2010

# HEAD COVERINGS IN THE VIRTUAL UMMA: THE CASE OF NIQAB

Heather Marie Akou

*Indiana University - Bloomington,* hakou@indiana.edu

**HEAD COVERINGS IN THE VIRTUAL UMMA: THE CASE OF NIQAB**

HEATHER MARIE AKOU

hakou@indiana.edu – www.heatherakou.net

Islamic dress is built on the concept of *hijab*, which translates into English as "covering." Although the practice of *hijab* involves both modest dress and modest behavior, Muslims and non-Muslims alike tend to focus on garments that cover the head, neck, and sometimes the face as "Islamic dress." I am especially interested in how Muslims are using the Internet to construct and debate the idea of "Islamic dress" as one aspect of a new global, interconnected Islamic community known as the *umma*. Along with politics, Islamic law, the interpretation of text, and procedures for Islamic rituals, *hijab* is a frequent topic of conversation on the Internet. A new convert in Canada, for example, could use the Internet to read translated passages from the Qur'an about *hijab*, buy an Islamic head covering from a company based in the UK, chat with a cyber-friend in Egypt about it, and then watch a video on YouTube demonstrating how to wear "Turkish-style *hijab*"—all without setting foot outside the home.

Originally in this paper I was going to explore a range of different head coverings for both men and women that could be considered "Islamic dress" (if you would like to read more about this you should look for my forthcoming article in the journal *Khil'a*[1]). Instead I decided to focus on just one type of head covering known as the *burqa* or *niqab*, which has been the subject of much debate in the media, particularly in Europe. In September 2010, for example, an overwhelming majority of the French Parliament voted to ban the *burqa* from all public spaces, viewing it as both a security threat and a sign of oppression against women.

It is important to note, however, that this garment is just as controversial among Muslims. While many—but not all—tolerate *niqab*, a smaller number believe that covering the face is *sunna* (recommended) or *mustahabb* (something done for the love of God); only a very small number would argue that covering the face is *fard* or obligatory. Personally, although I've been studying Islamic dress for ten years and converted to Islam in 2007, I have never considered wearing *niqab* and probably never will; covering the face is a practice that makes many people very uncomfortable. At the same time, there is no denying that this is a symbol strongly associated with "Islamic dress." Keeping these disclaimers in mind, this paper explores the role of the Internet in expanding *niqab* from a style of Arab, ethnic dress to a global style of Islamic dress.

**The Virtual Umma**

The concept of the *umma* as a global community of Muslims is actually quite old, going back to the earliest days of Islam. Originally, it was used in reference to the Muslim community established by the Prophet Mohammed and his Companions (peace be upon them) in Mecca, but over time the concept grew to include all Muslims in all lands regardless of time and space. In practice, however, it was difficult for individuals to experience the *umma*; only through extensive travel or undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca (the *Hajj*) could the individual gain a sense of the true diversity of cultures within the larger Islamic community.

In the twenty-first century the pilgrimage is still a central feature of Islam, one of the "five pillars" of the faith, but for many Muslims the Internet is allowing them to gain a new awareness of the global Islamic community. In an article for the journal, *Muslim World*, Danish scholar Garbi Schmidt described the *umma* as "an idea or vision: the conviction to take part in a border-crossing community that includes

---

[1] "Is There an 'Islamic' Dress? Evidence from the Internet Generation," in *Khil'a: Journal for Dress and Textiles of the Islamic World*.

believers worldwide."[2] In part this has been fostered by easier travel and increased migration, but recognition of (and excitement about) the *umma* goes far beyond these globalized communities. Although we must keep in mind that individuals are always situated in local cultures—and in particular, there is a common misconception that Arab or Middle Eastern culture is synonymous with "Islamic" culture—the concept of the *umma* holds out a promise of shared beliefs and values, that certain ideas, behaviors, and even styles of dress can be identified as "Islamic," not belonging to any specific ethnic group or geographic location. Scholars such as Gary Bunt, Peter Mandaville, and Alexis Kort have emphasized the role of the Internet in building this new global *umma*, calling it the "virtual umma," the "digital umma," or the "Dar al-Cyber Islam."[3]
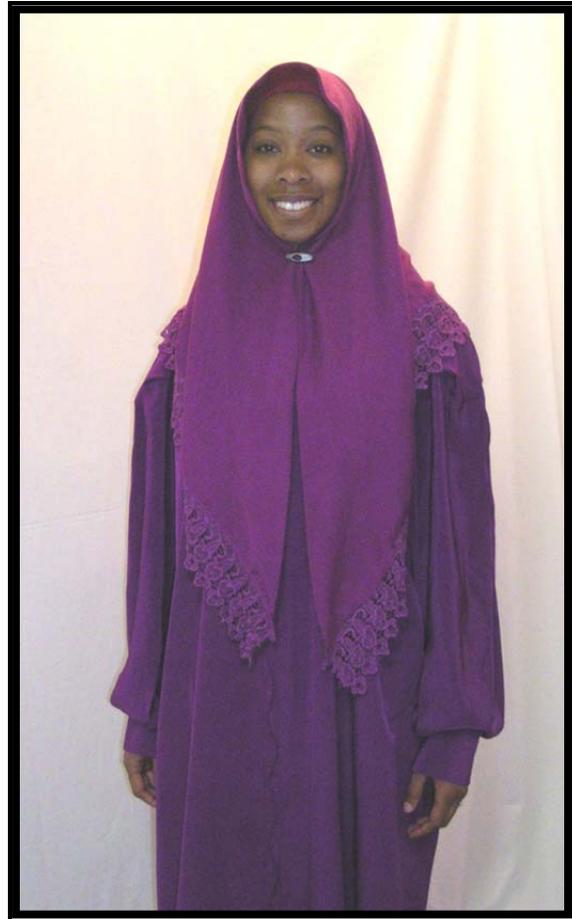


*Figure 1, left. Abaya (cloak) and niqab, covering for the head and face; garments in author's personal collection, photograph by author.*
*Figure 2, right. Jilbab (cloak) and khimar, head covering; garments in author's personal collection, photograph by author.*

---

[2] (2005), "The Transnational Umma—Myth or Reality? Examples from the Western Diasporas," in *Muslim World*, 95(4): pp 575-586.
[3] Gary R. Bunt (2009), *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Alexis Kort (2005), "Dar al-Cyber Islam: Women, Domestic Violence, and the Islamic Reformation on the World Wide Web," in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 25(3), pp 363-383.
Peter Mandaville (2001), *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma*, New York: Routledge.

**Usage of the Term "Islamic Dress"**

The concept of a global "Islamic dress" exists not just in academic theory, but also in the practical worlds of commerce and law. The online retailer SHUKR, for example, was founded in St. Louis, Missouri in 2001 to sell Islamic clothing to Muslims in North America and Europe. For several years, the company's "About Us" page stated,

> We aim to produce designs … which are suitable to wear to school, college, and work, as well as to the mosque and Islamic events. We at SHUKR see this as a necessary development in our growing self-identity as Muslim Americans, Muslim Canadians, and Muslim Europeans. SHUKR … encourages all Muslims to take an active part in this quest for Islamic authenticity...[4]

Although the company has relocated to Syria and now sells modest clothing to both Muslims and people of other faiths, SHUKR is clearly encouraging a global style of Islamic dress that is not tied to a specific nation or ethnic group. Likewise, DesertStore.com, an online retailer and manufacturer based in Saudi Arabia, states that it "aims to bring Arabia closer to Muslims all around the world by providing reasonably-priced Islamic clothing and other Arabian and Middle Eastern products…"[5] (note how a distinction is made between these two categories). While the company sells a few garments such as the *kaffiyeh* which have a limited appeal outside of the Middle East, most garments sold by Desert Store are now worn not just in the Middle East but by millions of Muslims in other parts of the world such as the *niqab*, *abaya*, *khimar,* and *jilbab* (see Figures 1 and 2).

The constitution of Uzbekistan makes a similar distinction between "traditional" (Uzbek) and "foreign" (understood as "Islamic") head coverings. The first category includes scarves with colorful patterns that are tied around the hair and sometimes the neck; garments like this have been a long-standing part of dress for ethnic Uzbek women. The secondary category is defined by head coverings that are a solid color and "clasped at the front or cover the face."[6] Although 90% of the country's citizens are Muslims and traditional head coverings are tolerated, items of dress from other parts of the world that have been deemed "foreign" are not. Concerned about the political influence of Islamic extremists, authorities have expelled and even arrested students, faculty, and administrators at state-run schools for daring to grow a beard or for wearing Islamic garments like the *jilbab* and *niqab*. (It is important to recognize that the government is concerned not just about influences from the Middle East, but also from other parts of Central Asia such as the Taliban).

**The History and Construction of Niqab**

One reason the *niqab* has become so strongly associated with Islamic dress is because there are so few cultures around the world where this kind of garment is worn on a daily basis. Covering the face disrupts our inclination as social beings to read another person's facial expressions, particularly when engaged in a conversation. Outside of the Middle East, face coverings are a curiosity. YouTube, for example, has a video labeled "Saudi Women Eating Spaghetti" which has been viewed more than 100,000 times.[7] Whether the women in the video are just actors or actual *niqabis* has been the subject of much debate, yet the fascination remains. How do the wearers cope with such an extreme style of dress on a daily basis?

Outside of the Persian Gulf region, *niqab* is worn by only a small minority of Muslims. Inside the region, however, *niqab* is so common that is hardly attracts any attention at all. Originally, this garment was a

---

[4] "About SHUKR," shukronline.com, accessed October 2006.
[5] "About Us," desertStore.com, accessed September 2010.
[6] Dominic McGoldrick (2006), *Human Rights and Religion—The Islamic Headscarf Debate in Europe*, Oxford: Hart Publishing, pp 226.
[7] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ytiXRyc0qk&feature=related, accessed October 2010.

practical solution to the problem of living in a desert; covering the face protects the wearer's eyes, nose, and mouth from blowing sand. Even men are known to pull the edges of their garments over their faces during a sandstorm. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, covering the face became a symbol of cultural and political resistance to European colonization. Movements such as Wahabbism and Salafism—which are still quite influential today—encouraged followers to practice in a very strict and austere way what they believed to be the lifestyle of the Prophet Mohammed and his Companions (peace be upon them) in the 7th century AD. One such practice—as they interpreted it—was to make a clear, visual separation between themselves and Europeans who were invariably Christians. This was the first step towards turning *niqab* from an Arab garment into an Islamic garment.

In the 1970s, when the petroleum industry started bringing enormous revenues into the Middle East, two important changes happened. First of all, Saudi Arabia (along with other neighboring countries) suddenly had an urgent demand for labor and the means to pay for it; because of this, hundreds of thousands of people from Africa, Asia, and other parts of the Middle East were recruited to the area to work as teachers, doctors, construction workers, and domestic servants. Secondly, for its own internal political reasons, the government of Saudi Arabia began a campaign to export Wahabbism, spending billions of dollars on charities, publishing, and scholarships so young men from other countries could study at Saudi universities.[8] These two changes spread awareness of *niqab* and other styles of dress worn in the Persian Gulf region far outside of the Middle East.

Contrary to what outsiders might think, the *niqab* is not a very complicated garment. It consists of two to three layers of cloth that are sewn together along one edge, leaving several inches un-sewn in the middle to create an opening for the eyes. These layers are secured over the face with ties or even Velcro, and then the top layer is pulled back to cover the hair. When there is a third (sheer) layer, this hangs over the slit to cover the eyes in such a way that the wearer can see out but the viewer cannot see in, much like a traditional bridal veil in the West. This is often worn with an extra head covering to ensure that the sides of the head and the neck stay covered at all times. Unlike the *chadaaree* worn in Afghanistan (which covers the entire body, hiding the face behind a screen), the *niqab* is strictly a head covering worn with a separate garment, usually a cloak called an *abaya*. Although some women in the Persian Gulf region wear masks that are also called *niqab*, these do not necessarily cover the hair and are not worn in other cultures (although they might remind some Americans of a Halloween mask or the Lone Ranger). Furthermore, the global style of *niqab* is almost always black, made of polyester or silk, and rarely has any kind of decoration that might call attention to the wearer.

**Niqab in the Virtual Umma**

In my experience, on most websites where *hijab* is discussed, women who wear *niqab* (*niqabis*) tend to be politely ignored or sometimes even dismissed as "ninjas." They make up only a small minority of active participants. In a multi-user blog associated with thecanadianmuslim.com, for example, which I followed for almost two years,[9] a woman calling herself, "Curious Niqabi," engaged frequently in discussions about a variety of topics, but rarely mentioned *niqab*. After several months she revealed that she was not actually covering her face, just curious about the practice and hoping to adopt it someday (explaining why she chose that particular username).

In contrast, on a website about Islamic dress called muhajabah.com[10] hosted by a *niqabi* who describes herself as "a covert to Islam of European-American heritage," a great deal of attention is paid to *niqab*. Along with links to online resources and debates over the status of face-covering in Islamic law, the site

---

[8] Khaled Abou El Fadl (2005), *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, New York: HarperCollins.
[9] For more, see: Heather Marie Akou (2010), "Interpreting Islam through the Internet: Making Sense of Hijab," in *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life*, 4, pp 331-346.
[10] "Muhajabah" means "those who practice *hijab*."

contains articles written by other women about their experiences. The author of one article on the "Benefits of Niqaab" emphasizes that in her view, covering the face is an "Islamic" practice and not a cultural one.

> ...we wear niqaab first and foremost for the pleasure of Allah. There are a few reasons that some [Muslim women] wear it that are <u>not</u> in accordance with Islam and are not pleasing to Allah. These include:
>
> - Pride and arrogance
> - Lack of humility about one's beauty
> - Class or caste distinction
> - Cultural tradition
>
> Sisters that wear the veil for these purposes are missing out on the real benefits of covering.

Although there are not many photographs on the website, all of them show the global-style *niqab*, not the Persian Gulf-style mask. The owner of the website also emphasizes the Islamic nature of this garment, ending a section titled, "Why Wear Niqab" with the following summary:

| | |
|---|---|
| Hijab is a screen of privacy | → Niqab is a better screen |
| Hijab helps develop taqwa | → Niqab helps develop more taqwa |
| Hijab is a jihad that purifies the soul | → Niqab is a greater jihad |
| Hijab is a protection for sisters | → Niqab is a better protection |
| Hijab is an assertion of Islamic identity | → Niqab is a stronger assertion |

What I find striking about this chart is its "more is more" sensibility. As the author argues, if covering most of the body is good, then covering all of the body must be better. Of course, not everyone views this kind of escalation as a good thing. In the practice of Islam, for example, the use of so much cloth could be seen as contrary to the principles of moderation and refraining from wastefulness, which are also emphasized in the Qur'an. Even so, increasingly visible expressions of piety are not uncommon in traditions where dress plays a role in the practice of religious faith.

The ensembles worn by all Catholic nuns prior to Vatican II, for example, both marked them as Catholic and set them apart from ordinary parishioners. While the components of the "habit" often varied from one community to another, all of these ensembles were expected to demonstrate the vows of "poverty, chastity, and obedience" taken by initiates.[11] In medieval times, when many Catholics viewed black as the color of "humility," austere orders like the Cistercians and Carthusians went one step further by refusing to use dyes. As Julie Kerr notes in her book, *Life in the Medieval Cloister*,

> This earned them the nickname the White Monks or Grey Monks but also generated hostility from some Benedictines, who saw this as the Cistercians' proclamation of superiority over themselves; the Cistercians themselves denied this and maintained they were simply declaring their commitment to poverty.[12]

Likewise, sociologist Solomon Poll has documented that, "Proper observance of religion is a basis for competition in the Hasidic [Jewish] community."[13] While most married Hasidic women wear wigs in

---

[11] Susan O. Michelman, "Fashion and Identity of Women Religious," in *Religion, Dress, and the Body*, ed. Linda B. Arthur, Oxford: Berg, pp 135-146.

[12] (2009), London: Continuum, pp 58.

[13] (2006), *The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg: A Study in the Sociology of Religion*, second edition, Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

public spaces, for example, the more "zealous" reject anything resembling human hair. In both public and private, they wear a scarf or turban made of cloth instead of a wig.

While there are a handful of countries and some isolated communities outside of the Persian Gulf region where *niqab* has become standard attire for women, in most areas of the world *niqabis* make up a small minority within a larger Muslim community. Even so, because the *niqab* is so unusual and so instantly recognizable, this garment has become an icon of "Islamic dress." In her study of Muslims in the UK, Emma Tarlo found that

> For those British Muslims who perceive face veiling as alienating, regressive and detrimental to women, finding themselves somehow associated with the practice by proxy is a cause of great frustration and irritation. What they resent is the way this small minority practice takes on representational status for Islam as a whole, regardless of whether or not the majority support it. And whilst many Muslim women who are against niqab respect the rights of others to wear it… they resent the inference sometimes made that by not wearing it, they are somehow less pious Muslims.[14]

Indeed, as a blogger for Suite 101 observed in an article titled, "Respect for Niqab,"

> Some Muslims give these sisters a hard time, saying that they are doing above and beyond what has been commanded by Allah SWT, and that the "extreme" appearance of these fully-veiled women projects a bad image to the non-Muslims who already view the Muslim woman as weak and oppressed. They argue that such individuals, upon seeing fully-veiled Muslim women, will be "turned off" by Islam, and we will have forever lost potential Muslim converts, or even the understanding and sympathy of the non-Muslim community.[15]

Once again, notice how the focus is on how *niqab* affects the practice of Islam and the global identity of Muslims, not just local communities. As much as the mainstream media might wrongly associate all Muslims with *niqab*, the Internet opens up new opportunities for debate. The anonymity of this medium also allows people on both sides to make pointed (sometimes even hostile) arguments about face veiling. The *niqab*-wearing host of muhajabah.com, for example, never reveals her name and certainly does not reveal her face; the reader has no idea where she lives and so is unable to assess how the author's dress practices might reflect or impact her local community. While there are certainly many other types of dress that Muslims wear to practice their faith and make their religious identity visible, *niqab* happens to offer a very clear example of how one style of dress can become iconic of a global culture.

---

[14] Pp 147
[15] A. Abdullah, http://www.islamicgarden.com/article1020.html, accessed September 2010.