

12-1-2018

Bucar, Elizabeth. Pious Fashion—How Muslim Women Dress. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Christina Pomianek Ph.D.
Lindenwood University, CPomianek@Lindenwood.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pomianek, Christina Ph.D. (2018) "Bucar, Elizabeth. Pious Fashion—How Muslim Women Dress. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 10: No. 1, Article 27.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1459

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol10/iss1/27>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Bucar, Elizabeth. *Pious Fashion—How Muslim Women Dress*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017.

In *Pious Fashion*, Dr. Elizabeth Bucar demonstrates the many ways in which Muslim fashions including *hijab*, *jilbab*, *chador*, and *tesettür*—serve as a form of symbolic communication. According to Bucar, pious clothing is clothing that expresses devotion. The interpretation of what constitutes piety and devotion varies, as the “nature of piety is constantly being redefined through debates about what Muslim women should wear, as well as through their everyday choices about what they actually do wear” (p. 3). The book focuses specifically on women’s decisions surrounding whether and how to cover, and the context in which those decisions are made.

In addition to detailing the personal decision-making processes of Muslim women regarding their dress, Bucar also analyzes how Muslim women’s fashion is co-opted by broader interests as a form of strategic communication. For example, Bucar notes that in Iran, where hijab (rules of modest fashion pertaining to headscarves and other varieties of clothing) is required by law and enforced by various tactics, women’s dress serves as a communication of morality and tradition to the world. Conversely, in strongly secular states such as Turkey, formal prohibition of pious fashion in the public sphere attempted to communicate modernity and neutrality of the state with regard to religion. According to Bucar, “. . . women’s clothing is a marker of [a nation’s] morality, honor, and ethnic identity” (p. 22). Bucar draws out the ways in which women continue to assert their autonomy and personal taste within the constraints of social and political structures while accommodating the top-down regulation of fashion that appears in public policy and Islamic scholarship. Bucar masterfully describes the ways in which her study participants navigate the intersections between national agendas, social pressures, and personal preferences, providing deeper insights into the complexities of Muslim pious fashion and the women who wear it.

This multi-layered approach reveals that, contrary to common misunderstandings in the West, Muslim women are always agents in their own decisions of when, where, how, and why to participate in pious fashion. Even where pious fashion is required by law and enforced by entities such as the Iranian *Basij* (The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed, a domestic volunteer security force that monitors public morality, including fashion) (p. 59), women retain control over exactly how to comply with the law as well as how to conform to or tactfully defy local expectations.

This more nuanced understanding of Muslim fashion and Muslim women’s decisions surrounding fashion is only possible because Bucar herself participated in pious fashion and she conducted in-depth field research in three unique settings—Iran, Indonesia, and Turkey. The comparative nature of her research reveals that Muslim fashion is by no means homogeneous and that women’s decisions regarding fashion depend largely on context. During her fieldwork, she conducted interviews and focus groups with young Muslim women (between the ages of 18 and 30) about their perspectives on what constitutes attractive pious fashion and what her participants consider “bad hijab,” or pious fashion that has failed aesthetically or morally. In interviewing women about examples of failed pious fashion, Bucar extracts important insights about what women value, what they hope to achieve through their fashions, what their fashions communicate to the world, and how women position themselves relative to other women in their sphere.

Bucar's investigation of pious fashion in Iran reveals the ways in which fashion has been used to institutionalize the roles of men and women following the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. In this case, hijab is a legal requirement and a public symbol of the nation's piety. Fashion in Iran is regulated by male religious experts who create *fiqh*, or Islamic jurisprudence, on women's clothing. The objective of these regulations is to avoid *gharbzadegi*, or Westoxication through the internalization of Western norms that "infect from the inside out" (p. 55). From a Western perspective, it may appear that women have little power in these decisions. When Bucar digs deeper into the dynamics of fashion and politics in Iran, she illustrates the ways in which women possess unique power and influence in the political sphere because of hijab, not despite it. Because hijab is legally mandated, all women actively participate in shaping Islamic norms through their decisions regarding dress. For example, women may invoke Persian identities rather than that of the Islamic Republic in the colors, textures, and patterns of their fashion, conforming to the rules of the state while subtly critiquing it.

In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, the state does not enforce pious fashion and religious authorities offer very little guidance on the matter. Here, women did not traditionally wear head coverings unless they had completed the *hajj* and until relatively recently, women's head coverings were not considered fashionable. Indeed, headscarves were banned in schools and government offices from 1982-1991 as part of President Suharto's (1967-1998) efforts to eradicate Islam from politics. Unfortunately for Suharto, his efforts to suppress pious fashion actually contributed to the rise of jilbab (jilbab refers to women's modest fashion in Indonesia, typically centering on a headscarf that covers hair and ears) as a symbol of austerity in protest of his notorious corruption (p. 79). After Suharto's fall from power, jilbab became increasingly popular in Indonesia, and even Megawati Sukarnoputri, the first female president of Indonesia (2001-2004), wore jilbab when traveling to conservative parts of Indonesia. According to Bucar, in Indonesia modern jilbab is a signal of piety and good character, but it should also be used to complement and enhance the features of the wearer. In general, jilbab is more popular among young women, and many women must decide as young adults whether or not to begin covering their heads. Without a deep tradition of jilbab, women turn to advice columns, the internet, and books to decide when, where, why, and how to begin covering. In this way, young women are actively creating debates about how Islamic piety should be expressed in public (p. 118). Perhaps because jilbab is a product of rapid horizontal cultural transmission, there is some anxiety surrounding a woman's motivations for wearing the headscarf. As jilbab become more popular and fashionable, critiques of Muslim women's dress center on disingenuous displays of piety, or covering for the sake of fashion rather than the cultivation of moral character.

According to Bucar, in the secular state of Turkey "what Muslim women wear . . . is a politically fraught subject" (p. 125). Under Atatürk, the first president of the Republic of Turkey (1923-1938) the fez was outlawed in the Headgear Act of 1925 and the headscarf was disparaged as backward, ugly, and a detriment to Turkey's modern aspirations (p. 126). During this time, urban women did not cover their heads but dressed modestly, with high collars and long sleeves, as a signal of professionalism rather than piety. In rural areas, women wore *başörtüsü*, a loose scarf knotted under the chin, and were ridiculed by the government for embodying the "wrong" kind of Islamic identity (p. 126). Following Atatürk's death in 1938, the headscarf continued to signify a threat to Turkish secularism and was the target of discussion and debate within the government, the military, and society at large. In 1981, the National Security Council and the Council of Higher Education banned headscarves among university staff and students. When women responded by wearing wigs on top of their headscarves, wigs were banned. Women were

denied entry to university if they wore headscarves, driving many women to study at Western institutions where they were free to cover. The prohibition of the headscarf made the decision to cover a political act, placing women at the center of discourse on Muslim public identity. The ban on headscarves was not repealed until 2010, but pious fashion did not disappear under the ban. Indeed, in the 1980s the headscarf became emblematic of educated, professional women of the Islamic bourgeoisie.

Bucar's contribution provides a fascinating glimpse into the complex structures that influence fashion decisions among young, educated, urban women. In the selected cases, pious fashion serves as a powerful communication at the national to the household levels. Contrary to common Western perspectives, rather than symbolizing oppression of women pious fashion creates a space of women's power in public discourse that they alone may access. This highly readable book approaches pious fashion from multiple dimensions and calls attention to the unique historical and political circumstances that have shaped Muslim fashion in Iran, Turkey, and Indonesia. Bucar's work interprets complex histories through the lens of fashion, allowing the reader to track the historical significance of "trendy" women's clothing. *Pious Fashion* would be a wonderful supplement to undergraduate and graduate courses in anthropology, sociology, psychology, fashion design, advertising, marketing, international business, and many others.

Christina Pomianek PhD
Lindenwood University
CPomianek@Lindenwood.edu