The Saudi Cultural Robe and Adolescence

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Women in Saudi Arabia are required to wear the abaya, a loose full-length robe. There has been much debate about women’s rights regarding the wearing of the abaya. Some scholars and individuals in the Middle East, such as “Fathima” (Alvi 2014) call for the wearing of the garment because they believe it provides women with security, demands respect, and is a way to show their Muslim religion. Some women’s rights advocates, such as Fadela Amara, argue that the abaya is enforced in order to control women, and thus takes away their basic human rights (Bever 2013). No matter the stance, little research or analysis has been done to explore how the robe may affect young Saudi females’ identity formation. Professor Marida Hollos of Brown University shows that adolescence is a time in which individuals change in two main areas: psychologically and physically (Hollos 2013). This article will explore how both areas of adolescent change influence and are influenced by wearing abayas. The article takes an anthropological research approach to the issue of the abaya and aims to explore how the traditional robe may affect the personality, identity and sense of self of young women living in Saudi Arabia.

Method
The research was conducted over a two-month period. Fifty-eight females between the ages of 16 and 23 living in Saudi Arabia were contacted. Twenty-five females responded and were asked to fill out a questionnaire. Thirteen participants were native Saudis, four were non-Arabs, and the remaining eight were of Middle Eastern non-Saudi origin. Three of the respondents were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Fourteen respondents were from middle-class families, and the remaining eight were from upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds. It is important to note that not all participants responded to every question. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 11 out of the 25 participants. Blog posts and online newspapers were also examined in the research.

Findings
Tanner and Phyllis show that the majority of children pass through adolescence between the ages of twelve and sixteen. They also state that adolescence is the first time individuals become aware of their physical changes (Tanner and Phyllis 1976). It is important to note the age at which the respondents began wearing the abaya so as to determine whether this process occurs during the time of early adolescence. The interviewees were asked at what age they began wearing the abaya. The answers ranged between 11 and 14 years of age. The average age was 12. Some women expressed that they felt obligated to wear the abaya at an earlier age because their physical appearance was that of an older woman. Because there is no legal age at which women must start wearing the abaya in Saudi Arabia, the common understanding is that a young girl must begin wearing the robe when she starts to physiologically transform into a woman. The responses indicate that females begin to wear the abaya in their early adolescent years once their sexual organs begin to show (breasts, etc.). These
findings point to the possibility that the abaya may affect the psychosocial development of girls and women. This hypothesis will continue to be explored throughout this article.

No particular practice or ceremony is carried out when a girl or woman begins wearing an abaya in Saudi Arabia; wearing the robe in and of itself may be the ritual pointing to the right of passage into adulthood. Carol Markstrom and Alejandro Iborra state that the rituals carried out during a passage from childhood into adulthood are the most important aspects of the transition that affect an individual’s sense of self (Markstrom and Iborra 2003). The interviewed women were asked whether they felt the abaya was a marker of their transition from childhood into adolescence. Ten respondents replied “yes”, while the remaining 12 replied “no”. The split in these responses may be due to two reasons. First, the wearing of the abaya was not carried out with a ritual, and consequently may not have been perceived as a significant marker. Second, the process by which women begin wearing the robe may contribute to its lack of symbolism. The interviews conducted further on showed that the research participants did not start wearing the abaya regularly right away. Wearing the abaya was a process by which the women would wear the robe intermittently and more frequently until they finally wore it permanently.

The abaya may affect the psychological development of girls and women in Saudi Arabia through encouraging gender roles. The common Western view of adolescence is that it is a time of identity crisis: a significant stage during which identity and ego are formed (Hollos 2013). Thus, the effect the abaya may have during this time is significant. A woman’s role in Saudi Arabia is usually seen to be “feminine” (soft-spoken, poised, calm, respectable etc.). The respondents in this study were asked if they believed the abaya encouraged them to become more feminine. Only two respondents said that they believed the abaya encouraged them to be so. Two respondents were unsure, and the remaining 17 said that the abaya did not encourage them nor made them feel more feminine. In one interview, a respondent even expressed that she felt more feminine without the robe. The evidence points to the abaya and acting feminine as being almost completely unrelated.

Hollos shows that the physiological changes that occur during adolescence are the enhancement of sexual dimorphism, where the appearance of the two sexes is notably dissimilar (Hollos 2013). Moreover, Tanner and Phyllis state that adolescence is the first time an individual begins to become aware of his or her physical changes (Tanner and Phyllis 1976). Wearing the abaya may increase the effects this dimorphism and change has on girls and women’s identities; the robe may reinforce the gender roles and gender ideals present in the culture. Adolescence is a time when the physical differences between females and males become more apparent. Due to these changes, the adolescent girls living in Saudi Arabia begin to identify as “females”. Before this, young girls simply identify as “children”. Because this process occurs at the same time that women begin to wear a garment that expresses their gender, it may result in women being unable to differentiate between sex and gender. They may be implicitly and/or explicitly taught that following gender roles closely is just as natural as being a female, rather than placing these ideals in the area of social construct. The respondents in the study were asked whether they believed there was a difference between gender roles and sex. Ten responded “yes”, nine responded “no” and three said “maybe”. It is important to note that although both “sex” and “gender” were defined in the questionnaire, 12 respondents asked for the difference between the two words to be clarified. The lack of knowledge of the definitions could either be due to
language barriers or a basic lack of differentiation between sex and gender. In the interviews that followed, it was evident that many women believed there was a difference between the roles women and men had to play. Most women, however, expressed that although the roles were different, they were equally important. Thaniya K in her blog post “the Abaya and Women’s Rights” also shows that gender roles are expressed as complimentary (K 2012). The findings indicate that although women see themselves as equal to their male counterparts, they do believe that they fulfil different roles. The women may not identify these roles to be “gender roles” in particular. However, they do fit the stereotypical female gender role in Western society.

The abaya in Saudi Arabia is used as a method of rendering women more physically modest through covering up. As aforementioned, Hollos shows that the general Western view on adolescence is that it is a time of identity formation (Hollos 2013). It was previously mentioned that a girl must start wearing an abaya when she begins to physically transform into an adolescent. This implies that at this point a girl is beginning to look more like a woman and must consequently hide her attractive body. Thus, a possible outcome of the wearing of the abaya is that it might encourage women to see themselves as more physically attractive. This added identity attribute would render the women more confident. The women in this study were asked if the abaya made them feel more confident and whether they would consider wearing it outside the country. Only three replied “yes” and the remaining 17 respondents said the abaya does not make them feel more confident. In the follow-up interviews, one respondent even expressed that wearing the abaya made her feel less confident. Another respondent said she would consider wearing the abaya outside Saudi Arabia only if the general public would accept it. The evidence suggests that requiring women in Saudi Arabia to cover up their bodies renders them equally or even less confident than other women living elsewhere. This may be due to the inability of the ladies to feel flattered or more physically attractive through sexual attention. However, there is contradicting evidence to these findings. Thaniya in “the Abaya and Women’s Rights” expressed that she felt the abaya makes a woman feel more wonderful and feminine (Thaniya 2012). Furthermore, one woman the blogger interviewed expressed that she believed the abaya allowed people to focus on her personality rather than her physical attributes (Thaniya 2012). Thus, the findings suggest that although the abaya may incur confidence in some women, most women do not feel an added sense of the attribute through the wearing of the robe.

The abaya may take away some of the individuality women in Saudi Arabia could express through clothing. Although the robe contains some different designs, patterns, and materials, it is essentially a black cloak-like garment. The respondents all had different abaya designs: one had her favorite soccer team logo printed on the back while another respondent had pink lace on the sleeves and back of her robe. As Rym Tina Ghazel shows in her blog post “Single in the City: the Abaya and I”, many women in the Middle East spend a lot of time choosing their abayas and may even design the whole robe (Ghazel 2012). The question lies in whether the differences in abaya designs are enough for women to be able to feel comfortable and as though they have asserted their personalities adequately in their own robes. All the respondents were asked whether they felt the abaya took away part of their individuality. Ten respondents said “yes”, while the remaining 12 responded “no”. The women were also asked whether they believed that the different abaya designs were enough representation of their uniqueness. Seven respondents said “yes”, four replied “maybe”, and 12 said “no”. One of the interviewees who had replied “yes”
said that she did not care about fashion whether it was related to clothing or abayas. The findings suggest that although the abaya may not make women feel as though their individual differences have been taken away from them, they do feel as that their individuality is not pronounced enough because of the robe. Rym Tina Ghazel, for example, says that when women travel and their abayas are taken off, they are able to reassert their identities (Ghazel 2012). Olivia Sterns from CNN however, shows that “according to Simon the influence of expats has generated a demand for clothing that allows women to express their unique personalities” (Sterns 2009:23). If abayas were to become more unique and different (i.e different colors, more unique designs, etc.) women may feel more comfortable with the expression of individuality the robe brings. The abaya also provides other means of self-identification through peer comparison. Socioeconomic status can be compared based on the price tag of an abaya, the material it is made of, and even the colors it may have. Ghazel goes as far as to say that an abaya can define a woman’s social status (Ghazel 2012).

The formation of “social identity” and “cultural identity” may also be linked to the robe. Carol Markstrom and Alejandro Iborra show that social identity is an internal structure that is based on the connections an individual has with others (Markstrom and Iborra 2003). The abaya may induce a social connection between women in Saudi Arabia because of the joined experience of wearing the robe. The respondents were asked whether the abaya made them feel more unified as a group of women. Five respondents replied “yes”, one said “maybe”, and the remaining 16 said “no”. Although the women all go through a similar experience in wearing the abaya, the findings suggest that the robe does not incur a large sense of belonging or unity throughout the female community. Markstrom and Iborra also define cultural identity as referring to an individual’s sense of belonging to his or her own culture and ethnicity (Markstrom and Iborra 2003). Women in the Middle East, and specifically in Saudi Arabia, usually wear the abaya. Thus, the robe may represent a sense belonging to the region for these women. Furthermore, the abaya is sometimes seen as affiliated with Muslim teachings. Thus, it may also represent an expression of religion for some of the women. It is important to note that there actually is no official Muslim script that requires women to wear the traditional robe. Ghazel says that the abaya has nationalistic and patriotic connotations (Ghazel 2012). The respondents were asked whether they felt that the abaya represented an expression of religion and/or citizenship. Ten respondents said “yes”, one said “maybe”, and the remaining nine replied “no”. Most women in the follow-up interviews expressed that the abaya represents their religion rather than their citizenship. One respondent, however, said that she did not believe the abaya represented religion at all. The findings suggest that the abaya does not generally incur a sense of citizenship to the respondents. However, it does contribute to a feeling of belonging to Islam for a large number of women.

Conclusion
It is clear that women in Saudi abaya generally begin wearing the abaya during their early adolescent years. This may result in the robe affecting the identity formation of girls and women during this sensitive time. The majority of the women in this study said that they did not believe the abaya marked their transition from childhood into adulthood. This may be due to the lack of a performed ritual when women begin wearing the abaya or the slow process by which the robe is worn. Some believe that the robe may encourage gender roles. Almost all respondents, however, said that they did not feel the abaya pushed them to act in a way that was more in accord with their gender ideals.
There is much debate regarding whether the wearing of the abaya should be enforced on women in the Middle East. Both sides are very convinced of their own ideas, and the arguments are filled with fervor. The research conducted for this article, however, suggests that women living in Saudi Arabia state an almost indifference to wearing the robe. Although some expressed that they believe the abaya may encourage gender roles, it was clear that many did not regard this to have influenced their own actions. Most women expressed that the robe neither gave nor took away a sense of confidence. Many women expressed a desire for more pronounced abaya designs, however, it seems that this is based on fashion-oriented reasons rather than a sense of individuality loss.

Thus, it is evident that this debate may be based on the incorrect assumption that the abaya has a conscious influence on women. The robe itself may have no significant effect on women living in Saudi Arabia. Although abandoning the abaya would be an explicit expression of a movement towards women’s rights, the arguments are, in affect, misplaced. Walking through the streets of major cities in Saudi Arabia such as Riyadh and Dammam, it is evident that women go about their day veiled, covering their face, or simply wearing the robe without allowing it to interfere with their identity. It may be wiser for women’s rights advocates to push for more important reforms such as women’s education and equal employment opportunities. The argument regarding the abaya seems to be trivial in comparison to other women’s issues in Saudi Arabia.

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