

Datestamp: 02/23/2008

UA ATHLETE BALANCING TWO WORLDS

Forward's court attire respectful of her religion

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Before Amina Njonkou pulls her No. 32 jersey over her corn-rowed hair for games with the University of Arizona women's basketball team, she slips on a long-sleeved athletic undershirt, tucking it carefully into her basketball shorts.

The 6-foot-1 junior forward pulls on extra-long socks and wriggles black pads up her shins over her kneecaps for protection, then shoves her size 13 feet into Nikes.

When the 19-year-old takes to the court, the only skin showing is that on her head and hands. And that's just how she likes it.

Njonkou is Muslim, from the West African country of Cameroon. In keeping with tenets of her religion, she chooses to cover as much of her body as possible. She would also cover her hair on court if not forbidden to by NCAA rules.

"In my religion, females aren't allowed to show their body or their hair," Njonkou said. "But I'm not forced to do it. It is my choice. I'm just trying to do what I see God commands."

In a world where some people routinely pair the word "Muslim" with "fundamentalist" or even "terrorist," where universities in France forbid Islamic head scarves on campus and where southern Afghanistan warlords require women to cover all but their eyes, Muslim women on U.S. campuses are reveling in their freedom to choose religious expression.

"Some of this is just part of the wider trend toward more tradition in all faiths," said Maha Nassar, an adjunct lecturer in UA's Near Eastern Studies Department. "But a large part of it is, frankly, that one can express one's own religious identity. In fact, they see being able to express one's ethnic, cultural or religious identity, not as antithetical to being American, but as critical to being American."

In spite of negative reactions they might get from family or friends, more young Muslim women are choosing to take the Quran's command for modesty in dress seriously, but with variations. Some wear the hijab, an Islamic head scarf covering the head and neck. Some wear African-styled head wraps. Some cover their bodies but not their hair.

In the U.S. they can choose all, none or something in between. To them, it is no different than a Christian wearing a cross necklace or a Jew wearing a skullcap: It's between them and God.

Recruited in high school

Njonkou came to the United States in 2004, after being recruited in her village of Fouban.

"One day I was playing street ball and this man came up and said, 'I can make you go over to the United States.' Before I was always dreaming I could come, but I never thought it would happen," said Njonkou, who also played in local school tournaments.

Then a rising high school senior, Njonkou worried about telling her mother of the recruitment offer because her love of basketball had been a source of family tension.

In Cameroon, young women from traditional Muslim families don't go outside after dark, but Njonkou would go to watch her brother play basketball "and to be the one chasing the ball when it went off the court," she said.

"I have trouble with my mom because she said I have to stay in, but I would say, 'You can't prevent me from this. This is my passion,' " Njonkou said. "It was the only time I'm having pleasure."

Eventually, Njonkou's older brother persuaded their mother to let her go with him to play and learn the game. She eventually became one of the top female players in the area.

"Thanks God, she did not complain," Njonkou said, recalling telling her mother of the offer to come to the states. "And she knew the Bofias were here. It helped her understand."

UA centers Suzy and Beatrice Bofia grew up in a village near Njonkou, and came to the U.S. the year before, starting at a junior college before being recruited by UA women's basketball coach Joan Bonvicini.

Njonkou spent her senior year at West Memphis High School in West Memphis, Ark.

"She was a blessing for us that year," said Lady Devils coach Sheila Burns. "She completed our team because she was our big girl inside. We thought she was God-sent, that he'd answered our prayers."

Njonkou's father died about four months after she arrived in the states. It was then that she began to re-examine her practice of Islam.

"I'm not going to lie," she said. "My faith was not as strong then as it is now. I kept asking myself, 'Where is my dad now and what is he telling God now?' and I started thinking about being accountable to God."

Njonkou was recruited by Bonvicini and shortly after moving to Tucson, she went to a local mosque.

"I met some girls there who were a little older than me and I saw the way they were practicing religion and I started, too," Njonkou said.

For the UA student-athlete, that meant being faithful to the five-times-daily Muslim prayer routine and getting a waiver from the NCAA to modify her uniform.

Ty Halpin, NCAA associate director for playing rules, said he has facilitated about 20 dress code waivers from across the nation in the past nine years.

"The Muslim thing plays into it, yes, but Brigham Young gets one that adjusts the (tournament) schedule so they aren't playing on Sunday, and Yeshiva University (an Orthodox Jewish school in New York) gets a blanket waiver (for dress) across all sports because it is easier than giving individual ones throughout the year.

"Our concern is for the safety of the players. A general basketball player shouldn't need the additional

coverage (Amina) does," Halpin said. "But if it's a religious situation, we're certainly not going to come between a person and their beliefs."

The flexibility of the NCAA is something for which Njonkou is grateful.

"I was really upset when I heard that Muslim women in France can't cover in the schools," Njonkou said. "You are not doing it to offend someone, just to cover yourself. I am really happy in the United States that the law allows young women to do so."

Young embracing their faith

According to Nassar, the UA lecturer, Njonkou isn't alone in her gratitude.

"There's a move across all religious traditions right now for younger people to embrace outward expressions of piety in their faiths," Nassar said. "They are more traditional than their parents . . . (and) when they hear of countries where you can't express your religious identity, they embrace the freedom to do so here."

Muslim women do not see the hijab as a political statement, as some critics may view it, Nassar said.

"They see it as a statement of their religious and cultural identity, and they think if there is no problem with a Christian or a Jew wearing religious or cultural (dress), there shouldn't be a problem with Muslim women doing so."

Njonkou said keeping observant with modest dress can be difficult in the United States, but not because of discrimination. Rather, it is countercultural on campuses where the typical female uniform is low-rise shorts, spaghetti-strap tank tops and flip-flops.

"Muslim women view covering up as helping prevent us from doing what we should not be doing," she said. "In our religion we are not allowed to have - and I'm sorry to have to say the word - sex before marriage. Dressing this way helps prevent guys from approaching us with wrong intention."

Njonkou does not cover her hair on the basketball court, but she does wear a kerchief-style scarf when not playing basketball and a hijab when she prays.

Njonkou lives with the Bofia sisters, who are Catholic. Despite their different faiths, Njonkou said the three are close friends and spoke with pride about the regard for religion in their home.

"Everybody respects everybody in our house," Njonkou said. "They let me pray in peace, and if they want to play Christian music, I just go to my room. We give each other the freedom of religion in the house. And they love my cooking."

Bonvicini said Njonkou is the first Muslim player she has coached.

"We pray before every game - we always have - and I tell the players to pray in the way they are comfortable. We're at a public university and my job is to respect everybody's belief," Bonvicini said. "But to see someone as devoted as Amina, it is really inspiring. Add to that that she's a very good player, she's an excellent student and she's a strong leader. She's really impressive."

The coach said there have been no negative reactions to Njonkou's dress on the court. Other teams hear about her before they play UA, not just because she's a Muslim basketball player, Bonvicini said, but because she's got game.

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Njonkou has scored in the double figures the last 19 games, averaging 14.6 points and 8.2 rebounds a game. She is shooting 50 percent from the field, the fifth-best mark in the Pac-10, according to figures from the UA athletics office.

Majoring in Spanish with a minor in Arabic, the honors student hopes to earn a master's in interpretation and translation. She said she considers herself a role model for student-athletes, but not necessarily for young Muslims.

"I'd say I'm about 40 percent a role model, because I know I can do so much better," she said. "I visit with other (Muslim) women for support so I don't get lost in the middle of everything on campus, but I'm not perfect yet.

"Sometimes, especially when it is hot in the summer and I'm covered, people look at me like I'm crazy. But when you know what you want to achieve, it is not hard. I do not need to please the people.

"As long as God is pleased with me, I'm fine."**TO FIND OUT MORE**

Anne Betteridge, head of UA's Center for Middle Eastern Studies recommends the novel, "The Girl With the Tangerine Scarf," for those interested in an in-depth look at what it is like for young Muslim women growing up in the United States. It is written by Mohja Kahfs.

Islam Basics

There are an estimated 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide. The largest Muslim population is in Indonesia. Approximately 20 percent of Muslims live in the Arabic-speaking world. There are approximately 7 million Muslims in the U.S.

Muslims believe in a chain of prophets beginning with Adam and including Moses, David and Jesus. They believe a consistent message from God was brought by these prophets and reaffirmed and finalized by the Prophet Muhammad, who tradition says began receiving revelations in about the year 610. The revelations continued for 23 years and were recorded in the Quran, which is Islam's holiest book.

AMINA NJONKOU, a UA basketball player and a Muslim from Cameroon (University of Arizona basketball player Amina Njonkou sits in prayer at her home.) (Njonkou scored 13 points against Stanford in a January UA basketball game.) Amina Njonkou (right) feeds 3-month-old Irene Bofia Guiamatsia. The baby's grandmother Marie Guiamatsia is beside her. Njonkou lives with fellow basketball players Suzy and Beatrice Bofia and Irene, who is Suzy's baby.

Caption:

'In my religion, females aren't allowed to show their body or their hair. But I'm not forced to do it. It is my choice. I'm just trying to do what I see God commands.'

AMINA NJONKOU, a UA basketball player and a Muslim from Cameroon

Publication: Tucson Citizen

Section: Local

Source: Citizen Staff Writer

Edition:

Page: 1A

Book: A

Byline: RENÉE SCHAFER HORTON

From: