

## **Black or White: The Turbanization of Islam**

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### **Abstract**

The Turban has been worn by Muslims since the early period of Islamic history. This paper will examine how the black turban has been used to amplify the social and religious superiority of the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad in Twelver Shi'ism. The paper will also discuss the significance attached to the method of tying the turban and will demonstrate how this was used as an ideological tool among Shi'i scholars.

## **Black or White: The Turbanization of Islam**

The turban has been associated with Islam since the inception of the religion in the seventh century. It is imbued with various connotations that distinguish and differentiate its wearers from others. This distinction is frequently premised on socio-cultural and religious norms. This article will examine the basis of the distinction of black and white turban in the Twelver Shi'i context. As we shall see, besides its association with authority, the color, size, and forms of wearing the turban are interwoven with social status and financial benefits.<sup>1</sup>

### **Turbans and Angels in the *Hadith* Literature**

The best way to accentuate the importance of turbans, as with many other acts in Shi'i Islam, is in the form of favorable utterances from the Prophet and Imams. Like its Sunni counterpart, Shi'i *hadith* literature accentuates the importance of wearing the turban by

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Leila Chamankhah, my research assistant, for her help in composing this article.

stating that it is worn by angels. This indicates the cosmological provenance of the headgear. For example, the Shi'i *hadith* transmitter al-Kulayni (d. 939) narrates several traditions which state that God had sent four angels to destroy the community of Lot. When they passed by Abraham he did not recognize them as they wore turbans. It was only when Gabriel removed his turban that Abraham recognized him.<sup>2</sup> Al-Kulayni also cites a *hadith* stating that besides angels, jinns also wore turbans. He narrates that:

“Ahmad b. Idris and Muhammad b. Yahya narrated from al-Hasan b. ‘Ali al-Kufi from ibn al-Faddal from a group of our people from Sa’d al-Askaf who said: "Once I asked permission to meet Abu Ja‘far (Muhammad al-Baqir). I found saddles of camels lined up in front of the door and I heard very loud noises coming from inside. Then a people came out with turbans like those of Indian gypsies. I asked Abu Ja‘far about them and said, “May Allah take my soul be in service for your cause. Today it took a long time to receive permission to meet you. I saw a people coming out with turbans whom I could not recognize." He said, "Do you know, O Sa‘d, who they are?" I said, "No, I do not know." The Imam said, "They were your brethren in religion from the Jinns. They come to us for religious instructions, to learn the lawful and unlawful matters and the principles of their religion."<sup>3</sup>

Reports such as these depict the turban as an angelic dress and underscore its importance. Besides the association of turbans with angels, many traditions Shi'i *hadith* literature cite the merits of wearing a turban. The seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim (d. 799), reportedly stated that the Prophet called the turban “the authority of Allah.”<sup>4</sup> Other traditions state that it is God’s

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Kulayni, *Al-Kafi fi 'Ilm al-Din* (Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, Tehran, 1986), 5/546.

<sup>3</sup> Kulayni, *Kitab al-Kafi*, 1/394-5; Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Saffar, *Basa'ir al-Darajat fi Fada'il Al Muhammad* (Qum: Maktabat Ayat Allah al-Mar'ashi, 1983), 1/97, hadith # 18; 1/100, hadith #10.

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad ibn Ya'qub al-Kulayni al-Razi, *Kitab al-Kafi*, translated into English by Muhammad Sarwar, vol. 1-8 (n.p., the Islamic Seminary, n.d.), 453; H 827, Ch. 72, h 14.

dominion (*sultan*).<sup>5</sup> Due to the proliferation of *hadith* about turbans, the Prophet Muhammad was known as “the wearer of the turban” (*sahib al-‘imama*).

Some traditions emphasize the importance of wearing a turban, especially when praying.<sup>6</sup> The sixth Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 765) reportedly said “one who offers the prayers on the days of the two *eids* must wear an ‘*imama*.”<sup>7</sup> The only time when it is forbidden to wear a turban is when a person is in a state of *ihram* during the pilgrimage. Even in this state, al-Sadiq states that the pilgrim can tie the ‘*imama* around his stomach.<sup>8</sup> Al-Kulayni cites traditions stating that it is meritorious to tie a turban not only on those who are alive but also on the dead.<sup>9</sup> Such traditions underscore the importance of the turban; they also enhance the status of those who wear it. Even though al-Kulayni cites traditions on merits of wearing the ‘*imama* there is very little discussion on why it is so important to wear it. Nor is there any mention of the significance of the color of the turban.

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<sup>5</sup> Muhammad al-Baqir Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar: al-Jami‘a Lidurari Akhbar al-A‘imma al-Athar*, 110 vols (Beirut: Dar al-Ihya al-Turath al-‘Arabi, 1983), 48/310; 50/26. Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, 2/82.

<sup>6</sup> On wearing a turban especially in *salat*, see Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, 80/193.

<sup>7</sup> See Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Hurr al-‘Amili, *Wasa‘il al-Shi‘a ila Tahsil Masa‘il al-Shari‘a*, 20 vols. (Beirut: Dar Ahya Turath al-‘Arabi, 1967), 7/441. Other traditions from the same Imam state that it is permissible to pray without an ‘*imama* although the Imam loves to pray with one. Ibid., 7/442. Significantly, there is no discussion on the importance of the color of the turban.

<sup>8</sup> al-‘Amili, *Wasa‘il al-Shi‘a*, 12/533.

<sup>9</sup> Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, 3/145.

## The Significance of the Turban

In Muslim culture, the turban symbolized, among other things, authority, power, dignity, and respect. When the Arabs wanted to treat someone with respect they adorned him with a turban; preferably with their own turban. In contrast, the removal of a man's turban in public by an authoritative figure was a form of public humiliation and punishment. The turban was so important that people sometimes swore oaths on their turbans.<sup>10</sup> Like their Sunni counterparts, Shi'i traditionists also recorded traditions on the authority that is accorded to one wearing a turban. According to Shi'i reports, before appointing him as his successor at Ghadir, the Prophet put a turban on 'Ali b. Abu Talib's head.<sup>11</sup> Al-Mufid reports a tradition from 'Ali that when he had sore eyes, the Prophet spit in his eyes and tied an '*imama* on his head and prayed that he should never feel the heat or cold.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, before the Prophet sent 'Ali to fight 'Amr b. 'Abd Wudd at the battle of the allies (*ahzab*) he called for 'Ali. He then removed his turban from his head and put it on 'Ali and he gave him his sword, saying: "Carry out your task." Then the Prophet prayed: "O Allah, assist him."<sup>13</sup> It is reported that the Prophet did not appoint a governor without dressing him in an '*imama*, letting down its fringes, the "*adhaba*, on the back of the appointed governor on his right side in the direction of his (right) ear."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Shelagh Weir, *Palestinian Costumes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>11</sup> See al-'Amili, *Wasa'il*, 5/57; al-Majlisi, *Bihar*, 80/199.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Mufid, *al-Amali* (Qum: International Congress of Millennium of Shaykh Mufid, 1992), 318.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, trans I. Howard (London: Balagha & Muhammadi Trust, 1981), 67.

<sup>14</sup> M. J. Kister, "The Crowns of This Community," 233.

## The Color of the Turbans

An important consideration in any discourse on the turban is that of its color. Just as the turban had symbolic significance, so did its color. The Prophet and his companions wore different colors of turbans ranging from white, blue, black to even red.<sup>15</sup> He would sometimes wear a white-colored turban for which he was referred to as *Sahab* (cloud).<sup>16</sup> The Prophet wore a yellow turban on the day of Badr.<sup>17</sup> A tradition states that he would sometimes dye his clothes, including the turban, in yellow.<sup>18</sup> Apart from the Prophet, the Imams also wore different-colored turbans. For example, the fourth Imam Zayn al-‘Abidin (d. 713) often wore a white turban. Other reports indicate that he would also wear a black turban.<sup>19</sup> When Asbagh b. Nubata went to see ‘Ali on his death bed, ‘Ali was wearing a yellow turban.<sup>20</sup> Al-Mufid notes that on the day of his coronation to succeed al-Ma'mun (d. 833), the eighth Imam al-Rida (d. 818) wore a white turban.<sup>21</sup> During al-Rida’s time, the ‘Alids would wear green as that was their preferred color.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See the example cited of the famous companion Jabir b. ‘Abd Allah al-Ansari seated in the mosque of Medina looking for al-Baqir while wearing a black turban. Muhammad b. Ya'qub al-Kulayni al-Razi, *Kitab al-Kafi*, trans. Muhammad Sarwar, vol. 1-8 (n.p., the Islamic Seminary, n.d.), H 1267, Ch. 118, h 2, p. 664.

<sup>16</sup> Abdul-Husein Ahmad Amini Najafi, *Al-Ghadir fil-Kitab wal-Sunnah wal-Adab*, vol. 3/290-293. Stillman, "Libas," *EI*.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Abd al-Rahman Jalal al-Din Suyuti, *al-Durr al-Manthur fi tafsir bi'l ma'thur* (Cairo, 1896), 2/70.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Dawud *Sunan*, Book 32, *hadith*, 4053.

<sup>19</sup> al-‘Amili, *Wasa'il al-Shi'a*, 5/57.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Mufid, *al-Amali*, 352.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, trans. I. Howard (London: Balagha & Muhammadi Trust, 1981), 474. *Kafi*, 686, H 1234, Ch. 121, h 7.

<sup>22</sup> Even in Syria in the 1960s, among the Sunni community, the green turban was reserved for the descendants of the Prophet. See Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), 21.

Al-Ma'mun changed the official color of the 'Abbasids to green after he appointed al-Rida as his heir. After the death of al-Rida, al-Ma'mun changed it to black.<sup>23</sup>

Although the color of the turban is not stated, al-Majlisi states that when the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, reappears he will wear the turban of the Prophet.<sup>24</sup> Significantly, although the traditions mention the different-colored turbans the Imams used to wear, they do not state what color of turbans their followers should or should not wear. Stated differently, the color of the turban was left to the followers of the Imams to decide.

Although the Prophet and Imams wore different-colored turbans the black turban was construed as special as it symbolized piety and the conferral of authority. Many traditions suggest that the Prophet wore a black turban on important occasions especially when he was traveling.<sup>25</sup> The Prophet dressed 'Ali in a black '*imama* before sending him to engage in battle in 'Amman.<sup>26</sup> The authority that the black turban wielded can also be discerned from another tradition which states that the Prophet dressed 'Ali in a black turban, and wound it three times around his head, letting (the fringe of the *imama*) hang one cubit in front of him and a certain distance from behind him. The Prophet then said: "This is the proper way of winding the '*imama*."<sup>27</sup> By dressing 'Ali in a black turban, it could be argued that the Prophet was transmitting his spiritual and political authority to him. Even when traditions discourage the wearing of black clothes, black turbans are exempted from this rule. Many reports in Shi'i *hadith*

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<sup>23</sup> Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-Umam Wa'l-Muluk*. 8 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasa al-A'lami), 1983, 3/1013, 1037.

<sup>24</sup> Majlisi, *Bihar*, 52/302. Ibn Abu Zaynab, *Kitab al-Ghayba*, trans. Abdullah al-Shahin (Qum: Ansariyan, 2003), 439.

<sup>25</sup> Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, 16/250.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 41/77.

<sup>27</sup> M. J. Kister, "The Crowns of This Community," 221, fn. 16.

literature state that it is detestable to pray in black clothes. However, black socks, robes, and turbans are exceptions to this rule.<sup>28</sup>

## **The Black Turban**

It should be remembered that black was the official 'Abbasid color. During their revolt against the Umayyads, they raised black banners and used the color black as a symbol of political resistance. After overthrowing the Umayyads, they retained black as their royal color; later the caliph a-Mansur (d. 775) commanded the courtiers to wear black. The black turban was the headwear which was donned by men.<sup>29</sup> As Teresa Bernheimer has noted, the 'Alids not only supported the 'Abbasids, but started wearing black in order to show their allegiance and loyalty to the new rulers.<sup>30</sup>

During the time of the 'Abbasids, the Shi'i Imams wore black clothes only when they were forced to. This can be discerned from the following tradition: Dawud al-Riqqi narrates: "The Shi'a questioned Ja'far al-Sadiq regarding the wearing of black clothes. Once, I saw the Imam sitting while clothed in a black robe, a black hat, and a pair of black socks with black cotton lining. He said: 'Render your heart white and you may wear whatever you please.' Al-Saduq, a prominent Shia narrator of hadith explains: 'The Imam performed this action out of compulsion and *taqiyya* (dissimulation). He said this as a result of accusations that had been

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<sup>28</sup> Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, 3/403; Muhammad b. 'Ali b. al-Husayn al-Saduq, *Man La Yahduru'l Faqih* (Qum: Jamia Mudarrisin Islamic Publications office, 1992), 1/251. al-'Amili, *Wasa'il al-Shi'a*, 4/382, 4/387.

<sup>29</sup> Nazemian Fard, *Vakavi-e Karbord-e Rang-e Siah dar Mian-e Abbasian*, 2, 7, (2011): 147-148.

<sup>30</sup> The first 'Alid from the Hasanid branch, who wore the 'Abbasid color was al-Hasan b. Zayd b. al-Hasan b. Ali (d. 784). See Teresa Bernheimer, *The 'Alids: the First Family of Islam 750-1200* (Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 2014), 43.

made against him by the enemy, for the Imam does not consider the wearing of black clothes to be permissible.”<sup>31</sup> The tradition indicates that the Imams and their followers would not wear black clothes or turbans unless they were compelled to do so.

When did the Shi‘i ‘Alids start wearing black turbans to the exclusion of other colors? Without quoting his source, Ibn Anbah claims that Sayyid Razi (d. 1016) was the first ‘Alid to wear black. It was only after him, it is said, that black turbans became a prominent feature among *sayyids* and those from the tribe of Bani Hashim.<sup>32</sup> However, even after Sayyid Razi, the ‘Alids did not always dress in black nor was it seen as their official emblem. As mentioned before, one of the reasons why the ‘Alids wore black at the time was because they were forced to do so by the ‘Abbasids. As a matter of fact, there are many traditions which discourage Shi‘is from wearing black.

Mohammad Baqir al-Majlisi (d. 1699) was a prominent Shi‘i scholar during the Safavid era. He wrote, among other books, *Hilya al-Muttaqin*. In one chapter, he discusses the proper forms of clothing, grooming and etiquette for men, as well as the significance of turbans. As for wearing certain colors of clothes, Majlisi states:

“White is the best color to wear; the next best color is yellow and then comes green. After that are pale red, purple, and brown. Dark red is considered an abominable (*makruh*) due, especially during prayer. One must avoid wearing it [dark red], and wearing black is loathsome for everything except for the turban, *aba* (inner robe), and high boots. However, if the turban and *aba* are not black, it is better.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> al-‘Amili, *Wasa'il al-Shi'a*, 4/385.

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.erfan.ir/arabic/article/view/78723>.

<sup>33</sup> Muhammad al-Baqir al-Majlisi, *Hilyat al-Muttaqin* (Tehran: Yas Publication 1993), 5-6. The text is closely studied by Faegheh Shirazi in her article entitled “Manly Matters in Iran: From Beards to Turbans”, In *Critical Encounters, Essays in Persian Literature and Culture in Honor of Peter*



Significantly, in the chapter dedicated to the wearing of turbans, one would have expected al-Majlisi to discuss the various colors of the turban that should be worn. The fact that he does not mention anything suggests that, in his period, the color of the turban was not significant. On the contrary, he states that even though wearing a black turban is not a detestable (*makruh*) act, he discourages it. Majlisi also cites a tradition from Yusuf b. Ibrahim who states: “When I went to visit Abu ‘Abdullah (al-Sadiq), I was wearing green clothes. I asked him his opinion of this color. He replied: “There is no problem with wearing green. When al-Husayn was martyred, he was wearing green.”<sup>34</sup> Even when he considers the best colors for shoes, Majlisi’s first choice is yellow followed by white. He reserves black for boots.<sup>35</sup> Generally speaking, for the Shi‘is, unless one is mourning or wearing boots, a robe, or a turban, wearing black is seen as detestable. Al-Sadiq is even reported to have stated that black is the color of hell and that one should not pray in it.<sup>36</sup>

According to several traditions, al-Sadiq encouraged his followers to wear white. He reportedly said, “Wear white garments since [white] is the best and cleanest of all the colors, and bury your deceased corpses in a white *kafn* shroud. ... al-Sadiq said: “Imam Ali used to wear white most of the time.”<sup>37</sup> In his text, Majlisi cites several traditions encouraging wearing white

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*Chelkowski*. Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami and M.R. Ghanoonparvar eds., (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publications, 2007), 146-166.

<sup>34</sup> al-Majlisi, *Hilyat al-Muttaqin*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

clothes. Significantly, he mentions no special reason or merits for wearing a black turban and even discourages it.

The significance attached to the black turban probably increased during the Safavid period when, as we shall see, turbans became important to identify a person's socio-political affiliations. Given the Prophet's penchant to the color black, descendants of the Prophet gradually came to favor wearing black turbans. It is within this context that we can discern why the *sayyids* became especially fond of black.

### **Sayyids and the Black Emblem**

When the Safavids came to power in Iran in 1501 they adopted Shi'ism as the state religion. They resorted to different ways to promote their new faith. As I have discussed elsewhere, they popularized Shi'ism by encouraging the public cursing of the first three caliphs, enacting public mourning ceremonies to mark the death anniversary of Husayn (c. 681), the grandson of the Prophet, and by pronouncing the name of 'Ali in the *adhan* (call to prayer).<sup>38</sup> The political ideology of **the Safavids** was demonstrated in the headgear of its **rulers**. They used the turban to enunciate their dissociation from the Sunni Ottomans and to proclaim their religious affiliation.

As previously mentioned, many traditions from the Prophet and Imams encourage the wearing of white. The Safavids expressed their belief in Twelver Shiism by donning white turbans which was wrapped around a twelve-gored felt or brocade cap (*taj*) cap with a high, spiked protrusion that extended straight up through the middle of the headdress. The cap was

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<sup>38</sup> Liyakat Takim, "From *Bid'a* to *Sunna*: The *Wilaya* of 'Ali in the Shi'i *Adhan*." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120, no. 2 (2000): 66-77.

normally red, although occasionally blue.<sup>39</sup> The red stick turbans signified the wearer's affiliation with the Safavids and their devotion to Shi'ism. Due to the color of the cap, the Safavid troops were referred to as *Qizilbash* by the Ottoman Turks, a pejorative Turkish word meaning "the red heads."<sup>40</sup> This headgear was called the *taj Haidari* or *taj-i Safavi*. It was said to be the invention of Haidar (d. 1488), the father of Shah Isma'il (d. 1524), the founder of the empire.

The Safavids celebrated the establishment of a Shi'i state by imposing the *taj-i Safavi* for all royalty and related administrative personnel. It was regarded as the ultimate signifier of political allegiance.<sup>41</sup> Safavid Persian poetry contains many literary references to the turban. For example, Sa'id Tabrizi (also known as Isfahani), in his verses, sarcastically connects the size of a turban to the amount of knowledge and erudition of its wearer.<sup>42</sup> The variety of turbans by the Safavids worn also signified the rank and status of the wearer.

Apart from political affiliation, the color of the turban was used to demarcate different religious groups and social rankings. In Safavid culture, white was the dominant color of the turbans. It is within this context that we may be able to surmise the exclusive use of black turbans by Sayyids.<sup>43</sup> As I mentioned earlier, since the time of the Prophet, black symbolized

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<sup>39</sup> Yedidah Stillman, "Libas," 749.

<sup>40</sup> *Cambridge History of Islam*. Edited by Peter Holt, Ann Lambton, and Bernard Lewis. 2 vols. (Cambridge: 1970), 1/396.

<sup>41</sup> [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/safa\\_f/hd\\_safa\\_f.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/safa_f/hd_safa_f.htm). See also <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/clothing-x>

<sup>42</sup> Faegheh Shirazi-Mahajan, "The Semiotics of the Turban: the Safavid Era in Iran," in *Journal of International Association of Costume*, 9, 67-87 (1992):72.

<sup>43</sup> Pierret notes that the white turban in Syria was a symbol of religious knowledge, and is worn by religious scholars even today. Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria*, 9 - 10, 41.

power and authority. Amidst the plethora of different colored and types of turbans, in order to enhance their unique status and authority in society, the *sayyids* adopted the black turban as their official emblem. Although it is not possible to know exactly when the black turban became an exclusively *sayyid* insignia, the importance given to *sayyids*, especially in the Safavid era, suggests that it probably started in this period. To understand why the *sayyids* chose a specific color that differentiated them from the masses, it is important to comprehend the importance given to the descendants of the Prophet in Muslim societies.

With the advent of Islam, the term *sayyid* connoted a title of honor for the descendants of the Prophet. Several traditions describe the two grandsons of the Prophet, al-Hasan and al-Husayn, and their parents, as *sayyids*. Al-Hasan and al-Husayn are also addressed as *sayyiday shabab ahl al-Janna*, “the two leaders of the young men of paradise”<sup>44</sup> while their mother Fatima, is lauded by the Prophet as “mistress of the women of this community/my community” or as “mistress of the women of the people of Paradise (*ahl al-janna*).”<sup>45</sup> Due to the *sayyid* factor, belonging to or being a descendant of the “house of the Prophet” has become a mark of social distinction and elevated status in most of the Islamic world.

The importance of authority premised on the principle of Prophetic lineage can be discerned from the fact that *sayyids* are exceptionally efficacious figures within Muslim communities. They are treated differently from non-*sayyids* in most Islamic societies. For example, they occupy a prominent place in Arab genealogies.<sup>46</sup> In many social settings, a *sayyid*

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<sup>44</sup> al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, 296.

<sup>45</sup> Bosworth, “*Sayyid*,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 9:115. See also Muhammad b. ‘Ali b. al-Husayn al-Saduq, *Risala al-I’tiqadat (A Shi’ite Creed)*, trans. A. Fyze (Oxford: 1942), 108-9.

<sup>46</sup> Bernheimer, *The ‘Alids*, 17.

who distinguishes himself by a pious life becomes revered as a holy man. His blessing is expected to bring good fortune, while his wrath brings misfortune. In Yemen, it is popularly believed that he can drive away locusts and that his prayer can put an end to infertility, while his curse will make it continue. Many *sayyids* are visited for their healing powers, and reverence for them is frequently expressed in various forms of gifts of land.<sup>47</sup>

The favorable treatment and reverence for *sayyids* was felt throughout the Islamic world. When the Ottoman empire was established, *sayyids* were granted special social and economic privileges. They were also exempted from paying taxes in Turkey. This attracted more *sayyids* to migrate to the Ottoman empire.<sup>48</sup> Apart from receiving state revenue they got the same privileges as the military.<sup>49</sup> In sixteenth century Morocco, Prophetic descent was necessary for the execution of political and religious power. The *shurafa'*, as they came to be called, became sources of divine power.<sup>50</sup> On the Swahili coast in East Africa, a *sayyid* was not be criticized even if he slept with someone's wife because, it is believed, he could rescue her from hell.<sup>51</sup> In India *sayyids* had special governmental privileges such as stipends and land grants.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Bosworth, "Sayyid," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 9/115. See also Liyakat Takim, *The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi'ite Islam* (Albany:SUNY 2006), chapter two.

<sup>48</sup> Ruya Kilic, "The Reflection of Islamic Tradition on Ottoman Social Structure: The Sayyids and Sharifs" in Morimoto Kazuo ed., *Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies: The Living Links to the Prophet* (Routledge: New York, 2012), 123.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 132-133.

<sup>50</sup> Mercedes Garcia-Arenal, "Shurafa in the Last Years of al-Andalus and in the Morisco Period: Laylat al-Mawlid and Genealogies of the Prophet Muhammad," in Morimoto Kazuo ed., *Sayyids and Sharifs*, 162.

<sup>51</sup> Valerie Hoffman, "The Role of the Masharifu on the Swahili Coast in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" in Morimoto Kazuo ed., *Sayyids and Sharifs*, 191.

<sup>52</sup> Arthur Buehler, "Trends of Ashrafization in India" in Morimoto Kazuo ed., *Sayyids and Sharifs*, 235.

Many miracle stories and rewards for those helping *sayyids* were invented.<sup>53</sup> The message from such narratives is clearly that the holy lineage of the *sayyid* is to be venerated regardless of his acts. As Kazuo has shown, the stories of the special sanctity of the *sayyids* can be found in both Sunni and Shi'i sources and, in many cases, the Shi'is borrowed and even modified Sunni accounts. Thus, reverence for the *sayyids* crossed sectarian boundaries.

The favorable treatment of *sayyids* is reflected in the laws of *khums* (the fifth). In the Shi'i legal system, *khums* is used in a much broader sense than in the Sunni legal system where it is confined to the booty taken from enemies defeated in battle. In Shi'i jurisprudence, in addition to other items, *khums* is payable on a fifth of net savings. Al-Khu'i, who was regarded by many Shi'is as the most learned religious authority of his time, states, "*Khums* should be divided into two parts. One part is the portion of the *sayyid*; it should be given to a *sayyid* who is poor, or an orphan, or to one who is stranded without money when he travels. The second portion belongs to the Imam. During the present time [of occultation], it should be given to a *mujtahid*."<sup>54</sup> This bifurcation of the *khums* revenue excludes non-sayyids who are instead to receive a share of *zakat* and voluntary alms (*sadaqa*).

The social and financial advantages that accrue from being recognized a *sayyid* can be corroborated from the fact that throughout history there have been many false claimants to Prophetic descent. Various groups, agnate descendants claimed to be Sayyids. The descendants of 'Ali's father Abu Talib through 'Ali as well as his other sons Ja'far and 'Aqil claimed to be *sayyids* through Hashimi descent. Some have claimed that even Zaynabis, the descendants of

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<sup>53</sup> See Morimoto Kazuo, "How to Behave towards *Sayyids* and *Sharifs*: a Trans-Sectarian Tradition of Dream Accounts, in Morimoto Kazuo ed., *Sayyids and Sharifs*, 22-25. Other stories talk of the inviolability of Sayyids, *ibid*.

<sup>54</sup> Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i, *Minhaj al-Salihin*, 9th edition, 1:371.

Zaynab, the daughter of ‘Ali and Fatima, should also be considered as *sayyids*.<sup>55</sup> It should be remembered that within Shi‘ism, *khumus* was payable on savings, not just on war booty. This means that the share payable to *sayyids* was enormous, fifty percent of the *khums* payable, a sum that not only encouraged people to proclaim their lineage but also enticed some to fabricate their genealogy.

*Sayyids* are also believed to have inherited the *baraka* (blessings) of the Prophet. These sacred personages may transmit *baraka* to the masses, either during their lifetime or after their deaths. Due to the principle of Prophetic lineage, it is also believed that children of holy men become contemporary recipients of the *baraka* that is transmitted by the saint. The emphasis on honoring the descendants of the Prophet precipitated the cult of the shrines of *sayyids*, or *imam-zadeh* as they came to be called. Especially in Safavid Iran, the tombs of many *sayyids* became a focus of pilgrimage, a phenomenon widely prevalent in many parts of the Shi‘i world today.

It should be remembered that when they came to power, the Safavids claimed Prophetic genealogy. They reportedly forged descent from the seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim. Shah Isma‘il, the first ruler, claimed to be a Husaynid. Later on, the Safavids claimed descent from the seventh Imam.<sup>56</sup> This empowered the kings to invoke their noble ancestors in the legitimization of their rule. As Arjomand says, “The rulers possessed great charisma of lineage as descendants of the Imams, and even claimed an attribute of the Imams: infallibility or sinlessness.”<sup>57</sup> The

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<sup>55</sup> Teresa Bernheimer, *Genealogy, Marriage, and the Drawing of Boundaries among the ‘Alids (Eighth-Twelfth Centuries)*, in Morimoto Kazuo ed., *Sayyids and Sharifs*, 83-85.

<sup>56</sup> This was reiterated under Shah Tahmasp. See Kathryn Babayan, “Sufis, Dervishes and Mulla: the Controversy over Spiritual and Temporal Dominion in Seventeenth-Century Iran” in Charles Melville ed., *Safavid Persia* (Tauris: London, 1996), 123. See also op. cit. page 135 fn. 26 for details of tampering with Safavid genealogy.

devotional attachment to the Imams and their descendants helped the Safavids enhance their own stature as the progeny of these noble figures. The claim to ‘Alid descent also helped them win wider acceptance among the masses.

Since the Safavids claimed prophetic descent, the *sayyids* enjoyed great respect and prestige under their rule. In all probability, the social prestige combined with the financial benefits that accrued to *sayyids* led to their public proclamation as the descendants of the Prophet. As previously mentioned, white was the dominant color of the majority of turbans in that period. The *sayyids* had to differentiate themselves from the laity by deploying a color that was not in common usage, and, as descendants of the Prophet, a color that could be closely linked to him. In the Islamic world, *sayyids* generally wore green turbans. For example, when Mustafa Celebi wore a green turban in Turkey in 1632, people raised questions whether he was a real Sayyid. He claimed *sayyid* descent from his mother’s side. The right to wear a green turban was accorded only to those whose father was a *sayyid*.<sup>58</sup>

The Safavids sought a distinctive stratification of the Shi‘i community into believers and *sayyids*. It was through Prophetic descent that they sought to legitimize their privileges and superior status. It should be remembered that the Prophet frequently wore a black turban, and as I discussed, had dressed ‘Ali with it. The best way that a person could publicly proclaim himself to be a *sayyid* and differentiate himself from a *non-sayyid* was either by adopting the title *sayyid* or by donning a black turban. Undoubtedly, the turban was the more powerful tool since it

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<sup>57</sup> Sa‘id Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order and Societal Change in Shi‘ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), 211.

<sup>58</sup> Ruya Kilic, “The Reflection of Islamic Tradition” in Morimoto Kazuo ed., *Sayyids and Sharifs*, 130-131. In his descriptions of contemporary Ottoman society Nicolas de Nicolay (d. 1583) discusses the green turbans worn by the *emirs* (another title for the family of the Prophet).



conveyed one's nobility without having to verbalize it. It should be remembered that during the Safavid period, the wearing of turbans was not restricted to scholars. On the contrary, the masses wore turbans since these were popular costumes. Thus, the black turban became an important tool of identifying and signifying a *sayyid*, bestowing him, thereby, the respect, honor, and financial rewards that was due to him.

Although a national costume, the westernization policies of Reza Shah in the 1930s forced most Iranians to abandon their traditional headgear in favor of western clothing. Only scholars were exempt from this proscription. With time, the turban became what it is today: a headgear worn primarily by scholars to distinguish them from the rest of society. Within the scholarly elite, color was used to mark Prophetic genealogy. The turban was used not only to differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims but also between Muslims themselves. The reason for this genealogical distinction was both social status and financial benefits.

It is not possible to know exactly when the *sayyids* chose to wear black turbans. Majlisi, who died in 1699, does not cite any special merit for wearing a black turban; in fact, he discourages it. It is possible that *sayyids* started wearing black turbans after his time or during the Qajar period. Why did the *sayyids* choose to wear black turbans? It has to be remembered that when the Safavids came to power, they encouraged the public expression and enactment of various forms mourning rituals for the family of the Prophet in general and for Husayn in particular. These rituals ranged from passion plays to flagellations and self-immolation. It is possible that the *sayyids* decided around this time to wear black as it was the color of mourning. They wished to proclaim that they were the descendants of the family that was being publicly mourned and venerated. Another possible reason why the *sayyids* switched to black turbans was because, as previously discussed, the Prophet himself had worn a black turban on various

important occasions. Gabriel had reportedly donned him with a black turban; the Prophet also wore black when he was delivering sermons and when he conquered Mecca. He had put a black turban on 'Ali before sending him to fight. Another possible reason for switching from green to black was because of sectarianism. With the increased sectarian tensions with the Ottoman Sunnis and the public cursing of the first three caliphs under the Safavids, it is possible that the Shi'i *sayyids* wanted to differentiate themselves from Sunni *sayyids* who wore green turbans.

### **Burial with a Turban**

Another distinctive feature among the Shi'is is that a person can choose to be buried with a turban. Evidently, this practice can be traced to the times of the Imams even though the traditions clearly enunciate that the 'imama is not a part of the shroud (*kafn*) hence it is not obligatory to bury a person with it.<sup>59</sup> Before his death, Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 743), the fifth Shi'i Imam, made his last testimony to his son Ja'far al-Sadiq. He asked him to shroud him in the cloak in which he used to perform the Friday prayer, to put on him his turban, make his grave square, and raise it to the height of four fingers above the ground .....<sup>60</sup> In another tradition, al-Baqir commands al-Sadiq to bury him with his own turban which he used during his life.<sup>61</sup>

In some instances, the Imams were buried with turbans from the previous Imams. The eleventh Imam, al-Hasan al-Askari buried his father in the following manner: "I shrouded my father with two pieces of winter clothes that he had used as the clothes for Ihram [...]. Also one

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<sup>59</sup> Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, 3/144. In another tradition, al-Sadiq states that my father told me to bury him with three items of clothing, but the 'imama is not a part of the *kafn*. Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, 3/144. The donning of the 'imama on a male corpse is considered a *sunna*. Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, 110/342.

<sup>60</sup> Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, 410; al-Kafi, 443; h. 797, ch. 70, #8.

<sup>61</sup> al-Kafi, 537.

of his shirts and the *'imama* that belonged to 'Ali b. al-Husayn and a gown that he had bought for forty dinars were used".<sup>62</sup> However, a turban can only be buried with the corpse if a person had willed it before his death.

### **The Size and Form of a Turban**

As I have discussed, the turban, its color, form and size impacted one's social and financial standing. The method of wearing the turban is also important. The Prophet is reported to have left the "tail" (*'adhaba*) of his turban hanging between his shoulder blades. This practice was imitated by the companions, and became a part of the Prophetic sunna.<sup>63</sup> According to the Prophet's companion 'Abd al-Rahman b. 'Awf (d. 653): "The Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) put a turban on me and let the ends hang in front of him and behind me."<sup>64</sup> The letting down of the *'adhaba* was included in the Prophetic injunction on wearing the *'imama*.

Within the Shi'i school, both the *'adhaba* and the fastening the under the chin (called the *tahannuk*) were also important in identifying true believers.<sup>65</sup> Like the wearing of the turban, they have been seen as modes of distinction from non-Muslims. Al-Saduq cites a tradition from the Prophet stating that the difference between a Muslim and a polytheist is the hanging down (*talahi*) of the *'imama*.<sup>66</sup> This was a Prophetic practise that was replicated by the Imams. When the eighth Imam 'Ali al-Rida went out in public for his coronation, he hung one part of the

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<sup>62</sup> al-Kafi, 672.

<sup>63</sup> Tirmidhi, *Jami'*, vol.3, Chapter 12, *hadith* 1736.

<sup>64</sup> Ibn Dawud, *Sunan*, Kitab al-Libas, Book 32: Hadith 4068.

<sup>65</sup> I am grateful to Alihussein Dato for sharing his research on the *tahannuk* with me.

<sup>66</sup> Al-Saduq, *Man La Yahduru*, 1/266 hadith # 821.

turban on his breast and the other between his shoulders.<sup>67</sup> The Imams also urged their followers to observe the custom of fastening the turban under their chin since this was also considered a mark of a true believer. The Prophet is reported to have stated: “The distinction between the Muslims and the unbelievers is the fastening of the turbans under their chin.”<sup>68</sup> The Shi‘is emphasized the *tahannuk* even more than the Sunnis did. So important was this practice that disregarding it could lead to incurable ailments. A tradition from al-Sadiq states: “He who wore the ‘*imama* and did not fasten it under his chin, let him not blame anyone except himself if he is inflicted with a disease for which there is no remedy.”<sup>69</sup> In another tradition, the same Imam is reported to have guaranteed one who travels while observing the *tahannuk* that he will return home safely.<sup>70</sup> Within Shi‘i circles, it is considered detestable to wear the ‘*imama* without tying it under the chin.<sup>71</sup>

When he discusses the question of how to wear a turban, Majlisi states in Chapter 7 entitled *dar bayan-e bastan-e ammameh* or on how to wrap the *Imama*:

“To wear an *ammameh* is a tradition and to wrap it under the chin is also a tradition. Wearing the *imama* with one end thrown at the back and one end kept loose in the front is also the tradition of the *sadat* ...to wrap an *ammameh* while in a standing position is also a tradition. According to the Prophet Muhammad, *ammameh* is the

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<sup>67</sup> Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, 474.

<sup>68</sup> Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, 83/194.

<sup>69</sup> Yusuf al-Bahrani, *Hadaiq al-Nadhira* (Najaf, 1379), 7/126. Majlisi, *Bihar*, 83/194. Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Khalid al-Barqi, *Kitab al-Mahasin* (Qum: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, 1951), 378.

<sup>70</sup> Al-Saduq, *Man La Yahduru*, 1/265.

<sup>71</sup> Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, 80/193. The tenth century jurist al-Saduq considered that one who wears an ‘*imama* has to observe *tahannuk*. Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, 80/193-4.

crown of the Arabs. When a man stops wearing his turban God will stop honoring him. ...Imam Rida said that the Prophet Muhammad wrapped his turban with the ends, one in the front and one at the back and *Jibrail* (Gabriel) did the same.<sup>72</sup>

Most Shi‘i scholars have recommended that the *tahannuk* be practiced at all times. The medieval jurist ‘Allama Hilli (d. 1325) states, “The *tahannuk* is recommended by the words of Imam al-Sadiq, ‘Whoever wears the turban and does not put the *tahannuk* an ailment has struck him for which there is no cure. Thus, he should blame nobody but himself.’”<sup>73</sup> Hilli further states that “it is abominable to pray in black clothes [...] and to abandon the *tahannuk*.”<sup>74</sup> He concludes by stating, “It appears from these narrations that the *tahannuk* is recommended at all times, whether one is praying or not.”<sup>75</sup> Hilli’s ruling is shared by scholars like Muhammad Jamal al-din al-Makki al-Amili (also known as Shahid al-Awwal - d. 1385) who states in his *Lum‘a Dimishqiyya*, “It is *makruh* to abandon the *tahannuk* at any time.”<sup>76</sup> Baha’ al-Din Muhammad b. Husayn al-‘Amili (also known as Shaykh Baha’i - d. 1621) further emphasizes the point stating that “the *tahannuk* is recommended for anyone who wears the turban – whether he is praying or not. There is nothing in the traditions to suggest that it is recommended only during prayers.”<sup>77</sup> Other scholars like Ja‘far Kashif al-Ghita (d. 1812) go even further, quoting al-Saduq (d. 991) as saying: “I heard our teachers say that it is not permitted for one who wears

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<sup>72</sup> Majlisi, *Hilya*, p.7.

<sup>73</sup> Hilli, *Tadhkira al-Fuqaha’* (Qum: Mu’assassa Al-Bayt, 1993), 2/451.

<sup>74</sup> *Qawa’id al-Ahkam* (Qum: Mu’assassa al-Tabi’a al-Jami’a, 1992), 1/257.

<sup>75</sup> Hilli, *Muntaha al-Matlab*, 4/251.

<sup>76</sup> Muhammad Jamal al-din al-Makki al-Amili, *al-Lum'a al-Dimishqiyya* (Qum: Manshurat Dar al-Fiqr, 1990), 2/62.

<sup>77</sup> Al-Amili, *al-Habl al-Matin* (Qum: Manshuurat Maktab al-Basirat, 1999), 187.

a turban to pray unless if he observes the *tahannuk*.”<sup>78</sup> Although Shi‘i traditions greatly emphasize the *tahannuk* it is not practiced by most contemporary scholars. In explaining this, the commentator of Majlisi’s *Hilya al-Muttaqin* states that in the past, the *tahannuk* was observed at all times. However, this is no longer a common practice.

Despite the numerous traditions on the merits and virtues of observing the *tahannuk* and the negative ramifications for ignoring it, most scholars who wear turbans do not observe it. In all probability, this is because, in the past, *tahannuk* was performed by the Akhbaris, the dominant school in the medieval ages. Most contemporary scholars are Usulis who consider the Akhbaris as literalists and their nemesis. They have thus labeled the *tahannuk* as a sign of Akhbariism.<sup>79</sup> Whereas medieval scholars emphasized the importance of observing the *tahannuk*, later scholars like Fayd al-Kashani (d. 1680) claimed that the changing milieu and custom had dictated that the *tahannuk* be avoided in public. He states that, in his time, the *tahannuk* had become an abandoned sunna because it had become a mode of dressing that attracts attention (*libas shuhra*) and could be an object of derision, which is prohibited. Hence, he argues, it is not necessary to observe it.<sup>80</sup> With time, the *tahannuk* became symbolic of the ideological battle between the two schools within Shi‘ism. An act that was highly emphasized by the Shi‘i Imams was abandoned by the very scholars who transmitted their teachings. This is further proof of how the turban and the method of wearing it has been used as a tool of differentiation not only between Muslims and non-Muslims but also within the Shi‘i community itself.

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<sup>78</sup> Al-Ghita, *Kashf al-Ghita'* (Isfahan: Intisharat al-Mahdawi, 1999), 1/202.

<sup>79</sup> I am grateful to Ayatullah al-Sayyid Fadhil Milani for this observation.

<sup>80</sup> See al-Saduq, *Man La Yahduru*, 1/266 fn 2.

## Conclusion

Although a pre-Islamic costume, the turban was endorsed by Islam which subsequently became an important component of Islamic clothing. The turban performed various functions; one of them was to differentiate Muslims from others. The turban was also used in the Safavid era as a tool for social stratification. The size, color, and form of turbans demarcated different stratas of society. Although the Prophet and the Imams wore different-colored turbans, black was worn by the Prophet for important occasions. Sunni traditions on the turban are replicated in Shi'i *hadith* literature which also sees the turban as the crown of Arabs.

My research into the topic indicates that, in order to enhance the status of the *sayyids* in Safavid Shi'ism, black turbans were reserved exclusively for the *sayyids*. White turbans were used for non-*sayyids* since this was the norm in much of Safavid society. This practice was supplemented by many traditions which encouraged the wearing of white clothing. The differentiation between black and white turbans was thus a historical construct, based on social and financial rather than religious considerations. Wearing a black turban for *sayyids* became a customary rather than religious requirement. Within the Shi'i tradition, the importance of the turban was further highlighted by reports which recommended that turbans accompany the dead to their graves. Clearly, the attachment to the turban was so deep that it accompanied the wearer to the hereafter. Later on, tying the turban under the chin became an ideological tool of differentiation within the Shi'i community.

Various statements of the Prophet indicate that one of the most important functions of the turban was that of differentiating from and discriminating against non-Muslims. He is reported to

have stated: “The difference between us and the polytheists is that we wear turbans over caps.”<sup>81</sup>

A tradition recorded by al-Tirmidhi (d. 892) states that the “*imama* forms a sign which separates Muslims from unbelievers; Muslims wear turbans, unbelievers do not.”<sup>82</sup>

Given that black was the official color of the ‘Abbasids, where and when did the Shi‘i practice of wearing black turbans by the descendants of the Prophet start from?

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<sup>81</sup> Abu Dawud, *Sunan*, Book 32: *hadith* 4067; Hafidh al-Tirmidhi, *Jami‘i*, <https://islamfuture.wordpress.com/2013/06/22/jami-at-tirmidhi-6-vol-set/>, vol. 3, chapter 42, *hadith* 1784.

<sup>82</sup> M. J. Kister, “The Crowns of This Community,” 225.