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Hair Covering within the Context of Mixed Families

Introduction

Women (as well as men) have been known for centuries to cover their hair (and face) – so did ancient Romans, Greeks and Egyptians, as well as Byzantines and Persians; both Southeast Asian societies and various African tribal communities; Christians, Muslims and Jews. Hair covering is a well-known practice in Bulgaria, too, although nowadays it is not as widely spread as in the nearer and distant past. In rural areas, for example, elderly women (both Christian and Muslim) wearing colourful, plain colour and black head scarves could still be seen.

Different varieties of veils and veiling are both an aesthetic part of the outfit and a cultural and religious symbol. They are used in various daily activities (prayers, agricultural field work), festivities, customs, rituals and rites of passage (weddings and mourns), in order to indicate ethnicity (of Sikhs) or social status (of married women) (see also El Guindi, 1999; Daily, Parute). For centuries, the headscarf has been a symbol of belonging, a tool for (self-) identification within multiple contexts, “a rich and nuanced phenomenon, a language that communicates social and cultural messages” (El Guindi, 1999: xii).

Veiling in Muslim culture in particular is a multi-layered issue, transforming under different socio-cultural and historical processes, political controversy and media debates, all of which shaped and influenced by the specific developments of the given country (Gabriel and Hannan, 2011: 1; Evstatieva, 2016). According to the Arabic-English Lexicon (Lane, 1984), the word *hijab* means something that prevents, hinders, veils, conceals, hides, covers, or protects. In this respect, the headscarf is an essential part of some Muslim women’s dress code, a piece of clothing they use to protect “themselves and the men from temptation” (Evstatieva, 2016: 91), as stated in the Qur’an, “O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): this is most convenient, that they should be

known (as such) and not molested” (33:59).¹ Therefore, the veiling is perceived as an expression of commitment to the religion, where women “find value, purpose, and identity” (Moghadam, 1994: 21; see also Ruby, 2003: 59). This principle is considered pivotal by many religious men, as well as women who choose to cover their hair (faces) and bodies (see also Hannan, 2011; Zempi, 2016). In this context, veiling could be a symbol of self-identification, especially in predominantly non-Muslim environment, when “Muslim women might feel a need to reinforce their religious identity” through clothing (Gabriel and Hannan, 2011: 15; Kyurkchieva and Koseva, 2012). Therefore, despite the country of residence, wearing *hijab*, on the one hand, could be a matter of personal choice, on the other, it could be a requirement of the given ethno-cultural and religious group.

On the contrary, there are cases of Christian women who visit or reside for a certain period of time in predominantly Muslim societies, within which the socio-cultural and political specifics impose veiling on public places based on the religious considerations mentioned above. Hence, for (some of) these women the mandatory hair covering can be beyond their personal preferences and worldviews. However, by willingly dwelling “there” they may tacitly accept the local social order, even try to understand the headscarf, recognizing it mostly as a cultural marker not so much as a sign of religiosity. Others, however, not only reject *hijab* and *niqab* (face veil) as legitimate cultural/religious symbols, but even criticise Muslim women and their husbands who allow/make them wear it (Vinea, 2007: 95-96).

There are several studies considering the topic of veiling among Muslim women in the context of Islam and residence in European and North American countries. Some regard the wearing of *hijab* in Canada (Ruby, 2006; Bullock, 2011), the USA (Droogsma, 2007; Shirazi and Smeeta, 2010), France (Afshar, 2008; Scott, 2010), Germany (Rosenow-Williams, 2012); others focus on *niqab* in the United Kingdom (Hannan, 2001; Zempi, 2016), and the Netherland (Moor, 2009). These researches outline diverse motivations for the hair (and face) covering such as taking control of one’s own body and looks, securing respect and dignity, avoiding unwanted male attention (both non-Muslim and Muslim), religious piety, “asserting a Muslim identity as well as resisting sexual objectification and oppression” (Zempi, 2016: 2-3).

Since one of the main cases discussed in the article is a result of religious conversion, here I will briefly point my attention to some researches considering the topic within the context of

¹ Some authors, such as Ruby (2003), Zempi (2016), and Evstatieva (2016) outline some of the basic concepts of the *hijab* in the context of Islam and the Qur’an.

mixed marriages.² Contrary to many studies who recognize the act of veiling as an expression of women's own state of mind, some authors (Cochiari, 1988; Köse, 1996) more or less consider conversion influenced by factors outside of the individual (social environment, stress and external pressure). They do not take into account the personal perceptions, reflections and needs – the reasons within. Such researches (in)directly leave aside the possibility of one's independence. Ata (2009: 160), however, considers the religious conversion of one of the partners as an obvious annexation. This aims at “unification” of the spouses, removing the religious differences between them, in order for the relationship to survive. While Vinea's (2007: 102-109) study on Romanian-Egyptian marriages, presents the process as affected by some cause-and-effect factors, individually determined for each case (avoidance of intra-family conflicts, inheritance, facilitating the religious choice of the offspring, and personal preferences).

Data and structure

The current article is a result of the ongoing project “Religion and Festivity as Cultural Markers within Bi-religious Families (between Bulgarians and Foreigners)”³. The study deals with intercultural interactions within bicultural (mostly bi-religious, but also a couple of mono-religious) families of Bulgarians and immigrants descending from Middle East and North African countries. The aim of the project is to establish and examine manners of functioning, collaboration and transformation of features typical for the culture of each of the marital partners, related to their religious affiliation and festivities. The research is based on first-hand ethnographic data, collected through individual semi-structured in-depth interviews. All interlocutors were approached by me and were found via the intermediation of common acquaintances. Some of the conversations were conducted face-to-face, others via Skype and Messenger audio calls, according to people's whereabouts and availability.

It should be mentioned that the article considers only wearing of *hijab* – a headscarf that covers women's hairs but not faces. For that topic I chose to present five cases of Bulgarian women

² The term ‘mixed’ is considered as unifying in terms of bicultural (and in some of the families – bi-religious) and cross-national. The latter, according to Cottrell (1990: 152) encompasses marriages between external partners where the two of them keep their birth citizenships and maintain connection with their native country, regardless of the place of residence.

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married to foreign men⁴ from Syria, Egypt, Iran, and Yemen. It focuses solely on their point of view and experience regarding veiling, considering different socio-cultural aspects and the relation (or the lack of it) to their personal choices. Therefore, the text is structured in two sections. The first consists of the stories of Muslim women, whose veiling is a result of a conscious life choice. The second section, however, aims at showing another aspect of hair covering that does not refer to one's religious affiliation, but derives from some specifics of the "other" country – the foreign partners' homeland.

A matter of personal choice

The first section focuses on two cases of Muslim women of Bulgarian descent married to foreign men (an Egyptian and a Syrian Palestinian) also with Muslim background. Their stories regard, on the one hand, their personal paths towards the religion, on the other, their perceptions of veiling.

Zeyneb

Zeyneb (b. 1985) was born and grew up in a small town in the West Rhodope Mountain (South Bulgaria). She comes from a religious family of Muslim Bulgarians. However, when growing up, she used to have "other perceptions of the world" which did not refer to her parents' religiosity. In her late teens she got more curious about Islam and thanks to her sister, left for Turkey in order to study Arabian language and the Qur'an for a few months. "This is how my second life started. Before that I had no idea who I was [...] it was like I was not myself". This spiritual journey gave her life a new direction. After coming back, Zeyneb studied in the Islamic Institute in Sofia for two years, in order to get to know better the foundations of the religion. However, this type of institutionalized study, as well as the surroundings there were not "her thing", so she continued her enlightenment by creating closer personal relationships and exchanging thoughts and experience with Muslims from around the world.

Zeyneb stated, the spiritual change reflected her appearance – she started to cover her legs and arms completely, though still wearing trousers and "shorter" shirts. However, as the most significant of all she pointed out the covering of her hair. Despite (or maybe thanks to) her religious background, she recognizes the act of veiling as a matter of a woman's personal choice, not of a predestined religious principle. In this respect, at a certain point of her life she got determined to

⁴ The names used in the text are fictional. They are chosen among names typical for the respective culture, but do not correspond with the interlocutors' birth names.

wear a headscarf. However, her own appearance in both her marriages differs significantly in one way or the other, defined by her two husbands' state of mind. During her first marriage to a Syrian Palestinian (2005-2014) she was not *allowed* to cover her hair. Zeyneb accepted his negative reaction to her intentions as a “ban”, explaining it with his authoritarian personality, which aimed at controlling her appearance and attitude in general. Although being religious, he did not accept the headscarf as an important element for a righteous woman. Considering their residence in the predominantly non-Muslim social environment in Sofia, it would have made her too visible on daily basis. Her second marriage, in 2015, again to a Syrian Palestinian (named Baseem), on the other hand, *allowed* her to express her vision and to choose her own looks. However, after experiencing her first husband's control, Zeyneb became more determined to be truly independent regarding her own lifestyle, “I told him, ‘one day, when we get married, I will veil myself’ [...] he understood me”. Ever since their wedding, she has been wearing a headscarf on her own terms, just like her mother and sister.

Lilly

Lilly (b. 1988) originates from a small town near the Bulgarian capital Sofia. Although she was born in a Christian Orthodox family, her parents do not consider themselves religious, hence, she was not raised as one, either. At the age of 16 she left for London along with her first husband (a Bulgarian Orthodox Christian). Their marriage ended in a couple of years. In 2009, while still living in the United Kingdom, Lilly met on-line her future husband of Egyptian descent. In 2011 they got married in Cairo and settled down in her home town in Bulgaria, later they moved to Sofia, and since 2016 they have been residing in England.

According to Lilly, she did not feel truly connected to the religion she was born with. In her early twenties, a while before she met Masud, she found herself in a peculiar state of mind, a spiritual seek, questioning the fundamentals of Christianity and Islam, religion and belief and their place within her life. After not finding the answers she was looking for in her birth religion, in the end of a years-long process of considerations (in 2010), she became a Muslim. In her own words, Islam is the religion that “fits my understanding of God... the world in general”. After her conversion, Lilly started dressing even more modestly than before – long sleeves, trousers, dresses and skirts in any season of the year, as this corresponds better to her self-perception, closely connected to the religion she chose. In this respect, for Lilly wearing headscarf was (and is) expression of her religious conversion, which happened about two years later. It was a matter of a well-considered personal choice, however, having in mind some important social circumstances.

“Honestly, I wasn't covering my hair for a long time after the conversion. I started when my husband came

[to Bulgaria] [...] then, I thought to myself, now I have the support, I am covering my hair. If *something* goes wrong, he will do something, he will explain.”

The quotation clearly shows her initial suspicions about possible negative reactions of others and social rejection. This perception was reinforced by her surroundings at that time. Lilly left London for her home town several months after the religious conversion and shortly before her marriage to Masud. Her native place is small enough so that the local people know (about) each other, hence, many of them know Lilly from “before”. Although she was thinking about covering her hair from the very beginning, the new social environment, not as diverse as the London one, weakened her determination. Therefore, Lilly acknowledges that she would not have been so indecisive, if she had remained in England. In this respect, Masud’s arrival helped her overcome her worries and facilitated the veiling.

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At a certain point of their lives, Zeyneb and Lilly found themselves in a peculiar spiritual crises (see also Noble, 2003: 67; Troeva, 2011: 120). This provoked them to look into their lifestyle and to question their own affiliation to the native religion. On the one hand, Lilly did not recognize Christianity as *fitting* for her worldview, or she did not feel *fit* for its norms, or maybe both. On the other, Zeyneb was in a state of mind where she wanted to be *fit* for her own religious background. However, in order to make an informed choice and not to (re)act impulsively, both women went through a period of religious enlightenment. For Lilly it was reading “the Qur’an [...] books and internet forums [...] all variety of sources of ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ regarding Islam”. This way, she was able to get a wider view of the matter thanks to (un)prejudice opinions and experiences of strangers from different religious backgrounds. After comparing and estimating the gathered information, Lilly made the deliberate decision to convert to Islam. Zeyneb also looked for her answers within her own native religion, studying its dogmas and exchanging experience with others like her. As a result, she strengthened her believe and realized that “the religion makes me who I am”, choosing the identity she preferred the most (Troeva, 2012: 125).

In general, the role of the husbands proved to be more or less fundamental for some of the significant changes in the lifestyle of the two women. Although Lilly claimed, the decision for the conversion was taken independently of her Muslim future husband (the event took place more than a year before their wedding), his presence in her life was regarded as helpful. The intercultural (including interreligious) interaction between them from distance and face-to-face when she visited him in Egypt, allowed Lilly to compare the two religions on daily and festive terms. Along with

that the opportunity to discuss and debate some fundamentals of the Islam with Masud facilitated her decision. However, through the final stages of the process she considered him more of a support than a guide.

At the same time, Masud as well as Baseem became their wives' greatest moral support when it came to veiling. Their presence and understanding were constantly described by both women as needed and decisive, allowing them to visually express their own state of mind without any hesitation, giving them the feeling of being *protected*. Although both women's personal paths towards Islam were quite different, for them the hair covering happened as a function of incorporating "new" values and attitudes into their lifestyle. As Kisikova states, "the veiling... symbolically marks the new identity... the cutting of the ties with the past and the creation of a new personality" (2013: 73). For Lilly the past encompasses the time before the conversion, before finding her spiritual self. As of Zeyneb, the past refers to the time before Baseem, before being able to express her own religious self, in her own words, "the headscarf is a sign of freedom and dignity... Freedom, because it enables us to be valued according to our abilities, not our appearance, and dignity, since everything [we] accomplish is a result of hard work".

Although the headscarf is the most visible and recognisable religious sign of the appearance, there are other dressing markers which express their new lifestyle. During the conversations some specific pieces of clothing were mentioned as such with special meaning and usage. For Zeyneb it is a headscarf she received as a gift from "an Indonesian woman [...] we met at the Atatürk airport". It is a bridal *hijab* of soft white cotton fabric richly decorated with gold lame. Such piece was worn by the woman's daughter on her wedding day, and since Zeyneb really liked it, her acquaintance sent her one, a gesture that my interlocutor highly appreciates. It was meant to be worn on Zeyneb and Baseem's civil wedding ceremony, where the headscarf was the most distinguishable part of the bride's outfit. Therefore, being among the most precious items on that day for her, she still keeps it as a strong reminder of the event.

For Lilly it is the *abaya* – a loose robe-like dress which covers the body from neck to heel. Throughout the years following the conversion, there has been a significant change in its manner of wearing. At first, during Lilly and Masud's residence in Bulgaria, it was perceived as a prayer garment worn exclusively within the home. However, after their settlement in the United Kingdom, she gradually started dressing *abaya* occasionally – being out with family for walks in the park, gathering with friends and working. Today, she even shows off her new *abayas* on social media. Just like the covering of her hair, Lilly needs some comfort in the socio-cultural surroundings in order to make a change in her appearance. In her new place of occupation she meets and communicates with many Muslim women, some of which dressed like her, therefore, living in such

a diverse environment allows her to adopt some dressing habits not typical for her birth place and culture.

By the daily or special occasion appliance, these items become an integral part of their life. The headscarf, for example, being placed and used in another socio-cultural environment somehow transforms from an “ordinary” belonging into something exceptional (Woodward, 2001: 134). In this respect, these pieces of clothing are frequently seen as reminiscent to another country, also bearing the memory of their acquisition and the people involved in it. The headscarf brings Zeyneb dear memories of the late Indonesian lady who gifted her after such a short time together. This way, the item symbolizes their meeting and subsequent communication from distance. On the other hand, all of Lilly’s *abayas* are from Egypt, some are acquired while being there, and others are gifts from Masud when visiting his home country. Therefore, except for having daily utilization, they also turn into peculiar bearers of memories of the stays in Egypt, making the “other” country co-present by proxy (Baldassar, 2008: 252, 256-258). By wearing *abayas*, Lilly acquires a specific cultural element (not as much typical for the religion as for the “other” country), as well as honouring it as a marker of her husband’s cultural background.

Requirement of the surroundings

In the next section of the article attention is paid to another set of three cases of hair covering. These interlocutors are Orthodox Christians whose headscarf wearing is not a matter of personal choice, but is imposed by the socio-cultural specifics in the country of origin of their husbands – Iran and Yemen. Being in different situations for different periods of time, the women’s personal perceptions of the mandatory hair covering are not synonymous.

Anastasia and Nina

Both Anastasia (b. 1970) and Nina (b. 1973) are married to Iranians (respectively since 1992 and 1993) and live in Sofia. Their husbands came to Bulgaria in the 1980’s in order to receive university education in medicine, and both families have been close friends ever since. None of the couples have lived in Iran, but visit the country every now and then for a few weeks, whenever their work schedules, everyday arrangements and finances allow them. Therefore, Anastasia and Nina dress more conservatively than usual and wear headscarves solely when going to Iran. Here is how the two of them describe their own dressing experiences during their stays before (the 90’s of the XXth and the first years of the XXIst century) and how the demands of the environment have changed during the last decade or so.

“I change on the plane [...] before I set foot on Iranian soil I cover my hair and put on a mantel [...] The first time I went there the rules were stricter [...] I wore a long tunica and my headscarf was tightly tucked on my face. Now [...] the bangs may be left out [of the headscarf] and elbow-long sleeve shirts, a bit longer than a t-shirt, are also allowed.”

In general, during our conversations they were quite easy-going regarding the situation, and for that matter two circumstances could be pointed as facilitating. First, each of them are free to choose their looks within the household “there” among Iranian relatives (regardless of their gender and age). Second, as mentioned in the quotation, the state policy regarding women’s clothing on public has been evolving over the years, and the direction it has taken is satisfying for both women, giving them hope for even more liberal changes in the foreseeable future.

Siana

Siana (b. 1963) married a Yemeni man in 1991. The couple met in the late 1980’s as students in Varna, Bulgaria. For the last twenty-five years they have been residing in Siana’s hometown in South Bulgaria. However, the beginning of their life as a family they spent exclusively in Timin’s birth place in the south parts of Yemen⁵. At first, the couple dwelled along with his family, but in a few months they moved to the north region in the united country’s capital Sana’a. This decision was provoked by a better professional opportunity for Timin, however, it disturbed his wife’s everyday comfort. On the one hand, Siana was getting along with her Yemeni relatives, daily counting on their help and support. On the other, according to the couple, the society in the south region was more liberal and welcoming the foreigners in comparison to the north. Hence, after the move Siana met some significant restrictions coming from the religiously-bound socio-cultural perceptions of the locals. As most essential among them it was outlined the hair covering on public places. It was a demand she had to accept and oblige against her own will. At the same time, Timin felt (and still feels) responsible for her being in this position that he could not change, but had to support.

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⁵ The country used to be divided into two states – South Yemen (People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, with capital the city of Aden, 1967–1990) and North Yemen (Yemen Arab Republic, with capital the city of Sana’a, 1962–1990). In 1990 they united, creating the contemporary state with capital the city of Sana’a.

In general, the duration of the stays “there” is an important factor for the perceptions of all three women. While for Anastasia and Nina it is a vacation-visits-whenever-possible situation, a period of time with clearly defined beginning and end, for Siana it used to be a living situation.

Although Anastasia and Nina’s connection to Iran, the social environment they dwell within and some of their experiences “there” have a common ground, their perceptions of the hair covering situation (slightly) differ from each other. For instance, Nina does not stress on the practice itself, but on the high quality and the labels of the headscarves she wears, specially bought for that matter. This way she mitigates the act of hair covering, pointing her attention towards the aesthetic side of her outfit⁶. Anastasia, on the other hand, openly shares that the headscarf causes her some discomfort, being unusual for her dressing habit. However, this does not affect her attitude towards Iran and its culture, “I don’t like it, but it is not such a problem [...] may be because it is just for a little while”. Namely, the notion of it not being permanent is facilitating enough for both of them, and hence, even though they do not have a saying in it, they accept it as an expression of respect for the local society and its traditions.

In this respect, though Siana also wore headscarf because of the socio-cultural demands of the environment, her attitude towards it was not as settling. After her first settlement to a new country and culture, away from the relatives and friends, Siana went through a second period of adaptation after moving to Sana’a. At the time, she and her husband did not seriously discuss going back to Bulgaria, therefore, the living conditions were considered permanent. This made it difficult for her to cope with the veiling situation. However, unlike the headscarf, other pieces of clothing typical for Yemen brought her daily comfort “there” because of the soft fabric and the wide cuts. Such is the traditional *darah* dress which nowadays, more than two decades after the family’s settlement in Bulgaria, is a positive remnant of the couple’s life “there”. Several years ago, from his only trip to his country of origin, Timin brought *darah* dresses, which Siana specifically asked for. There she might wore it outside, but here it is a piece of clothing that stays exclusively within the household. Its ownership is not manifested out in the public where wearing it would distinguish her too much, but is preserved for the most *private space*. This way, it constitutes the “world of objects” of the self (Assmann, 2011: 24-25), supporting both Timin and Siana’s memories of the past, the life “there”, the “other” home country, providing them with “a sense of continuity” (Turan, 2010: 46).

⁶ There are some publications considering the headscarf in contemporary fashion (Evstatieva, 2016: 263-275; Aghajanian).

Concluding remarks

Regardless of the specifics of their personal spiritual quest, Zeyneb and Lilly perceive Islam as “a moral system that regulates the world and people... gives them meaning and order” (Kisikova, 2012: 260). Thus, by veiling they both seek to express their religious affiliation, responding to certain expectations for “proper” and respectful behaviour and appearance. As Lilly stated, “I made up my mind the moment I decided to become a Muslim [...] if it is my thing, I am doing it right”. In this respect, for both of them the headscarf not only consist their dressing habit, but also is perceived as a matter of lifestyle, which confers status and dignity. Through it they could blend in the religious and cultural group they belong to (see also Dayan-Herzbrun, 2000: 75-78) regardless of their place of residence. At the same time, Ruby’s (2006: 61) claim that veiled women utilize “the *hijab* to set boundaries between themselves and the outside world” could also find its confirmation in Zeyneb’s case, as well as in Lilly’s especially while living in Bulgaria. Dwelling “here” in a predominantly Christian society where veiling is considered unusual in the city environment, on the one hand, and on the other, it is a practice referred to as typical for pious Muslim women, indeed makes them to stand out. When in England, however, Lilly finds herself less *different* than the rest, thanks to the wide cultural and religious diversity of the society (especially in London) and because there she has the opportunity to communicate more intensively with other Muslims, many of whom Masud’s compatriots.

However, the veiling of Anastasia, Nina and Siana aims at their unification with the rest of the women in Iran and Yemen. For them the hair covering is a part of the dress code, imposed from outside. Despite having some issues and personal discomfort with the mandatory character of veiling, they accept it as an inseparable part of the local culture. Therefore, unlike other practices from “there”, regarding food, festivities and home arrangements, for example, which take up a lasting place within the couples’ everyday life “here”, the veiling is a marker which they have to experience only temporally. This, however, facilitates its seamless wearing.

In all five cases the figure of the foreign spouse is more or less essential for the hair covering. Although Zeyneb’s first husband was the main obstacle for veiling, Baseem facilitated the wearing of *hijab* on a daily basis, respecting her wishes. Masud also accepts Lilly’s decision to cover her hair not only in the UK, but here too, while living in her small native town as well as in Sofia. However, the role of the husbands in the cases of the second section is quite different. Anastasia, Nina and Siana’s veiling does not need their sanction or support, since it is strictly bound to the socio-cultural environment in Iran and Yemen. Therefore, maintaining tangible relationship with the husbands’ birth places and families by visiting them and communicating face-to-face is the fundamental of the head scarf for Anastasia and Nina. However, for Siana the hair covering

was due to her husband's aspiration for residing and building a career in his native country. Hence, in all of the cases veiling is more or less a family affair, reflecting supplementing specificities of the socio-cultural environment.

In general, in one way or the other, the narrative of all my interlocutors is placed in the context of "thanks to or in spite of". On the one hand, through veiling Zeyneb and Lilly are able to sense the freedom to express themselves. On the other, despite the mandatory hair covering, Anastasia, Nina and Siana experience their stays in the "other" country through the advantages of the visits, such as spending time with family and learning about the "other" culture. In this respect, the veiling is a *change* for all five women, which for some comes from within, in sync with the personal understandings and believes, for others it is imposed, and though not corresponding with their personal preferences, it is recognized as required by the environment.

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