In February 1945 Muslim religious leaders in Cape Town gathered to establish an organization to represent the specific religious needs of local Muslims and consider the means to protect Islamic customs in South Africa. They named their association the Moslem (sic) Judicial Council. It became the platform for the voice of the ulama—Muslim clerisy—of the city and constituted itself as the only legitimate representative of Muslims and Islam to the Christian state. This was one of the first forums of its kind in the history of South African Islam. While the Judicial Council was certainly an innovation, it was nonetheless symbolic of the distinctive place the ulama occupied in the development of a local Islam a century earlier. But during the nineteenth century Muslim leaders confined their efforts to their mosques and immediate constituencies and there were only informal and sporadic collective activities on their part. Their political and social initiatives were always modest even though they were in close touch with the feelings and aspirations of the urban labouring classes—Muslim and non-Muslim.

The classical sources of Islam—Quran and Hadith collections—do not stipulate a clerical class as an inherent part of its structure. However, the development of a stratum of ‘professional’ religious experts is clearly discernible in medieval Islamic history through studies of the growth of Islamic learning and educational institutions. In addition, historical and anthropological studies of the roles and functions of the ulama in contemporary Islamic societies point to the actual existence of a clerisy. But these studies show that it is extremely difficult to make generalizations about the class, cultural and political character of the Muslim clerisy. For sub-Saharan Africa there has been a wealth of studies on the ulama and their connection to Sufi brotherhoods, in so far as these leaders can be classified orthodox ulama, and on the jihad movements of particular nineteenth century leaders. But there are also numerous studies of politically quiescent religious leaders, such as Lamin Sanneh’s
study of the Jakhanke clerics in Senegal who rank prominently among those ulama who have overtly spurned political action and instead insisted on the quietist path of teaching the religion. If Islamic Africa has spawned many kinds of religious specialists who have recently begun to earn growing scholarly attention, then southern Africa has understandably had less attention given to the sparse strands of Islam and Muslim clerisy there. The beginnings of the Cape colonial Imams go back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the first Muslims were forcibly sent there from the Indonesian Archipelago by the colonizing Dutch. The exile of Shaykh Yusuf, a major figure in the Javanese resistance to the Dutch, at the Cape of Good Hope from 1694 was of great significance to the later expansion of Islam in Cape Town. He died in May 1699 and was buried about 20 miles outside the city. His tomb was, and continues to be, a site of veneration for Cape Town’s Muslims. The growth of Islam was slow during most of the eighteenth century but from the 1770s on there was a real growth of Islam at the Cape. The Muslim teachers of the eighteenth century, and especially the late 1700s, were largely men who were initially imprisoned on Robben Island, off the shore of Cape Town, and when released by the Dutch quietly led and instructed the small community of slave and free Muslims.

The most significant figure was ‘Abd Allah Qadi ‘Abd Al-Salaam, later known as Tuan Guru (‘Mister Teacher’), who, it is claimed in oral tradition, produced a handwritten copy of the Quran from memory while he was incarcerated on Robben Island. When he was released in 1793 he initiated the struggle to establish the first mosque in Cape Town. In 1806—two years after the Dutch colonial ban on the public practice of Islam was lifted—Cape Town’s Tuan Guru died. In the years between the death of Tuan Guru and the emancipation of slaves in 1834 the community of Muslims expanded dramatically. It was also during those years that the Imams became more visible and vocal, and multiplied. It is difficult to write with any accuracy about the content and character of the Islam which the early Muslims at the Cape brought with them from southeast Asia except to draw on the general religious history of the Indonesian Archipelago. By the time the Dutch started sending prisoners-of-war to the Cape the ‘Islamization’ of the region had advanced considerably since the 13th century when Islam first started having an impact in the archipelago. Although Islam was widespread, it was not an ‘orthodox,’ scriptural but a mystical, syncretic religion which incorporated local, often Hindu and Buddhist, spirits and deities.