The Materiality and Social Agency of the *Malaḥfa* (Mauritanian Veil)

Katherine Ann Wiley

Abstract: This article examines the *malaḥfa*, a veil that has long been popular in Mauritania, using the scholarship of materiality to analyze how it and the wearer co-constitute each other. This approach demonstrates how the malaḥfa's particular form and fabric provide women with certain constraints and possibilities; women activate these qualities to exercise agency, be it in redefining their positions in the social hierarchy, exercising control in their relationships, or asserting authority over others. Focusing on the malaḥfa's materiality illustrates how such garments can be central to women's agency and power, and demonstrates how women shape the broader social hierarchy.

Résumé: Cet article examine le malaḥfa, un voile longtemps populaire en Mauritanie. À l'aide de la recherche sur la matérialité, j'analyse comment le voile et son porteur se façonnent l'un à l'autre. Cette approche montre comment la fabrique et la forme particulière du malaḥfa donne aux femmes contraintes et possibilités ; les femmes utilisent ces qualités pour exercer leur liberté d'action, que ce soit en redéfinissant leurs positions dans la hiérarchie sociale, exercer contrôle dans leurs relations, ou affirmer leurs autorités sur les autres. Mettant l'accent sur l'importance que le malaḥfa représente en tant qu'objet, cette analyse illustre comment ce vêtement peut être centrale à servir à l'action et le pouvoir des femmes et montre de ce fait comment les femmes peuvent façonner la hiérarchie sociale.

Resumo: Este artigo analisa o *malaḥfa*, um véu que há muito se tornou popular na Mauritânia; recorrendo ao conceito académico de materialidade, procura-se compreender de que modo o véu e a sua portadora se constituem um ao outro. Este estudo demonstra que o formato e o tecido específicos do *malaḥfa* subordinam as mulheres a determinados constrangimentos, ao mesmo tempo que lhes abrem

---

African Studies Review, Volume 62, Number 2 (June 2019), pp. 149–174

Katherine Ann Wiley is an assistant professor of Anthropology at Pacific Lutheran University. Her book, *Work, Social Status, and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania*, explores the lives of slave descendants (Indiana University Press, 2018). Her work has also been published in *Africa* and *Africa Today*. Her current research focuses on social status, gender, dress, materiality, and Islam. E-mail: wileyka@plu.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2018.83

determinadas possibilidades; as mulheres ativam estes atributos para exercerem a sua agencialidade, seja redefinindo o seu posicionamento na hierarquia social, seja exercendo controlo sobre os seus relacionamentos ou impondo autoridade sobre os outros. Ao centrar-se sobre a materialidade do *malaḥfa*, a autora revela que este tipo de indumentária pode desempenhar um papel central para a agencialidade e o poder das mulheres e explica o modo como estas determinam a hierarquia social em geral.

Keywords: Mauritania; materiality; veils; dress; gender; social hierarchy; slavery; Islam; agency

Introduction

In the early twenty-first century, women in the northwest African country of Mauritania continue to wear, indeed prefer wearing, the *malaḥfa*, a type of veil that has been present for well over one hundred years (Ruf 1999). While the fabrics have changed dramatically, in style this garment remains quite similar to its predecessors: it is composed of six yards of cloth that wrap around the body and cover the head. Most women begin wearing this garment at puberty, but it defies even years of experience: it trips the wearer, gets tangled beneath her when she sits, and blows out of control in the wind. In a rapidly modernizing society in which men have been moving increasingly toward the wearing of Western clothing, why do women value this particular garb? What does the malaḥfa *do* for women and why do they persist in wearing it? What can this garment tell us about Mauritanian society more broadly? To answer these questions, I draw upon the concept of materiality, which argues that people and objects co-constitute each other and should thus be analyzed together (Gell 1998; Miller 2005b). This perspective draws attention to agency, both of the clothing itself and of the wearer, in ways that more traditional approaches to understanding the veil in Muslim societies do not. It thus provides insight into social change, including how women navigate their shifting societal positions and how they shape the broader social hierarchy.

Dress and beauty are important preoccupations for many young women in Kankossa, a town of about ten thousand people in southern Mauritania. This is the case among all ethnic groups, including the Ḥarāṭīn. This group, on whom this article focuses, are former slaves or slave descendants who make up about 40 percent of the population (McDougall 2010:259). Sartorial concerns are highlighted at family ceremonies, especially weddings, when women don their finest malaḥfas and display chic ensembles that include cute purses, sparkling jewelry, and stylish heels. Family ceremonies are also moments when instruction about dress may occur, which was the case at a Ḥarāṭīn wedding in a village not far from Kankossa. The morning after the *marwah* (celebration at the groom's family's home), Fatima decided it was time for the bride to "wear her clothes." Fatima was in her forties and an older cousin of the groom. Another woman brought

the bride, Meimouna, to the room where the groom's female relatives and friends from Kankossa were staying, which was by now littered with plastic sacks of luggage, discarded veils, and peanut shells.

The bride arrived still engulfed in the black veil that she had worn the night before. As is common practice, she had anchored one end of the malaḥfa in place by knotting it around her shoulders, thus forming a kind of tunic. The remaining length is draped over the head and wrapped around the body to provide close to full coverage, while generally exposing the face and hands. Women wear malaḥfas over other clothing, usually a dress or a shirt and long skirt. Black malaḥfas are traditionally worn when the bride first appears in public as a married woman and are positioned so that the free end covers her face to highlight her modesty. Like many such veils, Meimouna's was slightly transparent so, despite the full coverage it offered, her wedding headdress, which consisted of braided artificial hair decorated with bright beads, peeked through, making it visible to those in attendance.

The women proceeded to strip the bride of these garments and began to *yiṯhaffel* (dress up, decorate) her in front of the Kankossa women as well as several of the groom's female relatives, most of whom were older than the bride. The crucial part of her new outfit was a filmy malaḥfa of white translucent material with a pattern of abstract orange flowers; this veil was one of the most popular styles at the time. The women left the bridal headdress in place and proceeded to apply makeup, including eyeliner, lip gloss, and eye shadow. They also gave her a set of sparkling jewelry, attaching her earrings, slipping a bracelet onto her wrist, and positioning large, eye-catching rings on each hand.[1]

As they dressed her, Fatima and the other women instructed Meimouna on the appropriate use of this expensive finery. Fatima explained that, although the groom was originally from the *bādīya* (countryside), he was now really from the *dashra* (town, city) since he worked in Kankossa and was completing his college degree in the capital.[2] She emphasized that this meant that the bride should not act like someone from the bādīya, referring to widely-held stereotypes that portray rural people as backward and uneducated, in contrast to those who are *mitmeddan* (sophisticated; city person). Instead, Fatima told Meimouna that she should dress well and prioritize cleanliness, brushing her teeth and bathing daily. Fatima also lectured her on her new jewelry, advising on its care (wrap it in Kleenex to protect it) and appropriate wear. Higher-quality jewelry was not suitable for everyday use, and should be reserved for special events (fieldnotes, February 2011).

Attempts such as Fatima's to control women's sartorial decisions are linked to their understandings of how women's dress can have a real impact on the world. As these instructions suggest, Meimouna's dress would play a significant role in transforming her into the kind of sophisticated, refined, moral, and beautiful woman her husband expected. Her malaḥfa is not simply passive but, along with its accompanying accessories, it affects the kind of married woman Meimouna can become. In analyzing such conceptions of dress, I draw on the scholarship of materiality, focusing on how the malaḥfa

and its wearer co-constitute each other; this approach is useful because of what it reveals about the garment itself, demonstrating how the malaḥfa's particular form and fabric provide the wearer with certain constraints and possibilities. Furthermore, the lens of materiality provides insight into how women understand what the malaḥfa can do in the world and how they employ this knowledge. Women use this garment as a tool for exercising agency, be it in redefining their positions in the social hierarchy, exercising control in their relationships with men, or asserting authority over other women, as Meimouna's in-laws did with her. Focusing on the materiality of the malaḥfa thus calls into question claims that veils are oppressive, instead showing how they can be central to women's agency and power.

Based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork with Ḥarāṭīn women and men between 2008 and 2011, this article builds on scholarship that has explored the rich meanings of Muslim women's dress beyond the religious realm (Abu-Lughod 2002; Buggenhagen 2012; Mir 2014; Renne 2013; Tarlo 2010). Such work urges us to view Muslim women as three-dimensional and not merely characterized by their religious identities. By focusing on women's actions and agency, I also aim to challenge tropes about Muslim women as passive, weak, and controlled by men, views that remain prevalent in the U.S. media.

Challenging Economic Times and Shifting Social and Economic Roles

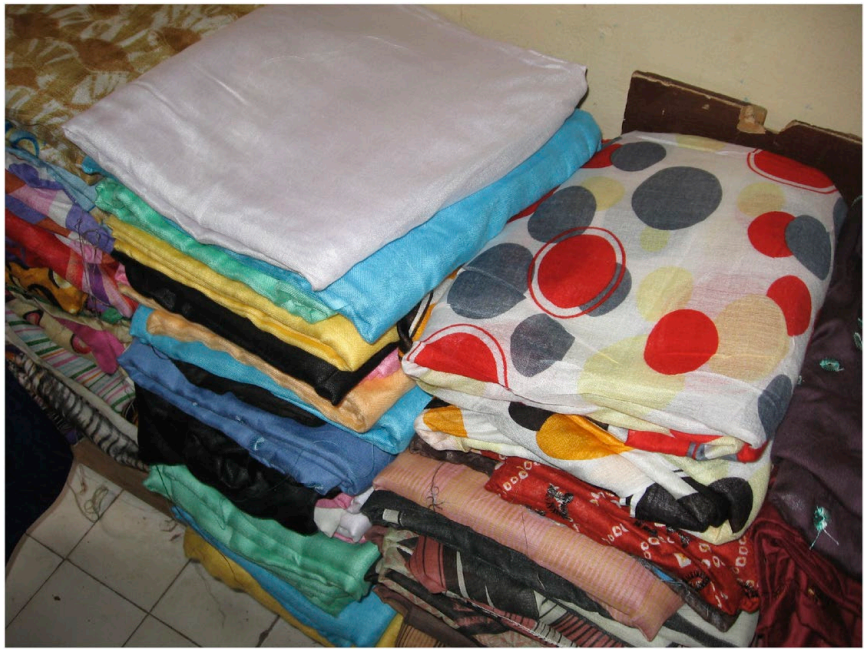
Along with sub-Saharan African groups, who constitute about one-quarter of the country's population, the inhabitants of Mauritania are composed of the Bīẓān and Ḥarāṭīn. Bīẓān are people who claim Arab or Berber descent and have historically dominated the country politically and economically. The Ḥarāṭīn, who are the focus of this study, are usually of black African descent and are generally former slaves or descendants of slaves of the Bīẓān.[3] Slavery was legally abolished in Mauritania in 1981, although it diminished well before that time, partly due to environmental factors including droughts, which made it difficult for slave owners to care for their dependents. The shared histories of these groups mean that Bīẓān and Ḥarāṭīn speak the same dialect of Arabic, Hassaniya, and share many cultural attributes including religion, diet, and dress. Ḥarāṭīn's status as former slaves is thus marked by their skin color, as well as their shared language and culture with their former masters. While in recent decades some Ḥarāṭīn have made substantial political and economic gains—the runners-up in the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections were Ḥarāṭīn—they remain disadvantaged, especially due to the lingering stigma of slavery.

Bīẓān and Ḥarāṭīn society is composed of a hierarchical system in which Ḥarāṭīn have long occupied an inferior position; however, the fluidity of social rank also means that people have long manipulated their positions within it, whether by shifting the political or ethnic group with which they identified (Cleaveland 2002; Villasante-de Beauvais 2000), gaining wealth and respectability to improve their social standing (McDougall 2005), or

taking advantage of legal and environmental changes (Bonte 1990). High social rank was linked to genealogy historically, and also to achieved attributes such as wealth, respectability, religiosity, and generosity. Today Ḥarāṭīn and others work to not only assert such attributes themselves, but also to negotiate the underpinnings of status more generally (Wiley 2018). Even though in a relatively small town such as Kankossa people's free status is known, Ḥarāṭīn work to distinguish themselves from other former slaves by asserting their social value. Some of the avenues for doing so include claiming a significant temporal distance from slavery, expanding social networks, accumulating wealth, and displaying piety (Wiley 2018). Dress plays an important role in these maneuverings.

This social positioning occurs against a stark economic backdrop. Kankossa is located in the southern Assaba region which is part of the "triangle of poverty," an area that in recent decades has endured droughts, locust invasions, growing inflation, and the enduring negative consequences of neoliberal reforms, including increasing gaps between rich and poor (Ould-Mey 1996).[4] Residents face a lack of jobs and high poverty rates; in 2008, 39 percent of the active population was unemployed (ONS 2011:44) and in 2004, 44 percent of Assaba residents were living in poverty (ONS 2008).[5] Although imported goods have long been available in this region, with the growing dependence on cash stimulating demand for them during the colonial period, neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s

Figure 1. Malaḥfas for sale in Nouakchott. Photo by author.



intensified these processes. High demand today for imported products makes life even more expensive. These changes have impacted the availability of clothing by introducing a wide variety of imported malaḥfas in a dizzying array of fabrics, patterns, and colors in addition to the popular locally hand-dyed veils.

Malaḥfas remain extremely in demand, with Bīẓān and Ḥarāṭīn women almost exclusively wearing this garment.[6] While men's traditional garment, the *darnā'a*, or boubou, is also increasingly available in a wide range of fabrics, colors, and qualities of cloth, many men have begun to adopt Western dress (pants, jeans, button-down shirts, suit jackets, etc.), in some cases exclusively. Bīẓān and Ḥarāṭīn women wear Western dress beneath their malaḥfas, but never on its own. Some young men dress in a style known as "*jenk*," a term used to signify clothing inspired by local and international rap and hip-hop artists, and which can include low-slung pants, gold chains, and tee-shirts with international icons. Such dress is subject to critiques from elders that young men are investing too heavily in their clothing. These critiques reflect broader anxieties about social reproduction, as elders fear that such investments make it difficult for youth to collect the money needed to wed.

This backdrop of economic volatility and increased consumption has affected how gender relations and labor are organized. While in the past, at least ideally, men were responsible for providing for their households, in recent decades increasing numbers of women have begun earning incomes. As one middle-aged female Ḥarāṭīn trader describes, "Now I work. That woman works. That woman works. All people have money. If you [husband] have something, give it to me. If not, I'll get it myself. That's our life now. During earlier times it wasn't like this. During earlier times the woman was only sitting" (interview, Kankossa, March 2011). Her comments echo common descriptions of the past, in which elite Bīẓān status was marked by women's inactivity while men worked to support their families, though slaves and their descendants generally would not have been able to enjoy such leisure. Bīẓān women did in fact historically work, including in organizing caravans, producing crafts, and serving as Qur'anic guides and healers; however, avoiding labor remains associated with an elite lifestyle. Slaves and their descendants have long worked, including serving as wet nurses, domestic workers, and market traders, but given the growing unemployment and increasing demand for consumer goods, Ḥarāṭīn women in Kankossa today face increasing pressure to contribute financially to their families. This is heightened by the fact that high rates of divorce and male out-migration mean that many women are de facto heads of household, which reflects larger trends throughout the country (Brhane 1997; Cleaveland 2000). In 2008, 44 percent of Kankossa heads of household were women (Fall 2008).

Many Bīẓān and Ḥarāṭīn women now work in markets, although the kind of tasks they conduct may reproduce hierarchy (Wiley 2014). In Kankossa many Bīẓān women sell malaḥfas, while Ḥarāṭīn women sell vegetables, a lower-cost investment. The local garment industry, which has sprung up in the past decade in Kankossa, is also an important source of income, with

women dyeing, sewing, and selling malaḥfas. These activities, particularly dyeing (Bīẓān avoid this "dirty" work), serve as significant income sources for Ḥarāṭīn women.

Women's growing economic participation has brought questions about gender roles to the forefront as people try to make sense of these changes. Men (and some women) often critique women for acting "like men," accusations that reflect anxiety over the increasing power that women may hold in their households. This power is connected to the fact that, in Islam, women are allowed to keep their money, an ideal that Mauritanians take seriously, although men may try to influence how women spend it. Women's incomes thus give them increasing access to resources that they may control themselves, meaning that they can also make decisions regarding household financial priorities and investments.

This backdrop of shifting economic roles has also impacted marriage practices. Women (and men) worry that marriages may be delayed or called off, since it is becoming increasingly difficult for men to garner the bridewealth needed to marry (Aïdara 2013). With many men living elsewhere, women also worry that their husbands are involved with other women, which can destabilize or destroy marriages and siphon away resources. The perception that *sirrīyya* (secret marriages) are becoming common heightens this anxiety. As the name suggests, in these unions men marry a woman secretly (Fortier 2011). Migration fuels these secret unions, since some men take second wives where they work, unbeknownst to the families that they have left behind. Similarly, men worry about their wives having affairs in their absence. These economic and social changes impact women's understandings of how dress acts on the world.

The Materiality of Dress and How Women Activate It

While malaḥfas are not sentient, the impact they have is shaped by their material properties. Anthropologist Daniel Miller (2005b) has emphasized the importance of examining the materiality of objects as a way to better understand how things operate. This approach argues that objects and people co-constitute each other; clothing is not simply passively controlled by wearers, but it impacts their lives as well. He and others have explored such processes, whether through the free end of a sari tripping the wearer (Banerjee & Miller 2003), veils helping women cultivate their religious virtues (Mahmood 2005), or new types of silk fabric making it difficult for headscarves to be styled as they formerly had been (Ünal & Moors 2012).

Clothing—and by extension material culture more generally—thus affects how people experience the world and their possibilities for action. As Webb Keane argues, clothing does more than simply express identities; it makes particular behaviors and outcomes possible. He describes how pocketless Sumbanese clothing allows objects to be hidden in its folds in a precarious manner; thus wearers can discard items that would be dangerous to intentionally dispose of (a talisman) by letting them fall to the ground

"accidentally" (2005b:192). Likewise, a woman who commonly wears a sari "is not just a person wearing a sari, because the dynamism and demands of the sari may transform everything from the manner in which she encounters other people to her sense of what it is to be modern or rational" (Miller 2005b:32; Banerjee & Miller 2003).

Similarly, the various material properties of the malaḥfa influence its potential effects on wearers, illustrating how "persons and things exist in mutual self-construction" (Miller 2005b:38).[7] While clothing engenders certain possibilities, the wearer must activate particular meanings. Clothes, after all, "are not worn passively but require people's active collaboration" (Hansen 2000:6). Such projects involve substantial labor, knowledge, and resources, and thus highlight women's agency, challenging claims that Muslim women's clothing is primarily oppressive and imposed by men.

This conception of dress diverges from the ways in which scholars have previously analyzed Muslim women's veiling. Scholars have recently critiqued analyses of veils that present them as primarily religious or oppressive garments (Abu-Lughod 2002; Moors & Tarlo 2007; Rasmussen 2009, 2013). They argue that veiling practices are not monolithic, but rather are shaped by particular cultural, political, and religious contexts (Abu-Lughod 2002; Rasmussen 2013). Scholars have demonstrated how veils can be political tools that women employ for resistance (El Guindi 1999), signs of modernity (Bernal 1994), and fashionable garments (Moors & Tarlo 2007; Rabine 2013; Renne 2013; Tarlo 2010). This complexity of analysis resonates in Mauritania where the malaḥfa has been shown to signify women's religious and cosmopolitan identities (Tauzin 2007; Wiley 2013), their national identities (Simard 1996; Tauzin 2001), and their concern with global fashion (Tauzin 2007). Focusing on the materiality of the malaḥfa, and thus its agency, helps us further complicate the meaning of veiling by demonstrating how particular garments impact women's actions. Furthermore, analyzing how women work to activate, manipulate, and control the malaḥfa and its meaning illuminates women's own agency and their changing social circumstances.

As an unstitched garment, one of the most striking aspects of the malaḥfa is its flexibility. Its free end, which women drape over their heads and arms (and sometimes over their faces, as the bride did), is not firmly anchored in place and is thus subject to constant adjustments.[8] Unlike some forms of Muslim dress such as the burqa that hide the body from view, the malaḥfa's flexibility means that it can reveal parts of women's bodies, along with their clothing and accessories. The flexibility of this garment provides women with certain possibilities for action, including the ability to attract attention by exposing their accompanying accessories or to flirt by revealing a shoulder or arm. Most women have great control over their malaḥfas' movements, having worn them since their early teenage years, and so are not solely at the garments' mercy; this was presumably the case when a young woman's malaḥfa slid off her head when she had a new hairstyle to show off. Conversely, the garment's flexibility means that it can also

be used to modestly mask the body. Some women contend that the malaḥfa should always be tightly wrapped around the face in public; it is common to hear mothers admonishing their daughters to cover their heads.

The malaḥfa thus has a dual nature, since it can be used for seduction or to cultivate modesty. As Annelies Moors argues, "Things do not have either a religious or a secular, non-religious, status; rather, the ways in which forms become or cease to be religious may well shift in the course of their production, circulations, and consumption, and depends on the intentions of those engaging with them" (2012:276). This duality helps to protect malaḥfa wearers from accusations that they are immodest, since they can always call a slip of the fabric an accident. After all, the malaḥfa's movements cannot always be controlled; a gust of wind can easily blow them out of place. Women can also defend against accusations that they are devoting too much time to their looks by emphasizing the religious nature of their veils. Of course, such contentions are not always accepted, but this dual nature provides a level of freedom, and perhaps the enduring popularity of the malaḥfa is influenced by its ability to navigate within and between secular and religious realms.

While the malaḥfa functions in this way for all wearers, it has special meaning for slave descendants as a way to assert both control over relationships and their own religiosity. While slaves could marry, they had to seek permission from their masters, who could also dissolve such unions or separate partners (Ali 2010). The ability to use a garment to flirt with others is a way through which women assert control over their relationships and sexuality. Furthermore, while many slaves were Muslim, slaves were often not allowed to participate fully in religious life. By wearing the malaḥfa in a way that emphasizes their modesty and piety, Ḥarāṭīn assert their social value and free status.

A malaḥfa's contributions to creating aesthetically pleasing looks are also connected to the type of fabric it is made of and how it falls. As an unfitted garment, it loosely envelops the wearer and thus conforms to Islamic notions of modesty by not clinging to the body. Some synthetic malaḥfa fabrics exaggerate these processes since they can be starched so that they stand out from the body, thus extending women's presences spatially and helping to create their importance (Bastian 2013:22; Sylvanus 2016:27). While these silhouettes again emphasize women's piety, they also resonate with Mauritanian beauty standards, which historically favored fuller-figured women, a preference that was cultivated through force-feeding (Tauzin 2001). While such conventions are shifting today (Fortier 1998; Lesourd 2007; Tauzin 2007), many women in Kankossa continue to prefer them. Creating a larger silhouette has additional meaning for Ḥarāṭīn women since, historically, slaves would not have had the time or resources to cultivate fuller figures. Emphasizing plumpness thus speaks to their free status and socioeconomic positions as people who can not only buy new clothes but also cultivate particular kinds of beautiful bodies. Fashioning oneself as a beautiful woman has long been an important means of asserting femininity and creating social value in Mauritania (Lesourd 2010:99; Simard 1996; Tauzin 2001).

The relative newness of a malaḥfa can also enhance a woman's ability to create an attractive look. One holiday, three Ḥarāṭīn teenage girls complained to their parents about their lack of new clothes, which are considered important parts of celebrations. The girls' parents were experiencing financial difficulties and had decided not to purchase the requisite dress for their daughters. To make matters worse, their mother did have several new veils, but she planned to sell them in the market. The daughters' distress illustrates how, while a woman may be beautiful in an older garment, new items can make a grander impression. A veil can only be new on the first wearing, so at that moment its impact is magnified. This is especially the case in a small town such as Kankossa, where people can keep track of others' dress since they see each other frequently. Wearing new clothing also signifies the wearer's ability to access resources and thus their social networks and economic positions, so it has special meaning for slave descendants as a way to index improved social standing. Women do, of course, creatively navigate financial constraints. A woman with few economic resources may buy an inexpensive veil in a new style or purchase new clothing on credit. Similarly, the teenage girls' complaining eventually worked, as their mother reluctantly distributed veils to them that she had intended to sell (fieldnotes, Kankossa, February 2011).

Beyond their relative newness, the type of cloth also affects malaḥfas' potential impact. Historically, women primarily wore opaque veils, but in recent decades, transparent veils have become popular. When the young women examined the veils their mother eventually gave them, they held the fabric up to the sun to gauge its transparency. Upon discovering their relative opaqueness, one of the girls complained that they were "for an old woman." Her comment speaks to the belief that older, married women should dress more modestly (and thus favor opaque veils).[9] Conversely, transparent veils make women's accompanying dress and accessories visible, thus increasing their potential impact on others. This is an important quality, since the malaḥfa's own agency can be magnified by the accompanying accessories a woman wears, as well as by her comportment.

Understandings of beauty in this setting emphasize accessories as essential parts of creating stylish looks. One of my research assistants explained that *shabība*, an adjective used to describe attractive women, refers to the "ensemble" of a woman—her clothes, shoes, jewelry, words, and the way she walks.[10] It is impossible to be shabība all the time; this is a temporary state that women create by donning beautiful dress and accessories. A beautiful outfit may also extend beyond the visual to include scents such as spray-on deodorant and perfume, and can involve prominently displayed technology such as cell phones. Women are aware of the power of multiple aspects of their dress and try to draw attention to them. In photographs—images that will long preserve their ensembles—women often adjust their malaḥfas so that their jewelry shows, and they prominently display cell phones and purses. When I was taking pictures of Meimouna at the wedding, her husband told me that it was "very important" that

Figure 2. Woman dancing in transparent malaḥfa. Photo by author.

I position her so that her jewelry was visible. This was an essential element of her ensemble and also testified to his family's generosity and wealth since it was from the bridewealth (Wiley 2016). Part of activating a look requires ensuring that the whole ensemble may be seen.

Women thus carefully select their outfits and consider how the various elements work together. For example, one young woman told me that she would not need sparkles in her hair if she had a nicer malaḥfa (fieldnotes,

Kankossa, November 2010). Accessories or embellishments can thus elevate a plain malaḥfa and enhance its impact; conversely, an exquisite malaḥfa needs little embellishment to stand out. The way that other aspects of dress can enhance a malaḥfa affirms Emma Tarlo's contention that scholars of Muslim dress should look beyond the veil in their analyses (2010:5).

Transparent malaḥfa fabrics can be powerful, then, because they highlight a woman's complete look, since accessories can easily be seen through the cloth. This was the case with the bride's headdress still being visible despite wearing a black veil. The ambiguity of the malaḥfa can again be protective here, since even a transparent malaḥfa can be used to cover accessories before others (though they may still be visible). It thus allows women to claim they are acting modestly, even though some women and men criticize these veils as being inappropriate dress for pious Muslims.

A veil's transparency is not the only aspect that contributes to making visible women's complete ensembles. Part of the reason why women's clothing has a large impact in this setting is due to the spatial context in which it is worn. While in some parts of the Muslim world women primarily display their finery in interior spaces with their husbands or other women (Masquelier 2009:222–23; Meneley 2007), in many parts of Mauritania, women's beautiful dress is not confined to their households, since they circulate freely. That Kankossa women wear their clothing ensembles in exterior spaces such as the market means that their dress is seen by, and hence can act on, others. Women's ability to circulate fairly freely is tied in part to the relatively privileged status they enjoy despite enduring patriarchy (Lydon 2009; Simard 1996; Tauzin 2001). It is common for women to mix with unrelated men (although often in the presence of relatives) and for men and women to joke relatively freely together. Women's dress is on display even when they are home, since in Kankossa most people spend much of their time under semi-permanent tents whose sides are usually open, thus making their inhabitants visible to passersby. Similarly, since most people move about Kankossa on foot, women's outfits are not hidden in vehicles. Movement is easier for Ḥarāṭīn than for elite Bīẓān, who may maintain more secluded lifestyles that continue to be associated with wealth and status; for example, some teenage Bīẓān women told me that they were not allowed to visit the market. Likewise, in urban areas where people are frequently among strangers, higher-status women's circulation may also be more limited, and people spend more time in interior spaces where they are not seen by passersby.[11] In Kankossa, the hypervisibility of women's garments—the fact that they are frequently on display to others—gives more agency to their clothing since there are many opportunities for people to see it.

Women also take quality into consideration when choosing their clothing. Malaḥfas today hail from all over the world, including from Saudi Arabia, India, and Japan, and women have an immense knowledge of the varying quality and durability. Women can quote the cost of different types of veils and other kinds of clothing not just in Kankossa, but often in several

other parts of the country as well. This goes not just for imported veils, but also the locally-produced versions, whose prices vary depending on the amount of decoration and the quality of the dyeing. Creating a beautiful look can thus have an economic dimension, with more expensive veils being highly valued since they can make a women's wealth visible. For slave descendants, wearing a valuable veil can signal their improved economic positions in society, which is one reason why Meimouna's relatives highlighted their cost when examining the malaḥfas that were part of the bridewealth.

While being able to afford expensive veils can help women create beautiful looks, simple veils can also be effective, particularly if they are well-suited to the wearer. Women frequently discuss which colors of malaḥfa work best with their skin tones, with Ḥarāṭīn who are typically dark-complexioned generally favoring bright colors. Wearing an expensive veil that is unflattering to the wearer risks detracting from her beauty. New fashions, expensive or not, can also garner significant attention. One Ḥarāṭīn woman received many compliments when wearing a striking blue veil from Kaedi, a southern town known for its exquisite dyers. The malaḥfa was relatively inexpensive, but attracted compliments as she was one of the first people to wear this style in Kankossa. She emphasized how a good friend had given it to her in Nouakchott, which highlighted her social network and her ability to travel (and thus her economic means), both signifiers of social worth in this setting.

While women's malaḥfas cannot think for themselves, their materiality does make certain behaviors and interpretations possible. Whether it is by extending and expanding women's figures or by the garment's flexibility which enables the reveal of a graceful shoulder, the malaḥfa's expansiveness and fluidity allows women to craft beautiful figures in ways that would not be possible in more restrictive garments. Similarly, transparent fabrics make women's ensembles highly visible to others, and thus more likely to act on them.

This clothing, however, does not act alone, and women work to put together looks that will have the impact they desire. This is no easy task; rather, it involves paying attention to the combination of clothing and accessories, fashion trends, the cost of clothing, and its relative newness. Likewise, women make decisions about how to wear these garments and how the garments should move on the body. When they are successful, the malaḥfa can be a powerful tool for women in exercising their social agency. What work malaḥfas can do varies based on individuals' social positions; for Ḥarāṭīn they demonstrate how material culture can be an important way through which women assert their social worth. By securing new, beautiful veils, slave descendants can index their social and economic standing without saying a word and thus claim their valued positions in the polity. They can also highlight certain aspects of their garments to emphasize their religiosity or femininity, qualities to which lower-status groups did not have as much access in the past.

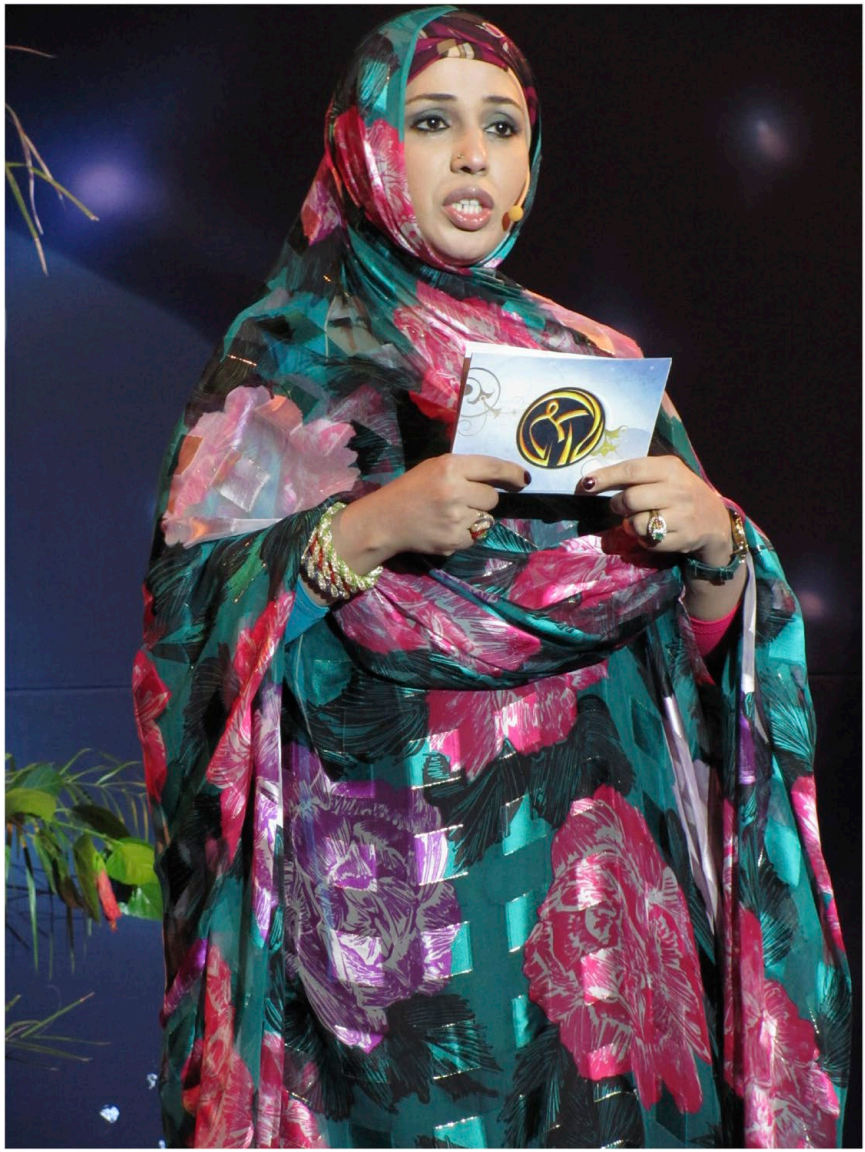
Women's Social Agency and the Malaḥfa

The malaḥfa thus works on its wearers to create (and limit) certain possibilities, and wearers work to activate them in particular ways, though they are not always successful. Exploring these interactions reveals ways that women harness dress to exercise agency and negotiate their social positions. For example, some women choose beautiful veils and accessories and manipulate their veils' movements to attract men. Indeed, women often highlight that beautiful dress can draw men to them, a claim that emphasizes women's abilities to impact (and control) men's attraction. One day, Khadija, a Ḥarāṭīn friend of mine who was in her early twenties, sat preparing to leave for a nearby village where she would soon give birth surrounded by relatives. Central to her outfit was an intricately patterned hand-dyed malaḥfa starched to stand out from the body and translucent enough to reveal the accessories beneath. Khadija wore a matching green dress, and she completed her look by styling her hair, applying lip gloss, and slipping on her watch and sparkling costume jewelry.

Khadija and her husband had recently been fighting. They disagreed over where she should live while pregnant, with her wanting to return to her family, while her husband wanted her to remain close to Kankossa's hospital. In the end they compromised, with her going to the village only as the birth neared, but the arguing had been bitter. Despite this, Khadija assured me that when her husband saw her dressed so beautifully, he would forget the fighting. While he had been teasingly calling her a *shwaybīn* (old person), she noted confidently that today "he will say that I am a young girl." Her beautiful outfit would make him see her with renewed devotion. Similarly, when a friend of hers examined the recently completed henna that covered Khadija's hands and feet in intricate patterns, she held up one of Khadija's hands and complimented it, saying that the henna *yitkellem* (talks, speaks). She thus emphasized the power of this ensemble to act on the world; while it was not clear what it might say, presumably the henna—an important part of dress on special occasions—would testify to her beauty, perhaps even calling her husband to her (fieldnotes, Kankossa, May 2011).

As Khadija's example illustrates, women activate their clothing in particular ways to impact men. Khadija's beautiful outfit (she hoped) would calm her husband and make him see her with fresh eyes, ending their fighting and reinvigorating their relationship. Similarly, when a young man told Khadija that he wanted to marry soon, she cautioned him that, if he marries too young, a beautiful girl would later walk by wearing a nice malaḥfa and perfume and he would follow her, potentially abandoning his wife. Another young man told me that, while he did not find his neighbor (and former girlfriend) physically attractive, he was drawn to her by her "style" and way of walking. According to him, an attractive "style," which involved beautiful clothing, could make an ordinary woman desirable. In all of these examples, clothing plays an important role not just in making women attractive, but in literally drawing men to them.

Figure 3. Nouakchott television host in malah̲fa. Note her jewelry and makeup. Photo by author.



Not dressing well can also hurt women's abilities to keep men. For example, Yahya, a recently married male shopkeeper, attributed the perceived rise in polygyny to women's dress. He explained that recently-married women dress attractively; however, soon many start dressing sloppily, which makes them appear much older. It is not good for women to neglect their looks, he said, and it results in men taking other younger (or at least

younger-looking) wives (fieldnotes, Kankossa, January 2011). This value of youth is echoed in Khadija's claim that her dress will make her appear young. Whether or not the perceived rise in polygyny can be linked to women neglecting their looks, Yahya's commentary shows how some people believe that failing to pay attention to clothing can have serious consequences.

I first became aware of clothing acting in this way through the copious advice that women offered me. I had never been married, and women viewed my marital status with a mix of confusion, distrust, and pity. While some woman worried about my intentions regarding their men, many felt sorry for me, since most Mauritanian woman of my age (thirty-three) would have been married for at least a decade and (hopefully) have several children.[12] When women advised me about how to get a husband—which was a frequent occurrence—most of their advice focused on my looks. One friend suggested that I line my eyes with black, assuring me that opening them widely would make me difficult to resist. Another woman scoffed at my contention that finding a good man was difficult, counseling me to wear makeup and carry a cuter bag. My presence, then, may have increased the frequency with which women talked about dress since they found my practices cause for concern and seemed to enjoy instructing me on how I could improve them.[13]

This focus on men's sexuality resonates with other literature that suggests that Muslim women are expected to dress modestly because they need to protect men from their own desires. This is due to the assumption "that it is easier for women to arouse the sexual feeling of a man than the other way around, and therefore, women should cover up those parts of their anatomy that can draw the male gaze" (Sandikci & Ger 2005:63–64). Women are thus seen as being responsible for controlling men's sexuality and "the function of the veil in these contexts, therefore, is not to attract attention, but to visually withdraw from public space" (Rasmussen 2013:240). These ideas serve to reinforce patriarchy, keeping men central to women's dress and suggesting that women's sexuality is dangerous and must be controlled. While they do apply to the Kankossa context, women's emphasis on dressing fashionably and well also suggests their power to engender and control relationships. While their attempts may not always be successful, the malaḥfa and the careful choices they make about their ensembles help them to assert power over men. Khadija, for example, was confident that her veil would help her to placate her husband and strengthen their relationship. Likewise, the bride's in-laws explicitly counselled her on the importance of dressing well to keep her husband. Instead of women and their sexuality being seen as something to stifle, this version emphasizes women's (and their malaḥfas') power in these arenas.

This view of women's power is not met without critique, which itself serves as another way through which women exercise agency through the malaḥfa. By monitoring other women's dress, women attempt to exercise authority and control over others; such monitoring is grounded in

particular choices regarding dress. Such surveillance was illustrated by Zeina, a middle-aged Ḥarāṭīn women who makes her living selling vegetables. One morning, a young woman with a chubby infant on her hip bent over Zeina's market table and purchased some beets and squash, asking her to cut fresh pieces. While Zeina did so, she asked the customer if her husband was in Kankossa. She answered that he was not, which was not surprising given how many men migrate. Zeina replied that, if he was away, she should not be wearing earrings like those. The offending earrings were moderately sized imitation gold balls that had two thin chains dangling off of them. The woman looked embarrassed and pulled her malaḥfa tightly around her face so that it covered her ears. She explained that if she removes her earrings, her ears hurt, making it difficult to reinsert them. Zeina pointed to her own earrings, which were pink plastic circles the size of pencil erasers. She told the woman that, if that were true, she should wear simple earrings like these. The woman gathered up her vegetables and, keeping her ears covered, left (fieldnotes, Kankossa, May 2011).

Given the effects that people understand dress to have on men, Zeina's disapproval of the young women's earrings makes sense; while beautiful malaḥfas and their accompanying accessories are thought to draw men to women, this can be dangerous if women's husbands are absent. As one man put it, if a woman dons beautiful garments when her husband is elsewhere, you would know that she has "*shī mā waḍḍāḥ*" (something unclear, incorrect); such actions could indicate she was having an affair. Since men often give their lovers gifts, including clothing, dressing up with an absent husband can also signal that a woman is benefiting materially from an extramarital affair. Prohibitions about married women's dress, then, attempt to make women's intentions regarding men clear and to limit their possibilities of wrong action.

This conception of the malaḥfa's agency as a garment that can attract men thus leads to strict rules surrounding when it is appropriate for women to dress up. As Zeina's critique implies, many women adhere to a restriction that married women should not wear beautiful ensembles when their husbands are absent. Women joke with each other about being *mddafara* (plainly dressed), explicitly connecting this state to absent husbands. Being mddafara is marked by wearing a simple malaḥfa with minimal to no jewelry and makeup, as well as avoiding elaborate hairstyles or henna. Women call attention to a plainly dressed woman when she starts dressing up again, based on the (generally correct) assumption that this change signals her husband's return. Simple dress thus helps women avoid appearing as if they are trying to attract a man or actually doing so. Fatima's warning to the bride that she should only wear her finery on special occasions is not just a warning to not look gaudy; it also cautions her to remain faithful to her husband.

Zeina thus contends that by wearing beautiful earrings, the young woman might attract a man in her husband's absence (or suggest that she wanted to do so). Such critique is connected to the fact that cloth and

clothing are often the focus of moral discourse (Buggenhagen 2012:24), and rules regarding modesty frequently focus on women. Some Muslim reformist movements in West Africa and elsewhere try to regulate women's dress (Masquelier 2009; Meneley 2007), and reformist preachers occasionally visit Kankossa. However, as Zeina's example suggests, here it is often women who monitor and police other women's dress, and they use language to enforce these understandings. Zeina publicly berated the young woman, women discuss and critique others' sartorial choices, and gruesome stories circulate about inappropriately dressed women, such as a woman who went to hell because she had worn thin veils and clothing. While the woman who told this tale did not specify the woman's marital status, it speaks to the significant repercussions of dressing inappropriately. Such stories serve as a warning to others and a lesson in moral comportment, while simultaneously drawing attention to the morality of the teller.

While few women directly reference it, this attention to dressing plainly when husbands are away relates to the Qur'an, which instructs women "not to display their adornments (except such as are normally revealed); to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to display their finery except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers … [list of other relatives, servants, and children] (24:31)."[14] Enforcing this interdiction (and adhering to it) is a way through which women create moral community in the context of their husbands' absence. For the Ḥarāṭīn, this is an important part of social positioning, since avoiding finery when their husbands are away helps Ḥarāṭīn women to emphasize their adherence to Muslim principles and thus their morality and piety, which are essential elements of being a free, respected person in this context.

Many women do avoid dressing up when their husbands are absent, even on holidays, when most people wear their finest outfits. Likewise, they may wear a new malaḥfa to gatherings exclusively attended by female friends, but it should be plain and relatively absent of adornment.[15] Their adherence to this convention also highlights aspects of their social positions. Marriage remains an important step toward adulthood and a desirable state for many women, so making one's marital status visible by what a woman does (or does not) wear signals it to others. Following the rule that married women should only dress up when their husbands are present emphasizes a Ḥarāṭīn woman's status as married, which demonstrates her respected social position and desirability.

Of course, not all people accept or adhere to these rules. While the young woman seemed embarrassed by Zeina's chastisement, she did not remove her earrings. She had also chosen to wear them even though she presumably knew that she thus risked public admonishment. Women may also violate these conventions due to differing notions of what contributes to moral personhood. Some women believe that dressing well can index women's economic success and work ethic, which they see as important to morality. Women navigate such contradictions in a variety of ways. Some, for example, may wear simple but new malaḥfas, which suggests their

economic positions while also adhering to modesty requirements. The general quality of wealthier women's dress is higher than that of poorer women, even if their husbands are absent. Only the highly impoverished would wear shabby clothing, so dressing down requires much negotiation.

Women's critiques of others are thus a way of asserting agency, through which they attempt to control others, work to define the boundaries of acceptability, and assert their respectability and social rank as well as their authority over others. After all, objects are part of a process through which power and status are created and social roles are differentiated (Morphy 2009). Making visible and reinforcing women's authority is central to this policing, since it allows them to position themselves in relation to other women. By chastising the younger woman in public, Zeina asserted her authority over her and drew attention to her own moral personhood. She did this partly by emphasizing her own appropriate attire, gesturing to her malaḥfa, which was modestly covering her, and her simple earrings as examples of proper dress and symbols of her respectability. Women like Zeina thus employ the malaḥfa to emphasize their modesty and piety, wearing simple veils wrapped so as to only reveal their faces and hands.

The question of who has the ability to monitor and chastise others is constantly subject to negotiation. A woman's age, social position, and economic standing may all affect her ability to exert power over others. Since women can ground this authority in a variety of attributes, such processes are also ways through which they define social meaning and value. Age plays an important role as a marker of respect, and it is often older women who police younger women. Women may draw on piety and modesty as sources of power, as Zeina did. Economic status can also be an important source of authority, with wealthier women often policing poorer women (Wiley 2018).[16] While in the past, women working was seen as a marker of low social status, today women who earn their own incomes may be respected community members. When Ḥarāṭīn women assert authority over others based on their economic standing, they demonstrate that they have moved beyond their former dependent status and are now cultivating dependents themselves.

Zeina's example illustrates that when considering materiality, we need to think not just of the object and its user (in this case wearer), but also of how others who are more distant from the object may try to employ it to assert their own agency, in this case both their authority over others and their moral personhood. The instructions given to the young bride did not just protect her marriage; through them, the groom's female relatives, whose household she would soon join, asserted authority over her. Since Bīẓān and Ḥarāṭīn historically have been virilocal, the bride usually goes to live with her in-laws after marriage, although in some urban areas couples may choose to live on their own. The women's instructions literally remake Meimouna, beginning a process of incorporating her into their home and establishing their authority over her. This instruction about dress was an

important way through which the women made their power within this household and community visible. However, how closely Meimouna followed their directions was not a given, so her own employment of her dress could be a means through which she asserted agency for other ends.

Conclusion

Clothing is not just passive, but rather is an integral part of women's personhood and how they navigate their social worlds. The malaḥfa's associations with religion as well as with the Mauritanian nation and its practicality in a desert climate all contribute to its continued popularity; however, the very makeup of the malaḥfa itself is a large part of its enduring appeal. The malaḥfa's materiality creates certain possibilities: the type of fabric can draw attention to a woman's complete outfit, the shape lets women craft fuller figures, and the flexibility allows the wearer to shift the garment from an instrument of seduction to religiosity in an instant. However, the malaḥfa does not act alone; women make choices within these parameters, trying to achieve particular ends and to assert various forms of social value. A woman may try to achieve a stunning look to exercise power over men; another may use the malaḥfa to construct her modest identity, which she may reinforce by critiquing others.

While all groups that wear the malaḥfa participate in these processes, they have special meaning for the Ḥarāṭīn. Unlike slave descendants elsewhere who adopted new forms of dress to highlight their piety, free status, and authority (Fair 2001), the Kankossa example shows how women can use a single form of dress to assert new meanings; the malaḥfa's flexibility and wide range of fabrics facilitates these transformations. Ḥarāṭīn women's veils help them to assert their improved social rank by highlighting valued qualities that slaves would not have easily been able to attain, including their femininity, modesty, and wealth. Likewise, that dress can attract men is a significant aid in slave descendants' social positioning, since it highlights their femininity and abilities to control relationships. Monitoring others' malaḥfas is also a way through which Ḥarāṭīn women position themselves in relation to others and work to assert their authority and thus their valued status in the community. Exploring the materiality of their dress thus helps us move beyond the narrow focus of its religious significance or conceptions of it as an oppressive garment and instead illuminates the role dress can play in altering or reinforcing social rank.

However, not all of this is necessarily empowering. The focus on the malaḥfa's ability to attract men also suggests women's subordination and enduring cultural traditions where women dress for men and acquire value through marriage. Such discourse places men at the center of women's sartorial choices. The contention that women's dress should be subject to particular rules implies that women's sexuality is dangerous and must be monitored and controlled. The acute attention to women's relations with men also reinforces the importance of marriage for women and emphasizes

the value that women achieve through such processes. Women's adherence to such restrictions thus reinforces restrictions associated with patriarchy.

However, this study shows that this is all not so simple. As we have seen, women's insistence that their clothing can attract men suggests women exercise power in bringing relationships into being and presents men as passive and controllable. Women's insistence that they dress for men (or in response to their absence) also serves to downplay their own expanding economic roles. In this setting, where women's positions are rapidly shifting amidst their growing needs to contribute financially to their households, their understandings of what dress can do and their efforts to regulate its actions demonstrate tensions between women's attempts to maintain gender roles and their expanding financial responsibilities.

Such practices suggest resistance within a "patriarchal bargain," a concept which suggests that in patriarchal societies both men and women adhere to certain rules regulating gender relations, which nonetheless can be challenged by the participants (Kandiyoti 1988). Deniz Kandiyoti argues that when systems of patriarchy shift in response to social and economic change, as is occurring in Mauritania, "women often resist the process of transition because they see the old normative orders slipping away from them without any empowering alternatives" (1988:282). Women may agree to, and even protect, patriarchal norms in order to improve their own power and options within the system.

Why women in Mauritania might, at least in part, uphold patriarchy deserves further research; however, this example points to a variety of possibilities. By emphasizing that they dress for men, Kankossa women highlight their more traditional social roles as wives or potential wives, despite the reality that many contribute significant resources to their families and act as de facto heads of household. By keeping men central to such discussions and emphasizing that they dress for men, women highlight men's power and potency, even if in reality it is often women who largely support their families economically. This can be an economic strategy, as it serves to remind men of their responsibilities to support their wives and families; they thus attempt to "make men live up to their obligations" (Kandiyoti 1988:282). It can also help women avoid critiques that they are acting "like men" by highlighting their femininity and proper comportment. For the Ḥarāṭīn, it is also a social strategy that serves to foreground their positions as wives and (at least potential) mothers and thus their respectability. Furthermore, in the past hard work was associated with slaves and lower-status people; by highlighting their positions as wives and their femininity through dress, Ḥarāṭīn women work to legitimize their economic activities and bring them into the sphere of respectable activities for women (Wiley 2018). Finally, by dressing for men, women remind husbands of their unions, an action that may be especially important given the threat of secret marriage.

Interdictions surrounding women's dress thus serve to give women the veneer of maintaining traditional gender roles despite their being in a

period of great change. Attributing agency to clothing provides a layer of protection for women and serves to downplay their own agency in a setting where emphasizing it may be fraught. Debates and discussions about dress, then, are not only about sartorial concerns but are also a way through which women (and men) grapple with and try to assert control in the face of social and economic change.

Acknowledgments

This piece was written at the Carter G. Woodson Institute for African-American and African Studies. Thanks to all the fellows and Adeline Masquelier, Deborah E. McDowell, and Susan McKinnon, who provided feedback there. Special thanks to Jon Forney, David Morton, and Erin Nourse, who read multiple versions of this piece. Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué also provided invaluable feedback, as did several reviewers.

References

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104 (3): 783–90.

Aïdara, Cheikh. 2013. "Célibat des femmes: Le probable titre d'une prochaine révolution en Mauritanie." *L'Authentique*, July 7, 2013. http://cridem.org.

Ali, Kecia. 2010. *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Amato, Sarah. 2011. "Fit to a T: Spray-On Clothing, Craft, Commodity Fetishism, and the Agency of Objects." *Utopian Studies* 22 (2): 285–302.

Banerjee, Mukulika, and Daniel Miller. 2003. *The Sari*. New Delhi: Roli Books in arrangement with Roli & Jansen BV.

Bastian, Misty L. 2013. "Dressing for Success: The Politically Performative Quality of an Igbo Woman's Attire." In *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performance*, edited by Karen Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison, 15–29. New York: Bloomsbury.

Bernal, Victoria. 1994. "Gender, Culture, and Capitalism: Women and the Remaking of Islamic 'Tradition' in a Sudanese Village." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36 (1): 36–67.

Bonte, Pierre. 1990. "L''ordre' de la tradition. Evolution des hiérarchies statutaires dans la société maure contemporaine." In *Mauritanie: entre arabité et africanité*, edited by Pierre Robert Baduel, 118–29. Aix-en Provence: Éditions ÉDISUD.

Brhane, Meskerem. 1997. *Narratives of the Past, Politics of the Present: Identity, Subordination and the Haratines of Mauritania*. Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago.

Buggenhagen, Beth Anne. 2012. *Muslim Families in Global Senegal: Money Takes Care of Shame*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Cleaveland, Timothy. 2000. "Reproducing Culture and Society: Women and the Politics of Gender, Age, and Social Rank in Walāta." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34 (2): 189–217.

———. 2002. *Becoming Walāta: A History of Saharan Social Formation and Transformation*. Portsmouth, NH.: Heinemann.

El Guindi, Fadwa. 1999. *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance*. New York: Berg.
Fair, Laura. 2001. *Pastimes & Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-Abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890–1945*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
Fall, Mohamed Chouaib. 2008. "Rapport: Etude de base pour l'ADP de Kankossa." World Vision Mauritanie ADP Kankossa.
Fortier, Corinne. 1998. "Le corps comme mémoire: du giron maternel à la férule du maître coranique." *Journal des africanistes* 68 (1–2): 197–224.
———. 2011. "Women and Men Put Islamic Law to Their Own Use: Monogamy versus Secret Marriage in Mauritania." In *Gender and Islam in Africa: Rights, Sexuality, and Law*, edited by Margot Badran, 213–31. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.
Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Hansen, Karen Tranberg. 2000. *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
Kandiyoti, Deniz. 1988. "Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender and Society* 2 (3): 274–90.
Keane, Webb. 2005a. "The Hazards of New Clothes: What Signs Make Possible." In *The Art of Clothing: A Pacific Experience*, edited by Susanne Kūchler and Graeme Were, 1–16. London: UCL Press.
———. 2005b. "Signs Are Not the Garb of Meaning: On the Social Analysis of Material Things." In *Materiality*, edited by Daniel Miller, 182–205. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
Lesourd, Céline. 2007. "'Capital beauté.' De quelques riches femmes maures." *Politique Africaine* 107 (3): 62–80.
———. 2010. *Mille et un litres de thé: Enquête auprès des businesswomen de Mauritanie*. Paris: Ginko éditeur.
Lydon, Ghislaine. 2009. *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Western Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
Masquelier, Adeline. 2009. *Women and Islamic Revival in a West African Town*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
McDougall, E. Ann. 1988. "A Topsy-Turvy World: Slaves and Freed Slaves in the Mauritanian Adrar, 1910–1950." In *The End of Slavery in Africa*, edited by Suzanne Miers and Richard L. Roberts, 362–90. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
———. 2005. "Living the Legacy of Slavery: Between Discourse and Reality." *Cahiers d'études africaines* 45 (179/180): 957–86.
———. 2010. "The Politics of Slavery in Mauritania: Rhetoric, Reality and Democratic Discourse." *The Maghreb Review* 35 (3): 260–86. Meneley, Anne. 2007. "Fashions and Fundamentalisms in Fin-de-siècle Yemen: Chador Barbie and Islamic Socks." *Cultural Anthropology* 22 (2): 214–43.
Miller, Daniel. 2005a. "Introduction" In *Clothing as Material Culture*, edited by Susanne Küchler and Daniel Miller, 1–19. New York: Berg.
———. 2005b. "Materiality: An Introduction." In *Materiality*, edited by Daniel Miller, 1–50. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
Mir, Shabana. 2014. *Muslim American Women on Campus: Undergraduate Social Life and Identity*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Moors, Annelies. 2012. "Popularizing Islam: Muslims and Materiality—Introduction." *Material Religion* 8 (3): 272–79.

Moors, Annelies, and Emma Tarlo. 2007. "Introduction." *Fashion Theory* 11 (2–3): 133–42.

Morphy, Howard. 2009. "Art as a Mode of Action: Some Problems with Gell's Art and Agency." *Journal of Material Culture* 14 (1): 5–27.

Office National de la Statistique (ONS). 2011. "Annuaire statistique 2010." Nouakchott: ONS.

———. 2008. "Assaba en chiffres, 1995–2007." ONS.

Ould Jiddou, Baba. 2004. "La communauté haratine." *L'ouest Saharien* 4: 159–82.

Ould-Mey, Mohameden. 1996. *Global Restructuring and Peripheral States: The Carrot and the Stick in Mauritania*. Lanham, Maryland: Littlefield Adams Books.

Rabine, Leslie W. 2013. "Religious Modesty, Fashionable Glamour, and Cultural Text: Veiling in Senegal."In *Veiling in Africa*, edited by Elisha P. Renne, 1–12. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Rasmussen, Susan J. 2009. "Critically Re-Thinking 'Islamic Dress'." *The American Journal of Semiotics* 25 (1/2): 1–23.

———. 2013. "Re-casting the Veil: Situated Meanings of Covering." *Culture & Psychology* 19 (2): 237–58.

Renne, Elisha P. 2013. "Introduction: Veiling/Counter-Veiling in Sub-Saharan Africa." In *Veiling in Africa*, edited by Elisha P. Renne, 1–12. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ruf, Urs Peter. 1999. *Ending Slavery. Hierarchy, Dependency and Gender*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Sandikci, Özlem, and Güliz Ger. 2005. "Aesthetics, Ethics and Politics of the Turkish Headscarf." In *Clothing as Material Culture*, edited by Susanne Küchler and Daniel Miller, 61–82. New York: Berg.

Simard, Gisèle. 1996. *Petites commerçantes de Mauritanie: Voiles, perles et henné*. Paris: Karthala.

Sylvanus, Nina. 2016. *Patterns in Circulation: Cloth, Gender, and Materiality in West Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tarlo, Emma. 2010. *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*. New York: Berg.

Tauzin, Aline. 2001. *Figures du féminin dans la société maure (Mauritanie)*. Paris: Karthala.

———. 2007. "Women of Mauritania: Cathodic Images and Presentation of the Self." *Visual Anthropology* 20 (1): 3–18.

Ünal, R. Arzu, and Annelies Moors. 2012. "Formats, Fabrics, and Fashions: Muslim Headscarves Revisited." *Material Religion* 8 (3): 308–29.

Villasante-de Beauvais, Mariella. 2000. "La Question des hiérarchies sociales et des groupes serviles chez les bidân de mauritanie." In *Groupes serviles au Sahara: Approche comparative à partir du cas des arabophones de Mauritanie*, edited by Mariella Villasante-de Beauvais, 277–322. Paris: Éditions CNRS.

Wehr, Hans. 1994. *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. 4th ed. Urbana, Ill.: Spoken Language Services, Inc.

Wiley, Katherine Ann. 2013. "Fashioning People, Crafting Networks: Multiple Meanings in the Mauritanian Veil (Malaḥfa)." In *Dress, Performance, and Social Action in Africa*, edited by Karen Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison, 77–91. New York: Blooomsbury.

———. 2014. "Joking Market Women: Critiquing and Negotiating Gender and Social Hierarchy in Kankossa, Mauritania." *Africa* 84 (1): 101–18.

———. 2016. "Making People Bigger: Wedding Exchange and the Creation of Social Value in Rural Mauritania." *Africa Today* 62 (3): 49–70.
———. 2018. *Work, Social Status, and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Notes

1. For more on this wedding, particularly the bridewealth exchanges and their meaning for Ḥarāṭīn communities, see Wiley (2016).
2. While in modern standard Arabic *dashra* refers to a small village (Wehr 1994:325), in Mauritania it is used to indicate larger towns and more urban spaces.
3. Scholars have noted that phenotype is not a reliable indicator of ethnicity in Mauritania since, due to centuries of intermarriage and slave owners' sexual relations with their dependents, most people, including Bīẓān, are racially mixed (Ould Jiddou 2004; Ruf 1999). However, many Kankossa residents referred to skin color when explaining the meanings of these categories to me. While some Bīẓān owned slaves, others did not, and sub-Saharan groups and some Ḥarāṭīn were also slave owners (McDougall 1988). Not all Ḥarāṭīn claim slave descent; some, for example, contend that their ancestors were always free, but that they gradually adopted Bīẓān customs by living beside them.
4. For a discussion of some of the challenges this region faces and the ineffectiveness of recent development projects see Ahmed B, "L'Aftout, Triangle de la pauvreté ou de l'espoir?" *L'Authentique quotidian*, April 18, 2013, http://www.lauthentic.info/spip.php?article3964 (accessed October 2, 2013).
5. The unemployment rate may be inflated since the report is unclear as to whether it counts informal sector work—i.e., market vendors, home-based producers of hand-dyed veils, prepared food sellers—as employment, which is how many people in Kankossa make their livings. Still, it illustrates the general lack of work in the region.
6. Woman may sometimes wear Western dress in their own homes in lieu of the malaḥfa if only close family or friends are present. Women also noted that they may wear clothing other than the malaḥfa when traveling outside of the country.
7. See also Miller (2005a), Keane (2005a, 2005b), and Amato (2011).
8. This is similar to the free end of the sari, the pallu (Banerjee & Miller 2003).
9. Note that the Qur'an (24:60) instructs that elderly women who are past childbearing age no longer have to dress as modestly. In Mauritania, older women do generally wear more opaque veils, though some elderly women may be less careful about covering up their bodies (for example, tying the free end of the malaḥfa around their waists as they move around their homes). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer who pointed out this distinction.
10. Definitions of *shabība* vary throughout the country, which is not unusual with Hassaniya words. Celine Lesourd, for example, notes that the word can also encompass a particular ability to speak in a flirtatious way (2010:17), and Giselle Simard defines it as "a seductive woman who all men want to woo" (1996:113).
11. In wealthier parts of Nouakchott, many houses are surrounded by walls, making it impossible for passersby to view the residents. Even in poorer neighborhoods, people typically spend more time inside than they would in Kankossa. Many urban women do, however, circulate freely, taking taxis, going to work,

and visiting markets, although the spaces women occupy are impacted by their social rank and socioeconomic class. Wealthier Kankossa residents have also started building walls around their homes and spending more time inside, which likely will impact behavior and dress practices.

12. The average age of first marriage in Mauritania is twenty-two. World Bank, "Mauritania. Age at first marriage, female," www.quandl.com, http://www.quandl.com/WORLDBANK-World-Bank/MRT_SP_DYN_SMAM_FE-Mauritania-Age-at-first-marriage-female (accessed September 16, 2013).
13. I occupied a liminal position in Kankossa. While I was clearly a woman, I had not yet undergone marriage or childbirth, important parts of womanhood in this context. Likewise, my education level and the fact that I had traveled alone here made me more masculine. Women's interest in talking to me about dress had to do with my interest in this subject, but also their concern about my well-being. In a sense, many were coaching me on how to become a woman and the role dress plays in this.
14. *The Koran, with a Parallel Arabic Text*, trans. N.J. Dawood (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).
15. Thanks to a reviewer who asked about how women dress at parties that are attended exclusively by women. In Kankossa, women with absent husbands still avoid dressing up at such events. This is likely related to transportation; during my fieldwork women moved throughout the town almost exclusively on foot. So even if women plan to attend a women's-only event, they would still be seen by other residents and would have to dress accordingly.
16. Poorer women may also police wealthier women. In Mauritania, some people who are positioned lower on the social hierarchy, including griots, often speak freely before others regardless of their economic status and so may critique others (Wiley 2014). Thank you to a reviewer for pointing this out.