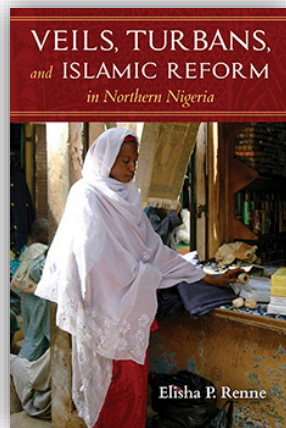


## BOOK REVIEW

# VEILS, TURBANS, AND ISLAMIC REFORM IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

*By Elisha Renne*

Reviewed by Adriana Myland



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Elisha Renne contributes significantly to our understanding of a unique part of the culture in northern Nigeria. Renne's extensive work on *Veils, Turbans, and Islamic Reform in Northern Nigeria* examines Islamic reform and the importance of understanding it through material expressions among Hausa and Fulani Muslims (2-3). In doing so, she helps explicate Nigeria's history and the current influence of Islam on culture in order to gain a deeper understanding of the expression of faith in the lives of Muslims in the North.

A complex and interesting focus on textiles and their relationship to spirituality infiltrates many facets of life for northern Nigerians. Some research has been done on veils and turbans in the past, but none such as Renne's, which focuses on the importance of appearance as it relates to religious piety and changes in gender ideology (6-8). Material expressions are crucial to understanding humanity from an Islamic perspective as Muslims pursue "an optimal way of being in the world, to find the right path and virtuous way," which helps understand how faith influences dress and what the "right path" means (204-205). Renne describes Islamic reform as new ways of "thinking about religious

practice," politics, education, gender roles and dress which has influenced the formation of identity and changed throughout the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate (5, 19, 21). Renne demonstrates the impact on numerous spheres including political and economic segments of society.

Renne's attention to detail in material expressions throughout the history of northern Nigeria allows her to connect to the development of Islam globally. There is a shared identity among Muslims that is expressed through dress, including the dress that Muslims take on in the Hajj (87, 145). This common dress indicates harmony across Muslim communities as well as the distinctive expressions of faith. For instance, there are unique styles of tying turbans, showing ethnic affiliation through different materials and changes in practices over time (74, 89). Renne examines how subtle differences in textiles help express the identity of various groups and roles in the North. As an example, political authorities such as emirs wear unique styles of turbans compared to the rest of community thereby reinforcing their powerful political positions (91).

Another important role of dress relates to the symbolic meanings of textiles for indicating differences among men and women. Material expressions connect to piety, status, class and influence gender, social and religious roles (98). There are surprising changes of dress among men in comparison to women. For example, Renne describes the constant change in proper veiling practices for men over time, including the veiling of emirs' faces, which in general supports the patriarchal structure in society (103, 106). Renne describes ways the covering of an emir's mouth shows reserve and status along with the developing belief of what a "proper Muslim" looks like according to dress (106, 43). This distinct practice alludes to religious piety and the high social status of emirs, and demonstrates the important role material expressions play in communicating Islamic faith and its development throughout time.

Further, learning about Islamic reform in northern Nigeria is enhanced by Renne's intensive study on the change of dress throughout time. The devastating terror

activity inflicted by Boko Haram on local populations involved some women who participated in the violence wearing their hijabs as a deceptive and deadly disguise (183). In this instance, the hijab has been used to portray the fundamental Islamic view of women rather than symbolize modesty and represent unity among Muslim women. Focusing on material expressions such as the hijab and uniforms, another deceptive disguise used by Boko Haram, influences ways material expressions can quickly change to negatively affect a culture's view of humanity (193). Rather than signifying religious unity in the Muslim community in northern Nigeria, these destructive uses of the hijab and uniforms have impacted northern Nigerians' view of each other. Here clothing serves as a metaphor for understanding social relations and ways people express their desire to seek the "right path" (203-205). This leads to conflicting views on how Nigerians in the North may perceive one another, including understanding the other's faith.

In critiquing Renne's work, I think it could be improved by discussing how Islamic reform continues to shape material expressions in northern Nigeria by elaborating on what the "straight path" means. She mentions different understandings of what the "straight path" means and how material life will influence ways Muslims express their faith (213). Also, she could focus on the influx of internally displaced people in northern Nigeria and how this may impact material expressions as some Nigerians have been relocated to other regions of the country impacting their pursuit of faith. Additionally, when I traveled throughout the city of Kano the symbol of the "northern knot" was visible and seemed to inspire some designs on men's clothing. It would be interesting if Renne explored specific symbols on clothing to elaborate on the expression of unity through dress among Muslims in the North and how specific symbols could be interpreted to understand the "straight path."

Another perspective that Renne might have presented in her work is the response from Christian minorities in the North to Islamic reform and its material expressions. This response is important in the region because of the religious tension between Muslims and Christians. It would be interesting to learn how Christians interpret different religious symbols of Islam and how this may effect their expressions of faith. Also, Renne's discussion on the deceptive use of the hijab and military uniforms by Boko Haram was provocative (183). It would be helpful to know ways the majority Muslims and minority Christians in the North can overcome deceptive perceptions of religious expressions and symbols. This might be an opportunity for Muslim and Christian communities to build bridges of peace by learning about the other's material expressions such as traditional dress.

Overall Renne's work is critical to understanding the influence of Islamic reform in northern Nigeria through its material expressions. Rich understandings are revealed about the life of Hausa and Fulani Muslims, as well as the expression of their faith through culture. There are significant benefits to learning about Islamic reform through changes in dress throughout history. Moreover, Renne's extensive study inspires me to learn how this affects Christian minorities in the region, as I will be returning to Nigeria to further learn from the Hausa community. I am eager to gain new insights into how Muslims understand humanity as revealed through their unique material expressions and to uncover ways to help explain practices and beliefs between communities.



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