

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 Prophetic traditions were used to enhance the significance of wearing the turban for Muslims. It will also demonstrate how the turban became a tool to differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims and 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.

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The turban is imbued with various connotations that distinguish and differentiate its wearers from others. This distinction is frequently premised on socio-cultural and religious norms. The turban has been associated with Islam since the inception of the religion in the seventh century. This article will discuss the origins of the turban in Islam, its significance, and the importance of the color and method of wearing it. The paper will also examine the basis of the distinction of black and white turban in the 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.¹

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

The word turban is probably derived from the Persian *dulband* which may have come to English via the Turkish word *tul-bant* or *tolibant*.² The origins of the *‘imama*, as it is called in Arabic, is not known. It is possible to surmise that, based on historical and archeological studies, the early Persians or Phrygians in modern Turkey were the first to wear a conical cap called the Phrygian cap that evolved to become the modern turban, though other theories suggest it was first widely worn in Egypt.³ Communities with turban-wearing custom are found in a vast territory from the Indian Subcontinent to Afghanistan, the Arabian Peninsula, Southeast Asia, Northwest China, the Near East, North Africa, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and parts of the Swahili Coast. The turban is undoubtedly of pre-Islamic origin and was widely worn in the ancient Near East. More recent studies have demonstrated that Roman soldiers may have also worn the turban.⁴

The pre-Islamic origin of the headgear is evinced from the Old Testament which states: “set the turban on his (Aaron’s) head and put the holy crown on the turban.” Then you shall take the anointing oil and pour it on his head and anoint him.” Exodus (29-6 and 29-7). Elsewhere, in Leviticus (8, 9, and 10) the significance of the headgear is further highlighted “and put the mitre upon his head; also upon the mitre, even upon his forefront, did he put a golden plate, the holy crown; as the Lord commanded Moses.” The Hebrew word *mitznefet* has been translated as "mitre" or "headdress". It was most likely a turban, as the word comes from the root “to wrap.”

² Yedidah Stillman “Libas” in: C.E. Bosworth et al., eds., *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill. 1983), 2nd ed., 735.

³ See Lynn E. Roller, “The Legend of Midas,” in *Classical Antiquity*, 2.2 (October 1983):305. Also Norma Goldman and Jacob E. Nyenhuis, “*Latin Via Ovid: A First Course*,” second edition (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), 160.

⁴ Raffaele D’Amato, *Roman Military Clothing (3) AD 400-640, Illustrated by Graham Sumner* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd, 2005), 23.

The priestly mitre was the head covering worn by the Jewish High Priest when he served in the Tabernacle and the Temple in Jerusalem. The widespread usage of the headgear in the ancient Near East and other parts of the world corroborates the view that Islam endorsed the custom of wearing the turban, one that it had inherited from pre-Islamic Arabia.

Turbans and Angels in the *Hadith* Literature

According to Muslim *hadith* literature the first person who wore a turban was Adam after he was expelled from Paradise.⁵ A tradition states that the angel Gabriel descended from heaven and dressed him in an '*imama*'. This became a substitute for the crown that he had reportedly worn in Paradise.⁶ In the *hadith* literature, the turban is also projected as a headgear of the angels. 'Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 661) narrates that the Prophet once bound a turban on his head, allowing the ends to hang down in front and behind and said, "The crowns of the angels are thus."⁷ When the Prophet ascended to heaven he saw that the majority of the angels were wearing turbans.⁸ The angels sent to assist the Muslims at the Battle of Badr are also recorded to have worn turbans, some yellow and others white.⁹ A tradition transmitted from Ibn 'Abbas

⁵ M. J. Kister, "The Crowns of This Community...: Some Notes on the Turban in the Muslim Tradition," in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 24 (2000): 230.

⁶ Hamid Algar, *Amama*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/amama-or-ammama-arabic-emama-the-turban>.

⁷ Mottaqi Hindi, *Kanz al-'Ummal*, ed. M. 'Abd-al-Mu'id Khan (Hyderabad: Deccan, 1973), 10/45.

⁸ M. J. Kister, "The Crowns of This Community," 243.

⁹ Algar, "Amama." Traditions on the color of the turbans worn by the angels at Badr are not unanimous. Some of the early scholars reported that the angels wore white turbans; the fringe of their turbans hung down on their backs while others state that at the battle of Hunayn the angels wore red turbans. A tradition claims that Gabriel descended on the day of Badr wearing

states that on the day of the battle of Uhud the angels wore red turbans whereas on the day of Badr, they wore black turbans.¹⁰

The view that angels wear turbans is substantiated in Shi'i *hadith* literature. 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.¹¹ Al-Kulayni cites another *hadith* stating that besides the angels, jinns also wore turbans.¹² Other reports indicate that even Satan wore a turban when he came down from heaven.¹³ Reports such as these depict the turban as an angelic dress and enhance its importance.

The turban was a national dress, one which was an identity marker and was used to distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims. The best way to accentuate the importance of turbans, as with many other issues, was in the form of utterances from the Prophet. Besides the

a yellow turban; M. J. Kister, "The Crowns of This Community," 231. The Shi'i scholar Majlisi cites a tradition from al-Baqir stating that the angels wore white-colored turbans at the battle of Badr. Muhammad al-Baqir al-Majlisi, *Hilyat al-Muttaqin* (Tehran: Yas Publication 1993), 7.

¹⁰ M. J. Kister, "The Crowns of This Community," 232.

¹¹ Al-Kulayni, *Al-Kafi fi 'Ilm al-Din* (Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, Tehran, 1986), 5/546.

¹² Kulayni 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." 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.

¹³ M. J. Kister, "The Crowns of This Community," 227.

association of turbans with angels, there are many traditions reported from the Prophet Muhammad regarding the merits of wearing a turban. He is reported to have said that the “turban is the crown of Arabs.”¹⁴ Many traditions in Shi‘i *hadith* literature also accentuate the importance of turbans. The seventh Imam, Musa al-Kazim (d. 799), reportedly stated that the Prophet called the turban “the authority of Allah.”¹⁵ Other traditions state that it is God’s dominion (*sultan*).¹⁶ Due to the proliferation of *hadith* about the turbans, the Prophet Muhammad was known as “the wearer of the turban” (*sahib al-‘imama*).

Many traditions accentuate the importance of wearing a turban, especially when praying. In his *Sahih*, Muslim b. al-Hajjaj narrates a tradition from ‘Urwa b. al Mughira b. Shu'ba who reports from his father that he said the Prophet used to wear a turban when praying.¹⁷ A tradition states that bowing down twice wearing an ‘*imama* is better than performing seventy bows without one and that God and the angels pray for a person wearing a turban during Friday (prayers). Reciting the Friday prayers wearing the ‘*imama* has the value of seventy prayers on Friday (without the ‘*imama*).¹⁸ Traditions of the same genre also appear in Shi‘i *hadith* literature.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibn Hajr al-Asqalani, *Fada'il al-Qur'an al-Karim*, (Beirut: 1986), 144.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, *Al-Musnadu Al-Sahihu bi Naklil Adli* known as *Sahih Muslim*, Converted by Bill McLean, <http://www.mclean.faithweb.com>. last accessed 6 August 2015, 167-168.

¹⁸ M. J. Kister, “The Crowns of This Community,” 242-3.

¹⁹ On wearing a turban especially in *salat*, see Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, 80/193. In another tradition, al-Sadiq says “one who offers the prayers on the days of the two *eids* must wear an ‘*imama*. See Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-

Both Sunni and Shi'i texts cite various *hadith* regarding the significance of wearing a turban at all times. According to a *hadith*, wearing a turban brings a person closer to God since it is a sign of angels.²⁰ 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, Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765), the sixth Shi'i Imam, states that the pilgrim can tie the '*imama* around his stomach.²¹ Traditions such as these underscore the importance of the turban; they also amplify the status of those who wear it and differentiate them from non-believers.

Even though Shi'i texts cite many traditions on the '*imama* there is very little discussion on why it is important to wear it. So, for example, traditions cited by al-Kulayni state that it is meritorious to tie a turban on the head of a dead body;²² other traditions state that it is not permissible to wipe on the turban (*mash*) when performing the ablution.²³ However, there is little discussion in his work on the significance of wearing a turban or the importance of the color of the turban.

Wearing a turban is highly emphasized especially in the religious seminaries. In my correspondence with various scholars on this topic, I was surprised to hear of discriminatory policies against those who do not wear turbans in the traditional Shi'i religious seminaries.

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.

²⁰ Muhammad Fahad Badri, *Al-Imama* (Baghdad: Government Publication, 1968), 10.

²¹ al-'Amili, *Wasa'il al-Shi'a*, 12/533.

²² Kulayni, *al-Kafi*, 3/145.

²³ Al-'Amili, *Wasail*, 1/455.

Certain *maraji*²⁴ do not give the monthly stipend (*shahriya*) which is reserved for the highest level students (level 3) unless a student wears a turban when he goes to collect his stipend. Tahir Ridha, a scholar studying in Qum wrote to me, “This is something I can personally attest to. The offices of Ayatullah Wahid Khurasani and Ayatullah Safi Gulpayghani explicitly say that if one is not turbaned, he can only collect the considerably lower stipend (level 2).”²⁵ As someone sarcastically noted, “what is on the head seems to be more valued than what is in the head.”

The Significance of the Turban

Besides the traditions enunciating the merits of wearing a turban, the headgear 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.²⁶ Like their Sunni counterparts, Shi‘i traditonists also recorded traditions on the significance of the turban. Authority was accorded, and perhaps transferred to a person by dressing him with a turban. According to Shi‘i reports, before appointing him as his successor at Ghadir, the Prophet put a turban on ‘Ali’s head.²⁷ 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

²⁴ In Shi‘ism, the *maraji* are the sources of reference for ordinary believers on issues pertaining to Islamic law.

²⁵ Email communication July 2015.

²⁶ Shelagh Weir, *Palestinian Costumes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 6.

²⁷ See al-‘Amili, *Wasa’il*, 5/57; al-Majlisi, *Bihar*, 80/199.

that he should never feel the heat or cold.²⁸ 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.”²⁹ 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.”³⁰

The symbolic significance of the turban was intertwined with an important concept in the early period of Islam: as a form of identification and differentiation. It should be remembered that medieval jurists enacted several discriminatory measures to demonstrate the superiority of Islam and to degrade non-Muslims. They ruled that a Jew or Christian was not allowed to dress like an important person. A Muslim may not wash a Jewish or Christian toilet.³¹ Other jurists held that *dhimmi*s were to wear distinctive clothing, more specifically, special emblems on their clothes as a token of their inferior or different status. They were to live in houses that were smaller than Muslim houses. They were not permitted to ride a horse, which was a public proof of one’s affluence. *Jizya*, says the Qur’anic exegete Zamakhshari, should be taken from them with belittlement and humiliation. The *dhimmi* is to come walking, not riding. When he pays the *jizya*, he shall be slapped on the nape of his neck.³² These regulations were incorporated in

²⁸ Al-Mufid, *al-Amali* (Qum: International Congress of Millennium of Shaykh Mufid, 1992), 318.

²⁹ Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, trans I. Howard (London: Balagha & Muhammadi Trust, 1981), 67.

³⁰ M. J. Kister, “The Crowns of This Community,” 233.

³¹ John Alden Williams, *Themes of Islamic Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 159-60.

³² Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 15.

Islamic jurisprudence as a divinely sanctioned system of discriminatory provisions.³³ The tendency among jurists of the eighth and ninth centuries was to seek justification for the discriminatory rulings by asserting that the unbelievers had chosen to refuse the offer to convert. Hence, their inferior status was the product of their own choice.

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.”³⁴ 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.”³⁵ Since turbans are worn by believers, the privilege of wearing them should not be accorded to unbelievers. This is exemplified by the treatment meted out by the Umayyad caliph ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (d. 720) to a delegation of the Christian tribe called Bani Taghlib that visited him. When he learnt that the visitors were not Muslims, the Caliph, removed, among other things, their turbans.³⁶ Based on the necessity of differentiating between believers and non-believers, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya forbade the *ahl al-dhimma* to wear turbans.³⁷

³³ For other restrictions and acts of humiliation inflicted on the *dhimmi*s see, Majid Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1955), 197-98.

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ M. J. Kister, “The Crowns of This Community,” 225.

³⁶ Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Ahkam ahl al-Dhimma* (Damascus: 1961), 2/742-44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2/739-40.

The Color of the Turban

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. Many traditions suggest that the Prophet wore a black turban, especially on important occasions. Tirmidhi narrates that on the day of the conquest of Mecca, the Prophet wore a black turban, a tradition that is also cited by Muslim and Bukhari.³⁸ Traditions on the Prophet wearing a black turban are also cited in Shi'i sources.³⁹ These traditions are opposed by several *hadith* which state that the Prophet entered Mecca wearing a helmet.⁴⁰ Muslim cites several *hadith* on the Prophet wearing a black turban on other important occasions, like when he addressed the people from the pulpit. Ja'far b. 'Amr b. Harith narrates from his father: "As if I am seeing Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) on the pulpit with a black turban on his head, and its two ends hanging between his shoulders."⁴¹ An important tradition reported by Abu Hanifa states that Gabriel had put on the Prophet a black 'imama.⁴² Other traditions indicate that the Prophet would wear a black turban especially when he was traveling.⁴³

Both Sunni and Shi'i texts cite many traditions on the Prophet wearing a black turban especially on important occasions. They suggest that the black turban became a symbol of prophetic authority, one that could be utilized by his successors and descendants to wield

³⁸ Muslim, *Sahih*, The Book of Pilgrimage (Kitab Al-Hajj), Book 7, Hadith 3146; 3148; Tirmidhi, *Jami'*, vol.3, chapter 11; *hadith* 1735.

³⁹ al-'Amili, *Wasa'il al-Shi'a*, 5/57.

⁴⁰ Bukhari, *Sahih*, *Penalty of Hunting while on Pilgrimage Book 3: Volume 29 Hadith 72; Book 5; Volume 59, Hadith 582: Book 7; Volume 72, Hadith 699; Malik b. Anas, al-Muwatta', K. al-Hajj: Book 20: Hadith 20.76.256.*

⁴¹ Muslim, *Sahih*, The Book of Pilgrimage, Book 7, Hadith 3149.

⁴² M. J. Kister, "The Crowns of This Community," 237.

⁴³ Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, 16/250.

authority in their own times. Later caliphs followed the practice of the Prophet by dressing their governors and officials in black turbans. Gradually, as we shall see, especially in Shi'i circles, the black turban became a powerful tool to wield religious authority in the community.

That the black turban symbolized authority and was seen as something special is evinced from reports indicating that the Prophet dressed 'Ali in a black 'imama before sending him to engage in battle in 'Amman.⁴⁴ 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."⁴⁵ He did the same before sending him to conquer Khaybar.⁴⁶ By dressing 'Ali in a black turban, it could be argued that the Prophet was transmitting his spiritual and political authority to him.

The black turban became a popular headdress as early as the first Islamic century. Many traditions indicate that companions of the Prophet wore black turbans.⁴⁷ The Sunni *hadith* collector Abu Dawud (d. 889) cites a tradition in which Sa'd said: "I saw a man riding on a white mule and he had a black turban of silk and wool. He said: The Apostle of Allah (peace be upon him) put it on me."⁴⁸ Even when traditions discourage the wearing of black clothes, black turbans are exempted from this rule. Many reports in Shi'i *hadith* literature state that it is

⁴⁴ Ibid., 41/77.

⁴⁵ M. J. Kister, "The Crowns of This Community," 221, fn. 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 233.

⁴⁷ See the example cited of Abu Nadra in Muhammad b. Sa'd, *Tabaqat al-Kubra*. 9 vols. (Beirut Dar Sadir, n.d.), 7/208.

⁴⁸ *Ibn Dawud, Sunan, Kitab al-Libas, Book 32, Hadith #4027.*

detestable to pray in black clothes. However, black socks, robes, and turbans are exceptions to this rule.⁴⁹ Evidently, a black turban signified piety and the conferral of authority.

Black as the Emblem of the ‘Abbasids

When they began the revolt against the Umayyads, the ‘Abbasids raised black banners and used the color black as a symbol of political resistance. 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.⁵⁰ As Teresa Bernheimer has noted, the ‘Alids (Alawis) not only supported the ‘Abbasids, but started wearing black in order to show their allegiance and loyalty to the new rulers.

The first ‘Alid from the Hassanid branch, who wore the ‘Abbasid color was al-Hassan b. Zayd b. al-Hassan b. Ali (d. 784).⁵¹ High, black hats called *qalansuwas* were worn by the ‘Abbasid caliphs from the time of al-Mansur to al-Musta‘in (d. 866). ‘Alids who wanted to serve in the administration had to comply with this color. In addition, prominent ‘Alids were often pressured to wear the black clothes of the ‘Abbasids.⁵² Those descendants of the Prophet who were not prominent or serving the court were allowed to wear green turbans, even though the Prophet himself is not recorded to have worn a turban of that color.

⁴⁹ 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.

⁵⁰ Nazemian Fard, *Vakavi-e Karbord-e Rang-e Siah dar Mian-e Abbasian*, 2, 7, (2011): 147-148.

⁵¹ Teresa Bernheimer, *The ‘Alids: the First Family of Islam 750-1200* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 43.

⁵² See the example of Qasim b. ‘Abdullah cited by Bernheimer, *The ‘Alids*, 70.

The Shi‘i Imams wore black 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 made against him by the enemy, for the Imam does not consider the wearing of black clothes to be permissible.’”⁵³ The tradition indicates that the Imams and their followers would not wear black clothes or turbans unless they were compelled to do so.

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? As we have seen, the Prophet himself often wore a black turban. It should be noted that the Prophet and his companions wore different colors of turbans ranging from white, blue, black to even red.⁵⁴ He would sometimes wear a white-colored turban for which he was referred to as *Sahab* (cloud).⁵⁵ The Prophet wore a yellow turban on the day of Badr.⁵⁶ A tradition states that he would

⁵³ al-‘Amili, *Wasa'il al-Shi'a*, 4/385.

⁵⁴ 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.

⁵⁵ Abdul-Husein Ahmad Amini Najafi, *Al-Ghadir fil-Kitab wal-Sunnah wal-Adab*, vol. 3/290-293. Stillman, “Libas,” *EI*.

⁵⁶ ‘Abd al-Rahman Jalal al-Din Suyuti, *al-Durr al-Manthur fi tafsir bi'l ma'thur* (Cairo, 1896), 2/70.

sometimes dye his clothes, including the turban, in yellow.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ When Asbagh b. Nubata went to see ‘Ali on his death bed, ‘Ali was wearing a yellow turban.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ During his time, the ‘Alids would wear green as that was their preferred color.⁶¹ 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 back to black.⁶² 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.⁶³ 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 wear. Neither do they tell us what color they should not wear. Stated differently, the color of the turban is left to the followers of the Imams to decide.

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

⁵⁷ Ibn Dawud *Sunan*, Book 32, *hadith*, 4053.

⁵⁸ al-‘Amili, *Wasa'il al-Shi'a*, 5/57.

⁵⁹ Al-Mufid, *al-Amali*, 352.

⁶⁰ Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, trans. I. Howard (London: Balagha & Muhammadi Trust, 1981), 474. Kafi, 686, H 1234, Ch. 121, h 7.

⁶¹ 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.

⁶² Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-Umam Wa'l-Muluk*. 8 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasa al-A'lami), 1983, 3/1013, 1037.

⁶³ Majlisi, *Bihar*, 52/302. Ibn Abu Zaynab, *Kitab al-Ghayba*, trans. Abdullah al-Shahin (Qum: Ansariyan, 2003), 439.

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.⁶⁴ 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*, a seminal Shi‘i guide on the dress code and modes of grooming. In this work, 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.”⁶⁵

Significantly, in the chapter dedicated to the wearing of turbans, one would have expected 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.

⁶⁴ <http://www.erfan.ir/arabic/article/view/78723>.

⁶⁵ 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 Chelkowski*. Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami and M.R. Ghanoonparvar eds., (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publications, 2007), 146-166.

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 Husayn was martyred, he was wearing green.”⁶⁶ Even when he considers the best colors for shoes, Majlisi’s first choice is yellow followed by white. He reserves black for boots.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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.”⁶⁹ In his text, Majlisi cites several traditions encouraging wearing white 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.

⁶⁶ al-Majlisi, *Hilyat al-Muttaqin*, 3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

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).⁷⁰ 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 normally red, although occasionally blue.⁷¹ 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."⁷² 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

⁷⁰ 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.

⁷¹ Yedidah Stillman, "Libas," 749.

⁷² *Cambridge History of Islam*. Edited by Peter Holt, Ann Lambton, and Bernard Lewis. 2 vols. (Cambridge: 1970), 1/396.

political allegiance.⁷³ Safavid Persian poetry contains many literary references to the turban. For example, Sa'īd 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.⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵ As I mentioned earlier, since the time of the Prophet, black symbolized 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*

⁷³ http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/safa_f/hd_safa_f.htm. See also <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/clothing-x>

⁷⁴ 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.

⁷⁵ 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.

shabab ahl al-Janna, “the two leaders of the young men of paradise”⁷⁶ 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*).”⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸ In many social settings, a *sayyid* 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.⁷⁹

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

⁷⁶ al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, 296.

⁷⁷ 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.

⁷⁸ Bernheimer, *The ‘Alids*, 17.

⁷⁹ 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.

migrate to the Ottoman empire.⁸⁰ Apart from receiving state revenue they got the same privileges as the military.⁸¹ 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.⁸² 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.⁸³ In India *sayyids* had special governmental privileges such as stipends and land grants.⁸⁴

Many miracle stories and rewards for those helping *sayyids* were invented.⁸⁵ 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'i 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 *khumus* (the fifth). In the Shi'i legal system, *khumus* 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

⁸⁰ 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.

⁸¹ Ibid., 132-133.

⁸² 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.

⁸³ 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.

⁸⁴ Arthur Buehler, "Trends of Ashrafization in India" in Morimoto Kazuo ed., *Sayyids and Sharifs*, 235.

⁸⁵ 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.*

addition to other items, *khumus* 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, "*Khumus* 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*."⁸⁶ This bifurcation of the *khumus* 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. In fact people devised ingenious ways to fabricate their genealogy. Al-Bukhari mentions instances of people who falsely claimed descent from extinct Prophetic lines in places such as Egypt, Rayy, Hamadan, Khurasan and Kufa.⁸⁷ The fact that special punishments had to be invented to expose false claimants (including having their heads shaven and/or being exiled) further demonstrates the extent of fabricated genealogies.⁸⁸ Due to the forgeries, an official system of monitoring of genealogies had to be established in many cities.⁸⁹

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 Zaynab, the

⁸⁶ Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i, *Minhaj al-Salihin*, 9th edition, 1:371.

⁸⁷ Bernheimer, *The 'Alids*, Ibid., 24 - 6.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 26 - 8.

⁸⁹ Arthur Buehler, "Trends of Ashrafization in India" in Morimoto Kazuo ed., *Sayyids and Sharifs*, 235.

daughter of 'Ali and Fatima, should also be considered as *sayyids*.⁹⁰ 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 *khumus* 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.⁹¹ 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."⁹² The

⁹⁰ Teresa Bernheimer, *Genealogy, Marriage, and the Drawing of Boundaries among the 'Alids (Eighth-Twelfth Centuries)*, in Morimoto Kazuo ed., *Sayyids and Sharifs*, 83-85.

⁹¹ 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.

⁹² 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.

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*.⁹³

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 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

⁹³Ruya 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).

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 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.⁹⁴ 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 ground⁹⁵ In another tradition, al-Baqir commands al-Sadiq to bury him with his own turban which he used during his life.⁹⁶

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 of his shirts and the ‘*imama* that belonged to ‘Ali b. al-Husayn and a gown that he had bought for

⁹⁴ 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.

⁹⁵ Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, 410; al-Kafi, 443; h. 797, ch. 70, #8.

⁹⁶ al-Kafi, 537.

forty dinars were used".⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸ 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."⁹⁹ The letting down of the *'adhaba* was included in the Prophetic injunction on wearing the *'imama*.

Besides letting the fringe down, some traditions also required the tying of the turban under the chin. Sunni scholars are divided on this practice. Jurists like Malik b. Anas favored this mode of dressing but the Shafi'is did not consider the fastening of the *'imama* under the chin as sunna.¹⁰⁰ This practice was also used as a mark of differentiation from non-Muslims who wore turbans. Hence, it was not only wearing the turban that was important, the method of wearing it was also significant. According to some traditions, the Prophet said: "Disagree with the Jews and do not wear turbans that are not fastened under the chin, or with their fringes not let down, as this method of wearing the turban is the fashion of the Jews."¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ al-Kafi, 672.

⁹⁸ Tirmidhi, *Jami'*, vol.3, Chapter 12, *hadith* 1736.

⁹⁹ Ibn Dawud, *Sunan*, Kitab al-Libas, Book 32: Hadith 4068.

¹⁰⁰ "M. J. Kister, *The Crowns of This Community*," 227-228.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

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.¹⁰² 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*.¹⁰³ 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 turban on his breast and the other between his shoulders.¹⁰⁴ 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.”¹⁰⁵ 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.”¹⁰⁶ In another tradition, the same Imam is reported to have guaranteed one who travels while observing the *tahannuk* that he will return

¹⁰² I am grateful to Alihussein Dato for sharing his research on the *tahannuk* with me.

¹⁰³ Al-Saduq, *Man La Yahduru*, 1/266 hadith # 821.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, 474.

¹⁰⁵ Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, 83/194.

¹⁰⁶ 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.

home safely.¹⁰⁷ Within Shi'i circles, it is considered detestable to wear the 'imama without tying it under the chin.¹⁰⁸

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 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.¹⁰⁹

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.’”¹¹⁰ Hilli further states that “it is abominable to pray in black clothes [...] and to abandon the *tahannuk*.”¹¹¹ He concludes by stating, “It appears from these narrations that the *tahannuk* is recommended at all times, whether one is praying or not.”¹¹² 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

¹⁰⁷ Al-Saduq, *Man La Yahduru*, 1/265.

¹⁰⁸ 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.

¹⁰⁹ Majlisi, *Hilya*, p.7.

¹¹⁰ Hilli, *Tadhkira al-Fuqaha'* (Qum: Mu'assassa Al-Bayt, 1993), 2/451.

¹¹¹ *Qawa'id al-Ahkam* (Qum: Mu'assassa al-Tabi'a al-Jami'a, 1992), 1/257.

¹¹² Hilli, *Muntaha al-Matlab*, 4/251.

Lum 'a Dimishqiyya, “It is *makruh* to abandon the *tahannuk* at any time.”¹¹³ 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.”¹¹⁴ 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 a turban to pray unless if he observes the *tahannuk*.”¹¹⁵ 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.¹¹⁶ 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

¹¹³ Muhammad Jamal al-din al-Makki al-Amili, *al-Lum'a al-Dimishqiyya* (Qum: Manshurat Dar al-Fiqr, 1990), 2/62.

¹¹⁴ Al-Amili, *al-Habl al-Matin* (Qum: Manshuurat Maktab al-Basirat, 1999), 187.

¹¹⁵ Al-Ghita, *Kashf al-Ghita'* (Isfahan: Intisharat al-Mahdawi, 1999), 1/202.

¹¹⁶ I am grateful to Ayatullah al-Sayyid Fadhil Milani for this observation.

attracts attention (*libas shuhra*) and could be an object of derision, which is prohibited. Hence, he argues, it is not necessary to observe it.¹¹⁷ 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.

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

¹¹⁷ See al-Saduq, *Man La Yahduru*, 1/266 fn 2.

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.