SUMMARY OF DISSERTATION

THE MALAY COMMUNITY OF GAUTENG:
SYNCRETISM, BELIEFS, CUSTOMS AND DEVELOPMENT

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The dissertation focuses on a particular community, religiously defined, residing in a certain area. It characterizes their particular beliefs and customs, and portrays the history and development. For this purpose several sources have been consulted and no less than 37 people interviewed.

The Malay community of Gauteng predominantly originated from the Cape and Port Elizabeth. Their ancestors were originally posted to South Africa from the Dutch settlements in the Malay Archipelago during the 17th and 18th centuries as slaves and political exiles. Some of them, however, were people of high rank. The Malays settled in Johannesburg and Pretoria towards the end of the 19th century and in Nigel between 1976 and 1977. This area is presently known as Gauteng.

The Malay community of Gauteng are all Muslims and predominantly followers of the Shafi‘i madhhab (Islamic School of Thought). They constitute a minority group both religiously and ethnically. The Malays of Gauteng furthermore consist of various ethnical groups who were classified as part of the Coloured population group under the Group Areas Act 41 of 1950. In Johannesburg and Nigel the Malays lived in Coloured residential areas but in Pretoria the Malays rather associated them with the Indian Muslims. In Pretoria the majority of the Malays therefore settled in the Indian residential area Laudium instead of the Coloured residential area Eersterust.

The research highlights the prominent early ‘Ulamā’ (Muslim religious scholars) in both the Cape and Gauteng as well as their contributions towards the preservation,
growth and development of Islam in both areas. Unfortunately in the Gauteng province (formerly part of the old Transvaal province) the Malays were often denied their contributions and initiatives in the Islamic field by another Muslim ethnical group.

Attention is paid to the Malay communities’ acceptance of various *syncretistic elements* and *innovations* in their daily Islamic belief systems and social and religious customs. These include certain practices during pregnancies, ‘*aqiqah* (birth ceremonies), grave worshipping, engagements, weddings, doopmaal (baptisms), religious celebrations and tamats (Muslim religious school graduations). The research shows how pure Islamic elements were diffused and transformed into a unique local version of Islam since their days of slavery. The said practices also reflect possible elements of Hinduism and local tribal customs in them.

It is founded in the research that the Malay community practised syncretism in the spirit of pure Islam. Their syncretistic customs were never intended to show disrespect to Islam or to create a new brand of Islam. It was practiced by the majority of the Malay community rich and poor, educated and uneducated. The Malay community of Gauteng never realised nor were they aware that their various religious customs and cultures were actually syncretistic in nature and not part of pure Islam. It was only during the last fifteen years that they became aware of this fact. To many Malays what they were practising was part of Islam and as such will always be part of Islam and part of their heritage. Their practices, however, brings them into conflict with some of the Malay ‘Ulamā’.

The research also discusses the various dark *superstitious beliefs* of the Malays of Gauteng. These kinds of superstitious beliefs formed an integral part of the belief system of the Pagans prior to the advent of Islam. Unfortunately even today superstition still forms part of some Malays’ belief system which include elements such as visiting dukums (Malay spiritual doctors), fortune tellers; avoiding double weddings; superstitious beliefs pertaining to pregnant ladies, new born babies and the misperception that the month of Safar (2nd Islamic month) is filled with fear, ill fortune and bad luck.
Some Malay ‘Ulamā’ especially those who are alumni from the Dār al-‘Ulūms tried and are still trying various methods to rid the general Malay community of Gauteng from their syncretistic practises and superstitious beliefs but unfortunately they are not very successful in it. Wherever and whenever these ‘Ulamā’ officiate at Malay religious functions they would not participate nor allow or even encourage that any of the Malay syncretistic practices should be part of the proceedings. Since the Malays of Gauteng have moved to new mixed racial areas far from vibrant Malay communities the future of the Malay culture is however unpredictable.

The research further focuses on the spiritual, educational and economical development of the Malays of Gauteng.

Firstly it focuses on the fact that the Malays were forcibly removed from their homes in Johannesburg and Pretoria and compelled by the government to resettle in new Coloured residential areas. Here they were however afforded the opportunity to purchase their own residential properties and built their own businesses. (Formely the Malays were deprived by the authorities to rent businesses from government owned business enterprices).

Secondly it focuses on the growth and development, deterioration and eventual resurgence of the Malay Hifz (memorization of the Qur‘ān) tradition. A similar tendency is also reported with regard to the number of ‘Ulamā’. Most students are nowadays trained locally at the Dār al-‘Ulūms in South Africa. Formerly they were educated at institutions in India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Many Malay ‘Ulamā’, past and present were known for their extensive academic qualifications.

Thirdly the research focuses on the Malay ‘Ulamā’‘s inability and unsuccessful attempts since 1923 to establish a recognized ‘Ulamā’ body (theological council) in Gauteng. The research found that the Malay ‘Ulamā’ had over the years resisted all attempts to unite on a common ground in Gauteng.