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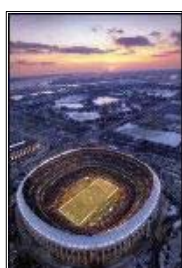
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Annette John-Hall | What lies beneath head-to-toe clothing

By Annette John-Hall
Inquirer Columnist

Khadijah Abdus Sabur has issued a challenge to the young Muslim women she teaches at her Philadelphia mosque.

When the temperature soars, cover yourself in devotion.

I couldn't help wondering, with the scorching weather that had us standing next to our air conditioners this week, just how much more Abdus Sabur could cover up.

The 28-year-old wife and mother of two wears the uniform of many observant Muslim women in the city.

She is cloaked in black from head to toe, in a full-length *abaya* robe and a *niqab*, a snug head covering with only a narrow, horizontal slit for her eyes.

Makes me sweat just writing it.

Have to admit, ever since I moved to Philadelphia almost 14 years ago, I've wondered what was up with these shrouded women - "black moving objects," as one blogger callously described them. Their conspicuous garb screams oppression for us feminists who grew up free to wear whatever - and however much of it - we wanted.

Freedom, not oppression

In this age of instant-message anonymity, with face-to-face communication already in short supply, a foreboding hood doesn't encourage folks to pull up a chair and chat.

But I had questions for Abdus Sabur. And she's heard them all.

The sneers of "Osama" as she walks down the street. The "you poor thing" clucks of nurses during doctor's visits. The unceasing inquiries by non-Muslim women: "Does your husband make you wear that?"

As with the remarks that Islam was to blame for the terrorist attacks, Abdus Sabur chalks up the insensitivity to ignorance.

She sees strangers' questions as an opportunity to share her truth, just as she teaches the African American girls in her Islamic Women's Training classes that their appearance is a form of *dawah*, a way to positively express their faith.

"We look at our bodies as a rare jewel in a special case that comes out for special showings," Abdus Sabur says.

Which means that the designer sundresses, makeup and jewelry that hang in many Muslim women's closets are worn inside, for their husbands only.

Covering up, she says, shields her from vulgarity. Instead of men catcalling when she walks down the street, she gets "good mornings" and nods of respect.



SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Khadijah Abdus Sabur walks in front of her mosque on 15th Street. She says wearing head-to-toe clothing in summer heat is "a small sacrifice to make for the serenity that you have."

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For Abdus Sabur, that's not oppression. That's freedom.

"It's ironic that women say they want the autonomy . . . and then dress in booty shorts and a tank top. And when men say something to them . . . they have a problem," she tells me.

We talk in her mosque, the United Muslim Masjid on 15th Street, in the heart of the South Philly neighborhood music mogul Kenny Gamble is revitalizing. Like many who live and do business here, Gamble - known in these parts as Luqman Abdul-Haqq - is Muslim. So is his wife, Faatimah, who wears a *khimar* head covering and *hijab* overgarment, but eschews the full-face *niqab*.

There are degrees of compliance with the dress code. Abdus Sabur's decision to wear a *niqab* was gradual.

Evolutionary process

In the mosque, the Overbrook High graduate "unmasks" herself and reveals an expressive face with almond-shaped eyes. A *niqabi* for three years, she draws her veil when she is in public or in the company of men who are not relatives.

Born Muslim, she has worn a head covering most of her life. But her *khamir* would be in an eye-catching color to match her pantsuit.

The more she studied Islam, the more Abdus Sabur realized that the point was not to be a fashionable Muslim, but one who guarded virtue and promoted modesty.

"If you're trying to maintain a low profile and you're wearing fuchsia, that's not the way to go," she laughs.

Yes, laughs. That's the other thing. Because of her dress, people assume she is some repressed, subservient wife. In fact, Abdus Sabur works for a Fortune 500 company and conducts staff meetings wearing a *niqab*.

Her summer overgarment is made of a soft cotton blend. Under it are a lightweight ankle-length skirt and T-shirt.

Summer is challenging, Abdus Sabur admits. But it allows her to demonstrate the power of *dawah*.

"Even if you're hot," she says, "it's a small sacrifice to make for the serenity that you have."

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