Modesty in Consumption: The Impact of Islam

Conference Paper · January 2009

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Paper 49

Modesty in Consumption: The Impact of Islam

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This paper considers the Islamic concept of *haya'* from the perspective of physical modesty, using the example of Muslim women's clothing. It looks at the clothing requirements, considers how they "communicate" in a Western context and the implications for consumption.

Introduction

Muslims are increasingly members of the consuming middle-classes, both in the West and outside of it. Whether these consumers come from the "new" middle-classes in Turkey (Sandikci and Ger, 2001) or other increasingly wealthy countries such as China, or they are "new Muslims" (Western converts) who were already part of the Western middle-classes (Hill, 2001), or "new Western Muslims" (migrants or their children), all kinds of Muslims in all sorts of countries are joining the consuming middle classes. Traditional writing on culture has viewed it as being largely geographically bounded (e.g. Hofstede, 1980; Mastor, Jin, and Cooper, 2000; Schwartz, 2004), and religion has, in turn, been written about as an aspect of this geographically bounded culture. In contrast, this paper argues that Muslims from everywhere share a culture that springs from Islam (Jameelah, n.d.), and so Muslims have great commonality in how they consume, regardless of their geographical location. It is generally accepted that Islam affects the thinking and behaviour of Muslims (e.g.

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Ali, 1995, 2001; Rice, 1999; Rice and Al-Mossawi, 2002; Ibrahim, Harwick, and Al-asmar, 2005), and considering its influence from a holistic perspective, beyond the conventional geographic boundaries of culture, also fits with the societal marketing concept (El-Ansary, 1974; Pettigrew, 2005).

In such a context, understanding the Islamic guidelines to which Muslims subscribe, is increasingly important. For this paper, clothing is chosen as an illustrative example, in part because of the visible nature of its consumption, but also because of its recognised symbolic importance in the West (e.g. Mandel, 1989; Beck, 1980; Sandikci and Ger, 2005).

Whilst in English Islam is referred to as a religion and, as such, would be an element of culture, the reality is that it is represents an holistic approach to life. In Arabic, the language of The Qur'an, there is no specific word for religion, and given the scope of Islam in comparison to the Western understanding of "religion", 'way of life' is a better description. To illustrate this in its entirety is obviously an undertaking beyond the constraints of this paper, so, instead, the key concept of *haya'* or modesty will be considered only in its relationship to physical modesty and only with reference to Muslim women's clothing. Muslim women's clothing is a visible form of public consumption, and has been the subject of much debate within the mass media and Western society in general (e.g. Abu Odeh, 1993; Dwyes, 1999; Shirazi, 2000). As such, it is a particularly topical and appropriate focus for this paper.

What is *Haya'*?

Haya' is an Arabic word which means bashfulness/shyness/timidity/diffidence, but which is most frequently translated into English as "modesty" (Baalbaki, 1994). It is from the root hayat which means "life". In an Islamic context, modesty has implications for everything and impacts on every facet of daily life. Modesty is referred to in the Islamic teachings on everything from marriage to faith to speech to action to thought. In fact, the importance of this concept in Islamic teaching can best be illustrated by the following translation of the meaning of a quote from the Oral Tradition: "The Messenger of Allah said, "Every *deen* (way of life) has an innate character. The character of Islam is *haya*"" (Al-Muwatta of Imam Malik ibn Anas, 1989, 47.9).

Haya' in Terms Of Physical Modesty

In physical terms, modesty is connected with the *"awra',"* an Arabic term meaning "inviolate vulnerability" (El Guindi, 1999) [what must be covered] and consisting of the private body parts of a human being (Al-Qaradawi, 1992). For women, the *awra'* is extensive and may seem complicated, especially to an outsider. A women's *awra'*, with respect to men outside her *mahrem* [family members/those permanently ineligible for marriage to her] and non-Muslim women, consists of her entire body, with the exception of her face and hands. There are 12 categories of *mahrem* and these people may see a woman's "hair, ears, neck, upper part of the chest, arms and legs. Other parts of her body, such as the back, abdomen, thighs and two private parts, are not

to be exposed before anyone, man or woman, excepting her husband" (Al-Qaradawi, 1992). Some scholars have also ruled that a woman's *awra'*, with respect to other Muslim women, is "the area between her navel and knee" (Al-Qaradawi, 1992).

We may consider the human's areas of *awra'*, then, to be "navel to knee" for men and "women's whole bodies excepting her face and hands" (Al-Qaradawi, 1992). In practical terms, this means that these areas of the body are not to be shown to anyone except the spouse (or, if necessary, a doctor), and in the case of women as stated above, it refers to what she must cover when in public — not when she is at home and/or with her family members in a private area. (A consideration of the definition of "public" from an Islamic viewpoint, will be considered later in this piece).

Islamic Clothing Guidelines for Women

Having considered previously that modesty is central to Islam, and physical modesty is a consideration within that, modesty in clothing is an obvious component. The discussion on clothing presented here focuses mainly on women's clothing, and women's clothing in the public sphere i.e., with non-*mahrem* — clothing that is worn in the company of strangers. This means that the public sphere is defined here as "in the company of strangers" rather than "outside the home", although often these two situations coincide. It does not refer to "public space" and "private space" as defined in a Western paradigm (Tarvis, 1992), and does not allocate public space as outside the home and/or solely the domain of men (or vice-versa).

There are a number of requirements and prohibitions concerning clothing in Islamic teachings. Fundamentally, the *awra'* must be covered, but the method or style of coverage varies greatly from country to country and person to person.

> Islam permits, in fact, requires that the Muslim be careful about his appearance, dress decently, maintain his dignity and enjoy what Allah has created for the purpose of clothing and adornment. From the Islamic point of view, clothing has two purposes: to cover the body and to beautify the appearance... Islam has made it obligatory on Muslims to cover their private parts... cleanliness is the essence of good appearance and the beauty of every adornment... Beautification and elegance are not merely permitted but are required by Islam...
>
> "Say: Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good things of His providing" [The Holy Qur'an, Translation of the Meaning, 7: 32],
>
> ... Islam makes it *haram* (prohibited) for women to wear clothes that fail to cover the body and which are transparent, revealing what is underneath. It is likewise *haram* to wear tightly fitting clothes which delineate the parts of the body, especially those parts which are sexually attractive... The general rule for the enjoyment of the good things of life, such as food, drink and clothing, is that their use should be without extravagance or pride (Al-Qaradawi, 1992, pp. 79-87)

To this list a prohibition on perfuming the (publicly consumed) clothing may be added (see also, al-Albani 1994). Other consumption prohibitions include: tattooing, plastic surgery, plucking the eyebrows, and using wigs and hairpieces.

For the non-Muslim observer, what is Islamic teaching and what is a reflection of local culture is hard to discern. As foreshadowed earlier, the inter-relationship between Muslim's religious beliefs and culture is somewhat different to the conventional view. Muslims share a culture that comes from the Islamic way of life (Jameelah, 1978), and so, rather than religion being part of culture, religion is the primary component of culture across all Muslims in all countries in which they live. In contrast to much Western writing on culture, religious considerations come before cultural ones. With regard to clothing, this means that cultural preferences and fashions determine the different ways in which the religious requirements are met. Modest clothing is an obvious component of a *deen* with the innate character of *haya'*.

Fundamentally, the *awra'* must be covered, but the method of coverage varies greatly from country to country, culture to culture, and person to person. There are all sorts of outfits which reflect the country of origin, or the ethnic group, or the country of origin of the parents or friends of the wearer or simply, what the wearer likes best! Thus, what is seen on the street in Western countries can be any of these styles, or any mix of them. Despite the common misconceptions, no colours are specified in Islam, nor are any particular styles. Black is favoured by some in Gulf countries, but is not at all popular in Morocco, for instance. Arabs tend not to like red, but prefer browns, blacks, and blues, while other geographically based groups like brighter colours.

Similarly, the role of head-covering is part of the teaching on women's dress and is universally accepted. "Among Islamic scholars there is a consensus with regard to female covering but there is no consensus for the actual form of the covering" (Roald, 2001, p. 271). For example, recent interviews undertaken in Morocco included the basic question, "why do you cover your head?" The first and most common response was that is it "*fard*" (see also, Roald 2001, p. 294; Azzam 1996, p. 226). This is an Arabic term which best translates as "obligatory" (required by the *deen*). A similar sentiment expressed in response to this question, usually along with the response "*fard*", was that of "*taqwa*".

The term *taqwa* is often translated into English as "fear of Allah". However, an "angry God" is not how *taqwa* is understood in a Muslim context. Firstly, Allah does not have human characteristics and so does not get angry or feel anger as a human does. Secondly, *taqwa* has a double meaning because takwa has two roots — one can be translated as "safeguard" (*it-tiqa'*) and one "power" (*quwwa*) — we take from the positive what is beneficial (power) and push away the harmful negative (safeguard). It means that you fear what Allah has forbidden for you, and you need to take the action of pushing away the harm, and also act to attract the good. This is consistent with the Islamic understanding that Allah gives the guidance he does as practices to be followed which have benefits for you and for the wider society. Therefore, wearing Islamic clothing, defined as clothing which meets the standards set out in the texts and rulings — ie, loose, covering, non-transparent, subdued, clean, neat and tidy — is an act of worship and submission to Allah (Ash-Sharawy, 1991, pp. 1977-1978).

"Translation" of the Guidelines

As mentioned above, the consensus of the scholars on clothing does not extend to the style or form of the ensemble, so there are regional variations. Typically, in Egypt for example, Muslim "women wear full-length *gallabiyyas* (*jilbab* in standard Arabic), loose-fitting to conceal body contours, in solid austere colours made out of opaque fabric" (El Guindi, 1999, p. 143).

Traditional clothing for Muslim women in Malaysia is the *Baju Kurong* — "a Malay dress with long skirt, long sleeves and tight neck... [and to] cover one's head with a scarf or a small headdress, the mini-*telekung*" (Lie, 2000, p. 33), or "loose-fitting long tunics over sarongs" (Ong, 1990).

In Morocco, it is the *jellaba* — "a long-sleeved, floor-length garment which also has a hood" (Davis, 1987:26), although in recent times the *jellaba* can also be hoodless, "a long, hooded robe worn as outer garment by both sexes" . "... women cover their bodies when they go out. They wear "either a *jellaba* (long robe) and veil, or a *haik*, a large piece of fabric which they wrap around themselves so just their hands, feet and eyes remain visible" (Davis,1983,p. 61, in El Guindi 1999, p. 61). "The *haik* is a variation on the wrap worn in certain traditional circles by women in rural and urban areas of the Middle East. In that sense, it is both an ethnic and a gender marker. The hooded *jellaba*'... on the other hand, is worn by both sexes and is similar in appearance. As a clothing item, it is dual-gendered, bringing out the nuanced variability of clothing as used by men and women" (El Guindi, 1999, p. 61). Similarly, Moroccan traditional shoes — *bilgha'* — are the same basic style for men and women.

The word *hijab* is used several times in The Qur'an, but only once does it refer to women's clothing. The two items of clothing mentioned for women are *khimar* (the head veil) and *jilbab* (a long gown), which had not been newly introduced by Islam but were likely already part of the wardrobe of the time (El Guindi, 1999). "It is also evident in my ethnographic analysis of the historical record that veiling was and is a practice that is differentiated and variable, with each variant deeply embedded in the cultural systems" (El Guindi, 1999, p. 12).

The Islamic teachings thus provide guidelines regarding clothing consumption, and different cultures have developed different styles to suit their tastes and climate.

Clothing as Communication

The Muslim woman's headscarf is an item that generates much interest in a Western context. This, too, is a communication — or miscommunication — issue. Just as Muslims are "in context" in some countries, they are "out of context" in others — usually when they are in the minority. As the "communication" of clothing messages suffers from "noise" (distortion) in these contexts, often the "message sent" by the wearer is not understood by the "receiver" — or is understood to have a very different meaning from that intended (or sent) by the wearer. This is particularly true for women who cover their heads, Roald (2001) suggests,

'The veil' has various connotations in a Western context. A Christian nun wearing a veil might be seen as an image of sincere religiosity, purity and peace, whereas a Muslim woman wearing a veil is likely to be seen as a symbol of the oppression of women and as making a political-religious statement...The visibility of her religious commitment may be seen to signal a 'holier than thou' attitude and thus evokes resentment in the non-Muslim. In...many...Western countries, religion is regarded as a private matter. Thus a common statement is that 'religiosity should not be visible but should be a matter of the heart and one's inner-most feelings'. The acceptance of the nun's veil seems unaffected by such complaints against the Muslim woman's veil, even although both share the same visibility. Why? Because the nun represents commitment to the prevailing religious tradition. She is an 'insider'. The Muslim woman, on the other hand, symbolises the intrusion of alien beliefs contrary to the prevailing in religious tradition. This response is further reinforced by negative media reports about Muslim immigrants or Muslims in other countries (Roald, 2001, p. 254)

El Guindi also makes this point: "In 1931 Crawley wrote: 'A Muslim woman takes the veil, just as does a nun' " (1931:76). This is an example of a very commonly presumed analogy that results from examining the veil as an object with universal (Christian) meaning. So the veil of the nun and the veil of the Muslim woman are presumed identical. Nothing can be more different than these two veils. The difference is in the meaning, the symbolism, the ideology, the constructed womanhood, and the notion of sexuality" (El Guindi, 1999).

This "deconstruction" of symbols leads to misrepresentations on both sides. "The instrumentalist interpretation of the phenomenon of Islamic veiling has its base in the nature of in-group/out-group communication" (Roald, 2001, p. 258). These misunderstandings are often exacerbated by research on the topic. "The analysis of Islamic veiling by social researchers must be understood in the context of recent social research which abandons religion as an instrument of analysis" (Roald, 2001, p. 257). "Secularist-bound scholars either deny the existence [of the Islamic feminist movement's use of the veil as protest] or ideologically dismiss any scholarly discussion of such formulations (even empirical studies) as apology" (El Guindi, 1999, p. 184). Consider this example,

> In the face of modern women who exhibit their femininity by the care they give to their bodies and clothes, Muslim women conceal their femininity behind veiling and thus present the "sacred body" against the "aesthetic" one...Veiled women, like their predecessors, enter into public life with the slogan "Personality But Not Femininity" (Gole, 1996, p. 130)

Clearly, Islamic teachings on modesty and normative social clothing practice in Western societies clash, but the Western paradigm sees women "who cover" as opposing them, when in fact the "social interaction" component of Muslim women's clothing choices are often considered a distant second to "vertical concerns" (fulfilling the will of Allah). "*Sharia*' [is] the Islamic law [which] switches between two

dimensions: the horizontal and the vertical. The horizontal dimension covers legislation in the social sphere, where rights, responsibilities and obligations are drawn up in terms of inter-human relationships (*mu'amalat*). The vertical dimensions have to do with the human being's relationship with God (*ibadat*). The latter is thus the overarching aspect of the law, as even social relations are regulated by belief in God as the Creator of all things" (Roald, 2001, pp. 104-105).

Concluding comments

Returning to the point made in the introductory comments regarding the fit between the holistic approach of Islam and the social marketing perspective, it is important to know what constitutes Islamic teaching (ie, the shared "culture" of the Muslims) and what constitutes local or national or ethnic culture. As Sanders (1997) points out in his classification system of "Muslims", even those in the broadest and vaguest category (ethnic Muslims), identify with the tradition — and that means that the person is aware of what is suitable and what is not at a fundamental level. It does not mean that they do it, just that they can identify it.

In his discussion of the social marketing concept, El-Ansary (1974, p. 318) identifies societal-based considerations which include "environmentally and morally compatible products". There a number of fundamental teachings in Islam that would similarly impact consumption and so affect how life is lived by an increasing percentage of the world (and local) populations. These include teachings on the environment, social justice, consumption and even the purpose of life itself. These same teachings offer a huge reservoir for future research topics with societal marketing impacts, and they will become increasingly important as the number of Muslims and their spread across different cultural and geographic boundaries continues to grow.

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Session XIV

Panel: Thursday 4.00pm-5.30pm