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Multimodal discourse analysis of variations in Islamic dress code in Bo-Kaap, Cape Town

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Abstract: The history of Islam in South Africa is as old as the history of the Dutch who arrived at the Cape in the latter half of the 17th century. The present study investigates Islam in South Africa and how it has come and spread in the country, especially in Cape Town (Bo-Kaap). It aims to shed light on how Muslim women reconcile their daily activities and personal initiatives with their religious beliefs and attire. It also explores the challenges that Muslims faced at that time. Moreover, it explores the dominant discourse on the veiling of Muslim women, with reference to the identity of Muslim women in Bo-Kaap as well as the Western influence on their Islamic dress code. In addition, it indicates how the dress code in the Cape differs from mainstream Muslim attire in the Middle East. The methodology adopted in this research is qualitative. The data was collected through observation and questionnaires. The kind of analysis used was discourse analysis and multi-modal discourse analysis. The results showed that the cultural impact of western society is reflected in the manner Muslim women wear their *hijab*. In spite of this, many of these women are still attached to and proud of their Islamic identity.

Key words: Bo-Kaap, Islam, dress code, multimodality, Muslim, Islamic identity.

خلاصة: ان تاريخ الاسلام في جنوب افريقيا قديم قدم تاريخ الهولنديين الذين وصلوا الي كيب في النصف الاخير من القرن السابع عشر. تبحث الدراسة الحالية في الاسلام في جنوب افريقيا وكيف ظهر وانتشر في البلاد، خاصة في كيب تاون "بوكاب" وتهدف الدراسة الي تسليط الضوء علي كيفية توفيق النساء المسلمات بين انشطتهن اليومية ومبادراتهن الشخصية مع معتقداتهن الدينية وملابسهن. كما تستكشف الدراسة التحديات التي واجهها المسلمون في ذلك الوقت. علاوة علي ذلك، فان هذه الدراسة تستكشف الخطاب السائد حول حجاب المرأة المسلمة مع الإشارة الي هوية المرأة المسلمة في بوكاب وكذلك التأثير الغربي علي لباسهن الاسلامي. بالإضافة الي ذلك، فان الدراسة تشير الي كيفية اختلاف قواعد اللباس في الراس عن الملابس الاسلامية السائدة في الشرق الاوسط. المنهجية المعتمدة في هذا البحث نوعية. تم جمع البيانات من خلال الملاحظة والاستبيانات. كان نوع التحليل المستخدم هو تحليل متعدد الوسائط. واطهرت النتائج ان الاثر الثقافي للمجتمع الغربي ينعكس في طريقة ارتداء المسلمات للحجاب. علي الرغم من ذلك، لاتزال العديد من هذه النسوة مرتبطات بهويتهن الاسلامية وفخورات بها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بوكاب - الاسلام - اللباس - التعددية - المسلم - الهوية الاسلامية.

Glossary

Abaya: It is similar to thawb (see below) however, it is much more decorated.

Dupatta: A long multi-purpose scarf that is essential to many South Asians women's suits and matches the women's garments.

Hijab: The word literally means to be cover or be covered. Technically, it refers to the clothing and the head covering that a woman is required to wear according to the Revealed Law.

Thawb: Traditional long garment worn by men and women in the Middle East

Zeenah: adornment; something used to make something else more beautiful and attractive.



INTRODUCTION

1.1. Rationale

Islam is a widespread religion that is based on the belief of Monotheism. Besides being a religion, it is also considered as a comprehensive way of life. It encompasses all aspects of life which includes the personal, social, physical, spiritual and political spheres. Islam has been practiced for over 1400 years, spreading rapidly throughout the world. South Africa is one of the many centres of Islamic civilization and culture in the world, specifically Cape Town. Islam was introduced to the Cape four centuries ago, and it is still being practiced by a dynamic and vibrant Muslim community. Muslim population has contributed immensely many facets within the South African society. They have adapted, transformed and maintained a unique identity that is only found in Cape Town. In this research, we will focus on Islamic identity, how it has been developed and how it is determined, with special reference to the establishment of the identity of the Muslim woman.

1.2. Research problem

Due to apartheid, little is known about how Muslims in Cape Town express their identity. Islam and Muslims in South Africa were affected by Colonialism in terms of the political, social and economic spheres. The objective of this research is to demonstrate a practical insight of how Muslim women reconcile their daily activities and personal initiatives with their religious beliefs and attire. This was also a practice in Pre-Islamic society where women held an unequal social status to men. Despite they were working in their households and in the fields but they were not remunerated for their efforts. They were, in fact, considered to be burdensome to their families. Such attitude led in turn to a high rate of female infanticide (Thondoo, 2013). This research also tries to demonstrate how Middle Eastern culture has affected the dress code of Muslim women, with special reference to those who are residents of Bo-Kaap (Thondoo, 2013).

1.3. Aims of the Study

The aim of this study is of fourfold:

- To investigate how Muslim women in Bo-Kaap express their identity, specifically through an analysis of dress code.
- To identify divergences and convergences between broadly accepted Islamic dress code for women and that of Muslim women in Bo-Kaap.
- To see if it is linked to gender construction
- To demonstrate the influence of the West on Islamic dress code.

1.4. Research Questions

1. What does it mean to be a Muslim woman in Bo- Kaap, Cape Town?
2. Do all Muslim women dress the same in Bo- Kaap and Cape Town?
3. What are the challenges facing Muslim women these days?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Islam is a word with many meanings. For example, it means 'peace', 'submission' and 'obedience to God'. It also means 'acceptance' and 'commandment' as well as 'the guidance of God'. To be at peace with God, with other Muslims and with the environment is a fundamental characteristic of Islam. Thus, Islam can be said to be a



system of living in peace. It also refers to the message that God revealed throughout the history of mankind. Moreover, a person who follows Islam is called a Muslim (Arabic word which means, the one who submits to the will of God). The major characteristic of Islam is the belief in the prophet Mohammad and God's rules which show us how to live in harmony among in this world.

(Seda, 2002).

Islam in Bo-Kaap

Bo- kaap is a small but densely populated area situated on the slopes of Signal Hill in Cape Town. Artisans, builders and craftsmen started to build their own homes from 1750 onwards. Over time, Bo-Kaap came to be viewed as a residential area for the working class. African slaves who converted to Islam brought ethnic diversity to the Muslim population which made it difficult for Dutch and British colonialists to classify people on the basis of their ethnic groups due to their long and complex history (Jeppie 2001). The first Muslims to arrive at the Cape were servants who worked for the officials of the Dutch East India Company. They were slaves, political prisoners and exiles from Bengal, the Malabar Coast and the Indonesian archipelago who, under the Dutch supervision, helped to establish the basic colony (Jeppie, 2001).

Cape Malay Identity

It is noted that Cape Malay Muslims have different origins and religions and they are classified as an ethnic group. Many Malays have found their Muslim identity to be more salient than their Malay ancestry. They were sometimes described as "Cape Malay" and sometimes as "Cape Muslim".

The Cape Malay identity was a subcategory of the 'Coloured' according to the apartheid classifications of ethnicity. (Khilafa, 2007). Furthermore, most Cape Malays refer to Afrikaans as their home language and English as their second language. However, they do not actually speak their original mother tongue, which was a mixture of Malay languages that were spoken by their ancestors. Interestingly, they have maintained some Malay words and phrases which are still a part of their local dialect (Ghirardo, 2003).

Cape Muslim Culture

Ferraro, (2002, 3), pointed out that "Culture refers to the lifestyle of a group of people, including the religious, political and economic behaviour of group members". The veil is the most visible symbol of women's Islamic identity because it distinguishes them from non-Muslims. In many Islamic societies, Muslim women dress in accordance to the Islamic law and society. Generally, South Africa is considered to be a multi-cultural country. As a result, there are variations of how the *hijab* is worn. Moreover, the European colonialism created different cultures in South Africa, resulting in a more modern design of clothing different from traditional South African dress.

Cape Female Dress Code

Cape Malay women wear some versions of the Muslim head scarf with long skirts or Middle Eastern attire and this is mostly observed at Islamic gatherings. Some Cape Malay women have, however, adopted a variation of the knee length top and long pants, resembling the Pakistanis and Indians, rather than the long skirts worn by Malaysians and Indonesians (Farrath, 1980). In Bo-Kaap, there are also a significant number of Somali and Indian women (Khilafah, 2007). What follows is a description of the various types of dress code readily visible in Bo-Kaap.



Somali Hijab

According to De Voe, (2002:238), clothing is a “silent symbol of self and community”. The way in which some Muslim women dress is often at the centre of discussions, especially when the Muslim community has been integrated into a Western country. Consequently, Islam became an extremely gendered issue when it comes to immigration and schooling. As such, the negative and positive consequences of wearing the *hijab* to study or work vary greatly across the national and local contexts. Somali women’s veil is worn to express their culture and in order to retain and maintain in a foreign country (Minnesota Historical Society, 2004). Moreover, the veil or *hijab* also is primarily considered as a symbol that embraces Somalian identity.

Indian Muslim Women

A large number of South African Indian women have recently adopted a dress code that allows them to be fully veiled (i.e. covers their entire body and face). Additionally, the practice of wearing the *hijab* is recently viewed by Islamic societies as a sign of the rebirth of Islam. Thus, Islam requires women to cover their entire body, including their hair. Indian Muslim women also wear the *hijab* in a different way by tying the headscarf tightly around the head and tucked in at the back. The *dupatta*¹ (also known as *chunri* and *chunni*) has long been used as a *hijab* to cover the head and represents a symbol of modesty. This is considered as their daily attire which often comprises of a long dress which is a usual feature of the Indian Muslim identity that diverges from other Muslim identities (Knudsemm, 2003).

Analytical Framework

- Multimodality and Discourse Analysis

Miles and Huberman (1994:18) defined a conceptual framework as a visual or written product, that “explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied: the key factors, concepts, or variables and the presumed relationships among them”. The most important thing about the conceptual framework is that it provides a model that helps to formulate the study, delineate the research design, assess research aims, develop realistic and relevant research questions, select appropriate methods and identify potential validity threats to the researcher’s conclusions. It also ensures the justification of the research (Casanave & Yongyan, 2015: 39-40).

- Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multi-modal discourse analysis (MDA) refers to the study of language in combination and in relation to other resources. These resources include images, scientific symbolism, gestures, action, music and sound. When these two aspects are combined and integrated, meaning is created and developed in the Multimodal (multi semiotic) phenomena (e.g, printed materials, videos, websites, 3D objects, videos, websites, modes and modalities) known as MDA or ‘multimodal studies’ (O’Halloran, 2011).

‘Discourse’ is defined as a communal exchange as well as a social and cultural resource people may draw upon to explain their activities, a linguistic system and rules. (Brown & Yule, 1983).

¹ *Dupatta*: A long multi-purpose scarf that is essential to many South Asians women’s suits and matches the women’s garments.



METHODOLOGY

- Research design

The methodology adopted in this research is qualitative, particularly through participant observation. Qualitative research helps me focus on how people feel, what they think and why they make certain decisions. It is a form of exploratory research which aims to understand the underlying opinions, reasons and motivations of Muslim women. To collect data, a range of tools were used including: individual interviews, observation and a questionnaire. The sample was selected in order to fulfil a certain quota (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

- Data Sampling

There were eighteen women in total who were photographed. Most of the photographs were taken in the area of Bo-Kaap. They were mostly taken in public areas as the *hijab* is worn outside of the house.

The Muslim women who voluntarily participated in this research were keen to assist me and they did not mind taking photos of them. Therefore, ten photos were taken to thirteen Muslim women.

- Data Collection Technique

Questionnaires

A questionnaire was distributed to thirteen Muslim women in Bo-Kaap. A sample of the questionnaire is provided in the appendix. The research participants were asked to complete the questionnaire at home, where their names, age, contact details, residence were optional. The total number of questionnaires completed is thirteen. The age of the women ranged from twenty one to fifty five.

DATA ANALYSIS

Islam provided clear guidelines with regard to every aspect of life, including how a Muslim woman is required to dress when she leaves her house.

Nowadays, women entered the workforce and they are expected to dress in a certain manner in order to be accepted and promoted in the work environment. Thus, a more modern approach to wearing the *hijab* was adopted in order to 'fit in' to the workplace. However, there are many companies that do permit Muslim women to wear the headscarf, excluding the traditional Somalian dress code which is seen as too traditional and unprofessional (Hoel, 2005).

In this chapter, I will discuss the figures of the thirteen Muslim women in Bo-Kaap. According to the photos, there were some differences in their manner in which these women wear the *hijab*, influenced by their surrounding environment and the local Islamic culture.

- Multimodal Analysis



Figure1

In Figure1, there are four women standing in front of Schotsche Kloof Primary School. They are modestly covered and only one elderly lady is wearing the



traditional Arab *thawb*. Two of the women are wearing trousers with long shirts. The woman in the foreground is wearing black loosely fitted trousers, with a long purple shirt covered with a black jersey and a head scarf. She is wearing white sneakers. The other woman in the background is wearing a long pink jersey that just reaches her knees, worn over grey trousers, with a grey head scarf. This is a very common combination amongst the elderly Muslim women of Bo-Kaap. In the background, a Somalian woman is dressed in the traditional Somalian dress code with a purple head covering that reaches her knees. The colours are normally dark and not bright in order not to attract attention. The fourth woman will be discussed separately in Figure 5.



Figure 2

In Figure 2, there are two women who appear similar in their dress code. Both women are wearing the traditional Middle Eastern *abaya*, which is a black loosely fitted full length dress. However, they differ in how they wear the head scarf. The first woman is wearing a cream headscarf over a green one to make sure that her hair is not exposed. In addition, she wears matching cream shoes. On the left side, the second woman's body is completely covered. She is also wearing a black *abaya* with a black leather jacket, a black bag and leather boots. However, her fringe is exposed. The exposure of the hair has become a fashion trend among the younger Muslim women.

Figure 3

In Figure 3, the woman is wearing a leopard print head scarf over a black one. However, it is tied at the back, thus exposing her neck and earrings. She is wearing a black long blouse with a belt that reaches her knees under a grey cardigan and jeans. This could be regarded as a modern interpretation of *hijab* which is followed by most of the younger generation.



Figure 4

In Figure 4, a middle aged woman is wearing a black shirt, black jersey, a black tights with boots. Her head scarf is tied and her hair is slightly exposed. This can also be



seen as a modern adaptation of *hijab*, where there is still a slight exposure of the hair. Traditionally, Muslim women do not wear trousers or tights, but this has changed over time.



Figure 5

In Figure 5, a young lady is wearing the traditional black *abaya* worn under a red sweat shirt with a beige sling bag. Her head scarf is tied to the back exposing her ears, some hair and her neck. She is wearing a combined dress code influenced by both the Eastern and Western styles of dressing.



Figure 6

In Figure 6, an elderly woman is wearing wide trousers and a long blouse and a jersey. Her head is completely covered and, thus, she is dressed in accordance to the Quranic injunction of *hijab* which is typical of Cape Townian women. Even though, her dress code is influenced by the west. She is still completely covered but not in the traditional manner.



Figure 7

In Figure 7, an elderly woman is wearing a bright red long dress worn over a tight jeans and a turquoise long sleeved shirt. She is also wearing a bright red scarf over a turquoise under scarf. Her dress has been influenced by western fashion in terms of the turquoise flat pumps. This is not considered as the traditional Islamic dress for elderly women. Her dress code is also a modern version on *hijab*.



Figure 8

In Figure 8, a middle aged woman is wearing a long black jacket that reaches her knees worn over a pair of black trousers. She is wearing a black scarf which covers her entire head. Even though her dress code covers her entire body, it is not traditional for elderly women.



Figure 9

In Figure 9, a middle aged woman is wearing a long red blouse with black sweater, and a jeans with a black scarf on her head which completely covers her head. Her

dress code is also a modern version of *hijab* because her body is not covered with traditional clothing.

The results of this study showed that there were some differences in the dress code from one woman to another. Each woman represented and displayed her culture which reflected her identity in various ways. However, most of them wore their *hijab* according to legitimate ruling.

This research infers that there are many ways to describe Islamic dress code among fellow Muslims according to their cultures and their surrounding environment. For instance, it is noticeable that the older generation wears their dress code in a way which is completely deferent from what the younger generation does.

- **Fieldworker reflection and discussion**

Sometimes, in western societies, women are not allowed to wear Islamic clothing but if they are outside of the workplace, they are able to wear the traditional garment. I have also noticed that many of these women do not conform to the strict rule of the Qur'an with regard to *hijab*. What makes a Muslim a Muslim in the first place is the belief in Allah (God) which is the basis for being a Muslim. The rules in the Quran are clear about *hijab* and how women should cover themselves. I have observed in Cape Town that many Muslim women wear tight clothing with their hair partially covered. Traditionally, most Libyan women cover their entire bodies and hair when they leave their houses. However, there are some exceptions.

According to the Qur'an, the *hijab* has to be wide and not transparent to prevent temptation. Therefore, tight and transparent clothing are completely and legitimately prohibited as God says:

"And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts from sin and not show of their adornment except only that which is apparent, and draw their head covers over their necks and bosoms and not reveal their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women (i.e., their sisters in Islam), or their female slaves whom their right hands possess, or old male servants free of physical desires, or small children who have no sense of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto Allah altogether, O you Believers, in order that you may attain success [An-Nur, 24:31]." (Kaita, 2015).

The word *zeenah* in the above verse, literally means "adornment", and it includes both (a) the natural and/or physical beauty that Allah has adorned and (b) that with which they adorn themselves, i.e., jewellery, make up and cosmetics, attractive clothing, etc. The chapter An-Nur spells out specifically the commands concerning the fact that a woman's natural beauty and her adornments are to be concealed from strangers.

Hence, an outer garment or cloak must be worn by a Muslim woman whenever she goes out in public or if she is in the presence of strangers within her own home or the home of a close relative. (Addwesh, 2000).



Questionnaire – Discourse Analysis

As previously mentioned, a questionnaire was distributed to thirteen Muslim women in Bo-Kaap between the age of twenty to fifty five. The women ranged from housewives to professionals with a variety of social, economic and religious backgrounds. The first question focused on the identity of Muslim women in Bo-Kaap and what it meant to be a Muslim woman in Cape Town. The aim of the second question was to investigate whether women in Cape Town dress in a similar manner which in turn establishes a specific dress code or not, whereas the last question focused on the challenges that these women face because of their Muslim identity.

What does it mean to be Muslim women in Bo-Kaap, Cape Town?

Many Muslim women in Bo-Kaap linked their identity to the pervasive Islamic culture that they face daily. There are eleven mosques in the Bo-Kaap area alone and the constant multiple call to prayer serves as a reminder to them to practice their faith. Thus, the geographical position of Bo-Kaap has influenced the women who reside there. On the one hand, some research participants expressed a sense of pride with regard to their Islamic as well as their Malay identity. They also distinguish themselves from Muslim women in other areas, as they believe that the roots of Islam started in Bo-Kaap. They link their Muslim identity to the Bo-Kaap Malay culture, heritage and identity. On the other hand, others expressed a sense of freedom to practice their faith because it is predominantly a Muslim area, with over ninety percent being Muslim.

Do all Muslim women dress the same in Bo-Kaap and Cape Town?

In terms of the responses to the second question, all research participants agreed that the dress code of Muslim women varied greatly and it depends on women's religious, social and economic background. Furthermore, most research participant concluded that the choice to wear *hijab* is determined by the woman's level of spirituality as well as her cultural background. Older women are more likely to wear the *hijab* in accordance to the instructions of the Quran. However, a large number of Muslim women, with special reference to the younger generation, have been influenced by the dress code of western society.

In light of the previous findings, it can be inferred that significant variation of Islamic dress code in the Bo-Kaap area is a norm. It is this variation that allows these women to be distinguished from different cultures.

What are the challenges facing Muslim women these days?

The majority of research participants agreed that the biggest challenge facing Muslim women these days is the establishment and maintenance of their Islamic identity. This has been endangered by the constant influence of the western culture on them. Some confirmed that being judged by others for wearing the *hijab* was also a major challenge. Some also expressed that wearing *hijab* could be a hindrance in the workplace, where women are not allowed to cover their heads.

Key Findings Challenges facing Islamic Culture in Cape Town

This section will address key findings discussed in the previous analysis of multimodal and questionnaire data. Three themes will be considered:

An Islamic environment such as Bo- kaap's has an impact on one's faith

Islamic environment plays an important role in Muslims' life because it reminds them with their religion all the time, such as the five daily calls to prayer and the dress code



of Muslim women. This is informed by what of the research participants said: “I grew up in Bo- kaap. We were surrounded by Mosques which reminded us that we are Muslims. Many Muslim women in Bo-Kaap are aware of our Islamic religion.”

This is one of the main themes deduced from the answers research participants gave in response to the question what does it mean to be a Muslim woman. They feel a strong sense of identity and connection to their Islamic roots and culture. This is illustrated in the following statements of two research participants: “...mosques which remind us that we are Muslims.” “...because Islam started in Bo- kaap, it is rich in Muslim heritage and because there are eleven mosques in Bo-kaap, it makes it easy to practice your religion.”

Hijab is a choice

In response to the question about the variance in the dress code of the Muslim women in Bo- Kaap, one of the research participants wrote: “It depends on that orthodox Muslim woman how she except (sic accept) her religion. She will dress accordingly.” Furthermore, another informant added: “It is the choices that the women make with their environment, to fit in with society.” It is interesting to note that most research participants think that wearing the *hijab* is in fact a choice made by the woman, depending on her spiritual level and religious upbringing. The overall theme is wearing *hijab* is a choice.

The negative influence of the West on Islamic dress code

With regard to the many challenges that Muslim women face, one of the subjects wrote: “We are not in an Islamic Country.” A similar argument was expressed by another subject who wrote that “The biggest challenge is the Islamic dress code. Not many Muslim women are willing to submit willingly to the proper dress code and Fashion is a major challenge for our girls...” From these statements, it can be inferred that the inability to project their Islamic identity through their dress code is also another major challenge facing Muslim women. They are influenced by the west code dress which in turn compromises their religion.

Based on my observation, it is clear that elderly Muslim women adhere to a stricter application of the *hijab* than the younger women. This might be due to the varied cultures of the *hijab* residing in Bo-Kaap. This is illustrated by the different *hijab* styles of the Somalians, the Turkish and Arabs from Libya and Saudi Arabia. To conclude, Islamic identity is the biggest challenge that Muslim women face in the Bo-Kaap area.

CONCLUSION

This research paper focuses on the Islamic identity, its development and determination, with special reference to the establishment of the identity of the Muslim woman. An overview of the origins of Muslims in Cape Town (Bo-Kaap) is discussed. In this study, I tried to provide a practical insight into how Muslim women reconcile their daily activities and personal initiatives with their religious beliefs and attire by investigating how Muslim women in Bo-Kaap express their identity, specifically through an analysis of dress code as well as the extent of the influence of the Western standards on Islamic dress code. It also demonstrates how Middle Eastern culture affected women in their dress code, with particular reference to younger Muslim women in Bo-Kaap.

The methodology adopted in this research is qualitative. It provides a measure of what people think. Therefore, a questionnaire was distributed to 13 Muslim women in Bo-



Kaap in order to gain an insightful solution to the problem. According to the questionnaire, it can be concluded that the biggest challenge that Muslim women in Bo-Kaap face is the establishment and maintenance of their Islamic identity in the face of the constant pervasive influence of western culture on their society. Furthermore, the fear of judgement by others for wearing the *hijab* is another major challenge. This is due to the negative perception of Islam created by western media. The *hijab* was viewed as a possible hindrance in the workplace.

According to the research findings, I found that Muslim women in Cape Town, specifically in the Bo-Kaap, face significant challenges as a result of the impact of diverse and exotic cultures and the influences of Western culture on this identity. I also found that the Western and foreign media negatively impacted the Islamic values of some Muslim women. Therefore, I recommend more research to be conducted in the field of Islamic culture and religion to shed more light on the challenges Muslims face and how to take advantage of media to reverse the negative perception of Islam created by the west media.

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