



(PREPRINT) The *Niqab*: A Cross-Religious COVID-19 Safety Measure in Madina Zongo

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ABSTRACT Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of the *niqab* (face veil), typically associated with Islamic fundamentalism and banned in some parts of Europe and Africa, has gained currency in multi-religious communities such as Madina Zongo (strangers' quarters in Hausa) in Accra, Ghana. For some Muslim women in Madina, the *niqab* appeared to be a perfect replacement for the face mask even without an official statement from medical authorities or state officials on its protective capacity. Wearing the *niqab* allowed these Muslim women to simultaneously follow their religious tradition and attempt to protect themselves from the disease. Interestingly, some Christian women in the community have also been donning the *niqab*. Employing Laura Fair's (2013) proposition that the *niqab* contains a wide range of possible material uses, in this article I show why and how the *niqab* is appropriated as a face mask by some women in Madina and discuss the implications of this appropriation in the religiously pluralistic setting of the Zongo.

KEYWORDS niqab, COVID-19, Madina Zongo, cross-religious appropriation, face mask

IMPORTANT

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Introduction

For the first time, it feels good to be a niqab wearer in Madina Zongo. Some of our Muslim sisters are beginning to use it due to the outbreak of the corona virus. I have started making niqabs for sale and some Christian women have expressed interest in using it. I think the outbreak of the corona virus is a blessing in disguise.

[3]

These are the words of 30-year-old Shareefa, one of the interlocutors for my research on

[4]

women's beauty practices in Madina Zongo¹, in Ghana's capital city of Accra. She narrated how, prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, some Muslims and non-Muslims in the Zongo passed derogatory comments on her *niqab* (face veil) anytime she was in the public domain. She was nicknamed *Boko Haram*, *Al-Shabab*, or *Al-Qaeda*, which linked her *niqab* to the activities of Islamic militant groups in different parts of the world. However, COVID-19 changed the attitude of many Zongo residents to the *niqab*; they began to consider it as one of the protective materials likely to prevent the spread of the disease.

Examining the appropriation of the *niqab* as a substitute for the face mask, this article asks how the new, more positive evaluation of the *niqab* has affected the relationship among Muslims and between Christians and Muslims in the Madina Zongo community. In so doing, it explores how the *niqab* is entangled with the sartorial practices of Zongo women and highlights the religious, cultural, security, and health implications of its use as Ghana is fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. [5]

The research presented here is based on my on-going ethnographic fieldwork (conducted between 2018 and 2021) with Muslim and Christian women in Madina, including health personnel, and *Malama* (female Muslim teachers).² Within this research, I also talked to several *Imams*. I found that women in *niqab*, who are in the minority among female Muslims in the Zongo, are a hard-to-access group. Because by its very nature the *niqab* literally isolates its users in public space and also hinders communication, I decided to use snowball³ and purposive sampling⁴ as research methods. As a native of the community and a Muslim, on some occasions, I put on a *niqab* or the corona *hijab*⁵ during focus group discussions with Muslim women in Qur'anic schools as well as at Friday congregational prayers. To reduce the frequency of face-to-face interactions, I also conducted one-to-one interviews over the phone. Finally, I used the Internet to access materials and information about issues related to the COVID-19 situation in Ghana and beyond. [6]

Established in the late 1950s, Madina Zongo is a cosmopolitan community within the La Nkwantanang Madina Municipality in southeastern Accra. In Hausa language,⁶ Zongo means 'camping place of a carrier,' 'lodging place of travelers,' or 'strangers' quarters' (Schildkrout 1978; Pellow 1988). Throughout West Africa, the term is often used to name a part of a settlement inhabited by Muslim traders and migrants. The Hausa language, Islamic religion [7]

1 Zongo in Hausa means a stranger or settler community in Ghana, originally founded by Muslim traders from different parts of West Africa. Even though Zongos are dominated by Muslims, within the larger Ghanaian community Muslims are considered a religious minority (they count for less than 20 percent of the society), with Christians as the dominant religious group (over 70 percent of Ghana's population, out of whom members of Protestant and Pentecostal Churches form the majority).

2 The highest religious office a Muslim woman qualifies for in the Zongo community is a teacher, also called *Malama*. In this position, she teaches the Qur'an and Islamic practices to her fellow women. The *Malama* may also be seen preaching during funerals, weddings, and naming ceremonies where the congregation is mixed.

3 This method was employed because, apart from the fact that *niqab* users are in the minority, they do not take active part in public activities and are mainly restricted to their domestic space.

4 Due to differing opinions about *niqab* use by Muslim women in the Zongo, I needed to be selective in choosing my informants for this ethnographic research. It was my aim to specifically engage Muslim and non-Muslim women who have adopted the *niqab* for various reasons.

5 This is a special kind of *hijab* developed during the outbreak of the pandemic that differs from the *niqab*. It is a single piece of veil which does not only cover a woman's body but also her head, neck, mouth, and nose. See picture below.

6 An Afro-Asiatic language and a lingua franca of most ethnic groups in the Sahel region and some parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

and dress, and food practices are unifying factors (Ntewusu 2005; Pellow 1987) for most people in the *Zongo* community irrespective of their places of origin.⁷

Currently, Madina *Zongo* hosts people of diverse religious backgrounds⁸. Muslims are the dominant religious group; their practices are usually more visible to the larger community than those of Christians and adherents of the African Indigenous Religions. However, Christians do constitute the second largest religious group in the community.⁹ Their number is significant due to relatively cheap accommodation, safety, and proximity to state institutions such as the University of Ghana. For decades, Christians and Muslims have gone to great lengths to maintain peaceful relationships. For example, they share certain outdoor public spaces, such as parks. Both groups buy *halal* meat from butchers in the Madina market, while some Christians ensure that a fowl is slaughtered according to *halal* standards during Christmas so that they can share it with their Muslim friends and neighbours (Alhassan Adum-Atta and Rashida 2020). According to Ntewusu (2005), the relatively peaceful relationship between the two religious groups in Madina *Zongo* is a result of the fact that polemical preaching is absent in the community.¹⁰ The relationship between Christians and Muslims in the *Zongo* is also enhanced through mutual imitation and copying of each other's religious practices and clothing styles. For instance, some Muslim brides have appropriated the white wedding gown often used by Christians. Conversely, the *hijab*, and—more recently—the *niqab* have also been donned by some Christians.

This article draws on Laura Fair's (2013) assertion that the *niqab* contains a wide range of possible uses. She argues that—contrary to the idea that the *niqab* connotes piety, women's subordination to men, and Islamic fundamentalism—twenty-first-century Muslim women in Zanzibar use it to affirm their authority and economic independence. For her, the meaning of *niqab* is fluid and subject to transformation as women appropriate it to fit different settings. According to Fair, the *niqab*, thanks to the variety of its designs, suits women who want to look trendy and cosmopolitan. In addition, the black colour of the *niqab* offers unlimited sartorial possibilities. This idea is corroborated by José van Santen (2013), who examines how, in Cameroun, most women who returned from pilgrimage to Mecca added the *niqab* to their sartorial practices as a status marker. However, as I will show, in Madina the *niqab* is not so much used for sartorial purposes as in the case of women in Zanzibar, but is rather a religious material embedded in an Islamic cultural practice which has become very instrumental in the fight against COVID-19.

7 There are about four hundred *Zongo* communities scattered over different parts of the country (Brady and Hooper 2019), categorized as inner cities or slums and identified as marginalized groups. Since Ghana gained independence in 1957, state authorities have made different efforts towards the integration of *Zongo* communities through the development of social and infrastructural facilities (Brady and Hooper 2019). Some have described this engagement as an attempt to score political points in the *Zongos*. For instance, a special ministry called the Ministry of Zongo and Inner Cities Development was established in 2017 with the aim 'to coordinate, collaborate and facilitate critical interventions through affirmative action that progressively addresses economic and infrastructure deficits, and promotes socio-economic development of the Inner City and Zongo communities' (Awuni 2017). Four years after the introduction of this ministry, the president scrapped it in an attempt to reduce the number of ministers and cut public administration costs.

8 With a population size of about 137,162 in 2012, it is described as the twelfth most populous community in Ghana. See *Wikipedia entry on Madina*. Last accessed April 23, 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madina_Ghana#cite_note-World_Gazetteer-1.

9 The presence of Christianity in the *Zongo* is evidenced by several large church buildings located in its different parts.

10 Sometimes, this peaceful relationship can be disrupted. For instance, Joseph Fosu-Ankrah (2018) reported that the Methodist Church in Madina was sent to court by the Muslim community on issues related to noise pollution as a result of the church's nightly activities.

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The appropriation of the *niqab* as a face mask is not peculiar to Madina Zongo of course. [10] In Saudi Arabia, the Minister of Health, in responding to a twitter question, stated that in situations where face or surgical masks are unavailable, they can be substituted with a *niqab*.¹¹ Likewise, *niqab* wearers in Britain also used it as face mask, confirming that they no longer received strange looks and hateful comments they had been subjected to prior to the outbreak of COVID-19.¹² As faces are barely visible through the wearing of masks, the *niqab* is becoming less extraordinary in times of COVID-19. While it remains to be seen whether, thanks to the experience of the pandemic, the *niqab* might become more acceptable in the long run, this special moment in time (of Covid 19) offers an opportunity to rethink the use of the *niqab* in public spaces.

In the following, I will offer, first, a brief account of the measures put in place as far as the wearing of face masks is concerned in fighting COVID-19 in Ghana. Secondly, I will highlight how the usage of the *niqab* was framed in Ghana and in Madina Zongo in particular before the outbreak of the pandemic. Finally, the cross-religious appropriation of the *niqab* as a substitute for the face mask by Muslims and Christians in Madina will be addressed as well as its implication for religious co-existence in the Zongo. [11]

Fighting ‘the Invisible Enemy’ with Face Masks

Ghana is a multi-religious country, with its citizens belonging to Christianity, Islam, and African indigenous religions. Religion plays an important role in Ghana’s political, economic, social, and medical landscape. Abamfo Atiemo (2013, 96) shows how, in times of difficulty, Ghanaians “resort to religious functionaries with reputation for spiritual power such as prophets, *Malams*, priests or diviners, outside their normal religious traditions.” Similarly, in his discussion about the Akan¹³ worldview of disease and health, Kofi Appiah-Kubi (1981) shows that religion plays an important role in the quest for holistic health. He writes that the kind of healing religion offers restores an “equilibrium in the otherwise strained relationship between man, his fellow men, environment, ecology and God” (Appiah-Kubi 1981, 81). This stance still pertains across Ghanaian society. Following the outbreak of the Sars-Covid-2 pandemic, Ghanaians of different religious orientations intensified their prayers, fasted, and offered sacrifices in an attempt to stop the spread of the virus and restore their lives to normality¹⁴. Biblical phrases such as ‘The Battle is the Lord’s’ and ‘This too shall pass’ were used by president in his speeches and statements meant to provide some hope and encouragement to Ghanaians during these difficult times. [12]

The face mask has been identified by health officials as one of the best forms of protection, since it allows individuals to conduct their daily activities while keeping relatively safe.¹⁵ To curtail the disease, the government of Ghana saw the need to resource local manufacturers [13]

11 ‘Niqab’ or ‘Shmaagh’ can be worn as a face mask: *Health Call Center*. Last accessed February 4, 2021. <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/593682>.

12 Khan Shuaid Muslim women: *How coronavirus face-mask ruling has changed attitudes towards the veil*. Last accessed January 20, 2021. <https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/18716232.blackburn-muslim-women-say-covid-face-mask-rule-changed-attitudes-towards-wearing-veil>.

13 The Akan are a major ethnic group in Ghana.

14 Nteuwusu, Samuel. *Fighting COVID-19: Interventions from Ghana’s Traditional Priests*. Last accessed June 15, 2020. <https://religiousmatters.nl/fighting-covid-19-interventions-from-ghanas-traditional-priests/>.

15 Ayeni Tofe *Coronavirus: Is Ghana Winning the Fight Against the Virus?*. Last accessed May 11, 2020. <https://www.theafricareport.com/27592/coronavirus-is-ghana-winning-the-fight-against-the-pandemic/>.

to produce face masks from African print fabric.¹⁶ In addition, individuals were advised to maintain a distance of 1.5 to 2 meters to ensure maximum protection, though this recommendation proved to be impossible to observe in most situations. Subsequently, the government introduced a Legislative Instrument (LI) to incriminate persons who did not follow the mask-wearing directive.¹⁷ It stipulated those individuals who were found culpable would be fined or made to serve a minimum of four years in prison. This law remained on paper as most individuals continued to go about their daily activities without wearing a face mask. Meanwhile, a legal practitioner in Ghana, Martin Kpebu, described this LI as outrageous, calling on the government to focus its attention on educating the public on the importance of using face masks, since most Ghanaians are low-income earners¹⁸ and would not be able to pay the fine. In the months prior to the country's national elections in December 2020, politicians of all parties campaigned with complete disregard for the mask-wearing protocol. As Ghana continues to experience the second wave with its daily infection rate not exceeding 100 cases as at May 2021¹⁹, health officials are warning of a possible third wave if preventive measures including face masks are not taken seriously. Consequently, there is a joint effort by government and health officials to educate Ghanaians about the importance of wearing face masks. As an alternative to fining and imprisoning people who disregarded the mask-wearing directive, some metropolitan Municipal and District Assemblies initiated various forms of minor punishment. In Madina, for instance, I observed how the City Council guards asked people who disregard the mask-wearing protocol to drain gutters and sweep the streets.

After providing this general background, I will now turn to the different veiling practices in Ghana with a special focus on wearing the *niqab* in Madina Zongo. [14]

Veiling Practices of Muslim Women in Ghana

Veiling, a term loaded with ambiguity, represents a material used for concealing the body, face, and head of a woman from the gaze of unrelated men in public spaces. Even though women from different religious and social backgrounds practice diverse forms of veiling, the Muslim veiling practices of donning the *hijab* and *niqab* have gained currency in public discourses in Ghana and across the world (Bolaji 2018; Burchardt 2020, 132–54; Moors 2009). The religious and political discourses around these veiling practices have social, gender, and historical dimensions. For instance, in discussing the trends and causes for changing veiling habits of Muslim women in Zanzibar over the last century, Laura Fair (2013, 13) states that “wearing the veil is intended to elicit not piety, rather esteem and admiration.” Also, Leila Ahmed (2011) frames the Muslim veil within the context of gender equality and minority rights, adding that the meaning making of veiling largely depends on its geographical context. In this section, I briefly outline the historical trajectory of veiling practices in Ghana, the [15]

16 Okeke Chidera *Global Mamas' Face Masks Protecting the Public and Preserving Women's Livelihoods*. Last accessed October 14, 2020 <https://www.wabicc.org/global-mamas-face-masks-protecting-the-public-and-preserving-womens-livelihoods/>.

17 *Coronavirus: Ghana to impose severe punishments for those not wearing face masks*. Last accessed October 14, 2020. http://en.as.com/en/2020/06/19/latest/_news/1592566139/_181981.html (this site no longer seems to work).

18 *Punishment for not wearing a nose mask in Ghana is harsh – Legal Practitioner. Last accessed February 1, 2021. <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/punishment-for-not-wearing-nose-mask-in-ghana-harsh-legal-practitioner.html>.

19 *Statista website*. Last accessed May 31, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1110883/coronavirus-cases-in-ghana/>.

transfer of religious ideas about veiling across geographical, social, and religious boundaries, as well as the personal experience of female Muslims who donned a face veil prior to the outbreak of SARS-Covid-2 pandemic.

In Ghana, veiling reveals ideas about identity, character, and status. Prior to the introduction of Islam in Ghana, women of different religious and ethnic backgrounds practiced a cultural veiling form known as *duku*, a head tie (Sackey 2013) which is still part of the female dress style in Ghana. The connotation of *duku* depends on who uses it, as well as how and where it is used. Elderly women in the Ghanaian community use it as a symbol of maturity. Also, newly married Muslim women in the *Zongo* use a special type of *duku* called *wodasubo* as an indication of their new status. During funerals, a widow covers her head with a black *duku* to show her grief. However, the practice of wearing a *duku* as a demonstration of cultural and religious orientation has transformed in the twenty first century, as young women mostly use *duku* for sartorial purposes. [16]

Global religious entanglements have contributed to the transfer of new veiling practices such as the *mayaafi*²⁰, *hijab*, *arewa*²¹, *gele*²² as well as the *niqab* from Muslim countries to most *Zongo* communities in Ghana. According to Yunus Dumbe (2009), these entanglements—including educational and economic exchanges as well as the pilgrimage to Mecca—exposed Ghanaian Muslims to the Qadiriyyah,²³ Tijaniyyah,²⁴ Sunni, and Shia doctrines during the pre- and post-Independence era.²⁵ The Tijaniyyah doctrine occupies a dominant position in Ghana, to the extent that national chief imams in the country are always from the Tijaniyyah orientation (Dumbe 2009; Weiss 2008). [17]

The office of the National Chief Imam has been instrumental in addressing issues of discrimination against female Muslims who wear the *hijab* in public spaces. During a national campaign to allow female Muslims to don the *hijab* in Ghana's public spaces, the spokesperson of the Chief Imam, Sheikh ArmeYaw Shuaib, was emphatic about the security implications of sidelining and discriminating Muslims who constitute a religious minority in the country, adding that this could be a breeding ground for terrorist activities.²⁶ [18]

Most Muslim women who were exposed to secular education in Ghana did not use the *hijab* until the early twentieth first century (Sackey 2013). It was associated with illiteracy, poverty, and female suppression. The situation started to change with the emergence of Muslim women associations in the 1990s, including the Federation of Muslim Women Association in Ghana (FOMWAG) (Fatimatu 2006) and the Islamic Charity Centre for Women Orientation (ICCWO) (Khamis 2009). These groups, through the organisation of public fora and Qur'anic study groups, educated people on the fundamental beliefs and practices of Islam. This subsequently led to the adoption of different veiling styles, depending on the social background of the *Zongo* women. For instance, in Ghana, the *mayaafi* style of veiling was associated with female [19]

20 *Mayaafi* literally means “that which covers.” It is a two-and-a-half-yard-long veil mostly donned by married women in the *Zongo*.

21 A head tie style originating from the Northern part of Nigeria.

22 A head tie of the Yoruba people.

23 A Muslim mystical order founded by Abdul Kadir Jaylani from Bagdad during the twelfth century. This mystical orientation was introduced in Ghana by traders and scholars from Northern Nigeria and Jegu. See, Dumbe (2009).

24 A Muslim mystical order founded by Ahmed Tijani in 1815 in Cairo. The development of the Tijaniyyah orientation in Ghana can be traced to the missionary activities of Sheikh Ibrahim Niassé from Senegal in 1900. See, Dumbe (2009) and Pontzen 2021.

25 Ghana gained its independence from the British in 1957.

26 *Ghanaian muslim website*. Last accessed April 16, 2021. <https://ghanaianmuslim.wordpress.com/2019/10/14/hundreds-march-over-hijab-rights/>.

Muslims who never had secular education.²⁷ The secularly educated Muslim women in the *Zongos* tried to distinguish their veiling style by using a *mayaaafi* smaller than its regular size of two-and-a-half yards. In such situations, they used the *mayaaafi* to cover their shoulders but not their head. Currently, pilgrimage to *Mecca*, the media (BBC and Al-Jazeera), and trading activities of Muslim women in West Africa and the Arab world have also influenced the changing veiling styles of both secularly educated and non-secularly educated Muslim women in the *Zongo*.²⁸

The *hijab* has been a matter of contestation among Muslims and non-Muslims in most public institutions in Ghana over the last two decades. It has raised issues concerning the implementation of secularism in Ghana, religious diversity, and minority rights in shared public spaces. The discourse on the *hijab* interrogates the conceptual framework of secularism in Ghana, where the constitution grants religious practitioners the freedom to choose and manifest their religion but leaves this constitutional right unregulated in practice (Bolaji 2018). For instance, the debate about rights of female Muslims to don the *hijab* in secondary schools owned by Christian missionaries and in formal working environments such as hospitals, where dress codes are integral parts of these institutions' professional culture, continues to stain the relationship between Christians and Muslims in the country.

Unlike the *hijab*, the *niqab* is not a popular veiling practice in Ghana as is the case in some Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Morocco, and Sudan. Muslim women who don the *niqab* in the *Zongo* are in a minority. This practice is subject to debate among Muslim scholars. The debate concerns issues around the *awra*²⁹ of female Muslims and questions whether the face is a constitutive part of it. In this regard, Al Qaradawi³⁰ (2006) and Khan (2016) have argued that the Qur'an recommends women to dress modestly and cover their heads but not their faces. Their position is based on the Qur'an, Chapter 24, Verse 31, which states "And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity and not to reveal their adornment except what normally appears. Let them draw their veils over their chest, and not reveal their adornment except what normally appears..." Furthermore, they refer to one *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammed which stipulates that when a woman reaches the age of puberty, she should cover her whole body except for her hands and face. Based on this, Al Qaradawi and Khan argue that the *niqab* is not obligatory for female Muslims. In my interviews with male and female religious leaders—*Malam* Sultan and *Malama*³¹ Sarata—in Madina *Zongo* they emphasized that the *niqab* is not a requirement for Muslim women's dress as is the case with the *hijab*.³² *Malama* Sarata equates the use of *niqab* with a non-obligatory prayer. According to her, using it attracts a reward from God but if a woman does not practice it, she would not be punished.

In Madina *Zongo*, Muslim women who wear the *niqab* cite social and religious reasons for its adoption prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. One informant, Hajia Rashida,³³ recounts her pilgrimage to Mecca. During this pilgrimage, she observed that Arab women who adorn

27 Interview with Hajia Fati, 2020.

28 Interview with Dumbe, 2021.

29 Private part of a woman's body, expected to be concealed from unrelated men.

30 *Gulf news website*. Last accessed May, 31 2021. <http://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/Qatar/al-qaradawi-says-wearing-niqab-not-mandatory-1.264527>.

31 A female Muslim teacher of Islam in Hausa. Unlike their male counterparts, *Malam*, who may offer spiritual healing, the *Malama* focuses solely on religious education.

32 They explained that the Qur'an and hadith are explicit about the importance of the *hijab* for Muslim women.

33 *Hajia* is an honorary title used for one who has embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Rashida is the interviewee's real name.

themselves with expensive jewelries and designer clothes covered their faces with a *niqab*. As she puts it:

When I went to the bathroom to perform ablution, I saw an Arab woman in Baby Phat³⁴ jeans and top, which she wore under her *abaya*³⁵. Her gold bangles were a beautiful sight, including her gold earrings and necklace, but all these were covered with *abaya* and a *niqab*. I said to myself: if an Arab woman who lives close to the *ka'ba*³⁶ is this modest why shouldn't I emulate her? [23]

After her pilgrimage, she returned to Ghana with a number of *niqabs* for her personal use. [24] Another informant, Hajara, who belongs to a *tabligh jamaat*³⁷ movement, explains that Qur'an 24:31 is the inspiration behind her adoption of the *niqab*. According to her, the verse does not only imply covering the head and the body, but also the face. Most of the interviewees who wore *niqab* before the pandemic also refer to this garment as a devotional material which ensures a closer relationship with God. They explain that they feel rewarded by God for using face veils. At the same time, *niqab* screens them from the gazes of unrelated men. One typical characteristic of the *Zongo* community is the phenomenon of 'bases' (Muhammed 2015), where Muslim men gather to socialise after work. Usually, a woman can expect unnecessary gazes and calls from these young men anytime she walks by, but *niqab* wearers reported that they could pass without any form of harassment. According to them, the *niqab* offers them *daraja*—respect from the opposite sex. The *niqab* wearers have also attributed their lighter faces, a beauty ideal in the *Zongo*, to the face veil, mentioning that it screens them from the scorching sun.

Notwithstanding the social, sartorial, and religious significance of donning a face veil in the *Zongo*, my informants also pointed to the challenges they face in shared spaces such as markets, hospitals, and public transportation. They explained that their family members, who are also Muslims, have attempted to discourage them from wearing the *niqab*, because the social setting in Madina *Zongo* does not support it. This is attributed to the fact that women from Saudi Arabia, whom the *Zongo* Muslim women claim to emulate, are not actively engaged in public life. By contrast, a majority of women in the *Zongo* are involved in various types of economic, social, political, and religious activities in the public space. One of my informants, Sumaya stated that she had to put a stop to her use of the *niqab* due to her profession as a fashion designer, which requires a constant face-to-face interaction with clients. Realizing that the *niqab* is likely to deter clients from choosing her services in a competitive fashion industry in the *Zongo*, she decided to uncover her face. [25]

However, the attitude of people in Madina *Zongo* towards the *niqab* took a different turn with the surge of COVID-19. *Niqab* wearers could now be identified as responsible citizens who made an effort to protect themselves and prevent the spread of the virus. Female Muslims in the *Zongo*, who were non-*niqab* wearers, began to use it while some Christians also adopted it because of the 'comfort' it provides. In the following sections, I will discuss this phenomenon in more detail. [26]

34 A fashion label for women developed in America around 1999.

35 A loose over-garment used by Muslim women.

36 A Muslim shrine located in Mecca, regarded as the most sacred place on earth.

37 A multi-national Islamic missionary group which originated in India and Pakistan.

Cross-Religious Appropriation of the Niqab as a Face Mask in Madina Zongo

Religious boundaries in Madina Zongo are often porous as members of different religions imitate and appropriate each other's practices at different levels. In the Zongo, everyday practices of religious groups are embedded within negotiations of ideas and practices of the 'other' to the extent that religious identities are blurred and religious dichotomies partly dissolved. These negotiations occur within and across religious boundaries. So far scholars have paid little attention to such negotiations. Against this lacuna, Marloes Janson (2021) argues that it is important to realise that religious traditions, such as Christianity and Islam, are not as mutually exclusive as many scholars still seem to assume (see also Soares 2007; Larkin and Meyer 2006; Janson and Meyer 2016). Rather, religious practitioners mix each other's practices in their everyday lives, a process labelled by her as 'religious shopping.' With this article, I respond to her call to pay more attention to the dynamics of copying and mixing. These dynamics, which also include the mutual adoption of dress styles, are at the heart of the complexities of religious entanglements in a religiously pluralistic setting such as Madina. [27]

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the *niqab* has become a strategic medium which highlights the dynamics of religious co-existence among Muslims and between Muslims and Christians in Madina Zongo. In this section, I discuss the appropriation of the *niqab* by Muslim and Christian women in Madina Zongo as 'shopping' for protection against the disease. Within this discussion, I focus on the cross-religious appropriation and reinterpretation of the face veil from a devotional material to a protective one and explain the implications of this shift for the Zongo scape. [28]

My fieldwork in Madina Zongo shows that some individuals transformed their handkerchiefs and *hijabs* into a sort of face mask. Typically, a handkerchief is folded into a V-shape and tied behind the head. Some Muslim women also wrapped their *hijab* in such a way that it not only covered their heads and necks, but also their faces. Also, some tailors in the Zongo designed what they called the *corona hijab*, which does not only cover the head and parts of the body but also the mouth and the nose. Alongside these inventions, the attitude towards the *niqab* in the Zongo took a new turn. While some adopted it instead of a face mask, others supported its usage even though they did not have any personal experience with it. The *niqab* has, thus, been transformed from a devotional material used by a specific group of Muslim women to a protective material used by women of different religious orientations. As a result, it became impossible now to label women who used the *niqab* as conservative or radical Muslims. [29]

With the outbreak of the pandemic, dealers in Muslim dresses imported from Dubai, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt cashed in on selling *niqabs*. The price of *niqabs* skyrocketed in Madina Zongo. Hajia Rashida, a boutique owner, mentioned that more women than before have been coming to her shop to buy *niqabs*. Also, as noted in the beginning, two other informants—Shareefa and Malama Hamida—confirmed that they started making *niqabs* from *gumama* (second-hand clothes imported from the Arab world) for sale due to increased demand in Madina. However, Shareefa had to stop using the *gumama* materials for her *niqabs* because some customers were afraid that these second-hand materials can contain the virus. She therefore resorted to using brand new satin materials from the Madina market. [30]

Since most women in the Zongo are employed in the informal sector where they earn very little, *niqab* turned out to be more affordable solution for them than disposable face masks. Some Muslim women who were previously not using the *niqab* explained that, due to the [31]



Figure 1 The author in a corona *hijab*, picture taken by Abdulai Adam Eliasu.



Figure 2 *Hijab*-like face mask, picture taken by the author.



Figure 3 A focus group discussion with Muslim women at the *Malam Yunus* mosque in Madina Zongo, picture taken by the author.

outbreak of COVID-19, they now own more than one *niqab*, which they are able to wash after use. Similarly, during a focus group discussion in a mosque, one woman remarked that her Christian neighbours commend Muslims for using the *niqab*: ‘they said our dressing will prevent us from being infected with the disease since it looks just like face masks.’ Another respondent from a focus group discussion with members of a *tabligh jamat* women’s group in Madina explained that the pandemic brings a great relief to the *niqab* users because ‘previously some people did not even like to sit by us in the *trotro* (public transport). At the Madina market a woman described me as a dangerous person just because of my *niqab*, saying that she does not sell her things to people like us. But thank God for corona, we all look the same now.’

According to the Muslim women who used the *niqab* prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, they never attempted to use face masks during the pandemic. This is so because they saw the *niqab* as offering similar protection to a face mask without the downsides of the latter. These women explained that the design of the face veil does not subject it to a frequent touch with hands like face masks and does not lead to pain on the ears. They also referred to videos circulating on social media about a man who had difficulty breathing in face mask and eventually fainted. One informant said she challenged a nurse in one of the public hospitals in Accra who told her that *niqab* cannot be substituted for a face mask: ‘I told the nurse that *niqab* is even better than a face mask and she allowed me in.’ According to this informant, the *niqab* shields the nose and mouth just like the face mask, while making breathing easier than in a face mask.

In a multi-religious and multi-ethnic community such as Madina Zongo, where Muslims and Christians live together and often share the same compound, markets, and houses, I noticed different forms of cross-religious imitation and appropriation among Christian and Muslim women. For instance, it is not unusual to see some Christian women donning the *hijab* and wearing dresses perceived as Muslims’ attires. According to these Christian women,

being identified as Muslims gives them a sense of belonging to the *Zongo* community. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the wake of the Corona pandemic, some Christian women have chosen to wear the *niqab* even though they never used it before. Sister Doreen, a member of the Charismatic Evangelical Ministry in the North Legon (a neighborhood in Madina), who operates a mobile money shop and shares a house with Muslims in the *Zongo* explained that she was attracted to the *niqab* as a result of COVID-19. According to her, she had difficulty breathing every time she wore a face mask and, therefore, found the *niqab* more convenient. She added: ‘I sometimes dress my three-year-old girl in the *hijab*. My Christian friends have asked if I wanted to be a Muslim, but I told them I just admire their dressing.’ Sister Doreen also mentioned that when she decided to wear the *niqab*, her Christian friends asked her if she married a Muslim man. Other people asked her whether she has *tuba*, i.e. converted to the Islamic faith. In contrast, Muslims often expressed their approval when she used the *niqab* by saying that she looks more beautiful in it.

Daavi³⁸, a member of the Global Evangelical Church in the North Legon, who has been living in the *Zongo* for twenty-seven years, never attempted to use the *hijab* even though her daughters (six and fourteen years old respectively) occasionally wear it because of their Muslim friends. She explained that, even though they look beautiful in it, their father disapproves it. She added that the children still need a more profound understanding of the Christian faith; otherwise, they could abandon their faith and accept Islam if allowed to continue with their *hijab* practice. Daavi admitted that even though she does not use the *hijab*, her dress styles have also been influenced by Muslim women’s styles in the *Zongo*; usually she would prefer ankle-length dresses over knee-length dresses, which most Christians in the *Zongo* wear. In her words, ‘anytime I travel to my hometown in the Volta region my sisters say that because I live in the *Zongo* I dress like a *Zongo* woman.’ Even though Daavi has never used the *niqab* before the pandemic, she thought of it as the best alternative to a face mask. According to her,

In a tropical climate of Ghana, wearing face masks is very uncomfortable. As a market woman who does not have the luxury of working in an air-conditioned office, I am exposed to the heat of the sun daily. Keeping the face mask on for a long time attracts a lot of heat around my mouth and nose area and prevents me from breathing in and out properly. This is why my face mask has most often been on my chin.

For Daavi, the *niqab* is the best substitute for the face mask because it has an opening at the base which allows the circulation of air around the mouth and nose area. However, Daavi also emphasizes the limits of appropriating the *niqab*. She was quick to add that the idea of female Christians adopting the *niqab* should not be overly encouraged since it may lead to tensions between Muslims and Christians in the community. For example, the *niqab* is often used with a *hijab*, but in the case of sister Doreen she donned the *niqab* without a *hijab*. Daavi states ‘I am afraid that if this practice becomes widespread, it may generate tensions between Muslims and Christians in the *Zongo*, since some Muslims may describe this appropriation as a misrepresentation of their religion.’

Another respondent, Ewura Adwoa, a member of the Victory Bible Church, a branch of the Methodist Church in Madina, perceives the use of *niqab* as an orthodox Islamic practice, and as a Methodist she admires and approves religious orthodox practices. For her, the presence

38 The name of this research participant has been altered.

of *niqab*-wearing women in the *Zongo* evokes ideas about religious piety similar to the habits of Catholic nuns. After seeing pictures of fashionable *niqab*-like face masks on social media, she is of the view that if the *niqab* is designed with colorful African fabrics most non-Muslim women would be glad to wear it.

However, even the traditional black *niqab* has become attractive to some Christian women. [38] As one fashion designer in Madina *Zongo* told me, two of her Christian customers requested a *niqab* when she sewed funeral clothes for them. She explained that the black color of the *niqab* fits the Ghanaian traditional mourning dress and that the *niqab* offers ‘convenience’ when compared to the face mask. These women ordered their *niqab* specifically for the funeral as they thought that it was important to take extra safety measures, even though the government had restricted the number of attendants to funeral grounds to twenty-five.

As the above examples show, wearing the *niqab* is a practice that reflects and responds to [39] changing religious and social circumstances. Formally a symbol of Islamic conservatism and radicalism, during the Covid-19 pandemic the *niqab* has assumed a new meaning in Madina *Zongo*. It is no longer restricted to conservative Muslim women, or Muslim women alone but is also worn by Christian women.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the religious and social worlds of the *niqab* as well as its role [40] in fighting the coronavirus pandemic in Madina *Zongo*. Inspired by Fair (2013), I highlighted the notion of the *niqab* as an unstable religious material, the meaning of which continuously changes in different settings. The *niqab* in Madina has crossed a threshold from being seen as a contentious piece of garment to a more acceptable one, from a devotional material to a sartorial one, and from a material restricted to conservative Muslim women to a piece of clothing worn by women of different religious backgrounds, including Christians.

In employing the *niqab* as a substitute for the face mask, the meaning of the *niqab* is ex- [41] panded. It is no longer simply a symbol of piety or Islamic fundamentalism but also a protective device, just like a face mask, that could be used by all women. This makes women wearing *niqab* multi-interpretable, and less ‘suspicious’ as they would have been seen prior to the pandemic. This article reveals that in Madina *Zongo*, the additional value attributed to the *niqab* has directly or indirectly affected the relationship between and among women of diverse religious groups. The entanglement of the *niqab* and face mask has produced intra and interreligious encounters among Muslim and Christian women in the *Zongo*. Some Muslims appreciate the adoption of the *niqab* by the ‘other’ as an approval of their religious practices and as an action that promotes healthy relationships in a pluralistic community. Others, however, interpret this encounter as having the propensity to strain relationships in the event of ‘inappropriate appropriation’.

In the *Zongo* scape, beautifying the face is a very important practice of most women; the lips, [42] cheeks, nose, and eyes are accentuated to fit into *Zongo* beauty standards especially during social gatherings such as weddings. In contrast, the *niqab* covers most parts of the face leaving only the eyes visible. However, in addition to its original religious meaning, and on top of its protective features that become so essential during the pandemic, *niqab* can possibly become a part of *Zongo*’s dressing style that attracts women of different religious convictions. It is, therefore, important to study further whether this expanding meaning of the *niqab* will hold once the pandemic is over.

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