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Brazilian TV & Muslimness in Kyrgyzstan

JULIE MCBRIEN

Delfuza, 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.”¹ Another reported that, “*El Clon*’ is leaving Latin America wide-eyed and drop-jawed for all things Arab.”²

The sisters’ reactions to the trailer run in January 2004 indicated that the responses of residents in the town of Bazaar-Korgon (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 religion, its secularist legacies—which had vilified pious Muslim behaviour and turned Muslim identity into little more than an ethno-national marker—continued.³ This precluded any meaningful debate over the constitution of Muslimness well into the post-Soviet period. Moreover, with nearly all international television broadcast coming via Moscow and access to the Internet and satellite dishes severely limited, the amount of media from other parts of the Muslim world was highly curbed. However, the end of the 1990s saw a relatively free religious environment in Kyrgyzstan and the concomitant development of space for religious practice and discussion. It was within this environment that *Clone* was aired.

As the months went on, and *Clone* rose to tremendous popularity in the community, public discussion showed that what had most piqued viewers’ interest was the programme’s portrayal of Muslims. Residents said the soap was so fascinating because it was the first serial they had seen with (non-Central Asian) Muslims as leading characters. In short, they explained, watching the soap opera was a chance for them to see how Muslims really lived. *Clone* became a part of the community’s daily discussions over the nature of Islam and Muslimness. Whether this took place between family members, friends, colleagues, or acquaintances, or as part of the internal dialogue of individual residents, *Clone* became a source of information, agitation, and encouragement in local Kyrgyzstan circles.

In contrasting the “two worlds” of Brazil and Morocco, *Clone*’s creators objectified the places, lifestyles, and communities of the soap opera presenting them as fundamentally different from one another. Moreover, through text and visual imagery, they rendered a highly orientalized portrayal of Muslims and Muslim life especially regarding issues of gender and female sequestering. As has already been widely established in the anthropological literature on media, viewers actively engage in the production of meaning of a given media text or image, productively

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.

utilizing its material.⁴ Their interpretations, opinions, and usages of media are often highly divergent from those imagined or intended by the producers. It is with these considerations in mind, and within the wider context of post-Soviet Muslim life in Central Asia, that we can understand how, despite such orientalized portrayals, the material gathered from viewing *Clone* widened community perceptions about “other” Muslims, was utilized in individual

self construction, and served as a resource in community debates concerning what Islam “truly” was and, thus, what the responsibilities of community members as Muslims should be.

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 this soap opera 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 thus 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.⁵ Though Muslims were depicted as backward and lacking the virtues of modernity, the portrayal was a beautiful one that valorized certain aspects of the (perceived) Moroccan culture.

Internal dialogues—discussing *Clone*

Just after her marriage in 2000, Shahista, a resident of Bazaar-Korgon, 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 intimated.

[W]atching the soap opera was a chance for them to see how Muslims really lived.



Still from <http://oclone.on.neobee.net/>, a fansite of *Clone*

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 and whether, if I someday wanted to wear my scarf like this, it would suit the shape of my face.” Gulmira said she had never seriously considered becoming a more devout Muslim and, in light of her friends’ practices and her respect for them, she sometimes wondered whether she should even identify herself as one. *Clone* did not directly help her with her questions, but she remarked that because of the soap opera she no longer believed that the veil was always ugly and only for the old. It could be a beautiful and fashionable form of dress, she explained, albeit one that was worn by Muslims more “devout” than herself.

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 showed the Moroccans doing things 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 inter-

pretations 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 orientalized 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 are some of the most archaic projections and images that secular modernity can provide.

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Notes

1. Marianna Grigoryan, “Armenia goes Arabic over wildly popular soap opera,” *Armenian Diaspora.com* 10 November 2004.
2. Kimi Eisele, “Arab affinities—sci-fi soap opera ‘Clone’ sweeps Latin America,” *Pacific News Service* 1 November 2004.
3. See Julie McBrien, “Listening to the Wedding Speaker: Discussing Religion and Culture in Southern Kyrgyzstan,” *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 3 (2006): 341–358.
4. E.g., Purnima Mankekar, “National Texts and Gendered Lives: an Ethnography of Television Viewers in a Northern Indian City,” *American Ethnologist* 20, no. 3 (1993): 543–563. There are always limits to individual and collective agency. For an example concerning television see Lisa Rofel, “Yearnings’: Televisual Love and Melodramatic Politics in Contemporary China,” *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 4 (1994): 700–722.
5. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1978).