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Muslim Swim Wear Fashion at Amman Waves on the Internet and Live

Jenny Berglund

Abstract:

When viewed on the internet, the waterslides and pools at Amman Waves look deserted, but when paying a visit they are filled with children, women and men in various kinds of swim wear. At Amman Waves women's swim wear fashion ranges from small bikinis to swim-suits that cover every part of a woman's body except the face, hands and feet. In this article these differences in covering are discussed and categorized in relation to Islamic law. It is argued that this variation in swim wear also has relevance for European societies since it shows possibilities for negotiations (agreement) between traditional Islamic ideals and ideals in modern Western societies.

Keywords:

Jordan, gender, websites, Islamic law, e-commerce

Amman Waves on the Internet

If you search for water parks in Jordan on the internet you will soon find Amman Waves. According to the website, Amman Waves is an aqua park with pools, waterslides and a wave machine that can satisfy most children and grown ups, at least those that like to romp around in water. Looking at the online pictures of all the facilities, one soon notices (at least from a Swedish perspective) that there are hardly any people on the pictures using the swimming pools and water slides. The few pictures with individuals are taken from a very long distance and are not revealing of what they are wearing.

Considering that Jordan is a Muslim majority country, it is not a very grand suggestion that the pools and waterslides exposed on the web page as being empty has to do with the fact that according to Islamic law it is not considered appropriate to expose certain parts of the body. In strict observance, concerning women it is only hands, feet and face that can be exposed to

others than the close family. In Amman, as in Europe, it is very apparent that Muslim women have different opinions about the extent they think necessary to follow the dress codes of traditional Islamic legal interpretation or not, as well as in what way they should be followed. Among those who do not follow the regulations there are also varying opinions about what parts of a woman's body should be covered.

Amman Waves Live

When paying a visit to Amman Waves, the waterslides and swimming pools are filled with children, women and men who enjoy playing or exercising in water. There are special areas for children, and areas where children are not allowed, but otherwise all areas, except the changing rooms, are for both women and men. In this respect it could be an aqua theme park almost anywhere.

Amman Waves is clearly aimed at families in the upper middle class. Singles, no matter the age, are not allowed in without their parents. However, it is reported by some central Amman residents that women and teenage girls sometimes are let in without their parents, while men or teenage boys do not stand a chance to get in without their families. The owner of the place has made it clear he does not want it to become a "pick up place." The entrance fee is 14 dinars for grown-ups and 8 dinars for children, which is roughly the same in Euros. For most people in Jordan it is an impossible amount of money to pay. A secretary earns 250 dinars a month and the minimum wage is 120 dinars a month (1).

What causes me to write about Amman Waves is neither the fast water slides, nor the expensive entrance fee, but the variation in swim wear fashion that you find among women who swim at Amman Waves, a variation that I will here discuss in relation to Islamic law. These variations are possible to relate to the observed differences in swim wear fashion at Amman Waves during my visit in the summer of 2007. I have divided the swim wear into five categories, which are discussed in relation to the regulations of the different schools of Islamic law.

Women's Clothing

Within Islamic law there is consensus among the main established Sunni schools of law (Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanbali), as well as the Jafari about the obligation for a woman to cover the body except the face and the hands in front of men to whom marriage is not permitted (mahram, in principle close relatives).(2) Women who dress in this matter are called muhajabat. This obligation is foremost related to the Quranic surah 24 (Al Nûr), verse 31, where we can read the following:

And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers or their brothers' sons or their sisters' sons, or their women, or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigor, or children who know nothing or women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto Allah together, O believers, in order that you may succeed. (3)

Apart from the fact that the body has to be covered, the clothes should not be tight and show the outline of the body. This regulation is often related to a hadith from Sahih Muslim that says that "women who would be naked in spite of their being dressed" will not enter paradise.(4)

However, there are different opinions among the schools of law about exactly what should be covered in front of other women and in front of men to whom marriage is not permitted. Hanafis and Shafi'is say that awrah (a term that is used for the area between knees and navel) should be covered in front of other women and men towards whom marriage is not permitted; whereas Malikis and Hanbalis claim that this does only apply in front of other women. They claim that in front of men towards whom marriage is not permitted the whole body except head and hands. Most Jafaris claim that the behind and

other “private parts” have to be covered in front of other women as well as close male relatives, but that it is recommended but not obligatory to cover the rest of the body also in front of these. (5)

In the modern city of Amman, as in Europe, it is very apparent that Muslim women have different opinions about the extent they think it is necessary to follow these rules or not, as well as in what way they should be followed. Among those who do not follow the regulations there are also varying opinions about what parts of a woman’s body that should be covered. These variations are possible to relate to the observed differences in swim wear fashion at Amman Waves in the summer of 2007. I have divided the swim wear into five categories that in the following will be discussed in relation to the regulations of the different schools of law.

1. Bikini

Much of the swim wear that is worn by women who swim at Amman Waves is the same as the bikinis and one piece swim-suits that could be seen in any advertisement from clothes companies such as H&M (Hennes & Mauritz) or others. This swim wear covers the bosom and sexual organ, and if it is a one piece swim-suit, also the belly. This type of swim wear does not correspond to what any of the Islamic schools of law consider to be sufficient to cover up of the body in any situation. Hence, women who choose this type of swim wear can, for various reasons, be supposed to consider that it is not necessary to follow without question the regulations of the schools of law. [Images 1,2,3]



Images 1, 2, 3

2. Awrah Light

In this category, I have placed swim wear that covers the body between the knees and the navel and up to the shoulders, but without covering these. There is specific swim wear that serve this covering function, but many women use shorts, for example long biking shorts and chemise, to bring about a comparable cover of the body. In relation to the regulations of the schools of laws this correspond to what Hanafi and Shafi'i consider to be necessary to cover in front of other women as well as men with whom marriage is not permitted. Some of the swim wear in this category has a small skirt to cover the hips and reduce the impression of tightness. [Images 4,5]



Images 4, 5

3. Awrah Plus

In this third category you can find swim wear that covers the body from knees over the navel and also the shoulders. At the shop at Amman Waves there are several different swim suits that serve this function. There is one model with a skirt and one without; both could be found in a many different colours and patterns. Among several of the women at Amman

Waves this covering was also arranged by using biking shorts and a T-shirt. [Images 6,7,8,9]



Images 6, 7



Images 8, 9

4. Muhajabah Light

In this category I have placed swim wear that covers awrah as well as the rest of the legs, the arms along with the hair. This category holds swim-suits that are made of materials that fit tight on the body. The swim-suit on the picture could be found in the shop at Amman Waves. To cover the hips it has, like some of the swim-suits above, a skirt. It is possible to buy

a matching veil to cover the neck if wanted, but at the time when I visited Amman Waves there were no women who used this extra fitting. To avoid showing the outlines of the body it happened that women wrapped up a shawl around their upper part of the body. [Images 10,11]



Images 10, 11

Here I want to mention the trade mark BURQINI™ which has been established by the Australian company Ahiida. They specialize in sports clothing for women who want to dress according to Islamic law. According to an article in TIME, Ahiida's swim wear is not only used by Muslim women but also “conservative Christians, cancer patients, burn victims and senior citizens”. (6) [Image 12]



Image 12: Burqini™

5. Muhajabah Plus

Women who use swim-suits according to this fifth category are only occasionally viewed at Amman Waves. What distinguishes the swim-suits in this category from the previous one is that they are not tight. This kind of swim-suit could not be bought in the shop at Amman Waves, but it was available in shops along Mecca Street in central Amman or on the internet. [Images 13,14]



Image 13, 14

To sum it up, it is possible to claim that among the five categories of swim wear that can be seen at Amman Waves it is above all Muhajabah Plus that corresponds with what is prescribed by Islamic law about how women should be covered. However, I find it possible to claim that the swim wear in Awrah Light, Awrah Plus and Muhajabah Light in varying ways may be considered to be influenced by the prescriptions in the law, even though the product does not live up to the demands in full.

Relevance for Muslims in Muslim Minority Societies?

Does swim wear fashion at Amman Waves have any relevance for Muslim Minority societies like Sweden? For several reasons I think it has. To start with, it contradicts the stereotypic picture that Muslim women who cover do not swim and visit bathing facilities where men are present. Another

area of relevance is in relation to swimming education. In Sweden a new paragraph in the national syllabus for physical education has just been passed. This paragraph states that all students have to learn how to swim at least 200 meters before grade 5 (age 11), a demand that it is difficult for Muslim girls who cover in early years to live up to. (7)

The swim wear fashion at Amman Waves shows possible strategies for dressing relevant to girls and women who cover and want to swim in the facilities that exist in many European countries. Many Muslim women and girls previously have refrained from swimming because of their clothing considerations. In my opinion this situation highlights the importance of negotiation in a multicultural society: What is most important, that these Muslim girls dress according to the supposed norm in Swedish pools (category 1, bikini) or that these girls learn how to swim? And for the parents of these girls: What is most important, that the girls do not swim or that they dress in a way that could be considered to be decent? The variation in Muslim swim wear shows possibilities for agreement between traditional Islamic ideals and ideals in modern western societies. It also reveals that religious traditions cannot be seen as static but are instead in practice constantly reinterpreted. (8)

Post Scriptum Considering the Covering of Men's Bodies

In this article I have chosen to discuss swim wear among women at Amman Waves. I would however, want to point out that variation in swim wear also exists among men and that in the shop at Amman Waves it is possible to find swim-shorts of varying length for men. This variation is also relevant to what the different schools of law prescribe for the parts of a man's body that should be covered. The Hanafi and Hanbali school of law prescribe that it is obligatory for a man to cover awrah (between knees and navel) in front of everybody except his wife. Malikis and Shafi'is, however, make a distinction between what should be covered in front of other men and mahram (persons towards whom marriage is not permitted) and what should be covered in front of unknown women. In front of men and mahram they state that a man should cover awrah and that an unknown

woman should not see any part of a man's body. Malikis state that head and arms can be exposed, while Shafi'i's claim that there are no exceptions. (9)

About the author

Jenny Berglund (jenny.berglund@did.uu.se) is a doctoral candidate at Uppsala University in Sweden. Her thesis concerns Islamic religious education at Muslim schools in Sweden. An earlier version of this essay has been published in Swedish at www.islamologi.se. The photographs are by Jenny Berglund or from www.ahiida.com and www.jelbab.com with permission from Ahiida to publish pictures of their burqinis noting that it is a trade mark with TM.

Notes

- (1) Labour costs in Jordan (<http://www.jordanechb.org/codb/labor.shtm>).
- (2) Bakhtiar, Laleh (1996) *Encyclopaedia of Islamic Law*, Kazi Publications.
- (3) Pickthall, Muhammad M. (2006) *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*, Beltsville: Amana Publications.
- (4) Sahih Muslim, see www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/reference/searchhadith.html.
- (5) Bakhtiar, Laleh (1996) *Encyclopaedia of Islamic Law*, Kazi Publications.
- (6) Fitzpatrick, Laura (20070719) "The New Swimsuit Issue", *TIME*: www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1645145,00.html.
- (7) National syllabus for physical education (<http://www.skolverket.se>).
- (8) So far, only swim wear from Bikini and Awrah Light are available in shops in Sweden. Swim wear from the other categories have to be ordered from web shops, such as www.ahiida.com or www.jelbab.com.
- (9) Bakhtiar, Laleh (1996) *Encyclopaedia of Islamic Law*, Kazi Publications.

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