Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theatre

Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theatre
Ed. by Kari n van Nieuwkerk A Boo k Review By Marvin Carlson
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The vast majority of books currently on the market concerning the Arab world focus upon geopolitical, historical, or religious issues. Very few engage popular culture in the Arab world, even though this is perhaps the best place to get some idea of what concerns and world views are being circulated among the generation involved with developing what has been called a “post-Islamist” cultural sphere. Thus this wide-ranging, detailed and thoughtful collection of essays on current artistic developments in the Muslim world is particularly welcome and important. It draws upon recent work not only in that world but also in the increasingly important Muslim diasporic communities, and thus offers examples not only from Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Iran, but also from Germany, France, and the United States.

The collection is drawn from a workshop on Islam and the Performing Arts in Western Europe and the Middle East held in Amsterdam in 2008 and includes scholars form a wide variety of cultural fields, including Islamic Studies, ethnomusicology, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and political science. What was revealed was, not surprisingly, that the general cultural stereotype of Islam as a culturally conservative force, opposed to the arts and dedicated to the suppression of them, is far too simplistic. On the contrary, the role of the arts is central to discussions of the practice of Islam in the twenty-first century, and although these discussions vary widely in content and emphasis from community to community, most assume that the arts have a significant role to play in the Islamic cultural sphere.

Turkey is the country best represented in this anthology. It is the subject of three of the anthology’s nine essays, and this is perhaps not surprising, given that Turkey is uniquely situated on the dividing line between East and West, between Europe and the Islamic world. Furthermore, its historic position as a nation with deep Islamic roots seeking to open itself to Western ideas creates a particularly interesting crucible for the examination of the current Islamic utilization of Western popular cultural material.

In the opening essay, “Hardcore Muslims,” ethnomusicologist Thomas Solomon studies recent examples of Turkish rap music from both the diaspora and the homeland, demonstrating that although the experiences and subjectivities of individual rappers are always reflected in their creations, many leading rap artists, both in the diaspora and subsequently in Turkey itself, have found this genre particularly useful in the presentation of oppositional identities. While this situation is obviously central to the diasporic situation, when returned to Turkey, it has offered a means of expressing Islamic concerns within

an official secular society.

Peter Hecker, who has published several articles on heavy metal in the Middle East, discusses the current state of this scene in Istanbul in his "Contesting Islamic Concepts of Morality." On the whole, he sees this part of the Turkish musical world as forced into a more oppositional role with the recent rise to power of the conservative Muslim Justice and Development Policy. Recent public discourse in Turkey has accused heavy metal of political, social, religious and sexual subversion, which has placed this genre in an uncomfortable political position, but also one that is providing an important focus for resistance to Islamic revivalism.

Ahu Yi?it, a Ph.D. student in Turkey, looks at a major non-musical aspect of popular culture, the popular fantasy serials on Turkish television. In Turkey, just as in the West, TV series that offer a world of re-enchantment that destabilizes scientific materialism to some extent, are quite popular—the Turkish equivalent of *the X-files* or *Buffy the Vampire-Slayer*. Although Islam presents itself as a rationalist faith, Islamic television, like secular channels, recognize the commercial attraction of these stories of imagination and so both religious and secular programming find a common ground in commodification.

Two essays in the volume are devoted entirely to diasporic performance. The first is ethnomusicologist Farzaneh Hemmasi's "Iranian Popular Music in Los Angeles," which comes to conclusions similar to those of Solomon, asserting that diasporic popular music is highly individualistic; much of it is concerned with questions of identity. Because Iran is a more controlled society than Turkey, a more sharp tension exists between such expression in the diaspora and diasporic expression when it returns to Iran. In both locations, however, music is playing an important role in the evolution of national identity. The second diasporic essay, by ethnomusicologist Michael Frishkopf, "Ritual as Strategic Action," finds that music plays a far less important role in Canada. This essay uses demographic and social analysis to explain why in Canada, unlike in France or Germany, the Muslim community has been relatively limited in its acceptance of aesthetic and, especially, musical spirituality. His conclusions shed important light upon the differences in the cultural activities of diasporic communities in different locations.

Independent scholar Zeinab Stellar focuses upon the Iranian homeland in her "From 'Evil-Inciting' Dance to 'Chaste 'Rhythmic Movements," which traces the genealogy of modern Islamic dance-theatre in that country. She explores how the potentially dissident performing body has been the subject of official disciplinary measures to stress its purity and its expression of the ideals of Islam and of the modern Iranian state.

Both of the two other essays in the collection deal with this growing interest in artistic expression as a means of spiritual and social elevation in the Islamic world. In "Pious Entertainment," Joseph Alagha, a leading scholar on Hezbullah, discusses the often neglected cultural dimensions of Hezbullah, which do not oppose music, television and theatre. On the contrary, such cultural expressions are encouraged as potentially important sources of mobilization in the opposition to aggression and occupation, and in the promotion of peace and justice. Less tolerance, however, is shown to works that do not have such clearly utilitarian aims.

Similar conclusions are drawn by anthropologist Karin van Neiuwkerek, editor of the volume, in her essay on "Art with a Mission" in contemporary Egypt. She notes the rise, as part of the so-called post-Islamic movement of an interest in socially engaged art, variously known as *fann al-nadif* (clean art), *fann*

al-madabi (pious art) and *fann al-badil* (uplifting art). As all these terms suggest, these forms seek expressions grounded in religious ethics, but without specifically promoting Islam, thus creating popular art expressions in film, music, and soap operas, with a broader social appeal.

Finally, anthropologist Jonathan Shannon considers the current national (in Syria) and international status of Sufi rituals, which, as intimately involved with dance and music and also as one of the most "Orientalized" Islamic performative acts in the West, occupy a special role in any discussion of Islam and the arts. Shannon raises important questions not directly addressed by any of the other essays about modern globalization and marketing, using Sufi observances, the World Music phenomenon and the metaphor of the "fast food" industry to raise difficult and troubling questions about authenticity, heritage and the new more gentle face of "uplifting" Islamic art.

Although circling around a few central concerns, the essays in this strong collection cover an impressive geographical range and touch upon an impressive number of major modern cultural concerns, not only the relationship between Islam and the arts, or Islam and modern secularism, but also closely related concerns of globalization, cultural diaspora, global capitalism, marketing, and popular culture. It is a collection that anyone interested in any of these major areas of current interest will gain by reading.

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