ground. The atmosphere was strange. Cehl Meeah's voice is so strong. He was very serious....I felt strange...

I could not understand a single word!!! His level of teaching is too high; His vocabulary, his technical word... I listened to him for some weeks but I could not understand a single word even though he was speaking Creole. I was so ignorant, you cannot imagine.

Brother Cehl advised me to learn from one of his students. They explained to me about the basics then after a short period, I was qualified to listen to Cehl's lecture. Then, every week I came. I was so happy. My heart was happy [smile]. I became very much close to him and to all the brothers there. I acted as the driver of the *Jama'at*, bringing all the students to school at Curepipe. I got married with my actual wife. My life changed completely.

The *Jama'at* [movement] was strong and I became very pious....but the *jama'at* is no more the same as it used to be. Look. Normally I never discussed these things with anyone else. This is an interview and Brother Cehl has given you the permission. So I am telling you that the main problem is lack of seriousness on the part of the *Ameer* [leader] himself. He is never on time, always some 30 minutes late, always busy helping here and there. After his imprisonment, many Muslims have left. Those who have stayed are not so committed. This is my opinion.

He has many projects but they take much time to realise. The Friday prayer is always later than the other *masjid* [mosque]. Ten minutes are important for those who work and also, the *khutbah* [Friday sermon] is long. Many people cannot afford this time. He must understand. Then I do not agree that he does not share responsibilities. He keeps too many responsibilities for himself and of course, he will not have enough time to administer this. This problem creates many problems. If he stops this, then there will be no problem *insha Allah* but again I am saying this only because it is an interview, otherwise, I never talked about the *jama'at's* problem to anyone who is not in the group.

Sometimes, I go to Friday prayer in other *masjids*. But you know, it is not the same. Many *masjids* in Mauritius do not provide space for women, so my wife must remain at home. Another problem is the *khutbah*. Many mosques do *khutbah* in Urdu or Arabic. [smile] we are Mauritian, we speak Creole and they speak Urdu...

Education is what makes the organisation lively!!! Cehl is very good at motivating and persuading people towards education; he is very inspiring, very generous and daring. He has a very good heart. He is not afraid of anyone. He served the poor, all those non-Muslims, they all love him and respect him because he serves them and gives them food every month!!!! He has a very good heart and he cares so much for the poor no matter his religion. You can watch the videos if you want where he is visiting them and giving them food.

Many people embraced Islam through him. Many are already dead now; some have migrated to other countries.

## FIFTH INTERVIEW

Interview with Mahdiyah; Gender: female, Age: 58, Languages: Fluent in reading and speaking both English and French, Previous religion: none [culturally a Muslim], Educational level: Diploma, Profession: Inspector

R: My name is Mahdiyah. I am 58 years old. I am inspector at the primary school. I was married to a Muslim man though I had no religion and was not practising Islam, neither my husband. Only he would go to the mosque on Fridays, things like that....

My life was normal as any human being who has an ambition in life and wants to succeed; to be promoted in my work, to get more money, to reach a social status...to be happy with my husband.

For me, happiness means inner peace but I have not found it yet. I have fewer tensions in my mind. I do not feel this loneliness that I felt before. I have always been sad, I do not know why....

It was through my husband that I became aware of this group. Once, he was late for Jummah prayer and was looking for a mosque nearby. He saw an arrow indicating a mosque, so he went there for *Jum'ah*. He listened to the *Khutbah* in Creole and was very impressed about the *imam's* words. After prayer, he asked to meet the imam in order to thank him. Since he had an *amamah* [cover head] on his head, my husband did not recognise him. When he realised it was Cehl Meeah, he was surprised but Allah changed his heart into loving him. My husband did not like him [smile]. He thought brother Cehl has a different *aqeedah* [Islamic concept] but *Al hamdulillah*, Allah moved his heart and he was happy about his sermon. When my husband came home, he narrated to me about

his meeting. I was excited because Cehl Meeah is a well-known figure. I wanted to see him in person.

My husband went to his night lectures. He fell in love with him [laugh]. When he came home, he asked me if I could sit on the floor, I asked why? He said he had heard some marvelous words and would like me to hear them, but he said this place was a bit uncomfortable and they all sat on the floor, men are separated to women, and the women normally take a copybook to copy the words of the *sheikh*. I accepted as I was very curious [laugh]

Brother Cehl used to deliver night lectures every Wednesday in our local masjid and also, every fortnight, he used to deliver Friday Sermon here. This was before the mosque at the Centre was ready for *Jum'ah* [Friday Sermon].

[Laugh] He was talking with much enthusiasm, about the theories of the afterlife. I can say I was very far from this. He was not talking about my passion, the present world [laugh] but I kept patient and listened, and I could still hear the resonance of his words. He was so serious..... He was talking about hellfire, the punishment of the tomb and I looked around me, the women were so focused. They looked very serious in their black *jilbab* [long Islamic dress], and for the first time, I stared at them. They were simply dressed, all busy writing in their copybooks despite their adult age. I noticed they came from the poor or middle class... no jewels, no cosmetics...when I came back home, I was perturbed. There was a clash between their world and the world I was in....I don't know how they are dressed outside but what I am telling you is the image I got from them at that precise moment.

Yes, I came back again. I had no choice [big laugh]. My husband was very much interested and it may sound strange but I was curious to hear more. In fact, something attracted me there but at the beginning I could not say what it was. I decided to buy some clothes in order to be there because I did not want to look strange in front of them, wearing only the *hijab* [head cover] on my head with all my jewelries. And one day, I got *hidayah* [guidance from God]. It was as if all these words were addressed to me. Those verses of the Qura'n were a light to my heart which was darkened with the pleasures of this life. In fact, I felt poor, horribly poor in front of these women. How to tell you? I felt ashamed....they knew so much yet they were intellectually poor....I mean it seems that they had hardly gone to school. At the same time I don't have their Islamic knowledge....I could hardly make any conversation with them...While I am quite wealthy, I think they pitied me...I don't know. I felt small in front of them. I think Islamic education makes the difference. I have met other Muslims but *Subhan Allah* [Glory be to Allah], they just don't care...they have a Muslim identity; they do some rituals that's all.

I remember a specific occasion in the month of *Ramadan*. My husbands decided to donate two large plates of cakes to the local mosque and Cehl Meeah as well as his followers were to join in. Somebody said in surprise "Ya Allah, who brought these oily cakes for *iftar* [the breaking of fast]? Please put it somewhere because we only have water and dates." I kept quiet as I was very ashamed. Of course, she said it naturally without intention of hurting but I felt very ashamed and nobody ate the cakes....*Subhan Allah*. I reported this to my husband and told him never to bring oily cakes to the mosques again. What to say? These people they have learnt about sacrifice...they have been conditioned to live with the intention of winning a special place in the hereafter...

Both my husband and I decided to change our lives; especially Brother Cehl invited himself to our place. When he came, he was very stunned by our way of living. We lived in luxury with a swimming pool in front of the house. We had everything...and were proud of it because we have worked for it. We were totally convinced in this way of living. We never thought about another world after death. But brother Cehl is so straight forward and very innocent at the same time when he would ask us:" Why do you do all this? Why did you buy this and that? What is the purpose of this and that?" I could see very well how innocent he was as if he had uncovered many veils from my eyes...there was a big need for reform.

While we listened to him, we could realise our own mistakes that we were heading directly to our downfall. We could see that Allah's mercy was upon us and that He guided us towards brother Cehl.

People say that Cehl Meeah is a one-man show!!! This is not true. We are a jama'at and brother Cehl is the founder. He has all the merits. He does his mission very well. He is even considered as the best *da'ee* in Mauritius, the most charismatic one. So, it is normal that he talks instead of losing the attention of the people. Everybody comes to hear him. But during public talks, his people sit next to him on stage in order to support him. But in the daily lives, they have other duties...

All of us are working but people don't see because they are blinded by what the media say. We are all involved in *da'wah*. We do not do it officially but we do it with our families. Look, my whole family is now following Cehl....is it not a proof? Through my *da'wah* and that of my husband, we convinced them and they accepted. My husband has invited many people, his own colleagues, neighbours etc....

There is someone who is responsible of the *centre*, to take care about everything; there are teachers of *tajweed*, *hadith*, Qur'an etc. I myself am now a teacher of *tajweed*. My husband has learnt some small surahs and some hadith and he is doing *da'wah*. We have our own cameraman and videotec. All his lessons and lectures are recorded, then transferred on Youtube, weblogs and Facebook ...as I told you, we invite people to Islam through simple means like talking to our colleagues, friends, neighbours, families etc....there is nothing formal.

Well....doing *da'wah* is very demanding. Definitely, the problem of finance is hindering our performance. We are doing the best we can and we hope that things will improve in the future...

#### SIXTH INTERVIEW

Name: Shariah, Gender: female, Age: 40 years old, Educational level: Holder of a degree, Languages: fluent in English and French, Profession: System administrator, Family status: married. Previous belief: Christianity

Well, I learnt about Islam at my workplace through a group of Muslim males among the attendants. During their free time, they used to discuss religious issues and question me about Christianity [smile]. I suppose now that this was a '*da'wah* tactic' which I was not aware of [smile].

As far as I can recall...I would say that these attendants were very charismatic, convincing, concise and determined. As a human being working in a company and holding a post higher than them, we tend to look down upon them. This is due to our ignorance about the afterlife and we are conditioned to think that we are better than Muslims. I find this very sad now....You know, these guys would ask questions about

the oneness of God, the concept of trinity and whether Jesus was really dead on the cross. Of course, the technique was good because it allows me to think deeper and little by little I realised that I was in deep error [sad face].

I was quite stubborn though I was attracted by what they said. I asked one of them to give me a Qur'an in French which he did. It was a gift [smile]. It was an old one without Arabic. The first impression is that the Qur'an was different in style to the Bible. It seems very logical, very straight forward and too much real.

Of course, I went into big research. My first intention was to show them they were wrong. I wanted to make some research in order to prove to them that Christianity was the best religion [smile]. So, I had to read the Bible. It was bulky [big smile]. I did not know where to start and I had to start somewhere. I realised that they knew the bible more than me. How can this be? [big smile]. It was playing on my ego. I had to do something. So, I read and read. Oh my God, the more I read, the more I felt ashamed.

I saw many contradictions. I was in a big problem. I know that every day they would ask me questions about this and that, so I wanted to read and read and prepare myself to face them. But I had to admit to myself that something was wrong. Anyway, one of them told me that Prophet Muhammad was written in the Bible. *Subhan Allah*, this was revelation itself! I had never heard this before. I said to him: "If you bring me this reference, I promise I will change my religion!!!" By hearing this, he popped up "Sure, tomorrow I'll bring it!" And the whole day and night, this played in my mind. Anyway, let me tell you. The veil of darkness was being removed phase by phase. I was seeing the truth. These Muslims even they are not academically educated, they were intelligent because they read the Qur'an and they study their religion. But we as Christians, we were programmed

to think about love of God and be happy without asking any question. We think that Muslims are the worst creatures on earth but in fact, this is not true. Yes, culturally speaking, Muslims are backward in our eyes....they are unruly, unrefined and fanatical.

[big smile] First hour in the morning, he brought the reference I asked for and I checked it in my voluminous Bible book which remained in my drawer every day. I read this and I was electrolyzed. I did not say a word. Fortunately, he was gone and I was alone. I prayed for guidance. I was no more the same. Some hours later, I was blessed with a light in my chest. I was sure about the truth. I called him and told him, that I have taken my decision but that I did not want to tell him. He did not say anything to me rather he said that he wanted me to meet someone and that he would arrange a meeting with this someone in a few days. But before the meeting, he lent me a video. Once at home, I put on the video and immediately, I recognized Brother Cehl Meeah. I knew him for having read about him in the newspaper. The next day, he came to my office and he asked me a few questions about creation, the Creator and Islam etc, trying to convince me. I said "There is no need to convince me. I am already a Muslim. Just tell me what I have to do. I will do". This meeting was capital for me. He was the right man sent to me at the right time. He is intelligent and speaks reasonable things based upon proof. Whatever questions I put to him, he was able to answer. He quotes the Qur'an with references ...unbelievable! I still wonder if we have such a Muslim scholar in Mauritius who has the ability and rapidity to deliver such messages without looking in the Qur'an. A very brilliant figure, *masha Allah* [expression which demonstrates Allah's wish]....

Unfortunately, my family rejected me. They were not happy about my decision. Even in my loneliness, I felt blessed. In fact, I had no time to grieve. I had such a heavy schedule between learning Islam and going to the office each day. My colleagues could not

understand my choice and they too rejected me, as if I were some strange creature. They would backbite me. We tend to say that Muslims are fanatical and sectarians but other communities are also fanatical, let me tell you, and their attitudes may be worse!!!

In Mauritius, there is no such thing as *da'wah* project which targets solely non-Muslims. As you know, we are a small population and most of our Muslim brothers and sisters, do not have the *Deen* [faith in the religion]. The *da'wah* project includes those categories of Muslims. By giving night lectures, both ignorant Muslims, converts and Muslims to-be can take advantage of these.

#### SEVENTH INTERVIEW

Name: Rabidah, Age: 30, Gender: female, Previous religion: Christian, Situation: married, Educational background: Degree holder. Languages: speak English and French

My whole childhood was marred by the perpetual fights between my father and my mother. I have always felt lonely and disturbed. I felt that nobody could understand my feelings as they themselves were pursuing some vain dreams...I felt the adults were unjust about children and that they bear children only for the society, not because they really care about children. My mom loved me a lot though she never understood me. Maybe it is so because nobody seemed to take care about her...I have been sad for many years and was constantly looking for love.

It happened that I was having a difficult time and I was looking for peace. I tried to read the Bible, to go to the church and to pray but my heart was so empty...I needed someone to talk to, to support me....but life seemed so empty, so devoid of humanness. I don't like to think of those days because they remind me of such a waste of time!!!

One day while I was at work, the cleaner who is a Muslim, told me that Islam is the best religion on earth and that Michael Jackson [a pop singer] had embraced Islam. I should follow his example, he told me. I was very angry. I don't know why. I guess that seeing myself as a Muslim, was the last thing I could ever imagine. Normally, when we think about Muslims, we think about a group of people who are unruly, fanatical and marginal...Then one day, the cleaner asked me in a serious tone, if Jesus has ever seen God. I said, 'no' because I thought nobody has ever seen God, otherwise it would not have been a mystery. He was very satisfied with my answer and told me that I was much better than many Muslims. His attitude triggered me as I understood what he meant. Unconsciously, he thought as all Muslims think, that he was superior to me in religion. I was again disgusted by his attitudes but as I felt lonely, I was happy to be in his company, to talk to someone and to hear him say that I was better than the majority of Muslims, was a compliment...So, I reconsidered my attitude and decided to talk to him and to question him about Islam.

I was surprised by such a deep knowledge coming from a cleaner. He was very intelligent with a sound reasoning though quite tactless and unrefined. He gave me a rational answer to all my questions. For instance, he explained to me why Muslims are supposed to perform salah five times daily and the benefits of *salah* [prayer], fasting, and the economic aspects of *zakat* [prescribed alms]. I was very much interested to know more, especially I felt happy deep inside myself. Talking to him was a kind of rejuvenation. He was somehow humane and not superficial as those people we meet every day at work, on the road or in the society we are living in. Little by little, he proved to me that Christianity was not a complete way of life because it has no pillars and no specific laws...there is no indication about prayers, fasting and so forth. I was disconcerted and I

decided to leave Christianity but he pointed out to me that my situation was worse than before since I had no religion, because believing in God without believing in His Words, was a big sin. Once again, I was disturbed but he reassured me, saying I should accept Islam. I was upset. I thought about my parents and the fragile cocoon I had been living in.... They would never agree to my conversion. Seeing my reluctance, he told me to watch the video of Sheikh Ahmad Deedat. He gave me a copy. I did not have the least knowledge about Sheikh Ahmad Deedat and was not prepared about what I was going to hear. I was disconcerted by Sheikh Ahmad Deedat's courage to address Christians especially the Hindus. I remembered how he showed them pictures of their gods and everything was clarified in my mind. I was fully convinced that the true religion was Islam, without doubt. I was relieved after I had watched Sheikh Ahmad Deedat.

The next day, I explained to the cleaner my conviction; he said he would arrange a meeting with an important person. He said he would drive me to Plaine Verte to meet someone but when we reached Plaine-Verte, it was too late he told me, the important person had gone for *Hajj*. He said I had to wait for one month. I was very impatient but I did not ask him concerning the 'important person', rather I told him that I wanted to pray and to read the Qur'an. He wrote everything on paper and then, he asked me to see exactly the movements while he performed in front of me. He bought a Qur'an for me, a prayer mat and a perfume. These gifts rejoiced my heart. I felt as if, I was born again. Meanwhile, I learnt many rituals and was already practising. When the 'important person' came back to Mauritius, he brought me to his place. It was Cehl Meeah [laugh]. Cehl Meeah was very happy to meet me as I showed much interest to embrace Islam. He checked my knowledge through questions and he was apparently satisfied.

Within months, my whole life changed for the better. I decided to leave my job because I was not feeling happy among superficial people. I decided to study Islam at a higher level and to work in an Islamic environment. Today, I can say I am very happy. Of course, it is not easy to change our lifestyle and to quit our habits. Many Muslims are jealous about converts. They want to show us that they are superior, that their backwardness in terms of traditions and cultures are islamically approved. But I don't think so. There is a kind of rivalry between Muslims and Converts but if we are strong, then they cannot belittle us. Allah is the Creator of all mankind and I am very happy to be among sincere Muslims who put the Word of Allah higher than their own cultures and traditions.

#### EIGHTH INTERVIEW

Name: Layla, Age: 22, Previous religion: Christian, Situation: married with two under aged children and a new born baby, Educational background: primary school, can read French

I am Layla. I am a convert...my previous religion was Christianity. I met my husband and he asked me to convert to Islam in order to get married. I wanted to become a Muslim since childhood. My mum, my sister and I converted to Islam. We used to talk about Islam and we wanted to become Muslims .... [smile]. When I met my husband who is a Muslim, my family was very happy. His family is practising but lacks knowledge. On my part, I do my *namaz* and I listen to some Islamic lessons on Cd. I just have my baby, so I cannot pray...[smile]

I learnt about the J.U.M from a lady who comes regularly to visit me for da'wah. She visits all the converts in the region. She brings sweets and biscuits for my children. She

also brings clothes, food and monthly provision. The other day, she brought a tin of milk for my children....She said that I must learn as soon as possible. I said 'yes'.

#### NINTH INTERVIEW

Name: Shaheen, Age: 33, Situation: married with two under aged children, previous religion: Hinduism, Educational background: School Certificate, Languages: can read English and French

I was in love with my husband who is a Muslim. He has not been practising Islam since childhood. When he wanted to marry me, both our parents were against this decision and therefore they rejected us...yes, his mother is a Sunni Muslim but she has many wrong practices. For example, during the month of Muharram, she does the *ghoun* [mourning rituals of the Shites] this is why my husband is angry...My husband has not been to his mother's place for many years.

We decided to live together but we stayed in our own religion because my husband did not want me to become a Muslim. He said it is better to stay the way I was because the responsibility will fall upon him if ever I become a Muslim then apostate...

Yes, I embraced Islam against his will and we proceeded with the *nikkah* [Islamic marriage]. A Muslim woman told me that our relationship was illegal and there was an urgent need to officialise our *nikkah*... Before I met her, I was not convinced about Islam as a way of life. I just liked the idea of being a Muslim, that's all but now I am very interested to learn and to practise.

This group [*Jamaat Ul Muslimeen*] does door-to-door *da'wah* in the region. They came in this apartment where there are some Muslim Converts including myself. They

introduced themselves and asked us to come to the *Madrassah* [Islamic school] to learn about Islam. They say that learning Islam is compulsory upon all Muslims and that we need to learn in order to practise.

I am very touched by the way they talk about Islam, their love for Islam...well mannered, polite and generous... The first time the lady came, I was impressed by the way she talked. She was like an angel...[smile] she brought a prayer mat, a *tasbeih* [a rosary] and books...and then each time she comes, she brings books, biscuits ...the lady is very patient with me, she taught me how to pray, how to build confidence within Islam and she reads the Qur'an in Arabic for me [smile]. For the first time in my life, I feel supported and happy. I have a new family...before, we were so lonely. My only problem is time factor. We were very poor and now, we are self-employed, so I need to work hard and I have no time...

#### TENTH INTERVIEW

Name: Parweeza, Age: 39, Previous religion: Hindu, Situation: married with two girls, Educational background: primary school, can hardly read French.

I am already a convert. My mother was a Christian and my dad a Hindu, but we followed Hinduism...I am a divorcee with two girls. I met my present husband who is a Muslim. He too was divorced with two under aged children, a boy and a girl. He was quite depressed because his wife left her with two small children. We finally fell in love. We wanted to live together, so I proposed him to come and live with me and my old father... My father does not mind. I raised the four children as my own and he took care of my children as his own...I accepted to become a Muslim so that we can perform the *nikkah*. His son attends the madrassah but the others....no. Yes, the two girls are 13 years old

and the youngest is 8. But my mother-in-law complicates everything. She does not like me. She prefers my husband's ex-wife. She lived with my mother in law though she has divorced my husband. I don't like this attitude. She was not supposed to live with her and I am angry with my husband because of her. Every time he goes to see his mother alone, the other one is here, trying to win him over. He says there is nothing but I don't believe. I am disgusted.

A group of people came to meet us home. I don't know the name of the organisation. The first time a woman talked to me while her husband talked to my husband. She asked me if I have already accepted Islam. I said 'yes'. She asked me about my previous religion. I told her. Then she asked if I need help to practise. I told her that I was in fact very disgusted about this religion because I am having lots of problem with my in-laws. She was very compassionate and asked me 'what happened?' I explained to her my entire problem with my husband's previous wife; my husband does not give me a cent! I have not renewed my ward robe for long; this is why I cannot dress properly.' She listened attentively and said: "no worry, everything will be alright. You are a woman. You have dignity. You are wise. You have qualities. Your children love you. Allah loves you. He takes you out of darkness. He will never let you down. You have to be courageous. I will give you a hand." My two daughters were listening and they felt very happy... [big smile]. The same day, the lady came again and she brought gifts for all of us. She brought two hijabs for me which I should wear when I go to my in-laws. She said it is very important that I dress properly and beautifully in front of them so they will value me. She said I must also learn because only learning can change the way I think and will take me in this darkness. She asked me to tear off the photo of my 'gods' [from her previous religion] which was hanging at the door and said that after this Allah will be happy with

me and that my life will change. I felt as if an angel had entered my house. I had never heard this conversation. Yes, I obeyed her because she is good and she kept her promise. She again came another time with lots of gifts. Yes my husband's son goes to the *masjid* on his bicycle even in the morning but my daughters also want to learn. Yes, my life has changed. My husband is happy. His behavior has changed towards me. He treats me well.

No, they are not like other Muslims I think. They look happy. They make us feel happy. They support us...Each time they come they bring something: books, prayer mat, *hijab* for each child including myself, clothes...many many things...They are generous and supportive...

### Appendix III

Participant observation of a woman named Sarah, next day after her conversion; conversion which was held in joint assistance by the members of the *Tabligi jamaat* and one member of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*.

New name: Sarah, married twice and is now living in a free relationship with a non practising-ignorant Muslim. She has three children born from three different men; one eldest daughter and two sons. She works as a maid servant and her husband works as a poultry helper. Her social class is undefined since she neither belongs to the Hindu, Christian or Muslim community. Her mother was a Christian and her father a Hindu but she has never learnt any religion and has been brought up without religion. She is rejected by her parents and in-laws. Her Muslim partner has no knowledge about Islam and has been brought up without any Islamic knowledge. His father is a non-practising Muslim who married a Hindu, who converted to Islam then to Witnesses of Jehovah.

Here is a short narration about her life and what I observed when I first met her on the second day after her conversion.

In August 2014, a conversion took place at Pointe aux Sables, a coastal area near the region of Port-Louis. The convert was a lady whose father was a Hindu and her mother, a Christian. She explained that neither of them cared to instruct her about any religion and so she grew up without religion. From her first marriage, she has a daughter of 17 who has been baptized as a Christian. After her husband's death, she married another man with whom she is separated because of marital violence. From this union, she has a son who is also baptized Christian. She then fell in love with a Muslim man who is several years younger than her. As she is not officially divorced, she decided to live with him in a free relationship without the *nikkah*. From this relationship, she has a son who is eight years old.

The lady explains that she wanted to convert to Christianity but nobody has ever helped her. She has contacted the Church on two occasions but the priest has refused to convert her, saying that in her case it was not possible. On the other side, her Muslim partner could not be of any help as he is totally ignorant of Islam, its beliefs and practices. She explains that at times of hard difficulties, she would advise her husband to go and pray in his 'Muslim church' and to find help there but her husband was 'so ignorant that he was ashamed to go and seek help among the Muslim community'. Her husband is often ill-treated by the poultry owner in front of Sarah and the latter had to help him in his work. Life is so difficult that they hardly survive with three children.

It so happened that while the *Tabligi jama'at* members came to visit those few Muslim families in the vicinity of Pointe-aux-Sables, they came across this case and tried to

sermon Sarah's husband to come and pray at the *Jamaat khana* [prayer room] with them. Sarah's husband did not show any sign of interest but one day, when the members came again, Sarah went out and spoke to them. During the conversation, the preacher told her that in all religions, adultery is haram. So, it would be better to legalise their relationship by doing the *nikkah*. Sarah said that the preacher's arguments' made sense and she agreed. The preacher told her that it would be advisable to convert to Islam so that her whole family would benefit from such positive actions. "Such action", he said, "will bring light in her life." Hearing this, Sarah was interested to change her religion. She said: "I gave a thought and decided to convert because I wanted to see light in my life and to help my youngest son in his religious life and at the same time, teach my husband how to pray."

The next day, a *Maulana* [Muslim scholar] came and the conversion was done in the absence of the husband who was busy with his dying father. His father wanted him to legalize his relationship with Sarah before his death so that he might die in peace. So, the presence of the *tabligi Jamaat* members was well appreciated by the husband. The *tabligi* members were also accompanied by a member of the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen* who lives in Pointe-aux-Sables.

The next day, the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* members decided to pay a visit to the family and this is how I had the opportunity to accompany them. The members have brought along a basket full of gifts. A Qur'an in French, a *thawb* [Islamic clothe for men] and a *horni* [women head cover] that will be used on the *nikkah* day. Foodstuff, Islamic dresses, a prayer mat, shampoo, bath gels, other head covers and money were given to the lady as gifts. They explained that this is a normal gesture towards all converts in order to win

their hearts towards Islam and by so doing, protect their faith and create love and affection in their hearts.

The lady was very happy and relieved and said that ‘truly this religion is true because I did not ask for anything and I am given gifts for the first time in my life’. She showed much interest and was ready to learn the religion of Islam and said “Please teach me so that I can teach my son and my husband”.

She explained that she was hoping that Islam would change her life and that she understood the importance of education and wanted the best for her children but had been wasting so much time in her life seeking for help. She was grateful that those *Tabligi* members came to knock at her door.

After having listened to her needs and desires, the two members of the J.U.M introduced themselves and their work. One of them explained that he is a convert and that he had been searching for light until Allah opened his breast to Islam. The woman was very attentive and interested. I could notice that her concern was two – belief in a true God and getting out from her poverty. The J.U.M understood her problem and they tackled the situation by proposing her a monthly help.

They said: “You are now part of our family. All your sins have been washed away and you have now a clean register. Please keep this register always clean and remember from today’s onward, you are a new born. You must repeat to yourself that you are a Muslim and proud of it.” Hearing this statement, the woman repeated in a loud clear voice, smiling: “I am proud to be a Muslim”.

When it was time to leave, the woman accompanied us to the door and said: “Please come back again as often as possible. Please educate me. Don’t leave me alone. Let us do

it step by step” and the members promised to come back once a week for her educational training.

#### Appendix IV

Informal Discussion with:

Sister Nasreen, a social worker at the J.U.M

Age: 50, Situation: married with four children

Q: What are your views about *Da'wah* in Mauritius?

R: *Da'wah*, if we understand it to be an invitation to non-Muslims towards Islam, is not an easy task. Though it is an obligation upon every Muslim man and woman, we must remind ourselves about the context we are living in. Muslims themselves lack the real motivation of life. They are spiritually passive, lethargic and indifferent. They are at a loss due to secularism which makes you think that you are totally free, yet confine to suffer. Muslims do not even like to read....This can explain the backwardness of the situation. However, thanks to Brother Cehl Meeah, there is much awareness about the religion of Islam.

Q: Do you have any technique of *da'wah*?

R: Not actually. We do not have any specific way of doing *da'wah*. We have to fit in the reality and context of our local situation.

Q: Can you be more specific please?

R: Today people do not have much time to share; they are less generous in terms of free time. We have a few women who devote their time to *da'wah* and they are not, what we

can call 'professional'. They do door-to-door *da'wah* with men as well as women. Some of them are writers, editors, educators. They are what we call part-time street *da'ees*. They invite non-Muslims through our magazines and books. It is a kind of 'first contact' with the world of non-believers. We sow the grain and *insha Allah* [by Allah's permission], we hope to reap it in the future. We also have a *fisabilillah* shop [a shop which is meant to help people for Allah's satisfaction] which is run by sisters who are knowledgeable in social issues and Islam. So this increases the opportunity to meet more non-Muslims and to teach them about Islam.

Q: What do you think is the main weaknesses of your organisation?

R: ...Well, lack of human resources and financial support. If people contributed more in terms of money, there would have been a definite progress. For example, transport facility for *da'ees* to move around the island; a salary for all these men and women who devote all their time in the way of Islam. May be, we would have more people who would devote their time, if they were given a salary every month.

Q: Thank you sister.

Interview with Brother Muhammad Cehl Fakeemeeah founder of the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* organisation

Q: Brother Cehl, *As Salam alaikum wa Rahmatullah* [Islamic greeting]. First of all, let me thank you very much for accepting this short interview.

R: Wa alaikum salam wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatuhu. Everything we do, we do it for Allah Azzawajal. Let us pray that He protects us from the evil whisperings and guide our mouth to say what He commands us to say. *Al Hamdulillah* [Praise be to Allah].

Q: Can you tell us the objective of the foundation of this *Jama'at*?

R: When I went to Saudi Arabia, I was still young and inexperienced though I was already involved in Da'wah and was serving my ummah, Al Hamdulillah. During my stay in Makkah, the contact with the mosque, the *Ka'ba* [the holy house], the Arabic language itself...all these touched my heart deeply. I am not talking about the majority of Arabs who are plunged in materialism. I am talking about my own inner encounter with God, the Creator. Allah, the Supreme, made me experience things that never before I had experienced. I was totally aware that my brothers and sisters were victims of ignorance caused by lack of proper education, fanaticism, traditions, cultures and above all, materialism. It was impossible for me to come back to my country, Mauritius, and to continue doing what the majority of Muslims are doing. Do you understand what I mean? They are eating, drinking, entertaining themselves as if they have been created to think like they want, behave as they want. They are Muslims only when the *azan* [the call for prayer] is recited. They are so happy about the life they are leading that they will find it strange if we tell them, this is not Islam!!! All these came to my mind when I was still a student. I wanted to do something. So, first, there was an urgent need to educate the young men and women. So, first step, I gathered some of my friends and my friends brought their friends...and this is how we started, by Allah's permission.

Q: So, it started as a small group....

R: Yes. The energy, the courage, the desire I had was so intense..... On a motorbike, we would travel around the island, inviting people towards the message of tawheed. We invited people to believe in One God, both Muslims and non-Muslims. Several groups were formed around the island. During my absence, the others would continue to study

the books and notes I gave them. I would write to them, send them cassettes. I bought books from Arabia because we cannot find these books here. Many people were craving for knowledge. They were thirsty but nobody was there to help. So, my mission was a heavy one. I stayed in Makkah for 12 years!!! Back in 1991, by Allah's grace and mercy, a brother offered us generously an old garage which we transformed little by little into a mosque and official centre.

Q: Why is it called 'Centre'?

R: Whenever we need to go to our garage [smile], we used to say, let's go to our 'centre' to talk and discuss because it was a central place for us and still is, *Al hamdulillah*. Some brothers even slept there. We would eat, sleep, perform our salah, and discuss our ideas. We lived like brothers...It was like home. The name stayed because we did not like to use the word 'mosque'. It is so restricted in people's mind. The word 'Centre' immediately appeals to anybody.

Q: Excuse me for this question. Do you consider yourself a rich person, brother Cehl?

R: Certainly not. I was born in a very poor family, where I even did not have a pair of slippers to go to school. I was barefooted ...we often did not have food and I have two brothers and two small sisters. *Al Hamdulillah* our intellectual capabilities allow us to continue our schooling and we have been admitted to five star schools. So, it was a plus for me. I received a scholarship at primary level and was admitted at the Royal College of Port-Louis. At that time, it was a high priviledge.

Q: How come that you do not work?

R: ...After the 12 years, I did not want to go and work in a company and have a salary. I would be like a slave working from morning to afternoon and waiting for a salary, and having a boss who is either an unbeliever or someone who does not care about God on my shoulder. I wanted Allah to be my Boss and no one else.

Q: *Masha Allah*. So, you were earning a living somewhere before you were elected at the National Parliament?

R: At that time, I was trading in import and export from Arabia and also I have been an agent of *Hajj* for many years.

Q: Can you please tell us about the sources of revenue for this jamaat?

R: Every month, I donate a sum of money. The members of the group are free to give their *zakat* [obligatory alms] and *sadaqa* [voluntary alms]. The IRO [Islamic resources organization] is here to look after our financial needs and to advise accordingly.

Q: Are you affiliated with any other group internationally?

R: No.

Q: You mean your jamaat is totally independent both financially and ideologically?

R: Yes. Anyone is free to offer and give. But we are not affiliated with anyone. We are free people; taking money from organisations and having them dictate us, would be like suicide. Our motivation is that only Allah is the Provider and Sustainer. He knows the inner conscience and we ask only with Him...This is trust.

Q: Are you the only leader of the group?

R: Yes

Q: Do you consider that your *jama'at* is progressing?

R: First, let me ask you. What is progress? You see progress as the definition given to you in the dictionary, right? This is a material word. Allah alone is able to assess us and see how we are progressing. Victory lies in our sincerity, our commitment, the sacrifice that we make and the perseverance in the test. Certainly Allah is testing our patience. Allah is with those who have patience. So, He is with us [smile] and we have hope, total hope....

Q: Thank you very much brother Cehl for taking your precious time.

R: *Jazak Allah khayran*. [May Allah reward you with goodness] [He then ended his conversation with a short invocation]

## Appendix: Sample Questionnaire

Research design

Standard background questions based on demography were prepared. Here-under is a demography list of questions concerning participants.

Name: -----

Contact number: -----

Age: -----

Gender: -----

Family situation: -----

Profession [if any]: -----

Previous religion: -----

Questions were categorized into three main parts:

- Life before Islam
- Life at the time of conversion
- Life after conversion

A sample of semi-structured questions was in the following form:

Q1 Can you introduce yourself to us?

Q2 Please explain to us how you came to know about Islam?

Q3 Why did you convert to Islam?

Q4 How did you convert to Islam?

Q5 What are the changes that occurred in your life after your conversion?

Q6 Did you encounter any problem after your conversion?

Q6 Do you get support from the *Jamaat-Ul-Muslimeen*? If yes, explain how.

Q7 What do you think about the *Jamaat Ul Muslimeen* and da'wah conducted by this organisation?

Q8 Did you have any problem to integrate the Muslim community? If yes, please provide examples.

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