

Background to Declaration of the ‘Circle of Tombs (Kramats)’

“It is said that approximately more than 250 years ago a prophecy was made that there would be a “Circle of Islam” around the Cape. According to local beliefs, the circle is complete by comprising the tombs of Auliyah (friends of Allah) who were brought as slaves to the Cape. South Africa is rich in Islamic culture and history and this heritage must be preserved for posterity. We owe these heroes and torchbearers of Islam and could never repay them for their sacrifices.” (VidaMemoria and Cape Mazaars Society; Circle of Tombs (Kramats) Nomination 2019)

The “Circle of Tombs” consists of over 20 Kramats that are situated around the Cape Peninsula. They are the graves of the “Auliyah” (Friends of Allah), Islamic leaders who fought against the oppression of slavery and colonial rule, and who brought Islam to southern Africa. These graves are shrines to these Muslim Holy men who died at the Cape and were some of South Africa’s most influential and spiritual figures. As such these Kramats are considered to be of great importance and reverence to the Muslim Community of South Africa.

The history of the “Circle of Tombs” starts with the Dutch invasion in the East of places such as Java, India, and Ceylon. The resistance to this invasion was led by noble people of high calibre such as Sheikhs and religious leaders, people with great spiritual intellect and respect among their people. The Dutch were, however, unable to execute these leaders when they were caught because of their great influence. This would have made them martyrs and inspired ever greater resistance to the Dutch endeavours. Therefore, they were banished to the Cape, the furthest outpost of the Dutch East India Company’s (VOC) reach, leading to the emergence of Islam in the Cape.

In addition, the VOC’s station at the Cape under the command of Jan van Riebeeck required slaves. Due to the resistance from the local Khoi groups, slaves were imported from the East where the VOC had established control. In 1681, the Cape was also officially made a place of confinement for high-ranking prisoners from these lands. It is through these Eastern slaves, convicts, and political exiles that Islam was brought to the Cape and marked the beginning of the Muslim community – the Dutch arrived as conquerors and slave masters and the Muslims as conquered slaves.

Vidamemoria and the Cape Mazaars Society initiated a serial nomination for these Kramats in a “Circle of Tombs” to be considered for declaration as National Heritage sites.

The Kramats in the “Circle of Tombs” have been identified as sites of national cultural heritage significance due to their role in the origin and spread of Islam in Southern Africa, their sacred role to the Muslim Community and other faith groups who gain benefit from the sites’ tranquillity and sanctity.

As tangible representations of the life and character of the Saints buried there, the Kramats are symbols of resistance and struggle for religious freedom and tolerance. They represent the commitment the saints had to the preservation of Islam and their struggle against the oppression of colonial powers.

Brief Statement of Significance:

“A prophecy made over 250 years ago said that there would be a “Circle of Islam” around the Cape. It is believed that this Circle is formed by the shrines of Islamic Saints, the tombs of the Auliyah (Friends of Allah), and some of South Africa’s most influential spiritual leaders.

Referred to as Mazaars or Kramats, these shrines are regarded as highly sacred places that represent the advent of Islam to southern Africa (a religion that was suppressed in South Africa until 1804); and are symbolic of the resistance against religious, social, and political oppression by the Dutch, slavery, and British Colonisation both in South Africa and in Indonesia Archipelago.

These shrines are places of sanctity that provide spiritual benefits to those who visit and partake in the remembrance of the Auliyah. The Kramats inspire reverence and peace, not because of architectural achievement or aesthetic appeal, but because of the character, knowledge, and spiritual presence of those buried there. These Saints, further, contributed to shaping the cultural character of the Cape and the traditions regarding the history of these Saints have been passed from generation to generation mainly through word of mouth. Subjected to harsh forms of cruelty and torture for their roles in resisting oppression by the Dutch, and British both in Indonesia and at the Cape, the Saints never wavered and continued to teach unity and peace amongst different faiths. In keeping with these teachings many non-Muslims also visit the Kramats regularly.”

On 3rd December 2021, the first 10 Kramats in the “Circle of Tombs” were declared National Heritage Sites ([Gazette notice](#)). SAHRA intends to declare the following Kramats in the next phase of declaration:

Site No.	Name of the Kramat	Location	Erf /Farm number	Province
1.	Sayed Abdul Aziz	Muizenberg	86923; Cape Town	Western Cape
2.	Sayed Jaffer	Oude Kraal	2802; Camps Bay	Western Cape
3.	Sheikh Ali Sayed Bassier	Camps Bay	1491; Camps Bay	Western Cape
4.	Sayed Abdul Malik	Oranjezicht	3715; Oranjezicht	Western Cape
5.	Sayed Abdul Haq	Vredehoek	178079; Cape Town	Western Cape
6.	Hazrat Sayed Mehboob Ali Shah	Maitland Cemetery	24544-Re; Cape Town	Western Cape
7.	Sheikh Abdul Kader	On Table Mountain	1815; Vredehoek	Western Cape