Traveling Soap Operas, Brazil to Kyrgyzstan: 
Meaning-making and Images of the “Muslim Woman”

By Meghan Simpson

Abstract
This paper focuses on one soap opera with global resonance, the Brazilian telenovela Clone, and its reception among an unexpected audience in the post-Soviet country of Kyrgyzstan. Set in Morocco and Brazil, the program’s attraction stems largely from its appealing platitudes: Clone places classic and heavily gendered images of the Muslim East in stark contrast to those of a free and uninhibited West. Its trans-generational popularity in Kyrgyzstan, a country with a majority Muslim population, raises interesting questions about how ideas and resources flow, take root, and connect. Drawing from long-term fieldwork, this paper presents Clone and its imagery, the current socio-political milieu in Kyrgyzstan, and active processes of interpretation, identity forming, and meaning-making by diverse women viewers. The study contributes to a growing body of literature that explores how research situated in local sites can be profitably placed in a transnational or “global” perspective and provide a powerful tool for exposing multiple modernities and global interconnectedness.

Keywords: transnational flows, Islam, popular culture, Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

In mid-2005, I sat in a large family home in central Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, with a mother, her two daughters, and other young relatives, mesmerized by an odd mélange of pictures from distinctly Latin American and Middle Eastern locations. We were witness to a barrage of images of camels and water pipes, women wrapped in restrictive veils and belly dancing, enraged men, stolen moments of romance, and emblematic double helixes. These images comprised an advertisement for what had become a sudden craze in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere in the world: the Brazilian telenovela, entitled O Clone, or the clone.

Clone’s creators, as Julie McBrien has noted (2007a), objectified places, lifestyles, characters, and communities, presenting “modern” Brazil and “traditional” Morocco as two worlds, fundamentally different from, as well as mutually—and tragically—inamorated with, one another. Through text and visual imagery, they offered a reductive portrayal of Muslims and Muslim life, “especially regarding issues of gender and female sequestering” in the other/East (ibid.: 16). In Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, diverse audience members did not passively view the show, but engaged actively in unpacking its

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materials. Their various interpretations of the imagery and narrative of the *telenovela* undoubtedly departed from those imagined or intended by the program’s creators.

This paper builds upon McBrien’s thoughtful examination of these processes as well as other work on gender, generational change, and globalization in post-Soviet Central Asia (Kuehnast 1998). My aim is to explore the on-going formulation of multiple ideas about “being Muslim,” while bringing into focus gender and its entanglement with other facets of social identity. Dealing with active processes of interpretation, identity formation, and meaning-making by viewers of *Clone*, my analysis is poised at the intersection of gender and globalization. I show how the *telenovela* came to serve as an unexpected resource for igniting and enhancing debates concerning the roles and responsibilities of different community members. Audience members in Kyrgyzstan utilized materials from the program as they constructed their own self-identities and made sense of their dynamic environments. By exploring viewers’ engagements with the program, we can understand how, despite flamboyantly orientalist portrayals, media like *Clone* can factor into the widening and layering of perceptions about modernity and identity in contemporary, globalizing societies.

I draw heavily from participatory research in which I engaged in 2005 on women’s non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international aid in Kyrgyzstan (Simpson 2009). During this period, I encountered many connections—and disconnects—fomented by flows of funding, ideas, and others resources across disparate sites around notions of “women,” “women’s empowerment,” and the “global women’s movement.” At the time of my research, the *telenovela* had only recently been introduced to the country and immediately captivated audiences, as it had across the globe. As I watched and discussed *Clone* with a wide range of viewers in Kyrgyzstan, I found another opportunity to read into such flows and their implications for individuals and communities.

I begin by laying out the theoretical debates that frame the analysis presented in this paper, focusing on the currency of gendered and orientalizing/occidentaling images in contemporary, globalizing society. I then present the story of *Clone*, its narrative, and the representations it offered viewers. Next, I provide an introduction to the viewing context of Kyrgyzstan, paying particular attention to struggles over meanings of Muslimness and ethno-national identification. I follow this by introducing three diverse women I encountered in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan’s capital, in 2005, and discuss how, as they reflected on the images and story of *Clone*, they made sense of their daily experiences and the larger socio-cultural milieu. All together, this discussion aims to clarify how research situated in local sites and placed in a transnational perspective (Burawoy et al, 2000) can provide a powerful tool for exposing multiple modernities and global interconnectedness.

**Understanding Representations**

**East/West Images**

Popular media and soap operas in particular often succeed in captivating audiences by using appealing platitudes; viewers, meanwhile, engage actively by generating meaning, productively utilizing and integrating material in their midst (Hernandez, 2001; Rofel, 1994; Mankekar, 1993). The representation of race, gender, and ethnicity on television has been the focus of a growing body of research, emphasizing the
power of the media and its characterizations in perpetuating stereotypical ideas and preconceived notions about specific social groups (Giles et al., 2003; Harwood and Anderson, 2002; Mastro, and Greenberg, 2000; Macrae et. al., 1995). Television in particular is an important medium where social categories, relations and interactions between social groups, and stereotypes are visually conveyed (Harwood and Anderson, 2002). In Kyrgyzstan, most inhabitants had access to a few locally produced and higher-budget Russian channels; better infrastructure and service provision allowed residents in Bishkek and other urban centers access to a wider range images from the West and elsewhere.  

Media in general typically rely upon and invoke imagery and language that ascribe and homogenize a culture to people and place, across time. As with the Orientalism toward the Middle East explored by Said (1978), such resources have been employed in western European, Imperial Russian, and early Soviet constructions of peripheral, Asian, Muslim “borderlands” or “virgin” lands, and their purportedly inferior, backward, violent inhabitants (“others”). Based on relationships of domination and subordination, articulations of “traditional,” “underdeveloped,” or simply “otherness” have bolstered justifications for rule or intervention (Kamp 2008; Chernetsky et al, 2006; Northrop 2001; Brower and Lazzzerini 1997; Massell 1974). While recent scholarship has offered insightful analyses of the complexity, power, and material consequences of such constructions in contemporary political, media, and “everyday” discourses in certain contexts (Helms 2008), little attention in this regard has been paid to Central Asia.  

During my research, I regularly encountered forms of orientalism as well as occidentalism (Carrier, 1992). Various actors relied upon categories of modern, civilized, and developed in contrast to categories of traditional, uncivilized, and underdeveloped. These categories were often associated with ideas of the West/westernness and the East/easternness. Yet, values and meanings ascribed to westernness and easternness were prone to shift, and the distinctions between them were fluid. When making reference to modernity, locals and non-locals often referred to the West, characterized by democracy, wealth, individualism and unrestrained freedom; conversely, the East conjured up descriptions of tradition, patriarchy, authoritarianism, as well as strong values and spirituality. As I will discuss in greater detail, in ways that appealed to many viewers, *Clone* depicted Muslim characters in Morocco as un-modern, but also valorized certain aspects of easternness, such as through brilliant images of feminine beauty, art forms, and certain customs.  

To make sense of the diverse social reality in Kyrgyzstan, I also find it useful to consider representations in terms of a “metropolitan gaze” (Mackie 2001: 182). Representations I encountered throughout my research in Kyrgyzstan were structured in specific and localized relationships of domination and subordination, configured around gender, as well as ethnicity, rural/urban locatedness, belief, socioeconomic status, and

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2 Stereotyping is understood here as the application of oversimplified generalized characteristics to members of a certain group (Macrae et. al., 1996; Allport, 1979).  
3 At the time of research, estimates on televisions owned per 1,000 persons ranged between 45-250. While different broadcasting systems were available to viewers, most in the country had access only to between 5 and 12 basic cable channels, accessible with a standard antenna. *Clone* was broadcast on one of these channels.
other factors. Historical legacies have, in many ways, created disparities between residents of urban areas (and Bishkek in particular), where certain resources are concentrated and there is a propensity to speak Russian or English (rather than Kyrgyz), and those located in more isolated rural territories. Representations that reflected a powerful metropolitan gaze reverberated throughout my research, particularly in constructions of less modern “others” outside of the capital city. This discussion is relevant, as viewers’ reflections on *Clone’s* images were structured by a mix of factors. The women I present in this study were all ethnic Kyrgyz and resided in Bishkek, but reflect rich compositions of different generations, education and professional backgrounds, personal histories, and belief systems.

**Engendering Images and Mixed Messages**

Recently, attention has been paid to the gender component of the kinds of representations presented above and the enormous power they wield through the “the deeply entrenched institutionalization of sexual difference” (Okin, 1989: 6; also Helms, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 2001; Yegenolu, 1998; Lewis 1996; Nader, 1989). As the roles and behaviors of men and women are often perceived as natural given, rather than variable contextual constructions, couching an argument in gendered terms serves to “naturalize” and therefore legitimize ideological positions (Scott 1999), whether they deal directly with gender roles or not (Gal 1994). In particular, many orientalist/occidentalist discourses, employed within cultural or ethno-nationalist frames, are used to naturalize differences and legitimize the hierarchy between east(s) and west(s) (Helms, 2008; Yegenoglu, 1998; Ahmed, 1982; Said, 1978). Such discourses offer depictions of gender and sexuality, especially of women, to construct and legitimize the ideal character of society (or “the nation”) and to create expectations of members of society.

In conversations throughout my fieldwork, the ways in which women were treated by “their” men and the degrees to which they were “emancipated” were used as markers of society’s or a community’s relative backwardness or modernity. Such standards were reminiscent of orientalist justifications for European and Russian imperial or colonial rule and often implied an inherent link between a developed (modern/western) civilization and purported gender equality (see Chatterjee, 1989; Mani, 1987). Backward, patriarchal treatment of women said to be typical of Central Asian societies was at times rejected in favor of emancipating Soviet models or the modern West. Simultaneously, images of the modern/western woman carried negative connotations: western women were cast as symbols of unrestrained sexual freedom and objects of (heterosexual) male desire; aggressive, liberated western women/“feminists” had abandoned their positive “feminine” qualities.

New media, like soap operas, offer vast resources for making sense of and appropriating a wide range of gender roles and ideologies in Kyrgyzstan. Often, views on “proper” gender roles or identification with different gender ideologies seemed to me to be highly selective, as locals pivoted among Soviet models (e.g. of the “emancipated” woman), Kyrgyz customs (or those of other ethno-national groups), revitalized Islamic ideals, and recent arrivals from foreign media like movies, television programs, or magazines (Kuehnast 1998). Women of different generations and backgrounds, as we will see, identified with and drew together various gender ideologies. Their shifting among ideologies might be understood in terms of Nandy’s suggestion that under
conditions of colonialism and post-colonialism “cultural and psychological survival may require [a] kind of fragmented and shifting self” (1983: 107). Many young, urban women, for instance, dissociate themselves from customary Kyrgyz expectations of marriage, which entails strict gender roles, and also claim to be uninterested in the revitalization of Islam occurring throughout Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, many eagerly anticipate formal weddings officiated by a mullah, involving limousines and diskotekas. When listing their role models, many young women, including those with some recollection of the Soviet era, might include heroines of the pre-Soviet era, Soviet leaders, and recent icons from the international political arena or, more likely, popular culture. In such cases, we see how women might selectively choose or shift between their notions of a modern woman and religious, ethno-national, and familial expectations. The selective—and even contradictory—views related to gender roles offered by women and men throughout my research suggest a continuous yearning to find a sense of common sociality during a period of post-Soviet flux and uncertainty.

The Hijab Debate: Imagining the “Muslim Woman”

One notable aspect of Clone was its portrayal of modern Muslim life, particularly by way of gendered images of the (veiled) “Muslim woman.” Indeed, perhaps the most hotly debated issue concerning the identity and rights of Muslim women in contexts across the globe is that of veiling, or wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf). These debates expose wide-ranging views about modernity, culture, Islam, and appropriate gender roles in contemporary society.

Extremely rare today, the historical Central Asian variants of the veil, the parandja and chachvan, covered the entire body, with a netting that covered the face and resembling the emblematic Afghan burqa. Historical research has discussed how, as with European colonial powers elsewhere, accounts by European and Russian travellers throughout the nineteenth century provided tantalizing fantasies about mysterious eastern women forced to hide behind parandja, and described the oppression and misery under which Muslim women were thought to labor across Central Asia (Northrop, 2004: 34-32; Chattergee, 1993; Ahmed, 1992: 152-152; Massell, 1974). With the onset of Soviet rule in the region, reforms targeting indigenous and Muslim women were cast in terms of radical transformation and “emancipation” from the veil and the shackles of tradition. Yet, Soviet interest in women went beyond mere emancipation from provincial lifestyles (Akiner, 1997: 268). Millions of women across Soviet Central Asia became the focus of struggles for power, cloaked in the ideological propaganda of gender equality and liberation (Buckley 1989: 80-81). In particular, research has exposed how, in the late 1920s, war was effectively waged on women’s bodies in southern areas of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan during violent “unveiling” campaigns and the responses to them (Northrop, 2004: 204-208; Akiner, 1997: 271).

Studies have also suggested that ethnic Kyrgyz, joined by a history of pastoral nomadism, experienced relative equality among men and women, with their lifestyle also shaping the practice of Islam. Stories abound with lore of Kyrgyz men and women sharing the labors of domestic life, working side-by-side in and outside the home, participating in animal rearing, horseback riding, and hunting (Gullette, 2006: 9-13), while limiting their practice of Islam to “what they could fit in their saddlebags.” Such
memories rally women activists in contemporary society (Otunbaeva 1995), while also serving as markers of ethno-national identity—a theme we will revisit.

Now, reflecting a mix of faith and custom, many married women in Kyrgyzstan don simple headscarves, while some younger women have begun to wear more conservative head coverings, particularly in southern areas of the country. To signify their religious affiliation, few women who follow certain interpretations of Islam have adopted styles of dress similar to that worn by conservative Muslim women in Turkey and other parts of the non-Arab Muslim world: a long, loose, coat-like robe and headscarf that covers the forehead and neck and sometimes the entire face, save for the eyes.

Currently, the overwhelming attention given the hijab can be puzzling. This is certainly the case in post-socialist, majority Muslim contexts in Central Asia, where a strong Soviet state once made women’s emancipation and gender equality in public and private life a focus, and legacies of these efforts are now entangled with new freedoms and challenges associated with democratization and with entry into the global capitalist economy. It is also the case in areas where severe abuses of women’s rights are committed in the name of Islam. In contemporary societies in Europe and elsewhere, the “hijab debate” has generated extensive discussion and concern about the importance of (certain) women’s appearance and behavior as symbols of cultural identity, and of “invented tradition,” the weight of which falls most heavily on women (Winter, 2001; Okin, 1999; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). The hijab is indeed largely an invented tradition: in most countries and cultures where garments such as the hijab are now waved about as a banner of “authentic identity,” they are not, in fact, indigenous to the culture or region in question, but rather modern imports (Winter, 2001).

One can also explain the fascination with the hijab in western countries due to orientalist fantasizing of the “veiled woman” as both sexually fascinating and grotesque (Winter, 1996; Bloul, 1994; Enloe, 1990), and to western manipulation of “women’s rights” in the service of colonial or neo-colonial agendas (Lazreg, 1994). Indeed, as Helms (2003a) has pointed out, “whereas Said described the evocation of the eastern threat through images of deviant, uncontrolled female (or feminized homosexual male) sexuality, the political threat of Islam is now often depicted through images of strictly controlled female sexuality: ‘hyperveiled’ women in all-encompassing coverings” (Helms 2003a: 30; also see Macmaster and Lewis 1998).

Within the “post-9/11” (and arguably, post-Cold War) geopolitical construction (and self-construction) of the “Muslim world,” the hijab becomes—for Muslims and non-Muslims alike—the feminized demarcating symbol of a visible and vulnerable yet intransigent Muslimhood (Abu-Lughod 2002; Moghadam 2002). Certainly, in the wake of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan, images of women beneath “the veil” came to symbolize the brutality of the Taliban and the backwardness of Afghan and, by extension, all Muslim culture and its potentially destabilizing, terrorist elements. In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, many young and old Muslim women choose between headscarves or “push-up bras” as they explore and position themselves among multiple modernities (McBrien, 2007b; Kuehnast, 1998).

Veiling was a potent symbol and among the most prominent images of difference in Clone, which resonated among audience members in Kyrgyzstan. Before exploring viewers’ understandings, I turn to the story of the Clone, its story, and characters, and the gendered images it offered audiences.
The Clone Phenomenon: The Story and Its Imagery

Clone is a fantastical and complicated tale that stretches across juxtaposed settings. The story focuses on Jade, a Muslim girl (muslima) born in Brazil from Moroccan parents. When her mother dies, orphaned Jade is forced to move to Morocco and live with her uncle, Ali. In Morocco, she encounters a culture clash: unaccustomed to the conservative Islam practiced in Morocco, she struggles to adjust to the rules and punishments associated with religion in her new surroundings.

In Rio, meanwhile, the well-positioned Ferras family—identical twins Lucas and Diogo, their doctor and godfather Augusto, and their father Leonidas—travel to Morocco to visit Uncle Ali, a dear friend and colleague of Augusto. Upon their first meeting, young Jade performs a seductive belly dance for Lucas, under the watchful eye of Uncle Ali. Though it was a sin for Jade to love Lucas, a tumultuous love affair ensues. Jade is to be married by her family to Said—a wealthy and stern man, several years older than she—and Lucas is expected to return to Brazil. Between long separations, and bitter fights between Jade and Uncle Ali (with promises of 50 whips in the central market of Fez), Jade and Lucas steal enchanted nights together. Meanwhile, Lucas’ twin, Diogo, dies suddenly in a helicopter accident. Augusto, as the devoted godfather, is devastated.

In Brazil, using a cell of Lucas, he makes the first human clone in secrecy. He implants Deusa, an boisterous woman of African decent who is unable to conceive. Deusa gives birth to Léo, unknowing that he is a clone.

Clone takes place in the present: Jade and Said are married with a daughter, Kadijah; Lucas has wed Maysa, and they, too, have a daughter, Mel. As their paths to weave together, a complex story of events and connections unfolds. Lucas and Jade continue to meet; out of jealousy, Said and Maysa have a love affair; Mel experiments with marijuana and spirals into cocaine addiction; and the handsome Léo emerges as the mysteriously splitting image of a younger Diogo (or Lucas).

Created by renowned Brazilian writer Gloria Perez, Clone aired in Brazil from October 2001 to June 2002, with over 200 episodes and a nearly all-Brazilian cast. It was quickly syndicated, dubbed into myriad languages, and exported to over 60 countries, including the United States, Israel, Serbia, Portugal, Russia, Turkey, and Latin American neighbors, such as Peru, Argentina, Venezuela. The serial was among the most popular programs in Brazil, and the Spanish language-version El Clon (aired on Telemundo network), was the most-watched tejenovela in the US (Globopar, 2002, cited in Barbosa 2005). The Russian-language version, Klon, was shown on Channel One (Perviy Kanal) from February 2004 to May 2005 (and later, on Domestic [Domashniyi], from 2007-2008) in Russia and broadcast on accessible, basic cable in Kyrgyzstan. A host of Internet-based resources and fan clubs in Russian and other languages have emerged over the years as platforms for making sense of the program’s elements and for forging a transnational community of “clonoholics,” or avid Clone fans.

To appeal to international audiences, various alterations were made to the syndicated version. Specifically, the original soundtrack, consisting of a collection of Brazilian songs compiled to signify characters and settings, was replaced by an international mix of songs of the “world music” genre. In addition to a number of Brazilian works, the international soundtrack featured “Desert Rose,” a popular duet performed by Sting with Algerian rai singer Cheb Mami; “Nour El Ain,” a dance phenomenon in the Middle East and internationally (as “Habibi”) by Egyptian Amr Diab;
a soulful ballad by Italian Alessandro Safina; a track by renowned Algerian artist, Abderrahmane Abdelli; a worldwide hit by the Colombian-Lebanese Shakira; and a host of contemporary and not-so-contemporary British and American pop-stars, including Groove Armada, Michael Bolton, Dido, and Elton John. Many of these songs were played ceaselessly on the radio or downloaded onto cellular phones for constant listening during my research in Kyrgyzstan.

The program was not merely popular. In Brazil and elsewhere, the soundtrack, cast, and creators of the Clone, and the show itself, received acclaim and awards. Among these was the Cidadania Brasil de Exportação in the category of Prêmio Destaque, sponsored by the Arab-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, the Brazilian Institute for the Development of Citizenship, the Export Promotion Agency, and the Foreign Relations Ministry of Brazil. The award was granted for the “brilliant novela’s contribution in bringing together cultures and peoples and valuing Brazilian products in the international market” (Folha Online, 2002, cited in Barbosa 2005).

In addition to its fantastic storyline, glamorous cast, and beautiful production—from the Medina in Fez, Sahara to boisterous street settings in Rio—Clone has been notable for dealing with controversial issues. Perez, the program’s creator, was not new to social merchandising. She also wrote Explode Coração (Explosion of the Heart), a telenovela that exposed issues of missing children and child labor. For the story of Clone, Perez assembled three provocative issues: drug and alcohol abuse (for which Clone received recognition from the Rio de Janeiro Anti-Drugs Council and the Brazilian Alcohol and Drugs Association), human cloning, and “Muslim culture” (Jordan 2002). These themes were identified to pique potential audience members’ curiosity.4

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” (Grigoryan, 2004). Another reported that the “sci-fi soap opera” is sweeping Latin American, leaving it “wide-eyed and drop-jawed for all things Arab” (Kimi, 2004). Yet, despite its popularity and acclaim, the program received harsh criticism for its portrayal of Islam and of Arab societies. Contrary to the Brazilian tradition of reality-based novelas—rather than attempting to draw up realities of life in Morocco—Perez allowed her imagination to run free with Clone. She combined and embellished practices and customs from a range of contemporary and historical contexts regarding controversial themes such as polygamy, adultery, and women’s rights.

My point in describing this program in detail is to construct a more complete picture of the broad, transnational context against which Clone as a spectacle for consumption emerged in Kyrgyzstan. As elsewhere, Clone was immensely popular and widely accessible in Kyrgyzstan. Stores took the names of beloved characters, fashion accessories and dresses were labelled “Jade,” ring-tones of cellular phones broadcasted songs from the program’s soundtrack, and flimsy magazines, trinkets, and various Clone memorabilia cluttered kiosk windows. From the perspective of audiences in Kyrgyzstan, the serial introduced not only fabulously colorful and exotic life in Brazil, but also

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4 Perez has also commented that these themes were established long before September 11, 2001. However, following these events, some actors refused to participate in the novela, fearing retaliation for propagating anti-Muslim sentiments (Mattos and Castro, 2002, cited in Barboso, 2005).
“different” Muslims, with numerous scenes comparing, contrasting, and connecting these two cultures in a tragic tale.

**Contemporary Kyrgyzstan: Context and Vantage Points**

In Kyrgyzstan, debates over Muslimness are tied to a longer story of the shaping of ethno-national identity. These debates have resurfaced, or at least become more pronounced, since the collapse of the overarching Soviet Union in 1991. At the time of my fieldwork, approximately 80% of Kyrgyzstan’s population of five million referred to themselves as Sunni Muslims. In May 2005, there were an estimated 1,611 mosques in the country, and a small number of institutes for higher Islamic teaching.\(^5\) While the vast majority of the population claims to follow Islam, many inhabitants are engaged in a self-conscious struggle over understandings of their religion and Muslimness.

For most of the last century, religious practice was militantly controlled by the Soviet state and typically, religious convictions were not discussed in what is now independent Kyrgyzstan. Yet, despite stringent restrictions on religious identification and practice, particularly in the early Soviet period, Central Asians continued to identify as Muslims albeit in altered ways. Through parallel processes, by the late-Soviet period, Muslim identity came to be understood as an inherent part of national identity (McBrien, 2006:344). Various indicators of national identity, like some sanctioned holidays and customs, were also key elements that many in Central Asia saw as inherent in their Islamic identity (Shahrani, 1984: 35); many, such as rituals related to the family, home, and life cycles, were also markedly gendered. In effect, an unintended consequence of Soviet policy was that Muslim identity merged with the static, primordial notion of national identity. As McBrien writes, “tautologically, Kyrgyz and Uzbek national dress, dishes, and holidays became Muslim as well because the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks were Muslims” (2006: 345).

Many aspects of Muslim spiritual life, meanwhile, were severed from local definitions of Muslimness. In many cases, they were reinterpreted as “backward” or “extreme.” Certain elements, like (for women) clothing and veils which covered the entire head and body, or praying five times daily (*namaz*), were cast as overtly religious. Meanwhile, daily practices and familiar rituals that were integral to the lives of Muslim Central Asians were entwined with Soviet notions of culture. Through private belief in God and the observance of certain life cycle rituals, it thus became possible for many in Central Asia to maintain an affiliation with Islam and sense of Muslimness without engaging in many duties such as prayer or fasting (Saroyan 1997). In effect, “Muslim” became a cultural category.

By the late 1980s, religious restrictions were being incrementally relaxed. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the relatively weak state that coalesced in its wake

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\(^5\) Approximately 10% of the population were Russian Orthodox. There were also small populations of Jews, Buddhists, and Roman Catholics, Protestants, and others. Notably, there was no official estimate of the number of atheists. There is a correlation between ethnic and religious affiliation; ethnic Kyrgyz are primarily Muslims, while ethnic Russians usually belong to either the Russian Orthodox Church or one of the Protestant denominations. Official data from the National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2005) reflected the following ethnic breakdown of the population: Kyrgyz, 67.4%; Uzbeks, 14.2%; Russians, 10.3%; Dungans (ethnic Chinese Muslims), 1.1%; Uighurs (ethnic Turkic Muslims), 1%; and other ethnicities, 6.4%.
allowed for a relatively open civic arena and, concomitantly, a rush of ideas about and opportunities for religious practice in newly independent, ostensibly democratic Kyrgyzstan. Interpretations of Islam that stressed regular prayer, covered forms of dress, mosque attendance and which focused on written sources for establishing religious orthodoxy, began, slowly and unevenly, to expand, alongside the perpetuation of Soviet-infused ideas about culture and religiosity.

Now, use of the appellation “Muslim” is widespread and variously interpreted. While it is used throughout the country in both urban and rural areas, due to historical and contemporary factors, Islam as an organized religion is less visible and its followers are less devout in the North. This is particularly the case in the capital of Bishkek, which has a sizeable Russian-speaking population and historically, large Russian, Ukrainian, German, and other European communities. Bishkek, urban and diverse, is now awash with international companies and investors, foreign researchers and educational institutions, and aid workers, a growing and largely western-oriented local middle class, and an expanding population of domestic migrants and urban poor.

As in other post-socialist states, the process and effects of “transition” have been decidedly gendered (Kuehnast and Nechemias, 2004; Ashwin 2000; Gal and Kligman, 2000a and 2000b; Bridger and Pine 1997; Buckley 1997; Scott, Kaplan, and Keates, 1997; Einhorn, 1993; Funk and Mueller, 1993). Economic decline, the dismantling of state services, a changed public sector, and the ascent of civil society, for instance, have affected men and women both, though in decidedly different ways. Within Kyrgyzstan’s robust civic sector, diverse women leaders and women’s organizations are numerous and active on a wide range of issues (Simpson, 2009; Corcoran-Nantes, 2005; Kuehnast and Nechemias, 2004). Several groups, particularly in Bishkek, collaborate with various feminist, human rights, and other transnational advocacy networks and international agencies, and regularly encounter norms and engage in debates on a range of issues. By and large, Kyrgyzstan’s women’s activists, who represent diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, have couched their work in the secular language of democracy and human rights. They typically have not framed their arguments for equality as many Islamic feminists elsewhere have, by reflecting on the possibilities of reconciling religious law and gender equality. With a few notable exceptions—such as the outspoken Chairwoman for an active Muslim women’s NGO, Mutakalim—there are few leading female figures who openly associate themselves with Islam in the country.6

The socio-political landscape in contemporary Kyrgyzstan is such that engaging in a tempered discussion about the role of Islam has proven to be contentious. The government expressly forbids the teaching of religion (or atheism) in public schools, and by law, allows for freedom of religious practice. A draft law, “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations,” initiated by the government in 2001, raised eyebrows in its emphasis on concerns about terrorism and other illegal activities committed by groups “disguised as religious organizations.” The initial draft included

6 That said, the International Crisis Group (ICG) has reported on the growing, but relatively under-researched trend of women joining radical Islamic groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, particularly in southern areas of Kyrgyzstan. The report argues that women, especially those living in rural or conservative areas where traditional gender norms prevail, turn to [Hizb ut-Tahrir] to find meaning in their restricted social roles (ICG 2009).
compulsory registration of religious bodies, a prohibition against unregistered religious activity, and tight control over religious activity deemed “destructive”; it was subsequently revised under pressure from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (US Department of State 2005). Political leaders have also feared a rise of political Islam, whose followers are labeled violent “Wahhabis,” which might overwhelm their own grip on power, particularly in the country’s South. A wide-ranging “Extremism Law,” which leaves open the possibility of its being applied to peaceful religious activity and communities, was adopted in 2005 (Rotar, 2005). These Islamists, officials have repeatedly warned, seek to overthrow the secular government and establish an Islamic theocracy (US Department of State, 2005). Local human rights observers have disputed these claims, and alleged they have been made to discriminate against Muslims as well as the Uzbek minority and to legitimize repression of any group that poses a potential threat to the existing regime.

Meanwhile, growing number of authoritative political and community leaders—not to mention popular Imams—have brought Islam into public debate. Deliberations recur in Parliament on decriminalizing polygyny or limiting of women’s access to abortion, with public leaders making use of a mix of ethno-religious, economic, and social claims to justify their arguments. In various ways, ethno-religious arguments have been used to justify hierarchical and restrictive gender roles, including the marginalization of women from certain spheres of public life.

It was across this terrain that Clone, with its gendered, culturalizing images, was aired and consumed in 2005. 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 program’s portrayal of Muslims and less explicitly, its gendered images. Many interlocutors said the soap was so fascinating because it was the first popular television program 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 in contemporary contexts. 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 circles.

Active Viewers and Diverging Interpretations

In the following section, I discuss the responses of three women to Clone. These women, all ethnic Kyrgyzstan and residing in the capital city of Bishkek, offered very different views not only on the telenovela’s story, but also on the images and representations it offered, particularly related to gender and Islam. Exploring their interpretations and connecting them to broader contexts and flows creates an understanding of the multiple—and often contradictory or overlapping—factors and

7 For instance, though illegal, it is widely understood that polygyny is widely practiced in Kyrgyzstan. Serious debate on the issue reached a fever’s pitch in 2006-2007, when, Marat Kayipov, Minister of Justice of Kyrgyz Republic, declared in 2007 that polygamy is not a crime; it is tradition; and it can be a remedy for poverty and various social ills (Marat 2007; Karimov 2006; Panfilova 2006).
forces that shape interpretations of community, social identity, and modernities in local sites.

Ainura

Ainura moved to Bishkek from the medium-sized, sleepy city of Jalalabad fifteen years before we met in 2005. She was 21 and married when she relocated with her husband and young son; she had completed some years of university studies before giving birth and leaving school. Making use of family connections and regional ties, as is common practice in Kyrgyzstan, her husband procured a relatively high-paying, security-related job in the capital. Through this position, he regularly received “gifts” in the form of exotic fruit, alcohol, and money. The family built a large, modern house and regularly hosted guests; Ainura enjoyed the occasional opportunity to travel abroad—such as to Germany, Turkey, and Thailand. Over the course of ten years, she also gave birth to four more children—two daughters and two sons—and focused her energies on caring for her family. Regularly, she hosted (and put to work) young members from her extended family, who attended school in Bishkek or left home in search of opportunities in the capital city.

Having grown up during the Soviet period, Ainura and her husband were generally ambivalent about religion. After some years in Bishkek, however, Ainura’s husband began to drink. He often arrived home late, smelling of alcohol and cigarettes, Ainura explained to me, and could not control his temper well. He often yelled at her and their young children for no reason, and at times, he was physically abusive. Faced with limited tolerance in society at large for public discussions on “private” issues like violence against women, Ainura felt she could not talk to anyone about her problems at home.

Hoping to bring peace into her home, as she put it, Ainura began to take an interest in Islam. Like many married women in southern and rural areas, she wore scarves that covered hair. She changed her self-presentation: increasingly, she started to wear richly colored, loose and flowing dress and covering more and more of her body. She began to pray five times a day, and often filled the house with Islamic prayers, which she played on the stereo. At times, she visited a recently built, neighborhood mosque. Though her husband did not follow her religious transformation, she believed her newfound practice and faith did bring a new calm into her home in the bustling, rapidly changing capital city. Her children, meanwhile, often teased her, saying that she was becoming “old fashioned.”

Though not an avid fan, Ainura enjoyed Clone and she watched regularly with her daughters and the other young, female family members who helped around and stayed at the house. She found fault with some of the actions of the Moroccan characters. On one occasion, she contrasted various customs shown in the program 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. Though she hoped her daughters would stay in school and not marry before attending the university, and certainly not engage in pre-martial sex, she accepted that “things happen.” The important thing in a Muslim’s life, she said, is that one has faith and behaves decently to others.

Ainura also found that characters in the program grappled with problems to that she, too, faced, but which were taboo as a topic of public discussion. She selectively
chose aspects of *Clone* to explain her ideas about Islam. On a personal level, she related to Jade, her abusive husband, and the other domineering men in her life in Morocco. She believed that verbal and physical violence lodged by men against women and children was not “true” Islam, as the *telenovela* seemed to suggest, but it was a cultural phenomenon of the East. Her faith, in fact, had brought peace into her home, and contrasted with the challenges and demands associated with post-Soviet transition.

Reflected on *Clone*, Ainura mentioned that she could relate to the feeling of isolation and difference that the—admittedly exaggerated—Moroccans in Brazil encountered. She suggested that many in Bishkek, particularly among the capital’s growing middle and upper classes, associated her style of dress with being “other”—be it southern, rural, or devout. Seeing beautiful women veiling in fashionable ways confirmed her idea that veiling was not “backward” or a sign of age, social conservatism, or extremism, but absolutely modern, familiar, and global. Ainura’s interpretations and the connections she made to Morocco and images of Muslimness appeared to be a way of validating her faith and the daily choices she made for herself and her family.

*Aisulu*

Aisulu, Ainura’s younger daughter, attended an elite Russian-speaking school in central Bishkek. Twelve years old, she was born after the collapse of the Soviet Union and was growing up in era of relatively free media, and at a time when ideas about Kyrgyzness—and Muslimness—were divergent. Avid consumers of ideas, images, and other products from across the globe, Aisulu and her peers formulated their own ideas, which reflected their location and social positionings, as well as their hopes for their futures.

Like many of her classmates, Aisulu watched *Clone* religiously. In the early evenings, when the show began, Aisulu would prance into the kitchen and call for her mother, sister, and others in the house. We would all park ourselves in the dining nook, in front of the television, to watch the latest drama unfold. Aisulu found the images and story magical. She was not particularly interested in one of the most unique central topics of the soap opera: human cloning. In general, the bizarre details of the program’s story were mere accessories to her. She loved the music, dancing, and exotic scenery from Brazil to Morocco. She adored the stars of the show: in Morocco, the women were tragically beautiful and mysterious; in Brazil, they were lusty and wild. The men, she crooned, were handsome—tall, dark, and strong. Moreover, it was the lavishly presented, and highly romanticized, Muslim “other” that made the program so fascinating. In short, Aisulu was attracted to the imagery of the program, but was not (yet) prone to question many aspects of the story.

In Bishkek, few young women publicly veiled, though Aisulu had seen girls her age wearing modest head coverings when she visited relatives in the southern cities of Jalalabad and Osh and nearby villages. Many of her classmates had never traveled to southern regions for visits, but among them, it was widely accepted that girls from outside of Bishkek were “traditional,” and their life choices were limited by highly restrictive socio-cultural norms—about how to dress, behave in public, when and whom to marry, and so on. In contrast, girls in Bishkek enjoyed a much more “modern” and free way of life, not to mention more numerous outlets through which to access a wide range of popular cultural media and professional and educational opportunities. Growing up in
Bishkek, Aisulu often felt caught between life in the bustling capital and the more conservative world of the South, where her extended family remained.

As she watched *Clone*, Aisulu began to experiment with scarves and other head coverings. She draped them around her head, peering out mischievously; she dreamed of having a collection of scarves and clothes like Jade’s or Latifah’s. In a different twist, she tied them around her torso, performing her version of the belly dancing that featured so prominently in the program. Meanwhile, though her mother was increasingly devout, Aisulu saw religion as “boring,” “old fashioned,” and “not interesting.” She was, however, enticed by the idea that, in Morocco, provocative dancing or publicly kissing at wedding ceremonies appeared to be acceptable, “even for Muslims.” She reflected on the show: “I don’t know, but it seems that I could be Jade and I would be happy. Like, just because she couldn’t marry Lucas doesn’t mean she isn’t happy. I think she’s happy, and I think she’s creative and smart. That’s one thing I think the show says to us. About how we can live in hard situations and remain beautiful and smart.”

Though fascinated by aspects of Islam and eastern culture presented in *Clone*, Aisulu appeared to view them as just some of the many resources that shaped the lives of characters. While Aisulu found the program informative about life in Morocco as well as Brazil, she also drew some conclusions about ways to cope with societal norms and certain experiences. That is, undoubtedly enticed by *Clone*’s strategic use of platitudes and stereotypical images; she felt many aspects of the show were applicable to her life. She and her classmates eagerly consumed and related to one another through the *telenovela*; they could pick and choose among its rich resources as they asserted their own identities. These exchanges were enhanced by Internet chat rooms, cellular phone ring tones, flimsy publications, and other media or memorabilia that centered on program. Altogether, *Clone* inspired wide-ranging discussions that both challenged and reaffirmed perceptions circulating in Aisulu’s midst about womanhood, culture, and modernity.

**Nasipa**

Nasipa managed a prominent women’s NGO in Bishkek that worked primarily on awareness-raising and advocacy on issues like violence against women and women’s political participation. She was active internationally, in a range of forums that brought together women’s activists from across the globe. In recent years, she had connected with several transnational networks of women’s organizations and activists in South and East Asia, including the vibrant Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUM), an international solidarity network that provides information, support and a collective space for women “from South Africa to Uzbekistan, Senegal to Indonesia and Brazil to France” whose lives are “shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam,” and Asia-Pacific Women’s Watch (APWW), a network dedicated to advocating and monitoring the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and its review. She was familiar with women’s struggles in a range of contexts and under various regimes, be they post-socialist, post-colonial, or Islamic, and an increasingly harsh critique of the retrenchment of democratic reforms and the failures of “transition”

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8 For more on WLUM, visit the network’s official site: http://www.wluml.org/
9 For more on APWW, visit the network’s official site: http://apww.isiswomen.org/index.html
in Kyrgyzstan. In contemporary society, she made clear in our discussions, religion—and Islam in particular—is a “specific thing,” easily entangled in political struggles.

Nasipa situated her work to improve the status of women in contemporary society in terms of democracy and human rights; she did not side with leaders, including those of the active Mutkalim women’s NGO, who advocated in support of polygyny (to reverse rates of impoverishment) and state support for religious education (to expand schooling to more devout followers of Islam). At the same time, in her work with Muslim women activists from across the globe, she warned about images that “ghettoize” Muslim women and serve to subordinate gender issues to a homogenizing “Muslim” identity.

Nasipa, who often faced social criticism of her work as a “feminist” or as a donor-driven NGO member (see Simpson 2009; Bagic 2006; Keuhnast and Nechemias 2001) explained: “Just like we ‘NPOshniki’ [NGO members] are seen to be ‘westernized,’ and not authentic enough, in society here [in Kyrgyzstan], I see how [activist Muslim women elsewhere] constantly face the same stereotypes, have to answer the same questions, always have to work harder to be taken seriously even by sisters in the women’s rights movement.”

Nasipa did not approve of Clone, and found it to be an uncritical exercise in pandering to consumer impulses. She also harbored ambivalent views about the centrality of sexualized, veiled women in the program. She suggested that while women should have the right to dress as they please, in Kyrgyzstan, religion is a “specific thing,” easily entangled in on-going social and political struggles. Issues like veiling, she contended, are often about limiting forms of women’s behavior to what is deemed to be culturally “appropriate.” Clone sent particularly mixed messages to young women, encouraging them to flaunt their bodily sexuality, while romanticizing and popularizing certain aspects of Muslim culture—namely, female submissiveness, belly dancing, and donning beautiful head coverings. In effect, the show situated young women at the center of on-going socio-political debates, implicit or explicit, about the performance of gender and Islam in society.

Further, she voiced concerns about reducing women in Muslim concerns to “the Muslim woman.” She continued: “It’s like we—women in, as we say, ‘Muslim societies’—are all the same, and we all face one problem: Islam. But I think we have to be more serious. What about globalization. What about problems with the environment. What about the criminalization of political dissent. What about our politicians, by the way almost all men now. And on and on. We have to think about these things, how these things affect women. We don’t need more stories about Muslim women hiding under the parandja. It’s just not serious enough. It’s not good for the women’s movement.”

In her work, Nasipa often touted the mantra of “act locally, thinking globally.” To her, diversity among women was a strength of the movement; like many of her colleagues in the various networks in which she participated, exploring intersections of race/ethnicity, gender, and class was key to understanding the various factors that structure women’s status.

In short, while some commended Clone for bringing life “as a Muslim” to homes across the world, Nasipa found the program to be generating simplistic and effectively counter-productive images specifically of women. Yet, she tempered these concerns about the telenovela with an appreciation for range of perspectives it evoked. “My
“daughter,” she said, “never just watches Clone. She watches, and we discuss. I have to appreciate even such nonsense on television for getting people to think and talk.”

Conclusions

After 70 years of Soviet rule, there is now a sense in contemporary Kyrgyzstan and the wider Central Asian region that inhabitants “lost” their culture, and that as Muslims, they were stripped of their knowledge (and practice) of true Islam and proper Muslim behavior. Feelings of inferiority and loss were often revealed in discussions surrounding Clone, as were revelations about “real” Muslim life, customs, and virtues. In my research, viewers often deliberated on certain aspects of the program. Many viewers attributed educational value to the program and commented on how much they were learning from it; some expressed a degree of pride that this popular show, which featured intriguing Muslim women embroiled in complex affairs, was being aired and digested in contexts across the globe.

The largely inaccurate representation of a range of practices has certainly sparked criticism from those whom the program sought to portray. Nasipa voiced her concerns about the unsophisticated, erroneous, and even deleterious images of Muslims, and particularly of Muslim women. Another notable critic included the Moroccan Ambassador to Brazil and Paraguay, who considered the high profile of Clone’s representations to merit a response. In a bulletin board posted on his embassy’s website, he stated that Clone conveyed erroneous images of the origins and culture of the Arab-Muslim community, which audiences in Brazil and elsewhere have readily embraced. From belly dancing to styles of dress, audiences have been overcome by an offensive “Clonomania.” In denouncing the program, the Ambassador described four myths about Morocco portrayed by the Clone: polygamy is a pervasive, widely-accepted practice in Morocco; women do not study or work outside of the home; women are subordinate to men in public and in the family; and belly dancing is “the” national dance (or primary mode of communication between men and women). According to the program, he fumed, a woman’s bounded universe is limited to her husband and belly dancing; in fact, belly dancing exists solely in touristy places and nightclubs, as in Brazil (see Barbosa, 2005). Apparently, representations of Morocco – as an idealized “East” – spoke volumes about marketable ideas of “other” cultures.

Portrayals of Muslim life in Clone exemplify the kinds of persistent, ill-informed, gendered and culturalized stereotypes that abound in contemporary media, particularly regarding westernness and easternness. Yet, the uses of Clone’s contents by viewers in Kyrgyzstan reveals that global popular culture can provide tools for creative processes of alternative societal- and self-formation. Indeed, the wide range of meanings made from watching and discussing Clone suggest that it might be well understood as a program that, despite its platitudes and stereotypes, widened audience members’ exposure to alternative ways of living and interpreting Islam, as well as daily experiences in general. In effect, the program did offer a resource from which viewers drew when constructing their own ideas about Islam and Muslimness.

In trying to reconstruct social life after the collapse of socialism, people in Kyrgyzstan are engaged in forming alternative modernities and understandings of contemporary life that include “culture” and “religion,” and entail ideas about proper gender roles and other aspects of social identity. It is fascinating not only that the tools
and resources from which they draw are some of the “most archaic projections and images that secular modernity can provide” (McBrien, 2007a: 17), but also that viewers have engaged so avidly in pooling resources from a range of sources to reconstruct and make sense of their immediate settings and the world. This engagement is occurring at a time in post-Soviet Central Asian life when East/West and similar dichotomies are imbued with tensions, as the region’s states and societies grapple with the repercussions of having been thrust into global economic markets and shifting geo-political landscapes, with emboldening social and religious movements, and with post-September 11, 2001 posturing and regional military interventions. The consumable offerings of media like Clone make individual’s involvement in these processes more understandable.

Bibliography


