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Global Sightings: Muslim Women in Trinidad¹

Janet Bauer, International Studies and the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Program

Until recently we didn't pay much attention to Muslims living next door, in the Caribbean and Latin America--not even to one of the first *hejab* incidents, which occurred in Trinidad in 1995. However some of the fastest growing Muslim communities (primarily through conversion and immigration) are located in this region. And, right away it's the women (or some of them) that we recognize--from their elaborate African-inspired headdresses or their Indian-inspired shawls. In their religious practices, individual Muslim women in Trinidad, like women of other religious backgrounds, range from the more "secular" to the very devout, distinctions which are often signified by their head coverings. And, women tend to select styles of *hejab* based on their perceived ancestral heritages.

The Muslim community of Trinidad and Tobago (TT), although representing only 6% of the nation's population, is a diverse one, including those who trace their ancestry to either the African Diaspora (Afro-Trinidadians) or the South Asia Diaspora (Indo-Trinidadians). While Islam stresses unity and many mosque associations are multi-ethnic, this Afro-Indian racialization or ethnic difference underlies the formation of the many distinct Muslim communities in TT (from the Nation of Islam to the mainline Sunni groups organized around the Trinidad Muslim League (TML) or ASJA --The Anjuman Sunnat-ul-Jamaat Association), to name a few. To some extent the various Islamic organizations are also differentiated by their views on women and gender relationships. For example, "nonconformists" like the TML organizations have had women on their highest boards since their founding, and men and women easily interact with each other in most activities, although some of the women are in *hejab*. The Ahmadiyya give adamant support to women's education and professional development. While the Islamic Resource Organization deliberately works to counter what is perceived as Arab patriarchal traditions in Islam, there are no women at the highest administrative level of this group and women signify their membership by wearing *hejab*. ASJA women include many highly educated professionals and well-heeled members but ASJA maintains separate male and female organizations and a sense of "modest decorum" when it comes to male and female interaction.

Even though more of the highest community leadership positions are still held by men, women are important members of their religious congregations (or *umma*). Women in most (but not all) of the Islamic groups in Trinidad do maintain women's organizations that are active in charity and community service. If we were indeed to consider women's activism on behalf of women a kind of feminism, we would certainly find varieties of Islamic feminists in Trinidad today and in the past.

¹ This brief article is based on research conducted by the author in Trinidad and Tobago, 2004-2005.² Translation: "When you get hot below you lose your head, so keep your legs closed."

Here are three women active in different Muslim groups. Khadija is well-traveled and an avid reader. She was one of the first to invite me to participate in the ASJA women's organization meetings. In contrast to teenagers and some other women I've met at ASJA events, Khadija is almost always in *hejab*. We met this time in her comfortable house in the Port of Spain area. When she was a young girl growing up in a small town, her mother held religious and other classes for young girls in her home. Her mother's activism instilled an interest and passion in Khadija as well. She considers herself fortunate to have been a member of the Young Muslim Women's Association founded by a Muslim missionary in 1950 and to have several new opportunities being made available to young people at that time. As a member of that group she was invited to attend an all-Caribbean youth camp in 1960 which stimulated her desire to serve her country and gave her a curiosity about women elsewhere. As an adult, she has had further opportunities to meet and talk with Muslim women from other countries on several trips to Mecca.

We met Zahre at the Id al-Adha (sacrifice of Abraham) commemoration at a TML (The Muslim League) Mosque. As she leaned against the wall in the kitchen, where both men and women (professors, doctor's wives, the head of the organization, ordinary women and men) were cooking lunch with the meat from the sacrifice, she talked about her long association with this group. She recounted how the women had built their own meeting house near where the current primary school stands fifty years ago, carrying mud from the river nearby. As a young girl she participated in Trinidadian carnival--before it became so risqué, back when people wore traditional costumes and were 'covered up,' not 'naked' like today. She remembers when weddings were held at home and not in the mosque but she reckons that you can't prevent young people from making changes. Earlier during prayers at the mosque, I noticed how many young girls in this group wore attire in very stylish *hejab*, eye makeup, Indian jewelry, and cell phones in their hands or in their bags. I wondered if this were traditional values inflected with latest technology--but I learned that some of the girls only wore *hejab* to mosque; some chose to wear it all the time.

The third woman was a leader of the women's group at the Islamic Resource Organization, a mainly Afro-Trinidadian association drawing on a less-affluent neighborhood in central Port of Spain. The adult women in this group are typically converts. This was true for Joan, who became Muslim 27 years ago. As a leader among the women she spoke for many around the table when she described the peace that Islam had brought to their lives--giving them a certain kind of self-assurance and respect. Yet lack of resources prevents them from making certain choices--like seeing only women doctors, not a luxury they can afford at government hospitals. Young women here are also encouraged to wear *hejab* and yet they bring an independent spirit that shines beneath it and work alongside men in the group's various *dawah* or educational activities.

While there is some feminist scholarship which engages women of the African and Indian Diasporas in Trinidad, the case of Muslim Trinidadian women has not informed comparative feminist studies of women of the Muslim world. The Trinidadian case, however, is an interesting and important one. In contrast to their sisters in other

parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East, Muslim Trinidadian women consider themselves more ‘modern’. Indeed because they are living in a multicultural democracy they have many choices (including choice of what to wear) that Muslim women elsewhere may not enjoy.

Fascinated by my work in the Iran, Meena asked me endless questions about her impressions of Iranian women’s lack of opportunities, worrying that her reliance on the media for these images might have mislead her. Her fascination with how other Muslim women live originates partly out of Muslim Trinidadian women’s own ‘projects’ or efforts to make connections to their “homelands” closer to the Middle East--in Africa and South Asia. Yes, despite their public inclusion in a diverse society that publicly celebrates the distinct religious traditions of different groups, women also find it important to explore their Muslim identities in a global perspective.

Connections abroad, however, present some of the several paradoxical challenges facing Muslim women in Trinidad today. (1) First is the quandary of how to position oneself on certain matters of dress and behavior, within the larger Muslim *umma*. In the 1950’s, missionaries from South Asia and the Middle East encouraged Muslims in Trinidad to adopt conservative dress and ways of thinking more in line with religious prescriptions practiced in the Middle East. And, it is missionaries today from Ghana and Syria who continue to emphasize what many men and women here see as an infusion of “Arab/foreign cultural heritage” into Trinidadian Islamic practice. This influence has constraining implications for women’s self-designed choices, ones they actively contemplate.

(2) A second challenge lies in creating greater collaboration among local and ethnically and racially diverse Muslim organizations in Trinidad that currently draw on connections to ethnic compatriots abroad in Africa or Pakistan. Increasingly it is the women’s groups that reach out to collaborate with other Muslim and non-Muslim Trinidadian women’s organizations. In fact there is now a national Muslim women’s association that serves as a kind of umbrella organization welcoming those from different Muslim groups.

(3) A third challenge is asserting or establishing the Muslim minority’s presence within a larger multicultural society. With perceived negative press attention to Muslim events (such as the recent call by a fringe community leader for segregated villages where Muslims could avoid contact with non-Muslim Trinidadians or pieces on al-Qaeda connections in Trinidad) or for some, the bacchanal nature of the *Hosay* commemoration (one of the public Muslim holidays), Muslims are perhaps both more scrutinized by others and more concerned about their own image.

The *hejab* incident of 1995 reflects the complications of being Muslim in this avowedly multicultural society. A Muslim girl who had passed the qualifying examinations to enter a Catholic secondary school was denied the right to attend wearing her *hejab*. Although this particular student won a legal battle to wear *hejab*, the school was successful blocking future students from following Summayyah’s example. While girls are allowed to wear *hejab* in public, government-owned schools, they are not currently given this right when attending the state-assisted schools or private schools. Not

every Muslim wears *hejab* but to have this public right was important in a country where pluralism accentuates public displays of difference as a form of inclusion.

(4) A fourth challenge emanating from the others is keeping young people involved in local Muslim organizations and making Islam a relevant part of their lives. With cell phones, computers, and airplane tickets young Muslim Trinidadians have access to a new world of possibilities beyond the islands. Those internationalized connections can reinforce or stimulate Muslim identities among some youth, while working to erode them or supersede them in other cases. It is the women who are often most visibly concerned about the communities' younger generations, and it is often the teenagers (in pink or no *hejab*) who are most deliberately trying to fashion modern and global identities for themselves. [In these regards they very much resemble Iranian youth.]

Before national independence, Muslim Trinidadians sometimes felt it necessary to suppress some aspects of their religious identity. That is no longer necessary. To the contrary, there is some pressure now to express religious affiliation through specific dress and outward appearances. To paraphrase one elderly interviewee, "Fifty years ago Muslims wore many different styles of apparel and dress was not an emblem of your devotion or lack of it. Now people make a big deal about what you wear--whether you have a scarf or a beard. However, it's not really a reflection of your morality." Amidst current pressures toward conformity, perhaps a final challenge to be taken up by women is finding a way to include and be even more tolerant of variations in practice--to allow individuals to find their own spaces of identity among or within the various Muslim communities and to embrace those 'ethnic' Muslim women who are considered secular in their observance of daily ritual practices, or who leave abusive domestic relationships, or who choose not to adopt *hejab*.