**Developing Methods for the study of dress and religion**

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*My background is in social anthropology and I was trained at a time when most anthropologists still went to live in small communities in far off places to do fieldwork. Accordingly I set off for a village in rural Gujarat to carry out research for my PhD on dress and identity in India. Whilst I learned much there about the intimacies of clothing disputes and practices and what they revealed about caste, class and gender relations in rural India, I was aware that much of what happened in ‘the village’ was informed by wider historical structures and ideas which could not necessarily be grasped purely at the local level. From the start then, I became preoccupied with issues of scale – how could I develop methods sensitive enough to grasp both micro and macro phenomena and to enable me to situate the place I was studying in time and the time I was studying in place. It is one of the key challenges that every anthropologist faces.*

*I have tried to deal with this issue by drawing on what I consider anthropology’s two greatest strengths – an ethnographic sensitivity to detail and a flexible and adaptive approach to the research process. This may involve casting the net wide in terms of possible research material, including such things as government records, archives, photographs, material objects, letters, print media and, more recently, internet sources in combination with fieldwork. It also involves considering these additional sources not only in terms of the ‘evidence’ or ‘facts’ they might generate but also as different types of ethnographic terrain which lend insights into particular preoccupations in time and place.I have always tried to take this multi media approach to research, whether working on dress in colonial and contemporary India (Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India, 1996), politics and state oppression in Delhi (Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in India, 2003) or on contemporary Muslim dress in Britain (Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith, 2010). In each case, my methodological tool box expanded on the ground in relation to where the subject took me. A willingness to follow unanticipated threads is, I believe, central to an ethnographic approach. What follows is a discussion of the challenge of developing methods for the study of ‘religious dress’.*

My interest in religious dress practices emerged from the fact that, living in London in the first decade of the new millennium, I was witness to the growing popularity and variety of forms of dress which marked out their wearers as Muslim. I wanted to understand more about the appeal of dressing ‘Islamically’ at a time when visibly Muslim dress was often treated with suspicion and was subject to an increasing range of restrictions in many European countries. How was Islamic dress was being defined, interpreted and understood by a new generation of Muslims who were displaying and enacting their identity and faith in ways which differed from their parents? Existing approaches to the topic of Muslim dress practices tended to be framed by the disciplinary categories of religion, politics or human rights. In anthropological terms, these categories seemed restrictive both in terms of the methodologies and the analysis they encouraged.

Religion-centred approaches tended to involve the exegesis of language, concepts and prescriptions found in religious texts (Guindi El 1999), the interpretation of religious dress as a form of bodily and social control (Arthur ed. 1999) or the role of dress as embodied ritual practice and technology of the self (Mahmood 2005). Whilst much could be learned from these approaches, there was a tendency to overstate the role of religion as if a person’s choice of dress could be understood purely in terms of obedience to rules, maintenance of boundaries or perfection of ritual practice. Yet none of these interpretations seemed adequate for understanding what it means to visually identify as Muslim at the current time. Nor did they offer insights into the diversity of contemporary Muslim dress practices many of which were more inventive than traditional.

By contrast there were studies which placed politics at the centre and interpreted people’s clothing choices as a form of gender oppression and evidence of the spread of Islamist political ideology (Winter 2001). Here the wearers of Islamic dress were perceived as victims of wider political forces in which they were little more than dupes or pawns. This image simply did not correspond to the reality of a generation of young visibly Muslim women in Britain and Europe whose dress often defied or at least reinterpreted the clothing preferences promoted by religious leaders, patriarchal fathers and political ideologues.

Furthermore, neither religion- nor politics-centred approaches could lend insight into the sheer diversity of Muslim practices and opinions regarding dress, whether in Britain or elsewhere around the world. Whilst young religiously oriented women were making complex material choices and inventing new ways of looking Muslim, their dress was often reduced to little more than whether or not they did or did not, should or should not be wearing headscarves. Whilst such debates highlighted the fact that clothing mattered, ironically they paid almost no attention to the materiality or ‘matter’ of clothes.

How then could one develop methodologies which placed people’s material choices and understandings at the centre? The answer seemed to lie in beginning with the clothes themselves and the people who wore them rather than beginning with religion or politics. If young women were increasingly wearing clothes which marked out their identity and faith, then what exactly were they wearing? How did they make particular choices and what did their clothes mean to them and those with whom they circulated? In taking this approach I was influenced by a long standing tradition within the ‘anthropology of religion’ of putting emphasis on everyday practice rather than scriptural ideals or at least considering textual ideals only in so far as they are put into practice. Obviously not all Muslims wore clothes which revealed their religious identity, but I decided early on that the category of ‘visibly Muslim’ would set the parameters of the research. This category had the advantage of being based on actions rather than origins, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism inherent in studies which reduced people’s behaviour to their ethnic, regional or religious backgrounds. Anyone who dressed in a visibly Muslim way, whether born Muslim or a convert, might be included in the research which would not be restricted to any particular ethnic group.

By putting emphasis on how religiously oriented Muslim women decided what to wear I also wanted to re-humanise a topic which was treated in the media largely in terms of polemics about, gender inequality and social integration. Deciding what to wear was a common concern which everybody faced on a daily basis, and in this respect Muslim women were no different from anyone else. By no longer considering visibly Muslim dress purely in terms of ‘religion’, I could leave space for consideration of a whole range of factors: issues of impression management, social expectations linked to particular spaces and millieux, engagement with fashion, ethics, politics, heritage and aesthetics, and inter-generational concerns – all of which might combine with a person’s religious conviction to play a role in their choice of clothing.

It was clear from the start that qualitative ethnographic methods were going to be central to this study, but ethnography with whom? One option would have been to choose a particular location with a high density of Muslims and to make that the locus of the research. However, I was keen to avoid producing an ‘enclave study’ of a particular ethno-religious community given the global appeal and transnational character of much visibly Muslim dress. Whilst local and community concerns were likely to feature in a person’s choice of dress, so too were other issues such as wider fashion trends, the availability of particular goods in British cities, travel, trans-cultural encounters with other Muslims and non-Muslims, access to new media such as the internet where religious niche markets were proliferating and debate about dress flourishing amongst young Muslims both nationally and internationally. All of these formed part of the wider imaginary and material landscape in which clothing choices were made, so I needed to develop methods and choose locations which would enable me to access the contours and content of this expanding domain.

For this reason I chose to mix pockets of ethnography with individuals and groups from different locations in London with observation of Islamic events, shopping practices and fashion shows which brought together people from different locations. For example, ‘IslamExpo’ and ‘Global Peace and Unity,’ both major international Islamic fairs held in London, drew entrepreneurs, preachers, artists, musicians, shoppers and worshippers from all over the country and around the world. This made them interesting places for meeting Muslims from different regions, including Islamic fashion designers and traders and for tracing how national and international Muslim networks were developed and sustained. Yet ethnographic observations and interviews needed to be combined with other methods if I were to gain access to the wider field in which new Muslim looks were being created and debated. It was here that the study of internet sources played an important role, opening up a different type of ethnographic terrain which complemented direct observations in important ways. What follows is a discussion of the combination of methods employed.

**Observations and Mappings**

Since visibly Muslim dress makes a visual intervention in public space, it made sense to begin with observations. What was worn and where? This involved wandering around different areas of London and simply observing how people dressed in different public spaces, including shops, markets, mosques, schools, high streets, universities, buses and parks in different areas. This act of looking was important for challenging my own preconceived ideas and assumptions, making me aware of the sheer diversity of visibly Muslim dress practices worn on the streets of London, from full head to toe black garments to trendy outfits which combined elements of ethnic or mainstream ‘Western’ fashions with headscarves, tied in an increasing variety of styles, often layered and decorated with hijab pins. This made it abundantly clear from the start that the headscarf was not only an object of piety or politics but also an object of aesthetic elaboration and stylistic concern. Observing the different types of outfits worn in the streets also made it clear that young Muslims were engaging with mainstream fashion in all sorts of ways, creating layered outfits from garments purchased in shops like H&M and Zara. Contrary to the impression created in media representations, there was very little that was ‘traditional’ in many of their outfits.

These casual observations were sometimes supplemented by simple exercises such as sitting in a cafe and counting how many people wore what on a particular afternoon. This was not a scientific exercise but gave me a basic idea of the density of particular trends in certain areas, lending insights into the subtle geographies of dress in London where face veiling, for example, is fairly common practice in some areas with large immigrant populations but totally absent in others. Whilst I usually carried a camera on these occasions I was reluctant to take photographs of individuals without asking their permission, although I did often snap street scenes showing people’s dress from behind or at a distance in order to compile images for reference purposes. Later, when I joined a Norface funded collective project directed by Annelies Moors on the emergence of Islamic fashion in Europe, photographing high street scenes became a regular feature of the research with people taking photographs at regular intervals of shopping streets in the different research sites of Holland, Denmark, Germany, Sweden and Britain. This enabled comparison of how Islamic fashions were developing in different locations across Europe.

Simultaneous with the on-going exercise of looking and recording was the act of sensing the different atmospheres generated by particular clothing repertoires. This involved recognition of the extent to which dress practices form part of the urban landscape and play an important role in defining the feeling and texture of particular spaces. This was an issue which also featured prominently in women’s narratives of when and where they felt ‘in’ or ‘out’ of place dressed in particular ways. From these narratives one gained a sense of the normative pressures attached to ‘blending in’ and the difficulties, challenges and responsibilities attached to ‘sticking out’ as visibly Muslim in different areas.

**Ethnographic Encounters**

Whilst scanning the visual field remained an important part of the study throughout, so too did other more interactive ethnographic methods: qualitative unstructured interviews with individuals, group discussions, photo and object elicitation, wardrobe analysis and documentation of religious commercial outlets. I met research participants through a variety of channels: community centres, conferences, Islamic events, protest marches, shops and through personal contacts. Through internet searches I also identified key figures involved in designing, marketing and promoting Islamic fashion, enabling me to track the development and growth of Islamic fashion enterprises in Britain and online. Interviewees were usually very willing to open up networks of additional contacts, so finding people to participate in the research was not difficult. Initial introductions usually involved my explaining the project and its interest in some detail. I was highly aware of how many Muslim women felt misrepresented in the media and did not like being perceived as walking headscarves or emblems of unchanging tradition. It was therefore particularly important to explain why this project was different.

I often rather dreaded these initial introductions, not wanting to contribute to people’s sense of being targeted. However, taking time to discuss research ideas in detail with potential participants gave people a way of identifying with the project and many were not only willing but also enthusiastic about participating. There was a shared sense of learning in these ethnographic exchanges as many women took the research as an opportunity for self-reflection which enabled them to vocalise long term pre-occupations and concerns about dress. People talked openly about the benefits and burdens of being visibly Muslim; the issue of how to convert potentially negative attention into positive interest through a judicious manipulation of style, the importance of clothing as a form of embodied religious practice and tensions concerning degrees of covering and interpretations of modesty.

Whilst first meetings were often about contextualising the research, subsequent meetings were usually more intimate and private, taking place in people’s homes or at locations chosen by research participants. Following methods initially developed during my research on Indian dress (Tarlo 1996), and further developed by other anthropologists of material culture (Bannerjee and Miller 2004, Woodward 2007) I focussed on eliciting sartorial biographies, encouraging participants to reflect on the different clothes they had worn at different stages of their lives and on the meaning of transformations in style. This method was ideal for unearthing the rich complexity of clothing dilemmas and the diversity of meanings people attached to particular forms of dress at different stages of their lives.

It was rare to find young women simply wearing what their mothers had worn. Many had experienced feelings of alienation and stigma in childhood when encouraged to wear various forms of ethnic dress by their parents and many had tried to resist this in favour of popular ‘Western’ styles. It was only later in their late teens or early 20’s that many had started to dress in ways they considered ‘Islamic’, usually by adopting hijab and paying closer attention to covering arms and legs in an attempt to put Islamic ideas of modesty into practice. In all cases the decision to adopt hijab had been accompanied by considerable levels of anxiety regarding how they would be perceived by others, both Muslim and non Muslim. Motivations for dressing Islamically included wishing to make a public declaration of faith, desire to fulfil koranic ideals of modesty and covering, the pleasure of community recognition, the importance of being protected, the desire to impose a form of self restraint and the daily challenge of doing something difficult for God.

Here one encountered how religious ideals were put into practice through dress. Yet young women were often frustrated by the hierarchies of piety and self righteousness attached to certain forms of dress and wished to take distance from the more austere or sanctimonious interpretations of Islamic dress promoted in religious pamphlets or by conservative clerics. Here fashion played an important role in enabling young women to maintain continuity between their pre and post hijab days and to remain in touch with wider cosmopolitan tastes.

Whilst sartorial biographies were verbal accounts which I taped with the permission of participants, they were often prompted by looking at and touching material artefacts such as photographs and items of clothing. I went through photographic albums and wardrobes of clothes with some participants, treating these as personal archives which contained or recorded visual and material elements of the self from different time periods. The objects acted as mnemonic devices, enabling people to recall particular periods, events, ideas and relationships with which certain items of clothing were associated. They also provided insight into the diversity of styles which might be won by a single individual and highlighted levels of engagement with mainstream fashion.

From these intimate fieldwork encounters I was taught about the diversity of possible ways of tying hijab and learned about the techniques by which women converted it from mere agent of modesty into an object of beauty and symbol of Muslim pride. Some women spoke of the discipline of hijab and how the feel of the cloth on one’s head acted as a constant reminder of one’s faith and of the need to behave in a restrained, respectable and responsible manner, not least because one became representative of Muslims. They spoke also of the ambivalent effects of hijab: how it was intended to protect women from the male gaze but how it sometimes seemed to perform the opposite function. Clearly the issue of ‘impression management’ and the problem of how to signal the right message to different audiences was a major preoccupation.

**Internet Ethnography**

Whilst the internet had not played a role in my earlier research projects, it was central to this project in numerous ways: as a source of information, a site of image projection and debate, a means of communication with and between participants as well as being the locus of online Islamic clothing stores and blogs. In many ways it provided an alternative ethnographic terrain for it was here that new and old visibly Muslim looks were being proposed, contested, classified, negotiated, promoted and debated.

Some ethnographers may be sceptical of treating online debates as a source of ethnographic information, partly because of problems over the veracity of online identities, but also no doubt because anthropologists have tended to assume that intimate knowledge can only be gained through close physical contact, preferably through the researcher living with the people concerned. Yet to ignore internet discussions would have been a major methodological error in a context where the internet is playing a central role in the production of Muslim looks both nationally and internationally. Furthermore there were certain advantages to be gained from the physical absence of the researcher in discussions. Whilst in interview situations people might be inhibited in expressing certain opinions to an outsider, this was not the case in internet discussion forums on Islamic websites where communications were taking place between people of the same faith who seemed at liberty to discuss opinions freely precisely because they were not face to face with their interlocutors.

By following online debates on dress I could gain considerable insight into social and psychological aspects of the sartorial dilemmas and preoccupations of young Muslim women without influencing the shape of the discussion by my own research preoccupations. Here access to intimate knowledge seemed to be enabled rather than prohibited by distance. This was a free space where clothing ideas were being explored, fashion tips exchanged, ideological positions disputed, religious textual knowledge interrogated, highly personal domestic clothing controversies shared, shopping advice offered, images of possible outfits pasted up for discussion and news of events from Islamic fairs, religious or political lectures and meetings and fashion shows posted.

Having access to the vast body of discussions taking place over the web offered a sense of proportion and scale, providing a kind of meta-ethnographic material which enabled me to better understand and contextualise interviews and encounters off the web. In this sense data generated from virtual and non virtual worlds proved mutually reinforcing. However the internet also posed huge methodological challenges not least because of the sheer enormity of possibilities it offered. Which websites should I consult? How often? How might I capture material which was constantly being updated? How could I ever keep abreast with such an expandable beast? In my case this problem was compounded by the fact that Muslim dress practices were caught up in a series of controversies which gained them massive and often disproportionate media coverage. I soon learned, however, that reading every article on these controversies and the responses to them on the web was not very productive as the debates were often predictable and repetitive. Far richer material could be gained from interactive forums. So learning what not to follow became as important as learning what to follow online.

The method I chose was to select a few websites which represented different types of Muslim opinion and to consult these regularly as well as referring back to any archived discussions they had on dress. For example, on one British website the ‘sisters section’ contained 2,500 pages worth of online discussion threads relating to dress which I downloaded and printed out for ease of reading. I then used a simple colour code to identify different recurring themes: domestic disputes, hijabi fashion tips, debates about face veiling etc. . Whilst this was a site which offered a space for democratic exchange, others offered advice from ‘experts’ such as religious scholars or psychologists. For example the Qatar based website, Islamonline.net, contained intimate discussion of clothing issues in a number of different fora: the Live Discussion Forum, the Cyber Counselor section and the Live Fatwa and Fatwa Bank. Here one could get a sense of global interactions, tracing how individuals in different locations around the world, including Britain, might consult imams and psychologists based as far away as Qatar or the United States over highly personal and local clothing dilemmas.

Finally, since much Islamic fashion commerce took place over the web, I was able to contact entrepreneurs and designers by email, arranging to meet them and interview them in person if they were based in Britain or by email if located further afield. Contrary to what I had assumed, I found that discussions through email could be highly informative as research participants had time to reflect on questions in some depth and often provided long and reflexive answers. In some cases people I first interviewed by email would turn up at Islamic events in London so I was able to develop further knowledge of them and their products. This work was supplemented by analysis of how Islamic fashion was visualised and represented in online Islamic fashion stores and blogs.

The extent to which the domain of online activity relating to Islamic dress expanded during the time period of the research (2004-10) was striking, making the question of how to trace and classify such information increasingly challenging. From 2010-2011 I became involved in an AHRC funded project on Modest Fashion and Internet Retail which looks at the connections and divergences between Jewish, Muslim and Christian online traders and bloggers promoting modest fashion. For this project, directed by Reina Lewis from the London School of Fashion, it became essential to encapsulate information in such a way that it could be shared by researchers. Here, Jane Cameron, post doctoral researcher on the project, played a crucial role in developing methods for tracing and encapsulating the slippery, expansive, interconnected and fast changing world of blogs, tweets, online retailers and so forth. Using a variety of research engines found through webcrawler, she was able to identify and create an Excel data base of relevant blogs and online retailers, encapsulating the key facts, links and images concerning each one on a single page for ease of access. By signing up for Google alerts relating to relevant phrases and to a programme called ‘tidy favourites’ which provides live information from selected websites, she was able to keep pace with the speed of information generation online. Attempts were also made to establish an online interactive discussion forum which was intended to take place over a period of two days, enabling collective dialogue between entrepreneurs involved in marketing modest fashions in Britain and the USA. The idea was to integrate the interactive and communicative possibilities of the web into the research process. However we were beset with technical problems which reminded us of some of the difficulties of relying on advanced technology.

**Visual Techniques and Analysis**

Since all clothing involves material assemblages, bodily performances, image projection and reception and the manipulations of colour, texture and form, it was important to develop methods which gave sufficient attention to issues of visuality and materiality. The fact that visibly Muslim dress is partly about Islamic ideas of modesty, privacy and bodily concealment and the fact that many of the companies advertising Islamic fashion choose not to show the faces of models on their websites meant that I was anticipating that some participants would be reluctant to be photographed. This was the case with a few of the more conservatively-dressed women. However, many participants were happy to be photographed. The interactive nature of the digital camera was helpful here for it enabled people to view their own images on screen and participate in the image selection process. Whilst I had sought oral permission from participants at the time of interviews I later found out that my publisher expected written permission so this is something worth considering from the start with a project of this kind.

In addition to taking pictures during the fieldwork, I asked interviewees to look through their own personal collections and to email me any images of themselves that they were happy to share. In this way I accumulated digital images of people in different circumstances rather than relying purely on the more contrived portraits I had taken. It also meant I learned what people wore at different times and how they wished to be represented. I would often open my inbox to find pictures of young Muslim women on holiday, relaxing with friends or attending a wedding. As Sarah Pink has pointed out, anthropological image-making is a two way process that takes place in the context of relationships built during the research (Pink 2007) This makes it quite different to the image-grabbing characteristic of some press photography. In the end it was not obtaining photographs that proved difficult but rather having to exclude certain images from publication after people had taken the trouble to share them.

My decision to publish large numbers of images, and the enthusiasm of research participants to send me photographs, was linked in part to a desire shared by both researcher and researched to challenge the existing monotone images and associated stereotypes found in newspapers, films and on book covers. Drawing the readers’ attention to diversity, nuance and details of colour, texture and style was in this sense a political act. In particular, by including coloured sequences which focussed on the acts of shopping and tying hijab I wished to draw attention to the creative and aesthetic aspects of visibly Muslim dress rather than simply reducing it to a matter of rules and restrictions. Here religion, politics and aesthetics were intimately bound together in a person’s choice of self presentation. Many women spoke of their desire to look modern and fashionable partly in terms of creating a positive image for Muslims but also in terms of integrating ethics (including ideas of modesty, privacy, concealed sexuality and gender separation) with aesthetics. Here a skilful use of colour, texture and form became a means of negotiating a new public image both at an individual and community level. This was also an important theme for designers and those involved in marketing new Islamic fashions over the web. They too were concerned to promote aesthetically pleasing ways of looking Muslim and were also generous about sharing images for publication.

In addition to photography, the research involved analysing the existing repertoire of images of Muslim appearances available in both Muslim and non-Muslim media. By surveying a large repertoire of images it was possible to see how images of women in hijab, jilbab and niqab were often used in the media as a visual shorthand to suggest that Muslims are ‘unmodern’, refuse to ‘integrate’, are linked to terrorism or in need of rescue. By comparing representations of visibly Muslim dress from different sources (national news papers, religious pamphlets, Muslim life style magazines, Islamist political groups, children’s books, government leaflets, TV and film, Islamic fashion websites and blogs), it was possible to further ascertain the contested nature of Muslim appearances both within and outside Muslim communities. Again, this confirmed the assertion that there is no such obvious category as ‘Muslim dress’ and that the category of ‘religious dress’ does itself require interrogation.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, ‘religious dress’ has often been studied within the context of religious scripture and ritual practice where it seems tradition-bound and conservative. However, by employing a mixture of visual, oral and interactive ethnographic methods and by paying attention to virtual and material matters, it becomes possible to gain access to the wider significance of religious dress practices in the contemporary world. While the discussion above has focused exclusively on Muslim women’s attire, there is of course scope for employing similar methods in the study of the dress of men and women of different religious faiths.

**Questions to author:**

**Can you explain how you defined ‘visibly Muslim’: did this involve looking *and* asking, and did your criteria change over the course of the project as you learned more?**

**The category of ‘visibly Muslim’ was never defined in any rigid way either by me or the participants in the research. It was something we discussed not in terms of trying to create definitions but in relation to understanding the challenges and dilemmas of being visually associated with a particular religious group. What became clear in the course of the research was that the category operated differently in different circumstances. For example, some clothing choices were deliberately ambiguous, enabling their wearers to be recognised as visibly Muslim by other Muslims but not necessarily by outsiders.**

**It is interesting to note how deeply *social* dressing (and other ‘body practices’) often are – we dress forother people, with relationships in mind etc. Why do you think issues of fashion, body management etc. are often characterised in academic and other circles as individualistic?**

**I think clothing has been treated very differently in different academic traditions. Whereas fashion studies have tended to place too much emphasis on the individualistic nature of fashion designers and clothing choices, anthropological studies conventionally did the opposite and saw clothing almost entirely as a social phenomenon. However these boundaries have been breaking down for some time now. Today there is interesting work in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, fashion studies and cultural studies which address the tensions between individual and social elements of fashion and body management. The notion that fashion is all about the expression of individuality is, however, powerfully projected by the fashion media and remains an appealing idea to many in societies where individuality and freedom of expression are highly valorised.**

**Questions to reader:**

**What do the different methods used in this research separately provide, and how can the different kinds of information they elicit be brought together?**

**How is a research question(s) selected? Often, as in this research, many factors are in play including (a) the personal interests, experience and expertise of the author (b) topical issues and perceived problems in wider society, e.g. stereotyping (c) a desire to improve knowledge of a neglected or misunderstood area (d) an ethical concern to produce benefits or reduce harms (e) funding and other practical opportunities. Chapters in Part 3 offer further reflections on these issues. It is useful to be conscious and self-critical about these factors in relation to one’s own research.**

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