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## HIJAB CONTROVERSIES IN NIGERIA

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**Abstract:** Over the past decade, and particularly since the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack in the United State, the Muslim community in most parts of the world has experienced an increased level of social and religious scrutiny. This unfortunate incident has fundamentally changed the way the mostly dominated Muslim society views Muslims, especially Muslim women who wear the veil or hijab in public. Muslim women have experienced various instances of discrimination including people trying to remove their hijab, and/or name-calling. A unique aspect of Muslim women in Nigeria is that they not only confront the stigma of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion but that which is attached to Islamic dress as well. Despite some of these problems, however, the experiences of Muslim women all over the world remain one of the least researched topics in sociology. The purpose of this work is to explore the controversies surrounding the hijab in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Islam, Sharia, Nigeria, Holy Quran, Hijab.

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## INTRODUCTION

The wearing of the *hijab* and other forms of Islamic dress has become a much-discussed and controversial issue since recent world events including the destruction of the World Trade Centre on the 11th September 2001, the Iraq conflict in 2003, and the London bombings on the 7th July 2005. Furthermore, at the end of 2003, and the beginning of 2004, the world was witness to French legislation banning the wearing of the hijab in certain spheres and the discussion and debate that subsequently surrounded it (Croucher 2008).

Until the 9/11 issue in the United States of America, being a Muslim in Britain and wearing the hijab was a topic that few people were interested in. A study of this nature would have attracted little academic interest and although the reasons why Muslim women wear the hijab were important to those within the communities in which they lived, those outside of the religion saw little need to research these reasons. Since 9/11 and the interest in Islam in the media and within the population of Britain as a whole has increased significantly.

As a teacher of Religious Studies when Islam is mentioned in the classroom, the pupils frequently repeat many of the negative stereotypes that have been reported in the British press. Many pupils seem to believe that all Muslims are terrorists and during a classroom discussion recently a pupil explained to the rest of the class how Muslim women are forced to wear the hijab by their husbands and fathers. The idea that Muslim women are forced to wear the hijab by their husbands is still prevalent not only in the classroom but in homes in many areas of the country. Some still believe that these women are oppressed and if given the chance would immediately remove their scarves and be free from this restriction. It is often easy for those without any contact with Muslims to believe what is reported and therefore, research of this nature is vital

to expose those stereotypes and to help with social cohesion in areas of the country where few Muslims live and contact with anyone of religious faith other than Christianity is non-existent.

The wave of fundamentalism in Islam has increased of late through physical violence and also by the implementation of the Sharia system of government in Nigeria. One of the outcomes of the Sharia movement in Nigeria is the progressive enforcement and entronement of the use of hijab in public space. The Holy Quran itself through the prophet Muhammad never made hijab mandatory for all women. This work attempts an exposition of the meaning, types, and uses of the hijab. It also assesses the level of politicization of hijab, while drawing attention to the Nigerian traditional veil system. It looks at the traditional veil system and the reasons for the emergence of the new tradition of hijab. The work also assesses a list of hijab crises in Nigeria and concludes with a critical evaluation.

## MEANING OF HIJAB

The term *hijab* in common English according to Glassé & Smith (2002) refers to “a veil worn by Muslim women in the presence of any male outside their immediate family” (p. 2). It consists of a light veil used to cover parts of the head and the chest. Glassé & Smith (2002) also define hijab as the “veils or clothing used by Muslim women that conforms to the dressing code for Islamic women” (p. 3). This is the exhibition of modesty by Moslem women.

According to Muhaimin (2006), “hijab can also refer to the seclusion of women from men in the public sphere, or it may denote a metaphysical domain, for example referring to the veil which separates man or the world from God” (p. 67). The hijab has metamorphosed from many other interpretations to remain what it is today. Llewellyn-Jones (2003) explained that: “In the Quran, hadith, and other classical Arabic texts, the term

*Khimar* was used to denote a headscarf, and hijab was used to denote a partition, a curtain, or was used generally for the Islamic rules of modesty and dress for both males and females” (p. 43). There have been some arguments and counterarguments on the use of hijab even in the Holy Quran and where it is to be used. The directive on hijab came from the remarks made by Nakamura (2002) that the Quran instructs Muslim women to dress modestly. According to Masquelier;

In the Quran, the term hijab refers to a partition or curtain in the literal or metaphorical sense. The verse where it is used is commonly understood to refer to the curtain separating visitors to Muhammad’s, house from his wives’ lodgings. This had led some to argue that the mandate of the Quran to wear hijab applied to the wives of Muhammad and not women generally (p. 92).

It should be noted that veiling and segregation of women are even older than the Islamic civilization which started around the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. The practice of veiling dates back to around 3000 BCE. According to Amer (2014) “the first surviving written reference to veiling and segregation of women is from the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Wearing hijab is a type of veil was once practiced by Christians, Jewish and Muslim women and it is one of the most visible signs of a person being a Muslim” (p.13).

### ORIGIN AND TYPES OF HIJAB

*Hijab* was not a traditional dressing to Nigerians. Its origin is traced to the conquered Persian and Byzantine Societies (Wilkling 2020). The dressing was always viewed as a cultural dressing among the people of those areas. The emergence of the hijab in Nigeria may have been through the trade interaction between Nigeria and the Middle Eastern countries and the cultural swoop during the hajj in Mecca and Medina. There are many types of hijab according to their

tradition and origin. Ajayi listed some types of hijab to include the following:

1. The *Niqab*: This is mostly reserved in Persian Gulf countries. It covers the face and head but exposes the eye. This is worn as a particular interpretation of the Quran (Tissot 2011).
2. *Chador*: This is mostly worn in Iran. It is a black or dark coloured coat that covers the head and is held in place with one’s hands. It is wrapped around the head and upper body leaving only the face exposed, worn especially by Shia Muslim women (Meneley 2007).
3. *Burqa*: This cloth is commonly used in Pashtun, Afghanistan. This covers the whole body from head to feet, worn in the public by Muslim women with crocheted eye openings (Lægaard 2015).
4. The *Shalwar Qamis*: This is a traditional outfit of South Asia worn by men and women regardless of religious affiliation. It consists of a knee-length tunic and pants (Chawla 2006).

### THE QURAN AND HIJAB

Islam as a religion has been at the forefront of modest and descent dressing and interaction between members of the opposite sex. The dress code is part of the general and particular teaching of Islam. In surah 24, Allah commands Prophet Muhammad as follows: “Say to the believing men that: “they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste). This is better for them” this command is to help reduce lust from the men. It is called “Hijab of the eyes.” A similar directive on the dress code is given to women. According to Khri-Allah (2021): “Women should not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their *Khumur* over their bosoms” (p. 51). The term “Khmer” as it is being presented here is a plural of *Khimar* which is a veil covering the head. According to Huggins

& Glebbeek, (2009), it describes *al-khimar* as: “something with which a woman conceals her head...it is a scarf, and it is known as such because the head is covered with it” (p. 111). Placing the *Khumur* over the bosom means what? Alibhai-Brown (2014) explained that:

The women of the medina in the pre-Islamic era used to put their *Khumur* over the head with the two ends tucked behind and tied at the back of the neck, in the process exposing their ears and neck. By saying that place the *Khumur* over the bosoms, Almighty Allah ordered the women to let the two ends of their headgear extend onto their bosoms so that they conceal their ears, the neck, and the upper part of the bosom also (p. 74).

Hijab is generally seen as the preservation of modesty in all aspects of one's life including attire. El Saadawi & Sa'dāwī (2007) remarked that:

Hijab, the head covering worn by Muslim women, is an outer manifestation of an inner commitment to worship God. This brochure explores the different dimensions hijab brings to the lives of women and the responsibility men and women share in upholding modesty in society. Along the way, it debunks common stereotypes and celebrates the voices of women who practice hijab with pride (p. 32).

Few observations about the hijab should be noted here. Wearing a hijab is strictly a personal and independent decision that comes from a sincere yearning to please God. The Holy Quran says “let there be no compulsion in religion” (2: 256). El Saadawi & Sa'dāwī (2007) also remarked that; “Prophet Muhammad never forced religion upon anyone. If a woman is being forced to cover her head, it is contrary to this clear Islamic principle and might be due to cultural and social pressure” (p. 54). There is also the second fact of being an ambassador of faith. Hijab identifies

women as followers of Islam. The women draw inner strength and resolve, accept criticisms and misinformation in the public and forge ahead in their religious pursuit. Pervez again compares Muslim women with hijab to Mary the mother of Christ as follows: “indeed, Muslim women identify themselves with Mary who is commemorated for her piety and modesty...I cannot help but wonder if they would have ordered Mary, the mother of Jesus to uncover her hair” (Ammerman 2017, p. 223).

There is also the case of mutuality in modesty as hijab encompasses modest behaviours in manners and speech. The inner humility as exhibited through etiquettes and morals completes the significance of the physical veil.

## THE HIJAB IN NIGERIA

Hijab wearing in Nigeria is a silent religio-cultural and social revolution. This revolution has seen a gradual increase in the number of Islamic women wearing the veil in the last 30 years especially in public gatherings. This revolution was first noted in institutions of higher education in Nigeria around the year 1970. According to Badru & Sackey (2013);

Because of where and who the wearers were, one could infer that the hijab has its origins in the values of the urban middle class. By the late 1980s, its use had spread to other classes of urban women and gradually to some of their rural sisters. By the 1990s, the idea of hijab had begun to pose a challenge to the government's uniforms policy in the public service sector such as the nursing profession. With the introduction of Islamic law in 1999, some of the Muslim states introduced the Hijab as a compulsory part of female dressing in certain public spaces. Yet the hijab as a subject of academic discourse about women's access to that space has

remained to say the least covert if it is ever written about. What does the dress change mean? How political and what kind of politics is it about (p. 261).

Hijab is a personal choice for whosoever chooses to wear it. No one should be coerced to do that. The politics of the hijab is seen when it is used as both religious and political tools. Hijab is used both as a cultural, political, religious, and social outfit. Islam in Nigeria has used clothing to mean solidarity and religious symbol in public space. Hijab is also used as a political tool. During the last general elections in Nigeria, the national Al-Minaat insisted on enforcing the wearing of the hijab. According to vanguardngr.org; "according to Oyewumi (2016), we are not a political organisation, but all our members across different zones in the country will not vote any candidate who opposes our right to use hijab. So no hijab no vote" (p. 43).

#### **TYPES OF VEILS AND NIGERIA'S PUBLIC CULTURE**

There has been a gradual and steady change in the dressing of women between the 1970s to now. We need to address the factors that led to the changes in women's dresses and the types of women dressing before the 1970s especially in Northern Nigeria. The diversity of Nigeria means that there is a variety of traditional veil types before the hijab. Each type of veil has its own history rooted in the cultural exchanges and /or technological capacity of the people and the classes of women in each of the communities. In the Hausa land, there is the veil called Khallabi and Gyale or Mayafi. There is also the Kamuri Mandiland Lefaya. According to Mahdi (2009);

Khallabi is a scarf of approximately one square meter or less, which is folded into a triangle and firmly tied from the forehead and Knotted at the back of the neck to cover only the head, sometimes only partially. Gyale is rarely less than 2 metres

long, with varying widths but seldom exceeds a meter. It is used in many ways: either it is folded lengthwise and thrown on or from the shoulder down, as far as the same can go... the Kauri uses the mandil, which is the same size as Gyale and is thrown loosely to cover the head (p. 7).

In both Hausa and Kanuri cultures, the art of covering the head had some art with practical meanings. Only very few women covered the head in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is so because every culture and ethnic group had a particular hairstyle that was customary to such people. There were the hairstyle braids called *doka* for Hausa and *Kela Yasku* and *gots* for Kanuri was common. None of the cultures stated here had any official veil for women on the farm but cases of women wearing hijab started coming up in the 1980s. According to Mahdi (2009); "I was accosted at a mosque in Hausa land for not wearing hijab. By the late 1980s, there was a tendency for men to be brazen towards women who did not wear the hijab and outright hostility towards teenage girls and women who did not wear any veil at all" (p. 8).

According to Mahdi (2009), two reasons have been proffered for the limited use of the veil in the pre-70s and the increasing use of hijab since the 1970s: "The first reason is that there were different perceptions of women's bodies between the pre and post the 1970s among Nigerian Muslims. The second reason is that Muslim women have had a different orientation in socio-political processes before the 1970s, and another in the post-1970s. Many other scholars believe that the use of hijab indicates Muslim women's persistence of pursuing their right to be in public space and their reawaken" (p. 8).

For Mernissi (1987); "the change in Nigeria reflects the division between those who hold authority and those who do not, those who hold spiritual powers and those who do not" (p. 13).

## **POLITICS OF VEIL IN NIGERIA**

Nigeria as a country is a secular state with different religious and cultural organizations. There have been series of religious attacks and religiously motivated reactions to issues in recent times. One of such issues was the emergence of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria led by Ibrahim Yaqoub Zaqzaqi and Izala organisation. According to Mahdi (2009); “they exerted pressure on women to wear the hijab as a precondition for the services they get. One of the success stories is the formation of formal Islamic institutions and the use of accurate veils (Hijabs) for females in the movement” (p. 2). Since the introduction of the sharia system of government in 1999 and the activities of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) and Izala organisation, women have been compelled to abandon the local styles of dressing to the use of the hijab. Kane (2003) reports that; “The Kano State governor, Mallam Ibrahim Shekarau, has this year reiterated his determination to extend the hijab beyond government schools into private ones. He says such laws are currently being operated in our universities; go to BUK (Bayero University Kano)” (p. 17).

Women and girls who refuse to adhere to the dressing code will risk access to education and other services in the state. The Islamic Movement of Nigeria through the sister’s forum organises activities and other assistants to women who adhere to Islamic teaching especially wearing of hijab; the movement also shares similarities with the Izala Society which is otherwise known as Jama at Izalat al Bidawalqamat as sunna. According to Ben Amaara; “today the Izala is one of the largest Salafi societies not only in Northern Nigeria, but also in the south and even in the neighbouring countries (Chad, Niger and Cameroon). It is very active in Dawa (Propagation of the faith) and especially in education. The Izala has many institutions all over the

country and is influential at the local, state and even federal levels.” (3) Hill also added that “The rise of Izala in the 1980s heralded the radicalisation of Northern Nigerian society.” (18) Many political interpretations for wearing hijab have been put forward by many scholars. For instance, Gasper (2020) said that;

Hijab is the most important symbol of an Islamic struggle. A lady in complete and lawful hijab is silently protesting against the Jahil set up ruling the world. She is doing this even without speaking to anyone. If you were to ask the oppressor about whom they dread most, they would almost definitely indicate that they dread women in their full and lawful hijab (p. 20).

## **CRISIS OF HIJAB IN NIGERIA**

There have been some crises in schools and other places with the use of hijab in Nigeria. These crises emerged not because of the school enforcement of hijab on the students but because some fundamentalist uses hijab as a means of expression of their religiosity and politicisation. Ele (2008) writes that “In Osun, there were melees. In Lagos, there were legal fireworks. Recently, in Ibadan, everybody was ready for a showdown – all in the name of religion and the theatre of the crises are schools as wearing of a head covering, otherwise known as hijab, by Muslim students became more than an issue of piety” (p. 76).

The case of wearing hijab in public schools in Lagos, Osun and the University of Ibadan International School was not there until recently when some fundamentalists embarking on Islamic revolution began their threat. Another report by Yusuf (2018) shows that the same problem of University of Ibadan International School almost took place in Ladoke Akintola University of Technology (LAUTECH) International School, Ogbomoso, Oyo state over the use of hijab. He reported that: “Another religious crisis may be brewing in Oyo state as no fewer

than 55 Muslim students were yesterday barred from entering the LadokeAkintola University of Technology... over the use of Hijab” (p. 54). In order to summarize the feelings of everyone on the use of hijab, Igwe reacted thus; “protests and scuffles over the use of the Islamic veil by Muslim school girls have recently been sweeping across Nigeria. The hijab crisis, as it is called, has led to the disruption of educational activities, litigations in courts, and a simmering religious tension in southwest Nigeria” (p. 64).

There was a celebrated case of Firdaus Amasa who was denied called to bar in 2017 because of hijab-wearing. She claimed that she wanted to challenge the status quo (Auwal, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

Hijab of recent has become a major distraction since the acceptance of the Islamic religion in Nigeria. It has made women look away from the myriads of problems facing them like marginalization in politics, female genital mutilation, vascular virginal fistula problems, child marriage, and so many issues. The use of the hijab has never caused problem in Nigeria until after the 1970s and most recently after 1999 when some states adopted the Sharia System of Government. The Holy Quran has not directed the enforcement of hijab on anybody but the hijab of recent has become a tool for the politicisation of the veil. The questions that we seem to raise here are: Have Muslims in Nigeria any prove that Allah worshipped before and now are different from Allah or has God rejected the prayer said before the enforcement of hijab? Even if the hijab is necessary for women as they were meant for Prophet Mohammed’s wives, why the enforcement in primary and secondary schools where minors receive training. The enforcement of the use of hijab is an abuse of the human rights of the female child and an attack on feminism and liberalization. This work has been able to explain the meaning of the hijab and its

uses from the holy Quran and the politics of the veil in Nigeria. It is worthy to note that Hijab has become a political, revolutionary, and religious concept in Nigeria where the rights of Muslim women are trampled and protected. It is zealous advocacy or support for the awareness of Islam in areas where they were hitherto unknown.

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