



***Hijab* and *Niqab*: A Cross-Religious COVID-19 Safety Measure in Madina Zongo**

KAUTHAR KHAMIS

Leiden University, Netherlands; Utrecht University, Netherlands; University of Ghana; Islamic University College, Ghana

ABSTRACT Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of *hijab* and *niqab* (face veil), typically associated with Islamic fundamentalism and banned in some parts of Europe and Africa, have gained currency in multi-religious communities such as Madina Zongo (strangers' quarters in Hausa) in Accra, Ghana. For some Muslim women in Madina, *hijab* and *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 these veils allowed them 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 these Muslim veils. Employing Laura Fair's (2013) proposition that *veiling* contains a wide range of possible material uses, in this article, I show why and how *hijab* and *niqab* are adapted to suit COVID-19 safety measures and appropriated as a face mask by some women in Madina. The article also discusses the implications of these innovations in the religiously pluralistic setting of Madina Zongo.

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

Introduction

Vignette

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.

[1]

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

[2]

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.

Research Focus

Examining the appropriation of the *hijab* and *niqab* as a substitute for the face mask, this article asks how the new, more positive evaluation of Muslim veiling practices have affected the relationship among Muslims and between Christians and Muslims in the Madina Zongo community. In so doing, it explores how *hijab* and *niqab* are 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. [3]

The research presented here is based on my on-going ethnographic fieldwork conducted since 2018. Data included in this paper comes from my 2020 to 2021 interviews with Muslim and Christian women in Madina, including health personnel, and *Malama* (female Muslim teachers)² as well as *Imams*. I categorised women in *niqab*, who constitute a minority among female Muslims in the Zongo, as a hard-to-access group; therefore, I used purposive sampling³ as a research method. Since the *hijab* is part of the everyday sartorial practices of Muslim women in Madina, the same research method was employed to interview women who adopted the corona *hijab* because of outbreak of COVID-19. [4]

As a native of the community and a Muslim, on some occasions, I put on a *niqab* or the corona *hijab*⁴ 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. [5]

Established in the late 1950s, Madina Zongo is a cosmopolitan community within the La Nkwantanang Madina Municipality in southeastern Accra. In the Hausa language,⁵ Zongo means 'camping place of a carrier,' 'lodging place of travelers,' or 'strangers' quarters' (Schildkrout 1978; Pellow 1988). In West Africa, the term is often used to name a part of a settlement [6]

1 Zongo in Hausa means a stranger or settler community. In Ghana, they were 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 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.

4 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 covers not only a woman's body but also her head, neck, mouth, and nose. See picture below.

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

inhabited by Muslim traders and migrants. The Hausa language, Islamic religion, and food practices are unifying factors (Ntewusu 2005; Pellow 1987) for most people in the *Zongo* community irrespective of their places of origin.⁶ However, the opposite is the case in relation to dress or veiling practices of women in Madina. While some are attracted to the *hijab* for religious, cultural, and aesthetic reasons, other beauty practices including the use of *niqab* are highly contested and hence not part of the everyday beauty practices of majority of Muslim women in this community.

Currently, Madina *Zongo* hosts people of diverse religious, ethnic, and social backgrounds⁷. The ethnic composition of Madina's inhabitants is more diverse than its religious structure. It is mainly inhabited by a multiplicity of migrant social groups (Sackey 2013). One group is known as 'aliens' who migrated from the Sahelian region, Nigeria, and Francophone West Africa including the Busanga, Fulani, Gao, Kotokoli, Losso, Mossi, Wangara, Dandawa, Chamba, and Zambrama ethnic groups. A second group comprises migrants from northern Ghana: Dagomba, Mamprusi, Gonja, Gurunsi, and Wala, among others, who are identified as 'indigenes' of the country but 'strangers' in Accra. The third group is made of Akan⁸ and Ewe⁹ ethnic groups. Due to the fact that all these ethnic groups are 'strangers' in the *Zongo*, leadership is often organised along ethnic, professional, or religious lines.

Muslims are the dominant religious group; their practices are usually more visible to the larger community than those of Christians and adherents of African indigenous religions. However, Christians do constitute the second largest religious group in the community.¹⁰ Their number is significant due to relatively cheap accommodation, safety, and proximity to state institutions such as the University of Ghana and University for Professional Studies. For decades, Christians and Muslims have gone to great lengths to maintain peaceful relationships. For example, they share compound houses and 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 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.¹¹ The relationship between Christians and Muslims in the *Zongo* is also enhanced through mutual imitation and

6 There are about four hundred *Zongos* scattered over different parts of the country (Brady and Hooper 2019, 10), categorized as inner cities or slums and identified as marginalized communities. 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, 11–13). 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” (Brady and Hooper 2019, 12). 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.

7 With a population size of about 137,162 in 2012, it is described as the twelfth most populous community in Ghana. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madina,_Ghana#cite_note-World_Gazetteer-1 (accessed April 23, 2021).

8 A major ethnic group, located in the middle belt of southern Ghana.

9 An ethnic group found in the Volta region of Ghana, some of its people trace their roots to parts of Togo and Benin.

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

11 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.

[7]

[8]

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* only 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 Cameroon, 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* as well as *hijab* are not so much used for sartorial purposes as in the case of women in Zanzibar but are rather religious materials embedded in an Islamic cultural practice which have become instrumental in the fight against COVID-19. To highlight this shift, this paper employs the concepts of adaptation and appropriation. Adaptation involves people's changing attitude towards *hijab* and *niqab* as a result of the outbreak of the pandemic, whilst appropriation is used in reference to the creative process of attributing a new meaning to *hijab* and *niqab* different from what they are originally meant for. The paper discusses the modification and transformation of *niqab* and *hijab* as protective materials, substituted for face masks even though their use has not been sanctioned by health officials. Muslim and Christian women who were formerly not *niqab* and *hijab* wearers are now 'shopping for protection' by using them as COVID-19 safety measure.

The appropriation of these veils as a face mask is by no means unique to Madina Zongo. 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*.¹² Likewise, *hijab* and *niqab* wearers in Britain also used them as face masks, confirming that they no longer received strange looks and hateful comments they had been subjected to prior to the outbreak of COVID-19.¹³ As masks also cover faces, the *niqab* and *hijab* are becoming less extraordinary in times of COVID-19. While it remains to be seen whether, thanks to the experience of the pandemic, the veils might become more acceptable in the long run, the current situation offers an opportunity to rethink their use 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 *hijab* and *niqab* were framed in Ghana and in Madina Zongo before the outbreak of the pandemic. Finally, the cross-religious appropriation of these veiling practices 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.

12 'Niqab' or 'Shmaagh' can be worn as a face mask: Health Call Center. <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/593682> (accessed February 4, 2021).

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

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 Akan¹⁴ 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 persists across Ghanaian society. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 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 normality¹⁵. Biblical expressions such as ‘The Battle is the Lord’s’ and ‘This too shall pass’ were used by president Nana Akufo-Addo 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.¹⁶ To curtail the disease, the government of Ghana saw the need to resource local manufacturers to produce face masks from African print fabric.¹⁷ 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 punish with fines and imprisonment persons who did not follow the mask-wearing directive.¹⁸ This law remained on paper as most individuals continued to go about their daily activities without wearing a face mask. Likewise, 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. [13]

When Ghana experienced the second wave with its daily infection rate not exceeding 100 cases as of May 2021¹⁹, health officials warned of a possible third wave if preventive measures including face masks were not taken seriously. Consequently, there was a joint effort by the 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, the City Council ordered people who disregarded 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 *hijab* and *niqab* in Madina Zongo. [14]

14 The Akan are a major ethnic group in Ghana.

15 Ntewusu, Samuel. Fighting COVID-19: Interventions from Ghana’s Traditional Priests. <https://religioumatters.nl/fighting-covid-19-interventions-from-ghanas-traditional-priests/> (accessed June 15, 2020).

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

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

18 <https://ghanasummary.com/ghanaweb/284841/mandatory-wearing-of-face-mask-in-public-places-is-a-private-car-a-public-place> (accessed February 2, 2022).

19 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1110883/coronavirus-cases-in-ghana/> (accessed May 31, 2021).

Veiling Practices of Muslim Women in Ghana

Veiling is a term loaded with ambiguity. While most Muslim societies associate veiling with concealing the body, face, and head of a woman from the gaze of unrelated men in public spaces, among the Tuareg men, veiling (especially the face veil) conveys social values including modesty and respectability. Furthermore, some non-Tuareg men in the Sahara may occasionally veil their faces to protect them from desert wind and sand (Rasmussen 2013). In Kano, northern Nigeria, veiling among men is also a status marker used by emirs as a symbol of royalty and authority. 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 example, in Afghanistan, the *niqab* signifies women's modesty or respectability (Abu-Lughod 2013, 35). However, 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. [15]

Like elsewhere in the world, 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. *Duku* was a head cover style associated with African women's beauty practices. Among African Americans, enslaved black women used *duku* to protect themselves from being exposed to the sun as they worked on plantations. The connotation of *duku* depends on who uses it as well as how and where it is used. Elderly women in Ghana 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 [17]

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 in 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 independence from the British in 1957.

Ghana, to the extent that national chief imams in the country are always from the Tijaniyyah orientation (Dumbe 2009; Weiss 2008).

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 received secular education in Ghana did not use the *hijab* until the early twenty-first century (Sackey 2013). It was associated with illiteracy, poverty, and female oppression. 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) (Sulemanu 2006) and the Islamic Charity Centre for Women Orientation (IC-CWO) (Khamis 2009). These groups, through the organisation of public fora and Qur'anic study groups, educated people about 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, the *mayaafi* style of veiling became associated with female Muslims who never had a secular education.²⁷ The secularly educated Muslim women in the *Zongos* tried to distinguish their veiling style by using a *mayaafi* smaller than its regular size of two-and-a-half yards. In such situations, they used the *mayaafi* to cover their shoulders but not their head. Pilgrimage to *Mecca*, the media (BBC and Al-Jazeera), and trading activities of Muslim women in West Africa and the Arab world have also recently influenced the changing veiling styles of both secularly educated and non-secularly educated Muslim women in the *Zongo*.²⁸ [19]

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. [20]

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, [21]

26 <https://ghanaianmuslim.wordpress.com/2019/10/14/hundreds-march-over-hijab-rights/> (accessed April 16, 2021).

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 <http://gulfnnews.com/world/gulf/Qatar/al-qaradawi-says-wearing-niqab-not-mandatory-1.264527> (accessed May 31, 2021).

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 themselves with expensive jewelry and designer clothes covered themselves with *hijab* and *niqab*. As she puts it: [22]

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 several *niqabs* for her personal use. 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 not only implies covering the head and the body, but also the face. Most of the interviewees who wore the *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, the *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. [24]

Notwithstanding the social, sartorial, and religious significance of donning veils 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 [25]

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.

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.

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.

However, the attitude of people in Madina Zongo towards the *hijab* and *niqab* took a different turn with the surge of COVID-19. Wearers could now be identified as responsible citizens who tried to protect themselves and prevent the spread of the virus. Female Muslims in the Zongo who were non-veil 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]

Cross-Religious Appropriation of *hijab* and *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. 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 2010; 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 *hijab* and *niqab* have 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 these veils 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 veils from devotional materials to protective ones 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 not only covers 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 also took a new turn. While some adopted it instead of a face mask, [29]



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

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. In other words, the *niqab* has become a part of Ghanaian culture regardless of religious or political affiliation.

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 could 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, the *niqab* turned out to be a more affordable solution for them than disposable face masks. Some Muslim women who were previously not using the *niqab* explained that due to the 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 [31]



Figure 2 A *hijab*-like face mask (left) and *niqab* (right), pictures taken by the author.

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 touching with one’s 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 a face mask and eventually fainted. One informant said she challenged a nurse in one of the public hospitals in Accra who told her that the *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. [32]

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 [33]



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

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 North Legon³⁹ who has lived in the Zongo for twenty-seven years, never attempted to use the *hijab* even though her daughters (six and fourteen years old) occasionally wear it because of their Muslim friends. She explained that, even though they look beautiful in it, their father disapproves of 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 fashion 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.” This implies that there is a kind of a mixing of dress styles among Muslim and Christian women in Madina who encounter each other on an everyday basis. Even though Daavi 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

38 The name of this research participant has been altered.

39 A suburb of Accra neighbouring Madina.

[34]

[35]

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, this may generate tensions between Muslims and Christians in the *Zongo*, since some Muslims may describe this appropriation as a misrepresentation of their religion.” [36]

Another respondent, Ewura Adwoa, a member of the Victory Bible Church, a branch of the Methodist Church in Madina, mentioned that she sometimes uses the *hijab* but never had a personal experience with the *niqab*. However, she sees the use of both religious apparels as orthodox Islamic practices, and as a Methodist she admires and approves religious orthodox practices. For her, the presence of *hijab* and *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. [37]

However, even the traditional black *niqab* has become attractive to some Christian women. 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. [38]

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

Conclusion

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

In employing the *hijab* and *niqab* as a substitute for the face mask, the meaning of veiling is expanded. 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 [41]

wearing veils 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 *hijab* and *niqab* has directly or indirectly affected the relationship between and among women of diverse religious groups. The entanglement of these veils and face masks has produced intra- and interreligious encounters among Muslim and Christian women in the Zongo. Some Muslims appreciate the adoption of *hijab* or *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, 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 became 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. [42]

Funding

This research is part of “The Madina Project” funded by the Religious Matters Project and chaired by Professor Birgit Meyer at Utrecht University (NL). [43]

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my special appreciation to my supervisors; Prof. Birgit Meyer, Prof. Martha Frederiks, and Dr. Rabiātu Ammah. I also acknowledge the careful editing and constructive comments from Alex Agadjanian and Konrad Siekierski. Thanks to my colleagues both within and outside the Madina project, as well as Margreet Van Es and Abdulai Adam Eliasu for their insightful suggestions and comments. To Christien Franken, many thanks for the language corrections. My appreciation also goes to all my interlocutors in Madina Zongo and to the reviewers of this article. [44]

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2013. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Ahmed, Leila. 2011. *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence, from the Middle East to America.* USA: Yale University Press.
- Alhassan Adum-Atta, Rashida. 2020. “The Politics of Purity, Disgust, and Contamination: Communal Identity of Trotter (Pig) Sellers in Madina Zongo (Accra).” *Religions* 11 (8): 421–32.
- Appiah-Kubi, Kofi. 1981. *Man Cures, God Heals: Religion and Medical Practice Among the Akans of Ghana.* New York: Friendship Press.
- Atiemo, Abamfo. 2013. *Religion and the Inculturation of Human Rights in Ghana.* UK / USA: Bloomsbury Publishing.

- Bolaji, M. H. A. 2018. "Secularism and State Neutrality: The 2015 Muslim Protest of Discrimination in the Public Schools in Ghana." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 48: 65–104.
- Brady, Colleen, and Michael Hooper. 2019. "Redefining Engagement with Socio-Spatially Marginalised Populations: Learning from Ghana's Ministry of Inner City and Zongo Development." *Urbanization* 4 (1): 9–28.
- Burchardt, Marian. 2020. *Regulating Differences: Religious Diversity and Nationhood in Secular West*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Dumbe, Yunus. 2009. "Transnational Contacts and Muslim Religious Orientation in Ghana." PhD diss., Ghana: University of Ghana.
- Fair, Laura. 2013. "Veiling, Fashion, and Social Mobility: A Century of Change in Zanzibar." In *Veiling in Africa*, edited by Renne E. Page, 1–12. Bloomington: Indiana.
- Fosu-Ankra, Joseph. 2018. "Common Grounds: Urban Spaces. Everyday Religious Encounters and Intercommunality in Madina, Accra, ca. 1800-2020." PhD diss., Utrecht: Utrecht University.
- Janson, Marloes. 2021. *Crossing Religious Boundaries: Islam, Christianity and "Yoruba Religion" in Lagos, Nigeria*. USA: Cambridge University Press.
- Janson, Marloes, and Birgit Meyer. 2016. "Introduction: Towards a Framework for the Study of Christian Muslim Encounters in Africa." *Africa* 86 (4): 615–19.
- Khamis, Kauthar. 2009. "A Case Study of Islamic Charity Centre for Women Orientation." University of Ghana.
- Khan, Mateen. 2016. "Niqab: An Approach Based on the Proofs." The Institute for the Revival of Traditional Islamic Sciences.
- Larkin, B., and B. Meyer. 2006. "Pentecostalism, Islam and Culture: New Religious Movements in West Africa." In *Themes in West Africa' History*, edited by E. K. Akyeampong. Oxford: James Currey.
- Moors, Annelies. 2009. "The Dutch and the Face Veil: The Politics of Discomfort." *Social Anthropology* 17 (4): 392–407.
- Muhammed, Ali Baba. 2015. "The Phenomenon of Bases in Ghanaian Muslim Communities." Master's diss., Ghana: University of Ghana.
- Ntewusu, Aniegye Samuel. 2005. "The Northern Factor in Accra: A Historical Study of Madina Zongo as a Sub-Urban Settlement 1957–2000." Master's diss., Ghana: University of Ghana.
- Pellow, Deborah. 1987. "Solidarity Among Muslim Women in Accra, Ghana." *Anthropos* 82: 489–506.
- . 1988. "What Housing Does: Changes in an Accra Community." *Architecture and Behavior* 4: 213–28.
- Pontzen, Benedikt. 2021. *Islam in A Zongo: Muslim Life Worlds in Asante, Ghana*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rasmussen, S. J. 2013. "Re-Casting the Veil: Situated Meanings of Covering." *Journal Culture & Psychology* 19 (2): 237–58.
- Sackey, Brigid M. 2013. "The Status of Women in Islam: Perceptions from a Visit to the Madina Central Mosque in Accra, Ghana." In *Islam in Africa South of the Sahara: Essays in Gender Relations and Political Reform*, edited by Pade Badru and Brigid M. Sackey. Scarecrow Press.
- Schildkrout, Enid. 1978. *People of the Zongo: The Transformation of Ethnic Identities in Ghana*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Soares, Benjamine F. 2010. "Muslim-Christian Encounters in Africa." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18 (3): 436–39.
- Sulemanu, Fatimatu. 2006. "Leadership in the Ghanaian Muslim Community: The Role of FOMWAG." Master's diss., Ghana: University of Ghana.
- Van Santen, José C. M. 2013. "'Should a Good Muslim Cover Her Face?' Pilgrimage, Veiling, and Fundamentalisms in Cameroon." In *Veiling in Africa*, edited by Renne E. Page, 1–12. Bloomington: Indiana.
- Weiss, Holger. 2008. *Between Accommodation and Revivalism: Muslims, the State and Society in Ghana from the Precolonial to the Postcolonial Era*. Finland: Finish Oriental Society.