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THE VEIL IN ALGERIA (KABYLIE): THE MEANING OF THIS ISLAMIC WEARING

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Kabylie (Cezayir) Bölgesinde Peçe:
İslami Giyimin Anlamı Üzerine Bir İnceleme

Öz

Bu makale, Kabylie bölgesinde — özellikle Béjaïa şehrinde — peçenin farklı anlamlarını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Homojen bir gerçekliğe indirgemeden, kadınların sahada gözlemlenen çok katmanlı deneyim ağını keşfetmektedir. Çalışmanın temel hedefi, kadınların peçelerine atfettikleri anlamları kavramak ve bu anlamların İslamcı sosyalleşme ile ne ölçüde ilişkili veya bu sürecin bir göstergesi olup olmadığını tespit etmektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cezayir, hicab, post-İslamcılık, Béjaïa, kimlik

The Veil in Algeria (Kabylie): The Meaning of this Islamic Wearing

Abstract

This article aims to give an account of the different meanings of the veil in Kabylia, more specifically in the town of Béjaïa. Far from limiting itself to a homogeneous reality, this article explores the "maze of empirical realities" of these women. The aim is to grasp the meanings they attribute to their veils, and to ascertain the extent to which these meanings are linked to, or indicative of Islamist socialization.

Key Words: Algeria, hijab, postislamism, Béjaïa, identity

Introduction

For some forty years, researchers in the social sciences of religion have been observing a dynamic of (re)Islamization (Roy, 1992) taking place within populations of Islamic culture, including those living in the West (Césari, 2004). Adolescents, young adults, the elderly: all seem to be affected by this phenomenon, which, according to many analyses, is akin to an attempt at symbolic requalification, defined as a means of expressing generational conflict (for the youngest) or an assertion of identity (Kakpo, 2004; Villachaise and Bucaille, 2018). Nevertheless, it is often the expression of a plural, labile, plastic and instrumental religiosity (Khosokhavar, 1997). Often cobbled-together, this religiosity is not necessarily synonymous with a dogmatic, sectarian application of religious principles (Adraoui, 2012). Indeed, even if this religiosity can often be based on orthodox readings of Islam, it is accompanied by a form of religious pragmatism, that accounts for content and environment , Venel, 2004). While some researchers assert that Islamic religiosity is permeated by forms of communitization (Rougier, 2022), others highlight the dynamics of individualization of belief and modernity that structure the practice of Islam on a daily basis (Hervieu-Lèger, 1999; Hervieu-Lèger and Willaime, 2001).

What these "variations of belief" have in common, however, is that they are "framed" by an "ostentatious individualism," to use Jean-Pierre Willaime's expression: believers feel the need to "publicly demonstrate their faith" in their social interactions. This public display of faith is conveyed in three ways: proselytizing (Khédimellah, 2001), socio-political demands (Kepel, 1987; Burgat, 1995) and physical appearance (De Féo, 2024; Haenni, 1996). For the latter, dress has become the privileged vector through which women "theatricalizes" herself. For women, this practice is exemplified by the veil.

There are two competing explanatory models for the interpretation of this garment. The first emphasizes the autonomy of the subject as the basis for veiling. In their book Le foulard et la République, French sociologists Farhad Khosrokhavar and Françoise Gaspard declared in the 1990s that:

The veil is no longer the sign of blind submission to tradition, nor the expression of confinement in the space of ancestral femininity, withdrawn from the public arena. It's a veil that legitimizes women's externalization and simultaneously gives moral meaning to their lives, in the absence of any alternative in a French society where there is no longer any collective enterprise to establish meaning. This type of veil reflects a desire for self-affirmation, not only in the face of parents, but also in the face of French society, which represses in the name of the universal." (p .18).

The veil is no longer exclusively an expression of submission to God, but also a tool for asserting oneself in the face of one's family and thus obtaining "spaces of empowerment" (Venel, 1999). Resolutely modern and even an expression of feminism, it is not necessarily a garment produced by "male domination" (Bourdieu, 1990; Göle, 2003; Hamidi, 2008). Veiled women"seek" to exist, to take their place in society and to occupy it with their faces uncovered, that is, with their heads covered" (Ajbil, 2016), opposing the "Western mode of managing mores and training bodies" (Benkheira, 1997).

The second interpretation analyzes the headscarf in terms of a "regression," a "step backwards," and above all as the result of religious preaching, carried out by organizations sharing the same fundamentalist vision of Islam. Many researchers have stressed that the headscarf is closely linked to the religious preaching of Islamic movements (Tauil, 2020). The latter are said to have played a decisive role in the veiling of Muslim women in the East and West. This thesis supports the idea that, during the 1980s and 1990s, the veil was a cardinal demand of Islamists in the Arab-Muslim world and in several Western countries with large Muslim minorities (Kepel, 2000). While there is a genuine religious consensus among Muslim theologians representing orthodoxy and orthopraxy that the hijab is a religious prescription, or even obligation (Saadia, 2023, Fochr, Naef and Schlaepper, 2015), it was the Muslim Brotherhood in the mid-twentieth century, then the Tabligh and finally the Salafists, who made the veil one of their aims. They believed (and continue to believe) that the veil is one of the essential elements of a woman's Islamic identity. In the 1990s, it was not uncommon to hear or read preachers staunchly defending the idea of its compulsory nature. It's hardly surprising, then, that young women who had been socialized by this type of discourse began to internalize the veil as a cardinal expression of the Muslim woman's piety. In their worldview, a woman who claims to be Muslim must the hijab. This interpretation was not confined to the Muslim Brotherhood, but also applied to/was upheld by/was a belief of… religious leaders such as the Iranian ayatollahs, who in the early 1980s asserted the compulsory nature of women's veiling. In Europe, the veil was seen as a means of protest, a way of posing as an opponent of society.

The aim of this article is to provide an account of the different rationales for/arguments in favor of wearing the Islamic veil. Far from being a homogeneous reality, the aim is to explore the "maze of empirical realities" of these women (Geertz, 1992), to grasp the meanings they give to their veils, and to verify to what extent these meanings are linked to or indicative of Islamist socialization. We define Islamic socialization as the process by which the individual constructs. A subjective representation of the world, based on the idea of a totalizing Islam which embraces

all aspects of existence and emphasizes the need to politicize the Muslim religion.
To answer these questions, we will draw on a field survey, carried out between March and April 2024 in the city of Béjaïa, Algeria.[1] Why this city? There were several reasons for our choice. The first reason was practical: the research center where we work is located in this city. By asking people close to us, work colleagues and students involved in our laboratory's activities, it was easy to find women who were willing to meet with us and share their personal experiences. The second reason is that the Béjaïa region is known for its dense network of very active mosques, Sufi brotherhoods and relatively influential Salafist movements, which continue to influence the "space of meaning" (Kepel, 2000) in Béjaïa society. The final reason is that the town is Kabyle (Berber-speaking), and as a result, the lingering colonial imaginary in social representations makes the Kabyles supposedly very francophile and therefore "allergic" to tradition and the Muslim religion. However, empirical evidence points to a deep attachment not only to the French language, but also to Islam.

We conducted a dozen semi-directive interviews with veiled women. The aim of these interviews was threefold: (i) to identify their religious background and the different forms of religious socialization they may have undergone; (ii) to understand the main reasons that led them to wear the hijab; (iii) to report on the different meanings they attribute to the veil. Ten women between the ages of 29 and 49 were interviewed, belonging to different social classes and representing various profiles. These semi-structured interviews were supplemented by informal discussions and exchanges with students at the University of Béjaïa. However, this field survey is not intended to be exhaustive, as the sample was limited to our encounters and our professional, family and friendship networks. As a result, our sample includes an over-representation of people who have completed higher education and attend the University of Béjaïa from near or far.

1 A city of almost 200,000, it lies 200 km east of Algiers. Situated on the coast, it is considered one of the two capitals of Kabylia, along with Tizi Ouzou. It is also one of Algeria›s richest regions, thanks to the many factories located there. A tourist town and a land of emigration to France, it boasts a busy oil market? and seaport.

First name	Age	Family situation	Education/Profession	Year they started wearing the veil
Sabrina	32 years old	Married, 3 children	Bac plus 2 Executive secretary	From age 11
Sara	38	Divorced, one daughter	Bac level Executive secretary	For 13 years
Yasmine	29 years old	Married, one child	Master's degree in Amazigh language and culture Housewife	2014
Lila	34 years old	Married, one child	Business studies Civil servant	2004 (BEM).
Fella	39 years old	Married, one child	BTS Computer technician (civil servant)	Since the age of 12
Samira	49 years old	Married, two children	Bachelor's degree in computer science In charge of training at the University of Béjaia	16 years after marriage
Souhila	38 years old	Married, three children	Master of Business Law Housewife	2012
Karima	29	Single	Master's degree in French linguistics and applied languages French language teacher	2012 (since the age of 17)
Nissa	38 years old	Married with one child	English language teacher Bachelor's degree in English literature	2013
Thilleli	37 years old	Married, two children	Arabic language teacher (elementary school) Degree in philosophy	For 17 years

I. A veil that escapes Islamist socialization: the thesis of post-Islamism

While Islam was a major political force in Algeria in the 1990s, it has to be admitted that almost forty years later, it no longer has the powers of mobilization and leadership: the various Islamist parties have become shell of. However, this situation has not led to the disappearance of religion from the public arena and everyday social practices. On the contrary, we are witnessing a re-inscription and "proliferation of religious socialities" (Adouri, 2023). This dynamic is all the more interesting given that, unlike other Algerian regions (including wilayas bordering Béjaïa), the Hammadite capital was not an Islamist stronghold in the 1990s. Islamist parties were not able to attract a significant electoral base and consequentely never became firmly established in the région.

To analyze this question, we will draw on the thesis of post-Islamism defended by Asaf Bayat (Bayat, 2013), Olivier Roy (Roy, 1999), Farhad Khosrokhavar (Khosrokhavar, 2005), and Patrick Haenni (Haenni, 1999). We argue that the veil seems to have entered a post-Islamist era. If, in the early 1990s, the veil was often worn by young women socialized in Islamist circles (such as the Muslim Brotherhood), it has since become so commonplace that it ceases to be an "Islamist exception." Today, it is no longer simply the expression of a religious and social conservatism, nor is it backed by a political project etablished by the Islamists. Based on the thesis of post-Islamism, we intend to demonstrate that the veil is no longer exclusively Islamist, and that it now carries a variety of meanings. It is possible to assert that a real decoupling is taking place today between this religious symbol and the action of Islamists. The appropriation of the veil is no longer dictated by the pressure of Islamization movements, but is now based on the individual. Veiling has become an individual choice, a matter for the individual independent of the family or religious community of origin. It is even common to meet veiled women who are virulent critics of political Islamism and religious conservatism.

In the 1970s and 80s, the wearing of the veil by young Muslim women, both in the Muslim world and in the West in the 1990s, waspart of the political activism of Islamic movements, often stemming from the Muslim Brotherhood. For those who wore it, the veil symbolized a move away from a model of Western female emancipation perceived as incompatible with Islamic values. As Patrick Haenni states, "the veil expresses a desire to politicize clothing, which they intend to extend to society as a whole. [...] Clothing styles thus become one of the means of expressing the Islamist claim to a social project distinct from both Muslim traditionalism and Western modernism" (Haenni and Füger, 1996).

In the early stages of its development, the veil was a marker of Islamic ideals. Today, the ideological-religious significance of the veil is becoming less and less prevalent and has even disappeared in favor of a "new, sometimes heterodox polysemy, as it is reintegrated into the game of social distinction" (Haenni, 1996). It is therefore possible to assert that the practice/wearing of the veil observed in Kabylia is not the result of any Islamist influence or socialization. As a matter of fact, none of the people we met mentioned any socio-political arguments for wearing the veil. However, it is important to note that this conclusion may seem premature and would require further analysis to be fully validated.

II. Typology of veils: multiple meanings

Our survey revealed that the reasons for veiling are varied. This is why we propose a typology of the different types of veils encountered in the Béjaïa region. Although not exhaustive, this attempt at categorization enables us to synthesize the arguments put forward by the women we interviewed. We have thus identified seven types of veil.

A) The "elderly" woman's veil

Worn by women of a certain age (generally in their fifties), the veil takes on a particular significance (Amrani, 2020). It expresses the culmination of a personal journey marked by a growing preoccupation with religion that intensifies with age and fear of death. The veil is a means of sacralizing the social respectability associated with age, in a society where the elderly have a special place. Unlike other forms of veiling, this one is not intended to physically conceal, but rather to express a "maturity" corresponding to a heightened awareness of the need to integrate religious rites and beliefs into everyday life.

B) The bride's and fiancée's veil

This type of veil is worn by young women in their thirties and forties, often just before or after marriage. They discuss the choice/wearing it with their future husbands some of whom express the wish to see their wives veiled (Benmoussa, 2019). While the cloth has a religious dimension, it symbolizes above all a form of protection from the male gaze and constitutes a guarantee for the husband of the woman's seriousness and marital commitment (Kaci, 2018). As Sara says: "Marriage was one of the arguments that pushed me to wear the veil. I also wanted to cover my body, as I was often hassled in the street. The veil is a religious garment that I use to cover and protect myself." [2]

2 Interview with Sara, April 2024.

The veil here is an expression of respect for the husband, signifying to other men that the wife is no longer available for a matrimonial relationship. In this way, the veil becomes a means of publicly marking the wife's commitment to her husband, similar to the wedding ring. Although the veil may involve a partriarchal dimension, it does not necessarily imply submission to men. It is not always accompanied by intense religious practice, as the woman who wears this veil may have a rather flexible and not strictly orthodox relationship with religion.

C) The "occasional" veil

This type of veil applies to all age groups, but only at religious events with a strong social dimension. It is often worn during the month of Ramadan, at Friday prayers, or on religious holidays. The veil symbolizes a temporary peak in religiosity, marked by an increase in religious practice. It allows women to legitimately insert themselves into conservative or traditional social contexts. These religious events remind women of the need to veil, even if only temporarily. Women wearing this type of hijab do not feel the need to wear it in "secular" public space, using it only to sacralize a place or event. It thus symbolizes entry into a sacred universe and a spiritual temporality, generally corresponding to a flexible relationship with the Islamic norm.

D) The veil for young students and professionals

This veil is generally worn by women ages 20 to 30, often single. It is based on the idea of protection and distancing themselves from men in contexts where proximity between the sexes is commonplace, such as in universities or the workplace. The veil enables these young women to enter the public arena by protecting them from attempts at non-consensual physical contact (Dahbia, 1989). It reassures both the family and the woman herself, signalling to male colleagues that only professional or student relationships are desired.

E) The curator/pious veil

Of all the types of veil, this one is the closest to the hijab model advocated by Islamists. It symbolizes social and religious conservatism, and reflects a fundamentalist religious commitment that leaves little room for contextualization or pragmatism. The veil is accompanied by orthodox religious practice, which centers the performance of rituals and respect for worship are central. The veil is part of a rigorist Islamic normativity and its relationship to religion based halal and haram (Fall, 2014). Women wearing the veil are assiduous in their prayers and have an arithmetical relationship with salvation (Saghi, 2010). Often, this religious practice is reinforced by extensive religious socialization, in which the company of peers plays a crucial role. Aesthetically, this veil is marked by an ornamental austerity, often appearing in broad shapes and dull colors, such as gray, dark blue or black.

F) The "aristocratic" veil

This type of veil is worn by single or married women from maraboutic families in Béjaïa. They come from a religious background/grew up with religion, and belong to families of religious notables, with significant religious, social and economic capital. These families, well-versed in jurisprudence and Islamic knowledge, occupy a high position in the Kabyle social hierarchy, in both rural and urban areas, and generally possess a higher level of wealth than their non-maraboutic coreligionists. This veil, recognizable by its "bright" colors and the fact that the fabric used in its composition is "noble" (it's expensive), has no other function than to express this noble lineage and manifest a social distinction (Bourdieu, 1979) from the rest of the female population, who are perceived as "popular" (Belkacem, 2015). Women who wear this veil often live in the old quarters of the Bougiote medina and use Bougiote Arabic.[3] This aristocratic veil is both a symbol of social distinction and cultural identity.

G) The "poor woman's" veil

This veil is generally worn by working-class women. Its purpose is to conceal social and economic difficulties. In a context where clothes are expensive, the veil makes it possible to conceal the wearer's social class, thus avoiding possible discrimination. It's a clothing strategy that erases the outward signs of poverty, allowing women to blend into society without drawing attention to their economic status.

III. Some major trends in Kabylian veiling

A) The permanence of male domination

Contrary to "traditional" representations of Kabyle society, often perceived as progressive and modern, our field observations reveal the persistence of conservatism and traditionalism. Despite the growing empowerment of women, exemplified by their increasing access to work and study, they are still confronted with "male domination." Although this domination may be nuanced, or even questioned in intra-family relations and the private sphere, it is much more blatant in the public arena.

In Kabylia, as in Algeria generally, public space is traditionally perceived as a "men's domain." Going out in this space is defined by a typically masculine logic. As Bourdieu explains, "it is a typically masculine movement, leading towards other men, and also towards the dangers and trials that must be faced" (Bourdieu, 1980). The dichotomy between the dakhel (inside) and the barra (outside) is flagrant, as researchers have often pointed out (Dris, 2004).

3 A variant of Algerian Arabic that includes a number of syntactic and grammatical borrowings from the Berber language. This language is spoken by the old families of the town of Béjaia. Once in the majority, it is now an ultra-minority language and has been on the verge of extinction since the 1930s, with the massive arrival of Berber speakers from the region›s hinterland and Kabyle countryside.

The result is a "privatization" of public space by men, which could be described as confiscation. As Nassima Dris puts it, "Public space is a place where we veil and unveil ourselves according to established norms and the fluctuations that affect them... It's a question of setting up arrangements of visibility adapted to the moral context in order to blend in with the masses." The outside is the space of virility, of masculinity, where men meet, exchange and live. The irruption of women into this space is often seen, by both men and women, as illegitimate, a transgression of the sexual division of space.

As a result, the veil appears to be a resource enabling women to legitimize their presence in the public space. Yasmine testifie: "On a day-to-day basis, the veil has given me a lot: it has protected me from men and other people's stares." [4] Another interviewee/interview subject declares that the veil protects "a woman's charm and bodily integrity."[5] As well as not attracting attention, the veil establishes visible limits for men. Women's incursion into the public space, perceived as a dangerous place, is facilitated by the veil, which enables them to participate in social life (Oussedik, 2011). As Adouri points out with regard to women shopkeepers wearing the veil, "they use it to broaden their mobility, even to legitimize their presence in traditionally masculine spaces" (Addouri, 2022). The veil can even be a means of combating harassment, as Sabrina declares: "The veil keeps me away from problems and harassment."[6]

B) Aesthetization of the veil and religious individualism

Traditionally, this veil had an austere dimension: Darkly colored; covering the entire head of hear; accompanied by a long, wide dress (gray, black, dark blue, etc.). However, this hijab sharî' (veil in compliance with Islamic legislation) is not the most common style worn by women in Bougie. The style of dress varies from one woman to another: some wear pants or tight-fitting dresses, often in bright or non-dark colors. So, although these women justify wearing the veil out of a concern for modesty and discretion, they adopt strategies of self-presentation that sometimes run counter to the precepts of Islam, as defined by Islamic jurisprudence.

All the women interviewed, whether in formal interviews or informal exchanges, expressed great pride in wearing the veil. They see it as a symbol of social respectability, not only in relation to men, but also to women who don't wear it. In a region where the veil is not in the majority, it becomes a means of setting oneself apart from the rest of society and linking oneself to a prestigious lineage of pious ancestors.

4 Interview with Yasmine, April 2024.
5 Interview with Lila, April 2024.
6 Interview with Sabrina, April 2024.

This broadcast/announcement/display of religious difference requires a visible manifestation through differentiating signs. Women therefore develop distinctive strategies and behaviors, mainly using their clothing. This practice enables them to escape the social stereotypes associated with the perception of women. By wearing the veil, they distinguish themselves from other women who do not, thus affirming their membership to orthodox Islam. These efforts to differentiate are not derided; on the contrary, they are admired by those around them. In this context, it can be argued that the individual is at the heart of the veiling process and plays an active role in the choice. Veiling is often the product of an individual choice, sometimes against the advice of family and friends. Yasmine recounts:

"Ever since I was little, I wanted to wear the veil, because the village imam always told me to. But my family refused. One day, I decided to wear it no matter what, because I was really convinced. My parents always refused, because they didn't see the point of wearing it and also thought I wasn't ready yet. For them, the veil was made for an older woman, who knew life well." [7]

Conclusion

The logics of veiling in the Béjaïa region are far from being fueled by political Islam. The contemporary veil, as experienced and reappropriated by the women we interviewed, illustrates the dynamics of non-Islamist Islamization. So, while these women's reasons for veiling are linked to religious, traditionalist and conservative arguments, they do not stem from the direct influence of Islamist movements or preachers.

This is why the veil is polysemous. As our surveys affirm, the hijab "cannot be dissociated from the lived experience of veiled women" (Khosrokhavar, 1996). It is both the product of male constraint and an assertion of self as an autonomous subject. The garment is thus a complex symbol, reflecting a multiplicity of meanings and individual rationalities. Beyond the justifications of each individual?, what emerges from our survey is that veiling seems to be the expression of a desire to "normalize" women in the public space, a form of social inclusion that would enable them to move about in complete legitimacy. A symbolic struggle for position (Vincent de Gaulejac, Frédéric Blondel and Isabelle Taboada-Léonetti, 1994) is at stake, in which the will to take a place and try to obtain one (Ajbli, 2016) is at stake in a space that is and will remain dominated by men.[8]

7 Interview with Yasmine, April 2024.

8 For these authors, this dynamic is defined as «a solitary individual›s struggle to find or regain a ‹place›, i.e. a status, an identity, a recognition, a social existence» (De Gaulejac, Blondel and Taboada-Léonetti, 1994).

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