New transnational geographies of Islamism, capitalism and subjectivity: the veiling-fashion industry in Turkey

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The rise of the transnational veiling-fashion industry in Turkey has taken place within the context of neoliberal economic restructuring, the subjection of the veil to new regulations, and the resurgence of Islamic identities worldwide. Even after almost two decades since its first catwalk appearance, the idea of ‘veiling-fashion’ continues to be controversial, drawing criticism from secular and devout Muslim segments of society alike. Analysing veiling-fashion as it plays out across economic, political and cultural fields is to enter into a new understanding of the role of Islam in the global arena today.

Veiling-fashion crystallises a series of issues about Islamic identity, the transnational linkages of both producers and consumers, and the shifting boundaries between Islamic ethics and the imperatives of neoliberal capitalism. In this paper, our overarching argument is that controversies and practices surrounding veiling-fashion show how Islamic actors are adapting and transforming neoliberal capitalism at the same time as they navigate a complex geopolitical terrain in which Islam – and the iconic Muslim, headscarf-wearing woman – has been cast as a threatening ‘Other’. Thus the rise of veiling-fashion as a transnational phenomenon positions women and women’s bodies at the centre of political debates and struggles surrounding what it means to be ‘modern’ and Muslim today.

Based on interviews with producers, consumers and salesclerks, and our analysis of newspaper articles, catalogues and web sites, this article traces out how the transnational production, sale and consumption of veiling-fashion works to order spaces of geopolitics, geo-economics and subject formation.

Key words: Turkey, Islam, transnational, veiling, fashion, neoliberalism

Introduction

In April 2008, Tekbir (‘God is great’) Inc., Turkey’s leading producer of women’s Islamic dress, put on its sixteenth annual fashion show. Controversial as usual, the fashion show made waves in the Turkish press, with headlines reading ‘Önce Namaz, Sonra Defile’ – the Turkish equivalent of ‘First prayer, then the catwalk’ (Milliyet 21 April 2008). The controversy this year was complex. First, Tekbir had hired a German fashion designer, Heidi Beck, to design the 2008 collection, the irony of which was highlighted with newspaper headlines such as ‘Taking up veiling in the hands of a Christian designer!’ Secondly, the fashion show included performances of religious music, an Ottoman marching band and whirling dervishes – an attention-grabbing mishmash of cultural and religious references. The same eclecticism marked the styles on the runway, which referenced Sufism, the finery of the Ottoman court, and European wedding
wear, and the aesthetics of Arab and Indian dress. In the Islamic newspaper Milli Gazete, Tekbir was bombarded with criticism for its ‘sale’ of Islam and its seduction of consumers through the use of young, attractive models (Eygi 2008). And finally, immediately after the show the press erupted with the revelation that Tekbir’s CEO, Mustafa Karaduman, was a polygamist, a practice that is banned in Turkey. Karaduman’s defence of polygamy in the following days seemed to confirm the critics’ worst fears about gender inequality in the lifestyle of the new Islamic bourgeoisie.

These events surrounding the fashion show catalysed a flurry of criticism of Tekbir and, more broadly, of the relationship between veiling and fashion in Turkey. Why does the idea of ‘veiling-fashion’ continue to pose a problem, despite its actualisation in the everyday practices of Muslim women, not only in Turkey but globally (Akou 2007)? Since the early 1990s, this paradox has been vividly illustrated in the pages of Islamic women’s magazines in Turkey, where Islamic scholars and journalists have condemned veiling-fashion as contrary to Islamic principles, which forbid waste (israf) and frown upon the display involved in modelling and fashion (Aktaş 1995; Ceylan 1992; Çiftçi 1993; Karaosmanoğlu 2002). Veiling, for Islam, is usually understood as a Koranic injunction requiring women’s modest dress. Yet alongside such articles, these magazines have displayed ever more sleek advertisements for veiling-fashion and have played a central role in the creation of the profitable niche market that veiling-fashion has become today (Kılıçbaş and Binark 2002; Sandıkçı and Ger 2007).

The difficulty of the idea – if not the practice – of veiling-fashion can be traced out through the concept of fashion itself. Marked by cycles of rapid change, fashion is usually defined in relation to the rise of mercantile capitalism in Europe, new forms of social mobility, the abandonment of ‘tradition’ and the rise of the individualistic modern subject (Polhemus and Proctor 1978; Veblen 1953; Wilson 1985). For Baudrillard fashion represents the final result of consumer capitalism, the ultimate emptying out of the sign of all reference. With no sense except its constant renewal, its up-to-dateness that consists of recycled bits of the past, fashion for Baudrillard is inherently ‘immoral’ and subservient of meaning:

> Beyond the rational and the irrational, beyond the beautiful and the ugly, the useful and the useless, it is this immorality in relation to all criteria, the frivolity which at times gives fashion its subversive force (in totalitarian, puritan or archaic contexts) . . . (Baudrillard 1993, 93–4)

In short, veiling-fashion remains controversial because it combines two systems that are seemingly incompatible: veiling, with its powerful set of religious, cultural and political references, and fashion, an unmoored system of self-referential change associated with capitalism, modernity and a particular kind of consumer subject. And yet, this apparent contradiction dissolves in the everyday practices of the producers and consumers of veiling-fashion.

We argue that to understand veiling-fashion as it plays out across economic, political and cultural fields is to enter into a new understanding of the role of Islam in the global arena today. Veiling-fashion crystallises a series of issues about Islamic identity, the transnational linkages of both producers and consumers, and the shifting boundaries between Islamic ethics and the imperatives of neoliberal capitalism. In this paper, our overarching argument is that controversies and practices surrounding veiling-fashion show how Islamic actors are adapting and transforming neoliberal capitalism at the same time as they navigate a complex geopolitical terrain in which Islam – and the iconic Muslim, headscarf-wearing woman – has been cast as a threatening ‘Other’. Thus the rise of veiling-fashion as a transnational phenomenon positions women and women’s bodies at the centre of political debates and struggles surrounding what it means to be ‘modern’ and Muslim today.

Based on interviews with producers, consumers and salesclerks, and our analysis of newspaper articles, catalogues and web sites, this article traces out how the transnational production, sale and consumption of veiling-fashion works to order spaces of geopolitics, geo-economics and subject formation. In doing so, we respond to calls for commodity research that bridges the divide between economic and cultural studies (McRobbie 1997; Jackson 2002; Gunster 2004; Mansvelt 2005; Crewe 2003). By situating the ‘fashionable veil’ as a commodity at the centre of a web of geopolitical, economic and cultural relations, we go beyond previous work that has understood veiling primarily as a problem of competing ideologies, such as secularism vs Islamism or tradition vs modernity. To this end, after contextualising the rise of veiling-fashion within Turkey, we present three interlocking lenses on the phenomenon and its transnationalisation: (1) veiling-fashion as
geopolitical, (2) veiling-fashion as Islamic practice within neoliberal capitalism and (3) veiling-fashion as a site of subject formation.

Veiling-fashion in context

The rise of the transnational veiling-fashion industry in Turkey has taken place within the context of neoliberal economic restructuring and the resurgence of Islamic identities worldwide. Turkey has been at the nexus of both of these trends. In the past three decades, neoliberal economic reform has reoriented the Turkish economy from the state-led, import-substitution industrialisation of the 1960s and 1970s towards open markets, liberalised financial institutions, and production for export (Öniş 2000; Keyman and Içduygu 2003). In the wake of this broad economic transformation has followed an unexpected development: the rise of Islam as an increasingly prominent force both politically and economically in the public sphere of this secular, democratic state.

From this combination of economic, political and cultural reshuffling has emerged a highly visible new Islamic culture of consumption, including an Islamic fashion industry (Göle 1999; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Saktanber 2002; White 1999). Despite legislation against veiling in state institutions in the 1980s, a new style of Islamic dress has become increasing popular among educated, upwardly mobile young women, many of whom are active in Islamist politics (Aktas 1991; Gökanksel 2005; Göle 1996; Ilyasoglu 1994; Secor 2002). This industry, which encompasses mostly everyday wear and some haute couture, is based on modest dress and head covering. It comprises an estimated 200 firms operating out of Turkey in 2004 (Kilicbay and Binark 2002; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Sandikci and Ger 2001 2002). Turkish producers of veiling-fashion have begun to export their products to retail outlets in the Middle East, Europe and North America. Tekbir, for example, has outlets in Germany, the Netherlands, France, England, Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, Bosnia Hercegovina, Macedonia, Azerbaijan, Dubai, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Libya, Egypt, the Sudan, Algeria, South Africa, the USA, Canada and Australia.

The veiling-fashion industry in Turkey has its roots in the re-veiling movements across a range of Muslim societies, from Indonesia to Egypt, since the late 1970s. In Turkey, a new style of women’s modest dress began to appear in urban areas in the 1980s. This style, called tesettür by its wearers and producers, was neither fashionable nor an industry at this time. Tesettür consisted mainly of headscarf-coat combinations. A large headscarf that wrapped tightly around the face and draped down to cover the neck and the shoulders was its centrepiece. Its critics underlined the novelty of this headscarf and its threatening connections to Islamist politics by the term türban, while its supporters simply called it başörtüsü, a headscarf traditionally knotted under the chin, leaving the neck and the hairline partly exposed. The accompanying ankle-length coat was cut loosely. The whole ensemble was commonly in conservative solid colours (navy, black, grey and beige) (Navaro-Yashin 2002). Many were sewn as special order by tailors or at home. The advertisements of this era were very simple, consisting of a list of items available and illustrations of females, usually drawn without a face (Kilicbay and Binark 2002; Sandikci and Ger 2007).

These qualities contrast significantly with today’s diverse, colourful and constantly changing styles of veiling-fashion and a newly emergent and profitable industry that encompasses production, distribution, marketing, advertising and sale of this fashion as part of the consumer lifestyle of a new urban Muslim bourgeoisie. In the last decade, Tekbir and its competitors (Aydan, Dicle, Hak, Hilye, Setre, Sitare, Selam and others) became recognisable brand names with glossy catalogues, advertisements and even fashion shows that posed attractive models in sophisticated scenes. These scenes display and construct the elements of this new lifestyle: upscale vacationing, playing tennis (an elite sport in Turkey) and using state-of-the-art camcorders. In the catalogues and web sites of several companies, such as Benna and Dicle, headscarf-wearing models appear side by side with those who are not wearing a headscarf. Islamic female consumers can now choose from a proliferation of styles, including tunic and pants combinations, suits, formal wear, daily wear, sports, bridal, maternity and haute couture. These styles cater to different tastes, age groups, socio-economic classes and life stages. The colours, patterns and cuts vary greatly, from very bright colours, bold patterns and tight-fitting clothing to more conservative ones. These styles are under constant scrutiny as to whether or to what extent they are ‘Islamic’ (Aktas 1991; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Şişman 2001). The collections change at least seasonally, following national and international fashion trends. The designs are adopted from the catwalks of the women’s global fashion meccas of Paris and Milan. For example, the Tekbir CEO and the designers go to the conventions and shows in

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France and Italy every year. Tekbir’s hiring of the German designer Heidi Beck in 2008 points to further attempts to integrate European design elements and techniques to the veiling-fashion industry in Turkey. Yet Europe is by no means the only source of influence for this industry. The inspiration for designs also comes from East and Southeast Asia (for example, in Tekbir’s 2005 spring/summer collection and in Aydan’s 2007 summer collection) and the Middle East as well as from the Ottoman and pre-Ottoman past. In fact, Ottoman court dresses have been a style that Tekbir has continually referenced since its first fashion show in 1992. Tekbir’s 2008 line prominently illustrates this eclecticism and recycling. The diverse and ever-changing styles of veiling-fashion work to create and to profit from an increasingly segmented and growing domestic and transnational Islamic consumer market while raising many questions about the relationship between Islamic ethics and practice and neoliberal capitalism.

Navigating the geopolitical terrain

For over two centuries, veiling has been geopolitical – which is to say, it has been practised, represented and regulated as part of the enactment of global and local geographies of power. Embedded in the history of European colonialism in the Middle East and North Africa, veiling has been both a symbol of ‘Oriental’ difference and a focal point for the regulation of societies (Yeğenoğlu 1998). In the mid-twentieth century, for example, the French attempted a colonial strategy that hinged on the unveiling of Algerian women (El Guindi 1999; Fanon 1967; Lazreg 1994). Throughout the century, unveiling was either forced or encouraged by modernising and Westernising Middle Eastern states, such as Egypt, Turkey and Iran (Kandiyoti 1991). Veiled women were represented, both by Europeans and by the local modernisers, as backwards and oppressed, and this judgement was in turn extended to Islam itself (Ahmed 1992; Kahf 1999; Mabro 1996). The legacy of these attacks on the veil is that this item of women’s dress has become a potent cultural and political symbol (El Guindi 1999; MacLeod 2001; Mahmood 2005). As a result, the re-veiling of women has been a central motif of the ‘Islamic resurgence’, or the transnational rise of movements for the Islamicisation of society since the late 1970s.

Today, veiling and its regulation take place within a transnational legal context that produces ‘European’ and ‘Muslim’ spaces at both local and global scales. The production, sale and consumption of veiling-fashion are part of the growing transnationalisation of Muslim identity and political practice (Soysal 1994; Ehrkamp and Leitner 2006; Samers 2003; Jackson et al. 2004; Nagel and Staeheli 2004; Silvey 2006; Staeheli and Nagel 2006). Controversies surrounding the regulation of veiling in European Union (EU) have been a flashpoint for the tensions arising from Muslim immigration to Europe, especially since the attacks of 9/11 in 2001 and the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003 (Allievi and Neilsen 2003; Mandaville 2003). Disputes around women’s rights to veil in public institutions have erupted in France, and the veil (or hijab, as it is commonly called by Arabic-speaking immigrants in France) has been banned in schools since the State Court judgement of 1989. The strengthening of the French court’s anti-veiling stance throughout the 1990s was welcomed by Turkish secularists and represented a blow to those who have tried to cast veiling as a human rights issue in Turkey (Gökarıksel and Mitchell 2003). In Germany, veiling has also provoked legal controversies regarding the appointment of veiled women to civil servants’ posts as school teachers (Hausler 2001). As in France, the courts have been asked to rule on whether or not veiling is inconsistent with the state’s principle of neutrality in religious matters. In the Netherlands, the government has cited reasons of ‘public order, security and protection of citizens’ for planned legislation banning the veil in all public spaces, the most comprehensive anti-veiling legislation yet (BBC News 2006). Although today the legal regulation of veiling varies across EU member states, in the long run veiling regulation must also be considered against the backdrop of the European Court of Justice and its evolving jurisprudence (Shadid and Koningsveld 2005; Gökarıksel and Mitchell 2005). The regulation or deregulation of veiling has thus become bound up with debates surrounding the identity of the Turkish state, Muslim migrants in Europe and Turkish–EU relations.

Turkey’s ban on the veil in public schools, universities, courts and state offices has become a high-profile political issue. Since the headscarf ban began to be enforced in the mid-1980s, protests on university campuses have expressed popular opposition to the ban, while pro-headscarf politicians and pundits have made the lifting of the ban into a human rights issue (Secor 2005). At the same time, secularists have defended the ban as protecting the rights of women not to cover their heads. Indeed, the movement to lift the ban has been seen as a harbinger
of an Iranian or even Taliban-style reconfiguration of space, gender, and power in Turkey. The wider geopolitical mapping of this conflict jutted to the surface in 1999 when Merve Kavakçı, the Islamic party (Fazilet Partisi) parliamentarian attempted to take her oath of office wearing a headscarf and was escorted from the premises. While many commentators and ordinary people alike decried the incident for (further) politicising the headscarf, the mainstream Turkish press managed to accuse Kavakçı, who had both Turkish and US citizenship, of being at once an American provocateur and an Iranian agent (Özyürek 2003). Such fears and suspicions have frequently become attached to the wearers and producers of veiling-fashion. It is within this transnational juridical landscape and the geopolitical relations that structure it that not only veiling in general but veiling-fashion in particular has become popular in Turkey and transnationally. On the one hand, the legal regulation of veiling applies equally to all Muslim women who cover their hair, whether or not their style is à la mode. Thus from the perspective of regulation, the rise of veiling-fashion, with its appeal to young, educated women, does not shift the terms of the debate as much as it contributes to its visibility. On the other hand, veiling-fashion directly engages with the regulation of veiling and shifting geopolitical relations. For instance, in response to the Turkish parliamentary vote to lift the headscarf ban in February 2008 (a move declared unconstitutional by the courts four months later), Tekbir publicised special ways of tying the scarf and styles for university students and projected a 30 per cent increase in sales (Türk 2008; Yüzbaşoğlu 2008).

Veiling-fashion and its design can also be seen as responding to the post-9/11 geopolitical milieu and to the intensification of anti-Islamic sentiment both in Turkey and in Europe over the past decade. In an interview in 2004, a veiling-fashion store manager explained that she chose hot pink and white polka dotted headscarves and a completely white attire as the uniform for the salesclerks in an effort to avoid black and its associations with conservatism and fundamentalism. Choosing bright colours, she explained, improves the image of veiled women in society. Likewise, according to Özlem Sandıkçı and Güliz Ger:

The events of 9/11 had a further impact on the sense of tesettür fashion in Turkey. As the media repeatedly circulated stigmatizing images of Muslims highlighting the veil and the beard as symbols of Islamist militancy, it became even more important to portray a pleasant, elegant, and modern appearance. Black and dark-colored tesettür clothes and large headscarves became less popular. . . . [T]he new ‘modern’ style of covering rapidly spread to a larger group who did not want to appear repellent to the uncovered public or to become stereotyped as ‘ugly,’ ‘backward,’ and ‘threatening’. . . . (2007, 203; 2005)

Veiling-fashion is part of how Muslim women navigate the everyday geopolitics of ‘Islamic threat’. With American and British leaders asserting the need to distinguish between ‘good Muslims’ and ‘bad Muslims’ in the global arena, veiling-fashion can potentially work on the bodily level to associate oneself with the former (Mamdani 2002). By wearing lighter colours and more ‘pleasing’ styles, Muslim women not only attempt to dispel the negative associations of the veil, but also to position themselves as fashion-conscious consumers, integrating into ‘modern’ society – as a profitable niche market, no less. In short, veiling-fashion works on multiple levels – aesthetically, discursively and in the everyday practices of both its producers and consumers – both to accommodate and to challenge global geopolitical mappings that pit ‘Islam vs the West’.

Islam and neoliberal capitalism

Muslims of the Information Age, with their principles of High Morality, Free Market and Freedom of Thought and Belief have to build a global market based on the spirit of the Market of Medina . . . (MÜSİAD 1997, in Adaş 2006, 131)

When you [only] think of how to make more money in trade, then service suffers. But if you think of how best to serve your beliefs through trade, then it will be bereketli [bountiful] and service will be prolific . . . [Our goal] is to make tesettür part of Turkey’s current affairs, to have it endorsed, liked, and accepted. (Tekbir’s CEO, Mustafa Karaduman, in Ceylan 1992, 1)

The formation and development of the veiling-fashion industry puts the producers and consumers of its ‘Islamic’ products into a complex relationship with the rationality and imperatives of neoliberal capitalism. The veiling-fashion industry has emerged and grown rapidly as part of an expanding apparel production, retail and marketing sector fuelled by Turkey’s neoliberal policies and entry into Customs Union with the EU (Neidik and Gereffi 2006; Tokatl 2003; see also Begg et al. 2003; Pickles et al. 2006). It is part of a growing ‘halal’ economic landscape
from banking and finance (Maurer 2002) to online marketing and tourism (Al-Harmaneh and Steiner 2004; Bilici 1999). Proponents of ‘Islamic economics’ prescribe rules for the behaviour of Islamic firms based on Koranic injunctions and Islamic ethical mandates regarding business transactions, workplace practices, fair wages, community benefits and modes of profit (Pfeifer 2001; Uddin 2003). Thus, Islamic businesses must navigate the solidarity, social responsibility, other-worldly orientation and ‘high morality’ of Islamic ethics, while at the same time adhering to the demands of competitiveness, global integration, profit-making in an interest-based economy and this-worldly concerns. As the actors of the veiling-fashion industry navigate this complicated economic and ethical terrain, they formulate a highly contested Islamic neoliberal capitalism. We argue that this process involves not only the adaptation and appropriation of neoliberal capitalism but also the redefinition and transformation of Islamic practice and values.

In the context of Turkey, the rise and development of ‘Islamic capitalism’ has been directly associated with neoliberalisation processes of the last two decades (Atasoy 2003; Buğra 1998 2003; Öniş 2000; Tuğal 2002; Yavuz 2003). Neoliberal policies since the 1980s included market and trade liberalisation, fiscal austerity measures, increased transnational capital mobility and the privileging of small-scale businesses more adaptable to flexible markets. These policies worked to limit the secular state’s role in the economy directly (through privatisation) and indirectly, by undermining the support relationship it had established with the mostly secular, Istanbul-based oligarchy of large enterprises (Buğra 1998; Yavuz 2003). Many small- or medium-scale, mostly family-owned and Anatolian-based businesses that claim an Islamic identity were founded in this new economic environment. Most veiling-fashion companies fall into this category. The success of these new Islamic businesses, often called ‘Anatolian lions’, is attributed to the combination of ‘religious discipline, ethical solidarity and entrepreneurial dynamism’ in their business practices (Yavuz 2003, 82). The use of religious networks to secure investment finance from Turkish immigrants in Europe (especially Germany) has also been noted in the success of Islamic businesses (Buğra 1998, 532).

The distinction between these new Islamic enterprises and the secular business establishment was spelled out by the founding of two business associations, MÜSİAD (Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association, in 1990) and ASKON (Anatolian Lions Businessmen Association, in 1998), as alternatives to the secular TÜSİAD (Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen Association). Since their establishment, MÜSİAD and ASKON have become the prominent platforms for the concerns and interests of their members while also promoting Islamic ethics and solidarity. The textiles and apparel sector and the veiling-fashion industry are well represented in both of these organisations. For example, MÜSİAD’s web site lists 12 members specialising specifically in tesettür clothing, not including its member Setre. Tekbir has membership in both ASKON and MÜSİAD and its CEO is the head of the textiles and apparel sector of the first. An analysis of these associations’ rhetoric and activities provides important insights into the wider Islamic neoliberal context of which the veiling-fashion industry is a part.

As the quote above illustrates, MÜSİAD appeals to the ‘Muslims of the Information Age’ to form a global Islamic market. Presenting Muslim businesses as ‘the driving force of the Muslim rebirth’, it advocates for covering ‘the whole world with information and business networks’ (MÜSİAD 1997). Like many other Islamic intellectuals and businesses, this association refers to the Market of Medina as the basis of Islamic capitalism. The Market of Medina, established by the prophet himself, represents the utopian Golden Age of Islam and is defined retrospectively as the ideal and authentic ‘free market’ of Muslims (Adaş 2006). The Market of Medina is depicted as non-interventionist, non-monopolistic and tax-free; it attracts merchants, stimulates profits, allows for ‘just’ prices to be reached through market mechanisms, and thus benefits the consumers (Adaş 2006, 133). ASKON differs from MÜSİAD in its critique of ‘globalisation’ (as benefiting large Western corporations and eroding local cultures), the IMF and US involvement in the Middle East (ASKON 2008a). Nonetheless, ASKON is a proponent of the ‘free market’ redefined within an Islamic framework. Its motto ‘Hakli Zenginlik’ (sanctified wealth) sends the message of Islamic capitalism; its principles are listed as commercial ethics, honesty, freedom (particularly free enterprise), virtue, quality, non-wasteful consumption and fair income distribution (ASKON 2008b).

This Islamic neoliberal ethic is embodied by Homo Islamicus, a figure repeatedly put forward by MÜSİAD. Homo Islamicus seeks wealth and economic success not only for personal reasons but also for the greater good of Islam and community.

Area Vol. 41 No. 1, pp. 6–18, 2009
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company has 39 outlets/franchises domestically and Ankara and 13 across the country. In addition, the these are located in Istanbul, two in the capital has a total of 31 stores throughout Turkey; 16 of stores and franchises and its recently opened state-of-art garment factory. As of June 2008, Tekbir to grow into a brand name with numerous chain of-the-art clothing in 1982. After its first fashion show in 1992, the company started of Islamic, MÜSİAD and ASKON demonstrate the Islamicisation of neoliberalism to justify and to promote Islamic entrepreneurialism. Yet this rhetoric often reinterprets Islamic convention and rarely includes a comprehensive and consistent schema. In practice, even the most fundamental principles of Islam, such as interest rates, are flexibly redefined to suit business needs and working conditions are often not better for workers in terms of wages, safety, hours, etc. In fact, Islamic brotherhood can be mobilised to suppress dissent in the workplace (Adaş 2006, 124).

The veiling-fashion industry is one of the key areas where Islamic entrepreneurialism and Homo Islami-cus become prominently visible. Many of the com- panies in this industry construct an Islamic identity through such means as their choice of names for the company and its products and the messages they publicise through their web sites, catalogues and fashion shows. The ones that do not do so, including stores that include tesettür among their product mix to appeal to the widest possible segments of the market, such as Özbil and Eser (interviews June 2004), remain invisible in the contemporary economic and cultural landscape. The largest and leading company of this industry, Tekbir, has used its constructed Islamic identity as a successful marketing and branding strategy. This company demonstrates vividly the many issues related to Islamic neoliberal capitalism.5

Tekbir's Islamic identification is articulated in the name of the company (target of a recent lawsuit6), its stated mission, its products, and its personal and professional ethics – most of which are contested, as our opening story about the aftermath of the 2008 fashion show illustrates. Tekbir is a family corporation, founded and run by eight brothers who migrated from rural East Anatolia to Istanbul at an early age. The oldest brother and CEO, Mustafa Karaduman, started up a very small-scale tailoring business which began focusing on tesettür clothing in 1982. After the establishment of Tekbir in 1990 and following the global interest and national controversies following its first fashion show in 1992, the company started to grow into a brand name with numerous chain stores and franchises and its recently opened state-of-the-art garment factory. As of June 2008, Tekbir has a total of 31 stores throughout Turkey; 16 of these are located in Istanbul, two in the capital Ankara and 13 across the country. In addition, the company has 39 outlets/franchises domestically and 11 internationally. Its goal is to have a total of 100 stores and franchises by the end of 2008.

CEO Karaduman attributes the success of the company to the hard work and Islamic devotion and mission of its founders. In his words, this mission is to ‘get as many women as possible to wear a head-scarf. I am not trying to do this with a stick but with design’ (Barnier 2007). According to Karaduman, Tekbir has not received any loans from the state and has not benefited from any incentives because of its policy to avoid interest. Instead, the company has relied on informal business networks that he and his brothers have developed over the years with suppliers. Echoing the neoliberal mantra, he says he asks nothing of the state other than minimising its interventions in the economy. He sees ‘free trade’ as crucial to Tekbir’s and the country’s development, and taxes and tariffs on trade as artificial ‘barriers’ that need to be lifted. According to Karaduman, Turkey’s economic future lies in trade not with the EU, but with its neighbours, including ones with non-Muslim populations like Russia, Bulgaria and Greece. In Karaduman’s words:

Turkey’s neighboring countries import 70–80% of their apparel. When customs barriers are lifted, Turkey with its proved status [as a global exporter of textiles and apparel] can easily dominate these markets . . . That’s why [Tekbir’s] priority is the lifting of customs barriers. (Interview in Baydemir 2007)

Karaduman promotes this vision in his position as the CEO of Tekbir and the head of the textiles and apparel division of ASKON. As much as his ideas are in line with IMF-orchestrated policies, he is very critical of this organisation, which he sees as only serving US interests and power. Yet while laying emphasis on building networks with Muslims nationally and transnationally, he is also not strictly discriminatory in terms of trade and production relations. Tekbir’s recent hire of the German designer, Heidi Beck, is a case in point. This attitude is prevalent in other areas of the company as well. For example, Tekbir buys fabric from China and started to subcontract part of its headscarf and knitted sweater production to Chinese companies in 2004. Cafer Karaduman of Tekbir states that the company has not shifted its production significantly to China (as other Turkish apparel companies have) because of the responsibility they feel towards their workers (Çakır 2007).

In fact, Tekbir built a new, six-storey building in one of the main textiles and apparel districts of

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Istanbul (Mahmutbey) to house its garment factory and to bring all the departments of the company (design, cutting, sewing, quality control, accounting, management, marketing, etc.) under one roof. This building also includes a large wholesale showroom, recreation area for workers and a mesjid for prayers. The factory is equipped with the latest technologies, increasing its production capacity significantly. Operating with only 60 per cent of its capacity, as of December 2007, the factory produced 400,000 overcoats and 200,000 headscarves (Tezel 2008). Tekbir’s total sales in 2007 reached 39 million YTLs (approximately 30 million US dollars). Its growth is projected to continue into the future with the goals (approximately 30 million US dollars). Its growth is projected to continue into the future with the goals of having 50 stores and 2500 workers in 2010 and projected to continue into the future with the goals of having 50 stores and 2500 workers in 2010 and 100 stores and 5000 workers in 2015 (Cakir 2007).

Although the salesclerks and store managers of Tekbir are all headscarf-wearing women, perhaps ironically Karaduman’s stated mission is not actualised among Tekbir’s behind-the-scenes female workers, including some designers, cutters, sewers and quality controllers, many of whom do not veil. The salesclerks, however, in their company-provided uniforms styled according to the latest trends, play a significant role in marketing Tekbir products. In addition to modelling veiling-fashion in the stores, they also provide personal assistance and advice to customers. Most of the salesclerks are young (aged 18–25). Their performance (in terms of sales) is recorded on a whiteboard in the eating/resting area. The adjacent small mesjid – which spatially reflects the significance given to Islamic observance and would not be present in many other stores – provides space for fulfilling the religious duty of praying and, when not in use, also serves a storage space (for example, for decorative balloons in July 2004). Like the factory workers, salesclerks are paid the minimum wage determined by the state (about US$322 in 2008). They work long hours with few breaks. Interviews with Karaduman and salesclerks in 2007 revealed that only a few are expected to stay and pursue this work as a career, even after becoming a store manager. Yet many underline the value of the women-only social network they establish working at Tekbir stores and the relatively safe working environment.

As Tekbir continues to grow, it is also beginning new ventures in Islamic capitalism. In 2008, the company started to produce a men’s line and opened its first men’s clothing store in Istanbul. The company now has a Tekbir store card that gives many incentives (interest-free instalments, discounts, etc.) to customers to spend their money at Tekbir. It is competing aggressively with a growing number of firms in the same industry, with frequent promotions and discounts in addition to innovations in design and sale and ever more spectacular fashion shows. The company has also revised its position vis-à-vis some key traditional Islamic practices, for example stopping gender segregation among spectators at its fashion shows beginning in 2004 (Tercüman 2004). Through its business practices and vision, as well as its controversial styles, Tekbir illustrates how contemporary Islamic entrepreneurs are operating within a neoliberal modality cast as Islamic, from its origins to ethical principles and ultimate goals. And as Islamic entrepreneurs formulate new forms of Islamic neoliberalism, they also reinterpret and transform Islamic values and practice to suit the imperatives of capitalism and the changing economic and cultural landscape, including the desires of the newly emergent devout middle class.

Gender, subjectivity and veiling-fashion

[Tesettür] makes a woman aware of her femininity, makes her feel her womanhood. (Caler Karaduman of Tekbir, in Ceylan 1992, 1)

Women [in tesettür] like change. They like eye-catching models in their dress. They certainly do not want to purchase plain, simple clothes. They go for bright colors . . . Women in tesettür follow fashion trends very closely. Believe me sometimes they don’t like the display combinations we make [in the store]; they have very different ideas in mind and they come up with beautiful combinations. (Ayse, store manager, interview June 2004)

The producers and consumers of veiling-fashion participate in the construction of new Muslim subjectivities through the set of new meanings and practices enabled and promoted by this industry and its surrounding political and cultural debates. The proliferation of veiling-fashion and its diverse styles is embedded in the growth of consumer culture and the cultivation of subjectivities in increasingly commodified forms for the pious and the secular alike (Navaro-Yashin 2002). With its emphasis on the individual, even when part of an imagined national and transnational community of Muslims, veiling-fashion signals the emergence of a new female subject who navigates the multiple cross-currents of femininity, piety, modesty, sexuality, class, age and urbanity. Veiling-fashion involves constructing anew not only ideas about femininity, but also of taste,
of intense negotiations and sometimes quarrels between daughters and mothers or between wives and husbands about the purchasing choices women make. Veiling-fashion consumers are as much if not more interested in self-stylisation and are increasingly knowledgeable and tasteful about fashion according to Ayşe. Further she sees veiling-fashion as crucial to her subjectivity and to her positioning herself as an urban, educated, tasteful young woman who is Muslim and modern. She is conscious of the negative attitude toward veiling in Turkey through first-hand experience and is keen to counter this approach.

Yet Ayşe is very much aware of the criticism eye-catching veiling-fashion gets in Islamic circles (for example, in the pages of the daily Milli Gazete). She justifies her and her customers' choices, as well as the veiling-fashion industry more generally, by citing the lack of details about the exact clothing style in Islamic texts allow her and others flexibility in terms of interpretation as to with what to cover. But Islamist critics do not agree and are especially sensitive about the self-indulgence, wastefulness and elitism they see in veiling-fashion and its consumers (Eygi 2005). For them, these women represent the emergence of a ‘Muslim high society’ or ‘the green rich’, terms that came into wide use at least since 2002 following the extravagant wedding party of the Islamist political leader Necmettin Erbakan’s daughter at the international five-star Sheraton Hotel in Ankara. Veiling-fashion is taken as part of a consumerist lifestyle that puts this-worldly, hedonistic pleasures and concerns above everything else. Instead, these critics invoke solidarity and sharing with the poor and the disadvantaged in the transnational community of Muslims.

The secular media similarly criticises consumers of veiling-fashion and depicts the new fashionable Muslim women as the symbols of the hypocrisy hidden under the mask of Islam by Islamic capitalists and politicians. The news stories about the Islamic high society focus mostly on women and their veiling-fashion, emphasising their search for brand names and luxury items (Tempo 2008; Doğan 2006; Hakan 2008). During the coverage of the 2008 Tekbir fashion show, a young woman in the audience attracted the attention of the media. The secular daily Aksam used the headline: ‘The white-Turk girl of the fashion...
show talked’ along with ‘I read the Koran just as I put on make-up’ (23 April 2008). Her name was Gül and she was presented as the synthesis of modernity and Islam with sarcasm. She was wearing bright yellow trousers, jeans, a white tunic, and a very colourful headscarf tied on the side; it was noted that she had coloured contacts, tattooed eyebrows, make-up and fishnet stockings. The term ‘white-Turk’ was coined a few years ago to emphasise the racialised and Euro-Americanised elitism in Turkey; the use of this term to describe Gül underlined the emergence of a similar group of devout Muslims who are not only rich but also disinterested in and disconnected from the lives of ‘Others’ in their pursuit of self-interest and privilege.

As women wear veiling-fashion, they inevitably enter a complex relationship with these ongoing debates about what it means to be a woman, to be Muslim and to be modern. Different social, political and religious meanings are attached to different styles of veiling-fashion and their presentation (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Secor 2005). In this way, the meanings of veiling-fashion travel across different sites and position their consumers and producers vis-à-vis moralist discourses about Islamism, gender roles and consumerism.

Conclusion

By highlighting the ambivalences of veiling-fashion, both in practice and as it is produced as a political issue within national and transnational arenas, we aim to contribute to a nuanced understanding of emergent Islamic geographies. While Islam has been etched into discourses of security and geo-strategy in the context of the US ‘War on Terror’, in fact transnational Islamic networks encompass a wide range of movements for the spiritual and social Islamicisation of society. Islamic business practices, financial networks and the rise of Islamic consumption are prominent elements of this broader negotiation between Islamic ethics and the imperatives of neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, ‘Islamic consumerism’ may serve the vision of a global umma by cementing communal bonds between transnational Islamic actors at the same time as it creates and reveals differences among Muslims, especially those of class and gender.

Our discussion of veiling-fashion as a political, economic and cultural phenomenon highlights the paradoxes and controversies that trouble the relationship between Islam and consumer capitalism. If consumption is considered constitutive of the neoliberal subject and her relationship to the state and society (the ‘consumer-citizen’) (Yuval-Davis 1997), it must be said that this version of subjectivity is very different from the one Islamist movements generally construct. Contemporary Islamism, especially its ‘moral capitalist’ strand, emphasises religious ethics and solidarity in the lives of Muslim subjects and advocates moderation in consumption and the avoidance of extravagance and waste. Our discussion has shown some of the ambivalent ways these ideals play out on the ground through the Turkish veiling-fashion industry.

Finally, it seems that the bringing together of veiling, that erstwhile marker of piety and modesty, with the showy and ostentatiously wasteful cycles of fashion cannot but lead to controversy. While fashion is notoriously unmoored from meaning and judgement, the veil as Islamic practice is most definitely supposed to mean something. What veiling-fashion does is to reveal the sliding gap between the signifier (the veil) and its desired signification (Islamic womanhood). When the headlines cry, ‘From prayer to the catwalk’, the very impossibility of fixing the veil becomes a spectacle itself. With fashion, the already multivalent veil becomes, in Baudrillard’s conception, a free-floating signifier.

In its free play, the veil can become both the ultimate marker of Islam and a surface without clear referent. Consider Tekbir’s mission: to increase the number of women who veil by making veiling attractive and fashionable. The allure of fashion and the attraction of its ever-changing designs become vehicles for the spread of veiling among women, and this mass veiling is seen as a metonym for the Islamicisation of society. But using fashion in this manner changes the practice of veiling and of Islam significantly. It becomes more difficult to identify what motivates a woman to wear veiling-fashion and it becomes impossible to identify pure intentions, be they religious, aesthetic or social. In Baudrillard’s terms, the immorality of fashion is demonstrated in the emptying out of the meaning of one of the most potent symbols of Muslim femininity in the veiling-fashion industry. Yet as the controversies that we have analysed here demonstrate, producers, consumers and critics alike attempt to anchor veiling-fashion, attaching to it particular kinds of significance at the same time as it becomes part of the everyday, embodied practices of Muslim women. In the ongoing struggle to define what it means to be modern and Muslim today, women and the question of the veil remain at the very centre of the storm.
Notes

1 Milliyet is one of the major daily newspapers in Turkey. Many other newspapers, web sites and television channels used the same title in their coverage of the fashion show, including the best-selling daily, Hürriyet, and the television channels Fox and Haber3 TV.

2 Veiling takes many forms, from simply covering the hair, to loose clothing that does not reveal the shape of women’s bodies, to complete covering that exposes no more than the hands and feet. While many Muslims consider veiling an essential expression of women’s piety, others do not consider it necessary to express their religious beliefs in this way. Veiling-fashion involves the covering of women’s hair and ‘modest’ dress, which, of course, is open to interpretation.

3 Interviews were conducted in 2004, 2005 and 2007 with different actors in Istanbul’s veiling-fashion industry, including the CEO of Tekbir, Mustafa Karaduman (four interviews), salesclerks (eight interviews, six of Tekbir), and store managers and owners in Fatih and Istanbul Manifaturacılardan Çarşısında (five interviews).

4 This information is from interviews with Tekbir CEO, Mustafa Karaduman. Other companies, including Dicle, Hak, Selam, and Aydan, similarly export their products to the Middle East, Europe and North America.

5 Tesettür is derived from setr, which means to cover up, to conceal in Arabic. Tesettür by definition is an umbrella term that includes various styles of covering, from the full body cloak to just a headscarf.

6 Although the exact form neoliberalism takes varies from one context to another, it is generally characterised by the active promotion of ‘free market’ economics and its rationality of governance worldwide (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002; Gill 2003; Harvey 2003; Larner 2003; Peet 2003). The ideal neoliberal subject is an autonomous, entrepreneurial, competitive, self-regulating and self-realising individual (Dean 1999; Gordon 1991; Gökankesl and Mitchell 2005; Rose 1999).

7 MÜSİAD has a very large presence in Istanbul and has chosen a more centrist approach, while ASKON emphasises its Anatolian base and is more aligned with conservative Islamic politics.

8 Unless otherwise indicated, the authors’ interviews with CEO Mustafa Karaduman (in 2004, 2005 and 2007) are the primary source for all views attributed to Karaduman and the information about Tekbir presented below.

9 Two Islamic intellectuals of the magazine İslamiyet have brought a case against Tekbir, arguing that this name is distinctively Islamic and as a sacred name, it is not appropriate for use in commerce (Turkish Daily News 2008).

10 Green is generally considered the colour of Islam and used to denote Islamic identity.

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