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# Hijabs, Gifts and the Creation and Operation of Social Relationships: Gifting Relations Amongst Muslim Women in Contemporary Finland

Anna-Mari Almila and David Inglis

## Introduction

Contemporary Finland has a variety of Muslim communities. Unlike in many other European countries, where there has been a plethora of studies about Muslim women's veiling practices (for an overview, see Almila and Inglis 2017), there have been relatively few analyses of such matters in the Finnish context (Isotalo 2006; 2017; Koskennurmi-Sivonen et al 2004; Almila 2018b). This paper examines some of the micro-dynamics of veiling-related practices of women in the Greater Helsinki area. This involves investigating intra-community dynamics and inter-community relations.

The paper seeks to understand what the women in question *do* with Islamic veils. These are often referred to as 'hijabs'. By the latter term we mean both scarves as well as other garments used to observe religious 'modesty' in dress. We are especially interested in how and why women pass on as gifts garments that can be used for veiling purposes. Gift theory and research, deriving from the original insights of Marcel Mauss, are used to understand the multiple layers of significance that are involved when veiling garments are passed on as gifts from one woman to another, or from a group of women to a recipient. Examination of these gendered gifting practices illustrates that, while forms of politics are involved in such processes, the giving of veiling garments also works to create intimate forms of social bonding, encompassing familial, friendship and community elements. The "gifting" of hijabs can establish, maintain, reform or repair relationships between Muslim women, and between the latter and non-Muslim women.

We first present the research methods used to gather the data used in this paper. We then set out some necessary background information about Muslim veiling practices in Finland. Then we consider some key ideas and research findings from the interdisciplinary literature on gifts, gifting and gift-based relationships, which we use to interpret the empirical data. Then there are three sections, each of which uses empirical data to present a particular set of intra- and inter-community dynamics involved in specific gifting relations: a) gift relations between Muslims, b) gifts given by Muslims to Finnish (would-be) converts, and c) gifts coming from non-Muslim Finns to Finnish converts.

A key finding is that, while veiling garments are widely understood, in political and journalistic discourses, to be in various ways *problems*, when such objects are gifted by women to each other, they may also be experienced and narrated as *solutions* to socially-shaped challenges, affording transitions towards more manageable social situations for recipients as well as donors. The gifting of Islamic garments often figures as a means not only for donors to influence recipients, a phenomenon which gift theory emphasises, but also for both donors and recipients to finesse potentially troubling or awkward social scenarios.

## Research Methods

The data gathered for this paper was generated as part of an ethnographic research project aimed at understanding veiling practices in Finland, with special reference to fashion- and garment-related issues. Data-gathering was conducted between 2011 and 2012 in the Greater

Helsinki area. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 46 women. Informants were accessed through various networks and formal organisations, such as the Resalat Shi'a mosque, and the Roihuvuori Sunni mosque (now closed), which was popular among young Somalis and Finnish converts, but also was accused of being "radical" by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Gift-related issues arose from the data spontaneously, with the topic of gifting not being introduced by the interviewer. Without prompting interviewees often mentioned issues to do with the gifting of hijabs. The paper focuses on six women who discussed such issues. They are all given pseudonyms to protect their identities. **Nura** is a Sunni Somali woman in her mid-twenties, who holds conservative religious views and dresses accordingly. She came to Finland in her pre-teens, having previously lived in Somalia and Saudi Arabia. **Afra** is a Shi'a Iraqi in her late twenties. She arrived in Finland as a teenager and is married to another Shi'a Iraqi. **Aisha** is a Finnish convert to Islam in her mid-twenties. She converted when she was 18, married an Arab man after her conversion, and lived for some years in Saudi Arabia with her husband. **Khadija** is a Finnish convert to Islam in her early 60s. She had converted two years prior to the interview. **Maria** is another Finnish convert, who became a Muslim at 18, and was in her mid-20s at the time of the interview. **Miriam** is a Finnish convert in her mid-twenties. She had lived as a Muslim for four years and did not have any contact with Finnish Muslim communities beyond her Arab husband, whose family members do not live in Finland.

The women presented here illuminate some elements of intra-community and inter-community dynamics present among Finnish Muslim communities. The examples we provide here are by no means representative of all Muslims, given the diversity and complexity of Finland's various Muslim groupings. Yet they do throw light upon certain general social factors that women in these communities deal with. These involve more and less conservative forms of religious faith and practice - including dress and fashion practices - within specific Muslim communities, and the crossing of cultural and community boundaries by Finnish converts to Islam. As the data on gifts and gifting arose spontaneously in interviews and were not a planned feature of the research project, we did not explicitly seek to situate this data within broader currents of intra- and inter-community practices of circulation (of goods, commodities, food, forms of care, etc.). But we do recognise that future work must engage in such a contextualisation, in the manner offered by, for example, Hogan (2010) in their study of such matters among Palestinian Muslims.

## **Veiling in Finland**

The relatively small amount of research that has until recently been carried out concerning veiling in Finland has largely focussed on Somali women. A particularly curious element of this ethnic community's preferred dress style is that they regard women's trousers with some suspicion (Almila 2016). While a minority of Somalis today combine trousers, tops, tunics and scarves, the majority of younger Somali women wear combinations of *abayas*, jackets and scarves. The *abaya* is a long-sleeved robe, covering the whole body from neck to ankles. They are typically black, but are often decorated, especially on the sleeves and the fronts. The slightly older generation favours skirts, *abayas* and *khimars*. A *khimar* is a head-covering which also conceals the neck, chest and back.

Such styles were not traditionally worn in Somalia. Before the 1970s, Islamic veils were worn there only by Arab and Persian settlers (Akou 2010). Somalis instead wore garments such as the *dirac*, a full-length sleeveless garment often made of translucent fabric (Isotalo 2017).

Some Somali women only donned the hijab once they were in Finland, as a marker of their ethnic and religious identity (Tiilikainen 2003). Those who had already veiled in Somalia often became more conscious of their dress style through the reactions of Finns to them (Marjeta 2001). Within the Finnish Somali community, previous research indicates that the hijab may sometimes serve as a tool for elders to control young Somali women, especially regarding their sexuality (Isotalo 2006, 2017). The visibility of the hijab makes it easier for the whereabouts and activities of young women to be tracked by community members, and removing it would harm the woman's reputation in the community. This is not to deny the voluntary nature of wearing hijabs amongst such women too. Additionally, Finnish converts to Islam often tend to retain their pre-veiling tastes in clothing when donning a hijab, often meaning that "[t]hey like comfortable and timeless clothes that are not too conspicuous" (Koskernurmi-Sivonen et al 2004, 446).

Veiling is not practised by all Muslim women. Some see the hijab as an unnecessary means of provoking hostile reactions by native Finns (Virtanen and Vilkkama 2008). The veil may also operate as a marker of differences *within* Muslim communities, with some members - both female and male - considering veiling Muslims as being overly religious or too "Arabic" (Säävälä 2008). More covering forms of veiling, such as veils that cover the face, are especially considered too "extreme" by some believers (Almila 2018b). Not to veil is not necessarily understood to be equivalent to not being religious. A refusal to veil, or a decision to unveil, can in fact be justified in religious terms (Lewis 2015; Tiilikainen 2003).

There are very few legal regulations about veiling in Finland, but there are not many explicit official statements allowing it either. In one exception to this situation, wearing a scarf in passport photographs is allowed, provided that the scarf does not hinder identification (EOAK 2079/2002). Finnish schools informally allow the wearing of a headscarf, although if a student wishes to cover her face, she may need to engage in some negotiations with school authorities (Almila 2018b). In work environments, banning a scarf (or a turban) has been considered as indirect discrimination (ESAVI 524/2013). However, employers have the right to restrict workers' clothing based on health and safety regulations. If the employer offers scarves to employees, they do not have an automatic right to wear their own garments instead, even if they considered the employer's scarf as less adequate in covering terms than their own preferred garment (Almila 2018b). Nonetheless, the Constitution of Finland guarantees individuals both religious freedom and the right to wear clothes of one's choice (EOAK 1455/2007), including those that cover one's face (LaVM 8/2004 vp).

Veiling in Finland follows many of the trends apparent elsewhere in the world, in terms of political controversies, religious and sectarian affiliations, and fashion, style and consumption patterns (Almila 2018b). Some of these elements are particularly relevant here, such as the ubiquitous division between more and less "conservative" styles of dress associated with specific doctrinal affiliations. According to Allievi (2006, 131), there are two main interpretations of the hijab, involving more "literalist" and more "interpretative" attitudes. The former follows stricter dress codes than the latter, and often prefers specific garments like the *khimar*, *jilbab* or *niqab*. A *jilbab* is a full-length garment worn as an over-garment; a *niqab* is a free-flowing face-veil that covers the whole face except for the eyes. *Niqabs* are often associated with more conservative Sunni doctrinal observance. But this is by no means a simple situation. For example, among the Piety Movement in Egypt, the *khimar* is popular in some more doctrinally moderate mosques, where "the absence of women wearing the *niqab* is an indicator of the kind of audience" that the particular mosque attracts - that is, a less "radical" audience than that made up of women preferring the *niqab* (Mahmood 2004, 41). In the Finnish

context, the more “radical” Roihuvuori Sunni mosque was frequented by several women wearing the *niqab*, and even more who wore the *khimar*. The Resalat Shi’a mosque had a very different dress code, and indeed some women there considered the *niqab* with the utmost suspicion. This is not surprising given that they associated it with radical Sunni Islam, which in some cases may consider Shi’as as non-Muslims.

The stigmatising elements that the hijab has taken on are found in many countries. This is often strikingly felt by white converts to Islam (Franks 2000). Finland is no exception here, especially given that it is a location where any strongly-expressed religious identity may potentially be stigmatising (Toivanen et al 2012), and where a visible affiliation to Islam may be particularly problematic. Such elements play a significant part in women’s garment choices. They may prefer less “visible” forms of veiling, or conversely may purposefully choose to be highly visible through their dress choices (Almila 2018b).

## Gifts and Gifting

Before considering how hijabs are presented as gifts between different sorts of women in Finland today, we set out some key ideas and research findings to do with gifts and gifting practices that help us make sense of the empirical data. Since the first publication in 1925 of Marcel Mauss’s *Essai sur le Don*, translated into English as *The Gift* (Mauss 1970), there have been many criticisms and refinements of his original claims (for extended discussion, see Almila and Inglis 2018).

Mauss emphasises the mixture of “obligation and spontaneity in the gift” (1970, 63). Gifts may seem voluntary, disinterested and “generously offered”, but the “transaction itself is based on obligation” (1970, 1). The recipient of the gift is potentially under two forms of obligation. First, there is a tacit but powerful obligation to accept the gift being offered. “Refusing to accept ... is a refusal of friendship and [social] intercourse”, while it may also “show fear of having to repay” the offered gift (1970, 11, 39). Second, there is an obligation for the recipient to reciprocate the initial gift by in turn giving the original giver a *counter-gift*. Failure to reciprocate with a counter-gift means losing face in the eyes of the donor, and possibly also of the group to which s/he belongs (1970, 5). The counter-gift therefore shifts the balance of power back towards the initial recipient. The countering of the initial gift is likely to provoke in turn a further series of gifts and counter-gifts between both parties. a process that may last a long time. A chain of gifts in exchange does not usually involve only a simple dyadic relationship between two individuals. The community - or communities - which each person belongs to may be symbolically present in the gifting relationship.

Later authors have emphasised Mauss’s original contention that the gift is fundamentally connected to forms of social power (Garces and Jones 2009). A gift relationship is, at least potentially, a means of donors controlling recipients. Mauss seems to imply that there are no “free gifts”, because obligations, to the donor and perhaps the group they are part of, are always incumbent upon recipients (Douglas 1990). The donor gains advantages over the recipient, and perhaps also over an audience which witnesses the gift being given, by the apparently altruistic act of giving things away (Kosalka 1999). A socially dominant donor might impose a debt that a dominated recipient may never be able to repay fully, keeping the recipient in permanent subordination (Chaniel 2014). The bestowing of a gift is also potentially a subtle but powerful means by which a group can instil its values into the mindset of a recipient if they are from another group. The gift can also work to reinforce a group’s values onto a recipient who is

already a group member, but who is felt to be lacking in the desired attitudes and practices expected by the group (Mauss 1970, 73).

The object that is given as a gift is transformed from being a mundane material thing into a special sort of entity. The process of gifting and counter-gifting involves not a cold, neutral exchange of commodities, but rather patterns of “spiritual bonds” between “things which are to some extent parts of persons” (Mauss 1970, 11). The object gifted is felt by the parties involved to be invested with some of the spiritual essence of the donor. A received gift therefore is not just an object, but also a powerful reminder of the donor, and possibly of the social group that stands behind them (Carrier 1994). The gift expresses and maintains the recipient’s obligations to the donor, and vice versa. Gifts therefore leave various sorts of traces, invisible yet socio-psychologically powerful, on both donors and recipients (Hyde 1983).

We have outlined elsewhere the special nature of hijabs given as gifts (Almila and Inglis 2018). The recipient of such a gift faces an object charged with multiple layers of significance, deriving variously from: *the individual donor* (involving an individual-level obligation to receive and reciprocate, encompassing relations and overtures of friendship); *the donor’s* (e.g. ethnic) *group*; and *the donor’s religion*. A recipient may be particularly delighted to receive, and especially reluctant to refuse, a gift so potentially powerfully charged simultaneously with multiple layers of significance.

Subsequent scholarship has extended Mauss’s original claims. Gift-giving can construct and reinforce ties of kinship and community (Caplow 1982). Gifting has been found to create group boundaries, and structure social relationships within those boundaries (Weinberger and Wallendorf 2011). Various authors (e.g. Derrida 1992; Komter 2005; Skågeby 2013; Pyyhtinen 2014) have particularly emphasised that gifts and gifting seem to express, involve, and operate in the spaces between sets of opposed values, including: *kindness/aggression*, *disinterestedness/self-interest*, *co-operation/conflict*, *care/control*, *altruism/personal gain*, *superiority/inferiority*, *hierarchy/equality*, *individual volition/social obligation*, and *interior piety/social displays of virtue*. Gifts are therefore deeply ambiguous phenomena, while gifting relationships are characterised by high levels of ambivalence.

Later scholars have sought to nuance Mauss’s views about the motivations of donors and recipients. Donors may not always possess an explicit desire to control recipients. Contemporary scholarship emphasises instead the mixed motives at work in gifting, locating these on various spectra: between high intentionality and totally unconscious motivations; and between high levels of manipulation, and donors having no desire to gain anything (Elder-Vass 2015). Contra Mary Douglas’s (1990) interpretation of Mauss, totally disinterested gifts are possible. These give the donor pleasure in the act of giving itself, beyond any self-interested expectations of reciprocation (Godbout and Caillé 1998). There may also exist forms of gift-giving from which Mauss’s emphasis on the obligation to reciprocate is absent (Mirowski 2001). In Bourdieu’s (1977, 2000) language, gifting practices are usually neither entirely interested nor wholly disinterested, but rather involve complicated mixtures of the two ideal-typical elements, shaped by the interplay of the habitus of each party. The disinterested aspect of giving a gift can be actively created by the donor suppressing, consciously or otherwise, any sense of calculation in the gifting act. This active creation of a sense of altruism on the donor’s behalf may seem to her perfectly without either calculation or any ulterior motives involving the imposing of herself upon the recipient, even if what transpires in the gift relationship actually turns out to be exactly that. (For problems with Bourdieu’s account of subjective intentions and objective outcomes, see Pyyhtinen 2014).

Feminist scholars have criticised Mauss's original formulations, especially regarding how female-to-female gift-giving relationships work. Some observers have noted that across many cultural contexts, women tend to struggle more than men to refuse gifts, or to escape from obligations to reciprocate gifts, these phenomena being indicative of broader patriarchal social relations (Folbre 2001). There is also the issue of unrecognised and under-valued gifts being particularly associated with female donors and recipients (Caillé 2007). In a more positive vein, the possibility of women exercising creative agency in gifting relationships has also been identified (Weiner 1976; 1992; Joy 2013). Gifting may be a means, at least in some contexts, to negotiate power relations, both with men and with other females (Komter 1996). Some radical feminist positions claim that specifically "female" forms of gifting are antithetical to what are regarded as essentially "masculine" forms of exchange of objects. This implies that "female" gifting, at least in some instances, may lack the obligatory-return dynamics identified by Mauss, instead being centred on unselfish forms of generosity, expressed through gifts that have no expectation of reciprocation attached (Vaughn 1997). Such gifting can create specifically "female" forms of solidarity and mutual enhancement, which may operate in relation to patriarchal structures, but which are irreducible to them (Irigaray 1996).

### **Transitioning within Communities through Gift-Giving**

We now turn to examine the first set of interview data, which concern gift-giving relations between Muslim women within specific ethnic/religious communities in Finland, focusing on the Somali Sunni and Iraqi Shi'a communities.

It is well known that in diaspora contexts, different social dynamics are at work than in the home country (e.g. Oksanen 2010; Tiilikainen 2008). To retain or recreate one's cultural heritage is of vital importance in a situation where community borders may be under constant threat of dissolving. The retention of perceived heritage may take on more conservative and/or stricter cultural forms than would be necessary or usual back in the homeland.

One of these tendencies in Finland is related to the conservative "Salafi" form of Islam, which seeks to "purify" Islam from what it regards as "external" cultural influences, aiming for "purer", "original" religious practice (Ahmed 2011). Salafism is strongly connected financially and ideologically with Saudi Arabia, and it is widely considered as "conservative" or "radical" by many Muslims and non-Muslims. Salafism is very oriented towards more covering forms of female dress. Supporters of Salafism often participate in *Dawah*, the "Calling to Islam", an invitation to practice Salafi Islam's doctrinal tenets, which is directed both to Muslims and non-Muslims. *Dawah* in part involves proselytizers encouraging others to veil, or to veil in more covering ways than before. But the doctrine also emphasises that the choice to veil must be the person's own, freely-willed choice and not a mere external imposition. As a result, contemporary debates about how women should dress draw upon and amplify ambivalences between "choice", "free will" and "obligation" (Almila 2018b). It was common in the empirical research undertaken for this paper to find that the same woman would say apparently contradictory things in one interview: that the hijab is only meaningful if it is chosen through an individual's free will, and also that the hijab is simply obligatory, beyond any choices a specific woman might make.

Nura, a Somali in her mid-20s, wears a *khimar* and a *niqab*. Her religious and socio-political views are very Salafi-influenced. She is active in *Dawah*-related activities, such as handing out

leaflets at information fairs to potential converts. She said that she had always felt excluded from Finnish society and had never been “accepted” by any native Finnish person. It was this situation of disaffection that she understood as partly driving her more radical opinions and dress practices. All this was very much bound up with her gifting activities:

Just this summer I gave up a *khimar* I’ve worn for many, many years. It was very dear to me... But... in my opinion it was useless to leave it in the closet; I got a migraine and I couldn’t [wear it]. Someone else wanted to start [wearing] the [*khimar*], which is a great thing if another Muslim wants to cover herself more. I was very glad [and] I gave it to her.

In giving her *khimar* to another Somali woman, Nura does various things at once. She experiences a certain joy in giving the garment to the other person and enjoys receiving the recipient’s thanks and expressions of pleasure in the donation. She understands her act as freely engaged in and generous, and the positive reception of the gift by the other woman as likewise voluntary. This is the sort of situation Bourdieu (1977; 2000) had described in terms of how donors often perceive their own actions – as disinterested and non-manipulative. This is particularly so here because Nura emphasises that it was the recipient, not the donor, who initiated the encounter that led to the gift-giving. At the same time, there are also elements of female bonding through gift-giving, which are emphasised by feminist analysts (Joy 2013).

But despite her presentation of disinterestedness, Nura’s gifting is nonetheless bound up with her Salafist proselytizing activities. She passes onto the other woman through the gift a strong obligation to wear the garment that is being offered. She in effect invites the recipient to follow a stricter dress code than previously, and thus to make a broader practical and ideological commitment to a more conservative interpretation of Islam. This gift would be very difficult for a woman living within the same community as Nura to refuse. What Nura can construe as volitional acts of giving and receiving have strong undercurrents of obligation as far as the recipient is concerned. The gift is a subtle but forceful means by which Nura can seek to impose her own dress norms, and therefore her specific religious values, onto those around her. This interpretation of Nura’s actions is bolstered by recognising her explicit and frequently-expressed desires to have her sisters adopt more conservative religious orientations, and to achieve this in part by dressing in the same manner as her. Such pressure was felt by others in the Somali community too. In the interviews, several Somali women who did not wear the *khimar* referred to other community members considering it as a compulsory form of veiling. Giving *khimars* as gifts is one way for Nura, and other women with similar beliefs, to exert pressure outside of her intimate family circle and within the wider ethnic community. Gifting allows this to be done in more indirect, subtle ways than Nura does within her household.

Afra is a Shia Iraqi in her late twenties who is married to a man from the same ethnic community. Her case illustrates how gift-giving operates vis-à-vis other aspects of family and community dynamics. Empirical research inspired by Hochschild (1989) has indicated the delicate but often vexed “economy of gratitude” that pertains within families in specific ethnic communities. Subtle power relations are at work within domestic settings, such that women are not only expected to *give* freely (of their time, emotional energies, etc.) to family members, but also to *receive* certain gifts at least willingly, if not indeed enthusiastically (Pyke and Coltrane 1996).

Iraqi women are expected to “give” to the husband’s family in many ways, including to the benefit of the family’s reputation among its peer group. In the interview Afra recalled certain



sartorial changes that were initiated by her decision to accept a marriage arranged for her by her family. She was to marry a man from what her family perceived to be the highest status Shi'a Iraqi family in Finland. This family is said to be directly descended from the Prophet Muhammad himself. Afra's husband's family sought to protect their high reputation in various ways, including through female dress strategies:

In respect to dress we [i.e. Afra's original family] are different because they [the husband's family] all wear the *abaya* and the *jilbab*. When a girl goes to school, they dress [like that] immediately. Now [one young daughter] wears trousers and a tunic but they slowly teach her to wear the *abaya* [...] But [in my family], mother wears the *abaya* and the *jilbab* but we [daughters] don't, we wear jeans and tunics and skirts. We are different [from the husband's family] in the sense that it's [...] not so necessary to have the *abaya*.

Afra's marriage made her a member of a higher status family than her own, transforming her life in various ways. Her mother-in-law's gifts of clothing were highly significant in this regard:

When I got married, my mother-in-law gave me clothes; she had bought them abroad... At that time, I didn't yet wear a black long robe, I had trousers and a top down here [*indicates below mid-thigh level*] and then the scarf. This robe I started to wear when I got married. It was [my husband's family's] wish, and I said, why not?

The demands coming from the husband's family, through the representative and commanding figure of the mother-in-law, could potentially have been perceived by Afra as an imposition on her autonomy by her new in-laws, but this did not in fact happen. It was the case that she was hardly able to refuse such gifts or to demonstrate reluctance to wear such garments. This was partly because going against a mother-in-law's wishes would seriously jeopardise the relationship, and partly because of the husband's family being of such high status within the community that their moral demands would be difficult to refuse. The mother-in-law's gifts quite directly communicated demands on Afra to dress and act differently than before. Despite potential feelings of imposition, Afra in fact embraced the situation, understanding the marriage, and all its corollaries in lifestyle terms, as her own free choice. The gifts were eagerly accepted and worn. The gifting of them was experienced not as involving obligations to dress - and therefore think and act - in ways she did not want, but as gestures of generous welcome to the new familial context. The gifting finessed the mother-in-law's demands, so that these became even more likely to be consented to by the young bride. Although this gift was deeply embedded in Afra's marriage, it was not a special wedding gift as such. It was a more everyday sort of gift that nevertheless served deep symbolic purposes in Afra's new familial connections.

Afra also noted how her own family viewed her sartorial and wider lifestyle transformations:

Mother says, the more you make an effort for the religion, the more you work, the better level of Paradise you achieve ... Mother makes a comparison that I who wear the long robe get more [religious credit], because I'm young after all, want to dress fashionably, want to look pretty but I still cover myself for God. Because I fear God and put the long robe on, I get more virtues, I get more points. But [a woman who] dresses according to fashion, she gets less.

Here we see how Afra's mother works in tandem with the mother-in-law. Both women are members of the same religious and ethnic community, have a shared habitus, and are strongly

culturally attuned to each other, especially regarding gender norms. The mother reinforces the understanding of the clothing gifts as highly positive and encourages Afra to embrace them enthusiastically. Through her mother's actions, Afra is made more likely to consent willingly to the demands made of her. Afra's consent, and the changed sartorial practices that go with and express it, are a kind of counter-gift voluntarily proffered by Afra to her mother-in-law, her mother, both families and the wider community all at once. These dynamics very much resonate with Bourdieu's (1977; 2000) account of the subtle manipulations by givers of recipients. The situation is narrated to Afra by her mother such that wearing the more restrictive clothing given by the mother-in-law concerns Afra's personal religious "credit". At the same time, having a visibly "pious" daughter is a major form of community and religious "credit" for the mother and the birth family. This is greatly augmented when peers believe that she is wearing such clothing gifted through marriage by descendants of the Prophet himself.

### **Gifting and Finnish Women Converting (or not) to Islam**

We now turn to consider how clothing gifts are involved in the putative or actual conversions to Islam of non-Muslim Finnish women.

The case of Aisha, who was 18 when she converted, illustrates some of these dynamics. She narrated how, after reading the *Qur'an* and believing it to be the "truth", she sought to learn more about the practicalities of living as a Muslim. Testing out the religion before taking the major step of affiliating herself with it, she sought to learn how to pray. Through an internet discussion forum, she made the acquaintance of a Somali Muslim woman of her own age and learned more about everyday life as a believer. When asked a general question about how she became interested in Islam, Aisha spontaneously volunteered an account of the importance of a scarf given as a gift:

I visited her [the Somali woman] a couple of times and she showed me how to pray and gave me a scarf and then an *abaya*. [...] So, I actually started to wear them and pray before I had said *Shahada* [the public and spoken declaration of belief that marks conversion].

The gift of the scarf was pivotal in Aisha's "conversion career" (Gooren 2007). Muslim women are required to wear a veil when they pray. It would not be enough for the Somali woman to teach Aisha how to pray. Aisha must also have the correct equipment, which the scarf and *abaya* are here. The gift works to start to draw her into the web of thought, practice and form of embodiment that constitutes Islamic prayer. Aisha sought out a spiritual guide who would facilitate her tentative entry into the religion. The Somali woman, responding to Aisha's request, gave her the gift of a scarf. Gifting such a garment is a means to establish a religiously-oriented relationship with Aisha. It also provided Aisha with material means of beginning prayer practices.

Interestingly, Aisha started to wear the *abaya* and scarf *before* her conversion. This was unusual, because all the other convert interviewees in the larger study began to veil at the moment of conversion, marked by the *Shahada* declaration, or at some later point. The thrust of Aisha's account was that she was gifted the garments and then very soon after that started wearing them, without any apparent fuss, reluctance or questioning, before her conversion. Because the garments were handed over as *gifts*, they implicitly came with certain obligations to reciprocate them. The counter-gifts offered by Aisha took two forms. In a more immediate

and direct way, Aisha started to wear those garments, and thereby started to pray. In a longer-term and more diffuse manner, wearing the gifted garments, and thus engaging in the techniques of prayer they afforded, brought her steadily more into the realm of full religious observance.

Tracing the connections between gifts and conversion can be pursued through another example. The empirical data-gathering was carried out by one of the present authors, Anna-Mari, a non-Muslim Finnish woman. Nura, mentioned above, at one point offered Anna-Mari a scarf intended to be worn as a hijab. The polyester scarf was inexpensive but fashionable among the Somali community at that time. Nura was particularly interested in converting non-Muslims to Islamic observance. She passed leaflets explaining Islam to Anna-Mari, a practice she regularly engaged in with many other women. She kept a supply of such scarves in her home, to be given as gifts to both Muslim and non-Muslim acquaintances. Nura explained that the scarves were bought in Dubai by her mother. Their economic value would have been at most a few Euros. Nura explained that she could buy fitted *abayas* from Dubai for 10 Euros. The gift received by Anna-Mari was economically cheap enough easily to pass between acquaintances. Nura also thought that the scarf possessed some practical value as a garment to be worn on an everyday basis, particularly for veiling Muslim women following current fashion trends. Nura herself was very interested in sartorial fashion, while wearing very conservative outer garments. Anna-Mari accepted the gift, partly for the sake of building a rapport with an interviewee. Acceptance of the gift was also driven by the fact that being offered a gift by someone one does not know well, but with whom one has entered some sort of relationship, seems to necessitate both acceptance and the demonstration of gratitude or even delight. Women may be under particularly powerful obligations in this regard (Folbre 2001).

Anna-Mari did not subsequently wear the scarf or pursue any interest in religious conversion. Yet it was not thrown or given away, despite its functional impracticalities: being made of very thin synthetic fibre, it was of little practical use in cold weather, and synthetic fibres are normally unappealing to Finnish sartorial sensibilities, which generally prefer natural fibres (Almila 2018a). It was retained by Anna-Mari because of its status *as a gift*. It was felt to bear the traces of Nura's personality, as well as the cultural practices of her community. To discard it thoughtlessly would have felt disrespectful both to the gifting individual and the group which stands behind her. This feeling went beyond the professional norms of social research, which demand a respectful attitude towards these being researched. It was also generated and thematised by the scarf's status as a gifted object.

The interplay of gifting and conversion is also apparent in the case of Khadija, at the time of interview a relatively recent Finnish convert to Islam in her 60s. In response to a general question about how she became interested in Islam, she spontaneously started to narrate a gift story. She described a situation some years before her conversion when she had been the recipient of a bespoke garment gift from multiple donors. She had befriended many Somali families through her work for Helsinki City Council, and the community members appreciated her efforts for their well-being. A group of women wanted to give her a garment to show her their appreciation.

This garment was described by Khadija as "traditional Somali dress". The donors wanted to give the recipient a garment particularly associated with their ethnic identity. Before having the garment made by a seamstress, the women came together to show the fabric to Khadija, demonstrating that the garment was new and made especially for her. Khadija explained that this sort of act is crucial for Somali gift-giving. A second-hand gift would be unacceptable for

marking and constructing special occasions. The bespoke and artisanal nature of the garment gave it a special nature, which was also augmented and dramatized through a ceremonial element. Khadija's account of the women arriving together as a group, to present to her the material of which the garment was to be made, was particularly meaningful for her, as she emphasised the centrality of this event in her conversion career. This collective act on our view seems to have bound all the donor women into the gift itself in a particularly forceful manner. All their individual personalities were melded together to become integral parts of the gifted object. By making the gift indicate that "this is a *Somali* garment", "it is from *all of us*", and that "it is made only for *you*", the women acknowledged Khadija's special status for them. She was a non-member of the group that nonetheless the group honoured because of the care - a kind of gift too (Ashwin et al 2013) - that she had shown them. We cannot say with certainty that the donors construed their garment gift as a counter-gift for all the gifts of service(s) that Khadija had rendered them in her professional life, but we can offer that as a plausible interpretation of their actions. Receiving this bespoke gift was one important element in Khadija having a very positive view of the Somali community. She said that this, and her other positive experiences with them, encouraged her to convert to Islam at a later date. This gifted garment was not explicitly "Islamic" in nature - it was foregrounded as ethnically "Somali" - but it nonetheless played a powerful role in Khadija's conversion career, precisely because its "religious" aspect was subtle and indirect. The garment gift here certainly expressed and created non-manipulative forms of female solidarity emphasised by feminist gift theorists (Weiner, 1992; Joy, 2013).

### **Giftng as Relationship Maintenance and Repair**

In this final section, we will consider how recent Finnish converts to Islam deal with the challenges thrown up by their new social situation and status after conversion, and how gifts can play particular roles within such contexts.

The case of Maria is not directly about gifts, but we include it here as important contextualising material. It illustrates some of the anxieties that can be felt by Finnish convert women about parental and familial reactions to the conversion. She converted to Islam as a teenager, and at the time of the interview had lived for eight years as a Muslim. She recounted her conversion in terms of "coming out" to her family, explicitly using the terminology usually associated with revealing one's homosexuality to family and peers. She emphasised the importance of the wearing of Islamic garments in generating some of the tribulations she faced:

For the first four months I led a double life. I still lived at home. I left home without [wearing the Islamic garments] – I had in the bag an *abaya* and a scarf. I went out from the staircase to a nearby forest, got dressed and moved on. And the same happened on the way back. Until one day I decided to walk in with my [Islamic] clothes on [*laughs*]. [...] Well, when I went there my mother wasn't at home. The house was empty and I thought "great!". My courage fell and I took [the scarf and the *abaya*] off quickly so that no one would notice. Then I called my mother [...] and asked: "Can you come home?" – "Why?" – "I want to talk" – "About what?" – "About something important" – "Related to what?" – "To myself". She said: "Ok I'll come". She had said [to the people the mother was with]: "[My daughter] is probably pregnant" and then went home. When she finally came, I didn't have the scarf anymore, but I told her and she was quiet for a while and said: "Well, I had [thought] already it might be something like this". [...] The only thing we discussed was the scarf, because mother thought it's not mandatory [for Muslims to

wear it]. [I said] I'm going to wear it from now on. That was the only thing. Otherwise she was "oh, ok". She had thought it's something much worse since I had been holding it back for a long time and mother had waited for it with a sense of horror. I've heard so many horror stories of how things have gone – families throwing [the converts] out – [I thought] it'll go like that. Mother then went back to where she had been and [said]: "She wasn't pregnant, she's just a Muslim!" It was clearly a relief: things could have been worse [*laughs*].

Maria framed her wearing of an Islamic scarf as fundamental both to the potential spoiling of her identity, and to the forms of acceptance by family members which would allow her to avoid such a fate. The only concern the mother seems to have had was about the day-to-day wearing of the veil, and not about any broader theological or political considerations. Having been reassured on that front, through her verbal acceptance the mother gave her assent to the conversion, demonstrating the sort of maternal care that some feminist scholars have argued is a fundamental form of feminine gifting, being altruistic and genuinely socially-bonding, rather than self-serving, manipulative or expecting reciprocation (Vaughn 1997; Joy 2013).

The case of Miriam and her mother both bears similarities to, and diverges from, the situation of Maria and her mother. At the time of interview, Miriam was in her mid-20s and had lived for two years as a Muslim. The changes in her lifestyle practices were less radical than for some other converts. This is partly because she chose to wear as a hijab a kind of scarf that is not immediately recognisable as "Islamic". She had anonymously blogged about her conversion, but otherwise had not talked about it openly with her Finnish family. But from Miriam's point of view, her mother giving her a scarf as a gift changed the situation markedly:

I didn't tell [them about my conversion] directly; they've been left to deduce it from the changes that have happened to me. They've not said anything [negative] about it, and my mother even wanted to buy me a scarf, which was really nice. We were at Porvoo [open air] market, they have handmade woollen scarves there, and it was really kind of her because I think they think I've converted because of my [Muslim] husband.

This situation bears some resemblances to that of Maria and her mother, as both are about parental acceptance of the daughter's conversion. But while in Maria's case the scarf was the problematic object which had to be dealt with, here it operated as a *solution*, working as an indicator of acceptance by the mother of the daughter's religious and lifestyle decisions. Maria's mother gave her *verbal* acceptance of the scarf-wearing. Miriam's mother, by contrast, seems to have been unable to acknowledge the conversion in spoken terms, but indicated her approval through the non-verbal act of gifting the scarf. Both the act of gifting and the gifted garment itself allowed for and expressed the continuance of positive family connections despite religious differences. In Miriam's view, they also silently but effectively communicated parental care, which itself can be understood as a specific sort of gift. This resonates with feminist accounts of the creation of female solidarities through gifting (Joy 2013).

The setting where the gift was purchased was also highly significant. Porvoo is famous for artisanal arts and crafts objects, most being sold directly by their makers. The scarf figured as a valuable gift, both in its relatively high monetary value, and because it was hand-made and sold by the maker herself. These types of value helped to define this gift as a one-off, prestigious and highly significant entity (Douglas and Isherwood 2006). The gift-giving of such a special object communicated powerfully the recipient's new socio-religious status and her mother's acceptance, and even appreciation, of it.

However, the mother was not aware that the design rendered the scarf impractical as a hijab for everyday use. It was too thick and inflexible to be constantly wrapped around the head. But the daughter was nonetheless delighted to receive it, because of what it said to her about her mother's acceptance of the conversion. This fits with one of Mauss's original points. A gift given for honorific purposes is not primarily to be consumed pragmatically (here, worn on the head), but rather is intended by the donor as a mark of respect in a process of alliance-building between two or more actors and the communities they represent. By bestowing such a gift, the donor is honouring "the existence and status of the other", both granting and in turn receiving "regard" (Hénaff 2010, 153). Much of the social significance in such cases is generated through non-verbal means. For subject matters that may be difficult to talk about directly - such as conversion to Islam often is in the Finnish context - gifting an object can speak volumes, especially when the object in question is charged with religious significance, as is a scarf meant to be used as hijab.

## Conclusion

Political, journalistic and academic discourses often emphasise the troublesome nature of Islamic clothing items, suggesting that such forms of dress create multiple types of problem for individuals, groups and societies. This understanding focuses on hijabs garments as politicised objects, taken in isolation from everyday social relations. But a rather different picture emerges when two analytically distinct, but empirically intertwined, elements are factored into the analysis: first, how Islamic garments are intimately involved in women's everyday social relationships; and second, what occurs within and to such relationships when these garments are given *as gifts*.

Mauss's gift theory emphasised the power of donors to influence or manipulate recipients, through the obligation-generating nature of receiving a gift. Our evidence suggests that such dynamics are indeed at work in some forms of Islamic garment gifting. This is particularly so in instances where the donor desires the recipient to veil in a stricter manner than hitherto, and thereby to adopt a more rigid form of Islamic observance. But the donors' motivations may, as per Bourdieu's (1977; 2000) and feminist (Weiner 1992; Joy 2013) reformulations of Mauss, involve complex mixtures of altruism, care and concern, as well as more or less subtle elements of manipulation, and may be more semi- or un-conscious than fully thought through. Even more apparently manipulative and power-laden instances of gift-giving possess their own fine-grained subtleties and ambivalences.

Beyond that, we find that the gifting of Islamic garments can initiate, maintain, reform or repair social relationships between women. The giving of such garments can, at least under certain conditions, render hijabs and related clothing items as powerful *solutions* for women in dealing with awkward or novel social situations, such as a family member's conversion to Islam. Garment gifting may work as a reparative mechanism, restoring a sense of balance in family relationships that have been problematised by a Finnish woman converting. Such gifting may also facilitate modes of active self-transformation, when recipients draw upon their receiving of a gift in the broader process of their shifting from being non-believers to becoming avowed Muslims. The act of gifting such a garment may spark the recipient's initial interest in such a transformation, as well as subsequently confirming and deepening the conversion.

It should be emphasised that the sorts of gifted clothing objects we have considered here cannot be ascribed with independent agency of their own. It is the social relationship of *gifting* such objects which has the power to establish, perpetuate or change other social relationships. Nonetheless, our data suggests some noteworthy patterns about the choice of garments to be gifted that to our knowledge other scholars, of both gifting and of Islamic garments, have not reported in the international literature on such matters. First, cheaper, mass-produced garments seem to be particularly gifted by donors who seem to be aiming at influencing recipients' conduct, in the direction of adopting stricter forms of dress and religious observance. This applies to donor-recipient relationships that pertain both within intimate family circles (the case of Afra) and between casual acquaintances (the cases of Nura and Aisha). These sorts of gifted garments possess pragmatic value, because they make the desired change more easily achievable – a woman given a scarf can start to pray in the prescribed manner.

Conversely, the choosing of more expensive and bespoke garments is more about symbolic than pragmatic value. They are more about expressing some emotion or attitude – acceptance, respect, regard, etc – on the behalf of the donor than they are about actually being worn. These gifted garments seem to be particularly associated with maintaining or repairing relationships between donor(s) and recipient, as in the cases of Miriam (where the non-Muslim mother was the donor) and Khadija (where a group of Somali women chose the gifted clothing).

In the latter case, we can note that the religious transformation of the recipient occurred significantly after the time of receiving the gift. This is best understood as an unintended consequence of the Somali women's gifting, which was meant to convey positive regard rather than induce conversion. This instance underscores a more general point concerning the gap that always potentially exists between donors' intentions (why they give, and what impression they want the gift to make on the receiver) and recipients' actual responses (whether they understand the gift in the manner it was intended, and whether they act upon the intended meaning). Contemporary economic sociology highlights the complexities and ambiguities involved in such relationships (Lainer-Vos 2013). These may be particularly complicated in the case of Muslim donors and recipients, given that Islamic doctrine stresses the importance of virtuous and honest intentions being more important than the outcomes of one's actions (Powers 2004). In the example given above, Nura's gifting did not lead to Anna-Mari's conversion, but her gifting of a scarf would count in her view as a form of religious credit to herself. More work now needs to be done - in Finland and elsewhere – to take the research agenda concerning hijabs-as-gifts forward. Such work can transcend the limitations of this paper, such as by dealing with a wider range of women drawn from more ethnic groups, by situating gifted hijabs more firmly within broader patterns of circulation of objects within diasporic Muslim communities, and by more systematically confronting different types of gift theory with more diverse forms of empirical evidence about everyday gifting practices.

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