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

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CONCLUSION

Rethinking Women's Beauty as a Modality of Religious Co-existence in the Zongo

Introduction

This thesis has focused on Muslim and Christian women's everyday beauty practices in the cosmopolitan and religiously pluralistic Madina Zongo. The thesis asked the question: How do religious women in Madina manage to appear beautiful in a cosmopolitan setting while adhering to religious and cultural rules regarding female beauty practices? Specifically, the thesis explored practices of religious co-existence from the perspective of gender using beauty as an entry point. The research findings suggest that on an everyday level, Muslim and Christian women develop beauty practices that are multi-dimensional, share similar circumstances, at times advise each other and are prepared to experiment with new beauty styles. The main idea of this thesis is that beauty is more than just the physical-aesthetic appearance of a woman; it involves an integration of the latter with the spiritual/religious, erotic and moral dimensions. As discussed in the various chapters, these dimensions of beauty are not mutually exclusive but intricately linked to one another, to the extent that the absence of one creates certain boundaries that require several negotiations.

Chapter One offered insights into how Christian and Muslim women in Madina negotiate the ethics and aesthetics of beauty in their attempts to keep up with religious, cultural and global beauty standards. The chapter concludes that, despite the availability of cosmopolitan beauty products in Madina, everyday beauty choices of Muslim and Christian women are equally guided by what is considered acceptable within a particular religious and social group. In the end, various forms of negotiations of beauty occur through borrowing and copying, as a way of connecting ethics and aesthetics.

With focus on beauty parlours as a space for beauty in Chapter Two, this ethnographic research also highlights how co-existence is practised in beauty parlours owned by Muslim or Christian beauticians with religiously mixed clients. Here, the chapter concludes that despite the risks and dangers associated with beauty work, Christian and Muslim women in the Zongo continue to venture into the beauty profession as a survival strategy in the Zongo, while they constantly employ similar and sometimes different ways of seeking for protection from God. Again, in these beauty spaces, Muslim and Christian women intermingle and share ideas about beauty tips and advice one another on how to maintain healthy intimate relationships.

Focusing on specific beauty practices as a lens to understanding religious co-existence from a gendered perspective, Chapters Three and Four concentrated on veiling and *kayan mata* counselling respectively. In Chapter Three, I explained how looking beautiful and pious is expressed by Muslim and some Christian women who use the veil. This chapter revealed that the meaning of, and perspectives on veiling among Muslim and Christian women in Madina is fluid. The fluidity of the meaning of veiling in the Zongo range from wearing it as religious/spiritual material to using it for purely mundane purposes. In the last chapter (Four), the study showed how being beautiful in the erotic sense is both burdensome and empowering for some religious women in the Zongo—in the sense that there is a lot of expectation that women will beautify themselves in order to keep a man. In the process of meeting this expectation, Muslim and Christian women also have to 'weaponize' erotic beauty practices by shifting gender barriers and empowering themselves at the same time. Based on the discussions on beauty practices in these substantive chapters, this concluding chapter discusses the research findings under two main themes: beauty as a gendered construction and religious co-existence from the gendered perspective.

Beauty as a Gendered Construction

This study contributes to knowledge production in the area of beauty practices as a lens through which to study religious co-existence from the gendered perspective. It answers the questions: What is beauty in the Zongo? Which styles of beauty are available in the Zongo? How do beauty practices raise questions about the body, sexuality and gender? In answering these questions, the study summarizes beauty in the Zongo into three themes: beauty as a burden, beauty as a form of Zongo cosmopolitanism and beauty as empowering.

Scholarly works on women's everyday beauty practices generally study beauty from a gendered perspective and as a form of social control, both of which can result in different forms of resistance and individualistic tendencies. However, this ethnographic study revealed that in addition to focusing on beauty as a gendered term, in Madina Zongo beauty is largely relational. The conclusions of this thesis suggest that the beauty practices of women in the Zongo are to some extent experienced as a burden. This is because many of the beauty practices of Muslim and Christian women in the Zongo are shaped by religious and cultural perceptions about the relationship between the female body and sexuality. In the Zongo, ideas regarding the female body raise critical questions about sexuality, intimacy and space. This research revealed that there is a certain public discourse about the representation of the female body largely determined by particular moral and religious

ideologies. Thus, women's bodies are seen in the Zongo as a double-edged sword, potentially dangerous but also attractive and enticing. Muslim and Christian women must apply certain beauty practices to be attractive but also modest. On the one hand, women need to use certain aphrodisiacs and charms to 'repair' and 'sweeten' their bodies in order for their husbands to remain faithful, and they need to use enticing clothes to continuously attract their husbands. But on the other hand, women must refrain from engaging in certain beauty practices in religious spaces so as not to distract pious men.

There were also instances where women's beauty practices affirmed gender stereotypes of men as leaders and breadwinners and women as subordinates and dependent on men. The study revealed that in the Zongo, the burden of beauty weighs very heavily on the shoulders of women. Women engage in several beauty practices mostly for men's desire. For instance, some of the Zongo women who use *kayan mata* for erotic purposes do so for the benefit of men and for their men to stick to them and remain faithful. Some women in the Zongo continue to rely on *kayan mata* for financial support from men, affirming certain gender stereotypes—that men are the heads of the family and that extra-marital affairs by men are blamed on their wives—and thinking that they have failed in keeping their husbands attracted to and interested in them.

I argued that even though cosmopolitanism may promote individualistic tendencies, as far as the beauty practices of religious women in the Zongo are concerned, there is an emergence of a form of cosmopolitanism from below, which I call Zongo cosmopolitanism—thus, an everyday cosmopolitanism that involves a mixture of local, global and religious beauty practices. The point is that with Zongo cosmopolitanism, beauty is not purely a matter of personal choice; it is shaped through multiple obligations and expectations in the sphere of religion, gender, marriage and family relations—meaning that the beauty practices of these women are not only personal but first and foremost also relational. Thus, with Zongo cosmopolitanism, beauty practices in Madina Zongo are negotiated and renegotiated to ensure that the boundaries of ethical beauty are extended for women to express themselves while maintaining social relations. For instance, despite the tension generated by religious authorities with regard to Muslim women taking part in beauty contests, Muslim women who partake in these contests continue to don their *hijab*s in the contests as a way of remaining loyal to their Muslim identity. The reaction of some Muslims in the Zongo to this development has transformed from hostility to tolerance. Additionally, this thesis revealed that despite the contestations surrounding the *lefè* and engagement beauty practices, Muslim and Christian women

continue to employ several strategies to make such beauty practices an essential part of Muslim and Christian marriages in the Zongo.

And yet, the study shows that Muslim and Christian women in Madina Zongo are not just passive targets of regimes that control their bodies. They have also weaponized the demands placed on their appearance by employing beauty practices to empower themselves. As I showed in Chapters Two, Three and Four, in facing these cultural and religious requirements, Muslim and Christian women find a margin to express themselves through cross-religious borrowing and copying. I discovered that even though the use of aphrodisiacs and charms popularly labelled *kayan mata* is for the purposes of male sexual pleasure, Zongo women are equally using *kayan mata* to empower themselves in the domestic and public spaces. With *kayan mata*, some Muslim and Christian women have challenged gender norms in patriarchal Madina Zongo by sharing chores with their partners in intimate relationships. Again, some women have become more economically independent through the sale of *kayan mata* beauty practices and the operation of beauty parlours. Also, these women are experimenting with different veiling styles and giving them multiple meanings, making it difficult to attribute strictly religious meanings to certain religious practices.

Religious Co-existence from the Gendered Perspective

This ethnographic research revealed that beauty practices have strong implications for religious co-existence and gender relations in the Zongo. While some beauty practices form the basis for inclusion in various groups in the Zongo, others are considered unacceptable and therefore require various forms of negotiations by these women. The primary questions to be answered in this section are: How do beauty practices unite or separate women from one another or in various social and religious groupings in the Zongo? And, which negotiation tactics do Muslim and Christian women employ to ensure that they remain within the boundaries of what is identified as appropriate and acceptable beauty practices?

Scholarly works on religious co-existence in Ghana have largely focused on how the veiling practices of Muslim women in formal places are contested and how such contestations lead to frictions between Muslims and Christians in some public spaces. However, this study allows us to appreciate the fact that religious co-existence occurs not only in the public formal spaces but also in the ordinary, everyday and informal spaces where people seem to be on their own. This study therefore contributes to knowledge production in the area of religious co-existence at the everyday

level and from the gendered perspective. In answering the questions above, this study identified three levels of everyday religious co-existence from the gendered perspective: the public, religious as well as the family levels.

At the public level, the multiple dimensions of Zongo women's beauty practices allow for a deeper reflection on the role of secularism in managing religious plurality in multi-ethnic and multi-religious spaces such as Madina Zongo. Here, my focus was on how Ghana's secularism has impacted Zongo women's beauty practices at the everyday level in a way that unites, separates and raises critical questions about Christian–Muslim relations from the gendered perspective. There is no doubt that the increasing economic development and plurality of Ghana's urban centres, including Zongo communities, have resulted in tensions and conflicts among practitioners of different religious groups, as they struggle for space, visibility and control (Van Dijk 2001; Arthur 2018; Bolaji 2018; Sarbah 2018; Goshadze 2019; Kasim 2023; Samwini 2006).

To resolve such religious tensions, secularity is often evoked by emphasizing the values of human rights and the freedom to associate and belong to any group of a person's choice. A typical example is the way secularity is evoked in resolving tensions around the use of *hijab* in Ghana's public spaces among Muslims and Christians (Bolaji 2018; Sarbah 2018; Prempeh 2022). Similar tensions continue to occur in some public institutions located in Madina Zongo and other parts of the country (Bolaji 2018; Sarbah 2018; Darko 2022; Khamis 2024). Interestingly, at the informal and everyday level in Madina Zongo, negotiations of religious co-existence from the gendered perspective are managed through the use of the *hijab* and even the *niqab*. These veils, while generally seen as markers for pious Muslim women, though generating tensions in Ghana's public space, have been 'de-Muslimized' or even 'secularized' by some Christian women in Madina Zongo. They take the *hijab* and *niqab* as mundane pieces of cloth with physical and spiritual protective properties. Engagement with these veils as mundane materials by some Christian women facilitates a form of gendered religious co-existence, different from the tensions witnessed in some of Ghana's public spaces. For some Christian women, these religious attires offer them an opportunity to 'properly' belong to the Zongo, where having a Muslim identity comes with a lot of benefits and respect.

Here, secularity facilitates not only freedom of association but also freedom to cross religions, borrow and copy from the religious 'other', as well as freedom to attach multiple meanings to religious materials and practices. For instance, some Christian women have also appropriated *hijab* and *niqab* for convenience and for aesthetic and protective functions. I discovered that, as Muslim

and Christian women co-exist in Madina Zongo's plural settings, they do not only secularize religious materials; they also engage in shared religious practices such as morning devotions, the use of ablution kettles when visiting shared urinal facilities, and the practice of removing sandals before entering beauty parlours.

Though some Muslims appreciate the cross-religious appropriation of *hijab* or *niqab* by the religious Other as an endorsement of the Muslim faith, thereby promoting conviviality and pacifism (Sanneh 2019) in a pluralistic community, others have also interpreted the appropriation as capable of damaging healthy relationships in the case of 'inappropriate appropriation' (Khamis 2021). Thus, apart from the convivial Christian–Muslim relationship these veils offer in Madina Zongo, there is also suspicion among some Christians that these religious materials could be used by Muslims to influence the religious 'other', especially children, into accepting the Muslim faith.

In Madina's public spaces, the bond between Christians and Muslims is embodied through the process of 'selfing and othering' (Baumann 2004; Udasmoro 2018). These processes are exemplified through gender and religious differences. For example, through everyday beauty practices, different forms of othering identities such as *ashawo* (prostitute), *anna* (Christians in Hausa), *kremo* (Muslim in Twi), *pepe fuo* (northerners in Twi), *tariqa* (Tijaniyya) and Ahlu-suuna/wahabiyawa are created. My insider and outsider experience in this ethnographic study allowed me to reflect on the perceptions about the religious 'other' in Madina Zongo. I realized that, even though Muslims and Christians live side by side in the same community and sometimes in the same compound houses, certain practices are derogatorily associated with the 'other'. For example, it was unacceptable for a Muslim woman to look like a Christian woman, or for a pious Muslim or Christian woman to look like a prostitute. The negative reactions of some Muslims towards my association with Tijaniyya and Christians indicated that, despite the proximity with co-present others, religious practitioners remain suspicious, as there is the fear that one could easily be persuaded to join 'the other side'.

In their effort to remain beautiful in the physical-aesthetic, spiritual/religious, moral and erotic sense, Muslim and Christian women share beauty parlours and give advice to each other. This is why I described beauty parlours as inter-religious spaces where women enhance their beauty in all dimensions. The study revealed how intermingling and mixing of persons and of materials belonging to different religious groups and worldviews (sacred and profane, spiritual and physical) are entangled and accommodated for pragmatic reasons. Since beauty parlour work is largely identified as a dangerous profession due to intimate contacts with people's bodies and beauty materials, prayer,

morning devotions, recitation of the Qur'an, and religious stickers and objects are used to keep these dangers at bay. The study found out that though the architecture of beauty parlours usually reflects the religious conviction of the owner, Christian and Muslim beauticians accommodate the religious 'other' as a way of staying in business. It is a fact that, some Muslim women feel more comfortable with visiting beauty parlours owned by Christian women, since it allows them to confide in Christian beauticians in their efforts to resolve their relationships. However, this relationship is not necessarily targeted by the beauticians for the purposes of conversion but as a means to attract more customers.

Similarly, efforts by some Christian women, whose churches enforce strict beauty practices on women, to incorporate cosmopolitan styles into religious beauty practices offer a deeper understanding of how women challenge power relations in patriarchal religious spaces. Though conservative prerogatives conveyed to women by religious authorities may result in subduing women and making them less visible in the public spaces, I discovered that Muslim and Christian women continue to innovate and extend the boundaries of aesthetics and the ethics of beauty practices to fit into what is considered acceptable for pious women. I understood that women are not passive recipients of socio-religious regimes that attempt to control their bodies; rather, they employ an approach that continues to mix beauty with piety in their everyday beauty practices. This approach is redefining what it means for a religious woman to look beautiful in some religious spaces, similar to the case of the Church of Pentecost where women can now wear trousers and uncover their hair when going to church. Muslim and Christian women in the Zongo have resorted to a subtle resistance by innovating and copying from each other, while still keeping in touch with religious prescriptions. In a patriarchal context such as Madina Zongo, one would have expected complete obedience to the teachings of the religious authorities, taken as people who 'speak in the name of God'. In this study, I described women in Madina Zongo as people who are attaching multiple meanings to their own beauty practices to suit their aims and aspirations.

This study has revealed that even though there is emphasis on modest beauty practices at the family and religious levels, some parents, aunts and grandmothers are equally uncomfortable about conservative beauty practices communicated to women by certain religious authorities, especially during occasions such as weddings, where a bride is expected to look her best. Here, looking your best in the eyes of family members may mean compromising certain conservative beauty practices. The family holds the view that when a bride looks more inclined towards conservative beauty practices—including not plucking eyebrows, not fixing on false eyelashes and avoiding the wearing of wigs, among other practices—it may pose a threat to marital relationships. Most families become

anxious about the implications of such uncompromising positions on beauty practices on the husband–wife relationship. Here, the tension that develops between the bride and family relations also extends to religious authorities. The study revealed that as far as women's beauty practices in the Zongo are concerned, there is also a level of tension and anxiety between religious authorities and the family.

In summary, this study has shown that when studying religious co-existence from a gendered perspective, beauty is not as simple as what is in the beholder's eyes; rather, it is characterized by personal and group relations where perceptions about the gendered body play a prominent role. I have also highlighted how perceptions about the beauty practices of Muslim and Christian women bring about different modalities of religious co-existence from the gendered perspective—such as conviviality, tensions, othering, borrowing, copying and appropriating. There is no doubt that the phenomenon of men's beauty practices is also gradually becoming more prominent in cosmopolitan settings like Madina Zongo. It remains to be seen whether men's beauty practices will be subjected to the same level of public scrutiny as women's beauty practices receive, and what the consequences will be for future religious co-existence.

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