

# Muslims and the Media in 1998

## Covering and Uncovering Masks: Race and South African Media

### COVERING JOURNALISM

Journalism deals in information, symbol, image, story and audience. Journalists "cover" the world, helping to make it ours. The media is also crucial to generating a sense of national belonging. John Hartley asserts that "[c]itizenship and communal identity are not possible these days without journalism" (1996, 39). For Hartley, the media provide a "national, political fantasy" in which a sense of community is rehearsed (1996, 45). They do this by helping audiences to map reality, and thus who is inside and who is outside. The "deep structure" of news stories is therefore the precariousness or stability of the social order. Stories of disaster in the news are meant to create an investment in the renewal of order and the sense of community.

Conversely, because of this "us" and "them" formula, those who find themselves on the outside of this community provide a critical perspective on the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. The coverage of the conflict between People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) and gangs provides such an opportunity.

The reason for this is that the Pagad-gangsters story generated a problematic linking of Islam with violence, threat and exoticism. My intention in this review is not to retreat to a defensive denunciation of all media, nor to provide a public platform for PAGAD. Instead, it is to engage with the workings of the media in this story, and suggest how it is possible to contest racist discourses in the public sphere.

In a way these are very old questions to ask. Reviewing questions of race in the media, one is faced with the realization that there is an excruciating slowness and resistance to ideas about racism and representation. Stuart Hall makes the assertion that history consists of "processes with different timescales". He elaborates by saying that "[p]olitical time ... is short". In contrast, "[c]ultural time is ... glacial" (Frankenberg and Mani, 354). The ideas to which I refer in this review are familiar from the 1970s and before. Edward Said in his books *Orientalism*, *The Question of Palestine*, and *Culture and Imperialism* has dealt seminally with these questions. The "glacial" pace of cultural enquiry is evident in this matter. In his books Said examines the way in which coverage in the "West" of the "East" is shaped by a comprehensive set of myths. Said has argued that American news coverage of matters of the Middle East and Islam are characterised by "gross simplification" and "[a]ppalling racist caricatures" (lxii). He continues, "for decades in America there has been a cultural war against the Arabs and Islam" (*Culture and Imperialism*, 364). Said describes such reportage as marked by "highly exaggerated stereotyping" and "formulaic ideas about Islam" (1997, lxii). Finally, Said notes the irony that commentators "attack Islam precisely for the sentiments of free-floating hostility" they show in their reports.

Let me take these lessons of coverage of Islam elsewhere to the Pagad-gangster story. The reporting of this story from the time of the murder of Rashaad Staggie on 5 August 1996 continues to have implications for the representation of Muslims in South Africa today. This is evident in an international report on a local event. The SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) news report of the murder of 6 people on 29 April 1998 at a house in Woodstock, referred to a "gang-related" killing. CNN coverage of the same event referred to the involvement of a "militant Islamic group" (29 April 1998). The difference in the reports is instructive. For CNN to use the discourse of gangsterism in its report, would have signalled

inappropriate notions of race from discourses concerning gangsterism in the United States. In South Africa, *everyone knows* who gangsters are. Instead, for its report on this incident, CNN reached for another discourse, on "militant Islam", which offered a kind of clarity which "gang-related" could not.

It is this notion of *knowingness* and *clarity* which I would like to address in this review.

### MASKS, VEILS AND NAKED ASSUMPTIONS

The iconic figure in the representation of the Pagad story since 5 August 1996 has been the masked man. The local daily and weekly newspapers of the period 5 to 12 August show an astonishing consistency in the appearance of this figure in reports.

The association of Islam with masks and veils in public discourse is a matter of record. A search of the terms "veil" and "Islam" will yield an astonishing number of entries. Helen Watson in *Islam, Postmodernity and Globalization* (1996) notes that "the image of a veiled Muslim woman seems to be one of the most popular Western ways of representing the 'problems of Islam'" (153). Conversely, the Muslim man becomes the sign of the unrecoverable, unassimilable, irredeemable extreme. The masked Muslim man is the true Other - foreign, alien and exotic; moreover, fixed, unchanging, and lacking subjectivity.

As noted above, the iconic figure in the stories on Pagad has been the masked man. Part of Pagad's contradictory attempts to widen its support drew on Islamic iconography and discourse while simultaneously proclaiming its appeal beyond Muslims. In the midst of such contradictory politics, and with similar linkage familiar from international media, local news reports referred to "militant", "extremist", "fear", "death threats", "attack", "invaded", "death

penalty" and "vigilante group" in potent combination with images of Islam. The connection of Pagad to Islam, Islam to violence, and therefore to all Muslims was made.

The anonymous masked men of the movement captured camera lenses. The tactic by Pagad members of wearing scarves over their faces provided an unprecedented opportunity for stereotype to parade as explanation in the media. The figures recalled those films in which "black-masked Orientals ... get their just deserts" (Said, *Covering Islam*, xxv). Here was embodied the most famous and intractable of stereotypes, the inscrutability of the East. Inscrutable means unknowable, incomprehensible, indecipherable, mysterious, mystifying, inexplicable, past comprehension, beyond research, enigmatic, elusive, unreadable, unrevealed, secret, veiled, masked, impenetrable. The opposite of inscrutable is obvious, plain, clear, evident, penetrable, understandable, familiar, revealing, transparent, lucid.

This stereotypical unknowability is a false one, of course. The old colonial image of the inscrutable native casts the male European gaze as the penetrating one. The blankness of the masked figure is a blankness upon which cliché can be written more clearly, definitively, and inerasably.

It is here that the discourses of covering and masking come suggestively together. The journalistic use of coverage, denotes "reporting, description, analysis, publishing, broadcasting."

Further, to cover means to "deal with, include, involve, contain, embrace, encompass, take in, comprehend, report, tell of, write up. Yet "[to] cover" also connotes to "blanket", "sheathe", "envelop", "wrap". Beyond this, [to ...] "hide", conceal, obscure, secret, cloak, veil, screen, mask, disguise, camouflage. The masked Pagad figure came to serve discursive needs for both the media and the group.

What is repressed but evident to analysis is the material presence of the media and its discourses. Just two years before the murder of Staggie, Cape Town had marked 300th year of the presence of Muslim people. The Pagad stories marked a strange erasure. Said describes a similar effect in the racist reporting on Islam in American media. "The political dynamics of a complex historical experience were simply effaced in the service of an extraordinary amnesia" (lxii). Shoddy journalistic practice effectively rendered vulnerable the sense of community felt by many Muslims in the new South Africa. Through careless practice, a history and lived presence can be overwritten or blanked out.

Furthermore, the answer lies not in changing personnel, but changing discourses, and a critical practice of reading and writing. When newspapers and journalists claim they are reflecting or reproducing the important issues of the day, they absolve themselves of responsibility for ideology and discourse, as though their actions are innocent of such practice. In fact, in South Africa, we know that producing knowledge and representation is never innocent. It is an act laden with responsibility, just as it is our responsibility and right as active citizens to respond to these representations critically.

Furthermore, how do the structures of journalistic practice hinder the responsible reporting of violence and complex realities of a community's experiences? When the only way to advance within the newspaper industry is to appear on the front page, and when the only way to appear in the headlines is to ensure that one's portrayal sells many newspapers, then it does not matter what individuals enter the news rooms because the same practices will govern their work. The presence of black or Muslim editors and journalists will not make a critical difference to representation of Muslims if discourses and practices do not change.

The Pagad story has lessons for journalists, readers and analysts of media. Said gives a simple recipe for improving the scandalous current state of representation of Islam: "By using the skills of a good critical reader to untangle sense from nonsense, by asking the right questions and expecting pertinent answers, anyone can learn".

The fight must be not only to contest racism in existing practices, but to provide alternative visions. For every *The Siege*, there should be a *Destiny* (a film about Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd by the celebrated Egyptian director Yusuf Chahine). For every retreat into defensiveness, there should be an expansive, astute response to contemporary realities. Muslim audiences are already engaging with the media in multiple ways. Writers on the subject of Islam must respond to the increasing resources which people are making available through their activism and engagement.

The answer to the "glacial" problem of racist representations of Islam lies in people reading critically, writing back, insisting on complexity, providing alternative visions, inserting a history, claiming the right to ethical journalistic practices, establishing media with varied ownership - in participating in and taking ownership of the public sphere.

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Gabeba Baderoon  
English Department, UCT