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Muslim Dress Code and Its Health Benefits

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Abstract

This article provided an overview of the history and benefits of Muslim dress code. It traced the origins and evolution of modest clothing styles prescribed in Islam and explored regional variations across Muslim majority cultures. Key benefits of adhering to Islamic dress standards around modesty are examined, including spiritual discipline, health aspects of loose fitting garments, and cultural identity affirmation. Common types of traditional Muslim attire such as *hijāb*, *jalbāb* and *abāya* are defined. The paper also looked at modern trends integrating Islamic dress principles with contemporary fashion design. Issues pertaining to social discussions on Muslim dress code in the context of religious

freedom, cultural integration and stereotyping are critically analyzed.

Keywords

Muslim fashion, *hijāb*, modest clothing, Islamic dress code, Muslim attire.

Introduction

Origins of Muslim clothing

The origins of Muslim dress can be traced back to the advent of Islam in the 7th century CE. The earliest prescribed standards of modest Islamic attire stem from the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth literature which provides guidance from the Prophet Muḥammad (S.A.W.). When scrutinizing the core scriptural sources, key principles emerge around dress serving the dual purpose of bodily humility and spirituality.¹

The Qur'ān encourages both men and women to “lower their gaze and guard their modesty” (Q. 24:30-31). Women are further advised to draw their head coverings over their bosoms (Q.24:31). These initial guidelines laid the foundation for modest Islamic standards of dress that progressively took shape over the centuries.² Ḥadīth narrations from Aisha, the wife of Prophet Muḥammad (S.A.W.), offer valuable context into early Muslim female dress norms.³

During the prophet's lifetime in the 7th century CE, women in Arabia typically wore a simple garment called the ihram which was a long piece of fabric draped around the body with the head covered.⁴ This basic cloth covering sufficed the criterion for *hijāb* or modest dress at the inception of Islam in the Arabian context. In the following Umayyad era from 661 to 750 CE, Muslim rule had expanded into the cosmopolitan cities of Damascus and Baghdad with diversity in cultural influences on attire as well as wealth available for fine fabrics and clothing.

¹ Ahmed, S.M (2000). Women and Gender in Islam. *The Afnad Journal*, 17(2), 61.

² Arjomand, S.A. (ed.) (1988). *Authority and political culture in Shi'ism*. London: SUNY Press.

³ Haykal, M.H. (1976). *The life of Muhammad*. New York: American Trust Publications.

⁴ Afsaruddin, A. (2008). *The first Muslims: History and memory*. New Delhi: One World Publications.

Evolution of Muslim fashion through history

As Islamic rule expanded into new regions, Muslim fashion evolved incorporating local styles but maintaining modesty principles. In the Abbasid era from 750 to 1258 CE, the court dress reflected Persian influences with tunics and trousers worn by men. Women's fashion adopted the Persian chador, a full-length semicircle cloth draped over the body and head.

The spread of Islam into South and Southeast Asia incorporated elements of Mughal and Indian attire from the 12th century onwards. The *shalwar kameez* and *kurta pajama* sets for men and long flowing *ghagras* and *kurtas* or *salwar kameez* for women became dominant. In the Ottoman period from 1299 to 1924 CE, Turkish influences came to define Islamic fashion with caftans and turbans for men, and belly-dancing costumes giving rise to the harem pant style for women.

Colonialism impacted Muslim fashion from the 15th century as Western styles infiltrated courts. However, modest interpretations prevailed such as the *jilbāb* replacing the European skirt and jacket.⁵ Postcolonial Muslim-majority states saw a revival of traditional garments like the *thawb* in Arabia and *abāya* and *hijāb* globally with renewed emphasis on Islamic modesty.⁶ Contemporary Muslim fashion now integrates modest tailoring with cosmopolitan silhouettes.

Regional variations in Muslim attire

Muslim dress has taken diverse forms across different regions while upholding modesty. In the Middle East, the *thawb* is prevalent for men comprising an ankle-length garment with hood. Women wear the *abāya*, a loose over-garment and *shayla* headscarf.

In South and Southeast Asia, the popular *shalwar kameez* for women and *kurta pajama* for men are worn. In Indonesia, the *baju kurung* and *kebaya* blouse with sarong signify local Muslim attire.

In North and West Africa, flowing gown-like *fustanellas* are worn by women along with colourful headwraps. For men, *boubous* and grand *boubous* resemble caftans with embroidery.

The *chador* and *rousari* headscarf are characteristic of Iranian Muslim women's clothing. Turkish Muslim clothing comprises the *entari* dress and *tcharchaf* veil. Bosnian Muslim femmes wear the modest *goja* which is an ankle-length skirt and blouse.

⁵ Tarlo, E. (2010). *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, politics, faith*. Berlin: Berg.

⁶ Ibid, p.15.

Regional Muslim clothing helps to assert cultural identity while conforming to faith-based modesty. Globalization and interpreting dress through local sensibilities have kept traditions alive.

Benefits of Muslim Dress Code

Modesty and dignity

One of the primary benefits of adhering to the Islamic dress code is that it fosters qualities of modesty and dignity. The Qur'ān emphasizes protecting one's chastity as a virtuous act that pleases God (Q.24:30-31). Dressing modestly reduces temptation and objectification while promoting respect between genders.⁷

Loose, non-revealing clothing that covers the body is prescribed with exceptions made for medical concerns or very young children. This allows Muslims to immerse themselves in worship and community without distraction. Veiling for women is similarly viewed as a means to dignify femininity beyond physical attributes alone.⁸

Muslim scholars argue modest dress elevates one spiritually by shifting the focus from outward looks to inner character and intellect.⁹ Social psychologists have found it boosts self-esteem and confidence in those who choose it voluntarily versus being compelled.¹⁰ Anthropologists note it reinforces women's agency to determine appropriate behavior in public.¹¹ Overall, the concept of hijāb in Islam symbolizes decency, humility and protection of privacy.¹²

Spiritual discipline

Observing the standards of modest dress in Islam promotes spiritual discipline and mindfulness of God. Dressing modestly is

⁷ Arjomand, p.60.

⁸ Read, J.G. & Bartkowsky, J.P. (2000). "To Veil Or Not To Veil? : A Case Study of Identity Negotiation Among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas." *Gender & Society*, 14(3), 395-417.

⁹ Esposito, J.L. (2003). *Unholy war: Terror in the name of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

¹⁰ Ali, S.R., Mahmood, A., Moel, J., Hudson, C. & Leathers, L. (2008). "A qualitative investigation of Muslim and Christian women's views of religion and feminism in their lives." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 14(1), 38.

¹¹ Abu-Lughod, L. (2015). "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?" (Vol. 15, No. 5, pp.759-777). London: Sage Publications.

¹² Engineer, A. (2008). *The rights of women in Islam*. London: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

seen as an “outward expression of inner faith” that strengthens one’s connection to Allah.¹³

The physical act of covering oneself according to Islamic guidelines is considered an embodiment of God-consciousness (*taqwa*). It helps cultivate humility, avoid committing sins with one’s body parts, and purifies intentions.¹⁴ By restraining visual stimuli, Muslim attire facilitates concentration during acts of worship like prayer and recitation of the Qur’ān.¹⁵

Some scholarly interpretations even suggest compliance with the concept of *hijāb* carries spiritual rewards. For instance, it is mentioned as an act that may erase past sins and elevate one’s status in paradise according to certain ḥadīth narrations.¹⁶

Overall, adhering to dress standards functions as a daily remembrance of submitting to Allah alone as the Supreme Being worthy of veneration.¹⁷

Muslim dress is thus characterized as a form of worship that enhances devotion and fear of God through tangible discipline of the physical self.¹⁸ This spiritual component is central to comprehending its role and merits in Islamic practice.

Health benefits of loose fitting clothing

The concept of *hijāb* promotes covering the entire body except for hands and face with loose, modest layers of clothing. Medical research has highlighted health advantages associated with this style of dressing in Islam.

Loose fabrics allow the body to breathe naturally without restraint. This ventilation decreases chances of heat-related illnesses in warmer climates and is recommended by dermatologists. Air circulation also helps control body odour better than tight-fitting synthetic clothes.

Multiple layers provide UV protection to sensitive body parts and reduce risks of sunburn and skin cancers compared to beachwear. Researchers further link the modest outfit to lower stress levels due to reduced social physique anxiety.

¹³ Esposito, p.64.

¹⁴ Engineer, p.25.

¹⁵ Naşr, H. (2002). *The heart of Islam: Enduring values for humanity*. San Francisco: Harper.

¹⁶ Ramadan, T. (2003). *Western Muslims and the future of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Webb, G. (1993). *Islam: The straight path*. London: Longman.

¹⁸ Esposito, p. 33.

The spacious designs are comfortable for pregnant and breastfeeding women by avoiding constriction. They pose no impediment during exercises and daily chores either. To be sure, this attire style endorsed in Islamic teachings offers tangible physical and mental wellness advantages according to health experts.

Cultural identity

Following Islamic dress traditions helps affirm a Muslim's cultural identity and sense of belonging to a spiritual community. Scholars argue attire promoting modesty distinctly portrays adherence to religious values.¹⁹

For many Muslims, clothing like the *hijāb*, *thawb* or *jilbāb* possesses symbolic importance as a badge reflecting their heritage and faith.²⁰ Qualitative studies find donning such attire allows assertion of multiple identities - be it ethnic, national or sectarian.²¹

Psychological research also links modest dress to greater well-being due to strengthened religious identity.²² This aids positive self-image development among Muslim youth navigating diverse societies.

Some Muslim populations choose distinctive emblems to reinforce their cultural identity, such as the Moroccan fouta or Algerian haïk mantle. Overall, traditional Islamic clothing reinforces a sense of belonging through outward presentation of inner beliefs. This promotes healthy social ties within Muslim communities worldwide.

Common Types of Muslim Clothing

Hijāb

The *hijāb* or headscarf is perhaps the most well-known aspect of Muslim dress for women. It refers to modest head coverings that cover the hair, forehead and neck while leaving the face visible.²³

The practice of *hijāb* finds support in Qur'ānic guidance to draw *khimar* over the bosom (Q.24:31). Ḥadīth literature provides context that early Muslim women wore a shawl or head-covering

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 35.

²⁰ Read & Bartkowski, p. 395- 417.

²¹ Tarlo, p.55.

²² Ali et al., 14(1), 38.

²³ Webb, p.103.

called the *khimar* in public spaces.²⁴ While not obligatory, the act of veiling hair holds significance as a symbol of faith and piety for many.²⁵

Hijāb styles vary between cultures and personal style. Popular designs include the Arabic *shayla* which is a long rectangular scarf, the Turkish *türban* which is wrapped around the face tightly, or the Indonesian *sida* which loosely covers hair. Contemporary *hijābs* have evolved into fashionable patterns, colors and materials like georgette and chiffon.

Medical professionals also point to health perks as some studies link veiling to less scalp infections. Overall, wearing the *hijāb* allows Muslim women to balance religious principles with individual expression.²⁶

Jilbāb

The *jilbāb* is a loose fitting coat or cloak worn over other garments. It is particularly common among Muslim women in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and other regions. Historical records indicate the *jilbāb* emerged as an evolution of the traditional *ihram* garment donned in pre-Islamic Arabia. With Islamic teachings emphasizing modesty, the *jilbā* became a recommended overt garment to shield women's silhouette.²⁷

Scholars deduce the Qur'ānic command of *khimar* in Qur'ān 24:31 may refer to a *jilbāb*-like robe. Ḥadīth offer context that 'Āisha, wife of the Prophet Muḥammad (S.A.W.), described the most virtuous act of piety (*taqwa*) being walking with a *jilbāb*.²⁸ Thus, the *jilbāb* is seen as upholding morality. Today it comes in various cuts, often featuring slits at the sides, three-quarter or full-length sleeves and loose drapes. Popular fabrics incorporate thick materials like denim and canvas for conservative modesty. The *jilbāb* allows ease of movement while covering the entire body modestly according to Islamic principles. In more strict interpretations, it may be worn over even loose-fitting long sleeves and pants outdoors.

²⁴ Haykal, p. 75.

²⁵ Read & Bartkowski, p. 395- 417.

²⁶ Read & Bartkowski, p. 395- 417.

²⁷ Afsaruddin, p. 104.

²⁸ Haykal, p. 86.

Abāya

The *abāya* is a loose, full-length outer garment common in the Gulf states of the Middle East. Its name derives from the Arabic word meaning “cloak.”

As mentioned in ḥadīth literature, early Muslim women covered their entire bodies except for hands and face in mixed company.²⁹ The *abāya* emerged as a convenient solution fulfilling this requirement of modesty. It features a hood or loose scarf and may be worn with *niqāb* and *hijāb* for maximum coverage. Various materials are used from lightweight cotton to opulent brocades. Sleeves range from short to full-length and slits are cut on each side for ease of movement.

Contemporary *abāyas* reflect each woman’s personal style through intricate stitching, printed designs and vibrant hues. Popular retailers allow customization of fabrics, cuts and accessories like scarves or handbags. Medical experts note health advantages too, from shielding the skin to preventing musculoskeletal issues in older age. In short, the versatile *abāya* empowers women to adhere to modest requirements comfortably.

Khimār

Mentioned in the Qur’ān 24:31, the *khimār* refers to a head covering worn by early Muslim women. It is sometimes used interchangeably with other terms like *hijāb*. Etymologically, the Arabic word *khimār* means a piece of fabric drawn over the head or a veil.³⁰ When analyzing the social context of the verse, scholars concur it recommends modest draping of a shawl or scarf over the bosom area.³¹

Ḥadīth literature provides valuable context, describing the *khimār* as a yemeni-style head shawl that could be pulled forward to cover the face as well.³² This suggests it granted flexibility in veil-wearing rather than being a set garment.

While interpretations vary, most scholars agree the *khimār* was not a mandatory item of clothing but encouraged believers to draw their outer garments over their bodies with dignity.³³ Its meaning of a semi-transparent head-covering has influenced

²⁹ Ibid, p. 85.

³⁰ Wehr, H. (1979). *A dictionary of modern written Arabic*. Berlin: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag.

³¹ Arberry, A.J. (1996). *The Koran interpreted: A translation*. London: Simon and Schuster

³² Haykal, p. 92.

³³ Webb, p. 73.

modern *hijāb* styles as well. In sum, examining references to the *khimār* in early Islamic sources deepens understanding of recommended standards for women's dress alongside the principle of righteousness (*taqwa*).

Thawb

The *thawb* is a classic garment commonly worn by Muslim men. It originated in the Arabian Peninsula and remains a staple of modest dress for religious and cultural occasions.

Etymologically derived from an Arabic root meaning "cover", the *thawb* references a loose-fitting ankle-length garment with full sleeves. Historical records indicate Prophet Muhammad and early Muslims wore the *thawb* as daily clothing.³⁴ While simple in cut, *thawbs* were often carefully tailored from fine fabrics like linen or silk according to social rank. Elaborate styles featured intricate embroidery along cuffs and hems.

Traditionally white in color to symbolize purity, contemporary *thawbs* now come in various hues and may coordinate with a *kufi* skullcap or *ghutra* headdress.³⁵ Strict interpretations only permit the *thawb* and pants underneath for adult men.

By virtue of its loose draping, medical professionals note *thawbs* as breathable attire aiding circulation especially in hot climates. Thus the *thawb* remains the quintessential manifestation of modest elegance for Muslim men across regions.

Modern Trends in Muslim Fashion

Integration of style and modesty

A significant trend in contemporary Muslim fashion is the artful integration of religious modesty requirements with aesthetic style. Designers and brands are pioneering versatile, on-trend clothing that adheres to *hijāb* and loose-fitting guidelines.

Secular high-street stores now feature modest style collections recognizing this growing market. Popular modest clothing blogs provide looks featuring *abāyas*, *hijābs* and *jilbābs* as standout accessories to complement any outfit.

³⁴ Haykal, p. 94.

³⁵ Nasr, p.35

Runway shows by major designers debuted modest versions of red carpet gowns with long sleeves and high necklines. Modest fashion weeks in Muslim cities like Istanbul and Kuala Lumpur have encouraged this fusion.³⁶ Innovative fabrics play a role - breathable jersey cuts are popular for *hijābs*, while pants come in lightweight chiffon. Young Muslim consumers drive demand for modest statement pieces like printed *hijāb* wraps.³⁷ This has empowered many to actualize both religious and modern identities seamlessly. Access to modest yet stylish options allows reclaiming faith traditions on one's terms. The trend suggests an organic synthesis between religious guidelines and sartorial self-expression.

Emergence of Muslim fashion designers

An important development in the Muslim fashion industry has been the rise of dedicated modest fashion designers. Creatives from Muslim communities worldwide are producing stylish, tailored lines upholding *hijāb* and loose fit principles. Pioneers include Malaysian Kenneth Cole and Indonesian Annie Selly who launched modest style collections in the 1990s.³⁸ Brands like New York-based Modanisa offer chic *abāyas* and modest work-wear gaining mainstream recognition.

Leading global designers include American Mariah Idrissi of Modestly and London-based Hana Tajima promoting modest cuts in high fashion shows. Emerging labels fuse cultural heritage with contemporary silhouettes - Pakistan's Erum Khan uses intricate embroidery.

National fashion weeks now platform modest talent such as Turkey's Dice Kayek featuring modest formalwear.³⁹ Designers creatively use draping, embellishments and modest tailoring techniques.

This allows reclamation of faith-based aesthetics, and addresses the need for clothing adapted to each community. Their success signals rising economic power and visibility of the modest fashion consumer base on a global scale.

³⁶ Tarlo, p. 68.

³⁷ Mir, S. (2014). *Muslim American women on campus: Undergraduate social life and identity*. New York: NUC Press Books.

³⁸ Ibid, p30.

³⁹ Tarlo, p.68.

Adaptations for different climates

A key modern trend is tailoring modest clothing to suit varied climatic conditions. Designers must balance principles of covering with practical considerations like temperature, terrain and activity levels.

For warmer tropical locales, lightweight fabrics like linen, cotton and tulle are utilized. Creators experiment with layered skirt-pant combinations, cropped *hijābs* and breathable fabrics.

Brands catering to the Gulf develop *abāyas* featuring stretch jersey and perforated panels. Outfits incorporate ventilation slits, ponchos and accessories like portable fans.

Cooler mountainous areas see innovations in quilted, insulated *jilbābs* and coats. Designers release versatile separates embracing layering, like tunics over leggings.

Outdoor ranges function utility and modesty with UPF protection. Trending items include cargo pants, trail *hijābs* and cardigans.

As modest fashion becomes tailored to athletes, yoga practitioners and travelers, brands ensure religious guidelines do not hinder mobility or safety. Climate-conscious modest wear empowers active lifestyles globally.

Social Impact and Debates Around Muslim Dress Code

Freedom of religious expression

The right to freely practice one's faith through dress and appearance is a key debate around Muslim attire globally. Proponents argue restrictive laws undermine this fundamental freedom.⁴⁰

The UN Human Rights Committee maintains prohibiting the *hijāb* severely limits religious expression, especially for those who see it as a religious command.⁴¹ Landmark rulings like in France deemed bans a violation of human rights.⁴²

Studies find veiled Muslim women internalize stigma due to prevailing stereotypes in Western societies.⁴³ This marginalization

⁴⁰ Webb. P.55.

⁴¹ UNHRC. (Oct, 2019). Committee Issues Views Concerning Communications by the Victim of a School Hijab Ban in France. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

⁴² BBC (2014, July 1). French veil bans violate human rights - UN. BBC News.

⁴³ Tarlo, p. 19.

strengthens their religious identity tied to attire. At the same time, some states impose *hijāb* compulsions violating personal choice through patriarchal interpretations of sharia. A balanced approach respects an individual's agency over their clothing according to conscience.

As societies diversify, policymakers debate reasonable limits to secularism versus respecting religious pluralism. Thus, judicial consensus tilts towards individuals' freedom of dressing according to their beliefs.

Cultural assimilation

The degree to which Muslim immigrants and minorities should adapt culturally by modifying traditional clothing remains contentious. Proponents of assimilation argue certain attire presents obstacles in secular societies.⁴⁴

Critics countermand this promotes pressuring Muslims to discard intrinsic parts of their identity.⁴⁵ Qualitative research finds veiling can aid inclusion into public life through instilling leadership abilities and confidence among Muslim youth.

Some scholars propose a multidimensional concept of integration allowing parallel citizenship while sustaining community ties.⁴⁶ Forcing abandonment of modest codes may breed resentment and hinder belonging.⁴⁷

A balanced perspective considers individual priorities - some femmes choose situational unveiling in professional contexts while retaining *hijāb* spiritually.⁴⁸ Successful integration models tolerance for private religious observance. To state it forcefully, this debate underscores larger themes of negotiating distinction versus commonality in multicultural democracies. Respecting diversity may strengthen social cohesion more organically.

Stereotyping and discrimination

The visible nature of Muslim attire makes it a lightning rod for prejudices that lead to disproportionate monitoring and

⁴⁴ Roy, O. (2004). *Globalized Islam: The search for a new Ummah*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.

⁴⁵ Tarlo, p.28.

⁴⁶ Mir, p. 35.

⁴⁷ Webb, p. 69.

⁴⁸ Read & Bartkowski, p. 417.

xenophobic acts. Qualitative research links conservative dress to profiling experiences among Muslim women.⁴⁹

Post-9/11, veiling has become a racially marked signifier attracting hostility in public spaces (Peek, 2005). Studies show *hijābis* face workplace discrimination, social marginalization and physical threats due to the “threat narrative”.⁵⁰ Even in predominantly Muslim nations, some attires become targets for harassment depending on sociopolitical currents.⁵¹ Internalization of “othering” adversely impacts confidence and sense of belonging.⁵² Promoting Muslim fashion visibility in positive media helps altering stereotypical perceptions. Multicultural values of inclusion and respect for diversity can counter stigma.

Overall, discriminating based on dress infringes basic human rights while diversity enriches societies.⁵³ Tackling stereotypes involves addressing their socio-historical roots through open and informed public discourse.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Muslim dress reflects both religious obligations of modesty and cultural traditions that have evolved over time. While certain attires like the *hijāb* and *jilbāb* aim to fulfill Qur’ānic principles, their precise meanings have been interpreted diversely. Modern Muslim fashion integrates religious guidelines within contemporary silhouettes, materials and styles. Globally, designers are adapting attire for different geographies and activities. At the same time, visible Muslim clothing remains a topic of complex debate around issues like cultural integration, freedom of expression and discrimination. To be sure, appreciating the multifaceted role of dress in faith and identity is important for fostering more inclusive societies respecting religious diversity. Further open-minded discussion can help addressing misunderstandings and reducing prejudices related to this significant aspect of Islamic tradition.

⁴⁹ Afshar, H. (2008). “Can I see your hair? Choice, agency and attitudes: The dilemma of faith and feminism for Muslim women who cover.” *Ethnic and racial studies*, 31(2), 411-427.

⁵⁰ Tarlo, p. 44.

⁵¹ Read & Bartkowski, p. 417

⁵² Mir, p.70.

⁵³ Ramadan, p.39.