Beauty in the Zongo: women negotiating religious co-existence in Accra's urban area of Madina

Khamis. K.

INTRODUCTION

On 7 January 2017, the former second lady of Ghana, Hajia[1] Samira Bawumia appeared in a sleeveless outfit made from the *batakari*[2] fabric at the inaugural ceremony of president Nana Addo Danquah Akufu Addo, now former president of Ghana (see Fig. 1). There was a lot of debate about her outfit; some Muslims felt offended by her way of dressing, which they thought exposed certain parts of her body, accentuated her figure and therefore did not conform to the Islamic teachings on modesty. They accused her of deceiving the Muslim community by appearing in the traditional veil (*mayafi*)[3] during the pre-election political campaigns, but replacing it with a fashionable *duku*[4] after her party, NPP, was voted into power.

Fig 1. Hajia Samira Bawumia[5]

[1] The word Hajia in Ghana is a title for a woman who has completed a pilgrimage to Makkah. Pilgrimage to Makkah is the fifth pillar of Islam, a journey which every Muslim who is capable of undertaking is supposed to make once in a lifetime. In Ghana most Muslim women become offended when they are not addressed by this title after having performed the pilgrimage. The easiest way to identify them is by the golden teeth they insert within their dental formula. In the *mayafi,* Samira Bawumia was noted for being very vocal on the campaign platforms, and making popular statements such as 'Almighty Incompetence' in describing the leader of the major opposition party (NDC). She led the NPP when they visited the Zongos and Muslim institutions. Some political analysts in Ghana are of the view that her contribution to the victory of the NPP in the 2016 and 2020 elections was significant.

[2] This is a type of tunic worn mostly by the people of northern Ghana and identified with Dagombas, Mamprusi, Frafras, etc. It is made from coarse cotton strips woven by men and women.

[3] A head cover for Muslim women in Ghana, especially those who are married.

[4] A veiling style traditionally associated with elderly women in Ghana, currently adopted by young Ghanaian women in contemporary times as a symbol of Ghanaian identity (a detailed discussion is provided in Chapter three).

[5] Photo sourced from https://lifewithivy.com/2017/03/07/when-the-second-lady-gets-more-press/, accessed 7 November 2024

Fig 2. Hajia Samira Bawumia in white nose mask.[6]
Photo taken during fieldwork

This debate shows that female beauty practices are not merely an issue of individual choice, but are commented upon by a broader group in the Ghanaian society. Appearance is a matter of communication, which signals a particular identity, and in turn evokes responses from others. The outfit of Hajia Samira Bawumia—a Muslim woman, politician, wife, mother, and a former second lady—at a national function and the reaction of some Muslims, Christians and the wider public to her sense of fashion raised intense discussions. While some Muslims commended and endorsed her appearance, others accused her of having a duplicitous character. Some, including fashion bloggers and even a renowned Christian pastor,[7] praised her way of dressing. As a member of the then ruling party who shared in the vision of the government in promoting Ghanaian cultural heritage through fashion, music, food, and art, the former second lady drew the attention of her critics to how her authentically Ghanaian beauty practices were boosting indigenous fashion industries. While her dress differed from the popular '*kaba* [8] and slit' many women would wear to special occasions, and might

[6] This photograph was taken by the author during one of Hajia Samira Bawumia's political campaigns at Madina Astro Turf. Also in the frame are some female religious authorities in Ghana. They include Hajia Aida Jibril (fourth from right), Hajia Fatimatu Bint Habib (third from right) and Hajia Salamatu Tahir Umar Kuta (first from right). Standing by Hajia Samira is the then MP for the Madina Constituency, Honourable Boniface Abu-Bakar Saddique, seeking re-election in 2020.

[7] Bishop Duncan Williams, the presiding archbishop of the Action Chapel International in Ghana. He is one of the popular Pentecostal preachers in Ghana.

[8] The word *kaba* is corrupted form of the English word 'cover', embedded with both religious and economic origins during the colonial era. Suzanne Gott (2010, 11-13) traces the word to the trade language between West African traders and the British. It was meant for covering the upper part of the woman's body such as the breast, which were exposed by the indigenous dress styles. She adds that, Christian missionaries also influenced the popularization of '*kaba* and slit' in West African coastal areas. *Kaba* is usually worn as an ensemble, depicting the transnational entanglement of the dress

look Western-inspired at first sight, the fabric is locally made in Ghana, with the designer being a Ghanaian.

The discussions about Samira Bawumia's aesthetic expression in the public domain demonstrate how women's beauty practices are entangled in complex layers of interpretations and negotiations in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic society such as Ghana (also see Sackey 2003; Allman 2004; Essah 2008). Samira Bawumia's outfit and the multilayered discourse it generated demonstrate what it means for religious women, in this case a Muslim woman, to dress up in public. It shows how women deploy cosmopolitan beauty practices and at the same time negotiate their appearance, moving away from what may be described as strict religious and cultural boundaries.

Similar to many other African countries, women's bodies continue to be used as sites for religious, cultural and political contestations and debates in public (Sackey 2003; Masquelier 2009; Dosekun 2016; Tamale 2016; Bakuri 2021; Khamis 2023), yet, international gender policies and the liberalization of economic and media space across African countries, coupled with advanced technology, provide Muslim and Christian women with various possibilities of beautifying themselves. Currently, some Ghanaian women are undergoing liposuction and other forms of cosmetic surgery to enhance certain parts of their bodies, such as their hips, faces, arms, lips, buttocks and breasts. Others are engaged in the consumption of beauty products, including clothing, hair products, skin creams, body pads, charms and aphrodisiacs. Over the past decades, studies on women's beauty practices in Ghana indicate that, from the era of colonialism to present times, some women in Ghana continue to explore modern methods of enhancing their beauty (Allman 2004; Essah 2008; Got 2010). So far, less attention has been paid to the connection between beauty and religion, yet, as this thesis will show, the discourse regarding the fashion practices of women brings to light the relationship between beauty, gender and religion in a religiously and ethnically plural societies such as that of Ghana.

In this thesis, I investigate the beauty practices of Christian and Muslim women in one of the Zongo[9] communities located in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana, called Madina Zongo. Having evolved in the 1950s as a migrant community, Madina Zongo has grown into a cosmopolitan community that is culturally and religiously diverse. Madina Zongo now provides residential space for individuals from different regions of Ghana, Africa and other parts of the world. In this thesis, the term 'beauty practices' involves the combination of women's dresses, make-up, hairstyles, veiling

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style. It is made up of the blouse, a wrapped skirt (also known as slit), and a third cloth used as an upper wrap skirt, or sometimes used as a head cover or for carrying babies.

[9] The word Zongo is used in reference to the part of a city where Muslim traders live (see Schildkrout 1978; Pellow 1988; Bari 2014).

styles, charms and aphrodisiacs, as well as cosmetics, used as adornment by women in Madina Zongo. I describe the beauty practices of Muslim and Christian women in the Zongo as 'Zongopolitan'—thus, both Zongo-based and cosmopolitan. As a cosmopolitan setting, Madina Zongo provides women with opportunities of experimenting with new ways of looking beautiful, yet, in the Zongo-scape, these women are also constrained by dominant cultural and religious regimes that tend to control their everyday beauty practices. In an attempt to look beautiful as well as pious, Muslim and Christian women in Madina negotiate the multiple dimensions of beauty practices. These processes of negotiation form the central focus of this thesis. I take the everyday beauty practices of Muslim and Christian women as a privileged entry point into understanding how these women manage to dress up in a context that is cosmopolitan, religiously and ethnically plural.

This dissertation falls under a broader research project on 'Religious Matters in an Entangled World'[10] and its sub-project 'The Madina Project'[11], chaired by Prof. Dr Birgit Meyer. As a Dutch–Ghanaian research project, the Madina Project concentrates on the modalities of co-existence of Christians and Muslims as well as people devoted to African religion in Madina, through the lenses of beauty practices (undertaken by me), food (looked at by Rashida Alhassan Adum-Atta), health (considered by Martin Luther Darko) and common ground in shared spaces (researched by Joseph Fiifi Fosu Ankrah).

The main goal of this thesis is to examine how Muslim and Christian women negotiate ways of looking beautiful in a cosmopolitan, religiously and ethnically plural setting called Madina Zongo. The main question the dissertation seeks to answer is this: How do Muslim and Christian women in cosmopolitan Madina Zongo manage to look beautiful while observing religious prescriptions of women's beauty practices in their respective religious groups. Beauty, as I will explain in this thesis, is not just about the aesthetic dimension, but also has a strong spiritual, moral, as well as erotic dimensions. Given the religious dimension of beauty, this thesis discusses beauty practices among religious practitioners and how various religious groups influence women's everyday beauty practices. However, the spiritual dimension of beauty pertains to the question of how certain beauty practices expose women to spiritual attacks, and of how women subscribe to certain beauty practices for protection against evil attacks. These dimensions of beauty are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are interconnected. While the thesis studies beauty practices of both Christian and Muslim women in Madina, it does not discuss Muslim and Christian women in equal measures; because of the information gathered during my fieldwork and my own positionality as a Muslim inhabitant of Madina, the thesis focuses more on Muslim women. I take this approach to stress that Muslim and

[10] https://religiousmatters.nl/team/ accessed 9 October 2025
[11] https://religiousmatters.nl/?s=madina+project&submit=Search accessed 9 October 2025

Christian women do not just align themselves to the clearly and neatly defined rules of their faith, but rather use cardinal principles of faith to negotiate their identities, including their appearance through their beauty practices.

The Research Theme

In this research, I chose to pay attention to the beauty practices of Christian and Muslim women, because as a student of History and the Study of Religions, my earlier academic research in Nima/Mamobi (another Zongo community in Accra) during my undergraduate and master's levels, in 2009 and 2013 respectively, was specifically on Muslim women.[12] This thesis moves beyond studying one religious group to studying religion in a plural form. The study of religious co-existence focuses on encounters and interactions among practitioners of different religious traditions. The aftermath of the incidents on 9/11 in the United States and the rapid development of urban centres into cosmopolitan and religiously plural cities call for analysis of the plurality of religious expressions and their interactions, as well as for study of multiple religious traditions within a single paradigm, away from the compartmentalization of religious studies into distinct fields of expertise and research on single religious traditions (Larkin 2014; Meyer & Janson 2016; Meyer & Ntewusu 2022). The theme of the research is also in line with the call from Janson and Meyer (2016: 616) as well as Soares (2006: 1), to study religion in Africa in its plural setting. Meyer (2024), for instance, calls for the study of religious plurality from the spatial, material and everyday micro level, where religion actually starts from, adding that religious co-existence should not be limited to inter-faith dialogue. In addition to Janson and Meyer's (2016) proposition, I study religious plurality through the single lens of women's beauty practices. Here, I propose that research on Muslim and Christian women's beauty practices will enrich our understanding of living together in a religiously and ethnically plural context.

This thesis focuses on the often taken for granted aspect of the everyday lived experiences of Muslim and Christian women in a religiously pluralistic setting. The thesis pays particular attention to a mundane matter: women's beauty practices. Beauty practices involve the various ways Muslim and Christian women negotiate their looks while taking into consideration multiple desires and expectations. While at first sight, beauty may be understood from an aesthetic or physical angle, this

[12] The fact that I had already conducted some research on Muslim women before meant that I was well prepared for the research. I decided to focus on beauty because it is a very good lens through which to study co-existence.

thesis shows that this would be reductive. In a religiously pluralistic setting, religion affects the styles which Muslim and Christian women employ to beautify themselves and the ways in which they understand what beauty entails and what purposes it serves. Also, in the process of striving to look beautiful, Muslim and Christian women share certain cultural perceptions about gender and beauty, borrowing and copying beauty practices from each other for various reasons. In the same way, some women draw boundaries, as they refrain from beauty practices that are not compatible with their understanding of beauty and/or piety.

For instance, even though Hajia Samira Bawumia is noted for her high sense of fashion, she has never appeared in public without a head cover; as a Muslim woman, every outfit includes head covering, albeit sparingly using the *mayafi* or *hijab*. Additionally, even though some Christian women seemingly face fewer rules regarding their beauty practices than Muslim women, sometimes the beauty practices of these Christian women, including Christian gospel artists, cause a lot of controversy and tension in the public space. For example, one of the popular gospel musicians in Ghana, Evangelist Diana Asamoah, who has been singing gospel music for over fifteen years, has recently become quite fashionable in her public appearances.[13]

In recent times, Evangelist Asamoah has been spotted at religious and non-religious public events wearing highly fashionable dresses, with popular designer shoes and bags (such as Valentino and Gucci). When she was asked whether her recent love for fashion (and that of some other women in the gospel music industry) would distract people's mind from the word of God to fashion, the evangelist responded that she was rather 'slaying for Christ'. She explained this by saying that her recent beauty practices are manifestations of God's blessings in her life. The reason she is very intentional about her fashion practices is because she intends to communicate to the Ghanaian youth that Christ indeed does change people's circumstances, irrespective of where they find themselves. The evangelist described her taste for fashion as a sign of her maturity in the Christian faith, contrary to her earlier perceptions that wigs, make-up and high heels were associated with *Mami Water.*[14]

[13] https://www.ghanacelebrities.com/2022/11/15/evangelist-diana-asamoah-slays-for-christ-at-abba-father-concert-photos/ [Accessed 15 August 2024]

[14] Pentecostal Christians in Ghana regard *Mami Water* as a demonic spirit. They described her as a half-human, half-fish being that lives at the bottom of the sea; she is believed to be very seductive and to use her beauty to lure both men and women into her cult (see also Muller 2014; Meyer 2015).

Fig. 3 An old photograph of Evangelist Diana Asamoah.[15]

Fig. 4 A recent photograph of Evangelist Diana Asamoah.[16]

This differs from the observation made by Van Dijk (2001: 55) that gospel musicians in Ghana do not engage in beauty practices considered as secular. More than two decades have passed since Van Dijk made this observation, and the music scene keeps on developing. In the

[15] Photo retrieved from https://www.adomonline.com/adom-praiz-2020-diana-asamoah-takes-patrons-down-memory-lane-with-powerful-worship-tunes-video/. Accessed 4 July 2025

[16] Photo retrieved from https://ameyawdebrah.com/i-wasnt-slaying-before-because-of-the-false-doctrines-of-apraku-my-daughter-diana-asamoah/. Accessed 4 July 2025.

contemporary Ghanaian religious landscape, especially among some Christians, women are playing key roles (including as church leaders) in their religious groups and engaging in displaying highly fashionable, cosmopolitan beauty goods. They describe such lifestyles as a manifestation of God's blessings, signifying success and progress in their lives. This is typical of the Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in Ghana whose emphasis is on self-development and prosperity (see Meyer 1998: 320; Van Dijk 2001: 37; Gifford 2008: 283; Soothill 2010: 82–83; Asamoah-Gyadu 2023: 245).

Being based on longstanding ethnographic fieldwork, this study investigates the correlation between religion and beauty from the angle of women's lived experiences (Ahmed 2015). Indeed, I agree that 'anyone working on the anthropology of Islam will be aware that there is considerable diversity in the beliefs and practices of Muslims' (Asad 2009: 7). Religious traditions provide a broad range of ethical rules and guidelines such as the Christian Ten Commandments and the Muslim Five Pillars of Faith. Affirming these teachings is central to one's identity and identification with a religious tradition. However, the ways in which these cardinal teachings are practised require detailed research by scholars.

Madina Zongo as a Place of Religious Co-existence

The word Zongo traces its origin to the Hausa language, meaning a 'camping place of a carrier', 'lodging place of a traveler' or 'stranger quarter' (Schildkrout 1978; Pellow 1988; Bari 2014). It is also a term that refers to the part of a city where Muslim traders and travelers lived. Historically, the creation of Zongo communities in Ghana is attributed to the activities of Hausa Muslim traders, Soldiers, and clerics with diverse ethnic backgrounds who settled in the Southern part of Ghana (Pellow 1988). Bari (2014) states that, Zongo emerged as settlements for migrant Muslims in Ghana around the 1810, adding that there are about three hundred Zongos located in different parts of Ghana. Some of these Zongos include: Kumasi Zongo, Kasuwan Garba, Saltpong Zongo, Nima, Mamobi, New Town, Adabraka, Madina Zongo, Hausa Zongo, Moshi Zongo, Tudu, and Darkuma Zongo among others.

In the Zongo, Islam and the lingua franca of Hausa are well-represented. Pellow (1988). observed that traditional Arabic schools in the Zongo use Hausa as a medium of instruction, while preaching was also done in Hausa. Again, Pellow stated that fashion made the Hausa people stood out; as men were usually seen in their gown, loose trousers and skull caps, while Hausa women were

easily identified in their *bubu*, *shigan yarbawa* (a blouse and a piece of cloth used as a skirt) and a *mayafi*/veil as an identity marker for married women. Today, such clearly marked beauty practices attributed to the Hausa people and to Muslims living in the Zongo have changed; people from other religious groups especially Christians also wear these outfits that are typically identified as Muslim dresses. This correlates with the popular Akan saying in Ghana that the Muslim dress (*batakari*) has become ubiquitous, making it difficult to identify a true Muslim. Additionally, most Zongos including Madina Zongo, are marked by the co-existence of religious infrastructures such as mosques and churches, as well as people from different religious backgrounds who share markets, spaces, beauty parlours, and compound houses.

Madina Zongo is situated in the northern part of Ghana's capital city, Accra, and was founded in 1959 (Peil & Opoku 1994; Ntewusu 2020). Peil and Opoku (1994: 200) recounted that the first five years of the formation of Madina witnessed the establishment of a mosque, a spiritual church and four mainline historical churches. According to Sackey (2013), in the formative years, Madina was predominantly made up of two groups. The first set consisted of migrants from various parts of West Africa, while the second group comprised migrants from northern Ghana. The western and eastern parts of Madina Zongo were founded by two Muslim migrants, Alhaji Seidu Kardo[17] and Alhaji Abdallah Dagadu,[18] from northern Ghana and Niger respectively. Whereas Alhaji Seidu Kardo named his part Madina, Alhaji Dagadu named his part Happy Town.[19] However, with time the name Madina overshadowed Happy Town, and it is currently called by many as Madina Zongo, since it has characteristics of a Zongo community.

Sackey states that a third social group, made up of southern Akan and Ewe, moved into Madina to settle in the 1960s. From the 1970s onwards, the need for residential accommodation compelled other people to move into Madina as well; this is further confirmed by Lekpor (2019). Lekpor's survey indicates that this latter group included employees of the University of Ghana, Legon and retiring soldiers from the Ghana Armed Forces who were searching for affordable housing. Currently, the population of Madina is religiously and ethnically heterogeneous to the extent that it would be misleading to describe it as typically Ga, Hausa, Traditional, Muslim or Christian.

[17] Born in the Western Region of Ghana in 1916Alhaji Seidu worked with the PWD under the British Colonial Administration as laborer, headman, senior security officer and general supervisor.
[18] A zabarma from Niger, who first settled in Labadi but had to relocate to the present day Madina because the Tourism ministry had earmarked their place for tourist expansion.
[19] Interview with chief Dagadu and some of his elders. 15th June 2021 at the Chief's hour in Madina.

By 2012, Madina had expanded and grown into a municipality known as the La Nkwantanang Madina Municipality, with a mixture of urban and rural settlers, with rural areas fast growing into urban areas. Today, Madina Zongo, where this research was conducted, has developed into a pluralistic community within the La Nkwantanang Madina Municipality, advantageously located near other communities. It is bounded on the southwest by the University of Ghana, Legon; on the northeast by Adentan; and on the west and east are Haatso-Agbogba and Ashaley Botwe respectively. It is further divided into west and east by the Legon–Madina Highway.

Ntewusu (2020) suggests that religious co-existence played an influential role in the foundation of Madina Zongo as a migrant community. He argues that despite the dominant manifestation of the Islamic religion in Madina, it is common to find Christians as well as several church buildings scattered in different parts of Madina Zongo. He further attributes the relatively peaceful religious relationship amongst Muslims and Christians in Madina to the receptivity and openness of the original residents, the Ga, making it easy for Christians and Muslims to co-exist with the spirits and gods of the African Indigenous Religion. Similar to what Pellow (2001: 63) and Cassiman (2018: 73) wrote about the people of Sabon Zongo and Nima respectively, the encounters with persons from different cultural and religious backgrounds in Madina has inherently affected the life experiences of the people in the Zongo, including women's beauty practices.

It is not an exaggeration to describe beauty in the Zongo as overwhelmingly cosmopolitan (Zongopolitan), as Madina Zongo fashion includes beauty products and practices from other countries including: America, Europe, the Middle East and Asian countries. Beauty practices in Madina Zongo are not typically Ga, Christian or Islamic, but a fusion of the different groups of Zongo women who relate with one another on daily basis.

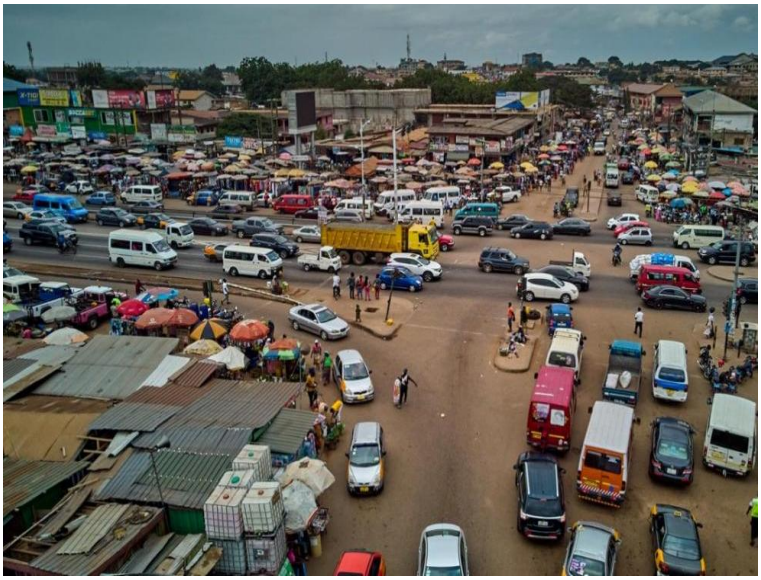

Fig. 5, Madina Zongo Junction.[20] Photo retrieved from fieldwork

Given the strategic location of Madina Zongo, close to public and private tertiary educational institutions such as the University for Professional Studies, University of Ghana, Islamic University College, the Academic City University as well as Wisconsin International University College, Ghana, women in the Zongo are exposed to cosmopolitan beauty practices that are in line with modern trends. Coming from different economic and social backgrounds, students from these institutions visit beauticians in Madina and introduce them to various beauty practices. Moreover, Madina Zongo is surrounded by residential communities such as Adentan, North and East Legon, and Agbogba; and the inhabitants of these surrounding communities, who have been exposed to Western beauty practices, tend to introduce these beauty practices to their beauticians in Madina.

These factors, coupled with the pilgrimage to Makkah and the travels of clothing boutique owners to countries such as Nigeria, Togo, Egypt, the Middle East, Asia and Europe, make Madina Zongo a beauty hub. As a result of this exposure, women in Madina engage in the consumption of foreign and local beauty products and practices, such as *daham* (Arabian gold), *mayafi*, laces, African print cloths, hair dressing, plucking of eyebrows, wigs made from human and artificial hair,

[20] This crossroad is made up of parts of Madina zongo on the west, the eastern side leads to the Madina market, the main road to the south leads to Legon and the north leads to Adentan.

henna tattoos and *abaya*[21], all of which portray their cosmopolitan lifestyles. The cosmopolitan nature of Madina is also exemplified in the names attributed to some parts of the Zongo. In an attempt to portray that inhabitants of Madina have also travelled, worked and experienced life in Europe and the Middle East, some sections of the Zongo have been labelled with cosmopolitan names; these include: Washington, Oxford City, the United Nations, Chicago, and Libya Quarters.

Beauty in the Zongo

Beauty as a word is not solely a subjective idea. Beauty has different connotations depending on the context, and applies differently to people. Naomi Wolf's (2009) controversial work '*Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women'* looks at beauty from a feminist position, answering the question of whether women exercise any freedom in their quest to look beautiful. Wolf states that even though Western feminists should be commended for their success in improving women's economic, education, legal and reproductive rights, they have failed to succeed in changing the everyday beauty practices of women and the notions of beauty and body on which these practices are based. Wolf (2002: 10) stated that 'more women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers'. For Wolf, beauty is a notion used as a political weapon to suppress women.

Diana-Abasi Ibanga (2017), a scholar at the Department of Philosophy, University of Calabar, Nigeria, posits that, the idea of beauty in Africa is a gendered expression that is mostly used in relation to women rather than men. Among some ethnic groups in Nigeria, beauty has a dual meaning: it can pertain to inner beauty, manifested in good character, as well as to outer beauty mainly based on physical appearance. Ideally, she argues, the two complement each other, and the absence of one nullifies the other; a woman's good character should be complemented with her physical appearance. Also, for some ethnic groups in southern Ghana, according to Gyekye (1996), beauty is not limited to works of art but also pertains to the behaviour, appearance and speech of an individual. The cultural values of the Akan people teach individuals not to rely solely on physical beauty but also on character and conduct, especially when it comes to choosing a marriage partner.

[21] A loose dress used by Muslim women.

During my ethnographic field work in Madina, I observed that the understanding of beauty among Muslims in the Zongo is captured in the phenomena of *sala* bills. *Sala* bills is a term combining Hausa and English words: '*sala'* means Eid celebration, while 'bills' is related to the cost associated with buying items. In simple terms, *sala* bills is used in reference to the cost associated with the beauty needs of Zongo women during Eid celebrations. S*ala* bills in Ghana's Zongo communities is an important part of popular beauty culture, but it is also highly contentious. Videos of *sala* bills were widely shared on social media between 2019 and 2021. Few days to the end of Ramadan, some Zongo women usually make videos of themselves articulating the importance of beauty to celebrate Eid Fitr. These women are often seen sending reminders to their lovers about their beauty needs to commemorate Eid Fitr celebrations. However, due to the moralization of *sala* bills, mostly by Muslim religious authorities in the Zongo, the videos have become unpopular—even though some young Muslim women in Madina Zongo continue to create them. The following is a transcription of one of the numerous videos on *sala* bills:

It's all about sala bills. I would like to put this across to our boyfriends and sugar daddies that Ramadan is halfway through; they should start preparing for our sala bills. This year we are wearing Mongolian hair, corona lace or spatumana[22] *lace and apasa qualba (glass-breaking) shoes.*[23]

In this video, the woman is seen listing highly fashionable and expensive beauty accessories, such as laces, wigs and shoes. As these videos go viral, the women shown in such videos are mostly chastised by some Zongo men and religious authorities for paying attention to the worldly act of beauty during an intensive one-month period of fasting and spiritual development. The phenomenon of *sala* bills not only offers an understanding of the anthropology of beauty in the Zongo, but also of how religion and women's beauty practices are intertwined in fascinating ways.

What makes *sala* bills especially contentious in the Zongo is the fact that almost all the women involved are unmarried and demand that their lovers should take care of their beauty needs for the Eid celebration. In response, some Zongo men advise these women to rather concentrate on getting married and reserve *sala* bills for married women. Similarly, among some Christians, there are rumours about how some men attempt to end love relationships when Christmas is approaching. This is mainly because they try to avoid being billed for the beauty needs of their girlfriends. In his

[22] The title of a popular hip life song in Ghana.
[23] This video was widely shared on social media in 2021; however, due to the moralization of *sala* bills, it was taken off the internet. Efforts to engage the Muslim lady who made the video were unsuccessful because of the extent of criticisms on *sala* bills.

work on the anthropology of Ramadan in Mumbai, Tayob (2018: 151–155) argues that the practice of fasting and feasting is an example of the lived experiences of Muslims, equating them to Van de Veer's (1992) notion of praying and playing. He argues that even though Ramadan is about worship, it is also about the consumption of food and fashion backed with correct intention (*niyya*). For Tayob, in the lived tradition of the Mumbai people, the consumption of food and fashion is as important as fasting, since individuals interpret the blessing of Ramadan also with the wearing of new clothes.

The moralization of *sala* bills, particularly among some Muslim reformists—male and female clergy in particular—relates to the moralization of pre-marital dating and courtship practices. In the teachings of reformist religious leaders, pre-marital relationships are channels through which young men and women could engage in sexual immorality, called *zina*.[24] Yet, these teachings are also more than moralizing the culture of such gift exchanges and women's beauty practices, as they also demonstrate the connection between religion and beauty practices as component of the lived experiences of Muslim and Christian women in the Zongo. Festive occasions are also meant for gift-giving. Historically, during festivals of all types, kin-members and non-kin-members share and receive gifts. Given that festivals are occasions for reaffirming family ties and resolving existing tensions, the culture of gifting promotes both goodwill and reconciliation. For potential couples, such occasions are characterized by gifts, as the would-be-groom deploys gifts to signal both financial readiness, generosity and preparedness to assume marital responsibilities. However, the context is now different from some decades ago, when kin-members pooled resources to support their relatives in such love relationships. With many of the inhabitants being migrants, with virtually no extended family members around to draw support from, festivals have become occasions of stress and anxiety, particularly for men. For men in the Zongo, the act of gifting during festivals is a reflection of 'masculine prestige' (also see Dauncey 2016: 209); but for the women, festivals have become occasions for making many claims, which are sometimes used to predetermine the degree of a potential spouse's generosity and sense of both personal and moral responsibilities. A woman who flaunts gifts received from a lover uses these to display both her understanding of beauty, and the readiness of her would-be spouse to accommodate such aesthetic practice.

From the list in the vignette on *sala* bills (page 13), gifting during festivals is also part and parcel of the pre-marital collection of beauty items for one's future post-marital life. The phenomenon of *sala* bills has metamorphosized from an old practice associated with Zongo women called *tarea* (to gather). *Tarea* is a common practice where the Zongo woman gathers cooking

[24] This is the Arabic word for adultery and fornication, used in Islamic jurisprudence.

utensils, pieces of cloth, veils, detergents, and so on in preparation for marriage.[25] *Tarea*, which were publicly carried and transported to a bride's post-marital home, were a status marker for most Zongo women. Young girls, when growing up, were advised to practice *tarea* to prevent any form of shame and embarrassment after marriage. Apart from the gift of *lefɛ* (discussed in Chapter One) that a woman receives from her prospective husband, *tarea* is expected to assist the woman to settle well in marriage. It is an indication that a would-be wife is industrious, has a reliable social network and also comes from a responsible family who would not overburden a prospective husband with her beauty needs. In fact, among some ethnic groups in the Zongo such as the Kotokoli, Chamba and Dandawa, it is from *tarea* that a new bride first begins to beautify herself after marriage. Some ethnic groups often pass derogatory remarks on women who use their *lefɛ* for their personal beauty practices right after marriage. However, this does not apply to Dagombas from northern Ghana. For example, I was told that among the Dagombas, the first *kaba* and slit sown for a married woman during *buday kay*[26] is made from a cloth selected from the *lefɛ.*[27]

Notwithstanding the aesthetic and socio-cultural significance of *tarea*, owing to the current economic difficulties in Ghana and other countries, many women have developed the idea of s*ala bills* to creatively draw men into the space of taking responsibility for both the material and aesthetic aspirations of their would-be spouses. Contextually, the introduction of social media and its proliferation in the country have fostered the progressive migration of online demonstration of s*ala bills* as amplifying and visualizing the beauty aspirations of women.

As contentious as the phenomenon of *sala bills* in the Zongo is, it also draws attention to several issues about the question of beauty in Madina. It shows that in the Zongo, beauty and religion are intricately entangled, even though some religious authorities may disagree. For Zongo women, their beauty practices to commemorate the end of the Ramadan fast are as important as the Ramadan fast itself. As one of the Muslim women mentioned to me, 'it is my make-up and all other beauty practices on the *sala* day that will draw the angels closer to me.'[28] The videos about *sala bills* also underscore that Zongo fashion is cosmopolitan, since it involves the use of imported wigs, laces, and other beauty accessories. It also focuses on the gendered dimension of beauty and the presumed gender relations in the Zongo, for beauty is perceived to be predominantly something women

[25] Interview with Hajia Kande, 15 June 2022.
[26] Literally meaning uncovering of the head, but technically a ceremony to mark the first visit of a family to the house of a newly married couple, where the bride is presented with beauty items and cooking utensils. See Khamis (2013); Dauncey (2016).
[27] Interview with Memuna, Madina, 15 June 2022.
[28] Memuna, interviewed 15 June 2020.

practise; but while many women want to look beautiful, they often rely on men to take care of the cost associated with their beauty needs, since beauty is practised primarily to attract and keep men.

My understanding of beauty within the context of this research is that, firstly, beauty in Madina Zongo is fundamentally a gendered term, used more in relation to women than men. As my interlocutors often told me, women are mostly profiled as transmitters of culture; they are expected to portray and maintain a particular kind of appearance to maintain relationships. Beauty is considered necessary for a woman/wife to keep a man/husband, and it is used by other women to 'get' a man, since it is believed that all men want beautiful women.

Secondly, beauty is about performance and knowing the type of beauty to practise at a given time and place. During my ethnographic research amongst Christian and Muslim women in Madina, I observed a huge difference between living standards (housing structure, sanitation and availability of basic infrastructure) and female everyday beauty practices. This is because beauty for women is concerned with gaining respect; a woman's presentation of herself in public is heavily dependent on how she appears, especially during social occasions. She is expected by the regimes of Zongo beauty not to under-dress or overdress. These rules and regulations guiding the everyday beauty practices of women expect their clothing to fit specific circumstances and occasions. For example, during a group discussion with some Muslim women in their thirties and forties, one of them mentioned that she had to return home after realizing that she had under-dressed for an occasion.[29] According to her, upon seeing the clothing of the guests, including their laces, head covers and heavy make-up, she felt completely out of place and returned home. Also, I have lived with neighbours in Madina Zongo who refused to attend church on Sundays because they did not have new dresses. Some explained that despite the religiousness of the church space, women find it difficult to escape from conspicuous displays of beauty.

Thirdly, I propose that beauty be viewed as multi-dimensional. Unlike Gyekye (1996), who distinguishes between inner and outer beauty, I maintain that beauty encompasses multiple dimensions: it involves a conscious integration of the aesthetic, moral, erotic and spiritual dimensions of women, which together influence how women who practise Islam or Christianity beautify themselves in Madina Zongo.

The first dimension, the aesthetic dimension of beauty, consists of how beauty is performed by women; how women alter or decorate their bodies, as well as the materials they use in an attempt to look good. The second, the moral dimension, refers to the functional and communal dimension of

[29] Hajia Moda, interviewed 23 June 2020.

women's beauty practices; how beauty makes and unmakes relationships. For example, while women who wear short dresses that expose the thighs and breasts in public can be labelled *ashawo* (prostitutes), as many may deem it offensive to the public eye, in contrast, women are encouraged to wear such body-exposing clothing in their intimate spaces with their husbands in order to keep men interested, as an erotic dimension of beauty. The third dimension of beauty focuses on beauty in the erotic sense; this involves the use of the religious and popular counselling approaches to enhance women's erotic beauty (see a detailed discussion in Chapter Four).[30] The fourth and last dimension of beauty is the spiritual/religious one; here, I explain how certain beauty practices expose women to spiritual attacks from evil spirits, and the sort of beauty practices these women employ to protect their bodies from such evil spirits. In the religious sense, I discuss beauty practices among religious practitioners, specifically Muslims and Christians. I affirm that religious beliefs and practices strongly influence how women in the Zongo beautify themselves. In this dissertation, these four dimensions of beauty will be discussed by looking at female beauty practices in a multi-religious context in Madina. The study explores how Muslim and Christian women take the values of their respective religious or ethnic groups into consideration when beautifying themselves, to what extent these values overlap, and in what ways they borrow from each other.

Gender and Body

For a deeper understanding of the beauty practices of Muslim and Christian women in Madina Zongo, it is important to pay critical attention to the female body and how its understanding connects with gender relations, sexuality and religious co-existence in the Zongo. Here, the views of the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss in his '*Techniques of the Body* '(1973) offer a good starting point for understanding female bodily practices in various societies across Africa. Mauss (1973: 70) explores the relationship between the body and culture. He argues that the body is every human being's 'first and most natural instrument' (p. 75). By focusing on the body and how it is viewed in different cultures, he proposes (p. 70) we can appreciate how societies differ from and influence each other. For Mauss (p. 74), bodily practices such as walking, swimming and running, among other

[30] During officiation of marriages and pre-marital counselling, women are advised on how to seduce their husbands and continuously keep them interested as a way of ensuring the stability of their marriages. Here, I am interested in how the church and the mosque are educating women on erotic beauty practices, the inadequacies of the religious counselling approach, and how Muslim and Christian women are finding solace in an emerging social media counselling called *kayan mata* counselling, to enhance their erotic beauty practices.

activities, are not natural but culturally acquired. There are different cultural styles of moving the body that have developed into social standards and are subject to change over time.

Building on Mauss' argument about the body as a natural object, Barcan (2004: 2) argues that the human body is described as natural when it is naked; however, simultaneously the body is equally unnatural, since all human societies have clothed, decorated or adorned the body. Barcan adds that just as nakedness or nudity is culturally constructed, clothing is also subjected to individual manipulations and social control (also see Hansen 2004: 167). Depending on the cultural context, the body, whether clothed or naked/nude, may be described as moral or immoral. Barcan (2004: 2) also argues that various types of body modifications (e.g. dress) essentially differentiate humans from non-humans, as well as categorize humanness into groups and grades: 'male/female, civilised/savage, sane/insane, normal/deviant …'.

Generally, nakedness is associated with negative connotations, while clothing is associated with civility and respectability (Masquelier 2005: 15). The body, whether naked or clothed, communicates messages that seek to unite or separate people from each other. In actual fact, both ways of presenting the body have been subjected to several contestations (Masquelier 2005: 16). In addition, it is important to pay particular attention to the seriousness various societies attach to dress codes and practices that seem to flout these codes. A typical example involves the numerous scholarly works on the gendered body, which has been largely described as a battlefield for religious, state and cultural struggle for several decades (Mahdi 2009; Fadil 2011; Moors 2015; Tamale 2016; Almila 2018; Bolaji 2018). Such discussion borders around issues of the relationship between women's bodies and private–public spaces.

Almila (2018: 232) argues that there is always a relationship between spatial practices of a people and the body, especially in view of veiling practices. She emphasizes that in some societies, space has a gendered dimension which is historically and culturally constructed. The public space is predominantly reserved for men, while the private space is framed to be the domain of women. She further states that the gendering of spaces in contrasting terms of public and private does not necessarily create exclusive tendencies, since various societies have gate-keeping mechanisms to ensure who is included and who is excluded (Almila 2018: 233). When strangers are allowed into a private space, it is temporarily turned into a public space; in the same way, when the public space is restricted to a particular group of people, it becomes private. While the house is usually defined as women's private space and everywhere outside the house as men's domain and public, the house is

not entirely inhabited by women, as Almila (2018: 233) describes the house also as 'male–female space'.

Almila's view of the house as male–female space is also shared by Mahdi (2009) in her analysis of space and gender among the Hausa people in Kanuri. She states that though the architecture of housing in some Muslim societies, such as in the Central Sudan, clearly separates male spaces from female spaces, this strict separation does not apply to the Hausa people in Kanuri (Mahdi 2009: 3). The architecture of the Hausa housing structure does not restrict women from accessing the public space (pp. 3–4); there is a common door that both men and women use in accessing the public space. In the public space, the Hausa women were primarily engaged in farming, implying that traditionally their dress practices did not include *hijab*, even though emphasis was placed on modest dressing (pp. 4–5). However, Mahdi recounts that contestations about the female body among the Hausa gained public attention during the oil boom in Nigeria, where most women who were into farming migrated from rural areas to the cities to take advantage of the economic boom. Women were then seen playing more roles in the formal public space, and it was at this point that perceptions about women's bodies began to change (p. 11). As Mahdi puts it: 'The woman was no longer being judged and valued by her capacity to labour, but her aesthetic/sexual roles' (p. 11).

However, Mahdi argues that changes in the perception of women's bodies cannot be attributed to local factors alone but also involve transnational factors such as the introduction of Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) after Nigeria's independence. She cites (p. 12) as an example, the *Izala* group led by Abubakar Gumi, who maintains that all forms of traditional practices, including dressing and veiling of people, were un-Islamic for Muslim women. These organizations were able to gain influence by providing social services to Nigerian people and took advantage of it to promote their own ideals regarding gendered dress codes. For example, they provided free education to women and children, insisting that all women must cover their heads with a *hijab* (p. 13). While the *Sufis*, like the Tijaniyya, did not have any problem with women's traditional dress styles, the *Izala* and Shi'ites had encouraged Nigerian women to adopt the Saudi Arabian and Iranian dress styles respectively. The *Izala* and Shi'ites were able to wield much influence on women's bodies to the extent that the *hijab* became a state requirement for female education in some parts of Nigeria (p. 14). This exemplifies how perceptions of what constitutes pious dressing in a particular location change over time and how both internal and external factors influence ideas of modesty and piety.

Similarly, Allman (2004) recounts that a year after Ghana's independence, a member of the Convention People's Party, Hannah Kudjoe, launched the non-governmental 'anti-nudity campaign', after realizing that a section of Ghanaian women from the north still went about their activities almost naked. Even though Allman (2004: 146) argues that nudity and nakedness are socially and historically constructed, the campaign tied notions of nudity and nakedness to poverty and discrimination against women, which in his view did not reflect the image of the independent nation Ghana. Years later, the campaign gained national attention and became part of a national project adopted by Kwame Nkrumah (p. 144). Thus, in post-colonial Ghana, nudity was associated with backwardness, paganism (p. 146) and, in some contexts, with seduction, indicating an increased eroticization of the female body (Tamale 2016: 84).

Similar to the anti-nudity campaign is the phenomenon of the *Apuskeleke* fashion craze in Ghana, which gained a lot of public attention during the early 2000s, though it was not passed into law or promoted to become a national agenda. In her discussion of *Apuskeleke* fashion, Sackey (2003) reveals the conundrums of the female body as both personal and social. Sackey (2003: 57) states that the popular hiplife song, *Apuskeleke,* described the fashion practices of some young Ghanaian women as indecent. These fashion practices included wearing tight and short dresses as well as those which exposed private parts of women's bodies. This is based on the conviction by some parents, religious organizations and other institutions that women's bodies are sacred and therefore should not be exposed in the public space, especially not when men are around (Sackey pp. 59–63). According to Sackey, *Apuskeleke* fashion was not peculiar to Ghana but swept across sections of West Africa, including Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone, though it was labelled differently in different locations (p. 57). Such clothing was considered inappropriate around places such as mosques, churches and chiefs' palaces. However, young women felt and still feel that it is their right to choose whatever fashion they want to associate with.

The connection between the female body and culture is also reflected in the discussions of some African feminist scholars, including Sylvia Tamale (2016: 84) who argues that the idea of sexualizing women's bodies in Africa is a post-colonial project that aims at enhancing national identity and shifting attention from undemocratic governance in Africa. For Tamale, this post-colonial idea about the female body is linked to a notion of womanhood as a nation's honour, when in actual fact, in pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa, some women went about their activities and still exposed parts of their bodies without their being labelled immoral (p. 84). She places the blame for eroticization of women's bodies squarely on Islam and Christianity, the two religions she

identifies as the main controllers of the female body. She claims that these religions often describe women's bodies as seductive, capable of diverting the attention of men to immoral thoughts. For her, the signing of the Anti-Pornography Act (2014) in Uganda,[31] which forbids women from wearing mini-skirts, hot pants and other body-exposing clothing in public spaces constitutes violence against women and a violation of their rights as human beings (p. 88). This ties into Hansen's (2004: 168) notion of 'shifting shame frontiers' in Zambia, as she questions why a grandmother's half-nude body does not attract the kind of contestations a young woman in a mini-skirt would. Again, Hansen asked why the pre-colonial dress, which consisted of bark cloth, animal hides, tattoos and beads, exposing most parts of the body, was never considered as inciting men's sexual desires, but clothing that ends above the knee, such as the mini-skirt, does.

Apart from the contestations about the display of women's private parts in the public space, a female's head hair equally attracts controversies at both the state and religious levels. The question of whether women's hair should be covered or uncovered in public continues to receive academic attention from feminist and non-feminist scholars alike (Mernissi 1991, 2003; Wadud 1999; Asad 2006; Mahdi 2009; Fadil 2011; Moors 2015). Quoting Prempeh (2020:82), head covering practices among women of the Church of Pentecost was a visible marker which differentiated them from other Christians.

From the discussions above, it is obvious that women's bodies continue to be perceived and analysed from state and cultural as well as religious positions. However, it is argued that nudity or semi-nudity is context-dependent (Allman 2004; Tamale 2016). This suggests that, in order to understand the meaning of women's bodies and their beauty practices, circumstances under which such bodies are exposed or covered requires critical analysis from researchers. In this ethnographic study, I focus on how perceptions about women's bodies are discussed in various religious formations, and what impact these perceptions have on gender relations and religious co-existence in the Zongo. I am interested in how perceptions about the female body relate to matters of sexuality and marriage, and in the question of how these perceptions have shifted over time in the Zongo. I contest that in Madina Zongo, the female body is conceived in two opposing ways: as being potentially dangerous or threatening—in the sense that the female body is considered seductive and a source of attraction towards evil spirits—but also attractive and empowering. Despite the supposed danger of women's bodies, through erotic beauty practices, women use their bodies as tools for challenging gender relations in the Zongo.

[31] See https://ulii.org/akn/ug/act/2014/1/eng@2014-02-17

Cosmopolitanism

In his book '*Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in the World of Strangers'* (2006), the Ghanaian-British philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah identifies two components of cosmopolitanism: the acknowledgement of differences in human life, and the obligation to respect people and their differences (Appiah 2006: 25; also see Beck 2000, in Kendall et al. 2009: 19). For Appiah, in cosmopolitan settings, 'human variety matters because people are entitled to the options they need to shape their lives in partnership with others' (Appiah 2006: 181). The notion of cosmopolitanism highlights the fact that people from different cultures mix and borrow from each other to ensure continuity and development. Appiah (p. 194) further argues that the idea of 'cultural purity' is an oxymoron, since culture in itself is fluid and not static.

These ideas about cosmopolitanism are also corroborated by Kendall et al. in the book '*The Sociology of Cosmopolitanism'* (2009). They emphasize that cosmopolitanism encapsulates 'a receptive and open attitude towards the other' (2009: 1), encouraging individuals to move beyond their personal idiosyncrasies and appreciate the value in others. They emphasize that cosmopolitanism provides the opportunity for individuals to connect instead of separating from one another. Kendall et al. buttress their views on cosmopolitanism with the idea that in practice, cosmopolitanism is 'used by ordinary people to bridge boundaries with people who are different from them.'(Lamont and Aksartova 2002: 1)

From the above definitions, it is recognized that even though cosmopolitanism points towards openness to diversity, the term has been defined differently by the scholars mentioned above, ranging from issues of civic responsibility to ideas about cultural purity and authenticity, migration and cross-cultural influences. While cosmopolitanism has been credited as an ethical value with both individualistic and social dimensions (Kendall et al. 2009: 1), the concept has also been highly criticized for its Eurocentric views and described as a form of cultural imperialism aiming to create an elite identity or make some people citizens of the world (see Vertovec & Cohen 2002: 14; Van der Veer 2002: 165–166; Appiah 2006:189–191; Driezen et al. 2020: 3).

From the religious dimension viewpoint, Driezen et al. (2020: 4–5), argue that the adoption of a radical secularist approach as a form of cosmopolitanism in some European countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark, France and Belgium has tended to place cosmopolitanism and religion in a binary opposition. In Europe, scholars often consider religion to be a promoter of fundamental and puritan ideals, thereby creating exclusive tendencies and challenging cosmopolitan ideals of liberalism and inclusivity. In other contexts however, religion has been credited for promoting

cosmopolitan values, through the use of terms such as Christian community and Islamic Ummah, blurring ethnic, national and local boundaries among these religious groups (Driezen et al. 2020: 4).

In this regard, Kendall et al. (2009: 19) argue that since context plays a crucial role in understanding cosmopolitanism, instead of focusing on cosmopolitanism as a universal concept, it is important to look at the concept within specific contexts. They proposed the term 'cosmopolitanisms', rather than cosmopolitanism. For them, cosmopolitanisms is experienced and practised in different ways. For a broader understanding of cosmopolitanisms, Driezen et al. (2020: 3) propose the idea of 'everyday cosmopolitanism', equating it to Appiah's (2010) idea of rooted cosmopolitanism—thus, a form of cosmopolitanism that moves away from the elite or formal context to one that involves everyday lived experiences of ordinary people. Driezen et al. quote Werbner's (2015) cosmopolitanism 'from below'. Since religion is a central dimension of the lived experience of most Africans, research on how Muslim and Christian women engage in everyday beauty practices in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic context offers a good understanding of cosmopolitanism from below, even though religion has largely been identified as un-cosmopolitan (Driezen et al. 2020: 3–4). For instance, Turner (2018: 189) accuses the practitioners of 'Abrahamic religions of the problem of otherness, because Yahweh was a jealous God'. Following Turner and other critics, it may appear difficult to use a concept such as cosmopolitanism, which is conventionally placed in direct opposition to religion, as a framework for discussing religion in Madina. Often, religion is understood to be about maintaining purity and authenticity and not allowing mixing, copying and borrowing of religious beliefs and practices from the 'Other'. For this reason, cosmopolitanism and religion have largely been identified as mutually exclusive binary terms.

However, recent works regarding the beauty practices of Muslim women in cities across the world show that religion and cosmopolitanism can be seen as entangled. For instance, using the term divine cosmopolitanism, Turner (2018: 189) argues that Stoicism may have contributed significantly to the origins of cosmopolitanism. However, the actual driving force of cosmopolitanism is largely attributed to religion (Islam and Christianity), because cosmopolitanism is neither recent nor secular. Also, Tarlo (2007: 145) employs the term 'Islamic Cosmopolitanism' to explain the fashion practices of three Muslim women in London who are bridging boundaries between religion and cosmopolitanism, showing that these are not separate worlds. She argues that while fashion practices associated with Muslims are identified as conservative and a form of political activism, some Muslim women in the West are skilfully negotiating their cosmopolitan lifestyles in their everyday beauty practices. Tarlo argues that a focus on the fashion biographies of these women allows for a shift away from the binary description of religion and fashion as being opposites.

Taking inspiration from Kendall et al. (2009), Turner (2018), and Tarlo (2007), as well as from Driezen et al. (2020) about context-driven cosmopolitanism and micro-level cosmopolitanism, I propose the idea of Zongo cosmopolitanism. My understanding of Zongo cosmopolitanism within the context of this research allows us to pose the question as to how Muslim and Christian women are mixing cultural and religious as well as local and transnational beauty practices to create unique identities for themselves, an identity that is uniquely Zongo, reflecting the aspirations of Zongo women. I suggest that women's everyday beauty practices in the Zongo are neither entirely dictated by religious teachings that emphasize purity, piety or authenticity, nor are they solely determined by a particular local or traditional type of beauty linked to Ghanaian identity. Here, I conceptualize the Zongo as a stranger community, where people from different cultural and religious backgrounds relate with one another, allowing for cross-cultural and cross-religious borrowing, copying and mixing. I argue that in Madina Zongo, women's beauty practices are as varied as its people's ethnic, religious and transnational identities. Their everyday beauty practices have a cosmopolitan outlook, and are embodied in heterogenous ways. I argue that the cosmopolitan beauty practices of the women in the Zongo are very much affected by class differentiation. The Zongo women I refer to in this research are mainly cosmopolitan Muslim and Christian women, who travel to other places or have contact with people from different parts of the world; these classes of women have access to cosmopolitan beauty ideals, have the available resources at their disposal and also participate in such lifestyles.

Religious Co-existence from a Gendered Perspective

Having highlighted Madina Zongo as a cosmopolitan space that allows for cross-religious and cross-cultural borrowing of beauty practices, I will now turn my attention to scholarly works on religious co-existence from a gendered perspective, a topic that speaks directly to the theme of this dissertation. I look at these works from the perspective of this study's special interest in the question of beauty. As mentioned earlier, apart from socio-cultural perceptions about women's bodies, religion and the state also play major roles in controlling women's bodies in the public space. The discussion below will focus on how beauty practices associated with Muslim women specifically affect Christian–Muslim relations in a secular state such as Ghana. In this discussion, I pay particular attention to the discourse on the *hijab* in Ghana's public spaces, since it is through the *hijab* that Christian–Muslim relations from the gendered perspective come into play. As mentioned earlier, while the theme of the

research is about inter-religious co-existence, most of the cases discussed in this thesis focus more on Muslim women than on Christian women.

Samwini (2006: 136) succinctly captures one of such discourses as 'The *hijab* in public life'. Here, Samwini intimates that in the post-colonial period, Ghana witnessed Muslim women's revivalist movements in the public space. These movements led to a transformation in the perceptions about Muslim women as people whose roles were limited to private and domestic spaces. Through the formation of social and religious organizations, the perceptions in Ghana about Muslim women who were generally perceived by non-Muslims as uneducated, poor, oppressed and suppressed, changed. Despite having no educational background, some Muslim businesswomen in the Zongo established the first Muslim women's association, *Zumunchi*, in 1968 (Pellow 1987; Sulemana 1994). This was later followed by the formation of a Wahhabi women's group known as the Islamic Centre for Women Orientation (see Dumbe 2009: 221; Khamis 2009: 9), and then the Federation of Muslim Women Association in Ghana, in 1992, by a group of Western-educated Zongo Muslim women (Sulemanu 2006, 2023). While the activities of these Muslim women changed the narrative about the place of the Muslim woman among non-Muslims in Ghana, Samwini (2006 136) reiterates that within the Muslim group, some men felt apprehensive about the women, as they feared that women were taking control of the public space and could be seen as being superior to men.

Even though Samwini's research did not specifically discuss the *hijab* as part of Muslim women's beauty practices, as the theme of my research suggests, the use of the phrase '*hijab* in public life' was metaphorically used by Samwini to imply the changing role of Muslim women in Ghana's public spaces. For me, Samwini's personification of the *hijab* in post-colonial Ghana communicates to readers about the visibility of Muslim women in Ghana's public spaces and their active participation in roles formerly reserved for Muslim men. As Mahdi stated in the context of Nigeria, several years after active participation of Muslim women in public life, their appearance and presentation of the self in the public formal spaces was heavily contested, and the discussion was shifted from the contribution of these women to national development to their appearance in public, as in the case of Samira Bawumia and Diana Asamoah. This shifting trajectory on the role of Ghanaian Muslim woman in public life was intensified by the arrival of Muslim revival groups from Saudi Arabia, Iran and Kuwait in post-independence Ghana.

A typical example of a beauty practice of Muslim women in Ghana which continues to generate tensions among Muslims and non-Muslims in most formal public spaces in Ghana is the

identity of the Muslim woman with the *hijab*. Hijab-wearing by Muslim women is a practice that continues to generate tension between Muslims and Christians in several public institutions. For instance, Mohammed H. A. Bolaji's (2018) study '*Secularism and State Neutrality: The 2015 Muslim Protest of Discrimination in the Public Schools in Ghana'* notes that, even though Ghana is noted for its relatively peaceful religious co-existence among Muslims and Christians in the West African sub-region, over the past decade, disagreements that ensued between Muslims and Christians in some public schools, especially regarding the *hijab* worn by female Muslim students in Ghana indicate that all is not rosy. For Bolaji (2018: 70), even though secularity as a framework is deployed by the state to ensure its neutrality and peaceful co-existence among members of different religious groups in plural settings such as that of Ghana, its successful application remains a mirage in various institutions. In other words, the problem this secular framework poses to Ghana's religious plurality as purported by Bolaji is that the application of secularism in various public and private institutions is not clearly spelt out and often results in conflict. This is due to the fact that Christian religious practitioners, who constitute the religious majority in Ghana and occupy most of the formal positions in important institutions appear to assume a hegemonic position, perhaps also because their tolerance/perception of Muslims is changing due to developments in the sub-region and the world.

Chronicling a series of events that complicate the relationship between practitioners of the two religious' groups, Bolaji cites cases of religious discrimination at different levels of Ghana's public schools. He refers to the insistence by officials of the West African Examination Council (W.A.E. C.) on having female Muslim students remove their *hijabs* before taking passport-size photographs that require their forehead, mouth, nose, chin, eyes and part of the head's hair to be shown, for the purpose of registering for the Council's exams (Bolaji 2018: 86). Being a state institution,

WAEC officials were expected to provide a level playing field for individuals from different religious backgrounds. However, since most of these officials are Christians, some Muslims assumed that the actions of the WAEC officials (who were identified as Christians) were an indication of clear discrimination against their religious practice. Also, Muslim nurses complained about continuous harassment, as they don the *hijab* at various private and public hospitals (Darko 2022).

Another scholarly work which speaks to the theme of religious co-existence from the gendered perspective is by Cosmas Ebo Sarbah (2018). In his paper '*Religious Rights in the State Regulated Mission Schools in Ghana'*, Sarbah takes a close look at the 1961 Education Act and how it has affected religious plurality in Ghana. The Act ensured that all pre-university educational

institutions were to be handed over to the state (Sarbah 2018: 213). The state, through the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service as its agent, took control of all private schools, including Christian Mission schools. Among the duties of the state was to develop a policy and curriculum for all schools in Ghana, maintaining infrastructure and building new school projects. The state was also in charge of training and appointing teachers, and of payment of teachers' salaries.

However, the Christian Mission schools were not enthusiastic about the Education Act, as they continued to engage in Christian practices such as morning devotion and other Christian worship services, which were mandatory for all students irrespective of their religious background. The Christian Mission schools described the state take-over as an infringement of their rights. Also, Muslims thought that making Christian practices mandatory in state public schools was an infringement on their rights. These contestations continued to mar the relationship between Muslims and Christians for several years. In such schools, though state-sponsored, Muslims could not practise their religion, which included female students' wearing of *hijabs* and performance of their prayers. Simultaneously, the tension marred the relationship between Christians and the state, which, through the Ghana Education Service, issued threats of sanction against heads of Christian Mission schools who violated the rights of Muslim students (Sarbah 2018: 216). The Mission schools argued that their insistence on mandatory Christian practices should be seen as an attempt to instil discipline in children, not an attempt to indoctrinate them. Muslims were offered to go elsewhere if they felt their rights in Mission schools were violated. However, Sarbah argued that separating children on the basis of religious differences would not be helpful for religious co-existence in Ghana. While some Mission schools made provisions for Muslim students to practise their religion, others did not (p. 220).

Sarbah (p. 220) also suggests that according to the rules of Ghana Education Service, all Muslim public basic schools[32] are expected to observe certain Islamic practices such as the wearing of *hijab*, reciting the opening chapter of the Qur'an in Arabic during morning assembly, allocating specific breaks for daily prayers, and providing a weekly programme to explain Islamic beliefs and practices. However, Sarbah observed that this practices were not enforced in all Islamic schools, since in schools located in the Muslim minority communities, Islamic practices were optional for non-Muslim students; surprisingly, he observed that some Christian girls wore the *hijab* in solidarity with their Muslim friends (p. 221). He stresses that the place of religion in Ghana's public schools continues to be a matter of controversy among Muslims and Christians (p. 222). Most parents trust

[32] In Ghana, a basic school comprises of the Primary and Junior High School.

school authorities to instil discipline in their children, but not to introduce them to a religion different from that of their parents. Sarbah's work mentions in passing the cross-religious borrowing of a religious garment, in this case the *hijab,* by non-Muslim girls for non-religious reasons. In the discussion that follows, specifically in Chapter Three, I provide detailed ethnographic research on the cross-religious appropriation of the *hijab* and also the *niqab* by the religious Other for mundane purposes.

Beyond the enforcement of certain religious practices in some public basic and secondary schools by religious organizations,[33] Kasim (2023) discusses the provision of tertiary education by state and religious organizations in Ghana—thus, public and private universities respectively. All these universities operate under a secular constitution that allows for freedom of religion and association. However, Kasim identifies the public universities as secular and the private universities funded by religious organizations as restrictively religious. These universities operate under the secular–religious binary, with various forms of religious activism on university campuses. Through the activities of religious associations on various university campuses in Ghana, Muslims and Christians are able to nurture their faith and keep each other in check on campuses that appear to be secular (Kasim 2023: 172–173). Kasim observes that in the performance of religious activities, Muslim and Christian religious practitioners cross each other's paths without any problem. He observes that female Muslims don their *hijabs* in public and private universities with ease, including those universities established by Christians (p. 174). In public universities such as the University of Ghana and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, some female Muslim students also use the *niqab,* which often results in some tension between those women and university officials for the purposes of identification (p. 175). While the use of the *hijab* by female Muslim students generated many controversies at the basic school and secondary school level, it is obvious from Kasim's research that female Muslims in various universities in Ghana exercise a lot of freedom in wearing their *hijabs*, including at universities owned by Christians.

The above research clearly spells out the freedom female Muslims express by donning the *hijab* in educational institutions that operate under a secular framework. The next question is: Do Muslim women exercise the same liberty to wear their *hijab*s, or are prevented from wearing them, in their various works places? Here, the work of Martin Luther Darko (2022) on contesting the *hijab* at the Pentecost Hospital in Madina provides some answers. Darko (2022: 494–495) observes how in a religiously pluralistic community where Muslims are in the majority, the Alpha Hospital in Madina

[33] These are schools built by religious organizations but managed by the government. A typical example is the Umar Bun Hatab Islamic School in Madina.

which is the foundered and managed by the Church of Pentecost, emphasizes that the use of the hijab by female Muslim nurses in the hospital is incompatible with the church's Christian identity.. Even though the church's ban on veiling violates the rights of female Muslim workers, they can do very little to change the directive.

Clearly, the above discussions highlight the fact that Ghana's secular constitution allows all religions to express themselves, with secularity used as a mode of managing religious plurality by the state. At the same time, the unwillingness of some Christian-owned institutions to permit Muslim women to wear a veil *(mayafi, hijab, niqab*),[34] raises critical questions about gender and religious co-existence in Ghana. While these tensions discussed in the literature often occur in relation to formal institutions such as schools and hospitals, this research focuses on the informal spaces or the everyday level where pragmatism often wins over strictness. Despite the clashes between Muslims and Christians at the national level, at the everyday informal level, these religious practitioners relate to and usually tolerate and manage to live with one another in a multi-religious context such as that of Madina Zongo. In this ethnographic study, beauty practices, especially the style of dressing, are important entry points to understanding the gendered dynamics of co-existence.

Research Questions

As stated in the discussion above, existing literature on women and religious co-existence in Ghana largely focuses on the *hijab* and the various challenges it poses to the Constitution, which describes Ghana as a secular country. Specifically, these scholarly works tend to focus on the contestations between Muslims and Christians on the use of the *hijab* in formal spaces such as schools and hospitals, rather than in informal and everyday spaces where women negotiate religious co-existence on a daily basis. Seeking to redress this lacuna, this dissertation takes women's everyday beauty practices as a lens through which to understand the gender dimension of religious co-existence. The main question guiding this dissertation is: In a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic and multi-religious context such as Madina, how do Muslim and Christian women manage to look beautiful while ensuring that they do not fall out of line with what are seen as acceptable beauty practices in their respective groups? In order to answer this question, the dissertation poses the following sub-questions: What is beauty in the Zongo, and what dimensions does it have in addition to the physical-aesthetic one? How do Christian and Muslim women negotiate a balance between being pious, as defined in their

[34] *mayafi*: a Hausa term for a veil.

respective traditions, and being fashionable? In what everyday beauty practices do Muslim and Christian women engage in the Zongo? How do beauty parlours in the Zongo serve as gendered and inter-religious spaces? What are the perceptions Muslims and Christians have about the female body in the Zongo? What role does veiling play in connecting the female body, modesty and fashion in the Zongo? Apart from the religious meanings of veiling, what new meanings do women attach to veiling, and how do these new meanings affect religious co-existence? How do Zongo women beautify themselves in the erotic sense, and how do their erotic beauty practices question gender roles and religious co-existence in the Zongo?

Methods of Data Collection

This thesis was based on ethnographic research on religious co-existence in a suburban community called Madina Zongo, located in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. The thesis was conducted from January 2018 to February 2021. On the commencement of the research in 2018, I dedicated my time to identify specific locations that were of interest to women's beauty practices in the Zongo. Part of the year was used to introduce myself to key interlocutors such as Muslim and Christian religious authorities as well as women who owned beauty shops. The COVID-19 pandemic however slowed my fieldwork from May 2019 to June 2020. Subsequently, another round of fieldwork was conducted between July 2020 to February 2021. The study's data collection method was primarily qualitative, explorative and descriptive. I employed interviews, formal and informal interactions and participant observation, as well as focus group discussions. My key interlocutors included selected men and women with Muslim or Christian backgrounds, religious leaders, women who own beauty parlours and their apprentices, as well as photographers, all from Madina Zongo.

Women were my key interlocutors. Specifically, this study focused on cosmopolitan women between the ages of eighteen and seventy five; women in this age group provide and/or are consumers of beauty services such as hairdressing and make-up, as well as women's dresses, aphrodisiacs and other beauty materials. In addition to being either Christian or Muslim, women in this category have different social and cultural backgrounds and may be single, married, divorced or/and widowed. However, the thesis focused largely on the beauty practices of married women, since it is within marriage that gender roles regarding all dimensions of women's beauty practices really come into play. Moreover, religious restrictions and sanctions placed on women's beauty practices bear heaviest on married women, more than on women in other categories. Next to talking to (married) women in order to learn about their beauty practices, I also spoke with Muslim and

Christian women who own beauty parlours and clothing boutiques; I refer to them as beauticians. Extensive discussions were held with both Muslim and Christian women who have taken up such professions as a source of livelihood. The fact that such beauty spaces have different architectural forms—including shops, locally built metallic containers, and open spaces under trees—allowed me to gain in-depth knowledge about the diverse use of beauty spaces and the levels of interaction among their clients.

During my fieldwork, special attention was paid to Muslim and Christian women leaders, because they are highly respected by their fellow women, mainly due to the leadership roles they play in the Zongo religious space; also, several Muslim and Christian women look up to these female religious leaders for sartorial inspiration. For instance, I held interviews with two female reverend ministers from the historical mainline churches (one Presbyterian and one Methodist), leaders of women's fellowships of the Roman Catholic Church and Methodist Church Ghana, a female Pentecostal-Charismatic preacher, and a woman who founded her own church at Madina. On the Muslim side, interviews were conducted with five female Muslim leaders (*Malama)* in the Zongo. These Muslim women leaders mostly associate with the Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jama group. There were also focus group discussions with the Muslim women at a Qur'anic school as well as with Muslim and Christian women who sell *kayan mata* (aphrodisiacs and charms for erotic beauty practices). Additionally, focus group discussions, telephone discussions and informal discussions were held with some Christian women in Madina, both at their religious premises and in their homes. These included members of the Deeper Life Church, Women's Fellowship at the Victory Society Church, Church of Pentecost, and Our Lady of Apostles Catholic Church.

Though this research focuses primarily on women, I also interviewed some male religious leaders, such as imams and pastors. Since Ghana—and, for that matter, Madina—is a patriarchal society, interviews with these categories of people allowed me to understand how their sermons and teachings influence women's everyday beauty practices, as well as the debates their sermons generate regarding gender and the body. I held interviews with seven imams. In addition to these Muslim men, I also held interviews with two male groups who sit at bases[35]—namely, the Parliament Base and the Allah Rufa Asiri Base. On the Christian side, I interviewed a youth leader and several

[35] Even though this is not a religious organization, I used the premises of a driving school to substitute for the bases usually containing Muslim men. Most of this driving school's instructors are Christians from different groups. In a focus-group discussion, they shared their views about the practice of women's beauty in the church and what they think about Muslim women's beauty practices in the Zongo.

women of the Redco Deeper Life Church, some Christian men at the Stevens Driving School,[36] as well as my colleagues, Martin Luther Darko (a member of the Church of Pentecost), and Joseph Fosu Ankrah (a Methodist).

I also participated in, and observed Muslim and Christian weddings, funerals, Christmas and Eid celebrations, in addition to Watching Night Services on 31 December. Other events I participated and observed included blessings of apprentices of beauty parlours, a political rally for women in the Zongo, Faila Party, Ramadan programmes for Muslim women, church services and Friday congregational prayers for Muslims. This enabled me to acquire firsthand information about how women beautify themselves at such events, emphasizing that beauty has aesthetic, spiritual, moral and erotic dimensions.

The impact of COVID-19 in Ghana in 2020, which coincided with my fieldwork, pushed me into what some anthropologists describe as the 'ethnographies of waiting' (Bandak & Janeja 2020; Reinhardt 2018). To appreciate the socio-cultural context of a people, it is necessary to focus on what they do during periods of waiting. Since the beauty industry did not fall under the essential services during the partial lockdown, beauticians who happened to be among my key interlocutors were forced into waiting.[37] They had to wait for all restrictions on movement to be removed before they could go back to business. This meant that I also had to wait for the beauticians to bounce back. My fieldwork had to wait because beauty parlours were shut, and social and religious ceremonies were restricted to a particular number of people. However, this period of waiting allowed me to appreciate the significance of beauty in the lives of Muslim and Christian women in the Zongo.

I realized that even though most beauty shops were closed during the time of COVID-19, weddings and religious festivities that required specific beauty practices continued to take place. Muslim and Christian brides still beautified themselves and posted their pictures under their social media handles. During Eid, Easter and Christmas celebrations, my interlocutors who were either Muslim or Christian women felt it was a blessing to be alive when others had lost their lives to COVID. As an expression of God's blessing, they bought new clothes and dressed up to commemorate these celebrations. In an attempt to meet the needs of clients' clothing, boutique owners began to advertise online. As a result, my attention was also drawn to how online markets popularized modest fashion in the Zongo, and how dresses popularly identified as Muslim dresses

[36] A programme organized by Tijaniyya Muslims for prospective Muslim brides. This programme is characterized mostly by drumming and dancing and words of advice from one of the Tijaniyya imams to the prospective couple.
[37] https://religiousmatters.nl/waiting-for-god-in-times-of-covid-19-the-case-for-quarantined-beauty-parlours-in-madina-zongo/ accessed 24 June 2024

became attractive to Christians, who also used such dresses during their festive occasions. More importantly during this period of waiting, I also noticed how some Christian women appropriated the *niqab* for face masks as a COVID-19 protective tool (detailed discussion in Chapter Three).

Media platforms such as magazines, newspapers, WhatsApp, Facebook pages, Instagram accounts, films, popular television programmes (*The Hairdressers*) and popular songs were also used in gathering data. These sources allowed me to appreciate how popular culture plays out in women's beauty practices as well as how the media influences ordinary Muslim and Christian women's beauty practices in the Zongo.

Outsider/Insider

Ethnographic research is necessarily subjective, as it needs to allow for personal and emotional connections to interlocutors. This leads me to a reflection on insider/outsider perspectives in ethnographic research. The insider/outsider debate allowed me to develop insights into the negotiations involved in the beauty practices of religious women in Madina. Holmes (2020: 5) suggests that the insider has a 'personal biography' (gender, race, skin colour, class, sexual orientation and so on) that offers him/her to have a 'lived familiarity' with and a previous understanding of the group being researched, but the outsider is known as a researcher who is not familiar with the group he/she is studying.

In this ethnographic study, I placed myself as both an insider and an outsider. I considered myself as an insider because I am a Zongo Muslim woman who lives in Madina, conducting research in a community dominated by Muslims. I am familiar with most of the beauty practices in Madina, even though I do not practise some of them. I also have firsthand experience of living in a multi-religious setting: prior to starting this research, my family and I lived in a compound house in Madina with my landlord and his family (Muslims), together with six other co-tenants. Only two of the tenants were Muslims; the rest were all Christians—two were Jehovah's Witnesses, one was a member of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and the last tenant, a Catholic, did not attend regular church but patronized prayer sessions at the International God's Way Church founded by Daniel Obinim at Ashaley Botwe, a suburb east of Madina. This woman, a hairdresser by profession likes to wear a very large *hijab,* which she got as a gift from a friend who had returned from hajj; she said it comes in handy when she wants to step outside to buy something, and she likes it when others

address her as *Hajia, Amaria*,[38] and also greet her with *Asalamu Alaikum or kwalafia*.[39] Occasionally, I had some discussions with her regarding the beauty parlour work.

In Madina, most of my neighbours and co-tenants called me *Mma* Nasara (Nasara's mother) while those who knew my background as a lecturer at Islamic University called me Madam. My husband's profession as a Director of an Islamic school, Daarud-Deen Islamic Centre in a neighbouring community called Adentan, has also earned me the title '*malama'*. These three identities have also influenced my beauty practices and behaviour in the Zongo, to the extent that it is difficult to partake in certain activities and beauty practices that other Zongo women may engage in. For instance, on one occasion when I had just stepped out of my house to buy something from a nearby shop, with a head tie and no veil covering my head, one of my neighbours queried me and said that I looked like a Christian. Another Muslim woman who saw me when my veil had fallen off from my head, leaving just my head tie, said, 'Ah *malama*, I couldn't make you up; this is unfamiliar with you.' These comments allowed me to appreciate firsthand the expectations of a society about women's beauty practices, based on the roles they play or positions they occupy.

As an insider, my ability to speak the two dominant languages in Madina Zongo, *Twi* and Hausa, also helped with fieldwork. In the Zongo, *Twi* is mostly associated with Christians, while Hausa is associated with Muslims. However, due to the decades of interaction among Muslims and Christians, it is common to find a Christian who speaks fluent Hausa and vice versa. For me as a young Muslim woman, speaking *Twi* in addition to Hausa aided most of the conversations I had with my Christian interlocutors. To some extent, it blurred the religious barrier between us and allowed some of these Christian interlocutors to see me as one of them.

Also, among Muslims in the Zongo, I realized that my previous research work on Muslims in Accra facilitated my entry.[40] For instance, Hajia Salamatu Umar Kuta (popularly known as Malama Sala), the spouse of the late Malam Yunus, already knew me from 2008 and was happy to grant me interviews; she also introduced me to a host of *malama* she had trained and invited me to most of her programmes. Sometimes, she invited me to perform key functions during her public programmes. These invitations also facilitated my visibility in the Zongo and made it easier to conduct interviews with Muslim female role models in there.

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[38] A title used for a married woman in Hausa.

[39] 'Good morning' in Hausa.

[40] MPhil thesis, Khamis, Kauthar, 2013. 'Sustaining Muslim Marriages: The Role of Pre-Marital Counselling in Mamobi-Nima Muslim Communities.' Unpublished thesis submitted to the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana.
Long essay, Khamis, Kauthar, 2008. 'A Study of Islamic Charity Centre for Women Orientation.' Unpublished long essay submitted to the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana.

Since there are very few Zongo women who pursue higher education to the PhD level, I realized that my visibility among Muslims in the Zongo also gave me the status of a role model. As a result, relationships were created with some interlocutors. Some interlocutors attempted to draw me into their personal matters; for instance, after a neighbour introduced me to her niece who works as a beautician, she asked me to speak to the beautician about the importance of marriage and how staying single is not suitable for a Muslim woman at her age. I also had several invitations to weddings from my Muslim interlocutors, and there were instances when I had to buy a marriage commemorative cloth (*yaayi*) to identify with my interlocutors.[41] It also meant I had to be measured in the way I participated in some of the public programmes, to enable me have time to concentrate on my thesis. Therefore, I had to politely turn down some of these invitations.

Based on this rich insider background, one would assume that I would not consider myself as an outsider in the research area, especially among Muslims. However, I appreciated my outsider position among Muslims when I set out to interact with Muslim women who owned beauty parlours. I realized that most Muslim beauticians whom I attempted to engage were reluctant to communicate; as a Zongo woman, they saw me as a potential competitor who wanted to delve into the beauty parlour business. For example, after explaining my research topic and intention to interview one of the make-up artists in the Zongo, she started to avoid me by not responding to my calls. Others directly mentioned to me that I was asking too detailed questions which did not require yes or no answers, and therefore they were not certain about my intentions. I had to use the snowball method by relying on some neighbours who knew these beauticians to introduce me to them and what I do. During my trips to the Netherlands, I bought for these beauticians beauty products, such as make-up kits. This gesture was not intended to 'buy' my interlocutors but to strengthen my relationship with them. Also, during my supervisors' visits to Ghana, they also joined me in visiting some of these key interlocutors in Madina, which also erased all doubts about my interest in their beauty work.

Another hurdle that made my outsider position more visible to me during fieldwork was with male Muslim religious authorities. At the beginning, when I went personally to see some of the imams, some thought I had come for financial assistance or that I was facing some marital problems. One imam said to me, 'We do not assist people here; as you can see, we have an ongoing mosque project for which we also need financial assistance to complete.' However, after introducing myself and engaging him on several topical issues regarding women's beauty practices, the imam apologized. The attitude of some of these imams did not come as a surprise to me; in a patriarchal

[41] An African print cloth of a particular design selected to be worn at a marriage ceremony. In most Zongo communities in Ghana, this is locally called in Hausa *yaayi*.

society such as that of Madina Zongo, it is unusual for a woman to request that she wants to see an imam. In order to avoid some of these uncomfortable situations, my husband accompanied me to some of the interviews I had with the imams; and for others, I attended with one of the teachers of Daarud-Deen Islamic Centre who lives in Madina. Knowing that the presence of these third parties could influence my discussions with the imams, I constantly had to redirect our conversation to ensure that we kept to the main issue of the research. In some instances, these third parties also introduced me to the imams and left; at other times, I made follow-up telephone calls and conducted WhatsApp conversations for further clarifications from the imams.

As a patriarchal community, most of the interviews I had with Muslim men, especially those at the bases, were much easier because they knew my husband and thought that he had no problem with my sitting and having a discussion with a group of men at the base. Also, due to the tension between the Tijaniyya and the ASWAJ, I noticed some uncomfortable expressions on the faces of some Muslim acquaintances when they saw me entering the house or mosque of a Tijaniyya imam; these Muslims thought I was one of those clients who frequent such places for spiritual assistance. Also, when one of my relatives saw me coming out of the Victory Society Church in Madina after a discussion with a minister, she called to caution me and asked me to be careful about how I associate with Christians, since they could easily persuade me to join their religion. This exemplifies the level of social control in Madina, since people are being observed and watched and sometimes reprimanded about how they behave.

As noted in the discussions above, in the Zongo, beauty is synonymous with women. However, this research allowed me to recognize my ignorance about certain beauty practices associated with Muslim women who lived in the Zongo. Due to the moralization of sex in the Zongo, I noticed that some ideas about women's erotic beauty practices were shrouded in secrecy. Some of the women who sold *kayan mata* in the Zongo mostly did that in their homes; it required me strengthening my social network to reach some of these vendors. Some vendors started to avoid me when they felt the questions on *kayan mata* were becoming too deep. This especially occurred when I wanted some of them to introduce me to their clients in order to enquire how *kayan mata* products strengthened their love relationships. It took me weeks of interaction with these vendors before some vendors introduced me to *kayan mata* that were described by the vendors as spiritually fortified. Sometimes, I had to wait till the vendors were about to close their shops at night when there was no client around.

Seeing me as a Muslim woman, some vendors drew my attention to *kayan mata* products that would make my husband 'stick to me', so that he does not become polygamous. I was introduced to a variety of spiritually fortified *kayan mata* such as beads, eye liners, perfumes, face powders, creams, mirrors and other products. In order to acquire in-depth information about these products, I bought them at very expensive prices (funded by the research). Based on the interactions with my interlocutors, I also realized that these commodities were not just like any commercial commodity, but 'fetishised commodities' (Meyer 1998: 769) embedded with spiritual efficacy. Therefore, in order not to be affected by them in any spiritual way, I always said a prayer over them after buying them.

Again, this research allowed me to appreciate how gender plays out in women's beauty practices, especially with regard to women's erotic beauty practices; for instance, discussions with imams felt a bit awkward, even though some of these discussions were conducted in the presence of the men who accompanied me. I noticed that even in the company of these men, I had to continuously redirect the imams to my research questions, since there was a constant digression. I also paid attention to some of the public sermons and television programmes by some of these imams which touched on women's erotic beauty practices.

My insider and outsider experience in this thesis allowed me to reflect on perceptions about the religious Other. I realized that even though Muslims and Christians live in close proximity in the same community and sometimes in the same compound house, certain beauty practices are associated with specific religious groups. For instance, the practice of covering the hair is usually associated with Muslim women in the Zongo, while women who expose their are also identified as non- Muslims. For this reason, a Muslim woman could easily be labelled by others as a Christian just because she has not covered her hair, and vice versa.

Again, the reactions of some Muslims towards my association with people they regarded as the 'Other', be they Tijaniyya or Christian, showed that despite the proximity and frequent encounters with such others, some religious practitioners are suspicious that one could be persuaded to join their side. Also, my insider–outsider position allowed me to identify how gender roles in the Zongo influence women's beauty practices; it allowed me to understand the connection between gender, the body and religion. In a religiously pluralistic context, the gendered body could be perceived as physically or spiritually dangerous, depending on how it looks. Therefore, women negotiate cosmopolitan beauty practices with religious prescriptions to avoid spiritual attacks and fit into what is deemed appropriate in the eyes of Madina Zongo.

Giving my double status as an insider and outsider on women's beauty practices in the Zongo, further clarifications and discussions were made. On the Christian side for example, I made follow-up telephone calls on some observations with my key interlocutors for further clarifications. Also, my colleagues on the Madina Project, Joseph and Martin, gave more insights about certain observations I made. Additionally, further discussions were held with some female lecturers at the University of Ghana who happened to be reverend ministers. On the Muslim side, some passages of the thesis were shared with another colleague on the Madina Project, Rashida as well as some lecturers at the Department for the Study of Religions (Dr Rabiatu Ammah and Hajia Fatimatu Sulemanu). Field notes were also crosschecked with some key interlocutors to ensure that the work was devoid of any biases and prejudices.

Research Ethics

In ethnographic research, ethical considerations are important; this dissertation has made appropriate references to the materials consulted. In addition to the literature, findings and conclusions in the research are based on true reflection of discussions and interactions with interlocutors in the field. Over the past six years since this research began, the relationship with my interlocutors has transformed from that of a stranger or client to being a sister, friend and sometimes a daughter. The relationship I had with my interlocutors was not a casual one; some women opened up to discussing intimate matters with me based on the relationship I had developed with them over the period. As a researcher, I have not taken these relationships for granted. I have made my interlocutors aware that this research is an academic exercise and the data gathered will form the basis for my PhD. I have obtained oral consent from all my interlocutors to use the information provided, but will anonymize their identities. However, I used distinct names generally used by Muslims or Christians to convey their distinct perspectives. Additionally, I have sought permission not to anonymize names of religious leaders since they are already public figures who have sometimes made their positions on women's beauty practices known during public sermons.

I am also aware that people attach a lot of emotions to religious issues; I have remained sensitive in the way I write about potential controversial issues and have ensured the privacy and anonymity of my interlocutors by using pseudonyms, and doing so in such a way that their religious affiliation/identity can still be grasped. This approach resonates with the view that 'Ethnographers need to take informed consent from their participants by securing confidentiality, maintaining

anonymity, developing reciprocity, and preserving honesty for them in the research' (Ghimire 2021: 79). In this regard, to protect the integrity and privacy of my interlocutors, I have anonymized their names. I have tried to establish relationships that were reciprocal and benefitted both parties. As a member of the Zongo community, I was invited to some graduation ceremonies at some beauty parlours; I honoured those invitations and made donations (funded by the research) as was required by all invited guests. Also, during the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, I bought some veronica buckets (a hand-washing unit) for my interlocutors who were struggling to bounce back to business after the lockdown. For others, I had to patronize their salons to style my hair and/or to buy beauty products from these shops, and for the research's sake to engage in certain beauty practices that were personally not my style. These donations were not an attempt to buy information but rather to empathize with the beauticians, and also to strengthen my relationship with them and make sure that they did not feel used, but also benefited from the relationship.

Another important ethical aspect of this research concerns photography; even though most Zongo women share photographic images of their beauty practices on social media, I have sought permission from all interlocutors whose images have been published in this thesis and received their consent that their images be reproduced. I have also respected the views of those who asked that I take their pictures from behind in order not to show their faces. Some of the pictures in this dissertation were taken by professional photographers; they include: David Kwekutse and Nathaniel Worlanyo Kpogo. Pictures which were taken by me have been accordingly identified, as well as those retrieved online are equally referenced. Also, all pictures which were retrieved online are mainly those for public view, and I have referenced their sources accordingly. Data collected in this thesis were mainly in the form of audio recordings and handwritten notes. However, to protect the image and integrity of my interlocutors, the data will not be shared online; it has been stored securely on a password-protected drive.

Positionality

I am a Ghanaian Muslim woman from the Zongo, married with two children. Though not born and bred in a Zongo, I have relatives and friends in the Zongo, and attended a traditional Arabic school in a Zongo. I moved to live in Madina Zongo (specifically Washington) after I got married, five years before I started the research programme with the Madina Project. With regard to veiling my head as part of Zongo beauty practice, I was not introduced to this practice at home as I see some Muslim

parents in the Zongo currently do. I used the head veil only at the traditional Arabic school, but never wore it outside the school except for prayer and on Eid days. However, after being enrolled in an Islamic secondary school called Ghana-Lebanon Islamic Secondary School (GLISS) in 2000, where the *hijab* was part of the school uniform, it became part of my everyday beauty practices. I remember how at GLISS we were constantly educated on the significance of wearing the *hijab* as matured Muslim girls, since some of my schoolmates did not like it, and always took it off when they stepped outside the school. Personally, it was the beginning of my *hijab* journey. My late uncle Muhammed Abubakar and my brother Faisal Khamis, who have been interested in my spiritual and educational development, also encouraged me to wear it.

Outside school days, some Muslims would enquire if I were married, because they constantly saw me in *hijab*. I was cautioned against the excessive use of the *hijab* since it could hinder my chances of getting married. In other words, they thought that if I continued to wear the *hijab,* prospective husbands would think I was married. Following September eleventh (9/11) incident in the U.S., some people's discomfort about the *hijab*, especially the GLISS *hijab*, was heightened. I recollect that since the 9/11 attack was associated with Islamic fundamentalist groups, the GLISS uniform together with the *hijab* also suffered some antagonism. In the street of the Kwame Nkrumah Circle, public transport drivers and their conductors (drivers' mates) usually called us Osama bin Ladin's children or the Al-Qaeda people; others would ask if my colleagues and I did not have bombs in our bags.

Today, the *hijab* has assumed multiple meanings; young Muslim girls in Islamic and non-Islamic schools also wear the *hijab* in their everyday activities. The *hijab* has become synonymous with female piety and decency, to the extent that some babies are now donned with the *hijab* by their mothers, a practice beyond the Qur'anic injunction. When I attend social gatherings with my daughters without covering their heads, my family members will constantly remind me by asking, 'Why are the girls not in *hijab*?' Even though I do not consider myself as being more pious than women who do not don the *hijab*, my *hijab* allows me to connect to my Zongo roots as a Zongo woman. Personally, I also wear the *hijab* for a varied number of reasons irrespective of where I find myself; apart from seeing veiling as an expression of modesty in Islam, I also wear the *hijab* to honour my family, who have been instrumental in my educational trajectory. My brother Faisal Khamis who continuously shows interest in my education, have provided financial support throughout my educational journey. Therefore, throughout this research, I have been very intentional about the wearing of my *hijab* both at home and abroad to communicate to my family and the entire

Muslim community that a woman can still look Muslim while she pursues her career. My *hijab* also serves as an inspiration to those Muslim women from the Zongo who have been denied education for cultural and religious reasons.

However, I am mindful that my use of the *hijab* has influenced how some interlocutors, both male and female, Muslims and Christians, interact with me—sometimes advantageously, other times not so. For example, after some attempts to interview some members of the Church of Pentecost proved futile, I wondered whether if I had appeared without the *hijab*, the response would have been different. However, I felt at home the first time I visited the Deeper Life Church at Madina Redco; since it is part of the church's rule that women cover their heads, I was warmly welcomed. The women I interviewed constantly referred to my beauty practices by saying, 'We dress like you'—meaning that their church emphasizes modesty, which involves covering various body parts and not wearing tight-fitting dresses.

I have sat in church services in Madina in my *hijab*, including services at the Deeper Life Church, the Victory Society Assembly of the Methodist Church and the Our Lady of Apostle (Catholic Church), as well as at the Church of Pentecost. I have also attended church weddings in my *hijab*.

Notes on Language

Fieldwork carried out for this thesis was mainly conducted in the Hausa, Twi and English languages. All terms in Hausa and Twi are in italics and translated into English.

Thesis Outline

To answer the main question of how women's everyday beauty practices offer understanding of religious co-existence in cosmopolitan Madina Zongo, this thesis is structured into an Introduction, Four chapters, and a Conclusion. The current introductory chapter provides a general idea about the beauty-scape in Madina Zongo, theoretical framework, methodology, research ethics, positionality and outline of the research, among other aspects. The main chapters following this introductory chapter highlight specific aspects of Zongo women's everyday beauty practices from methodological,

spatial and practical points of view. Each chapter responds to the central research question from the angle of a specific aspect of beauty, from aesthetics to piousness and erotics.

In Chapter One, I use ethics and aesthetics as a methodological entry point to understanding the beauty practices of Muslim and Christian women in Madina Zongo. I state that in the Zongo, beauty is not only personal but also relational: it has the capacity to make and unmake relations. Therefore, in order to keep relationships intact, women negotiate religious and ethical standards regarding beauty with their aesthetic choices. Chapter Two delves into the architecture of beauty parlours in Madina Zongo, stating that beauty parlours are not just beauty spaces but potentially dangerous and inter-religious spaces. The chapter suggests that despite the dangers of the beauty work, Muslim and Christian women continue to be willing to take the risk, using the beauty industry as their source of livelihood. Doing so, they strategically engage in specific religious rituals to mitigate the fears and anxieties related with their work. Bearing in mind that their apprentices and clients are a mixture of Muslims and Christians, beauticians also extend their own religious boundaries to accommodate the religion of others.

Chapters Three and Four move beyond beauty in the aesthetic sense to unravel specific beauty practices that affect women's everyday encounters. In Chapter Three, I discuss the beauty and piety question, with special attention paid to the head veil. Parts of the chapter have been compiled on the basis of texts and photographs from a number of previous publications (see "Hijab and Niqab: A Cross-Religious COVID-19 Safety Measure in Madina Zongo", in Journal of *Entangled Religions* 2021, (12) 2; "Beautiful and Precarious Female Dummies in Madina", in *Material Religion*, 2022, (18) 4 (496-7); and "The Pacifist Hijab" in *Territoriality and Hospitality: Christian and Muslim Perspectives* edited by Azumah John and Cheikh Babou (UK: *Langham Publishing, 2024*), pp. 255-268), and have subsequently been integrated. Specifically, Chapter Three explains that beauty and piety play complementary rather than antagonistic roles. Exploring the veiling styles of Muslim women and some Christian women in Madina, in the chapter, I suggest that veiling is not new or peculiar to Muslims but rooted in the cultural practices of various ethnic groups in Ghana. This notwithstanding, veiling practices have undergone various forms of transformation, partly due to transnational contacts. Additionally, veiling among these women proves to have multiple meanings, including using the practice for worldly or mundane purposes.

Chapter Four delves into the erotic practices of women as a dimension of beauty that helps women to maintain intimate sexual relationships. In this chapter, I state that due to the inadequacies of the church and mosque counselling on sexuality among couples, some Muslim and Christian

women heavily rely on an emerging counselling ecosystem on social media, what I call the *kayan mata* counselling, originally associated with Hausa women from Nigeria. Even though sex as a subject of discussion creates a lot of amusement and is also moralized, this chapter states that the *kaya mata* counselling is a popular form of sex education, often sung about in popular music. The popularity of this emerging counselling system has extended moral boundaries regarding sexuality to ensure successful marital relationships. Specifically, this chapter focuses on how Muslim and Christian women are appropriating each other's counselling approaches to sexuality. The Conclusion to this thesis recapitulates the research findings and offers recommendations on areas for further research.