

“Being True to Ourselves...Within the Context of Islam”: Practical Considerations in *Hijab* Practice among Muslim American Women

Huma Mohibullah and Kristi Kramer
University of British Columbia, Vancouver

ABSTRACT

Since the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, debates about women’s status in Islam have become particularly galvanized. Images of oppressed Muslim women permeate popular imagination in the United States and elsewhere, and concerns about their “liberation” from male-dominated cultures are so pervasive that they have been cited as justification for the invasions of both Iraq and Afghanistan. Central to the portrayal of Muslim women in distress is the veil in all its forms: a head-wrapping *hijab*, a *niqaab* revealing only their eyes, or a face covering *burqa*. In everyday practice, however, these coverings can convey a variety of ideals, desires, and meanings, which are not determined by doctrine alone and are as diverse as the women who wear them. This paper links interview data and an analysis of public discourse surrounding a viral video showing fashion forward women in *hijab*. It builds on Samuli Schielke’s discussion of ambivalence and fragmentation in religious and moral practice to show how American Muslim women’s decisions to cover are informed both by their religious sensibilities *and* everyday pragmatics.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of women’s status in Islam has been contentious for decades but has experienced a noteworthy revival since the September 11th 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon (“9/11”). Concerns about Islam facilitating the oppression of women permeate popular discourse and the “liberation” of Muslim women from male-dominated societies has been liberally cited as justification for the invasions of both Iraq and Afghanistan.¹ Central to the image of the Muslim woman in distress is the veil in all its forms: a head-

wrapping *hijab*, a *niqaab* revealing only her eyes, or a face covering *burqa*. The color black is also associated with this image: women shrouded in darkness and rendered invisible.

We embarked on this study intending to highlight the role of the *hijab*, a headscarf or similar form of covering used by Muslim women, as indexing the counterhegemonic stances of American Muslim women living in a post-9/11, anti-Muslim climate. However, with the passage of time, repeated interactions with our interview participants, and rapidly shifting discourse about Muslim women and forms of cover, our attention moved away from any single area of investigation (“resistance”, “identity”, or “faith”, for example). Instead, we began focusing on heterogeneity surrounding the practice, for both in its physical appearance and in its symbolic value, the *hijab* carries no single meaning. Instead, it conveys a multiplicity of ideals, desires and expressions, which are as diverse as the women who wear it. *Hijab* can express any combination of emotions, political stances, or religious convictions; it can communicate one’s fashion sense or, to some non-Muslim Americans, it can stand as a marker of ‘the other.’ Several scholars have examined such heterogeneity, for instance, those who have analyzed the practice as a politically subversive act or as a social space.² To our knowledge, however, there is no study examining the role everyday considerations play in shaping ideas and practices of Muslim veiling. In what follows, we turn to Samuli Schielke’s discussions of ambivalence and contradiction³ to elucidate how American Muslim women’s decisions to cover (or to not cover) are informed by a combination of religio-cultural ideals and everyday pragmatics.

This paper is based on field research conducted in 2012 as well as on discussions surrounding the recent “Mipsterz” (Muslim hipsters) movement, which produced a popular internet video showing images of fashionable, young, urban women in *hijab*. While the video intended to challenge dominant imaginings of oppressed Muslim women, it became a catalyst for intense, ongoing debates about the meaning and representation of Muslim veiling. We link an analysis of this public discourse with qualitative data to show that prioritizing faith or function (which are the usual points of inquiry about *hijab*) in any discussion about American Muslim veiling habits, or conceptualizing them in the oft-referenced, stale dichotomy of “modesty versus modernity”, is shortsighted. Both the prioritization of faith and the “modesty versus modernity” dichotomy compartmentalize the practice by setting artificial boundaries around motivations that, in turn, overlook the wider contexts in which decisions to wear, and how to wear, *hijab* are made.

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL APPROACH

This paper is built upon interviews conducted in 2012 with six women between the ages of twenty-one and sixty who wore the *hijab* and lived in Harrisonburg, Virginia and New York City, New York. Both locations were chosen for their dense and highly diverse Muslim populations. Both locations were also field sites for the authors’ larger projects on post-9/11 religious subjectivities, and poetry and peace building.

We used qualitative, open-ended interviews to cover a range of points. Interviewees were asked about their perceptions of modesty as an ideal of Islam, how they came to wear the *hijab*, and what other aspects of Islam they practice. They were also invited to describe a key religious experience from their lives and share how that experience brought them closer to Islam or otherwise solidified their self-perceptions as Muslims.

Participants were asked about the possible contention between North American and Islamic ideals (as the two are often conceptualized as a dichotomy) and whether they have encountered any struggles wearing *hijab* in the United States, especially since the 9/11 attacks. The interviews were followed up with a series of informal conversations.

The participants ranged in level of education and class. From GEDs to PhDs, they possessed a diverse mixture of struggles and experiences in attaining education, as well as fluctuating economic statuses in which level of education did not always correlate to upward mobility. Additionally, they came from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Several were recent immigrants. Regardless of their backgrounds, participants understood *hijab* to symbolize different meanings in different contexts and also to stand for multiple ideals at once. As Tajeve, a woman of Kurdish background, explained about her *hijab* use, “Part of it is that... it’s part of my religion, and part of it is for respect for my culture, and part respect for my husband.” Along similar lines, Elizabeth, an African American participant, noted that her *hijab* “can mean different things to me at different times of day or many things in the same day.”

Pointing out that heterogeneity exists within Islamic belief and practice is certainly not a novel concept. Indeed, the notion that Islam is not monolithic has been around for some time, hence Clifford Geertz’s famous concept of many Islams or “local Islams”, each offering different approaches, interpretations, and styles of practice.⁴ Of course, the idea of local Islams has been critiqued by several interlocutors, and does not generally exist in the lexicon of everyday Muslims.⁵ Furthermore, articulating religious diversity by dividing Islam into localities also runs the risk of homogenizing Muslims and their practices by categorizing them under bounded subgroups. In our study of American Muslims, this approach erases meaningful complexities and tensions among followers of Islam, oversimplifies their personal experiences, everyday lives, and religio-political outlooks. Ironically, some of our participants themselves imposed group solidarity on all women who wear *hijab*. They did so through taken-for-granted understandings of the custom as a perfect religious practice that was rooted in shared motivations and religious outlooks. In our analysis, however, we interrogate everyday concepts that inform such assumptions, particularly the notion of “modesty,” which remains heavily cited in conversations about *hijab*.

In this paper, then, we examine areas of conflict, contradiction and change in *hijab* practice. We build on the work of Islamic studies scholar Samuli Schielke,⁶ who argues that studies of Muslims tend to emphasize the “Islamic-ness” of subjects and concerns about what Islam is rather than accounting for Islam’s significance in a broader context. He proposes instead a focus on the ambivalence and inconsistencies in Muslims’ lives as well as the pragmatic, everyday sensibilities and motivations of Muslim people. While *hijab* is often conceptualized through discussions about Islam and piety, Schielke does well to remind us that a narrow focus on religious discourse in any study of Islam or Muslims “risks reproducing Islamist goals by privileging Islam as supreme guideline in all life fields.”⁷ Having Islam as the central focus in a study about *hijab*, then, would overlook broader contexts that influence such religious practices and experiences.

Schielke suggests that we begin with the ambiguity in people’s lives (which “is not an exception from what is normal but is normality itself”⁸) and the “fragmented nature of people’s biographies which, together with the ambivalent nature of most moral subjectivities,”⁹ should be the starting point for studying ethical practices or moral discourse. He argues that Islam undoubtedly has a big presence in Muslim lives but it is also

entwined with secular experiences of everyday life. With this in mind, we have paid special attention to the practical considerations that influenced our participants' veiling choices—considerations that were activated by particular “traditions, powers and discourses that grant legitimacy to some concerns over others.”¹⁰ This technique revealed that the women we interviewed were not passive participants in a religious tradition, but were engaged in a dynamic practice with the possibility of change and that their commitments to cover could take on different forms over time, even be remade time and time again. The women seemed acutely aware of the boundaries that shaped their *hijab* use, including particular social spaces, gender dynamics, and religious beliefs. At the same time, they expressed contradictory attitudes or ambivalence toward *hijab*. Rather than viewing the coexistence of such certainty and contradiction as problematic, we see it as an illuminating and inherent aspect of our participants' complex, lived experiences. We approach the *hijab* much as Schielke does Islam, that is, instead of regarding it as a “thing” per se, we examine it as an unfixed aspect of the everyday that is “actively imagined, contested, give different paths and meanings” connected to other ordinary matters in life.¹¹

HIJAB IN THEORY

The term *hijab* comes from the root *h-j-b*, which indicates a “covering”, “partition”, “curtain” and “protection”, among other, similar ideas.¹² It is now a standard name for a piece of cloth commonly worn as a headscarf, and also in other styles of cover. Today, the word *hijab* is used so commonly to describe forms of veiling that it has been rendered vague. Even in this paper, we use the term loosely. Nevertheless, we note that the term does not stand for any single mode of practice, for as prominent anthropologist Fadwa El-Guindi points out, the word *hijab* is not just Arabic for “veil.” Rather, it is “a complex notion that has gradually developed a set of related meanings” (1999, 152).¹³ Along these lines, the exact origins of *hijab* practice in Islam remain open to discussion. Some suggest that the concept of *hijab* was first imposed on men who wished to communicate with or be in the presence of the Prophet Mohammed's wives¹⁴ through a revelation stating, “And when you ask [his wives] for something, ask them from behind a partition. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts.”¹⁵ In line with this theory, El-Guindi has notably argued that the notion of *hijab* refers to a sacred divide or separation between two realms, such as good and evil, believers and nonbelievers, aristocracy and commoners, among others, and that in the context of women's clothing, it implies a combination of sanctity and privacy. Today, the mainstream belief is that *hijab* is a Quranic institution for women¹⁶ which began with the revelation to:

...say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and adornments except what ordinarily appears thereof; that they should draw their head cover (khimar) over their bosoms and not display their ornament except to their husbands, fathers, and their husbands fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers or their brother's sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women or the slaves whom their right had possess, or male servants without sexual needs, or small children who have no sense of women's pudenda and that they should not strike

their feet to draw attention to their hidden ornaments.¹⁷

Interpretations of how veiling forms should be practiced are influenced by theories about the historical contexts in which the Quranic commands referencing them were revealed. In a preliminary study of *hijab*, Mostafa Sherif notes that schools of thought have been sharply divided on its implementations, with some Muslim jurists stating that the Prophet's wives had their entire bodies covered, including hands and face, in both life and death (implying that this is the example all Muslim women should follow).¹⁸ Meanwhile, other jurists concern themselves with questions of separate spheres, arguing that the women of early Islam were under no obligation to partition themselves from society, even if they were obligated to cover. Furthermore, historians of Islam remind us that *hijab* practices were not invented by Islam and were customary among pre-Islamic Jews, Christians, and others (including the women of Classical Greek and Byzantine empires).¹⁹ This line of reasoning suggests that *hijab* is not an Islamic practice per se, but a cultural one that became meshed with Islamic values over time. For example, religious scholar Reza Aslan contends that in Mohammad's time, *hijab* was only meant for his wives as a means of distancing them from his associates who would visit and pitch their tents within feet of the women. Aslan argues that extension of *hijab* rules to Muslim women generally occurred only after the death of Mohammed as a means of reasserting male dominance.²⁰

Discourse about modesty—another concept that lends itself to ambiguity—also plays a vital role in whether and how Muslim women practice *hijab*. A lengthy discussion about modesty (*haya*) as a virtue in Islam would be redundant here, as many scholars of Islam and Muslim societies have written about the concept extensively.²¹ To summarize, dominant schools of Islamic thought consider modesty a principle that goes beyond clothing and cover, requiring the moderation of demeanor in general: speech, thought, and other actions. Avoiding speaking with angry tones or lewd connotations is one example of the self-consciousness (often conceptualized as “shyness” or “shame”) involved in the practice of *haya*. In terms of clothing, it is required that the *awrah* of both men and women be covered. “*Awrah*” describes sexual or intimate regions of the body, which includes male and female genitals, women's breasts, and other parts of the body (such as the torso and legs). The method and extent of coverage, however, ranges in practice depending on textual exegesis and cultural context. As a result, understandings of what constitutes “proper” cover were variable among the women in this study.

For instance, Susan was a Dominican convert to Islam, an Ivy League trained scientist who changed careers to run an Islamic clothing shop in New York City. At the time of interview, she understood *khimar* (the form of cover recommended by the Quran passage above) to be “a very specific thing... a covering of the head, including the ears.” She went on to say that, “A Muslim woman understands *hijab*. She understands the religious significance of modesty.” This significance inspired her to make Islamic clothing. But religious duty was not her only consideration. She wanted her styles to meet both religious and secular demands, allowing Muslim women to remain “modest” while tackling the mundane tasks of daily life.

I think about really, initially, what I go through being a single woman, with a cat, sometimes I have to take her to the vet. I have to think of what's the easiest style I can wear

that can guard my modesty but can get me through the [subway] turnstiles with a sixteen pound cat. New York is a pedestrian city. People are carrying babies, books... what's the easiest thing [to wear]? She [a woman who wears *hijab*] wants to have a certain amount of style—whatever that means for her—and comfort and ease. We go through different public barriers to get through our day, like any New Yorker has to. So the *hijab* style I make is what is *as correct as possible*. First is pleasing Allah... But it's also what doesn't get in her way when she has to go through her daily life, the stuff in her life.²²

Susan insisted that her clothing line met Islamic standards. It is worth noting, however, that some of her designs were heavily decorated with eye-catching embellishments, which contradicted one prevalent aim of modesty according to many orthodox Muslims: not calling attention to oneself through ostentatious clothing. Susan reconciled this tension by emphasizing that the Quran is “very clear” on what a *khimar* should be: it “covers all of the hair and goes down to conceal the chest.” According to this narrow definition, her clothing line met appropriate enough Islamic standards. It was, in her words, “as correct as possible,” creating a balance between religious duty and the practical consideration of enhanced mobility in a bustling city.

While Susan's Quran-based understanding of the *khimar* is a common one, several Muslims we encountered in our broader fieldwork maintained that the Quran does not specify how austere one should be in covering her hair or body parts. They particularly pointed out that body parts such as ears and hands are not distinctly mentioned in the Quran as areas that require cover, but are nevertheless covered by many contemporary *hijab* practitioners. Furthermore, Progressive Muslim figures such as Amina Wadud argue that when it comes to what the Quran says about covering, “The principle of modesty is important—not the veiling and seclusion which were manifestations particular to that context” of early Islam.²³ The difference in Susan's, Wadud's, and other Muslims' outlooks on modesty and cover reveals that “*hijab*” is not a concrete concept that correlates to an absolute practice. Rather, it is a historically constructed ideal that remains highly contested. Nevertheless, the principle has a powerful presence that commonly surfaces in certain arenas of Muslim life. For instance, per widely accepted schools of Islamic thought, even Muslim women who do not practice *hijab* in day-to-day life willingly do so to some extent when performing prayers.²⁴ Most practicing men, when in religious settings, also adhere to the Islamic rules of modest attire set for them, which is to cover from below the waist to below the knees.

***HIJAB* IN PRACTICE**

Elizabeth was a sixty-year-old, African American woman who converted to Islam some twenty years ago through the Nation of Islam. Like many African American converts, she ultimately left the Nation for Sunni Islam, but retained an appreciation for the former's role in advancing Islam in the United States. In her years as a Muslim, she “experimented” (in her words) with different forms of hair coverings. She described her styles throughout the years as being influenced by various factors, such as her social circles and political

motivations. For instance, in the 1990s, her choice to bind her hair upward in a *gele* (African head wrap) was informed by her desire to express her African roots. She explained that she would especially wear a *gele* when going to jazz clubs that emphasized black pride. Later in life, she joined a conservative mosque in Brooklyn, New York, where women were encouraged to cover in a style commonly used by Arab women to conceal their hair as well as the shapes of their bodies. At the time of research, she considered that particular form of *hijab*—covering everything but her face, hands and feet—to be the most authentic and legitimate form of cover.

On one occasion, Elizabeth witnessed one of the authors being sexually harassed outside a mosque. In response, she flatly noted that the incident could have been avoided had the author “covered properly.” She explained that the author’s *khimar* could have been drawn lower over the chest to avoid attracting unwanted attention. While she acknowledged that women’s efforts to conceal their bodies provided no guarantees of safety, Elizabeth maintained that her *hijab* was the form recommended by Islam to curb sexual harassment. Even when her *hijab* had failed to curtain her from such experiences, it nevertheless provided her with a sense of self-satisfaction. “If I’m covered like I’m supposed to, and men still look at me, then it’s on them; I know I’m good,” she said. “I can be fine with myself because I know I did what I’m supposed to do: proper *hijab*.” The conviction and self-assuredness with which Elizabeth usually spoke about “proper” *hijab* was clearly rattled when she was asked to consider how other women in her mosque, who went beyond her methods by concealing their faces as well, might have regarded her level of cover as relaxed, traditionally inauthentic or inadequate. Eventually, she reasoned that women who covered their faces were religious extremists, that her form of cover was most “moderate... a balance between mini-skirts (which reveal too much) and burqas (which cover too much).” Using the language of moderation, she legitimized her *hijab* as the most religiously appropriate form of cover because, “Islam is a moderate religion and it is meant to be easy.” She offered no doctrinal basis for this claim, through which she ordered different forms of cover in a vague hierarchy of religious acceptability.

Most of the time, Elizabeth would act as a custodian of religious tradition with her repeated references to what constituted bona fide *hijab* and exactly how Muslim women were “supposed” to cover to please God. In certain contexts, however, her convictions would waver and she would abandon such lectures to support women whose *hijab* forms were deemed inadequate. In particular, she fiercely defended African American and Caribbean Muslim women from the judgments of their non-black peers, who, using the very same arguments about “proper” *hijab* that Elizabeth routinely deployed, would denounce *gele*-style coverings as inadequate. In this context, she eschewed her routine religious and moral discourse, and prioritized solidarity with other black Muslims instead. She guarded their integrity when she saw them criticized by Arab and South Asian Muslims, who commonly demeaned black Muslims for being both black and converts (as opposed to “real” or “born” Muslims like themselves). She reminded the naysayers that *hijab* does not guarantee good moral character. “Don’t even begin to know another person’s status with Allah!” she steamed, “They may be a person who has devoted their entire life to taking care of their grandparents, whereas I may wear a scarf every day but I don’t give a glass of water to my mother,²⁵ so who’s better?”

The process of negotiating *hijab*, as Elizabeth did, in accordance with life’s secular realms and practical interests was evident in almost every interview we conducted. Participants routinely spoke of “becoming

ready” to wear the headscarf, and, rather than being driven solely or primarily by Islamic principles, their decisions often involved years of contemplation and the weighing of mundane and secular factors such as one’s age, marital status, hardships in life, experiences with anti-Muslim bigotry, and more.

Tajev was a Kurdish woman in her forties who had migrated from Iraq to Turkey and Egypt before immigrating to Houston, Texas in 1998. In 2003, she settled in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She described her upbringing in Iraq as highly secular, noting that sometimes people in her ethnic community could even be adverse to *hijab*. Her family treated the practice with apathy. She explained, “I was against it [*hijab*] because I was raised in a family that didn’t care that much about religion, that nobody told me I have to wear *hijab*. Nobody told me I had to pray. If I was doing it, I was fine—without it, I was fine also.” It was only when her husband, who was not Kurdish, requested it of her that she began to wear *hijab*.

He told me a couple of times, he really wanted me to wear *hijab* for a long time, but I wasn’t ready at all. But after 2002, when I go to Harrisonburg, I saw the women wearing *hijab* and I thought, “I’ll try it.” ... Since 2003, there are a lot of Kurdish around here, so now people in Harrisonburg know that it is part of our religion.²⁶

While Tajev did care about accommodating her husband, his repeated requests for her to wear a headscarf were, on their own, not enough for her to take up cover. Only when she arrived in Harrisonburg and found *hijab* a common sight among her peers did the practice become normalized in her view and she felt open to wearing one. Even so, she described taking up *hijab* as an onerous endeavor that she was still not habituated to and treated with ambivalence.

It was difficult. Oh, it was so difficult... if you don’t grow up with it, if you don’t do it all the time when you’re a kid... you just don’t get used to it. I’ve been wearing it since 2003 and I still don’t feel too comfortable. Sometimes, I even forget to wear it. But when I have to be with strange men, then I have to wear it. So I mix it already, but some people are really strict about it because of their religion.

Furthermore, when Tajev returned to Iraq for visits, she would follow local custom and resume life without a *hijab*:

Actually, when I go back to Iraq, I completely lose my *hijab*. In the United States, I feel much better about my *hijab* but in Iraq I don’t. Sometimes I wear it but not like I do here. I don’t wear it in front of my husband’s family or relatives—I should, but I don’t. I live with them for a long time, they are my relatives... it’s not that every woman who makes *hijab* is perfect and good.

When asked why she felt more comfortable wearing *hijab* in the US, Tajev was unable to elaborate. Her

discomfort wearing *hijab* in Iraq may have been a reflection of cultural milieu, for in Harrisonburg, wearing one was a common practice among women, whereas it was not so in her area of Iraq. And although she believed that women were ordered by the Quran to abide by certain rules of cover, her statement showed that, for her, *hijab* was not a straightforward adherence to religious rules but a complex process of reasoning in which several factors informed when, where, and how she practiced it. For example, she acknowledged that although there were rules requiring coverage in front of certain male relatives, she made an exception with her male in-laws; that by having lived with her for an extended period of time, they became as her own brothers, father or uncles. In other words, she related to these men as *mahrems*²⁷ and granted herself exception from rules of cover in their presence. In treating orthodox understandings of male-female taboos as flexible, Tajev formulated a personalized understanding of *hijab* requirements. She also challenged the link commonly made between *hijab* and morality by emphasizing that wearing a *hijab* is not what makes a Muslim woman “perfect and good.” This is similar to the argument Elizabeth, above, made when defending other black Muslim women from the criticisms of non-black Muslims.

Zaynab, a white, American convert of over thirty years, also highlighted the idea of *hijab* practice depending on a woman’s social location. Like Tajev, she too lived in Harrisonburg and explained how her styles of cover evolved according to how she was perceived by people in different times and arenas of her life:

I would wear black...people would say, “You’re so young, why are you wearing that?” And I had trouble getting a job covered. I got better results when I wore brighter colors to my interviews, but then when I got to graduate school, I didn’t want to walk around campus looking like a flower all the time, so I started toning it down a little bit.

She added, “I’ve thought about, you know, maybe now that I’m older it’s not necessary, but I decided to continue with it.” Just as Tajev felt *hijab* to be less necessary around her male in-laws, Zaynab, now in her mid-fifties, felt it less necessary as one grew older. There is a widespread assumption (certainly not confined to Muslim groups) that older women are less appealing sexually, resulting preoccupation with shielding their bodies from the male gaze. Alluding to the sexual appetites of men, Zaynab and other participants—including Elizabeth, above—frequently used the word “protection” to describe their headscarves, explaining that it “kept [them] out of danger” or transformed them so that were “no longer an object.” Once she passed a certain age, Zaynab did not feel as much need for such protection.

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Anthropologist Gabriele Marranci notes that Muslims are generally “seen as followers of Islam rather than followers of their desires, imaginations, identities and passions.”²⁸ Examining our participants’ viewpoints and practices with Islam as the focal point would conceal that women who wear *hijab* are, first and foremost, “acting, reacting, thinking, feeling humans”²⁹ whose understandings of *hijab* are adapted to

the realities of their everyday lives. This pragmatism results in notions of cover and modesty that are far from straightforward, always complicated, and often contradictory (for example, Tajeв's use of *hijab* in the United States but not in Iraq).

The issue of readiness, i.e., "becoming ready" to wear the *hijab*, continually revealed the intricacies of the practice. Several participants spoke of wearing *hijab* after much contemplation, only to give it up and then take it up again. This was especially true for Saima, a Bangladeshi-American in her twenties who, at the time of this research, was studying economics and starting a wedding planning business in New York City. During our afternoon visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Islamic World exhibit, she began reflecting on how Muslims are perceived negatively in the United States. She expressed her desire to respond competently to anti-Muslim perceptions in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, including the common allegation that Islam facilitates the oppression of women. It was in this context, she explained, that she began studying Islam and feeling increasingly devout. Initially, she decided to wear the *hijab* to "identify with being a practicing Muslim," as the covering provided her the visibility to challenge representations of Muslims as violent fanatics, and to call attention to the fact that the vast majority of her coreligionists were usual, everyday people like herself. This is not to say that her motivation to cover her hair was purely political. Together, her religious reflections and *halaqa* (religious study group) peers had convinced her that "true" Muslim women should wear *hijab* as a way to stress modesty. Therefore, she indeed dressed in *hijab* out of political concern, but also out of a genuine commitment to piety. This commitment proved fragile over time, as Saima's outlook on modesty shifted. As she said, "...I realized that modesty is immaterial. And after I realized that... I took it [the *hijab*] off." When asked how her ideas of modesty changed, she answered that another group of peers, outside the *halaqa*, introduced her to the idea of modesty being subjective³⁰:

I guess it was the other Muslims in the community... I had a lot of people saying, "You know, this [wearing *hijab*] isn't what modesty is; there are so many different kinds of people." I guess I just didn't hang around those people at the time [at beginning of *hijab*]. When I started, I felt that to identify with a certain faith [Islam], I had to wear *hijab*.

Upon removing her *hijab*, Saima felt anxious about the judgments of certain women who covered, and appeared to harbor some guilt about her inability to commit to the practice. "I don't know how to answer when they say, 'Why did you take it off?' Am I supposed to say, 'Because I wanted to?' I don't want to say that." She resolved these tensions by simply distancing herself from judgmental individuals who were quick to be "the *haram* police"³¹ and exacerbate her feelings of misconduct.

Saima's comments continually showed her as being the "acting, reacting, thinking, feeling" person Marranci refers to, one whose religious practice is informed and swayed not only by her identity politics and social circles, but by her emotions as well. She said of removing her *hijab*, "I felt so weird because I had had it for a whole year before that, so I put it back on." Her final decision to cover was based not on any faith obligation, for as she herself put it, "Even if I took it off, I would be Muslim."³² Nor was it based solely in social obligations or pressures to fit in with other Muslims, for as she realized, "...whatever course of action you choose, you're always going to have critics." In the end, Saima expressed that she wore the *hijab*,

in part, because she had grown accustomed to wearing it. Leaving home without it felt strange, “weird,” as it had become a part of her everyday sense of being. However, habit was not the only factor influencing in her decision, for as she acknowledged, her *hijab* communicated multiple meanings that represented so many of her interests and values that she “couldn’t really put it into words.” She expressed that, ultimately, wearing it simply “felt right” for numerous reasons. She offered, “Maybe it is dogmatic piety and I haven’t really admitted it to myself.” Indeed, as Saba Mahmood found in her study of Egypt’s piety movement, it was through repeated bodily actions such as veiling that particular feelings were cultivated and imprinted in women, and that in the cycle of body learning and body sense, “your body literally comes to feel uncomfortable if you do not veil.”³³

Fluctuations and multiplicity in covering practices, such as those described by our participants, show that Islam is not a culture determining social blueprint,³⁴ therefore, it does not predict that Muslim women will don *hijab* at all, let alone the manner or style in which they will. As almost all of our participants pointed out, covering oneself does not necessarily correlate to religious commitment or morality, there are countless practicing or pious Muslim women who do not subscribe to *hijab* practices, and conversely, many who wear *hijab* that are not austere about other Islamic rituals, such as the five daily prayers or almsgiving. Indeed, Muslims are humans involved in different social actions and interactions that dictate their ways of life, including modes and degrees of religious practice.³⁵ This point was most recently illustrated by a group of young American Muslim women who found themselves embroiled in controversy because of their depictions of *hijab* in American culture.

“SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA”

In December 2013, a production company called Sheikh and Bake Productions, known for its short sketch commentaries on Muslim life, released a video entitled “Somewhere in America,” set to a song of the same name by hip-hop star Jay-Z. The video features a group of Mipsterz, or Muslim hipsters, who are described on their Facebook page as:

...at the forefront of the latest music, fashion, art, critical thought, food, imagination, creativity... someone who seeks inspiration from the Islamic tradition of divine scriptures, volumes of knowledge, mystical poets, bold prophets, inspirational politicians, esoteric Imams, and our fellow human beings searching for transcendental states of consciousness.... We are united not by some identity label, but by our interest in engaging with a tradition in all its myriad forms.

In the Mipsterz video, young Muslim women are seen posing around New York City and other urban settings, frolicking, hanging out, and demonstrating their freedom of movement by partaking

in athletic forms such as fencing, skateboarding, and handstands. They do so while sporting high style, dressed in combinations of leather jackets, tights, high heels, bold jewelry and aviator sunglasses. Each woman is topped with a different style of *hijab*. According to the director of the video, its point is to show fashion forward images of Muslim women (which are indeed absent in media usually inundated with images of *burqas* and other conservative styles of cover).³⁶ Aminah, a model featured in the video, asserted that she took part in it to show that “*hijabis* are human” and that Islam is not homogenous, but “a global religion with about two billion adherents and colorful, historical trajectories.”³⁷

Many Muslims lauded the video for highlighting Muslim diversity and challenging common stereotypes of female oppression in Islam. Many others vociferously critiqued it, most notably Sana Saeed of the *Islamic Monthly* and Dr. Suad Abdul Khabeer of Purdue University. Saeed argued that the video is based on particular mores of what constitutes “normal,” doing so by objectifying Muslim women and going against central tenets of their faith.³⁸ Abdul Khabeer opined that the video, by pairing expensive fashion with a soundtrack of record mogul Jay-Z, promoted capitalism and consumption, and thus presented only a narrow view of who Muslim women are.³⁹ These points were echoed and built upon by countless Muslim critics on the Internet who fiercely debated the concept of *hijab* and the video’s representation of Muslim women.⁴⁰

Reacting to these criticisms, Aminah (the aforementioned model) published a response on the popular religion site *Patheos* in which she interpreted criticisms aimed at the video as “taking away the agency and power” of the fashionistas who modeled in it. She also shared her own history of having worn and struggled with the *hijab*. Coming from a non-orthodox but traditional family, she had once decided to don the headscarf because it was “counter culture, reactionary politics and intertwined to my spiritual development...*hijab* gave me a place to fit in and served as a barrier to intrusive men.” In time, however, Aminah found that her *hijab* made her feel like an outsider and exacerbated feelings of being “not white enough, thin enough or beautiful enough,” and ceased wearing it.⁴¹

From identity politics to curtaining oneself from men, Aminah’s negotiation of *hijab* echoes, in many respects, our research participants’, though it is important to note that, unlike most of our participants, she cites no religious or spiritual pull towards it and emphasizes instead that she wore it as an outward expression of her minority status. Like our participants, she too is caught in a process of (re)negotiation in which her *hijab* use is informed by everyday considerations: she wears it in certain circumstances and not in others—in the Mipsterz video, for example, but not in the author photo that accompanies her response to critics.

Our participants and the Mipsterz show that *hijab* practice, like Islam itself, is highly dynamic in how it is (re)imagined and negotiated in accordance with other aspects of life. Scheilke calls these aspects “grand schemes” which include every realm of life, from capitalism (as in the Mipster video connecting *hijab* to the music industry and fashion) to love (as when the interviewees noted that they wear *hijab* as a means of expressing love of God, husband, or self). In *hijab* practices, then, we can see how secular experiences become meshed with religious ones in innovative ways. Mipster model Keziah Ridgeway spoke of this creativity when explaining the fusion of *hijab* conventions with the contemporary ideals of beauty, femininity, and style seen in the Mipsterz video:

What these women are... what I am, *are our true selves*. We've found a way to merge *our Islam* with our creativity and our view on the world, whether it be loving fashion or loving make up... So the first thing we're doing is being true to ourselves, and we're doing that within the context of Islam... We have to understand that there are different levels of modesty; not all Muslim women are going to dress the same...⁴² [emphasis added]

Ridgeway's notion of a "true" self implies that Islam, while having a place of great importance in Muslim lives, is not the defining factor of Muslim women or their practices. In fact, "the first thing" Ridgeway prioritizes in her statement is not austere religious traditions or divine revelations, but conveying a sense of herself through creative modes such as clothing and other presentation. These modes make her herself: a unique person with unique preferences and habits. She carries out her lifeways within an Islamic paradigm, but that paradigm is subjective ("our" Islam, as she calls it) and allows for individual expressions of *hijab*. As she tells us later in her interview, echoing the essence of what Saima's friends had told her, "*Hijab* is a personal journey, a personal struggle."

CONCLUSION

Following Schielke's suggestion to focus on aspects such as ambivalence, contradictions, and change thwarts a reductive view of women who wear *hijab* that defines them solely as products of Islam and ignores the various pragmatic considerations, emotions, personal experiences, and religious interpretations that go into their decisions to cover. In revealing these complexities, we end up having to present a multitude of messy accounts that are often rife with contradictions. For instance, Elizabeth stringently advocated a particular form of *hijab*, except in moments of identity salience that called for solidarity with other black Muslim women, whose unconventional forms of cover she defended. Tajev saw *hijab* as an order from God with universal applicability, but could not explain why she covered in the United States but not in Iraq. Saima struggled with the meaning of modesty, vacillated in and out of *hijab* practice, and ultimately covered her hair for reasons that she admitted were not yet clear to her.

It can be tempting to iron out such inconsistencies and ambiguities by highlighting common aspects or convergences in participant narratives to validate our theories. In this paper, for example, we could have examined *hijab* in relation to a single analytical category, such as "Islamic values," "Muslim identity," or "Muslim resistance," as these were themes through which the participants could be linked together. However, as anthropologist Daniel Varisco points out, "it's easy to create unity of our diversity but seldom does it serve any analytic purpose."⁴³ In this paper, we chose to highlight differences in opinion about *hijab* among the various participants, and in some instances, shifts in the same participant's opinions over time. Varisco additionally notes that the Western way of viewing Islam has largely been orthopraxy, that is, people

united via practice. As our interviews and the Mipster debates reveal, however, common practices (in this case, wearing a *hijab*) far from eradicate disagreements and uncertainties among Muslims about those very practices. Both our interviews and public discourse about the Mipsterz showed that it is complex, practical, and shifting considerations—rather than any stand-alone religious or moral conviction—that shape *hijab* practice. Focusing on our participants’ commonalities as Muslims, *hijab* wearers, cultivators of piety, or resisters of post-9/11 Islamophobia would have left little room for elucidating the tensions in their everyday lives that inform their varied religious positions and expressions. It would have compromised showing that religious practices are fraught processes in which taken-for-granted values ascribed to faith such as “modesty” are actually negotiated pragmatically and materialize in countless ways.

NOTES

1 Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002): 783-790. Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011). Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “In Afghanistan, US Shifts Strategy on Women’s Rights,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2011. Accessed on June 3, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/05/AR2011030503668.html>

2 See Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution* and Fadwa El-Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (New York, NY: Berg Publishing, 1999).

3 Samuli Schielke, (2010) “Second Thoughts on the Anthropology of Islam, or How to Make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life,” *ZMO Working Papers* (2010): 1-16.

4 Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

5 Benjamin Soares and Filippo Osilla, “Islam, Politics, Anthropology” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 45:1 (2009), pp.1-22; Samuli Schielke, “Second thoughts about an anthropology of Islam, or how to make sense of grand schemes in everyday life.” *ZMO Working Papers*. Vol. 2 (2010).

6 Schielke, “Second Thoughts on the Anthropology of Islam.”

7 Schielke, “Second Thoughts on the Anthropology of Islam,” 2.

8 Schielke, “Second Thoughts on the Anthropology of Islam,” 3.

9 Schielke, Samuli. “Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians.” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. 45:1, pp.24-40 (2009).

10 Schielke, “Second Thoughts on the Anthropology of Islam,” 12.

11 See also Samuli Schielke and Liza Debevec’s *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion* (New York: Berghahn, 2012).

14 Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). Reza Aslan, *No God But God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (New York: Random House, 2005). El-Guindi, *Veil*.

15 *Quran*, 33:53.

16 Mostafa Sherif, “What is *Hijab*?” *The Muslim World* LXXVII (1987): 151-164. It is noteworthy, as El-Guindi (1999) has pointed out, that the verse immediately preceding 24:30 commands men to similarly “lower their gaze” and “cover their genitals”, although 24:31 does broaden the scope of modest behaviors for women.

17 *Quran*, 24:31.

18 Sherif, “What is *Hijab*?”

19 Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* and El-Guindi, *Veil*.

20 Aslan, *No God but God*. Aslan argues that implementing *hijab* for all women was one of the ways men sought to regain the power they had lost due to the prophet’s egalitarian stances.

21 Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2000). Aisha Boulanouar, “The Notion of Modesty in Muslim Women’s Clothing: An Islamic Point of View,” *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 8 (2006): 134-156. El-Guindi, *Veil*. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004). Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

22 Emphasis added.

23 Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press (1999).

24 Some women who identify as Progressive Muslims strategically pray without their heads and/or limbs covered, to challenge standards that place more restrictions on women than on men. However, such efforts to subvert gender norms almost always take place in small, private gatherings rather than in everyday mosques.

25 Here, Elizabeth is referencing the religious command to honor one’s parent, and also the emphasis many Muslim societies place on the blessing that is sharing water with the thirsty.

26 In the past, Kurdish women covered neither their face nor hair. The phenomenon of Kurdish women wearing *hijab* is an innovation of Iraqi Kurdistan, informed by the gradual dissemination of orthodox religious discourse.

27 Male relatives that are ruled out for marriage and pose a low risk of sexual temptation per the Quran passage quoted earlier in this paper.

28 Gabriele Marranci, “Studying Muslims of Europe,” in *Companion to the Anthropology of Europe*, edited by Ullrich Kockel et al. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2012).

29 Gabriele Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam* (New York: Berg Publishing, 2008).

30 Sana Saeed of the *Islamic Monthly* argues that modesty is subjective according to the perspective one subscribes to, for example, one may abide by the Islamic legal perspective (based on different schools of thought and decisions made by scholars and jurists), or community perspectives that stand for particular group ideals, or their own, individual-level perspectives (2013, Al Jazeera).

31 “Haram,” meaning forbidden, refers to things that are prohibited in Islam. “Haram police” is a colloquialism used to define hardline Muslims who constantly point out the sins of others.

32 That the *hijab* is not always correlated to piety is a fact noted by several scholars, including Saba Mahmood (2004) and Lila Abu-Lughod, who wrote in her discussion of Bedouin women, “everyone recognizes that modest dress and even veiling are no guarantee of modesty” (1986, 153).

33 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 158. Schielke (2009) critiques Mahmood’s emphasis on practice for its focus on religious activists at the expense of stories highlighting the experiences of people who were once religious but then experienced ambivalence in relation to religion, particularly in the form of their contradictory urges and wishes.

34 Marranci, “Studying Muslims of Europe.”

35 Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam*.

36 “Beyond the #Mipsterz Video,” Al Jazeera, accessed December 12, 2013, <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201312102302-0023240>

37 Amina Sheikh, “Why I Participated in the ‘Somewhere in America’ #Mipsterz Video,” Patheos, accessed on January 8, 2013, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/2013/12/why-i-participated-in-the-somewhere-in-america-mipsterz-video/>

38 Sana Saeed, “Somewhere in America, Muslim women are ‘Cool’,” *Islamic Monthly*, accessed on December 30, 2013, http://www.theislamicmonthly.com/somewhere-in-america-muslim-women-are-cool/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=somewhere-in-america-muslim-women-are-cool

39 Suad Khabeer, “Somewhere in America?” All I Know is to be a Soldier, For my Culture, accessed on December 3, 2013, <http://drsuad.tumblr.com/post/68745089632/somewhere-in-america-somewhere-in-america-there>

40 The comments section of the official video illustrates these discussions and disputes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68sMkDKMias>

41 Sheikh, “Why I participated in the ‘Somewhere in America’ #Mipsterz Video.”

42 Al Jazeera, “Beyond the Mipsterz Video.”

43 Daniel Varisco, *Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation*, (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 134-35.

