

To Veil or Not to Veil: Voices of Malaysian Muslim Women

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Abstract: Few cultural artifacts exemplify the power of nonverbal communication more than the veil worn by some Muslim women. Rarely has a piece of clothing held such disparate and controversial meanings around the globe. This ethnographic study explores the meanings that some veiled, unveiled, and sometimes-veiled Muslim women in one state in Malaysia assign to this head covering by examining the reasons for their veiling decisions. Results illustrate that meanings are complex and individually assigned and that one cannot gauge religious beliefs or devotion solely on dress. The findings also demonstrate the power of this nonverbal artifact to influence self-image and behavior. Many of the results of this study are congruent with previous research on the meanings of the veil to Muslim women in other parts of the globe, but some are incongruent, emphasizing that meanings are both culturally and contextually dependent.

Keywords: Veil, Nonverbal Communication, Malaysian Muslim Women, Religious Clothing, *Tudung*

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, a piece of fabric has become a powerful and divisive symbol worldwide. The veil as worn by some Muslim women has assumed iconic proportions around the globe. To some it symbolizes piety; to others, oppression. To some it is a rejection of Western morality; to others, a rejection of modernity. To some, it is a religious statement supporting Islam as a way of living; to others, a political statement supporting violent Islamists. These disparate attributions exemplify the power of nonverbal communication and support the maxim that words and objects contain no inherent meaning; only people assign meaning.

While there are numerous scholarly works on veiling, most tend to “ascribe meaning rather than describe the meaning the veil has for Muslim women” (Droogsman, 2007, p. 295). Read and Bartowski (2000), Marshall (2005) and Droogsman (2007) all call for more studies that let Muslim women speak for themselves. I concur and also believe there is a need to examine the meanings of veiling in many locales since the practice varies by culture and context. Several studies published in English are based on the personal narratives of Islamic women in the Middle East (e.g., Ahmed, 2011; Al Munajjed, 1997; El Guindi, 2000) and in the United States and Canada (e.g., Read & Bartowski, 2000; Bullock, 2002; Furseth, 2011), but not as many focus on other areas of the world. One understudied country is Malaysia where 61% of the population is Islamic. In addition, much of the veiling scholarship has been completed by researchers in anthropology, gender studies, and religion. More scholarship is needed by communication researchers since they bring a different perspective to this complex medium,

particularly with regard to veiling as nonverbal communication.

This study is designed to address these shortfalls. Specifically, the research is intended to enhance understanding of women's own consciousness and reasons for veiling based on the meanings they attribute to this controversial attire. To accomplish this purpose, I analyze the results of interviews I conducted with 30 unveiled, veiled, and sometimes-veiled Muslim women in the Malaysian state of Sarawak on the island of Borneo.

Since the meaning of all communication is culturally and contextually dependent, the next section provides a synopsis of the modern history of veiling and some relevant background on Malaysia.

2. Conflicting Messages of the Veil: A Brief History

The term veil has no single visual referent, and the practice of covering among Muslim women varies widely across countries and ethnicities (El-Solh & Mabro, 1994; Roald, 2001). For example, the veil can be a simple headscarf, or a fabric that hides much of the face, hair and neck, or it can be part of a larger cloak that shields the body and face, with mesh over the eyes. The type of veil usually signals ethnic or national origin and sometimes indicates the degree of conservatism of the wearer (Benhabib, 2002). Two terms are commonly used to describe two of the types of veils seen in many parts of the world. *Niqab* is the Arabic term for veils which cloak the totality of the hair, neck, shoulders and face, except for the eyes. The Arabic term *hijab* has come to refer to the many varieties of headscarves which cover all of the hair, neck, and ears but leave the entire face exposed. Most Muslim women who cover wear the *hijab* (Lazreg, 2009), and this is overwhelmingly the case in Malaysia (Frisk, 2009). The *niqab* is not common in Malaysia and none of the women I interviewed wear it. In Malaysia, the *hijab* is called the *tudung*, and in this article, I will use the terms veil, covering, and *tudung* interchangeably.

Although the veil was worn by women in many religious traditions for centuries, the contemporary veil worn by many Muslim women is associated with the Islamic resurgence movement which began in the Middle East in the 1970s and quickly spread to other parts of the globe. For several decades prior to the 1970s, veiling was disappearing throughout most of the Arab world (Bullock, 2002). One reason frequently cited by scholars for the unveiling movement is the imported values of Western colonialists who controlled much of the Middle East prior to World War II. Schick (1990) writes that since colonial powers viewed the veil as a sign of backwardness and oppression, they encouraged women to discard the veil. As veiled women became more familiar with European ideas, unveiling became "ever more clearly the emblem of an era of new hopes and desires, and of aspirations of modernity" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 39). Thus unveiling became a symbol of emancipation and modernity (Bullock, 2002).

Then the Islamic resurgence movement of the 1970s not only changed societies and politics, but the symbolic nature of the veil. This movement refers to a revival of the Islamic religion that is marked by greater religious piety and a return to traditional Islamic customs (Lapidus, 2002). One goal of the movement was for Muslim women to abandon Western clothes and return to a more traditional, modest form of dress. El Guindi (2000) maintains that the "emergent Islamic consciousness and movement" revived the wearing of the *hijab* (veil)

and that the *hijab* became the “object and symbol for the new consciousness” (p. 143). Bullock (2002) notes the paradoxical change that occurred in the 1970s:

...women...whose grandmothers and mothers may have fought to uncover, started wearing the *hijab* and *niqab*. This trend turned into a women’s movement ... called the “re-veiling” movement, although it is not really a ‘re’-veiling movement because the women mostly concerned are covering for the first time, and they are mostly adopting *hijab*, not *niqab* (p. 85).

Within a short time, the symbolism of the veil in many Islamic communities had taken on a totally different meaning. Unveiling had become a symbol of emancipation and modernity, and then veiling became a sign of emancipation from Western secularism and a “new” modernity.

Later factions of the Islamic resurgence movement impelled some countries to require veiling as Iran did in 1979 and Afghanistan in the 1990s. Some Muslim women in these countries did not view such a requirement as emancipating. Shilandari (2010) argues that the veiling requirement in Iran limited women’s freedom of choice, affected their identities and, for many Iranian women, became a symbol of their subordination. The Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (RAWA) asserts that the *burqa* (with its full face veil and mesh over the eyes) lost its religious meaning when it was forcibly imposed and became a “misogynistic instrument of terror” (RAWA, para. 8). Thus for some women, the veil took on new meaning. Given the cultural and contextual nature of all communication, these multiple, complex, and changing meanings of the veil are not surprising.

As noted earlier, for many people, especially Westerners, the veil does not evoke positive images. As Reece (1996) argues, “Within Western cultures, the veil often is interpreted as a symbol of the oppression...of Muslim women, always carrying an air of backwardness” (p. 42). Power (2006) believes, “Aside from the flag, no piece of cloth in history has been imbued with as much power to liberate and oppress, rally and divide as the veil” (para. 1). The symbolism has become so divisive that Heath (2008) asserts that in the West the veil is rarely seen as a sacred or cultural practice, but only as a threatening symbol of political Islam. Giannone proposes that for those in the West, “this ‘vestimentary act’ is an alarming signal of the frightening side of Islam” (as quoted in Calefato, 2010, p. 350). Bullock (2002) asserts, “For many in the Western media, *hijab* (the veil) by and large stands for oppression and as shorthand for all the horrors of Islam (now called Islamic fundamentalism): terrorism, violence, barbarity and backwardness” (p. 123). Because of this prevailing negative view of the veil in the West, it is especially important to look beyond such commonly held views and examine the meanings that Muslim women attribute to this piece of fabric.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to provide an in-depth exploration of Islamic theology related to the veil, a précis of such discourse will provide non-Muslim readers information which will help them better understand comments of my interviewees. The Qur’an (the holy book which Muslims believe is the word of God as revealed to and recorded by the Prophet Muhammad) calls for Muslim women (and men) to be modest in their dress, but interpretation of this decree varies. One passage in the Qur’an (24:31) oft quoted by proponents of the obligatory act of veiling urges believing women to “draw their veils over their bosoms

and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women." Another Qur'anic passage (33:59) frequently cited to support the covering directive is: "O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested." Religious leaders also urge women to cover based on writings in the *Hadiths* (different collections of Mohammad's statements and actions written by others after his death). According to the Director of the Islamic Information Foundation, one *Hadith* commands that women cover all but the face and hands (Bedawi, 2008). Based on these and other *Hadiths* and Qur'anic passages, many Islamic scholars argue that covering is mandatory.

Other Muslim writers dispute that covering is obligatory. Some advocate that the true message of the Qur'an has been manipulated (Mernissi, 1987) and 'distorted by interpretations which sought to preserve patriarchal pre-Islamic traditions' (Watson, 1994, p. 144). Others argue that covering was a requirement only for the wives of the Prophet (Ahmed, 1992; El-Solh & Mabro, 1994). Hoodfar (2001) maintains that even though the veil is not explicitly sanctioned for all women by the Qur'an, "modern commentators have rationalized that since the behavior of the wives of the Prophet is to be emulated, then all women should adopt this form of dress" (p. 423). Still others interpret the scriptures differently and argue the veil was not even a mandate for the Prophet's wives (El Guindi, 2000). Not all Muslims accept the reliability of all the *Hadiths* and the one decreeing women cover all but the face and hands is especially in dispute (Syed, 2004). Historically all holy books have been construed in numerous ways, and the controversy over the veiling edict provides a striking example of this.

3. Some Background on Malaysia

Malaysia, a country in Southeast Asia, is divided into two geographical parts. Most Malaysians (85%) live in West Malaysia on the peninsula below Thailand. The rest of the country known as East Malaysia is on the island of Borneo. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country where the Malays, who are primarily the Muslims, comprise only 50% of the population. The rest of the population is Chinese, Indians, indigenous people and a few other ethnicities. Islam is the national religion, and 61% of the population is Muslim. The others are primarily Buddhists, Christians and Hindus (CIA World Factbook, 2012). Virtually all Malays are Muslims, and the Malaysian constitution decrees that a Malay is a Muslim (Saat, 2012).

As with much of the world, Islam in Malaysia has undergone a transformation in the last 40 years or so, and today is more conservative (Lee, 2010). Islamic resurgence or revival is referred to as the *dakwah* movement. *Dakwah*, an Arabic term for missionary activity, means an invitation to a renewal and commitment to traditional Islamic values and customs. Many religious and political organizations, known as *dakwah* groups, supported the revival movement of the 1970s and '80s. These groups viewed Western ways as immoral and materialistic and aimed to strengthen "the faith amongst the Malays by encouraging a stronger commitment to the two most important sources of Islam, the Koran (Qur'an) and the *Hadith*" (Frisk, 2009, p. 45).

Othman (2006) maintains one of the objectives of most *dakwah* groups was to persuade

Muslim women to adopt dress considered “Islamic”. Malay women responded to this challenge and traded in their jeans and t-shirts for long, loose dresses and head coverings. Thirty years ago, few Malay women covered, but today the majority do. Mouser (2007) maintains that the *tudung* and long dress have become a “social expectation for Malay women” and there is much social pressure to cover (p. 169).

Even though the majority of Malaysian Muslim women cover today, there is a sizable minority that does not. There is no national requirement that Muslim women cover their hair although one conservative state on the peninsula does mandate this (Othman, 2006). The Malaysians I spoke with stressed with great pride that the choice of whether to cover is the woman’s. Of course, some have considerable pressure from family to cover, but a few also have family pressure not to cover. Othman (2006) maintains that the common view in Southeast Asia is that the act of covering should be freely taken for it to be an authentic act of piety. My research supports this.

Unlike a few other parts of the world, the veil is fashionable in Malaysia and is usually coordinated in color with the rest of the clothing. The *tudung* is generally worn with the *baju kurung*, a traditional dress with long tunic top and floor-length skirt. These dresses are typically brightly colored and stylish. My observation is that most women consciously choose *tudungs* that match the color and pattern of their *baju kurungs*, and the combined result is colorful and chic. Nagata (2011) agrees:

Malay Muslim women generally stand out from their Middle Eastern sisters in their ability to make the most of brightly colored local batiks and silks, inventing stylist ways of draping the headscarf and adding...jewelry ... This is the new modern Malay female style in rural and urban areas, a new ethnic costume with Islamic characteristics. (p. 55)

The black *chador* in Iran or the blue *burqas* in Afghanistan are as alien to the women of Malaysia as the *tudung* is to most Western women.

This colorful fashion is perceived differently in a few areas of the Middle East. According to Benhabib (2002):

The brighter the colors of their overcoats and scarves—bright blue, green, beige, lilac, as opposed to brown, gray, navy, and, of course, black—and the more fashionable their cuts and material by Western standards, the more we can assume the distance from Islamic orthodoxy of the women who wear them. (p. 95)

This might be the assumption one can make in a few regions of the world, but not in most of Malaysia where veiling and fashion are viewed as compatible. Malaysia has many fashion magazines containing alluring images and advertisements for stylish veils and coordinated outfits. According to Nagata (2011), such styles are frequently called *Dakwah fashions*.

Although I am using the term *tudung* as a general word for headpiece coverings, there are different types. The most commonly seen headpiece is the *mini-telekung*, which covers the hair, neck and ears. Some women, who are often assumed to be more devout, wear a longer version,

known as a *telekung* which also covers the shoulders and bosom. A few wear a *selendang*, a short shawl or scarf, which shows some hair at the forehead and portions of the neck. The length and type of the *tudung* is one way that women express themselves and outwardly indicate something of their inner convictions (Frisk, 2009).

4. Methodology

In 1922, Malinowski wrote that ethnography is a method for grasping “the natives’ point of view” (p. 25). In more modern nomenclature, ethnography attempts to “translate the details of one culture for an audience usually unfamiliar with that culture” (Ellington, 2009, p. 131). Ellington notes that some communication ethnographers suggest “ethnographic accounts must capture participants’ perspectives and that the research process and reporting methods should privilege participant voices” (2009, p. 145). This study uses a descriptive ethnographic method which “privileges the voices” of those being studied so their individual narratives may be heard without judgment to provide a deep understanding of the complex and multiple meanings of the veil.

4.1. Participants

I interviewed 30 veiled, unveiled, and sometimes-veiled Muslim women in the Malaysian state of Sarawak on the island of Borneo (East Malaysia) between July and December 2010. I located interviewees using a non-probability convenience method, specifically recruiting through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. All interviewees taught at universities or colleges in Sarawak. Accordingly, they are professional, highly educated women, and most are foreign-exposed, having earned an advanced degree outside of Malaysia. I believe these respondents to be modern women who have a broad range of experiences and ones who would likely have considered the reasons for their veiling decision. Another factor in their selection is that they speak English, and I feared the use of a translator would inhibit open responses and result in an awkward interview climate. Participants range in age from the 20s to the 50s. Nineteen are married, seven are single, and four are divorced.

After the interviews were completed, the respondents were placed into groups: (1) women who veil, (2) women who do not, and (3) women who sometimes veil.

4.1.1. Women Who Veil

Fourteen of the 30 respondents wear the tudung all of the time or most of the time when in the presence of men they could marry, which they believe is the Qur’anic obligation. Some are very strict and cover all the time in this situation, but a few are not as strict and do not cover in their own homes. Yet all in this group cover when in public.

4.1.2. Women who Do Not Veil

Twelve of the respondents do not cover, except when praying, when in a mosque, or in some

atypical circumstances.

4.1.3. Women Who Sometimes Veil

Four of the 30 do not wear the *tudung* consistently in public. I attempted to locate more participants who would fall into this “sometimes” category, but was unable to do so even though many Malays told me such behavior was common.

4.2. Interview Procedure

I used a semi-structured interview format which allowed me to follow a prepared guide but deviate and probe as needed. The interviews lasted from 25 to 60 minutes and were not recorded since I thought this might inhibit candid answers. Indeed some respondents asked me about this before consenting to participate. During the interview I took extensive notes and then immediately afterwards, I typed a transcript. I analyzed the transcripts individually and then collectively for themes.

Respondents were assured that individual participants would not be identified. Since I was teaching at a Malaysian university as part of the Fulbright program, I was afforded access to respondents and provided credibility and a measure of trust that helped me secure cooperation. Because of the need to provide confidentiality, all respondents are identified below using pseudonyms.

5. Results

5.1. Women Who Veil

All but one of the 14 wearers concur with the pro-veiling discourse previously discussed. They believe the hair covering is mandated by the Qur’an, and they maintain that this is their main reason for covering. Some secondary reasons for covering were revealed as explained below, but participants contend these reasons are minor in comparison. With one exception, they think it is a sin not to cover. The responses of the one exception will be discussed separately at the end of this section since her views are not typical of the other women. Kartina’s succinct explanation is typical:

It is an order in Islam as I interpret it. If I am to live as God commands, I must wear it and I do so as a sign of my devotion to God. Each day when I put on the *tudung*, it reminds me that I have certain values that I must live by.

Osmawani’s response provides more details: “Wearing the *tudung* is compulsory. The Qur’an is clear on how women are to dress. The correct way is to show only the face and hands.”

The majority of veiled interviewees indicate the reason for the Qur’anic commandment is related to sexual attraction. Fareha explains: “The Qur’an requires this of me because the hair is a sexual attraction and we are to be modest and not tempt men.” Nazir concurs that the Qur’an

asks her to be modest and “not show off” her body or hair which might be sexually alluring. Ayu enjoins:

For everything written in the Qur’an, there is a reason. For men, there is a desire for the opposite sex. This is stronger for men than for most women. The hair is sexually enticing and covering it makes a woman less of a sexual object.

Several assert that the veil helps to focus men’s attention on women’s intellect and abilities instead of their physical appearance and helps them resist objectification.

Two respondents do not agree that the hair is a sexual object. One submits, “The Qur’an says that a woman’s hair is like her crown and we are to cover it.” This crown, this beauty, is to be reserved for one’s husband. Regardless of why the women believe they are asked to cover, they concur that covering the hair is obligatory, and as Latifah contends, “It is part of being a good Muslim woman.”

Even though these women believe covering is compulsory, they do not view this as a burden. Indeed, many told me how much they enjoy wearing the *tudung*. Some of this enjoyment is related to fashion as discussed later. But many respondents indicate the enjoyment is more deep-seated and pertains to the transformative effects of the veil. Wati, who had recently changed to a more conservative way of dress, succinctly encapsulates this view, “Now I feel closer to my God.” Ismah and Nazir contend that when they decided to cover, they began to feel more devout and fulfilled.

Some wearers also divulge that one reason the Qur’an mandates the veil is for the protection of women. Kartina explains: “In early Islamic history, men would improperly tease women so Muslim women were asked to cover to identify themselves as a sign of their religion and piety. Times have changed, but we are still asked to cover for protection.” The participants submit that the veil continues to send a message to men that the wearers are pious and should be left alone.

One other commonly mentioned reason for covering is that this act serves as a form of behavioral check and results in the wearer critically reflecting on her public actions. Ayu contends that the veil helps her to check her behavior:

(The veil) stops me from doing some things that are inappropriate. Before I veiled, I used to go clubbing and would socialize with men. But now that I wear the *tudung*, I won’t do this. It helps me be a more faithful Muslim.

Suraya further illustrates the power of the veil to regulate her actions: “When I wear the *tudung*, I know that others identify me as a Muslim. If I behave poorly, then I know it will reflect poorly on my faith.” The vast majority aver that the veil helps them to be more faithful Muslims.

However, Safinaz does not think that the *tudung* helps her to be more faithful. She says her faith comes from within and she would behave the same whether she was wearing the veil or not. She believes wearing the *tudung* is a “small thing” and not a measure of her devotion and piety.

Several respondents admit that another reason for wearing the *tudung* is fashion, and they related how much they enjoy coordinating their *baju karungs* (dresses) with their *tudungs*. Two also divulged that they believe they look “more attractive” wearing the *tudung*. However,

all these women stress that although they enjoy the fashion, they wear the veil primarily as a sign of their devotion. They simply see no inconsistency in the religious avowal of the veil and fashion.

However, several interviewees voiced their worry that more and more women are donning the veil primarily for reasons of fashion and convention and not religion. Latifah speculates that peer pressure related to fashion accounts for the decisions of teenage girls to cover just as much as religion does. Kartina laments: “More cover today than 30 years ago, but this doesn’t mean they are more devout. They cover because it is expected or because they like the fashion. It is the trend.” Several veiled, unveiled, and sometimes veiled respondents surmise that many women of all ages only cover because of societal pressure and because it is just easier to do what others are doing.

Izzah is the one veiled woman who does not believe the veil is compulsory and who is not religious in the traditional use of the word. She covers as a personal and political statement of solidarity with other Muslim women. After the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, she saw how Muslim women were discriminated against in the West. For example, she decried the treatment of their being stopped and searched in airports and public buildings and thought, “This search and stop was wrong.” She began to cover as an act of alliance with the women who were unfairly treated, as a sign of affirmation against injustice. Later when she was living in the West, she experienced this discrimination first-hand when people taunted and threw rocks and cans at her and other covered women. She reports some women decided to remove the veil, but she “became even more convinced that I should wear it as an act of solidarity.”

5.2. Women Who Do Not Veil

The narratives of the nonwearers vary more than those of the wearers and, as expected, some have alternative views of covering. However, the majority of the women in this group (7 of the 12) agree with their veiled sisters that covering the hair is a religious obligation and that failure to cover is a sin. Five of the seven use the exact same phrase—“I am not ready”—to depict the reason for their decision. These five respondents, who are all relatively young women, assert that covering is an enormous commitment since the *tudung* is a symbol of devotion. As Dalima proclaims, “When we wear, we have to be totally into the religion all the time.” It means that the wearers are to act in certain ways—be pious, say prayers five times a day, avoid touching men not in their family, avoid going to clubs, etc. They are simply not ready for this obligation even though they describe themselves as religious. They also emphasize that the *tudung* is not something that people should wear one day and then take off a few weeks later. They contend wearing requires a dedicated, long-term commitment. Those not married assume they will wear the *tudung* when married. Halimah’s answer is descriptive of those “not ready” to cover:

By wearing, you are the image of your religion, and you must comply with what the religion demands. I am still young and it is not unusual for a person my age not to wear, but when someone is around 30, then it is expected. If I wore now, I would have to comply socially and I am not ready for this. I love my religion and I will cover later.

Bahiyah has a different perspective:

When I was in school, I was forced to cover, and I thought this force was wrong. In Islam, there is to be a choice. So I rebelled and refused to wear the tudung. I know it is a sin, but it is also wrong to wear it and not be sincere. I don't want to be a hypocrite.

Even though those in this group believe their behavior to be sinful, they maintain it is a greater sin to wear the veil and not live up to the dedication it requires. They view the *tudung* as much more than a piece of fabric and contend that donning it will lead to marked changes in their personal and social identities.

The two others in this group who concur that failure to cover is a religious transgression do not use the words "I am not ready" to explain their decision. These two women, who are both older, stress that this is not a great sin since it harms no one else and is between them and God. One emphasizes that Muslims are obligated to intercede if the sins of someone causes harm to others, but being unveiled does not. Zabidah proclaims: "Not covering is a small sin. Who you are inside is what is most important." Zabidah believes that for many the *tudung* has become the symbol of righteousness. She disagrees and wishes to concentrate on values and actions instead.

The remaining five unveiled women provide oppositional discourse contesting the idea that failure to cover is a sin. Lela describes herself as a devout believer who has studied the Qur'an carefully and concluded the veil is not mandatory. She explains that women in Mohammad's times were instructed to cover as a means of protection, but she believes that wearing the *tudung* does the opposite for her when she travels abroad, which she does frequently. When she used to cover, she became uncomfortable when traveling because people stared at her and she felt their enmity. For her in this modern time, not covering provides more protection. Lela laments:

I think there are two groups in Malaysia — one group has a more traditional interpretation. The other focuses on the spirit of Islam rather than the letter of the law. To me this is what is important. The holy books were written at a different time and should be taken in context. There were slaves then and today we would see this as a gross violation of human rights and against our religion, but it was natural then. So we have to take the context into account.

Yasmin, who also considers herself a faithful Muslim, provides yet another outlook. She explains that the Qur'an only requires her to "guard her modesty". She asserts:

Too many people today cover and aren't modest. They are highly fashionable and decorative. This defeats the purpose of the covering — of being modest and not calling attention to your body. The tudung has become the standard and a fashion statement. I think I am more modest than many who cover.

The remaining three in this group explain that attire does not make a good person. Mawar

describes herself as an independent thinker and proclaims, “What matters is what’s inside and this is what God will judge.” In some ways, she believes it would be easier to cover since this is the norm, but she would feel hypocritical. Murni believes the Qur’an is being misinterpreted and emphasizes that it leaves the matter of covering up to the conscience of women. She also strongly disagrees with the idea that a woman is to cover so men will not be sexually provoked and finds this view insulting to men. The third woman admits she is not a devout Muslim and believes religion should be about how a person acts and not what is on her head.

5.3. Women Who Sometimes Veil

The four in this group cover only at certain times in public, and the reasons for this differ. The motives for three of the women pertain to respect, either to the esteem they believe veiled women receive or to the deference that should be shown to their family members. The rationale of the fourth woman relates to situational pragmatics.

Elya and Yahiya believe the unveiled Muslim woman is not valued by her Muslim male colleagues. Elya divulges:

I wear the scarf at work because I think I am treated differently if I do not. I don't get the same respect from males. There is a cultural expectation that you will wear it. It is more a cultural expectation than a religious statement. But I do not wear it all the time because I don't think this is a requirement of being a good, spiritual person. It is not a sin. I focus on the inside and being good.

Elya and Yahiya also cover out of respect for their parents’ wishes when around them. They report that they do not feel hypocritical about wearing the *tudung* sometime and not at other times for it does not have religious meaning to them.

Saliha covers at work because she fears her parents will learn if she does not, and she does not want to upset them. Unlike Elya and Yahiya, Saliha believes it is a sin not to veil and she presumes she will cover when married. Similar to the views of the veiled women, she indicates the *tudung* helps her to be more circumspect of her behavior for she never wears the *tudung* when she goes to a club where there is alcohol since it would show disrespect to the veil.

Aziz, whose parents and husband do not care if she covers or not, veils at work and most other times for religious reasons. Yet she divulges that she is not so conservative to cover all the time in public. If she is participating in sports or in a business setting where the presence of the *tudung* would make people uncomfortable, then she has no trouble unveiling. She relates that the *tudung* is a “small thing” and not the essence of her religion. Although I was not able to interview other women who share Aziz’s position, I was repeatedly told such views are common.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1. Reasons for the Veiling Decision

All but one of the veiled respondents in this study avow they cover primarily as a sign of

religious obedience, and this is consistent with the findings of other studies (e.g., Read & Bartowski, 2000; William & Vashi, 2007). Several researchers also identified similar secondary motivations for covering; namely, to have a daily reminder of their religious commitments, to protect themselves from unwanted male attention and thus gain a sense of security, and to be judged on their merits and not looks (e.g., Brenner, 1996; Droogsman, 2007; Fureth, 2011).

Research about Muslim women in other areas of the globe identifies some motivations for veiling not mentioned by my participants. For example, in some studies in the United States, Canada, and France, one incentive for veiling is to display religion in order to visually create community (e.g., Bullock, 2002; Croucher, 2009; Droogsman, 2007). Although the *tudung* provides instant communication about one's religious identity, not one of my respondent directly mentioned the need to establish community as a reason for covering, perhaps because Malaysia is 61% Islamic. Also in some areas of the world, researchers report that women perceive covering as emancipation from seclusion because it allows them to claim public space which has historically been denied them (e.g., Marshall, 2005; Reece, 1996). Since historically women have not been excluded from appearing in public in Malaysia, no participant specifically listed this as a factor in her decision. However, two of those who sometimes veil do so only because they think this is needed to gain the respect of Muslim male colleagues. Thus veiling is a way of their claiming public space. Likewise other writers found that veiling is frequently seen as a political declaration against Western colonialism and consumerism (e.g., El Guindi, 2000; Ahmed, 2011). Even though much of Malaysia was colonized by the British, no interviewee views covering as a political statement against the West, perhaps because much time has elapsed since the *Dakwah* movement first began. Even though a few of my participants indicate a secondary reason for veiling is to avoid being seen as a sexual object, none frame this motivation as a statement against Western ways. Indeed, all veiled participants frame their reasons for covering as a statement for something, not against something.

Other research, including one study conducted in Malaysia, highlights yet another reason for covering. Nagata (1995) discovered several of her Malaysian informants covered as a sacrifice to God. If God granted some request, interviewees promised they would cover as an act of abnegation. Yet none of the veiled respondents in this study view their dress as a denial of something they desired. Indeed most revealed how much they enjoy wearing the *tudung*. Some of this feeling might be based on fashion, but most appears to come from the gratification they proclaim they feel in being closer to their God.

Some of the responses of my unveiled participants are also consistent with the results of other studies, and some are not. Many of my unveiled respondents use the phrase "not ready" as a reason for not covering, similarly to respondents in research by Furseth (2011) and Sandborg (1993). GhanesBassari (1997) found many of her participants agree with the covering mandate but do not conform to it; likewise many of my interviewees agree but do not comply. Some researchers report that most of their unveiled participants base their decision on what they view as the patriarchal misinterpretation of the Qur'an (Furseth, 2011; Marshall, 2005) or they attempt to separate the veil from its religious significance (Read & Bartowski, 2000). Yet, this is the case for only a minority of unveiled in this study.

My results emphasize veiling and fashion more than most other studies. Although most researchers do not report fashion as a reason for covering, a few studies do (Brenner, 1996;

William & Vashi, 2007). Mouser (2007) interviewed women in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur, and her results confirm that some women cover primarily because it is fashionable. Although many veiled respondents admit looking fashionable is important to them, they avow that fashion is only a side benefit and not the motivation for veiling.

This ethnographic study was designed to help readers better understand how respondents give meaning to their veiling behaviors. It is not a critical analysis of their decisions, and I have no way of assessing the accuracy of their self-reports. For example, some veiled and unveiled participants in this study voiced concern that many Malay women cover because of fashion and convention and not because of religious devotion. Yet all but one of my veiled respondents maintain that their decision is based on religious conviction. This may or may not be accurate for all, yet the relevant issue in this study is that this is how they construe their actions. Likewise, whether the focus on fashion is consistent with the Qur'anic dictate to be modest and not call attention to the body is not the purview of this study. What is significant to this research is that the majority of veiled respondents do not believe it is inconsistent. Ethnographic research is about understanding how others behave and think on their own terms. The ethnographer Wolcott writes that two characteristics of such research are that it is "basically descriptive" and "non-evaluative" (2007, p. 28). It is about looking at the narratives of others, the meanings they attribute to their behavior and how they construct their social world.

6.2. The Power of Nonverbal Communication

The responses of the participants provide striking examples of both the power of nonverbal communication and the assigned nature of meaning. While interviewing the respondents, I was struck with how often many mentioned the role of the *tudung* in reflecting and reinforcing the self-image they have or desire to have. For example, for most veiled respondents, the *tudung* serves to emphasize their self-image as devout, obedient Muslims and provides a daily reminder of their devotion and piety. Without the *tudung*, most would not be who they are. Yet for two unveiled women, their modest clothing and uncovered heads support their self-perceptions as informed and faithful Muslims. For one veiled respondent, the headpiece has a totally different and non-religious meaning: Instead of serving as a daily reminder of her devotion and piety, it serves as a sign of her stand against injustice. For three of the sometime wearers, the veil reinforces their identities as dutiful daughters who cover out of respect for parental wishes. For a few others, their uncovered heads serve as a tangible expression of their independent spirits. Yet for a minority of respondents, the head covering does not appear to be central to their identities.

Another related influence of the veil which emerged in some interviews is its perceived transformative effect. Some respondents who had either changed to a more conservative type of veil or who had not always veiled as adults report feeling closer to their God and fulfilled as a result of their decision.

Another example of the power of the veil is found in its ability to regulate behavior. Many wearers referred to this self-regulating function when they discussed being more conscious of behaving a certain way when veiled. For them, the *tudung* is a visible symbol of the religion, and they do not wish to behave in a way that would reflect poorly on their faith. However, one

of the most interesting findings of this study concerns some of the nonwearers' reasons for not covering. One of the principal factors in their decisions was the anticipated self-regulating effect of this piece of fabric. For these non-wearers, the *tudung* was a visible icon representing piety and devotion, and if they could not live up to this expectation, then they were not ready to cover. Clearly the veil is a powerful force with intrapersonal implications to wearers and nonwearers.

The above findings are consistent with other research on the veil and on other religious clothing. For example, after interviewing veiled Javanese women, Brenner (1996) reported that the veil had a powerful impact on the women's self-image and actions: (The veil) "promotes rigorous self-discipline and self-consciousness; it serves as a perpetual, bodily reminder to the wearer of her commitment to be a dutiful Muslim" (p. 688). After interviewing U.S. American Muslim women who choose to wear the veil, Droogsman (2007) concluded that the veil caused the wearers to feel differently about themselves and their relationship with God and to reflect on their behavior so "they feel good about the example they set" (p. 304).

After studying the religious clothing of Amish (unadorned, modest, dark-colored and "old-fashion" apparel) and Mormons (special undergarments) living in the United States, Hamilton and Hawley (1999) concluded that putting on the sacred dress each day is an "act of volition that requires one to reflect at some level on ideological commitments made, however rote and fleeting the reflection may be" (p. 47). Their study of Mormons' religious clothing, in particular, emphasizes the intrapersonal aspect since the clothing is special underwear hidden by street clothes. According to Marshall, the undergarment, which is to be worn every day and night, serves as a reminder "of an inward covenant to the gospel principles of obedience, truth, life and discipleship in Christ" (as cited in Hamilton and Hawley, 1999, p. 44). Hamilton and Hawley (1999) also found that the dress of both Mormon and Amish serves to regulate behaviors: "The sacred dress of both groups restrains one's behavior in the social world" (p. 50). In her book *The Social Psychology of Clothing: Symbolic Appearances in Context*, Kaiser (1997) cites other research which substantiates the power of religious clothing and adds support to the findings of this study. Since clothing is an outward manifestation of inner thoughts and values, it is not surprising that religious attire can impact the wearer's actions and self-image.

6.3. Further Research

Several possibilities for future studies emerge from this research. Interviews with Muslim men in Malaysia and elsewhere are needed to better understand their perspectives and the pressure women may or may not experience. Since the sample in this study is admittedly limited and the interviewees are more educated and urbanized than the general population, research with a cross-section of Malaysian women, including those with little education and those living in rural areas, is warranted since we have little reason to assume the results would be similar. Also this study gave little attention to situational wearers of the veil and a better understanding of their perspective is required. Observational research comparing actual behaviors of the veiled and unveiled is also warranted. Most veiled participants believe the *tudung* influences their behavior, but observational studies need to validate the accuracy of these self-reports. Studies comparing the views of women who live in countries where veiling is voluntary to

the views of those in countries where it is obligatory would provide additional insight into how context and culture determine meaning. Last, longitudinal research is needed on the changing meanings of the veil. The messages of the veil have changed dramatically in the last 40 years, and ethnographic research, along with historical records, should document any future transformations in how the veil functions in women's lives.

7. Conclusion

This study adds to the literature on Muslim women's decisions to veil or not in an understudied area of the globe. It also adds to the body of research on the power of clothing, particularly religious clothing, to influence self-image and behavior. Further, the voices of the respondents illustrate that the meanings attributed to this controversial attire are culturally, contextually and individually assigned, and the incongruities in the results of this and other studies remind us that there is no one Islamic view of veiling. Results also remind us of the dangers of making assumptions about an inner belief based on outer characteristics. In addition, these voices demonstrate that Western perceptions about veiling are far removed from the perceptions of the Malaysian participants. Since the power and divisiveness of the veil are not likely to abate in the next few years, we can learn much by listening to the voices of Muslim women about the meanings they assign to the veil.

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