

What Goes on in the Mosque? Or: A Tale of Two-Tongued Imams

Kirstine Sinclair

News

In March, the Danish TV Channel TV2 broadcast a series of three documentaries on life in and around a number of Danish mosques. The programme series was entitled “The Mosques behind the Veil” and the bulk of the material from the mosques – including interviews with leading Imams – was recorded using hidden cameras. The documentaries sparked a heated debate as the featured Imams were demonstrating questionable morals in encouraging fraud and physical abuse of women and children.

Summary

In March 2016, the Danish TV Channel TV2 broadcast a series of documentaries based on recorded conversations and meetings with representatives of Danish mosques. The TV Channel had planted two moles, “Fatma” and “Mohammed”, and instructed them to act as a married couple facing different difficulties related to their marriage and conceiving. On this basis, they were sent to ask advice from Imams from different mosques throughout Denmark. The answers and suggested solutions they got raise a number of new questions regarding religious subcultures, minority identity formation and the success of integration efforts in the country. Here, I take a closer look at what the documentaries revealed and the nature of the debates which followed.

Key Words

Mosques, Imams, integration, TV2, documentary

About the Author

Kirstine Sinclair, PhD, Associate Professor at the Centre for Contemporary Middle East Studies, SDU.

Analysis:

The Documentaries: Frame, Method and Purpose

The investigation of Danish mosques took its point of departure in critique posed by young Muslims fleeing repressive families as well as Muslims voicing critique of such repressive environments informed by conservative religion. The aim was to give a “behind the scenes” impression of how influential individuals in these environments think and thereby understand the social and religious control young Muslims in Denmark are subjected to within patriarchal family and mosque circles. This impression, then, should lead to an understanding of what young Muslims in Denmark are struggling with when trying to accommodate and become fully integrated Danish citizens – and thus a wider discussion of the cluster of challenges related to integration in Denmark today and in the future.¹

The series of three documentaries was entitled: “The Mosques Behind the Veil” and in it, the two moles “Fatma” and “Mohammed” visited eight mosques in Aarhus, Copenhagen and Odense where they spoke to a number of Imams and other representatives regarding scripted challenges they were facing after their recent move to Denmark in general and related to their marriage in particular. According to TV2 and Programme Director Thomas Breinholt, all questions and topics were considered relevant for integration: Women’s role in the family and on the labour market, the upbringing of children and securing ties with the surrounding society.²

The controversial statements filmed on hidden camera concerned, in particular, the relationship and hierarchy between husband and wife (is a wife obliged to intimacy with her husband regardless of the circumstances if the husband so demands? Can a wife demand divorce if she is being beaten by her husband?), between parents and children (Is physical punishment of disobedient children acceptable? Is neglecting to pray equal to such disobedience?) and financial fraud (an Imam from Odense explains to “Fatma” and Mohammed” what they need to do in order to get free housing from the local council).

“The mosques behind the veil” series was followed by a fourth programme on the associations behind the mosques. The purpose of this programme was to follow the money trail behind the mosques as most of the involved mosques are registered associations (*Foreninger* in Danish), meaning they receive public funding. The questions asked in this programme were: Are the Danish authorities aware of the mosques’ activities and

¹ Please find the full description on TV2’s homepage:

<http://omtv2.tv2.dk/nyhedsartikler/nyhedsvisning/moskeerne-bag-sloeret/> (Last accessed 18th April 2016).

² Please find the full description on TV2’s homepage:

<http://omtv2.tv2.dk/nyhedsartikler/nyhedsvisning/moskeerne-bag-sloeret/> (Last accessed 18th April 2016).

values present in and around the mosques? Do they know what they are supporting? Based on the revelations in the first three programmes, the fourth programme pointed to the problematic situation of the Danish state funding practices and attitudes not conducive to the public good.

The programmes were broadcast during a period of two weeks in March 2016 (1, 3, 8 and 10 March) and in between, the sister channel TV2 News hosted a four-hour debate on 5 March. Also, every programme was advertised a couple of days in advance and the stories were kept alive on TV2's homepage during the broadcast period. Thus, the series constituted a massive part of the total range of programmes on TV2's channels, and the stories from the programmes were debated heavily in other national and local news outlets.

TV2 had been preparing the programme series since late 2014, and the idea is likely to stem from the British Channel 4's series "Dispatches" in which similar methods (moles and hidden cameras) were used to produce "Undercover Mosque" which aired in 2007. In 2014, Channel 4 "Dispatches" followed up with a programme on faith schools ("Faith Schools uncovered: No Clapping in Class"). Following the template from "Dispatches", TV2's documentaries also made use of a number of experts on Islam, Quran and Islamic Law from Danish universities as well as other individuals with research background and opinions about the connection between Islamic scripture and the behaviour and values of Muslims.³

The methods used for collecting information, moles and hidden cameras, reveal an underlying assumption: Journalists will not get honest answers if they knock on the door of a mosque and pose their questions to individuals there. Danish Imams say one thing when asked directly about their support for Danish legislation and values and something completely different when asked about concrete practice in families and among peers. And taking the documentary at face value this proved true. At least partly.

Debating the Documentaries

Danish politicians responded to the documentary as could be expected. Danish People's Party wanted to close all involved mosques the morning after the first programme was shown and members of parliament and city councils from all parties except The Red-

³ Please find the full description on TV2's homepage: <http://omtv2.tv2.dk/nyhedsartikler/nyhedsvisioning/moskeerne-bag-sloeret/> (Last accessed 18th April 2016).

Green Alliance and The Alternative (in Danish: *Enhedslisten* and *Alternativet*) suggested different degrees of control of individuals, practices and thoughts.

Amongst academics in the country, at least two positions were aired: One group was happy to see a public debate on such problematic issues as encouragement to fraud and outdated views on gender roles and made the claim that it is customary for academia to ignore problematic issues for the sake of defending a misunderstood multi-cultural practice. All the while, representatives from the other group insisted on adding nuances to the debate and problematizing the methods used in the documentary.

Belonging to the second group was anthropologist Christian Suhr who conducted field work for his Ph.D. for over a year at one of the mosques central to the documentaries, the Grimhøjvej Mosque (*Grimhøjvejsmokeén* in Danish). Suhr wrote a feature article in the daily *Politiken* explaining how nothing is gained from thinking about the Imams asking women to obey their husbands as the enemy.⁴ He knew for a fact that the very same Imam had talked several youngsters out of traveling to Syria to fight. So, what constitutes a bad Imam and a problematic religious environment?

Amongst journalists from *Politiken*, the Danish daily most related to multiculturalist and political correct views, the debate was also present. First, Jakob Sheikh criticized TV2 for the use of hidden cameras in situations where he deemed this method unnecessary⁵, then, a few days later, his colleague Morten Skjoldager wrote a review of the documentaries and emphasised that it was not the methodology applied but the content that was controversial.⁶

Skjoldager claimed that the views and attitudes towards Denmark surfacing in the documentaries justified the use of moles and hidden cameras as they illuminated what individuals in eight mosques throughout the country think and preach and thereby how they influence their congregations. Skjoldager, however, also raised the very important question: Why these eight mosques? This question is central because at least two of the eight mosques – The *Grimhøjvej* Mosque and The Islamic Congregation on *Dortheavej* in Copenhagen (*Islamisk Trossamfund* in Danish) – were notorious for hosting controversial Imams and speakers and had been receiving attention from politicians and the wider public long before TV2's programme series. In other words: There was reason to

⁴ Suhr, Christian: "Vi vil jo ikke gøre Satan glad" in *Politiken*, 10 March 2016 (Last accessed 18th April 2016).

⁵ Sheikh, Jakob: "Moskeer er sjældent arnesteder for radikaliserer" in *Politiken* 2 March 2016 (Last accessed 18 April 2016).

⁶ Skjoldager, Morten: "Anmeldelse: Vigtigt indblik i parallelsamfundets moskeer" in *Politiken*, 9 March 2016 (Last accessed 18th April 2016).

believe that the eight mosques had been singled out not because they are representative of Danish mosques or Muslims, but rather because TV2 expected to find views and practices worth uncovering.

Concerning TV2's motivation

TV2 introduced their documentary series as an expression of concern for future integration of Muslims in Denmark, i.e. politically and socially motivated. However, on the channel's homepage, they are preoccupied with registered number of viewers: Apparently, the first of the four programmes was watched by a third of all viewers (664,000 individuals) who marked the programme 4,1 on a 5 point scale. Furthermore, it is noted on the homepage, the programme resulted in high numbers of chat entries and posts on social media.⁷

In their critique of the documentaries, Suhr and Skjoldager both point to a somewhat sensationalist approach to the mosques and Imams by TV2. Suhr claims that the programmes show only half the truth of what is going on in the mosques, and Skjoldager asks: Why single out these particular mosques?

TV2's own introduction to the programme series, reveals a certain perception of religion. It says: "Fatma gains access to a Somali milieu where children and youngsters are taught at Quranic schools for hours every weekend" (author's translation).⁸ In a country with strong educational ambitions for future generations, the only problem with the mentioned schools is that they are religious. Hence, it could be argued that the premise for the documentaries is that religion is suspicious from the outset – before any Imam has said anything about wives being obliged to sleep with their husbands despite the character of their relationship and/or any lack of desire to do so.

Double Faces and Two-Tongued and How Many Mosques?

It would seem that the methods used by TV2 aiming to uncover the truth about what is going on in Danish mosques is part of the story itself. TV2 was not interested in knocking on the door of the country's mosques asking questions of leading Imams about their

⁷ Please find the full description on TV2's homepage:

<http://omtv2.tv2.dk/nyhedsartikler/nyhedsvisning/moskeerne-bag-sloeret/> (Last accessed 18th April 2016).

⁸ Please find the full description on TV2's homepage:

<http://omtv2.tv2.dk/nyhedsartikler/nyhedsvisning/moskeerne-bag-sloeret/> (Last accessed 18th April 2016).

views on marriage, gender equality and fraud. Rather, they were interested in revealing double standards and problematic views expressed behind closed doors. And they did. Imams from eight mosques in Aarhus, Odense and Copenhagen gave evidence to the scepticism concerning the potential for success of integrating future generations of Muslims in Denmark.

What the documentaries did not emphasise is that the vast majority of Muslims in the country – and everywhere else, really – hardly ever consult the local Imam when advice is needed on the upbringing of children or decisions regarding divorce are made. And only a small minority of those who do so, go to one of the eight mosques featured in the series. The views in the series are real, but they are not representative. TV2 may have revealed that a small number of Imams in Denmark are two-tongued, but the majority of Muslims in the world speak with only one.