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Style and Consumption Among East African Muslim Immigrant Women: The Intersection of Religion, Ethnicity, and Minority Status

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Style and Consumption Among East African Muslim Immigrant Women: The Intersection of Religion, Ethnicity, and Minority Status

What meanings do people attach to dress style and consumption, how do these meanings vary among cultures, and how do immigrants and other multicultural actors negotiate the different systems of meaning they encounter in different cultures? My research examines the dress choices and shopping behaviors of East African Muslim immigrant women to explore whether and how they understand dress and consumer choices in the context of ethnicity, Islam, and their relationships with non-Muslim Americans. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine East African Muslim women in their twenties living in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. I found that women use a personal Islamic framework to explain their style choices, though they also conceptualize dress as a collective attribute when positioning themselves relative to non-Muslims in the United States. These women frame their experiences in American stores as an experience of agency; they feel that knowledge of American fashion and consumerism demonstrates their belonging in or acculturation to non-Muslim American society. My findings suggest that the meanings these women assign to dress and consumption and the flexibility with which they can deploy these meanings depend on social relationships as well as personal religious views about style and consumption.

Sociology has long recognized that people use dress and consumption to construct an identity and to signal that identity to others (Davis 1992; Finkelstein 1991; Zukin 2004). However, theorists debate how accurately observers decode the signals wearers send to them (McCracken 1998; Finkelsetin 1991). Moreover, dress and the meanings it embodies can be culturally-specific (Shirazi-Mahajan 1993; Higgins 1998). Thus, using dress or consumption as a symbol of identity becomes more difficult when wearers or observers rely on different cultural meanings to interpret dress, or have access to multiple cultural interpretations.

This study takes as its point of departure the expanding body of research that analyzes consumption as a form of self-expression and it adds to recent research exploring the interaction between consumer habits and ethnic identity. However, more significantly, it explores the extent to which immigrants to America adopt, reject, or modify American style and consumer models when a powerful alternative paradigm—in this case, Islam—is available to them. It evaluates the intersection and interaction of these two frameworks, and demonstrates the potential of perceived social relationships to profoundly alter the use of style and consumption among immigrant populations.

I studied the style and consumer choices of East African Muslim immigrant women, focusing specifically on the overlapping and often competing effects of Islam and American consumer culture on dress and style decisions. I also explore how these women interpret their choices regarding dress and consumption in the context of culture, religion, and the relationships they perceive between themselves and Muslim and non-Muslim American communities, as well as the social and individual

processes by which norms of dress within this community are constituted, accepted, modified, and rejected.

A study of the social processes underlying consumption and dress choices calls for an understanding of agency. As Giddens (1984) notes, agency is not synonymous with intentionality. Agency implies power or ability; it "refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place…Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently" (1984:9). This study addresses agency in a commodified world, and offers an alternative to the perspective arguing that consumer culture diminishes opportunities for agency.

The study of dress and consumption among East African Muslim immigrant women is particularly compelling because these women have acces to Islam as an alternate framework in which to make style and consumer choices, and to ethnic shopping centers, which aid in the consumption of cultural and religious products. Moreover, most of these women wear a headscarf—many also wear hijab or other types of cultural and religious clothings—and thus signal their religious and ethnic identities visually, binding consumer and style choices to these identities.

The East African Muslim women I interviewed navigate two frameworks—Islam and meanstream American consumerism—that assign different meanings to clothing choices and have different ideas about what style and consumption decisions reveal about those making them. The meanings these women derive from each of the frameworks impacts how they relate to others both within and outside the East

African Muslim community. Often, Muslim women's differening understandings of appropriate Islamic dress produce uncertainties that take the form of internal deliberations or public debates about the definition of modest dress. At the same time, the relationships these women feel they have with others in American society affect the way they use the two frameworks—perceived discrimination can motivate women to demand cultural inclusion by demonstrating a knowledge of American consumerism at the same time that it strengthens the importance of Islamic dress as a communal undertaking.

Literature Review

A long tradition of sociology has established the relationship between consumption and identity. In a consumer society, our selection of goods can code who we are and what we believe (Zukin 2004; Dávila 2001). Bourdieu (1984) theorized consumption as a means to categorize oneself through one's categorization of consumer goods. In a similar vein, Mary Douglas argues that shopping is inherently "cultural" in that it reflects preferences for lifestyles or attitudes that purchased goods embody: "Commodities are chosen because they are not neutral; they are chosen because they would not be tolerated in the rejected forms of society and are therefore permissible in the preferred form" (1997:19).

Consumption becomes an increasingly effective identity marker in light of the increasing importance of the consumer as a social role. As Dávila noted, "[W]hether exiles, citizens, permanent residents, or immigrants—individuals are consumers first and foremost" (2001:11). Moreover, consumption is democratic, in theory equally accessible to everyone (García Canclini 2001:39, cited in Zukin and Maguire 2004).

Therefore, consumption can be an especially important method of self-expression for minorities and other marginalized groups, who have traditionally been denied access to other forums in which to establish or debate collective identities (Dávila 2001).

While links between consumption and ethnic identity are complicated (Hamlett et al. 2008), two trends uncovered by recent research suggest that immigrants may adopt consumption as an avenue for self-presentation. First, the experience of immigration and the frequent subsequent concentration of immigrants into certain neighborhoods and jobs encourage the development of strong ethnic identities (Morawska 1990). A strong sense of ethnicity combined with a marginal position within the host society make consumption a likely mode of identity expression. Second, theories of acculturation, in which immigrants selectively retain ethnic markers and adopt features of the host society, have replaced older models of one-way assimilation (Morawska 1990; Hamlett et al. 2008). These new theories suggest that immigrants may retain ethnic identities and corresponding consumer habits even as they gain familiarity with host culture institutions and infrastructure, thus acquiring a broader venue in which to exercise consumer power. Access to multiple orientations toward consumption offers immigrants several ways to blend these orientations; which method they choose depends on personal and structural factors. Immigrants may draw on different cultural understandings in different settings, or combine elements of different orientations to create an original perspective. Some may maintain traditional or ethnic orientations, while others may gravitate toward orientations from the host culture.

Of course, ethnicity or marginality alone cannot completely account for "ethnic" shopping behavior; practical constraints on shopping behaviors limit minority populations' access to consumption as a mode of cultural expression (Hamlett et al. 2008). However, in certain instances consuming can be a powerful tool for ethnic or minority self-expression, or a symbol of acculturation or belonging"[S]pecific knowledge of the value of goods" according to a certain cultural paradigm can establish one as fluent in or fashionable within that paradigm (Finkelstein 1997:7), and may offer marginalized populations a tool with which to demand inclusion or display collective identity (Lamont and Molnar 2001; Hamlett et al. 2008; Rouse 2004).

Consumption is second perhaps only to dress as a way for individuals to signal their identity to others. In addition, there is an intimate link between dress and consumption; dressing allows people to display to others what they have purchased. As a personal habit with social significance, dress "both hides and lays bare the body and soul. It is fraught with all the contradictions and tensions entrenched in universal, local and increasingly, also global social processes" (Brydon and Niessen 1998:xi). While physical characteristics have always had significance for social interaction (Finkelstein 1991), sociologists contest the extent to which people can manipulate dress to communicate internal traits (genuine or contrived) to others. Several theorists critique the notion that dress offers a clear means of communication, despite social actors' attempts to use it to convey specific messages (Finkelstein 1991; Davis 1992; McCracken 1988). As Shirazi-Mahajan's (1993) study indicates, dress serves as a form of symbolic interaction only if both wearer and observer agree on the meanings

clothing embodies. If they do not, people cannot effectively manage others' perceptions of them, and the language of clothing loses its power.

Thus, McCracken (1998) sees limited possibility for clothing as a genuine language; only certain modes of self expression are available, and the most original, and potentially expressive, are usually unreadable to others. In some cases, disparate interpretations of style can be an advantage (see Higgins' (1998) study). More often, miscommunication results (Finkelstein 1997). This potential for miscommunication makes dress in multicultural settings an especially compelling topic, particularly as modernization and commoditization insist with increasing strength on the readability of external signs (Finkelstein 1997).

External signs are especially salient for East African Muslim women as their ethnic identity cannot be divorced from religion-based stereotypes prevalent in U.S. majority culture. If European and North American societies consider Muslim women oppressed, the headscarf is the symbol of that oppression, and women who cover their hair cannot escape the consequences of this symbolism (Bullock 2002). Despite, or perhaps because, of this emphasis, the headscarf is often especially important for the identity construction among Muslim women living in the West (Göle 2003; Williams and Vashi 2007). In the current national climate, the headscarf is certainly the most powerful signifier of Islamic religious identity for women.

These studies on the meaning of the headscarf in Western/secular societies suggest that self-presentation is a relevant area of analysis for the study of eastern African Muslim immigrant women. The intersection of racial, ethnic, and religious identities this group encounters (Guenther, Pendaz, and Songora 2008) makes

consumption alone an inadequate analytic tool. Though consumption does allow the expression of religious identities (e.g., through the purchase of religiously sanctioned food), society's persistent focus on the headscarf as a symbol of oppression and second-class status make clothing a second venue through which Islamic religious identities can be asserted or negotiated (see Dietz 2004). By studying the intersection of consumption and self-presentation as forms of self-expression, this project can adequately address the intersecting dimensions of identity that Eastern African Muslim immigrant women confront.

Methods

My analysis relies on information gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation. The ethnographic portion of my study included observation periods in a shop in one of the Somali malls in Minneapolis and a few brief, on-site conversations with women shopping there.[1] In light of the differences between Somali and American malls, ethnographic observation gave me a better sense of the shopping environment in the Somali malls and yielded information that helped shape my interview questions. I also recruited three of the women I formally interviewed at the Somali mall. Though I used ethnography to supplement interview data, I draw most of my analysis from interviews, which best allowed me to uncover how people understand and negotiate overlapping sets of cultural prescriptions. In total, I interviewed nine women.

The questions of dress and consumption are questions of consciousness. As Ewick and Silbey (1998) define it, consciousness is a form individual participation in

[1] Somali malls are small shopping centers with East African-owned stores that sell a variety of imported East African goods, especially religious and cultural clothing that are not sold in American stores.

larger social structures; it provides a framework for understanding how individuals interact with socially generated patterns of meaning. Thus, the meanings women assign to dress and fashion choices, the processes through which they develop these meanings and translate them into behavior, and the mental and emotional contexts in which they do so are as or more important than consumptive practices themselves. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to use questions regarding basic consumptive behavior to evaluate whether and how these women understand consumption and self-presentation in a religious or ethnic context, have access to consumption as a mode of self-expression, and view the relationship between minority status and style choices. In interviews, I was able to frame questions in the language of shopping, avoiding suggestive wording. This was especially important because I anticipated some of the women might have experienced harrassment or discrimination related to dress style or consumption. In interviews, I could let stories about harrassment or discrimination arise naturally from the conversation; in contrast, a survey questionaire would almost certainly have cued certain responseses. From a practical standpoint, interviews facilitated communication across language barriers. Since I had no translator, I had to conduct the interviews in English, and often had to rephrase a question or ask a participant to explain her response. Any other research method would have made these processes of clarification near-impossible.

The population for this study was East African Muslim immigrant women in their twenties who live in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area who choose to wear a headscarf. I chose to study East African Muslim immigrant women partly for practical reasons; East Africans are a large and visible minority group in and around

the Twin Cities, and thus I believed I would have greater access to these women than to women in other minority groups. I wanted to work with first-generation immigrants who have lived in the United States long enough to be familiar with American institutions and systems of consumption. Women in their twenties are likely to have attended school in the United States and to speak English—a necessity, since I could not work with an interpreter. As a result of their experiences, these women are likely to have experienced both dominant U.S. cultural messages as well as East African cultures. Moreover, they have achieved a level of social and financial independence (relative to younger women) that lets them make personal decisions regarding shopping and consumption. I chose to work with women who wear headscarves in part to homogenize my sample, given the diversity of Islamic dress. However, I also suspected that these women would be more likely to perceive their religion as something that set them apart from mainstream American society, and thus more likely to make consumer choices in the context of that separation.

Practical concerns aside, my population is in several ways unusual among immigrant groups, making the study of their style and consumption choices theoretically compelling as well. Among East African Muslim immigrant women, ethnic identity intersects with race, religion and racial and religious stereotyping, gender, immigration and/or refugee status, and American racial categories, among other factors. (Guenther et al. 2008; Waters 1999; Rose 1993). East African communities in the Twin Cities are composed largely of refugees,[2] whose relationship to the state and the host society differ from those of most immigrants (Guenther et al.

[2] Though my sample, like the general population, included both immigrants and refugees, for the sake of consistency I will use the term "immigrant" to describe the East African Muslim women I worked with.

2008; Rose 1993). These differences may impact refugees' desire or ability to acculturate to the host society. Second, these immigrants have settled into a new gateway area, where "the lack of immigration history…means that the place of immigrants in the class, racial, and ethnic hierarchies is less crystallized, and immigrants may thus have more freedom to define their position" (Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2003, cited in Waters and Jiménez 2005). Thus East Africans may develop new, unanticipated patterns of consumption. For example, their consumer habits may reflect the intersection of native and host culture socializing influences more than a long tradition of previous immigrants' economic activity. This question is especially interesting with regard to East African Muslims because the recently-built Somali malls offer an alternative to American consumer settings.

Religion is another important influence. Most Muslim immigrant women recognize stereotypes about Muslims in host societies (Guenther et al. 2008; Dietz 2004). Whether religion or religious stereotyping affect women's style and consumption decisions is an important question because certain Islamic mandates touch on dress and consumption directly (e.g., buying halal food, or modest dress for women.)

I drew participants from several sources. I found some through academic contacts, and a contact in English as a Second Language program. I also directly recruited from American and Somali malls, and used limited snowball sampling. Recruiting from several different sources allowed me to sidestep the bias inherent in snowball sampling and increase the diversity of my sample. (In fact, no participant knew more than one other participant.) However, this method limited my control over

the sample. Particularly in the Somali mall, where direct recruitment was most successful, I was obliged to accept any participant who allowed me to interview them. I also conducted some of my research under less than ideal conditions—many of the women offered only limited time and several were unwilling to let me record their voice, owing to religious and cultural conventions. Thus, my final sample was somewhat more diverse than I expected. All of the women fit my basic criteria, but some were refugees, others were immigrants, and others were in the United States only to complete their education, after which they planned to return to Africa. While this diversity yielded several interesting themes, future research might focus on a more specific population.

Findings

For the women I interviewed, dress has both individual and collective significance. While women use individual criteria to create their own style, they sometimes experience dress as a collective phenomenon. Shopping for these women can be an opportunity to express individuality, to affirm social norms, or to claim agency in consumer settings.

"If you're feeling scared, it means you don't see around you people wearing like you're wearing": Dress as Community

With the exception of Somali malls, American norms of dress and consumption prevail in commercial settings. For some women, the discrepancy between East African Muslim dress codes and American dress codes infuses dress and clothing with communitarian significance. Fatima and Saida, both refugees from Ethiopia in their early twenties, downplay the importance that personal style has on

their clothing selection, focusing instead on clothing as a collective practice. Clothing emerges from their narratives as a collective, rather than individual, attribute. For Saida and Fatima, clothing serves as a symbol of community, as well as the medium through which acceptance, rejection, understanding, and ignorance are mediated.

Both Saida and Fatima have experienced harassment based on race, culture, or religion. For them, these conflicts are rooted in others' ignorance about or attitudes toward Islam. These women believe others see their clothing as the primary marker of their Muslim identity, and they consistently attribute confrontations, including those occurring in commercial spaces, to the feelings or ideas their clothing inspires in non-Muslim Americans. Said speculated:

> I don't know how [salespeople] judge. Some people, most likely, they don't like the way you dress. And that's how I believe.…If you are wearing pants or jeans or open your hair [do not wear a head covering] and you look or you act like that, they may not say that. Maybe you look different to them, because they don't know.[3]

These women feel dress separates them from non-Muslim Americans, and they believe their dress may inspire hostility or anger. Fear of confrontation, not personal considerations of style, interacts with religion to influence clothing decisions for Saida and Fatima. Explaining why she and Fatima no longer wear full hijab,[4] Saida cited an incident of abuse she had heard about: "They beat the girl at the bus station, and [were] chasing her and stuff. I say, 'I'm not going to do that if they're going to do

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[3] Significantly, Saida first explained the connection between clothing and poor treatment at the beginning of the interview, in response to a general question about the treatment she receives from salespeople, and not following specific probe regarding clothing styles or stereotypes. Variations on this theme recurred throughout the interview.

[4] A full hijab is a head covering that is tight around the face then drapes over the upper body.

that to me.'" Though both women dress according to a fairly conservative interpretation of Islam, fear of abuse constrains their clothing options.

However, Saida and Fatima both told me they would be comfortable wearing full hijab at the mosque or at the technical colleges they attend, because many other women in these places wear it. In these conversations, they adopted a view of themselves not as individual players seeking the right of personal expression, but as members of a community seeking to express what they consider an internally consistent style of dress. In the case of full hijab, they found at the mosque and at their schools not a venue to express their individuality, but a safe space in which to declare a shared ethnic and religious identity.

In this way, clothing becomes a powerful symbol of community, and can also be a strategy against harassment and discrimination. While Saida and Fatima believe their clothing signals their Muslim identity to others, they also see a community-wide dress code as an avenue toward greater acceptance for Islam and Islamic dress. Khadija, a young Somali ESL student, also associates a strong Muslim presence with increased personal comfort and safety:

> When we go to [American] stores, like the outlet mall [in an extraurban area], maybe they don't know Somalis, and they don't know our culture, or the things we wear, I feel scared sometimes. They're not saying anything, but normally they don't see people like me….When we go to the Mall of America, there's a lot of Somali people [and people are familiar with] Somali culture. They know us. But when we go [to other stores], they don't know us.

Like other women, Khadija feels more comfortable in settings where people are familiar with her culture and religion. As do Saida and Fatima, she believes dress is one way to establish familiarity and gain acceptance among non-Muslim Americans.

Saida, Fatima, Khadija, and Maua, a Somali woman in her mid-twenties, all moved to the Twin Cities from cities with small or non-existent East African Muslim populations, where they were less comfortable wearing Islamic dress. Fatima recalled:

> But once I…visit[ed] Minneapolis, I see people covering and I say, "Oh my god, why am I not covering my hair?" And the [Muslim] people, they explain it [to non-Muslims] the more we stay there. So by the time I reached high school, we can wear skirts, and wear long-sleeve shirts, and cover our hair….But before, we didn't explain. We didn't know how to explain it to them. So we ended up being just like them, just to be safe.

The presence of a large Muslim community, dressing the way they wanted to dress, gave Fatima and other women the courage to dress according to the understanding of Islam they share with the women in her community. Moreover, they believe the visible presence of Muslims in the Twin Cities has helped dismantle the stigma against Islam and create greater freedom for Islamic dress.

For many of these women, shared dress codes signify a strong community, and thus represent safety and comfort. Discussing feelings of fear and isolation in her previous city of residence, Saida explained, "If you're feeling scared it means you don't see around you people wearing like you're wearing." Dress was the primary means through which Saida established a sense of belonging.

When women feel uncertain about their relationships with non-Muslim Americans, they often draw on a collective understanding of dress, and rely on the commonalities within the Muslim community to carve out a space for Muslim women in society and to mediate these uncertainties. This framing of dress and consumption suggests that women do understand their clothing choices as a symbol of the identity, but the identity the clothing symbolizes is collective, rather than individual. When women discuss the messages their clothing sends to non-Muslim observers, they frame the discussion in terms of collective goals; the idea is to gain greater acceptance for Islam and Islamic dress, not to signal individual tastes or attributes. Personal style does have a role in women's dress decisions; however, even within the East African Muslim community, style is an unreliable method of communication.

"Me, I pretty much go by the religion": Islam as a Paradigm Shift

Despite having collective elements, dress is not a solely collective phenomenon. The women I interviewed also see style decisions as personal choices with implications for the individual. In this context, religion becomes an important element of style choices, and distinctions between Muslim women who dress differently can be almost as important as those between Muslims and non-Muslims. For some, the religious aspect of these choices is largely unconscious—the question is what color headscarf to wear, not whether pants are appropriate attire for a Muslim woman. Others consciously blend their own interpretation of Islam with their individual sense of style, creating a personal context in which to evaluate style choices. For all the women, religion offers an alternative to American consumerism as a paradigm that assigns and interprets the meaning of clothing. While Islam does

not subsume American consumer categories, it does present women with a different lens through which they can appraise, accept, reject, or modify these categories. However, using Islam as a paradigm for style creates its own ambiguity, as women encounter and must rationalize divergent interpretations of Islamic dress.

Some women believe Islam provides unambiguous instruction regarding dress. These women generally profess a strong link between dress and religious devotion, and thus do not seek to alter what they see as Islam's dress code. Amina is a young Somali woman who was raised since infancy in Kenya and came to the United States to attend college. She explained:

> I'm a practicing [Muslim]. I'm trying to practice my religion.…[Our religion] teaches us that God said women [are] supposed to wear non-fitting clothes, something which can cover you. That's what God said.

Sabra, like Amina, is ethnically Somali but grew up in Kenya. She is in her second year of college. Also like Amina, Sabra sees a correlation between style decisions and the strength of a woman's religious faith. While she understands and subscribes to the idea that taste influences clothing decisions, she also imbues certain clothing decisions, such as whether to wear pants or whether to cover one's hair, with religious implications:

> [What you wear] depends how conservative you are. If you're more conservative, you will care about tight stuff, or revealing stuff. If you're not, you wear pants, and revealing stuff. It categorizes you into more liberal and more conservative. And that's what makes you different from [the other Muslim women].

The understanding of dress code as a product or element of religion does not preclude the use of style as a mode of self-expression. Indeed, Amina goes to great lengths to preserve what she sees as her personal style:

> My mom sends me scarves from back home. If she sees nice scarves, she sends me them. Most of the skirts that are here are so tight, so fancy. I'm so simple, I don't like too much stuff, something which sparkles too much. They have beads, too much beads. I don't like that. So mostly my skirts I get from back home."

Amina does not reject style as a reflection of personality or individuality; she simply relegates personal style decisions to arenas she believes Islam leaves available to her. Sabra uses her sense of style in a similar way, drawing on it to fill in the gaps religion has left open. Her personal taste attracts her to certain items in American stores, though she noted that, "Most of the clothes that I wear, the number one thing that I consider is my religion: Is it something that you can wear as a Muslim woman?" Moreover, to these women, using clothing to signify Muslim identity may be more important than the smaller distinctions wrought by minor fashion decisions—these women may adopt "Muslim" as their master status. As Sabra explained it, "Dress code. Very, very important. It's part of our culture, and it's our religion, and it's what makes you different form the other [non-Muslim] person."

In contrast, Mapenzi, an Ethiopian woman and a recent college graduate, relies on her own interpretation of Islam to define appropriate clothing. She selects clothing that reflects personal, not collective, standards:

> I incorporate the Islamic belief of how a modest woman should look with the world we live in today….[Y]ou have to incorporate everything and make up your own style. A lot of Muslims that I'd be talking to might be telling me

> that wearing pants is wrong, but the way I interpret it, I can tell them that what it says in the religious principles is that women should be modest and shouldn't reveal themselves, so the jeans aren't revealing me, and I'm not exposing any skin, so that's how I look at it.

Unlike Amina and Sabra, Mapenzi carves a space within Islam for agency and personal religious interpretation. However, just as they do, Mapenzi limits the clothes she wears in accordance with her understanding of Islam. These two orientations represent two responses to different frameworks; two different types of consciousness. While Amina and Sabra favor ethnic and religious orientations, Mapenzi blends two perspectives to create her own. However, regardless of the specific understanding she has of the Islamic dress code, each woman frames style and clothing decisions in an Islamic mantle.

Considering the diversity of interpretations of the Islamic dress code, it is not surprising that women sometimes encounter perspectives other than their own, either within their immediate social circle or in the larger East African Muslim community. Diverging feelings about appropriate attire can threaten conflict or nurture internal contradictions as women struggle to reconcile their own understanding of Islam with others' understandings and with their belief in the sincerity of their fellow Muslims.

Though some of the women I spoke with believe dress is an accurate symbol of religious devotion, others reject the notion that clothing can predict a woman's faith. Significantly it is not only women who dress less conservatively who eschew the idea that one must adopt a specific dress code to be a good Muslim. Lela, is a college freshmen. Her parents are Somali, but she was born outside of Somalia and

has lived most of her life in the United States. Describing her style choices, Lela explained:

> Me, I pretty much go by the religion. But I don't think that you have to dress a certain way to be a certain religion. God is not going to judge you by the way you dress….[O]f course you have to cover up….[But] how you look on the outside and what is in your heart can be different things.

However, attempts to divorce dress from religion yield tenuous stability at best. For example, Maua, who dresses fairly conservatively, drew on the Qur'an to explain other Muslim women's chosen dress codes:

> [P]eople assume that if you are [a Muslim], you're supposed to be looking like other [Muslims]. But people don't choose that. God himself said, "I create all this different-ness, all these different humans." God tells us, "You can either choose to look like this, because that's what I want you to look like, and be thankful for your religion, and be at peace with everybody else, [or choose to look different.]" I have friends that pray…but at the same time, they don't dress that way. That doesn't mean that they're bad, and I'm better.

At the same time Maua denied the connection between faith and dress, she espoused the notion that Islam favors one style of dress. The belief that the Islamic dress code is self-evident frustrates women's attempts to separate dress from faith, as Maua's conversation with Khadija demonstrates:

> Maua: Muslim-wise, they [Muslim women] all know what to wear and what not to wear, because it's in the Qur'an. So everybody knows.
> Khadija: They know, but they ignore it. They don't want to do it.

Intellectually, Maua can rationalize women's differing standards of modesty. However, she has trouble accepting her rationalization. Regarding the role of religion

in determining dress codes, she said, “Islam, once you understand what God and Earth means, you are all done, and you basically have to practice it.” For her, Islam defines appropriate dress clearly; the question was whether people would accept Islam’s standard, or substitute their own. (Lela too, though she believes there is a disjuncture between dress and faith, spoke of “go[ing] by the religion” as though there is only one way to do so.)

Given these internal contradictions, it is not surprising that many of these women find themselves guarding an uneasy equilibrium, caught between their desire to reject the link between dress and devotion and their intuitive understanding that their interpretation of the Islamic dress code is correct and obvious. Ambiguity regarding Islamic dress, and the connection between dress and faith, obfuscates the messages these women might send with their own clothes, as well as the way they interpret others’ clothing choices. Moreover, internal contradictions can have social implications, and may affect women’s relationships with others. These effects are especially visible during shopping, when the activity centers on clothing and style decisions. As Mapenzi, who generally shops alone, explained,

> I have friends who are very conservative Muslims, who don’t wear pants and who don’t wear even skirts. They would have to wear that big black gown-garment kind of thing. And they cover up. And I have friends who wear pants who don’t even wear a headscarf. We all go shopping together and we all pick whatever fits our own identity. That’s when, if I would want to shop with my friends for regular [non-religious] clothing, I would tell them, “Oh, that’s too revealing,” or, “That’s too tight,” or, “That’s too loose.”

The diversity of styles among Mapenzi’s group of friends can lead to mild conflict, which may partly account for her reluctance to shop with others. (She does

shop with friends at the Somali mall, a setting which minimizes the possibility of debate, since she shops there only for specific, religious clothing.)

Sabra too has a diverse group of friends, though she prefers to shop with those who share her style. Sabra described how she and her friends act as checks on each other's shopping decisions: "If [someone buys] something that is not appropriate to wear, too revealing, we're like, 'Oh. You think you can wear that?' Or we tell them, 'I don't think that's nice. I don't think that's a good idea.'" Shopping lets Sabra affirm the Islamic dress code she shares with her friends, an opportunity she would lose if she went shopping with friends who understood Islamic dress differently. The practice of reinforcing identity through shopping is effective primarily when women use it to affirm their understanding of Islam with others who share that understanding. Thus, while women can use consumption to signal their identity, the link between consumption and identity is firmly situated within an Islamic framework.

The Islamic style paradigm adopted by most women helps them define themselves in relation to other Muslims. However, it also creates internal tension for women who grapple with the discrepancies between their own and others' interpretation of Islam. American consumerism, as an alternative framework, further complicates women's use of the Islamic style paradigm. American consumerism can challenge the Islamic framework at the same time it offers a chance to participate in American society.

"I don't wear it, but I still know about it": American consumer models and cultural fluency

Though the women I spoke with are conscious of the impact Islam has on their personal style, and cite religious criteria as the most important factor influencing their clothing choices, they are neither unaware of nor unaffected by American consumer models. The extent to which they accept, reject, or manipulate these models varies, but their interactions with American consumer structures are informed and deliberate.

Some of the women have adopted the use of brands as symbols of a certain style. When I asked women what stores they liked, a typical first response was, "Stores with brands I like." For these women, brands are closely tied to personal style. During her interview, Khadija broke her style down to its constituent branded elements: "I like Guess for the purse. And the shoes, I like Nike. And the coats, I really like Baby Phat." Khadija uses brands as a convenient way to define what kinds of clothes and accessories she likes. Likewise, when I asked Lela what she likes about the American stores she frequents, she explained, "The designs. And the brands, it's different.…I see myself wearing those kinds of clothes over any other kind of clothes in the world." Lela understands dress as a way to reflect her individuality, and she sees brands as a convenient shortcut to personal style.

The women who do not use brands this way are not unaware of the role brands play in American consumerism. Rather, they consciously reject the conspicuous consumption they see embedded in brand-name culture. Sabra told me, "I don't follow brand names…A lot of the stuff, you're paying for the brand, and they're not even cute, and they're not even comfortable.…Why would I buy something very expensive just for the name? Am I going to wear the name, or the

clothes?" In a similar vein, Amina criticized the use of brand names as a tool for projecting false wealth or status: "[L]et's say you have a Gucci watch, you have Versaci shoes, you have a Coach bag. [People] say, 'Oh, she's wealthy. She's rich.' It gives you a title that you are not….So for me, I don't like to be [seen] as something that I'm not." Brand names play a limited role in both women's fashion choices, but not because they are unaware of the symbolic status American consumerism assigns to brands. Rather, Sabra and Amina reject brands precisely because they understand them as symbols of styles and status.

Whether they accept or critique American use of brand names, women demonstrate a knowledge of American consumerism whose meaning, for many, goes beyond the practical implications of shopping and style. Most women are able to use their knowledge of American consumerism agentially, to affect the outcomes of their shopping experiences and make claims for inclusion or social power. For example, Sabra experiences fluency in American fashion as a point of pride. Though these fashions have a limited influence on her personal style decisions, Sabra believes others value her knowledge about them. As a sales associate at Macy's, she draws on this knowledge to advise customers:

> People come to the counter, [and ask], "What do you think goes with this? What color?" And I'll try to explain the color….[S]ometimes there's someone who comes with a dress and asks, "What kind of shoes?" …[M]aybe I'm used to coats and shoes, and magazines, and how every time we have a new style at Macy's they put it on the mannequins, so it kind of makes it easier [for me] to [learn]….Some customers will come and I tell them the style. I don't wear it, but I still know about it.

For Sabra, knowledge translates to social capital. Knowing about American fashions, despite not wearing many of them, gives her confidence to advise customers at work and friends when she goes shopping. American stores offer her a venue in which to demonstrate the extent of her knowledge and claim the incumbent social rewards.

For other women, proficiency in the American consumer system, which often takes the form of knowledge about different brands of clothing, is a natural outcome of acculturation. As Maua explained, "Brand names are something that you look into. It doesn't matter where you're from. It's just something in our society. [L]iving here, you look into it more." Maua sees her knowledge of brand names as a symbol of her integration into mainstream American society—her society. Saida described her developing interest in brands in similar terms:

> Before I don't look for the brand. A long time ago I don't care. Anything is good up to here [puts hand down by her ankle to demonstrate length]. I buy it, that's it, I don't care what name.…[B]ut sometimes it's good to have different company make different quality clothes….The more you go, the more you get interested….[Y]ou say, "This one's Calvin Klein…" and you know more difference. You learn it from people, even if you don't know anything.

Saida too frames her knowledge of brand names in the language of acculturation; she thinks about brand names almost as a rite of passage. In her eyes, her growing familiarity with brand names reflects a more general process of social or cultural integration. By discerning between different brands, she demonstrates her ability to read the codes of American consumerism. Rather than relying on brand names as code for a certain style or look, she understands this knowledge almost as an end in itself; a symbol of her growing familiarity with American consumer culture.

American malls offer her an opportunity to claim membership in one area of American society.

While many women understood brands and shopping as a sign of acculturation and a means to demonstrate acculturation, some also engage consumption aggressively and make more dramatic claims for social power. Saida's experiences are somewhat unusual among my sample; she was one of a few women who told me she had experienced overt harassment in American stores. Nonetheless, her response to this harassment, and the way she frames her shopping experiences, are revealing, and often simply extend the practice of using American consumption to demonstrate acculturation or cultural fluency.

Saida understands consumption, particularly in American stores, partly as a forum in which she can convert money to social power or acceptance. She sees her purchasing power as a way to challenge stereotypes and to assert her power as a consumer over salespeople who act inappropriately. She is unwilling to buy from a sales person she believes has treated her poorly. Discussing the language barrier she sometimes experiences in American stores, she explained, "I don't like when [American salespeople say], 'I don't know what you're saying.' They get the idea, but they just pretend they don't get what you're saying….You say it two, three, four times, I get mad. I'm not gonna say it. I say forget it." Saida frames her response not as an act of retreat (i.e., "running away" after a sales person offends her) but as an act of defiance—or of agency. By disengaging from the sale and refusing to give the offending sales associate the commission—and often buying from another

salesperson instead—she positions herself as the more powerful player in the salesperson-customer interaction.

Saida's experience at the Coach store at an American mall, which draws together several elements common to other stories, is revealing. With help from her husband, Amaad, she relayed the following events:

> Saida: She [a saleswoman] think we don't afford [the purse]. When we buy it, she say, "Oh, oh you bought it? Oh my god." See? She think we don't afford it. [laughs]
>
> …
>
> Amaad: [The sales lady], the way she's standing over there and she keep looking at us like some people [who might be] stealing….And when we get [a purse], and go [to the] other lady, I'm looking at [the first lady's] facial expression. And then we bought it and we left. And the next day, she [Saida] didn't like it and we turn it back to her.
>
> …
>
> Saida: We go [to the Coach store], [we return it.] This is the lady [who looked at us strangely.] Sorry for her! [laughs] Next day again, we are now going to buy [another] purse. We are walking along. "Hey, see that purse? [a different purse that was not at the store before] It's coming back again." And then I buy that one. The smaller one.

This narrative illustrates some of the strategies Saida uses to claim power and reject stereotypes in American consumer settings. First, with the purchase of a high-cost status symbol—a Coach bag—Saida asserted her knowledge of American fashion and her financial ability to pay for high-end items. (The second assertion is important because Saida often perceives that American salespeople suspect she is unable to afford the merchandise she is browsing.) Moreover, by choosing which salesperson to purchase the purse from, and by returning it and buying a different one, Saida

demonstrates her familiarity with American shopping rules and her ability and willingness to manipulate them. She is not ignorant of the system or desperate to make a certain purchase; instead she sees herself as a flexible player in a bid for power.

Fluency in American consumer culture had social implications, and women who can manipulate this knowledge feel they gain control over certain social relations—in other words, this familiarity generates agency and social power. Moreover, consumption allows East African Muslim women to interact with American culture in a way that dress precludes. As consumers, women can navigate American consumerism on an individual level. While dress positions women as part of a community—Muslims, with respect to non-Muslims—shopping allows them to engage American consumerism as individuals, and to demonstrate acculturation and social power. Whether Somali malls afford women the same opportunities to interact with social structures as individual agents is less clear.

"They wear pants and shirts—what's the point?": Shopping at the Somali Mall

While in American settings, East African women encounter a more or less static consumer structure, in Somali malls the Islamic dress and style paradigm is up for debate. Women can use consumption to make claims of inclusion and equality in American stores; in Somali malls, they advocate not for inclusion on the grounds of a shared paradigm, rather on the validity of their paradigm over another. Such a task is difficult in the Somali mall, where the clothing for sale is conservative, and purchasing it reflects tacit approval of a conservative paradigm. The process is

complicated by the role of the Somali mall as a social center and by the strong social norms that favor a more conservative interpretation of Islamic dress.

Though most women superficially frame their trips to the Somali mall in practical terms (e.g., "I shop at the Somali mall because they don't have what I need what at American stores,") it was clear that the Somali mall serves as a social nexus and fosters feelings of belonging and community. Many women told me they feel extremely comfortable in Somali malls, or that the malls feel "like home."

Though she shops at Somali malls infrequently, and generally feels comfortable in American settings, at the Somali mall Sabra feels she is part of a larger group of shoppers. For her the experience is positive:

> When you go to the Somali mall, you feel like you are at home. Because it's the same ethnicity, same background, same religion, same language. You connect to each other. You don't feel strange at the Somali mall. Because you can go and talk to anybody. You can give your opinion to somebody else who is not with you: "Oh I like that." But when you go to the American mall, you kind of feel like you do not know the person. If you talk to them, they will be like, "Why is she talking to me?" It's kind of different when it comes to the relationship there.

For Sabra, as for other women, the sense of community at the Somali mall hinges on shared experiences and shared culture, and produces feelings of trust and belonging.

The women universally see the Somali malls as a social center; however, they do not all feel they belong to the community this social center houses. Though they see the Somali mall as a gathering spot for others, some of the women feel isolated from the Somali social network within the mall. Amina and Lela feel their backgrounds set them apart from most of the Somali community. Though Somali,

each woman was raised from infancy outside Somalia, and neither feels that other Somalis completely accept her. According to Amina:

> [I]t's not me who sets myself apart from the crowd. It is they who notice things. And it's not that I [want to set myself apart.] But supposedly, the way I act, the way I talk, something….So, for them, they notice stuff. Even my accent, to them from Somalia, they notice it. They say, "You're not from Somalia." I say, "Yeah, I am. I was not brought up there. I was not raised actually there."

Like Amina, Lela feels that her accent and her life experience set her apart from other Somalis. She also feels unfamiliar with, or rejects, certain Somali social conventions, and she believes this distances her from the Somali community, a distance she feels acutely in the Somali malls. Though they share the ethnicity and the language of most other shoppers there, social or cultural differences prevent Amina and Lela from fully participating in the Somali mall.

For other women, the strength of social norms within the Somali mall can make shopping there uncomfortable. Interviews and ethnographic observation both revealed the Somali mall as a place where the community members can affirm community norms. The most relevant social norm for the women I spoke with was dress. Dress codes are fairly uniform at the Somali mall. Most of the shop owners and shoppers wear full hijab, or skirts, long-sleeve shirts, and scarves. People who work or shop at the Somali mall understand the social pressure the setting exerts on those who frequent it. Rahima, a young Somali woman I met at the Somali mall, told me her friends who wore pants and did not wear headscarves were uncomfortable shopping in the Somali malls. When I asked her why, she responded, "They wear pants and shirts—what's the point?" Yusra, a Somali woman in her mid-twenties and

a friend of Rahima, elaborated: "It depends on if you know people here…. That one girl [referring to a girl who had been in the mall earlier wearing tight jeans and a low-cut shirt, with a bandana tied at the back of her neck] didn't know anyone here." Yusra and Rahima understand the social bonds within the Somali mall as a powerful normalizing force with respect to dress.

Some of the women I interviewed have experienced this normalizing force directed against them. Lela and Mapenzi, the women in my sample who dressed the least conservatively, have both encountered criticism from women at the Somali mall. Lela recalls:

> They'll tell me, "Oh, if you dress like that you'll go to hell."…Or they'll say, "No Somali man will marry you if you wear those clothes," and I'm like, "Who says I want to marry a Somali man?"…If they think my skirt's too tight, I'm like, fine. The next day I'll come back wearing pants. Just to piss people off.

Lela's story recalls Saida's experiences at the Coach store; in each case, each woman refused to follow the script others had assigned her. Saida defied stereotypes to demand inclusion, and Lela defied them in order to express her personal interpretation of the Islamic dress code. While the American mall is, for many women, a setting in which to demand inclusion, its corollary, the Somali mall, is a place in which to debate the Islamic paradigm. And women who find themselves on the less conservative side of the debate often set themselves apart from the rest of the community; the function of individual agency in Somali settings can be division, rather than inclusion.

Mapenzi's experiences are similar to Lela's, though she described them in less emphatic terms:

> If I am dressed like this [jeans, a long sleeve shirt, a sweater, tennis shoes, and a headscarf] to go over there, they're going to be thinking I'm a "modernized Muslim." That's the label…And there are some nice, friendly people who will tell you, "Don't wear pants, it's not nice for you. I will give you this skirt, it will look really good on you. You should wear this," and things like that. But you don't find things like that in the regular [American] malls. You go over there, and you just buy whatever you want, and go home and that's it.

Mapenzi and Lela both enjoy the relative freedom of American malls. The absence of the strong social pressures common to Somali malls let women shopping in American malls juggle Islamic and American paradigms more freely than they can in the Somali malls. While the tensions deriving from identity-related consumption are present and salient regardless of the consumer setting, how these tensions manifest themselves—and how they are ultimately resolved—may differ in different locales. In other words, social pressures serve as a barrier to certain forms of consciousness; it becomes more difficult for women in Somali malls to move away from ethnic orientations toward consumption and dress, and the women who do choose non-ethnic orientations have limited control over others' responses.

While the women recognize the Somali mall as *a* social center, their willingness and ability to adopt it as *their* social center depends on the extent to which they share the social codes and religious values of the community inside. At the same time that shared culture, religion, and language make the Somali mall feel "like home" for some women, these commonalities intensify social norms, which promote the Islamic framework over American consumer models and limit women's

ability to engage Somali consumer settings as they do American consumer settings. Women often feel that shoppers and storeowners at the Somali mall judge them and their clothing according to an Islamic framework, and the prevalence of this paradigm constrains women's opportunities to use dress as a form of personal expression outside the Islamic framework. Others are more likely to judge clothing as a signal of religious faith than of personal identity; the ambiguity over the meaning of dress hinders the use of American consumerism models in Somali malls. Thus, Somali malls are an external constraint on consciousness—it is more convenient for women to adopt Islamic understanding of style and consumption within these settings.

Conclusion

For the women I studied, dress and consumer behaviors have changing and occasionally conflicting significance. Dress can be a reflection of personal style, a marker of Muslim identity, or both simultaneously. Viewing dress as a symbol of Muslim identity allows women to visualize a space for themselves in American society at the same time that an Islamic style framework emphasizes the differences among Muslim women and creates internal tension and social instability.

While the East African Muslim women I spoke with rely primarily on the Islamic style paradigm to guide their decisions about dress and interpret others' style choices, the ability to shift between Islamic and American reference frames gives these women agency in American consumer settings; this power demonstrates a form of agency in theories of consumption that surpasses simple consumption of commodities. In contrast, Islamic style paradigms rarely leave room for agency, as they give people little control over the meanings others extract from their style

choices. Women interpret other's clothing according to their own understanding, which may not match that of the wearer.

Echoing previous research, this study found dress to be an unreliable communicator of status and identity. Women generally feel their dress distinguishes them from non-Muslims, and dress acquires the most stable meanings when it serves as a symbol of collective identity with respect to non-Muslim Americans. However, the variety of definitions of Islamic dress makes personal style problematic as a signifier of identity within the community. While women may attempt to project a certain identity with their choice of dress, the discrepancies between their own and others' understandings of the meanings of certain clothing limits their success.

While they sometimes framed dress in collective religious terms, the women I studied were less likely to view their shopping behaviors as an element of ethnicity. (However, consistent with earlier studies, ethnic shopping enclaves do serve as social centers and places where the community can affirm social norms and ethnic culture.) As Dávila (2001) and Lamont and Molnar (2001) found, shopping in American settings sometimes gives these women a sense of control over their relationship to mainstream American society. Like the participants in those studies, some of the women I interviewed used their power as consumers to demonstrate acculturation or belonging.

This research began the important work of exploring style and consumption choices among a unique immigrant group. It provides an important foundation for further studies on style and consumption choices among immigrants and minorities

and on the interaction of alternate paradigms for evaluating dress style and consumption.

Future researchers may be interested in broadening the scope and focus of the study. As discussed earlier, my sample was quite diverse. While this diversity generated insights about the various ways in which Islamic and consumerism paradigms intersect, and allowed a fairly comprehensive analysis of women's consciousness with regards to dress and shopping, the characteristics of the sample limited my ability to generalize patterns based on attributes of individuals. Further research could expand the size of the sample, or focus on specific sub-groups within the population. My study was also hindered by a self-selection bias. I could only interview women who were proficient in English, and had very limited access to religious women who did not want their voices recorded. Future research designs could include an interpreter or stenographer to accommodate the inclusion of these women.

More generally, my research focused on a particular immigrant group with unique religious influences on style and consumption and specific venues in which they could carry out these mandates–an ideal group for a study of intersection dress and consumption paradigms. Later studies might examine the impact of retail infrastructure and community solidarity on conceptualization of dress and consumption, as well as dress and consumer practices.

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