Introduction

This volume grows out of an awareness of the dearth of literature about Muslim fashion practices and a more general lack of literature that engages with the relationship between religion and fashion. Underlying this absence seems to be the unspoken assumption that by being religious a person is by definition unconcerned with fashion or that by following fashion a person cannot really be truly religious. It is as if the two concepts operate in inverse proportion to one another. This problem is compounded further by the fact that where Muslims are concerned, the religious aspect of their identity is often assumed to be all-encompassing. It follows that the styles of dress worn by Muslim women are thought to be defined, if not dictated, by religious prescriptions and are therefore unrelated to fashion and incompatible with it. Such a view is of course contradicted by the rich diversity of styles favored by Muslim women, some of whom place considerable importance on religion, others of whom do not. Wherever they are located in the world, Muslim women are engaged with fashion, whether through challenging the idea of fashion, adopting and adapting local...
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and global fashions or by participating in the development of new fashion trends.

It is important to distinguish between what Muslims wear and what has come to be defined in the literature and the market place as “Islamic fashion.” What counts as Islamic or not is a matter of considerable debate amongst Muslims. Whilst many consider modesty an important Islamic virtue, how this translates into particular styles of dress is highly variable. Some Muslims do not consider that their religiosity is linked to dress. They may be religiously committed but do not feel the need to express this outwardly through their choice of clothing. Neither do they consider the wearing of covered dress a means to developing a more modest self. Others feel that the Koran urges women to wear covered dress. Of these, some claim it is a requirement for women to cover their bodies completely, with the exception of the hands or feet; others feel that it is primarily the head and hair that require covering whilst a small minority considers face covering a religious requirement. The purpose of this volume is not to define what is or is not “Islamic” but to give a taste of the variety of sartorial practices taking shape amongst Muslims in different parts of the world with a view to understanding how Muslims classify their own clothing preferences.

Geographies of Circulation

Different sartorial practices and religious interpretations can, to some extent, be geographically plotted. Muslim women in Iran, Saudi Arabia or urban Yemen are on the whole more covered and wear darker clothing than women in Turkey or Britain. However, such geographies are far from clear-cut. Dress is part of a complex reconfiguration process taking place in different spaces around the world as both clothing forms and the understandings of what they mean are in global circulation. A focus on Muslim clothing practices is not simply about slotting Muslims into the global fashion scene, but also, more importantly about exploring how such a focus actually transforms our perception of the fashion world. It offers a different topography, it points to different centers, and it follows different circuits to those conventionally associated with the concept of global fashion.

All of the contributions in this volume point to the futility of defining dress in terms of regional “origins” or fixed meanings. For example, whilst clearly influenced by fashion trends in London, Paris, and Milan, contemporary fashion designers based in Egypt and Iran also look to India, Lebanon, and Morocco for aesthetic inspiration (see Abaza, Balasescu), whilst designers based in Mali look to francophone West Africa, Dakar and Abidjan (Schulz). Meanwhile Muslims living in London create cosmopolitan wardrobes made possible by the global circulation of different types of dress as well as by their access to travel
and knowledge of Muslim countries (Tarlo). The same item of dress, however, may have quite divergent resonance and meanings in different contexts. Some women in south India, Yemen, Indonesia, and Mali look to Saudi Arabia for sartorial inspiration, leading to the spread and popularity of the *abaya* (an all-enveloping black cloak) in different locations. Whereas in Saudi Arabia the *abaya* can be considered a form of state-enforced national dress, in Yemen and south India it takes on different connotations and is perceived by many Muslim women as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and fashionable alternative to local varieties of covered dress (see Moors, Osella and Osella). In contexts where the introduction of the *abaya* is linked to labor migration, it may indicate a claim to a higher status and standard of living. However, when introduced by students of religion, the same garment may acquire more conservative or radical religious and political connotations.

One theme that emerges throughout this volume is the tension between the forces of homogenization on the one hand, and the multiple sources of diversification on the other.

A prime example of the former can be found in the creation and marketing of the Muslim doll, known in the popular media as “Islamic Barbie” owing to her striking resemblance to the ubiquitous American doll. “Islamic Barbie” comes with a fixed set of notions about how Muslim women should look, dress, and behave. She thereby embodies and reinforces a visual stereotype of the Muslim woman as covered out of doors and fashionable indoors, and is intended to educate young Muslim girls living in the West to abide by this practice and accept it as the norm (Yaqin). Similarly, conservative Islamist booklets, often produced in Saudi Arabia but disseminated in Yemen and elsewhere, attempt to curb varieties of dress by arguing for the strictest forms of coverings (Moors). However, such attempts are unable to counter the forces of fashion, as we have seen from the fact that even the *abaya* may become a fashion statement.

Diversification is ever present and made manifest in a variety of ways. It may be based on regional variations that are played out locally through different styles of dress or modes of wearing particular garments. For example, in Mali, Indonesia, and India there are regionally specific forms of Muslim dress that have little in common with each other. Religious interpretations are also highly variable as are biographical experiences (Tarlo). Added to these, political circumstances and market forces shape dress practices in particular ways. In Turkey, for example, a well-developed Islamic consumer segment has emerged as fashion companies produce, target, and respond to a growing body of women who wish to be explicitly identified as Muslim whilst dressing fashionably (Sandikçi and Ger). In Iran, where Islamic dress is obligatory in the public space, we see the reverse process as designers negotiate their way around state prescriptions on dress (Balasescu).
The tension between homogenization and diversification is also evident in clothing terminology. While on the one hand different terms may be used for clothing that looks very similar, on the other hand, the same terms may be used for very different items of dress. For example, the headscarf has become known in the British and American context by the term *hijab*, whereas in Indonesia it is called *jilbab*. In other contexts such as Europe and the Middle East, *jilbab* refers to a full-length coat, while in Yemen the term *balto* is used for such a garment. Whilst *chador* or *chadar* refers to an all-enveloping garment in Iran or Pakistan, in Indonesia it refers to a style of dress that includes a face-veil. Similarly, the term *burqa* refers to a modern-style face-veil in Yemen, whilst in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India some use it to refer to an all-in-one face and body cover, which in the Afghan case leaves a mesh for the eyes. Whereas the term *shalwar kameez* is used for a long tunic and loose pants in Pakistan and north India, in south India this is called *churidar*, which in north Indian parlance refers to tight drawstring trousers. Only the terms *jilbab* (cloak) and *khimar* (headcover) appear in the Koran to refer directly to women’s dress. It is only in contemporary Arabic that the term *hijab* came to be used to refer to covered dress. While the increasing currency of Arabic words in different locations suggests some measure of homogenization, the opposite is implied in the divergent uses to which such words are put. What is clear is that new geographies of vocabulary are emerging in the process.

**Religious and Other Belongings**

One theme that emerges strongly is the complexity of ways that even the most religiously defined forms of dress are related to a sense of national, regional, and ethnic belonging. These different identity strands are sometimes in tension, making dress a contested issue both in terms of identity politics and in terms of conflicting ideas of morality. Anxieties about morality and authenticity emerge in a number of settings demonstrating the important role dress plays as a visual intervention and medium of debate in the public sphere. This is the case both in locations where Muslims form the majority and where they are in a minority position. The idea that dress is a visible indicator of the piety and moral worth of the wearer is constantly undermined by the suggestion that the wearing of particular forms of covered dress is insufficient if done with the wrong intent and if the wearer cannot live up to the moral expectations linked to particular garments.

In some cases, local registers of belonging have been called into question by the spread of Western styles of dress beyond Europe and America during the twentieth century. In countries such as Turkey and Iran concerted state efforts were made in the 1920s to impose Western styles on the local populations. As part of an effort to de-Islamize the
public sphere in the name of modernization, women in Turkey were discouraged from wearing Islamic styles, whilst in Iran the wearing of the chador outdoors was forbidden between 1936 and 1941. By contrast, in Mali, Western dress never gained much currency, and in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, Western styles of outdoor dress are today largely absent.

Alongside “Western” and “Islamic” styles of dress, a wide range of forms of “national” and “ethnic” fashions has emerged. In New Order Indonesia courtly traditional styles of dress have been reinvented and presented as authentically Indonesian (Jones), whereas in Egypt and Iran older rural styles of dress have been adapted to modern times, and have become popular amongst the upper-class avant-garde, triggered in part by a Western taste for such dress (Abaza, Balasescu). In Iran, such styles became popular partly as a way of subverting more austere forms of state-imposed Islamic dress, while to members of the Iranian diaspora they evoke ties with the homeland. In Mali, attempts to invent “an authentic African dress,” inspired by rural fabrics, have been strongly supported by the state. Such fashions have gained great popularity amongst the transnational West African and African-American diasporas, but not with the local urban middle classes who consider them too rural (Schulz).

One of the most striking sartorial changes visible in many parts of the world is the increased emergence of styles of dress defined by their wearers as “Islamic.” In Muslim majority countries, such as Egypt and Turkey, the emergence of Islamic dress was a response to the secularization of society and, in some cases, played a significant role in the cultural politics of Islamist movements. Elsewhere, such as in Mali and Indonesia, those wearing Islamic dress set themselves apart from Muslim women who wear local styles, which the former consider insufficiently Islamic. In all of the above examples, it was at first austere forms of Islamic dress that emerged, displaying a strong anti-fashion stance. However, it did not take long for such styles to be elaborated and reworked into what has become known in the literature and market as “Islamic fashion.” Such styles often merged global trends with local or national flavors.

The meanings attached to wearing “Islamic fashion” vary considerably. In Turkey, where women who wear headscarves are still denied access to state institutions, higher education and state employment, a wide variety of Islamic fashionable outerwear has developed and is popular amongst religiously oriented “Islamist” women (Sandikci and Ger). By contrast, in post-Revolution Iran, where all women are obliged to wear Islamic dress that covers everything except for the face and hands, women express their opposition to state-imposed regulations by wearing outerwear that reveals as much of the body and hair as possible. Some seek inspiration in what they define as pre-Islamic dress. In response to requests from Iranian female officials, the state has also
started to discuss the development of forms of Islamic dress that are simultaneously Islamic, Iranian, and fashionable.

In environments where Muslims are in a minority, the situation is equally varied. In Britain, for example, there has been an upsurge of Islamic fashion as religiously oriented identity-conscious Muslims seek to position themselves both in relation to the majority culture and in relation to their cultures of origin. The result is the emergence of a variety of hybrid styles that blend concerns with religion, modesty, politics, and identity with a creative engagement with both Western and Eastern fashions (Tarlo). In India, where Muslims also form a minority, recent Islamic fashion trends have emerged in a context where national and even regional dress are defined as Hindu. In south India, Muslims distinguish themselves from Hindus through the amount of time and money they devote to fashion as well as through their choices of styles and fabrics and their modes of wearing particular garments (Osella and Osella). Both Hindus and Muslims are greatly preoccupied with the issue of female modesty but define the requirements of modesty in different ways.

Women’s sartorial practices are also influenced by changing political circumstances and events, sometimes in unpredictable ways. The attacks of 9/11 in New York, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, anti-Muslim violence in India, and negative representations of Muslims in the Western media have all contributed to shifts in expressions of identity and belonging. This may mean removing visible signs of Muslim identity as a temporary and possibly permanent measure. In other cases, it has triggered the adoption of such signs as an act of Muslim solidarity and defiance (Tarlo). Responses to events may be more or less subtle. For example, young “Islamist” women in Turkey have been choosing to wear more elegant, colorful, “pleasant-looking” forms of covered dress in response to the implementation of the ban on headscarves and tensions after 9/11 (Sandikci and Ger).

**Marketing, Consumption, and Agency**

A comparatively recent phenomenon is the emergence and growth of an Islamic consumer sector, which explicitly forges links between religiosity and fashion, encouraging Muslims to be both covered and fashionable, modest and beautiful. This sector is providing a new range of consumer products to satisfy the increasing range of Islamically defined tastes and demands. This involves both a diversification of Islamic products whether these are clothes, dolls, toothpaste or “Islamic chocolate” as well as the diversification of the media through which they are propagated, whether this is advertising, magazines, Internet, children’s books, religious booklets or fashion shows.
Increasingly, older austere and restrained forms of marketing are being replaced by more glamorous techniques. This dynamic is particularly apparent in Turkey where capitalism, consumerism, and politics converge in the development of a burgeoning Islamic fashion scene replete with fashion shows, glossy advertising, and specialist boutiques (Sandikci and Ger). More recently, Islamic fashion shows have also drawn widespread publicity in Indonesia and Iran. The latter has recently seen the publication of its first glossy women’s magazine to come out since the Islamic revolution (Balasescu). Such globally savvy marketing strategies often coexist with more restrained forms such as simple black-and-white advertisements in which women’s faces are blanked out.

In some cases it is covered women who are demanding better representation in the national media. In Indonesia, for example, young headscarf-wearing readers of the magazine Femina expressed resentment at the absence of images of covered women in the magazine. Fashion editors were obliged to respond to readers’ demands for representation by producing more Islamic fashion sequences and responding to requests for advice about how to look fashionable, modest, and Islamic. Similarly headscarf-wearing students attending femininity classes demand recognition and advice from their tutors, most of whom belong to a generation for which such forms of Islamic covering were rare (Jones).

Such examples challenge commonly held notions about Muslim women’s supposed lack of agency. It has often been assumed that women who cover do so because of pressure from men in their families. This may sometimes be the case. However, many women consciously adopt forms of dress that are more conspicuously Islamic than their parents or husbands either expect or desire. In Indonesia, it used to be mainly older women who had completed the haj who wore headscarves. Similarly in the British context the wearing of tight headscarves that cover the head, hair, and neck was relatively uncommon amongst Muslims of South Asian origin who migrated to Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these first- and second-generation migrants are disconcerted, puzzled, and at times actively oppose their daughters’ and granddaughters’ decisions to adopt headscarves and other forms of Islamic attire. By wearing such forms of dress, young people set themselves apart from the values and practices of the older generation. These are often perceived as being more “cultural” and “traditional” than “religious” and therefore “less Islamic.”

A second common assumption is that women’s dress is dictated by religious authorities. Whilst such pressures are certainly present in certain regions (most notably Iran), they cannot be assumed in other contexts and do not provide an overall frame of analysis for the variety of Muslim dress practices emerging in different parts of the world. What most contributions to this volume highlight is the wide range of factors motivating women to choose particular forms of dress. These vary from simple acts of conformity to regional and societal norms to
the development of aesthetic and moral alternatives, which may require greater or lesser degrees of covering, or different styles. What is clear is that for many Muslim women religion, fashion, and politics are not incompatible but intimately related and reworked through dress.

Notes

1. Mahmood (2005: 118ff) discusses these various stances in more detail. Whilst according to Mahmood, the women in the Egyptian piety movement consider wearing covered dress a technique of self-realization, others have analyzed women's veiling practices in terms of the expression of particular identities (see, for instance, Ahmed 1992; MacLeod 1991; El-Guindi 1981, 1999; Göl 1996; Navaro-Yashin 2002). Deeb (2006) writing about Shi'i women in the southern suburbs of Beirut indicates how women may simultaneously be involved in acquiring a modest self and expressing particular identities.

2. There are also dress requirements for men, such as to cover the area between the navel and the knees. This volume focuses predominantly on Muslim women's sartorial practices, as both the field of fashion and the debates on this topic mainly deal with women. For discussions of male dress, see Lindisfarne-Tapper and Ingham (1997).

3. See El-Guindi (1999: 147ff), who points out that the Koranic term hijab refers to separation. Moreover, the meanings of the Koranic terms jilbab and khimar are also subject to debate, such as to what parts of the body need to be covered.


5. The issue of generation has been convincingly addressed by Brenner (1996) for Indonesia.

References


