

# The *Hijāb* as Border of Cloth: An Ecological Systems Theory Perspective

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## Abstract

Using ecological systems theory to understand the systemic interactions in the context of Islam is not an extensively researched topic. In view of this, ecological systems theory is used in this article to argue that the social interaction of an individual Muslim female deliberately donning the *hijāb* should be interpreted and evaluated in the context of Islam as an ecological system. Islam is analysed as an ecological system in which each part of the system is influenced by all other parts, but in turn also influences all other parts. There are borders between the various parts of the system, but these borders are permeable from the inside and from the outside. These principles are applied to every Muslim female who chooses to don the *hijāb*. She becomes an integral and indispensable part of Islam as a system. She is influenced by every part of the system, and in turn influences every part by her conscious choice to give visual expression to her religious identity. Awareness of the mutual interactions between an individual Muslim female and all other constituent parts of her religion allows for a contextual and holistic analysis of the *hijāb* as religious and cultural phenomenon. The *hijāb* functions as a border of cloth demarcating the Muslim female body as sacred space in space as she interacts with and within her micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems.

**Keywords:** *hijāb*; Islam; ecological systems theory



Islam is present in every aspect of ... life through time, space, discourses and actions. More than a common reference, Islam is a system bonding people, objects, ideas, time and space. (Barylo 2017, 194)

## Introductory Remarks<sup>1</sup>

Few subjects have become so controversial in contemporary society as the wearing of the *ḥijāb* and *niqāb* by Muslim women. For many it has become “an emblem of radical Islamist politics” (Scott 2007, 4). El Guindi (2008, 143) aptly describes the preoccupation with the *ḥijāb* as a “hysterical obsession” when she says: “The hijab continues to be a hysterical obsession of politics and media and has become increasingly the focus of European politics and controversy.”<sup>2</sup> The *ḥijāb* is a constant cause for debate, a phenomenon to be explained, investigated, dissected, condemned and defended in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries. Central to the debate is the question whether the act of donning the *ḥijāb* is not an outdated practice suppressing a woman’s dignity and independence and consequently amounting to a violation of her rights (Ramírez 2015, 671–72).

The division by ideology and politics is also present in publications by Muslim scholars themselves, as seen in the collection of essays published by Mansoor Moaddel and Kamran Talattof (2000). The contributions display “the dynamic nature of the religion of Islam, far from its image that has been portrayed in certain media as a monolithic and stagnated system of ideas” (Moaddel and Talattof 2000, 1). The authors classify their material in two categories. The first, “covering a period between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, consisted of a set of interrelated discourses that sought to bridge Islam with modernity” (Moaddel and Talattof 2000, 1).<sup>3</sup> The second “came in pari passu with the decline of liberal-nationalism between the 1930s and 1950s ... and its end almost always through right- or left-wing military coups. In marked contrast with the previous ideologies, this new discourse categorically rejected the Western model and outlook” and can be labelled as “fundamentalism” (Moaddel and Talattof 2000, 2).<sup>4</sup> The so-called “Islam versus the West” debate is thus “not simply a debate between

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1 This article is based upon research done by Latifah Bin Nafisah for her PhD thesis in Ancient Culture Studies at the University of Pretoria under the supervision of Prof. Gert Prinsloo (Ancient and Modern Languages and Cultures) and Prof. Reineth Prinsloo (Social Work and Criminology) (Bin Nafisah 2018).

2 In the context of this study, *ḥijāb* is used as a broad term to refer to any form of Muslim female modest dress, while *niqāb* refers specifically to the face veil associated in particular with Arab women when they appear in the public sphere. Bin Nafisah (2018, 8–13) provides a more detailed explanation of various Arabic terms used for female dress items.

3 Cf. Moaddell and Talattof (2000, 23–196) for various contributions belonging to this category.

4 Cf. Moaddell and Talattof (2000, 197–372) for various contributions belonging to this category.

Islamic fundamentalism and the Western world. It is rather an ideological/theological debate within Islam itself” (Moaddel and Talattof 2000, viii).

In this article, the authors wish to avoid the Islam versus the West debate.<sup>5</sup> They analyse the *hijāb* as an expression of a female Muslim’s desire to visually exemplify her complete submission to Allāh. The authors avoid taking an overtly ideological stance by applying an approach from the social sciences, namely ecological systems theory, to illuminate the conscious choice of a female Muslim in the context of Islam as a religious and cultural system.<sup>6</sup>

## Ecological Systems Theory: Theoretical Perspectives

The researchers apply the Russian-born American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory to the phenomenon of the *hijāb*. They argue that the *hijāb* forms an integral and indispensable part of a complex system. Ahmed, Amer and Killawi (2017, 50) state, “The Islamic perspective considers a person’s context and environment to play a vital role in shaping individual behaviors and experiences.” The authors argue that in Islam, the individual is rooted in a larger ecosystem where all systems influence each other. El Guindi proposes an approach to Islam “in which life is conceptualized as a web of nested interconnections and embeddedness” (El Guindi 2008, xii). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory affords the authors an excellent opportunity to analyse Islam as “a web of nested interconnections and embeddedness” (El Guindi 2008, xii) that plays “a vital role in shaping individual behaviors and experiences” (Ahmed, Amer and Killawi 2017, 50). The guiding premise is that the total system of Islamic faith and traditions contains the overarching principles upon which Muslim women base their choice of dress. Viewing an individual Muslim female as part of an overarching and all-encompassing system will provide a new perspective on the phenomenon of the *hijāb* from the point of view of a Muslim woman donning it.

With ecological systems theory as guiding principle, the authors focus on the role of Muslim women in Islam as an ecological system. They indicate that boundaries exist between the constituent parts of Islam as a religious and cultural system. However, these boundaries are mutually permeable. Each individual part of the system influences all other parts and is, in turn, influenced by all other parts (Rangoonwala, Sy and Epinoza 2011, 223). Thus, borders and boundaries can be – and should be – crossed, but

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5 The scope of the article does not allow for a review of the vast literature on the role of the *hijāb* in Islam in general or the controversies regarding the wearing of the *hijāb* in predominantly Western countries. See in this regard, for examples, the extensive analyses by Fatima Mernissi (1991) and Leila Ahmed (2011).

6 Prinsloo and Prinsloo (2013, 158–78) applied ecological systems theory in their “interdisciplinary and intertextual reading” of the story of Dinah in Genesis 34. The present article extends such an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of the Islamic *hijāb* as a religious and cultural phenomenon.

according to the protocols and expectations of Islam as a complex system. The social interaction of an individual Muslim female deliberately donning the *hijāb* should be interpreted and evaluated in the context of the entire system (Ahmed, Amer and Killawi 2017, 49; El Guindi 2008, xi). Ecological systems theory illuminates the mutual interactions between an individual Muslim female and all other constituent parts of her religion and culture.

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 21) defines ecological systems theory as follows:

The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded.

For the purpose of the application of Bronfenbrenner's theory to Islam as a religious and cultural system, it is important to note two assertions. First, human development should be viewed in the light of both constancy and change in the "immediate settings in which the developing person lives." Second, there are "relations between these settings" and between "the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded" (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 21). For Darling (2007, 204) this perspective on human development implies three things:

First, the central force in development is the active person: shaping environments, evoking responses from them, and reacting to them. Second, a fundamental premise of ecological system theory is its phenomenological nature: '[I]f men define situations as real they are real in their consequences' (Thomas & Thomas, 1929, p. 572). Finally, because different environments will have different affordances and will be responded to in different ways by different individuals, experienced and objectively defined environments will not be randomly distributed with regard to the developmental processes and the individuals one observes within them. Rather, one will find ecological niches in which distinct processes and outcomes will be observed.

For the application to Islam, these remarks have important implications. First, individual Muslims are active persons who shape their environments, evoke responses from their environments and, in turn, react to their environments. Second, the perceptions and experiences of an individual Muslim are real in the sense that it is his/her perceptions and experiences. His/her actions should be evaluated in that light, and not by any measure applied from the outside. Third, Islam does not constitute a random environment in which individual Muslims should be observed and judged, but an ecological niche in the global environment with its own distinct processes and outcomes.

Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2011) apply ecological systems theory in their cross-cultural research, asserting, “(we) all grow up in cultures where we understand what happens around us because the experiences are a familiar part of our environment and our daily lives. These experiences are not always easily understood by those living in different ecological settings” (Gardiner and Kosmitzki 2011, 2). Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2011, 10) further argue that a cross-cultural approach to human development aids researchers in separating “emics, or culture-specific concepts, from etics, or universal or culture general concepts.” Instead of taking an ideological stance in analysing the *hijāb* as a phenomenon, the authors follow an emic approach, arguing that the phenomenon should be judged against Arabo-Islamic cultural behaviour, customs, norms, and values.

The authors’ approach links with Gardiner and Kosmitzki’s (2011, 10) assessment of the ecological systems model as a tool allowing researchers “to see and understand (within a broad framework) how patterns of interaction within the family and the wider society are influenced by and, in turn, influence the connection between development and culture.” Bronfenbrenner (1979, 10) asserts that “the environment as it is *perceived* rather than as it may exist in ‘objective’ reality” is what matters “for behaviour and development.” This perception influences one’s expectations and activities. Ahmed, Amer and Killawi (2017, 49) describe the connection between individuals and their environments as “interconnected transactional networks.” Acceptance of the critical role played by the cultural or environmental context is particularly suited to the study of human behaviour and development. Within the context of this study, the critical role of the religious, cultural, and environmental context of the Muslim woman wearing the *hijāb* should be recognised (Rangoonwala, Sy and Epinoza 2011, 238).

Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2011, 25) emphasise that the ecological systems model allows researchers to go “beyond the setting immediately experienced” and “permits the incorporation of indirect, but nevertheless very real, effects from other settings, as well as from the culture as a whole.” Neal and Neal (2013, 727) regard the setting as the fundamental building block of ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 22) views each system as arising from a setting, which he defines as “a place where people can readily engage in face-to-face interaction.” Social interactions form a key component in each system (Neal and Neal 2013, 726). These interactions commence in the smallest system, the family, and from there branch out into the wider systems to create social networks.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 3) describes this ecological environment “as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls.” He conceptualises it “as a nested arrangement of concentric structures, each contained within the next. These structures are referred to as the *micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems*” (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 22). Later, Bronfenbrenner (1986, 724) adds a fifth system – the *chronosystem*. It focuses on time and socio-historical conditions as the background against which all other systems function. He argues that “the complex of nested, interconnected systems is viewed as a manifestation of overarching patterns of ideology

and organisation of the social institutions common to a particular culture or subculture” (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 8). Each of these systems involves relationships defined by expected behaviours and roles (Husain 2013, 162). If relationships in these systems are in harmony, development proceeds easily and smoothly (Gardiner and Kosmitzki 2014, 25). It implies that a Muslim female donning the *hijāb* does so in the context of larger and more complex systems, each involving relationships defined by expected behaviours and roles (Rangoonwala, Sy and Epinoza 2011, 223).

Neal and Neal (2013, 727) warn against an over-simplified conceptualisation of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory. Neal and Neal (2013, 735) argue for a networked rather than nested metaphor when conceptualising ecological systems as a networked model that “brings the relational perspective” in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model to the fore and present the following as the benefits of their adaptation of Bronfenbrenner’s model:

Firstly, it reconceptualizes settings, drawing attention to social interactions as the building blocks of ecological systems. Secondly, it clarifies how ecological systems are related to one another, highlighting that they are not necessarily nested, but instead overlap in complex ways. Finally, it establishes the potential for a direct linkage between EST as a theory and social network analysis as a method.

Neal and Neal (2013, 723) bring two important perspectives to ecological systems theory. First, they argue, “ecological systems should be conceptualized as networked” rather than nested. Second, where Bronfenbrenner specifically focuses on “the developing person” (1979, 22), Neal and Neal (2013, 723) broaden the scope of ecological systems theory by not focusing exclusively on the developing person, but a focal individual. In their networked model, “each system is defined in terms of the social relationships surrounding a focal individual, and where systems at different levels relate to one another in an overlapping but non-nested way.” They argue that “social interactions” form “the building blocks of ecological systems” (Neal and Neal 2013, 735). In the application of ecological systems theory to Islam as a religious and cultural system, and specifically the role of an individual female in the context of the system, the emphasis will fall on a focal individual and her social interactions in the various building blocks of ecological systems.

Neal and Neal’s (2013, 723) conceptualisation of ecological systems as networked rather than nested, adds an important perspective to ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner’s nested conceptualisation is visually depicted as a set of concentric circles. The depiction might trigger two misconceptions: first, that ecological systems theory implies an uncomplicated interaction between immediately consecutive systems, and second, that there are fixed boundaries between the various consecutive systems. Neither assertion is true.

In the end, life “is a system of systems of systems” (Morin 1992, 97). According to Morin (1992, 97), “the chain of systems breaks the idea of the closed and self-sufficient object. We have always treated systems as objects; it is a matter henceforth of conceiving objects as systems.” In the context of ecological systems theory, the challenge is to conceive of an object (the *hijāb*) as a system, which Morin (1992, 99) defines as “a global unity organized by interrelations between elements, actions, or individuals.” Morin (1992, 102) indicates that it is “not possible to give a system a substantial, clear, simple identity. A system presents itself at first as *unitas multiplex* ... namely as paradox: considered in respect to the Whole, it is one and homogenous; considered in respect to the components, it is diverse and heterogeneous.”

This complex nature of systems should be kept in mind when Bronfenbrenner’s conceptualisation of micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems as a nested arrangement of concentric structures is applied to Islam as a religious and cultural system. Both Neal and Neal’s (2013, 735) notion of ecological systems as a networked rather than a nested model, and Morin’s (1992, 102) notion of a system as *unitas multiplex* should be taken seriously when Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory is applied to Islam in general, and Muslim women in particular. Bronfenbrenner’s concentric circles are simply used as a tool to visualise ecological systems theory.

### **Systems within Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model**

In this section the five “layers” in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model will be briefly defined.

#### *Microsystem*

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 22) defines a microsystem as “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations *experienced* by the developing person in a given *setting* with particular physical and material characteristics.”<sup>7</sup> Neal and Neal (2013, 724) focus on the importance of a single individual when they define a microsystem as “a setting – that is, a set of people engaged in social interaction – that includes the focal individual.” Paat (2013, 956) emphasises the importance of this “focal individual” when she states that the microsystem encompasses individuals’ “intimate contacts in which they have interpersonal connections, family members, and special events or settings that often serve as their point of reference.” The microsystem can be classified as a focal individual’s immediate environment.

The two critical terms in Bronfenbrenner’s definition above are “setting” and “experienced”. A “setting” is “a place where people can readily engage in face-to-face interaction” (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 22). Neal and Neal (2013, 724) emphasise the social

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7 Emphasis added by the researchers.

nature of a setting when they define it as “a set of people engaged in social interaction, which necessarily occurs in, and is likely affected by the features of a place.”

For Bronfenbrenner (1979, 22) the term “experienced” in his definition of microsystems implies that “the scientifically relevant features of any environment include not only its objective properties but also the way in which these properties are perceived by the persons in that environment.” Bronfenbrenner (1979, 22) thus asserts that ecological systems theory departs from a distinctly “phenomenological view.” It confirms this study’s phenomenological research strategy. This article emphasises that a Muslim female donning the *hijāb* perceives her environment from her perspective. Her *hijāb* should be analysed in the light of her experience and of her lived space.

### *Mesosystem*

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 25) defines a mesosystem as “the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates ... A mesosystem is thus a system of microsystems.” A mesosystem is “formed or extended whenever the developing person moves into a new setting” (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 25). Neal and Neal (2013, 724) emphasise the social aspect of mesosystems when they state that a mesosystem is “a social interaction between participants in different settings that both include the focal individual.” Mesosystems thus “include social interactions between two of the focal individual’s settings” (Neal and Neal 2013, 725) and, as such, are in essence a “network of *microsystems*” (Paat 2013, 956; original emphasis) influencing the focal individual. A mesosystem functions as “a linkage between two lower-level ecological settings” (Paat 2013, 956) and can jointly influence an individual’s social outcome. The mesosystem can be classified as a focal individual’s intermediate environment, the interface enabling the focal individual to interact with other systems.

### *Exosystem*

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979, 25), an exosystem “refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person.” Neal and Neal (2013, 724) define an exosystem as “a setting – that is, a set of people engaged in social interaction – that does not include, but whose participants interact directly or indirectly with, the focal person.” An exosystem thus “incorporates remote social settings that have an indirect effect” on a focal person (Paat 2013, 956). The exosystem can be classified as a focal individual’s indirect environment.

### *Macrosystem*

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 26) defines macrosystems as “consistencies, in the form of lower-order systems that exist, or could exist, at the level of subculture or culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies.” Neal



and Neal (2013, 724) again emphasise the importance of social networks when they define macrosystems as “the social patterns that govern the formation and dissolution of social interactions between individuals (e.g., homophily, transivity, and so on), and thus the relationship between ecological systems.” For Paat (2013, 956) the macrosystem can be “broadly defined as the large overarching set of social values, cultural beliefs, political ideologies, customs, and laws that incorporate the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, and *exosystem*.” The macrosystem can be classified as a focal individual’s remote environment.

### *Chronosystem*

Bronfenbrenner (1986, 724) indicates that notions of time changed in circles focusing on the scientific study of human development. Traditionally “the passage of time has been treated as synonymous with chronological age; that is, as a frame of reference for studying psychological changes within individuals as they grow older.” However, since the mid-1970s “an increasing number of investigators have employed research designs that take into account changes over time not only within the person but also in the environment and – what is even more critical – that permit analysing the dynamic relation between these two processes.” He uses the term chronosystem “for designating a research model that makes possible examining the influence on the person’s development of changes (and continuities) over time in the environments in which the person is living.” For Neal and Neal (2013, 724) the chronosystem rests on the “observation that patterns of social interactions between individuals change over time, and that such changes impact the focal individual, both directly and by altering the configuration of ecological systems around him/her.” The chronosystem thus emphasises “life transitions and individual changes through time” (Paat 2013, 956). The chronosystem can be classified as a focal individual’s global environment.

## **Islam as an Ecological System**

In this section, the authors argue that Islam can be viewed as a complex ecological system in the sense of Morin’s (1992, 102) notion of *unitas multiplex*. They will briefly, especially with reference to the notion of holy and profane space (Eliade 1959, 20), illustrate how Islam functions as a system and how each individual Muslim plays a distinct role in the system. They will then indicate how an individual Muslim female as a focal individual (Neal and Neal 2013, 723) becomes indispensable to and crucial for Islam as an ecological system.

### **Islam as a Religious and Cultural Ecological System**

In her book *By Noon Prayer: The Rhythm of Islam* (2008), Fadwa El Guindi (2008, xi) makes a case for not “atomizing, dichotomizing, or fragmenting” Islam. El Guindi argues that Islam should be analysed as “a one Islam,” an integrative whole and a unified and coherent phenomenon that is creative, generative, flexible, and dynamic.”

El Guindi argues that what is needed in the current debate on Islam is a “shift in paradigm” and a “new scholarship” insisting “on the receding of mechanism and moving to holism, from substance to pattern, from quantity to quality, from static configurations of components to the perspective of phenomena as a whole” (El Guindi 2008, 167).

The researchers connect El Guindi’s call for an analysis of “a one Islam” with Morin’s (1992, 102) notion of a *unitas multiplex*. Islam presents itself in contemporary society in diverse ways and cannot be considered a monolithic entity. Neither should Islam be reduced to “only the Five Pillars,” or “to media-created single subjects like the veil, women’s piety movement, jihad, Islamism, among a few others, or breaking it into Shi’ a versus Sunni” (El Guindi 2008, xi). What is needed is a “shift in analysis to a framework called complexity” which “combines qualities of holism, emergence and nonlinearity” (El Guindi 2008, xii). In a new framework, “analysis shifts from objects to relationships, from quantity to quality, from substance to patterns” (El Guindi 2008, xii).

El Guindi (2011, xii) calls for a “deep ecology” analysis of Islam, “a deeper and broader perspective, in which life is conceptualized as a web of nested interconnections and embeddedness.” Islam is more than a “social system, it is a personal decision and a personal commitment, a challenge, not a religion” (Barylo 2017, 189). It blurs the “boundary between religious and non-religious deeds” (Barylo 2017, 190). It can be argued that the world is no longer “divided between the mundane and the sacred: the mundane becomes sacred and vice versa. Daily life is religious, and religion is lived daily” (Barylo 2017, 190).

The Islamic worldview encompasses “the balance between human intellect and divine revelation” (Ellethy 2017, 119). In the Qur’ān, the Muslim community and nation are described “as a middle and balanced *ummah*” (Ellethy 2017, 119), as is asserted in the following quote from Sūra 2:143:

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا	Thus We have made you a middle nation,
لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ	that you may be witnesses to humankind.
Sūra 2:143 (البقرة <i>al-Baqarah</i> / The Cow:143)8	

Yusuf Ali (1967, 57, n. 143) indicates that the phrase *أُمَّةً وَسَطًا*, literally translated above as “a middle nation,” can also be translated as “justly balanced.” He states:

The essence of Islam is to avoid extravagances on either side. It is a sober, practical religion. However, the Arabic word (*wasat*) also implies a touch of the literal meaning

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8 Throughout this study, the Arabic text of the Qur’ān comes from the online version of The Noble Quran (<https://quran.com/>).

of intermediacy. Geographically, Arabia is in an intermediate position in the Old World, as was proved in history by the rapid expansion of Islam, north, south, west and east.

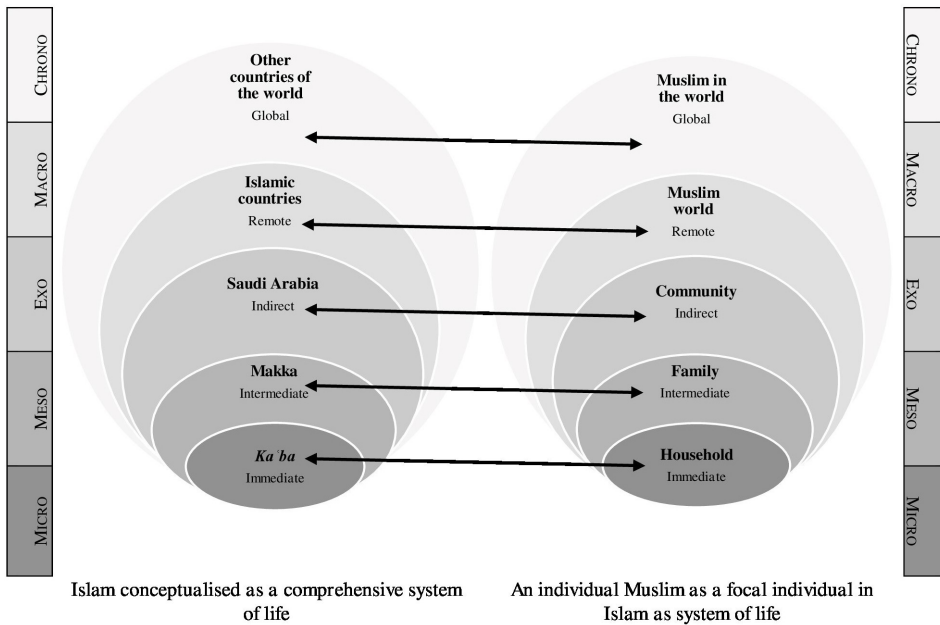
Ellethy (2017, 119) thus contends that the correct Islamic way of life is to find the *via media* between the extremes of “the guidance of God” and “proper consideration to the role of intellect in scientific and civilizational development.” It confirms Barylo’s (2017, 184) observation that Islam maintains “a certain level of complexity where faith, practice, rituals and daily life are interconnected.”

El Guindi’s (2008, xi) notion of “a one Islam,” Barylo’s (2017, 183) idea of “Islam as a matrix,” and Ellethy’s (2017, 118) assertion that “the very structure of Islam ... combines unequivocally the spiritual with the material” and that Islam “is constructed, symbolically, in a pyramidal form that is based on spirituality and moves toward the world of reality,” support the conviction that Islam can be conceptualised as an ecological system. Ellethy (2017, 118) states:

At the foundation and core of this pyramid stands a creed of pure monotheism (*Tawhīd*), and through rituals (*‘ibādāt*), which are strictly linked to a complete system of morals and ethics (*akhlāq*), it reaches its top in the form of a behavioural system of interaction with all the mundane context (*mu‘āmalāt*).

The researchers argue that this system can be conceived of as an intricate and complex network of constant, mutual interrelations between Islam and the world, between individual Muslims, and between a Muslim as a focal individual and his/her existence in and interaction with this world. The consecutive social and spatial spheres can be conceptualised as an ecological system where individual Muslims, through their agency, play an active role in the appropriation of sacred space, thereby transforming body, home, community, and the world into a powerful place.

The researchers realise that, to the best of their knowledge, no comparable ecological systems theory analyses of Islam have been made. They endeavour to develop an ecological systems theory perspective on Islam as a religious and cultural system, a Muslim’s role in that system, and especially the role of a female Muslim choosing to wear the *ḥijāb* in the system. They argue that an analysis of Islam as an ecological system might provide new insights to reveal the “interactive dance” of all components in the system. In Figure 1 Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model of human development visually represents Islam as an ecological system, as well as the symbolic functioning of an individual Muslim as a focal individual within the system. El Guindi (2008, 138) argues that Islam is unique in terms of the so-called “Book Religions” in the sense that it allows for the “fluidity of space and rhythmic patterns of time.” It enables Muslims to interweave space and time and to “move in and out during the course of the day between worldly and sacred spheres” (El Guindi, 2008, 138).



**Figure 1.** An ecological systems perspective on Islam

### Systems within Islam as an ecological system

Following Bronfenbrenner (1979, 22; 1986, 724), the authors argue that Islam can be conceptualised as an ecological system. Correspondingly, the life of each Muslim as a focal individual can be embedded in the system. The authors will now explain how Islam, and each individual Muslim, functions as a micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystem.

#### *Microsystem*

جَعَلَ اللَّهُ الْكَعْبَةَ الْبَيْتَ الْحَرَامَ  
 قِيَامًا لِلنَّاسِ  
 وَالشَّهْرَ الْحَرَامَ  
 وَالْهَدْيَ وَالْقَلَائِدَ  
 ذَلِكَ لَتَعْلَمُوا

Allāh made the Ka ‘ba, the Sacred House,  
 an establishment<sup>9</sup> for humankind,  
 as also the sacred months,  
 the animals for offerings, and the garlands,  
 that you may know

9 The active participle قِيَامًا is derived from the root قوم “to stand.” In this Sūra, the Ka ‘ba is qualified as “the sacred house” and by قِيَامًا, which is often translated as “an asylum of security” (Yusuf Ali 1967, 273). In the Islamic construction of space, the Ka ‘ba is the most holy place on earth.

أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ	that Allāh has knowledge of what is in the heavens
وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ	and of what is on earth,
وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ	and that Allāh is well acquainted with all things.
Sūra 5:97 (المائدة) al-Mā'idah / The Table: 97)	

This *āya* confirms the central position the *Ka'ba* holds for Muslims all over the world. It can be conceptualised as Islam's microsystem or immediate environment. It is Islam's most sacred place; thus it is regarded as the "navel" of the earth, the place where heaven and earth meet. The *Ka'ba* as a holy place imbues every single Muslim with holiness, thus "(o)nce pilgrimage is performed a Muslim man or woman attains an irreversible state of sacredness and social respect accompanied by the acquisition of the irreversible title of *Haj* (for males) and *Hajja* (for females)" (El Guindi, 2008, 133). The circumambulation of the *Ka'ba* affords each Muslim a new identity, and from the *Ka'ba* they disperse their holiness into every sphere of life, wherever they go.

Yusuf Ali (1967, 273, n. 805) indicates, "all sorts of people from all parts of the earth gather during Pilgrimage." When they circumambulate the *Ka'ba* they are not strangers, they are in "the House of God, and He has supreme knowledge of all things, of all thoughts, and all motives." The *Ka'ba* and every single Muslim affected by its holiness can be construed as Islam's microsystem. From there holiness and security spread over every part of the universe, wherever a Muslim goes. The *Ka'ba* becomes the focal point in the life of every Muslim performing *Hajj*. As the ecological centre point in the Islamic world, the holiness of the *Ka'ba* permeates the entire earth.

Similarly, every Muslim household/immediate family functions as a microsystem, a nucleus of sacred space, where each individual can freely act according to the principles of Islam. The household/immediate family acts as a safe haven, suffusing the individual with the collective holiness of his/her loved ones, enabling him/her to carry the light of Islam into the world. The constant interaction in this microsystem enables a Muslim as a focal individual to represent sacred space when he/she moves out into the world.

### *Mesosystem*

وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ	And this is a Book which We have sent down,
مُبَارَكٌ	bringing blessings,
مُصَدِّقٌ	(and) confirming
الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ	(the revelations) which came before it,
وَلِتُنذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَىٰ	that you may warn the mother of cities
وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا	and all around her.

وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ  
يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ  
وَهُمْ عَلَى صَلَاتِهِمْ يُحَافِظُونَ

And those who believe in the Hereafter –  
they believe in it,  
and they are guarding over their prayers.

Sūra 6:92 (الأنعام) *al-An 'ām* / Cattle: 92)

The notion that is important in the present section is that of ام القرى “the mother of cities.” Yusuf Ali (1967, 314, n. 913) indicates that it refers to *Makka*, “now the Qibla and centre of Islam.”<sup>10</sup> The city has traditionally been “associated with Abraham and with Adam and Eve (see ii, 125, and n. 217 to ii, 197)” (Yusuf Ali 1967, 314, n. 913) and is regarded by Muslims as the most important city in the world. It can be conceptualised as Islam’s mesosystem or intermediate environment.

The proximity of the ancient city of *Makka* and its Holy Mosque, *al-Masjid al-Harām* “the Holy Mosque,” to the *Ka 'ba* imbues the mosque and the city with holiness.<sup>11</sup> Because it is a holy city, non-Muslims are prohibited from entering it. From there, Muslims spread all over the world after the *Hajj*, thus carrying *Makka*’s holiness into the world.

Similarly, every Muslim’s extended family acts as his/her intermediate environment, the interface enabling him/her to interact with the world at large. Family space is holy space. Just as there are rules in engaging *Makka* as a holy site, there are also rules in engaging the Muslim family as holy space.

### *Exosystem*

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا  
لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ

Thus We have made you a middle nation,  
that you may be witnesses to humankind.

Sūra 2:143 (البقرة) *al-Baqarah* / The Cow:143)

As indicated above, this verse is concerned with Islam as a “justly balanced” nation (Yusuf Ali 1967, 57, n. 143). In response to Yusuf Ali’s (1967, 57, n. 143) suggestion that the phrase *أُمَّةً وَسَطًا* should also be interpreted with the literal meaning of “intermediacy,” the authors argue that Saudi Arabia as a country functions as Islam’s exosystem, and serves as its indirect environment. With regard to the Arabian peninsula, Yusuf Ali (1967, 57, n. 143) states: “Geographically, Arabia is in an intermediate position in the Old World, as was proved in history by the rapid expansion of Islam, north, south, west and east.” The presence of the *Ka 'ba*, the *Masjid al-Haram* and the

10 In Arabic مكة *Makka*. It is often Anglicised as Mecca, but *Makka* is the more correct rendition of the Arabic word and reflects its actual pronunciation (Wolfe 2002, 56–57).

11 The English word “mosque” is derived from the French “mosque.” It reflects the Arabic noun مَسْجِد *masjid*, which is derived from the root سجد *sajada* “to bow down (in worship), prostrate oneself.” A *masjid* is thus literally a “place of prostration” or “a place of worship” for Muslims.

holy city of *Makka* in Saudi Arabia affords the country a special position in Muslims' construction of space. Saudi Arabia represents this location now, as its government is responsible for the two Holy Mosques in *Makka* and *al-Madīna*.

Similarly, the Muslim community serves as an individual Muslim's exosystem or indirect environment. It acts as a source of inspiration, a well of holiness, and a haven of sacred space for each individual. The Muslim community enables the individual Muslim to represent the Muslim world as a "middle nation" and to act as "witnesses to humankind" (*Sūra* 2:143).

### *Macrosystem*

إِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُونِ	And verily, this Brotherhood of yours is a single Brotherhood, and I am your Lord, therefore serve me.
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*Sūra* 21:92 (الأنبياء *al-Anbiyā* / The Prophets:92)

إِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاتَّقُونِ	And verily, this Brotherhood of yours is a single Brotherhood, and I am your Lord, therefore fear me.
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*Sūra* 23:52 (المؤمنون *al-Mu`minūn* / *The Faithful*:52)

The two verses are almost identical. Both emphasise the unity of the Muslim world. Yusuf Ali (1967, 843, n. 2749) indicates that the noun *أمة* is best translated here as "Brotherhood." In various contexts the noun can be translated as "community," "race," "nation," and "people." Derived meanings are "religion" and "way of life." In this context, the word captures the following: "Our attention has been drawn to people of very different temperaments and virtues, widely different in time, race, language, surroundings, history, and work to be performed, but forming the closest brotherhood as being men and women united in the highest service of God. They prefigure the final and perfected Brotherhood of Islam."

The authors are of the opinion this one Fellowship of Islam represents Islam's macrosystem or remote environment. Muslims are bound together by service of (*Sūra* 21:92) and reverence for (*Sūra* 23:52) Allāh. They constitute one Fellowship, "their message is one, and their religion and teaching are one; they serve the One True God, who loves and cherishes them; and they owe their duty to Him and Him alone" (Yusuf Ali 1967, 883, n. 2909). According to Islamic conception, all Muslim countries and nations who believe in one God (*Allāh*) and in his prophets are all one nation.

Similarly, the Muslim world, wherever its representatives can be found in the global environment, functions as a macrosystem for individual Muslims. The Fellowship of Islam forms a network that supports and sustains every Muslim as he/she performs his/her daily duties. This Fellowship provides individual Muslims with the resolve to practice their “sober, practical religion” (Yusuf Ali 1967, 57, n. 143) in this world.

### *Chronosystem*

Finally, it can be argued that the “outside” world acts as Islam’s chronosystem or global environment. Neal and Neal (2013, 724) observe, “patterns of social interactions between individuals change over time, and that such changes impact the focal individual, both directly and by altering the configuration of ecological systems around him/her.” Much has indeed changed in and for Islam since its establishment in the seventh century A.D. Through all the changes in the chronosystem, Islam has endured and is indeed today the fastest growing religion in the world. In 2015 Muslims constituted about 24 percent of the world’s population, and it is estimated that this number will increase to 32 percent by 2060 (Clarke 2017, 13). The question arises: what made it possible for Islam to endure for fourteen centuries?

At least part of the answer is to be found in the attitude expressed in the *Sahih* Muslim, Book 45, *Hadith* 2585–2586.<sup>12</sup> In *Hadith* 2585, *Allāh*’s Messenger (ﷺ) is reported to have said:

الْمُؤْمِنُ لِلْمُؤْمِنِ كَالْبُنْيَانِ يَسُدُّ بَعْضُهُ بَعْضًا	A believer is like a brick for another believer, the one is supporting the other.
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In similar vein, *Hadith* 2586 reports *Allāh*’s Messenger (ﷺ) to have said:

مَثَلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ فِي تَوَادِهِمْ مَثَلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ فِي تَوَادِهِمْ إِذَا اشْتَكَى مِنْهُ عُضْوٌ تَدَاعَى لَهُ سَائِرُ الْجَسَدِ بِالسَّهَرِ وَالْحُمَى	The similitude of believers in regard to mutual love, affection, fellow-feeling is that of one body; when any limb of it aches, the whole body aches, because of sleeplessness and fever
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The two *ahādīth* imply that one Muslim should be a supporter to other Muslims wherever they are and whenever they are in need. Islam knows no borders. The Muslim in the East is a brother to the Muslim in the West. The whole world is seen as Islam’s

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12 Cf. *Sahih* Muslim, Book 45: كتاب البر والصلة والآداب *The Book of Virtue, Enjoining Good Manners, and Joining of the Ties of Kinship*. Accessed 31 October 2017. <https://sunnah.com/muslim/45>.



chronosystem in terms of ecological systems theory. The notion is also present in the Qur'ān:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ	O humankind!
إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ	Indeed We created you from a male and a female,
وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ	and made you nations and tribes
لِتَعَارَفُوا	that you may identify yourselves with one another.
إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ	Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allāh
أَتْقَاهُمْ	is the most righteous
إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ	Indeed Allāh is all-knowing, all-aware.
Sūra 49:13 (الحجرات) <i>al-Hujurāt</i> / Apartments:92)	

According to Islamic perception, all of humankind descended from a single pair of human beings (Yusuf Ali, 1967, 1407, n. 4933). Although they belong to many tribes and nations, human beings recognise themselves in one another. The righteous ones are they who act noble in the sight of Allāh, the One who knows everything and is aware of everything. It is this belief that enables Islam as an ecological system and each Muslim as a focal individual to live worthy lives in an ever-changing world.

## **The Female Muslim as a Focal Individual in Islam as an Ecological System**

In this section, the focus shifts to the individual female Muslim as a focal individual (Neal and Neal 2013, 723) and her social interactions (Neal and Neal 2013, 735) in the various building blocks of Islam as an ecological system.

### **The Female Muslim in Islam as an Ecological System**

Focusing on the individual female Muslim as a focal individual (Neal and Neal 2013, 723) and her social interactions (Neal and Neal 2013, 735) in the various building blocks of Islam as an ecological system is of particular importance for a contextual interpretation of the phenomenon of the *hijāb*. Understanding the position and role of a Muslim female in the context of Islam as an ecological system becomes an invaluable aid in analysing and interpreting the *hijāb* as a phenomenon. Analysing the *hijāb* as an element naturally belonging to Muslim female clothing practices, when the female is seen as an indispensable part of Islam as an ecological system, has several benefits.

First, it allows for an analysis of the *hijāb* from the perspective of the experience of a Muslim woman who consciously decides to wear it. An ecological systems perspective

on a female Muslim as a focal individual illustrates the complex nature of her experience (Tuan 2008, 8–9). As a focal individual, her experiences are fluid as she constantly moves between and interacts with her micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems (Figure 2).

Second, it allows for an analysis of the *ḥijāb* in terms of Arabo-Islamic culture. Within the framework of her culture, a female Muslim as a focal individual functions in a complex system of interweaving expectations, prescripts, convictions, and devotions. Her embeddedness in this complex cultural system is at the same time an objective and subjective experience (Triandis 1994, 22). A Muslim female donning the *ḥijāb* subjectively expresses what Islamic precepts objectively expect of its followers.

Third, an ecological systems perspective on the *ḥijāb* allows the researcher to analyse the phenomenon from a deliberately contradictory point of view. It creates a space to look simultaneously at the *ḥijāb* from the perspective of pluralism and holism. Pluralism allows for the possibility that a Muslim female as a focal individual adheres to diverging expectations and precepts and expresses complex convictions and devotion as she interacts with her micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems. The “personal *experience* as well as *cultural rules*” (Miller-Spillman 2012, 12; original italics) both play a role in the analysis of the *ḥijāb*. On the other hand, an ecological systems perspective allows for a holistic interpretation of the *ḥijāb*. The *ḥijāb* holds deep personal meaning for the individual Muslim female, but reaches out “beyond the self” (Tuan 2008, 8–9) to become a symbol, an “active visual” representation of her body “as a holy space” (Tuan 2008, 6).

Fourth, concerning the theme of the female body as a holy space, an ecological systems perspective illuminates the function of the *ḥijāb* as a border of cloth. The *ḥijāb* demarcates the Muslim female body as a holy space in space as she interacts with her micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems. Her *ḥijāb* becomes a boundary marker. The *ḥijāb* functions as a physical boundary in the sense that it sets up a physical structure “regulating human action” (Hernes 2004, 13). It functions as a mental boundary in the sense that it reflects the “core ideas and concepts” (Hernes 2004, 13) that are central and particular to Islam’s expectations and precepts regarding female clothing practices. Above all, however, it functions as a social boundary relating to a Muslim female’s “identity and social bonding” (Hernes 2004, 13). As such, the *ḥijāb* serves as an ordering device (Hernes 2004, 15), regulating the interaction of a female Muslim in and with her micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems; as a distinction clearly demarcating the interaction between a Muslim female’s internal and external spheres; and as a threshold (Hernes 2004, 13) regulating the flow or movement between a Muslim female’s internal and the external spheres.

Three passages in the Qur’ān specifically relate to Muslim female clothing practices. All three illuminate the contextual experience of a Muslim woman who wears the *ḥijāb*; express the Arabo-Islamic cultural values of “sanctity, sanctuary, respect and privacy”

(El Guindi, 1999, xvii); explain how the *hijāb* acts as a symbol, an “active visual” representation of a Muslim female’s body “as a holy space” (Tuan 2008, 6); and explains the function of the *hijāb* as a border of cloth demarcating the Muslim female body as a holy space in space.

In Sūra 33:53 (the so-called “*āya of Hijāb*”) the root *hjb* (‘to hide’) occurs in a context directly related to the issue of interaction between the Prophet’s (ﷺ) wives and people from outside his household, in terms of ecological systems theory the interaction between a Muslim female’s micro- and mesosystems.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا	O, you who have believed,
لَا تَدْخُلُوا بُيُوتَ النَّبِيِّ	do not enter the houses of the Prophet,
إِلَّا أَنْ يُؤْذَنَ لَكُمْ إِلَى طَعَامٍ	except when permission is given to you for a meal,
غَيْرِ نَاطِرِينَ إِنَاءَهُ	without awaiting its preparation.
وَلَكِنْ إِذَا دُعِيتُمْ	But when you are invited,
فَادْخُلُوا	then enter,
فَإِذَا طَعِمْتُمْ	and when you have eaten,
فَانتَشِرُوا	then disperse
وَلَا مُسْتَأْذِينَ لِحَدِيثٍ	without seeking to remain for conversation.
إِنَّ ذَلِكَ كَانَ يُؤْذِي النَّبِيَّ	Indeed, that [behaviour] was troubling the Prophet,
فَيَسْتَحْيِي مِنْكُمْ	but he is shy of [dismissing] you.
وَاللَّهُ لَا يَسْتَحْيِي مِنَ الْحَقِّ	But Allāh is not shy of the truth.
وَإِذَا سَأَلْتُمُوهُنَّ مَتَاعًا	And when you ask them for something,
فَأَسْأَلُوهُنَّ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ	ask them from behind a screen.
ذَلِكَمُ أَطْهَرُ لِقُلُوبِكُمْ وَقُلُوبِهِنَّ	That is purer for your hearts and their hearts.
وَمَا كَانَ لَكُمْ	And it is not [conceivable] for you
أَنْ تُؤْذُوا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ	that you harm the Messenger of Allāh,
وَلَا أَنْ تَنْكِحُوا أَزْوَاجَهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ أَبَدًا	or that you marry his wives after him, ever.
إِنَّ ذَلِكَ كَانَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَظِيمًا	Indeed, that would be in the sight of Allāh an enormity.

Sūra 33:53 (الأحزاب *al-Aḥzāb* / The Confederates:53)

Relevant in the present context, is the remark <sup>٤</sup> وَإِذَا سَأَلْتُمُوهُنَّ مَتَاعًا فَاسْأَلُوهُنَّ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ <sup>٥</sup> “And when you ask them for something, ask them from behind a screen. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts.” What Allāh here prescribes is “a physical separation of the noble ladies from the common folk, by a barrier that could

not be seen through. It secludes the Prophet’s (ﷺ) wives by giving them privacy and is simultaneously a symbol of their high status and dignity. The context of this *hijāb* is the separation of two spaces that are not to intermingle” (Aziz 2010, 76). El Guindi (1999, 69) argues that حجاب “screen” here refers to a physical separation, but that it also functions on the level of the symbolic. The *āya* is concerned with the notion of sacred privacy and sanctuary. Originally, it was a command for the interaction between the Prophet’s (ﷺ) wives and outsiders. However, in Muslim tradition it has been applied to all believing women in their interaction with non-*maḥram* men. The Muslim female dress code thus becomes an issue not only of proper cultural conduct and social etiquette, but also of a highly significant religious implication directly influencing the relationship between a female Muslim and Allāh.

In Sūra 33:59 the Prophet’s (ﷺ) wives, daughters, and female believers are commanded, “to bring down over themselves of their outer garments (مِنْ جَلَابِيهِنَّ).” It links with Sūra 33:53 and is concerned with the interaction between a Muslim female and people from outside her household. This *āya* determines principles for interaction between a Muslim female’s micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems.

(قَالَ اللَّهُ تَعَالَى)	(Allāh the Exalted said:)
يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ	O Prophet!
قُلْ لَأَرْوِّجَنَّكَ وَبَنَاتِكَ	Tell your wives and your daughters
وَنِسَاءَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ	and the women of the believers
يُذْنِبْنَ عَلَيْنَهُنَّ مِنْ	that they must bring down over themselves
جَلَابِيهِنَّ	[part] of their outer garments.
ذَلِكَ أَدْنَى	That is more suitable
أَنْ يُعْرَفْنَ	that they should be known
فَلَا يُؤْذَيْنَ	and not be harmed.
وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا	And Allāh is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

Sūra 33:59 (الأحزاب) *al-Aḥzāb* / The Confederates:59)

This *āya* implies that the Prophet’s (ﷺ) wives, his daughters, and the women of the believers in general have a special position in society. Due to their special position in the emerging Islamic community, they are encouraged to act as models for practising the proper dress code (Ahmed 1992, 55). The basic principle that can be deduced from this *āya* regarding a proper dress code is that the *hijāb* becomes a visible symbol of religious identity and protection. The *āya* confirms El Guindi’s (1999, 74) observation that *libās* (‘clothes’) in Muslim tradition is linked to notions of “gender, sexuality, sanctuary, and sacred privacy.”

Sūra 24:30-31 calls upon men and woman to act with modesty and restraint when they enter the public sphere. Women receive guidelines regarding clothing practices in that

sphere. These verses provide Muslims, particularly females, with guidelines regarding interaction in their micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems.

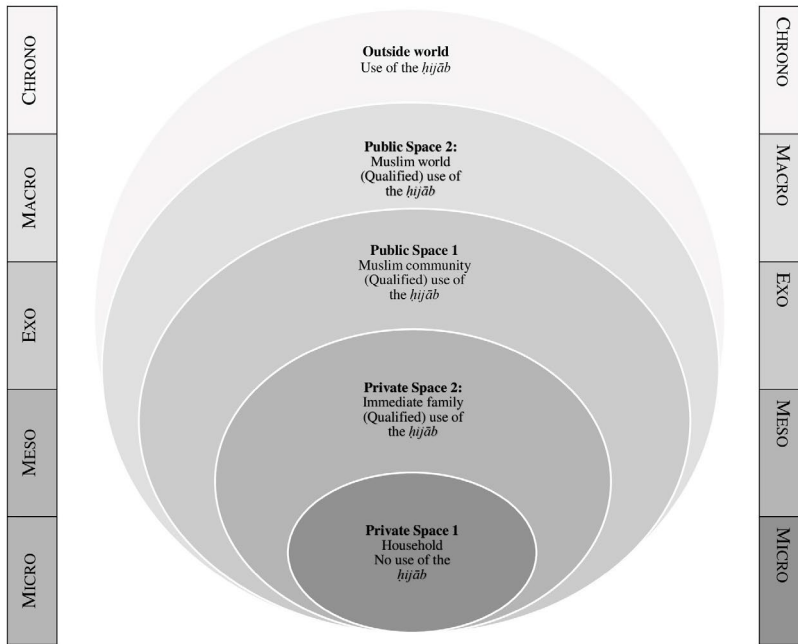
قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ	Say to the believing men
يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ	that they should lower their gaze
وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ	and they should guard their chastity.
ذَلِكَ أَرْكَى لَهُمْ	That is purer for them.
إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ	Surely, Allāh is aware of what they do.
وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ	And say to the believing women
يَغُضُّنَّ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ	that they should lower their gaze
وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ	and they should guard their chastity,
وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ	and they should not display their adornment,
إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا	except what is apparent of it
وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرِهِنَّ	And they should draw their head covers
عَلَى جُنُوبِهِنَّ	over their bosoms,
وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ	and not display their ornaments,
إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ	except to their husbands
أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ	or their fathers,
أَوْ آبَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ	or the fathers of their husbands,
أَوْ أَبْنَائِهِنَّ	or their sons,
أَوْ أَبْنَاءِ بُعُولَتِهِنَّ	or the sons of their husbands,
أَوْ إِخْوَانِهِنَّ	or their brothers,
أَوْ بَنِي إِخْوَانِهِنَّ	or the sons of their brothers,
أَوْ بَنِي أَخَوَاتِهِنَّ	or the sons of their sisters,
أَوْ نِسَائِهِنَّ	or their women,
أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُنَّ	or what their right hands possess,
أَوْ التَّابِعِينَ غَيْرِ أُولِي الْإِرْبَةِ	or the male servants not having physical desire
مِنَ الرِّجَالِ	among the men,
أَوْ الطِّفْلِ	or children
الَّذِينَ لَمْ يَطْمَهِرُوا	who are not aware
عَلَى عَوْرَاتِ النِّسَاءِ	of the private aspect of women.
وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بِأَرْجُلِهِنَّ	And they should not stamp their feet
لِيُعْلَمَ	to make known

مَا يُخْفِينَ مِنْ زِينَتِهِنَّ	what they conceal of their adornment.
وَتُوبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ	And turn to Allāh, all of you, o Believers,
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَفْلِحُونَ	that you may succeed.

Sūra 24:30–31 (النور *al-Nūr* / The Light:30–31)

Sūra 24:30 urges Muslim men to look only at what is permissible for them to look at and lower their gaze from forbidden things. If it so happens that a person’s gaze unintentionally falls upon something forbidden, he should quickly look away. The principles advocated here are modesty, decency, and respecting one’s own and the privacy of others. In Sūra 24:31 the same behaviour is expected from Muslim women, but more detail is given. A woman’s *khimār* should also cover their bosoms. The word means “cover.” Any cover can be called a *khimār*, such as a curtain, or a dress. In the *hadīth*, the *hijāb* is equated with the word *khimār* and interpreted as a head covering. In pre-Islamic *al-Madīna*, women tucked their *khumar*’s two ends behind their heads and bound it there, thus exposing their ears and neck. In Sūra 24:31, Allāh orders the women to let the two ends of their headgear extend onto their bosoms to conceal their ears, neck, and the upper part of the bosom (Abdullah 2006, 10–11). Women should “not display their ornaments except what appears thereof” and then “only to their husbands or their fathers.” The Arabic word *zinat* refers to natural beauty and artificial ornaments – in this context the first meaning in particular applies. The principle deduced for a proper dress code is that women should not display in public the parts of their body which carry any sexual connotations.

In Figure 2, the principles regarding a female’s dress code and proper behaviour in her interactions with her micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems are visually represented. The figure illustrates that the *hijāb* functions as a border of cloth demarcating the Muslim female body as a holy space in space as she interacts with her environments. The *hijāb* functions as a boundary marker for a female’s microsystem (cf. My Private Space 1). It refers to the intimate circle of her household. It demarcates her mesosystem (cf. My Private Space 2), which indicates her immediate family. The *hijāb* is also a boundary marker for a female’s exosystem (cf. Public Space 1), which refers to her interactions with and in the Muslim community. It also demarcates her macrosystem, classified in Figure 2 as Public Space 2, referring to a female’s interaction with the Muslim world in general. Finally, the *hijāb* is also a boundary marker in a female’s chronosystem, classified in Figure 7 as the outside world, referring to a female Muslim interacting with and in a non-Muslim environment. The role of the *hijāb* in each of the layers of Islam as an ecological system will be discussed below.



**Figure 2.** The individual female Muslim in the context of Islam as an ecological system

### **The Individual Female Muslim in Her Ecological System**

Following Bronfenbrenner (1979, 22; 1986, 724), in this section the authors indicate how an individual Muslim female fits into Islam as an ecological system and how she, as a focal individual, is embedded in the system. Each individual female Muslim functions as a microsystem in her meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystem.

#### *Microsystem*

The first level – the microsystem – refers to the Muslim female as a focal individual and her interactions in her most private space. This typically refers to her household where the immediate family (i.e., husband and children) reside. In this instance, a Muslim woman is not expected to wear the *hijāb*, except if occasionally men who are not *maḥram* to her are present. As indicated in Sūra 24:32, a *maḥram* is her husband, father, grandfather, son, brother, nephew – indeed, any relative whom she is prohibited from marrying. In her most private space, a woman is regarded to be in *iḥrām* (the state of

ritual consecration)<sup>13</sup> and need not wear a face veil and gloves. It is confirmed in Muslim tradition. To name but one example, in the *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, Book 11: The Rites of *Hajj*; *Hadīth* 106,<sup>14</sup> it is said that Ibn ‘Umar reported the Prophet (ﷺ) as saying:

المُحْرَمَةُ لَا تَنْتَقِبُ	A woman in sacred state <sup>15</sup> must not be veiled,
وَلَا تَلْبَسُ الْقُفَّازِينَ	nor should she wear gloves.

In the system closest to a Muslim woman, she has direct face-to-face contact with her intimate relatives in her daily life.

### *Mesosystem*

The second level – the mesosystem – refers to the Muslim female as a focal individual and her interactions in her private space in a wider sense of the word, that of the extended family. Her space is still private, but interaction takes place in a woman’s direct social network. The mesosystem, so to speak, becomes the interface between a female’s micro- and exosystems. It can typically include social events such as weddings, social gatherings and religious events such as Eid ul Fitr. In such Islamic environments, women are not obligated to wear the *hijāb*, unless there are non-*maḥram* men in the immediate vicinity.

### *Exosystem*

The third level – the exosystem – refers to the Muslim female as a focal individual and her interactions in her public space in a more restricted sense of the word. It typically refers to the interactions between a female and her community. Here, social institutions such as schools and other educational facilities, cultural institutions, workplaces, and everyday duties such as shopping and religious gatherings come into play. In these contexts, a qualified use of the *hijāb* is the norm. Where women are not in contact with non-*maḥram* men, e.g., during services at a mosque where there is a clearly defined space for women, women are not obligated to wear the *hijāb*. Contrary to the popular perception in Western ideology, female Muslims are not excluded from public space. On the contrary, it is exactly the use of the *hijāb* whenever non-*maḥram* men are present that allows a female Muslim to fully participate in the public sphere and perform

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13 In Arabic: *iḥrām*, from the root *ḥrm* “to be forbidden, prohibited, unlawful; to enter into the state of ritual consecration (especially for a pilgrimage to *Makka*). In Islamic tradition, it refers most often to the sacred state which a Muslim must enter in order to perform the major pilgrimage (*Hajj*) or the minor pilgrimage (*‘Umrah*).

14 Cf. *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, Book 11: كتاب المناسك “*The Rites of Hajj*.” Accessed 31 October 2017. <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/11>.

15 The noun can be translated by “a female wearing *iḥrām*.”



invaluable service in public facilities such as health and welfare organisations (Gardiner and Kosmitzki 2011, 27).

### *Macrosystem*

The fourth level – the macrosystem – refers to the Muslim female as a focal individual and her interactions in her public space in a wider sense of the word. It typically refers to interactions between a female and society. Here, also a qualified use of the *hijāb* is the norm. If interaction occurs only between females, women are not obligated to wear the *hijāb*. Typically, in Islamic countries, women will adhere to *sharī‘a* laws and wear the *hijāb* in public places. It should be emphasised, however, that the wearing of the *hijāb* does not restrict a Muslim female from appearing in public spaces. While it defines her, according to Muslim culture, as a modest human being with no intention of drawing attention to herself (Moaddel and Talattof 2000, 362), it does allow her to enter public space freely and with confidence.

### *Chronosystem*

The fifth level – the chronosystem – is used here to refer to the Muslim female as a focal individual and her interactions in public space in the widest sense of the word. It situates a Muslim female in the global world and acknowledges that in contemporary society Muslims reside everywhere, not only in Muslim countries. The wearing of the *hijāb* in non-Islamic countries has become a controversial issue. It is allowed in some countries, e.g., the United States of America, but prohibited in the public sphere in others, e.g., France. In non-Islamic countries, many Muslim women – although by no means all – wear the *hijāb* in accordance with their religious beliefs when they are in public and when they are in the presence of men who are not part of their immediate family. The fact that they adhere to their religious and cultural precepts, does not imply that they are not also good citizens of their countries of residence. It clearly marks Muslim females as Muslim, and as such becomes an expression of their identity.

## **Summary and Conclusion**

In this article, the authors argue that the holistic interpretation of the *hijāb* can be attained if the phenomenon of the *hijāb* is analysed not from an overtly ideological point of view, but as an expression of the female Muslim’s modest dress code. The authors avoided taking an overtly ideological stance by applying an approach from the social sciences, namely ecological systems theory, to the *hijāb* as a phenomenon.

They argue that Islam as a religious and cultural system can be conceptualised as an ecological system, that each individual Muslim functions within this system in a unique way, and especially that every female Muslim functions across all levels of the system in a unique way. This analysis addresses the need to look “analytically at ‘a one Islam,’

an integrative whole and a unified and coherent phenomenon that is creative, generative, flexible, and dynamic” (El Guindi 2008, xi).

Ecological systems theory afforded the opportunity to analyse Islam as interconnected and embedded systems (Ahmed, Amer and Killawi 2017, 50; Husain 2013, 163). Departing from the premise that the total system of Islamic faith and traditions contains the overarching principles upon which Muslim women base their choice of dress, the authors shed light on the phenomenon of the *hijāb* from the point of view of a Muslim woman donning it.

The social interaction of an individual Muslim female deliberately donning the *hijāb* should be interpreted and evaluated in the context of Islam as an ecological system, instead of dividing Islam (El Guindi 2008, xi). Ecological systems theory illuminates the mutual interactions between an individual Muslim female and all other constituent parts of her religion as systemic interactions (Husain 2013, 163). The *hijāb* becomes a border of cloth demarcating the Muslim female body as sacred space in space as she interacts with her micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems.

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