

Interview Akiedah Mohamed Humanizing Muslims through Visual Media

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In South Africa, a mere 1.4 percent of the population is Muslim. In the South African public sphere however, South African Muslims have a far more significant presence than what their actual numbers would suggest. In the media and in the arts, Muslims feature prominently; think of names such as novelists Achmat Dangor, Ahmed Essop, Ishtiyahq Shukri, and Rayda Jacobs; poets Gabeeba Baderoon and Shabbir Bhanoobhai; and the filmmaker Zulfah Otto-Sallies. Among the lesser known emerging young female Muslim voices in South African documentary filmmaking is Cape Town-based Akiedah Mohamed (b.1971). A single mother living in the suburb of Woodstock in Cape Town, her work has been screened domestically as well as internationally. Mohamed had her debut with the film *The Malawian Kiss* (1999), a documentary about the first Muslim in South Africa to openly declare her HIV-positive status, Faghmeda Miller. She has also made a documentary about a Muslim couple in a polygamous marriage in Cape Town, *The Second Wife* (2001); a documentary about Muslim women involved in the work of ritually cleansing the bodies of the deceased, *Tales of the Tukamanies* (2001), and a documentary about the month of fasting, Ramadan, and its significance for Cape Muslims, *Portraits of Ramadan* (2003); and finally *Freedom is a Personal Journey* (2004), about

In this interview, Akiedah Mohamed, a young female filmmaker from Cape Town, talks about her work and what being a Muslim means to her in the context of her filmmaking. She argues that in spite of all the usual representations to the contrary, the visual media have a potential for humanizing Muslims in the contemporary world.

two South African ex-prisoners. She is currently working on a drama series for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) based on a story by the South African author Ahmed Essop about love across the colour line. Mohamed grew up in a foster family in a southern suburb of Cape Town, has an undergraduate degree in Islamic Stud-

ies from the University of Cape Town (1994), and worked with various film production companies before her cinematic debut. I interviewed her at her home in February 2005. In the interview, Mohamed talked about her filmmaking, her problems with being labelled a "Muslim" filmmaker and her sources of inspiration.

"Muslim" filmmaker

Sindre: Would you define yourself as a "Muslim" filmmaker, and what, if anything, does being a "Muslim" filmmaker entail?

Akiedah: "Muslim" is such a loaded term in the same way as "Christian" or "Hindu" is in terms of identity. I deal with issues that affect me as a person who is Muslim, you know. That's the best way I can describe the work that I do. I think the filmmakers and the writers often occupy the space of the outsider in order to see clearly. But at the end of the day, my experience of the world is so limited. My understanding of life, and of religion is only contained in what experiences I've had in life. So, I can't speak with authority, and I don't want to be seen as doing that.

Sindre: In an era in which the visual representations of Muslims worldwide is often limited to veiled Muslim women and gun-wielding Muslim men,¹ the documentaries of filmmakers such as Mohamed, which concentrate on the daily lives of ordinary Muslims in a secular context, seem to me to have a humanizing potential. How do you look upon the media representations of Muslims?

Akiedah: Often I think that even our understanding of what it means being a Muslim is quite limited. It's limited to being in a mosque, or being on a musallah (prayer rug), or being in a prayer, or protesting against the situation in Israel and Palestine, or to being a terrorist. I think that there's a frail human face to being Muslim that we don't see in the media, one that Muslims experience in their intimate day to day lives, and this frailty is very important to me because it talks about our limitations and our struggle in a complex modern world. And in that lies the seed in a way, of our liberation, if we can find a way to accept our imperfections, and to make it an acceptable part of our journey through life.

Sindre: From your films I sense a very strong tendency towards representing voices that are, to a certain extent, marginal within the general Cape Muslim community: such as the co-wife in a polygamous marriage, the Muslim living with HIV/AIDS, the Qadari Sufi?

Akiedah: Yah, I think it's a very conscious decision to explore a wider range of experiences of being Muslim. What you see generally in the public sphere are those who are in positions of authority. They have the voice, and their voice is what is represented as the ideal. Most of the documentaries I have made deal with women because I'm a woman, and there are issues which women face that are gender specific. Also, in terms of literature and in terms of the visual media, women are underrepresented. They make up the other half of the Muslim population. In some traditional aspects of religion women

Akiedah Mohamed at the filmset of *Freedom is a Personal Journey*, 2004



PHOTO BY SOLOMON YIGSAW & M. FATIEG BEHARDIEN, 2004

are encouraged to cast their eyes down, not to speak too loudly, not to draw any attention to themselves in any way. This is seen as an ideal personality... I think that perhaps I've struggled with that because that hasn't been who I was... What I like is that there exists within the Cape Muslim community an acceptance for being yourself. The Muslim women's voices aren't silent. They do laugh, they do talk, they do speak their minds.

Creating meaning through the "word"

Sindre: You have started writing poetry in primary school, and was further encouraged in your artistic endeavours by your former Jewish high school teacher. There is a connection between your foster father's story-telling at weddings and funerals and your own need to express yourself artistically. The desire to integrate words and visuals is most apparent in *Tales of the Tukamanies* where poems by the Sufi poet Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi is interwoven with the visuals. Does this point to you being a filmmaker whose inspiration is drawn from poetry?

Akiedah: For me, there's something that is very, very magical about creating a meaning through the "word." I always wanted to write. In terms of filmmaking, I'm still finding my feet, trying to understand filmmaking. What excites me about the film media is its ability to connect to people through the sharing of an experience, and perhaps by stimulating them to think about their experience. I think it is important to be able to find ways to share truth, or share ideas. We have lots of experiences of our own reality, or this world, that we don't share with other people. But the assumption is that our experience of the world is the same as that of other people, but this is not so. The visual media allows me to portray to some extent, or to share with someone, how I'm experiencing this reality. This is difficult in light of the fact that reality or experience is affected by our current emotions or state of mind. This reality is not an absolute truth. It is only one way in order to begin to understand or make sense of our world, and to start engaging in that sort of dialogue.

The human connection

Sindre: Most of your documentaries have been commissioned by the state broadcaster in South Africa, the SABC. Being an independent filmmaker in a developing country where art is hardly the first of the state's priorities and the limited market is at present saturated with documentary filmmakers is demanding. The independent broadcaster E-TV, based in Cape Town, hoped to offer some opportunities for independent documentary filmmakers, has not commissioned local documentaries for years. SABC first started TV broadcasts in 1976, and these served as a propaganda instrument for the apartheid state until 1990. Ongoing conflicts relating to transformation and editorial policies within the SABC notwithstanding, charges of being aligned to the ANC have frequently been levelled against the SABC, and the SABC News in particular, in the post-apartheid era. From the point of view of an outsider, it seems however that there is less editorial oversight on the part of the SABC with regards to commissioned work like documentaries. Most of your documentaries have been commissioned by *Issues of Faith*, a weekly SABC programme about religious issues in various communities in South Africa.

Akiedah: Look, they're [the SABC's commissioning editors] based in Johannesburg, so there is a great physical distance between us. It impacts on the kind of relationship one is able to build. I cannot walk into their offices to have a meeting. Even within the broadcasting scenario, the human connection is so important. If they do not relate to you, you are merely a number on a proposal. The warmth of human interaction permeates all levels of society, including work. I've dealt mostly with religious programmes perhaps because the broadcaster considers that I have a degree in Islamic studies, or because I come from the Muslim community, and hence may have some insight into the documentaries directed.

Sindre: Even though your documentaries more often than not focus specifically on Muslim women, the documentaries also include interviews with the ulama of Cape Town about some of the moral and



PHOTO BY SOLOMON YIGSAW & M. FATIEG BEHARDIEN, 2004

social issues raised in the documentaries. I am interested in learning more about how you got along with the ulama in the process of making some of your documentaries. In your documentaries, you have worked closely with quite conservative ulama in Cape Town. What kind of specific challenges did you face in your interaction with them, given that you are a Muslim woman who doesn't wear a scarf, who raises her voice in public, and—to the extent that they know this—is a single mother—characteristics that you previously indicated might be seen as problematic by some conservative Muslims?

Akiedah: Let's just say that I'm very fond of them... I mean, they're conservative, but I don't see that as a bad thing, you know, conservatism isn't a bad thing. I think because I understand that they are protecting certain issues that they believe in. They want to protect the sacredness of family and the sacredness of life. They want an order, they want calmness, you know. So it's not that they're bad people—they're not. I don't generally go into attack. I go into dialogue with them, to speak to them, and to respect their position and who they are, you know, because that's how I would like them to treat me. And generally in my interactions I try to focus on the issue, and I do solicit their help, and I do want to give expression to their voice. Because that is part of the dialogue of understanding. Because I don't want to go and distort what anybody says, or who they are, or what they believe in—that's not the point. To engage in dialogue is more important. To move away from being judgmental of oneself and of others is the greatest challenge, and through a documentary, this aspect of one's approach is always tested, and sometimes one succeeds and sometimes not, but that is part of the process.

Sindre: Do you think that the visual media has a potential for humanizing Muslims, in spite of all the media representations to the contrary?

Akiedah: I think the media doesn't humanize well. I think the media lends itself towards fragmentation. Because the images, I mean the way we experience life, as John Berger says,² before we even speak, we see things and we read through the visuals. Our reality's made up in that way: and then we start to connect our words to this visual world around us. I think the key lies in how we build that relationship: that's why words are so essential. The media can be used—as we

have already seen—to portray a kind of demonized expression of being Muslim. It can be used that way. So it stands to reason that it can also be used for its opposite. The key, I think, in the humanizing process, is twofold—it relies on how that reality is built up in the media, as well as on people's relationship to the media.

Notes

1. This is largely true of representations of Muslims in South African post-apartheid media too. This topic is explored in a recent Ph.D. by Gabeba Baderoon titled *Oblique Figures: Representations of Islam in South African Media and Culture* (University of Cape Town, 2004).
2. John Berger, British novelist and art critic, probably best known for *Ways of Seeing* (reprint edition, Penguin 1995), which is the work being referred to here.

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