

Press Release for The Citizen
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MUSLIM FREEDOM IN PRIVATE SCHOOL EDUCATION

While 35.1% of the population of Tanzania are Muslim, these are mainly concentrated in the coastal regions – so how do young people in the rest of the country identify with their faith?

Do they choose to attend schools where they are surrounded only with those of similar practices? Is it a struggle in a predominantly Christian region?

The Citizen spoke to five young women from Arusha, whose families have chosen to send them to non-sectarian schools – St Constantine’s International School, Braeburn International School Arusha and UWCEA.

Layan Dakik has been at St Constantine’s for 14 years, enrolling as a pre-schooler when she was only two years old. Layan has known no other school but – like other students - regularly competes in sport against other private schools in the region, including the Muslim school of Jaffery Academy, founded in 1992 and owned by the “KSIJ” Arusha (Khoja Shia Ithna-Asheri Jamaat).

It was Layan’s mother who first visited St Constantine’s to do in-depth research of the facilities, teaching methods, pastoral care and discipline and also - importantly - the ethos of the now 68 year old institution and the non-sectarian environment it offered, while still respecting their faith.

Now, 14 years later, Layan is on the Prefect’s Council and the Student Council, helped to design the school’s Year Book, and has taken part in Art Club, netball, football, swimming and athletics.

A committed Muslim, she adheres to the principles of modest dress, keeps covered and wears the hijab.

“I take part in all activities,” Layan says. “It’s easy here at St Constantine’s and there’s no reason why it should be difficult. It is only during Ramadan that I cannot do sports and that is my choice.”

Layan says that both teachers and students respect her faith, despite some having little knowledge about it.

“Occasionally when a new teacher arrives from overseas, they may not understand and I have been requested to remove my undersleeves, but I explain that as a Muslim (Shia) I can’t show my arms and this is respected.” The school is now addressing such issues through a special section of the staff handbook, she said.

During the holy period of Ramadan, there is a room set aside for the students to pray and attend to all observances, but now a senior, Layan was keen to promote the idea of a permanent prayer room, as was her friend Sarah Fazal.

Sadly, due to the students being under-lockdown and unable to attend school, Layan and Sarah were amongst those who missed out on the St Constantine’s EID gift to the students – a permanent prayer room that could be used by both Muslims and Christians alike.

It had been the school's plan to have an all school EID celebration at St Constantine's, when they would announce and unveil the new prayer room.

"It was disappointing," headmaster Tony Macfadyen says, "but we look forward to the students return and the opportunity for those with a strong faith to get the use of this special space."

Neither Braeburn, nor UWC has a dedicated prayer room, but students believe there are a number of places where they are able to pray in private when they wish to, especially during the Holy month of Ramadan. Braeburn also organises a bus to take Muslim students to a mosque every Friday during the Holy month and students at the school pray together.

Both St Constantine's and UWC open the opportunity to celebrate Iftar at school, although non-boarders tend to spend this time with their families, Ghaidaa says.

Ghaidaa Dakik (Layan's cousin) is another long-term student, but at UWC East Africa, following on from her older siblings. She first attended at six years old, in year 1, and is now reaching Year 13.

While UWC does not have a dedicated prayer room, she says there are places within the school where she could perform her prayers with privacy.

"In all the years I have attended UWC I have never experienced another student disrespecting my faith, but rather I have had students asking questions because they are simply interested in understanding and educating themselves," she says.

Like Layan, she has never had any difficulty taking part in all aspects of the school.

"The teachers are always encouraging students to try new things and to discover new interests whether it be in sports or community service. I personally was given the opportunity to participate in several sports whilst also participating in community service," she says. "I was always encouraged and supported so that I could reach my full potential. I take part in football, basketball, and netball. I also participate in volleyball and Ultimate Frisbee; and in the UWC Rotary Interact," she says.

"The school has also given me the facilities to be able participate in a personal interest, which was to take piano lessons from a young age."

Another long-term student at St Constantine's is Umekulsum Fazal, who has been at the school for nine years after attending a range of different kindergartens and nursery schools. She was five years old when she was enrolled due to her parents' belief in the Cambridge curriculum and the success of her family's predecessors, who were all educated there.

Umekulsum chooses not to wear hijab and finds that often she is asked why not.

"It is pretty funny how the fact I don't wear a hijab fazes people, but the fact that I pray, I read the Quran, I fast every Ramadan, I strive to be close to Allah (PBUH) and I show kindness and respect when I need to, doesn't faze anyone. So no, I do not wear a hijab, but true beauty is defined by our behaviour and the kindness we show to one another and should not be judged by what we wear or do not," she says.

“This doesn't indicate that I am against my culture. In fact, wholeheartedly I do cover myself modestly, but only when I go to the mosque or stand before the Al-mighty. This act is not to please anyone, but it is done to show great respect to my Lord.”

While both Layan and fellow student Sarah, along with Ghaidaa from UWC and Salima Ali Sheriff from Braeburn choose to wear the hijab as a mark of their faith, Umekulsum confirms her choice not to.

“The hijab, I agree is a wonderful way to practise the Islamic faith and please our lord, but not the only way. I've learned to accept people for who they really are and not by how they look or what they wear.”

All five girls agree that they are completely accepted by all other students and that their circle of friends includes those from other religions, without any need for any of them – whether Muslim (Shia, Sunni or Ahmadiyya) Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist or Christian - to debate or defend their beliefs.

Sarah Fazal has spent the last eight years at St Constantine's since coming from an outside nursery school. Enrolled at five years of age, she says her parents were impressed with the diversity over a range of things from the studies offered, to the atmosphere of the teachers and student bodies

“I think the best thing is that the school has a different range of faiths, so we can interact with each other and learn more about each other's beliefs,” Sarah says, “and my fellow classmates and other students truly respect my faith.”

The others agree with her. “Learning about other religions and faiths I think is the biggest advantage of being at St Constantine's, along with my studies, says Layan.

“The respect, open mindedness, diversity, and the opportunity to learn about all sorts of cultures, language and religions is a great advantage in attending a non-denominational school,” according to Ghaidaa, “because I believe the best way to learn something is to be surrounded and educated about it through people who are at the same age as you.”

Salima has been at Braeburn for the last four years after coming from Yemen where her father was a physics teacher. He now teaches at Braeburn, which dictated Salima's coming there, enrolled at Braeburn at 13 years of age.

“It isn't difficult to participate in all activities,” Salima says, “because we are encouraged to try everything, but not forced to do anything, despite all sports being compulsory.” Salima plays basketball and netball, but also enjoys music, playing in a school band.

“The greatest advantage in attending a non-denominational school is the fact that you are all different and you are allowed to be different, so you don't have to pretend that you are somebody you are not,” Salima says.

“Personally, I think the biggest advantage of a non-denominational school is being surrounded by different people from different places with different opinions and visions and learning from them as they learn from me as well,” Umekulsum says. “My parents have always taught me not to judge anyone and so, due to that, I have learned to make my religion – Humanity,” she says.

“It is the basis of every religion and the mother of all religions. We are all humans up until race pushes us away from one another, then religion separates us, politics divides us and wealth classifies us and we become physically incapable of seeing one another.” The girls agree that the education they receive at their respective schools, prevents this.

All five girls intend advancing into further education; and above everything they treasure their studies as their number one reason for attending St Constantine’s International School, Braeburn International School and UWC. However, they also believe studying in a non-sectarian school adds to their experience as they learn, make friends and enjoy everything that school has to offer.

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Rank	Belief System
1	Roman Catholic Christianity
2	Protestant Christianity
3	Sunni Islam
4	Shia Islam
5	Non-Denominational Islam
6	Ahmadiyya Islam
7	Other Forms of Christianity
8	Indigenous Spirituality Alone
9	Sufi Islam
Irreligious or Other Beliefs	

Sawe, Benjamin Elisha. "Religious Beliefs In Tanzania." World Atlas, Apr. 25, 2017, worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-tanzania.html.

Tanzanians generally identify as either Christian or Muslim, though many still practice folk beliefs as well. Additional minority groups include Traditional Africanist, Buddhist, and Hindu.

Islam is a major religious belief system in Tanzania, with 35.1% of the population as followers. In fact, 99% of residents of Zanzibar Island identify as Muslims.

Islam is mainly practiced in coastal areas and the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba. The Islam sects in the country include the suni (14.4%), shia (7%), sufi (1.4%), Ahmadiyya Islam (5.6%), and non-denominational Islam (7.0%)