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Changing attitudes towards veiling among Bosniaks in Slovenia

A vast literature on dress has emerged in the past few decades, which tries to answer questions about the multiple meanings assigned to clothing. Among other issues raised, numerous authors have advanced the assumption that clothing is one dimension of material culture that is a most extraordinary indicator if not a catalyst for social and cultural change. As Grant McCracken explores, dress choices are a communicative device through which "social change is contemplated, proposed, initiated, enforced and denied" (McCracken in Neuburger 2000: 170).

In the present article I deal with the changing attitudes towards Islamic dress code, especially veil, among Bosniaks living in Slovenia. I will focus on various perceptions of these attitudes placing them in the context of changes that have influenced the altered Bosniak relation to Islam and their place in Slovenia.

From Invisibility to Visibility

Bosniaks represent three quarters of all the Muslims in Slovenia.¹ They came to Slovenia during the industrialization of former Yugoslavia, in the 1950s and especially 1960s and 1970s, when Slovenia was still one of the republics of Yugoslavia.²

What is most interesting is that in Slovenian society Bosniaks were not perceived as Muslims until recently. It is true that from 1974 on "Muslim" was the official national label for the people of Muslim religion living in the territory of Bosnia, and was in force until 1993, when the new national label, "Bosniak", was introduced, but these ethnic Muslims were not perceived as a religious group or religious individuals. All migrants from Yugoslav republics were lumped together, regardless of their ethnic and religious belonging or of the Yugoslav republic from which these migrants had come. They were all called "Bosanci", Bosnians, and

¹ There are 47,488 Muslims living in Slovenia, which represents 2.4% of the whole Slovenian population. They belong to different ethnic groups and today most of them are Slovenian citizens. They are Albanians, Romanies (Gypsies), Turks, Arabs and, by far the most numerous, Bosniaks (*Popis* 2002).

² Since 1991 Slovenia has been an independent country.

also *južnjaki* (southerners), *Švedsi* (Swedes), *ta spodni* (the people from down there). In Slovenia the label "Bosnian" was considered pejorative and was often used for people with surnames ending in -ić. In my opinion, these ethnographic data show, among other things, that Slovenians did not distinguish the immigrants from southern Yugoslav republics by their ethnic belonging but chiefly by the language, which among immigrants in Slovenia during the period of former Yugoslavia was mainly Serbo-Croatian, and that lent "southerners" a peculiar collective identity. As a matter of fact, Serbo-Croatian was *lingua franca* of former Yugoslavs.

Especially in Slovenia Muslims did not disclose their religious belonging in any way: they did not use Muslim greetings, women never veiled, Ramadan fasting was observed only by rare exceptions, also at Bajram (Aid) there were no major ceremonies. As Muslims in Slovenia did not have their religious buildings, also their religious activity was not noticeable.³ So, for a long time there was no visual evidence of the presence of Muslims – there were no mosques, no Muslim cemeteries, no halal butchers' shops, no Islamic dress code. In many respects it is so still today, but the most noticeable indications communicating, that certain changes have occurred in the Muslim consciousness, are changes in the dress code, which have become visible especially among Bosniaks.

Dress context

Changes in the dress code show mainly in the dress of some women who started to veil, and also in some men, who began to grow beards. Some of them also wear shorter, above-the-ankle, trousers. Changes began to appear after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They are not present on a large scale, observing that in Jesenice (in Northwest Slovenia, where I did my research) there are only about 20 individuals who stress their religious identity through their dress. They represent around 3% of all the Muslim population in the town and are mostly younger people, aged between 20 and 40.

Since veiling among Bosniaks was not a practice before, and since the number of veiled women in Slovenia is relatively low, women who have adopted the new Islamic dress code seem alien to ethnic Slovenians, but also to Bosniaks themselves. Veiled Muslim women often

³ That was so due to Yugoslav socialist system that prohibited religion which therefore continued to be practiced by people in a private sphere.

say that people stare at them in the street, address them in English, or do not serve them in shops because they assume that they do not speak Slovenian. At this point, the question arises why people find that so alien, especially Bosniaks, who unlike Slovenians know Islam as a part of their cultural repertoire.

As a matter of fact, this style of clothing differs completely from the clothing that Bosnian Muslims know from Bosnian past, or from the clothing which was preserved until today in Bosnian countryside and which can also be seen in local *mesdžid* (masjid, Islamic praying room) at prayers, worn by older Bosniak women. Chiefly, it is a combination of clothes with garments that today are being imported from various Muslim countries, mostly from Jordan, Qatar, Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, nearby Turkey etc. Women call their dress *hijab*, the notion which represents today one of the key conceptions connected with global Islamic identity. *Hijab* does not prescribe an exact form of veiling, it only prescribes covering the body and hair in loose and opaque textiles, meaning that any dress, in combination with a headscarf or shawl from the local shop, that fits the description of *hijab* can be used.⁴

Women usually combine what they can get in shops and sew it together with clothes such as the *jilbab* and the *abaya*, which they get from Bosnia or from Muslim countries through their friends or relatives. The colors that they choose for their dresses are usually less vivid and varied than the characteristic traditional Bosnian Muslim dress used to be, and they mostly represent the personal taste of women believers and also the belief based in primary Islamic sources. Colors like black, greys, dark browns and blues, traditionally limited to the Christian Bosnian population, are not rare, and when combined with clothes of non-Bosnian design, such as the *abaya* or the *jilbab*, they cause disapproval among most Bosniaks.

Besides the look of the dress itself having changed very much in the present time, its message changed as well: The Bosnian dress developed under influence of the Ottomans since the conquest of the Balkans in the 15th century on (see Beljkašić-Hadžidedić 1990, 1999). The influence was noticeable in the dress of Muslims as well as Catholics, Orthodoxes and Jews who lived in the territory of the present-day Bosnia. As a matter of fact, their clothes were so similar that one could hardly speak of a distinctively diversified ethno-religious identity

⁴ The term *hijab* derives from the Qur'an (33 : 53) and it does not denote a type of dress but a physical boundary between the Prophet's wives and the men who were visiting the Prophet. It became a term for the boundary in the form of a garment covering a woman's body only during the Islamic movement in Egypt in the 1970s (see El Guindi 1999).

conveyed in the form of dress. During this period, it could be depicted as marker of a common Bosnian identity pointing to a common historical, cultural, geographical identity of Bosnian inhabitants, but that identity was internally layered – divided into religious groups, which were shown in dress by different colors, and into various economic classes, which could be discerned on the clothes mainly from the quality and prestigiousness of materials, quantity of ornaments and the following of fashion trends. Rather than ethno-religious identity the dress conveyed social difference or the division of the population into rural and urban one. Veils are obviously also a kind of clothing, and similarly to other garments of Bosnians under the Ottomans they communicated into the environment information about different social identities as well.

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, oriental fashion was gradually replaced by fashion from the West, especially Vienna and Budapest. Nevertheless, veiling, the wearing of the *zar* or the *feredža*,⁵ was common and widespread until 1950, when it was banned by the new Socialist Yugoslav government (*Zakon* 1950).⁶ Consequently, after 1950, Western dress became both generally accepted and popular.

The *dimije*⁷ and the headscarf, called *šamija*, were preserved mostly in rural areas, but were not necessarily connected with Muslim identity, since they were often worn also by Catholic and Orthodox women. Ethno-religious identity was distinguished in women's dress only by the difference in color and pattern, and sometimes also in the way women used to tie their

⁵ These two garments consisted of the veiling the face as a sign of high social rank. The generic term *feredža* actually indicates a combined garment consisting of a coat of Turkish origin called *feredža* (Turkish *feraçe*) and a set of scarfs which used to be worn with it covering head, forehead and face below the eyes (Škaljić 1989: 170, 364). *Zar* is a long and loose garment consisting of two parts that included a mantle and a black face veil called *peča* or *vala* (Beljkašić-Hadžidedić 1987: 18).

⁶ The law was passed after years of controversy and a prolonged dialogue between Communists and religious leaders. The main official reason behind the law was the demand for universal economic and political equality, which had been a part of the political program of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (KPJ) since 1918. Liberation and education of women as well as their right to work was seen as a logical part of this program, while veiling was seen as an objective obstacle which had to be removed (Beljkašić-Hadžidedić 1997, Milišić 1999, Radić 2002). This law could be compared to clothing laws passed for example in Iran (Reza Shah Pahlavi) or Turkey (Atatürk). All these cases were actually about suppressing the Muslim garb for the sake of different political reasons (see for example El Guindi 1999).

⁷ Skirt-like trousers (Turkish *dimi*). After it had gained wide acceptance in urban areas, at the end of the 19th century they became popular also in rural parts.

scarfs. Muslim women usually chose bright, colorful *dimijes* and scarfs, while Croat-Catholic and Serbian-Orthodox women preferred dark colors. Orthodox women, for example, used to wear long, black skirts or black *dimijes* (see Bringa 1995). These color distinctions were most probably preserved from the times of the Ottoman Empire and Bosnians can still recognize and distinguish them.⁸ Only in the late 1980s, with the end of Communism and its one-party system, a kind of revitalization of all three religions started, and at that time, as Cornelia Sorabji reports, some young women in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo adopted headscarfs and long dresses (Sorabji 1993: 34).

So, the veils worn today by some Bosniak women do not have much in common with Bosnian tradition. Firstly, the context is different:

Here we are dealing with a minority Islam in an environment that does not have a multi-religious tradition, such as there is in Bosnia. Despite the presence of Muslims in Slovenia in the last 50 years, notions about Muslims are still associated with "Turkish incursions" in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries into the contemporary Slovenian territory. In public, media and political representations, Islam is equated with classic military incursions and plundering expeditions which do not have anything in common with Islam or Islamization. Another recurrent perception is the one equating Muslims with terrorists, that is with the image of Muslims that dominates the media. Therefore, we could say that notions about Muslims are very exoticized and transposed to places remote from Slovenian reality, to Muslim countries about which notions are held that we could label as orientalist (oppression of women, violence, terrorism, underdevelopment etc.) or they are transposed temporally, to the remote past of "Turkish" incursions, which is nevertheless continually present as the threat of history repeating itself.

Secondly, veiling in Slovenia is not legally regulated as it used to be in former Yugoslavia or as it is nowadays in France.

Thirdly, we are dealing with free-will veiling among Muslim women and beard growing among Muslim men, both of which are based in religious knowledge and not in a specific local tradition.

⁸ Ottoman authorities wanted to prevent the uniformity and intervened several times with administrative measures prescribing who can and can not wear what. These provisions referred mainly to colors: Christians and Jews, for example, were not allowed to wear red or green colors, they were prescribed clothes of darker colors (dark blue or black), without rich ornaments, and the like.

Fourthly, unlike the dress code of the Bosnian population in the past, modern dress code does not convey any status, class, profession or economic differences or differences concerning rural or urban descent of individuals.

Islam, Interpretation and Practice

How new trends influence the Bosniaks in Slovenia? As a matter of fact they cause obvious internal differentiation within the Bosniak community, which are closely connected with modern Bosniak notions about what Islam is and how it should be practiced.

As I have noticed personally, the majority of Bosniaks often disagree with religious practices of Bosniaks who have adopted the Islamic dress code. This group adopted a ritualized behavior reflected in the adherence to a consistent performance of Qur'an's and Sunnah's rules in their everyday life. For most Bosniaks, these new and quite rigid practices are unacceptable and they try to denigrate them in all possible ways. Naturally, such disapproval is not unilateral, as criticism goes both ways. Also the Bosniaks who have adopted new Islamic practices like to criticize other Bosniaks, who according to their interpretations do not even know Islam or they simply mix it with Bosnian traditions and customs.

In my conversations with people was especially enhanced their endeavour to present by their opinion the right Muslim and the right Islam. Who is a Muslim and how he/she is supposed to live Islam. The interesting point here is that while most of them are very inconvenienced by the new Islamic clothing practices among Bosniaks in Slovenia, they tolerate those same practices among young women in Bosnia and justify them by saying that the girls in Bosnia have lived with Islam since their childhood, while those in Slovenia only yesterday wore miniskirts and décolletage and supposedly overnight became Muslims despite not having a clue about Islam.⁹ Moreover, another thought-provoking fact is that members of both groups consider themselves Muslims and they try to deny each other Islamic identity and competence in Islam.

Regarding Islam among Bosniaks, what comes to the fore today is above all the issue of its practice and interpretation. There are divergences between the traditional conception of Islam and the Islam that strictly follows religious instructions as defined in the Qur'an and the

⁹ That of course is not exactly the case, as also in Bosnia new clothing practices became more vivid only after the war there in the 1990s.

Sunnah. Most Bosniaks regard their religion above all as a matter of their intimate sphere. Islam is appreciated in the context of the moral code rather than in the context of ritual and formal practices. Consequently, the majority of Bosniaks as a religious group of Muslims still remain invisible. On the other hand, the minority that adopted the new dress code follow Islam in a very strict, rigid form also in terms of formal practices and ritual behavior. Their lives are defined by the rules of Islam – from regularly performing prayers to bending their eyes upon the ground in front of the opposite sex and avoiding the mixing of sexes. And it is their adherence to formal practices and ritualized behavior that exposes them in the public and makes them not only visible but also eye-catching, especially due to their clothes.

Here it must be mentioned that such changes did not occur by themselves but were mainly caused by influences that came to Bosnia and then also to Bosniaks in Slovenia through representatives from Muslim countries who during the war had their humanitarian organizations in Bosnia or who fought alongside Bosnian Army.¹⁰ Saudi Arabian humanitarian organizations also sponsored numerous translations of various literature with religious content into the Bosnian language. These translations mainly influenced younger generations, who took an interest in Islam. The main characteristic of these books is that they interpret Islam in a very rigid and scriptural way, compared to the practices of traditional Bosniaks, with a stressed importance of the strict following of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. And a similar approach to Islam is today reflected also in new clothing practices among Bosniak women and men.

Through reading religious literature, young women began to veil. Of course, other Bosniak women veil as well, but their practice is different. Younger girls, who follow rigid religious interpretations, believe that veiling in everyday life is their religious duty. Their decisions to veil are well considered and based on religious knowledge. The majority of other women practice veiling only during prayer. Such loose understanding of religious rules is considered by the adherents of rigid interpretations of Islam an automatism of the oral and practical traditions of the Bosnian countryside. A general explanation of veiling by women who represent the traditional Islam is that veiling is obligatory only during the time of prayer and while visiting the *mesdžid* or mosque. Often they also claim that nowhere in the Qur'an does

¹⁰ The help mostly came from Saudi Arabia and Iran. One of the methods of this mission was to give help only to those who were willing to embrace their type of Islam. In short, people accepted interpretations of Islam that were different from those that in Bosnia had been habitual until then (see Maček 2000).

it say that women should veil all the time. Those younger women believers who veil only occasionally and who know religious instructions more accurately, refer to the fact that Islam does not demand from them to give up their careers and become dependant on their husbands' incomes because of the veil. There are also younger women and girls who would like to veil permanently but they do not do it out of the fear of jeopardizing their jobs etc.

In addition to the rules determining when a Muslim woman should be veiled, Bosniak women also differ about what garment should a woman be veiled with. While older women still stick to traditional, light and colorful fabrics typical of Bosnian Muslims and avoid dark colors, younger women believers often wear dark clothes, which people find alien. Rather than sticking to traditional practices, these younger believers follow religious instructions and choose their clothes according to their taste, which is however often at odds with tradition.

Therefore, we could say that there are two different dress codes among Bosniak women. The dress of traditional women clearly conveys the adherence to Bosnian tradition, while the dress of younger women is harder to define. The women themselves interpret the new way of dressing as a way of respecting religious rules, which transcend the shackles of tradition and ethnicity or nation. Those rules are the same for Muslims everywhere in the world. Women associate it with a global Islamic identity, which connects Bosniaks with the Islamic *umma*. On the other hand, traditionally oriented Bosniak men and women find the new dress code as something belonging to another tradition and with it also to an imported, Arabic Islam, which they associate with problematic media images of militant Islam, oppression of women and all that goes with it. And most Bosniaks wish to distance themselves from these images.

Representation of Islam in Slovenian Environment

In this light, also statements that veiling in Bosnia is acceptable while in Slovenia it is not, become much clearer. I think that besides the fact that such a rigid form of Islam does not suit most Bosniaks, the main issue is their representation in Slovenian environment, where Islamic identity has lately become problematic. They do not deny their Islamic identity but they also do not wish to expose it with the dress code or a consistent ritualized behavior and formal religious practices. Because any more rigid religious practices create in Slovenian society social boundaries that most Bosniaks actually want to transcend.

In contrast, the scriptural Bosniaks clearly position themselves primarily along religious social boundaries,¹¹ which should be understood to comprise anything in the actions, attitudes and appearance which denotes their membership of the Muslim minority in Slovenia. And those are above all their formal practices and routine behavior which construct the boundaries of their supra-ethnic identity. Such forms of religious practice inevitably entail some kind of public statement of difference from their non-Muslim colleagues or friends. Additionally, Islamic religious prescriptions for action encompassing all aspects of daily life ensure that the boundaries defining Muslim identity emerge in routine or mundane as well as explicitly "religious" activities. Fundamental religious prescriptions, such as the prohibition of alcohol and pork, and the insistence upon ritual slaughter of animals, can certainly promote the social distinctiveness of a religious community (compare Jacobson 1997: 247).

Explicit positioning along religious social boundaries is thus most obvious in women's religious dress code and seems – in the eyes of traditional Bosniaks – to promote a problematic social distinctiveness in their positioning in the Slovenian context. New veiling practices are for them a symbol of the Arab culture, which does not have anything in common with Bosniaks and is something that could threaten their position in Slovenia as Bosniaks and Europeans. While the new veiling trend represents a sign of religious identity to the adherents of the intellectual Islam, traditional Bosniaks associate it with foreignness of other traditions, in which Islam developed.

Thus the new dress code represents above all a new Islam, which compared to the traditional one is quite rigid, but at the same time it became a symbol of internal division in the Bosniak community, which builds its identity on different interpretations of Islam.

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¹¹ In using the term social boundaries, I am drawing on Barth's well-known work on ethnicity (1969). He argues that ethnic groups should not be defined by reference to any objective classification or set of cultural features, but that analysts must recognize that in any situation the actors themselves collectively determine which of many potentially significant cultural differences between groups are the grounds of ethnic distinctiveness. Hence, the term social boundaries can be used to refer to those aspects of the lives of members of a given social group which they themselves or others recognize as differentiating them from non-members of the group.

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