Connecting to the Modern

Brazilian TV & Muslimness in Kyrgyzstan

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Defuza, Zeba, and Mukadas, sisters living in a small town in Kyrgyzstan, were gathered around the television talking while commercials played. Suddenly one sister hushed the others and drew their attention to the images on the screen. The pictures were of beautifully dressed Muslim women, swirling strands of DNA, and images from Brazil and Morocco. It was a promotional trailer for the new Brazilian soap opera Clone. When I asked the girls what the new serial was about, they replied they were not sure, but mentioned that it had something to do with Brazilians and Muslims. While the images of the Moroccan Muslims had grabbed their attention, the girls said nothing about the rather unique central topic of the soap opera: human cloning. The sisters were not the only ones. For many viewers around the world, it was the lavishly presented, and highly romanticized, Muslim “Other” that made the soap opera so popular. Indeed, one observer noted that Armenia had gone “Arabic over wildly popular soap opera.” Another reported that, “El Clon is leaving Latin America wide-eyed and drop-jawed for all things Arab.”

The sisters’ reactions to the trailer run in January 2004 indicated that the responses of residents in the town of Bazaar-Korgan (30,000 inhabitants) would be similar. It’s not difficult to understand why. While the Soviet Union had long since ended and with it the militant control of the citizens, would be similar. It’s not difficult to understand why. While the Soviet Union had long since ended and with it the militant control of the radical society, polygamy, and dress. However, Clone did not simply demonize the Muslim other. Through complex techniques of mirroring typical of the Orientalizing discourses described by Said, the portrayal simultaneously romanticized certain “un-lost” portions of the other’s culture.

Understanding the soap and its imagery
Clone was produced by the Brazilian media giant TV Globo and aired in Brazil in 2001. The programme was then syndicated and shown around the world. As previously noted, the seemingly unique theme of Clone was its use of a cloned human being as one of the central characters in the tale. The main story-line revolved around the love affair of a Brazilian man, Lucas, and a Brazilian born woman of Moroccan descent, Jade (zha-dee). The couple, who met in Morocco after Jade moved there to live with her mother’s family, began their love affair in the 1980s. The affair, alas, was ill-fated and Jade was married off by her family to Said. Lucas married as well and began their long separation. The soap opera followed the lives of these two lovers as they managed to steal away for a night alone every few years.

All in all, the visual representations of Morocco were of an a-temporal place of extreme beauty and sensuality that was fundamentally different from “modern” Brazil. The episodes which dealt primarily with Moroccans focused precisely on the subjects where variance with “modern” life was perceived to be the greatest. These instalments largely revolved around issues related to gender: seclusion of women, patriarchal society, polygamy, and dress. However, Clone did not simply demonize the Muslim other. Through complex techniques of mirroring typical of the Orientalizing discourses described by Said, the portrayal simultaneously romanticized certain “un-lost” portions of the other’s culture.

Internal dialogues—discussing Clone
Just after her marriage in 2000, Shahista, a resident of Bazaar-Korgan, said she and her husband came “closer to religion.” A few years later, at age 26, Shahista slowly began to transform her mode of dress and veiling, covering more and more of her body. Shahista was an avid fan of Clone, as were nearly all the members of her immediate and extended families.

Shahista said that she learned something new from Clone every time she watched it for, as she explained, the characters in the programme dealt with the same kinds of problems she faced. Though Shahista lived in a nearly all Muslim society, more covered forms of veiling like she had come to wear (hijab) were not widespread. She was sometimes stared at when walking in public and would often overhear harsh comments on her mode of dress while shopping at the bazaar. When she watched Clone Shahista said she could relate to the feeling of difference that the veiled Moroccans in Brazil encountered. Beyond that she said she found validation for her form of dress through them. For Shahista seeing beautiful young women veiling in the most fashionable ways confirmed her idea that veiling was not a part of an antiquated religion as the critics in her town intimates.

Soap operas draw at least part of their success from their clever use of platitudes that may or may not be taken seriously by viewers. In this article, the author focuses on Clone, a Brazilian show in which Muslims are depicted in classic, and blunt, stereotypical fashion. While travelling from its intended audience in Brazil to unanticipated, but equally excited, audiences in Kyrgyzstan the soap opera obtained interesting new meanings. Ironically, the stereotypical images contributed positively to local debates on what it means to be Muslim.

[W]atching the soap opera was a chance for them to see how Muslims really lived.
Shahista was not the only one who relished the fashionable side of Clone. New stores took the names of beloved characters and some dresses were dubbed "Jade." Girls in Bazaar-Korgon who were considering veiling said they dreamed of having a collection of scarves and clothes like Jade’s or Latifah’s. Through these characters, girls in Bazaar-Korgon saw that Islam and veiling were not at war with fashion. Indeed, interestingly, even those girls who had not previously considered veiling said that they would now experiment with the veil because of the influence of Clone.

Gulmira, a 20-year-old university student said that although she called herself a Muslim she was simply “not doing anything with her religion.” Gulmira was also an avid Clone watcher. She recounted that sometimes, after viewing Clone, she tried on her mother’s headscarves. However, Gulmira did not tie them like her mother did—at the nape of the neck. Rather she experimented with the various ways Jade and Latifah wore their scarves—styles which all fully covered their hair and neck. Gulmira said “I did it because I wanted to know how it would feel to"Clone"." How did these young people experience the veiling of women and the consequences for Muslim women’s lives?

Is that how Muslims really do it?

In Bazaar-Korgon there is a sense that during the 70 years of socialism, Muslims in Central Asia lost the knowledge (and practice) of true Islam and proper Muslim behaviour. As a result, many residents of the town perceived themselves as least among equals in the global Muslim community. This feeling of inferiority was often revealed when residents discussed Clone. One of the most repeated phrases I heard when viewing or discussing the programme with others was the epiphanic statement “Oh, so that’s how Muslims really do it.” Many residents thusly attributed educational value to the soap opera and commented on how much they were learning from it.

Though they often uttered this phrase, it was always followed by a critical discussion of certain aspects of the programme. Thus, though residents often depicted Clone as a course on “Islam for beginners” it is better understood as a programme that widened their exposure to alternative ways of living and interpreting Islam and then, through critical reflection, a resource they drew from when constructing their own views about Islam and Muslimness.

Ziyod, Shahista’s husband and a 26 years old bazaar merchant, had also become “closer to religion.” Ziyod watched Clone but said that he did not always agree with it. He explained that some episodes portrayed that Muslims should not be doing, like dancing or publicly kissing at wedding ceremonies. He explained that both of these practices were un-Islamic. Despite this, he said, he still enjoyed the programme.

Kadir, a local school teacher age 50, watched Clone nightly but he found fault with some of the actions of the Moroccan characters. On one occasion, Kadir contrasted various customs shown in the programme with those kept in Kyrgyzstan—such as practices which establish a girl’s virginity at marriage—concluding that the former were unnecessary components of proper Muslimness. The important thing in a Muslim’s life, he said, is that one has faith and behaves decently to others.

While Ziyod’s and Kadir’s interpretations and applications of scenes from Clone differed—one drew on Clone to narrow appropriate Muslim behaviour while the other employed the soap to widen it—both utilized the soap as a resource in renegotiating, and then asserting, their interpretations of Islam and Muslimness. Shahista however, had a different reaction. She chose not to make normative claims about the actions of the Moroccan Muslims. She said “In Clone they do some Muslim things differently. I don’t know if they are wrong, or if the Muslims there are just a different type of Muslim. Before, I thought there were only Muslims and Christians. Now I am learning that there are many types of Muslims.”

Shahista’s realization that there were many types of Muslims and many ways of doing things is the new reality residents of Bazaar-Korgon are facing. While Soviet era notions of proper Muslimness still abound, the lack of Soviet authorizing structures, the rather weak contemporary Kyrgyzstani state, and a relatively open society has provided fertile ground for a proliferation of religious views and practices which have confronted formally stable, widespread notions about Islam. In this environment the material gathered from viewing Clone became a resource, and in many cases an emancipating resource, in these individual and collective debates of meaning.

The oriented portrayal of Muslims in Clone is an example of the kind of ill-informed stereotypes that still abound concerning “Muslims and modernity” in contemporary media. The uses of its contents by Muslims in Bazaar-Korgon nonetheless reveals that not only can popular culture be a site for resistance, it can also be a tool for viewers in creative processes of alternative societal, and self, formation. In reconstructing social life after the collapse of socialism, Muslims of Bazaar-Korgon are engaged in forming alternative modernities that include “religion.” It is intriguing that from among the tools and resources they draw from is some of the most archaic projections and images that secular modernity can provide.

Notes