



The Veil:  
Religious,  
Cultural,  
or Political  
Practice?

# Sources

- *Al Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History, Ibn Khaldun. Translated and introduced by Franz Rosenthal, Princeton University Press, 2005.*
- *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* by Amina Wadud. Oxford University Press, 1999
- *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*, Lawrence Venuti. Routledge, 1998.
- *The Travels of Ibn Battuta in the Near East, Asia and Africa, 1325-1354*, Rev. Samuel Lee, ed. Dover, 2004.
- *The Veil: Women Writers on its History, Lore and Politics*, Jennifer Heath. University of California Press, 2008.

# Outline

- Thesis: The labeling of a peoples by religion describes not necessarily individual beliefs but illustrates systems of political and economic power, and cultural practices.
- Definition of culture
- Definition of religion
- Examples from Foltz and first class surveys
- Silk Roads and Ibn Battuta – social construction of knowledge; multiple identities
- The veil – religious, cultural, economic or political practice?
- Conclusion: Practices associated with religion, such as veiling, demonstrate a cross-pollination of religions and empires. Such practices have historical and contemporary uses and meanings that are both secular and religious, and change over time.

# Culture

- Excellence of taste in the fine arts and humanities, also known as high culture
- An integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for symbolic thought and social learning
- The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution, organization or group.

*Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*  
Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, 1952

# Religion

**A system of human thought which usually includes a set of narratives, symbols, beliefs and practices that give meaning to the practitioner's experiences of life through reference to a higher power, deity or deities, or ultimate truth.**

*Religion as a Cultural System, Clifford Geertz, 1973*

# Relationship between Culture and Religion

Examples from your first class surveys:

- Worship services as both social and religious events
- Society's ideology and moral code determined by religion – enforced by politics
- Religious music, art and architecture
- Language, e.g. "Gruss Gott," common religious greeting in secular German society
- National identity, e.g. Brazilian Catholic
- Cultural identity, e.g. Santaria from Panama



# Expansion of the Islamic World to 1500



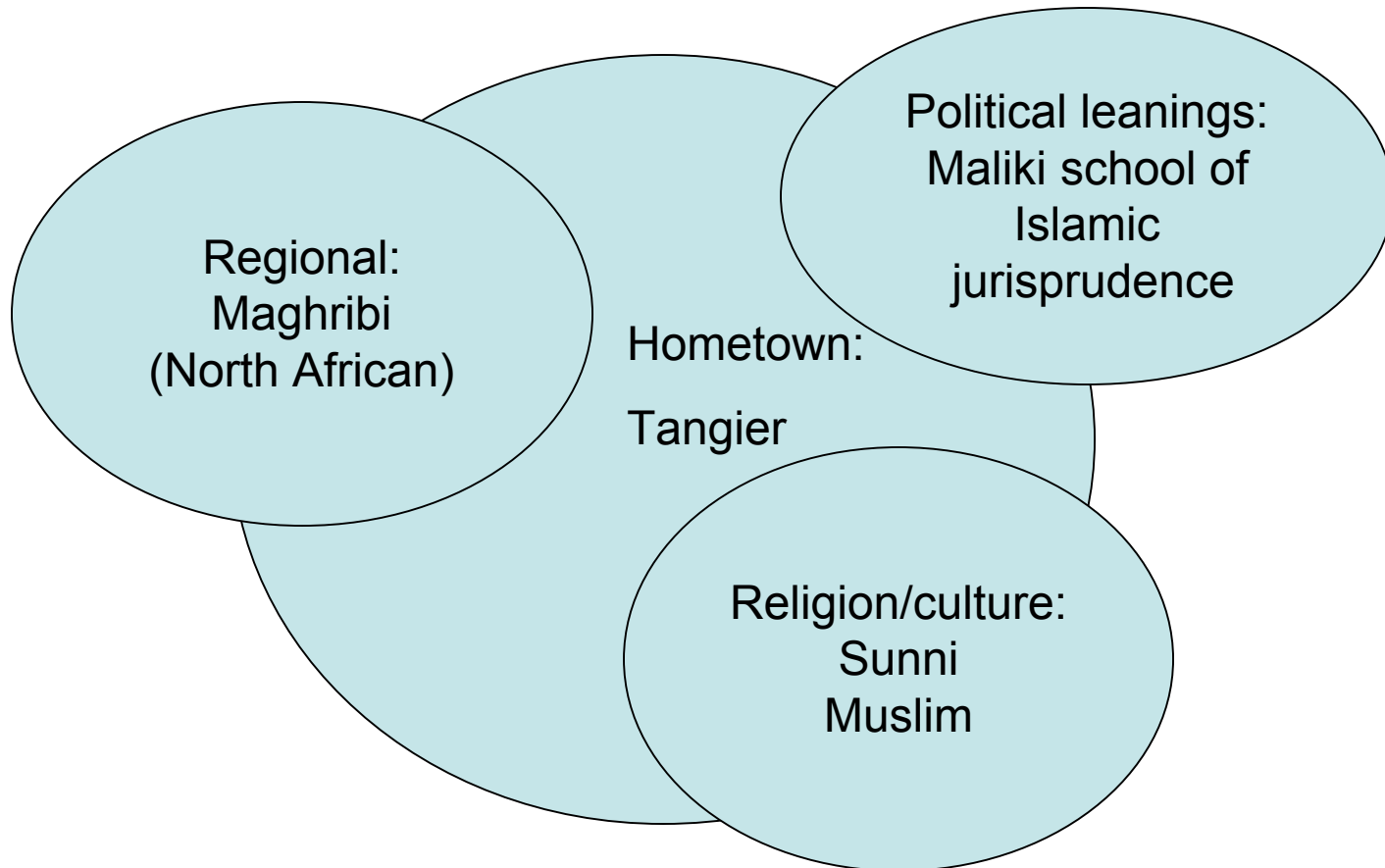
- Islamic world at the end of the Umayyad dynasty
- Extent of the Islamic world 1250
- Extent of the Islamic world 1500
- Area reconquered by Christians 1250
- Area reconquered by Christians 1500
- Extent of Christian crusading principalities in 12th century
- Site and date of important battle



Ibn Battuta,  
Morocco to China  
and back,  
1325-1354



# Identities of Ibn Battuta



# Gender and Islam

Muhammad was heavily influenced by women. Qur'an revolutionary in its treatment of women and gender:

- Refusal to attribute gender to Allah, or God.
- Never appointed a male priestly elite to serve as an intermediary between humans and Creator
- Belief that both men and women are equipped by nature to complementary rather than identical roles. Islam is very clear that men and women are alter egos of one another, and that life cannot exist without male and female polarity.
- No spiritual superiority of men
- Women have the right to choose their husbands, reject or accept proposals.
- In marriage, spouses are urged to respect each other's rights to pleasure and dignity. Men and women have equal right to sexual pleasure in marriage, and a woman has the right to live in the economic standard to which she is accustomed.
- Adam and Eve equally responsible for downfall of humanity (not just Eve's fault for tempting Adam with the forbidden apple).
- Women had right to inherit property (didn't happen in Europe until the 19th century. In the 1970s in the U.S., women still had difficulty getting credit cards in their names and were barred from running in the Olympic marathon until 1984).

# History of the veil (hijab)

- Tribal headdresses distinguished not only tribes among the pre-Islamic Arabs, but the freeborn from slaves, rich from poor. Not veils and didn't necessarily hide the face.
- Religious headdresses (veil) introduced into Arabia before founding of Islam, through Iran (Zoroastrian) and Syria (Byzantine Christian)
- Sign of (high) social status
- Muhammad's wives veiled due to:
  - Community nature of the mosque
  - Social status
- Became widespread after the Prophet's death:
  - As a way for women to emulate the Muhammad's wives
  - Subsequent leaders' misogynist tendencies, e.g. unsuccessful attempts to confine women to the home, prevent them from worshipping at the mosque. Institution of segregated prayers, forced teaching of women by male religious leaders, severe penal ordinances
  - New reliance on politically debated hadiths to interpret laws and customs
  - Issues of translation

# Obligations of men toward women (Qur'an 4:34)

- “Men are the support of women as God gives some more means than others, and because they spend of their wealth (to provide for them)...As for women you feel are averse, talk to them suavely; then leave them alone in bed (without molesting them) and go to bed with them (when they are willing).”

Princeton edition, Ahmed Ali translator

- “Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made some of them excel the others, and because they spend some of their wealth...And for those [women] that you fear might rebel, admonish them and abandon them in their beds and beat them.”

New York University edition, Majid Fakhry translator

# Veil (Hijab) – Religious practice?

- Two out of 40+ predominately Muslim countries require veiling. Of those two, one ban face veils, the other does not.
- Two countries ban veiling.
- Veil as symbol of defiance against Western political and economic domination, and images of womanhood.
- Varying styles:
  - Hijab
  - Niqab
  - Chador
  - Burqa

Jordanian national  
women's  
soccer team,  
Asian Games, Qatar

