Published: December 15, 1989
Last Updated: January 29, 2013

ʿAMĀMA

ʿ**AMĀMA** (or ʿAMMĀMA, Arabic ʿEMĀMA), the turban. Imbued with symbolic significance, the turban was once the almost universal headgear of adult male Muslims. Although of pre-Islamic origin and widely disseminated in the ancient Near East, it came in Islamic times to distinguish first the Arab from the non-Arab and then the Muslim from the non-Muslim. In a frequently quoted Hadith, the Prophet designated the turban as “the crown of the Arabs;” other traditions report him as saying “The turban is the boundary between faith and infidelity” and “The same distance separates the turban from the hat as separates us from the polytheists” (Mottaqī Hendī, *Kanz al-ʿommāl*, ed. M. ʿAbd-al-Moʿīd Khan, Hyderabad [Deccan], 1393/1973, XX, pp. 44-45; Aḥmad Żīāʾ-al-dīn Komošḵānawī, *Šarḥ rāmūz al-āḥādīt*Â¯, Istanbul, 1291/1874, II, p. 575). According to certain traditions, when Adam descended to earth, a turban was placed on his head as a substitute for the crown he had worn in paradise. The association of turbans with crowns was preserved both by Sufis and member of the chivalrous sodalities: They designated as *tāǰ* (crown) the distinctive types of turban they wore (see Shah Neʿmatallāh Walī, *Rasāʾel*, ed. J. Nūrbaḵš, Tehran, 1358 Š./1979, I, pp. 161-66; A. Gölpĭnarlĭ, *Tasavvuftan dilimize geçen deyimler ve atasözleri*, Istanbul, 1977, pp. 320-22; F. Taeschner, *Zünfte und Bruderschaften im Islam*, Zurich and Munich, 1979, pp. 264, 449, 490, 503). Before acquiring a particular association with the Safavids and their ideology, the twelve-slash turban worn by numerous Iranian Sufis was taken to indicate the necessity to acquire twelve particular virtues and to abandon twelve particular vices (Shah Neʿmatallāh Walī, loc. cit.).

Not only did the turban function as a reminder of primordial dignity through its association with Adam, it was also thought to be the headgear of the angels. ʿAlī related that the Prophet once bound a turban on his head, allowing the ends to hang down in front and behind; he then remarked, “The crowns of the angels are thus” (*Kanz al-ʿommāl* XX, p. 45). The angels sent to aid the Muslims at the Battle of Badr are also recorded to have worn turbans, some yellow and others white (Maḥallī and Soyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-ǰalālayn*, on Qurʾān 3:125). When the Prophet wound a turban around ʿAlī’s head at Ḡadīr Ḵomm, allowing one end to hang down between his shoulder blades, he said: “God aided me at the battles of Badr and Ḥonayn with angels who wore their turbans this way” (*Kanz al-ʿommāl* XX, p. 44). Angels were accordingly depicted as wearing turbans throughout the history of miniature painting (e.g., illustrations in L. Binyon, J. V. S. Wilkinson, and B. Gray, *Persian Miniature Painting*, London, 1933). Given these qualities of the turban, it is not surprising that to dream of a turban has traditionally been interpreted as auspicious—as a sign of the impending acquisition of power, rank, wealth, or a pious wife (e.g., ʿAbd-al-Ḡanī Nāblosī, *Taʿṭīr al-anām fī taʿbīr al-manām*, Cairo, n.d., II, pp. 104-05; Moḥammad-Bāqer Maǰlesī [?], *Taʿbīr-e ḵᵛāb*, Tehran, n.d., p. 32).

Numerous details have been preserved of the turbans worn by the Prophet; these have become part of the Sunna and the object of imitation. Generally, he wore either white, blue, or red turbans, but on the day of the conquest of Mecca he is recorded to have worn a black one (ʿA. Karāra, *al-Šamāʾel wa’l-aḵlāq al-nabawīya*, Mecca, 1389/1968, p. 19). When preaching from the *menbar*, the Prophet would wear a dark gray or near-black (*damsāʾ*) turban (Moṣṭafā b. Ḡonaym Manāwī, *Šīam al-Moṣṭafā*, ms. in collection of H. Algar, f. 22b; ʿA. Karāra, *al-Šamāʾel*, p. 19). Black turbans thus acquired the connotation of dominion and authority, and were often preferred by both rulers and *ʿolamāʾ*. The Prophet is recorded customarily to have left the “tail” (*ʿaḏaba*) of his turban hanging between his shoulder blades to a length of about two spans; this was observed and imitated by several of the Companions, and established itself as part of the Sunna (*Šīam al-Moṣṭafā*, f. 22b; I. Ḥaqqī, *Maʿrefat-nāma*, Istanbul, 1330/1912, p. 245). However, he dissuaded the Companions from binding their turbans beneath the chin, a practice known as *taḥnīk*; this became classified as a *beḏʿa* (reprehensible innovation) and was generally avoided, except in some parts of North Africa. On a number of occasions the Prophet is recorded to have wound a turban around the head of ʿAlī, most importantly on the day when, according to Shiʿite belief, he designated him as his successor at Ḡadīr Ḵomm (*Kanz al-ʿommāl* XX, p. 44). He is also said to have

bequeathed to ʿAlī a turban of special design known as *al-saḥāb* (ibid.; R. P. A. Dozy, *Dictionnaire détaillé des noms des vêtements chez les arabes*, Amsterdam, 1845, p. 306 with additional sources). The giving of a turban thus came to function as a rite of investiture for temporal rulers and as one of initiation for Sufi shaikhs.

The putting on of the first turban, generally at puberty, was virtually a rite of passage into Muslim male adulthood. However, wearing a turban was never made obligatory under religious law; it was termed either *mandūb* (highly recommended) or *mostaḥabb* (desirable) and was particularly encouraged during prayer. Popularly it was said that a single prayer performed with a turban was better than seventy performed without one.

Despite the normative and symbolic aspects of the turban, it underwent considerable variation in the course of Muslim history. The ʿAbbasid caliphs, for example, wore turbans with long trailing ends known as *rafraf*, a practice later imitated by the Mamluk sultans; they also encouraged the wearing of green turbans by descendants of the Prophet, even though he is not recorded to have worn turbans of that color (Dozy, *Dictionnaire*, p. 308; L. A. Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, Geneva, 1952, p. 13). Non-Muslim minorities were sporadically required to wear turbans of distinctive colors. There was also a continuous tendency to wear larger turbans, with the *ʿolamāʾ* generally in the lead over the members of other professions. Underlying this tendency was no doubt the Hadith to the effect that every twist of the turban generated additional light in the heart of the wearer (Komošḵānawī, *Šarḥ* II, p. 576). Despite the general currency of the turban, there was also an incipient trend in the Mamluk period to associate the turban particularly with the *ʿolamāʾ*, as well as members of the civil bureaucracy: They were known as *arbāb al-ʿamāʾem* (the wearers of turbans), in contradistinction to the military, who wore other types of headgear (Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, p. 28).

The turban reached an apogee of richness, variegation, and size in the Ottoman and Safavid empires. Among the Ottomans, each class of court official had its distinctive type of turban, often reproduced in stone over graves (See E. Cenkmen, *Osmanļĭ sarayĭ ve Kĭyafetleri*, Istanbul, 1948; N. Sevin, *Onüç asĭrļĭk Türk kĭyafet tarihine bir bakĭş*, Istanbul, 1973); the same was true of the artisan guilds (see the illustrations to the *Sūr-nāma* of Morād III, ms. Topkapĭ Sarayĭ, Hazine 1344) and the Sufi orders (for depictions of their turbans see Moḥammad-Ṣādeq Erzenǰānī, *Mecmūa-i Zenbūriye*, uncatalogued ms., Süleymaniye library, Istanbul). In Safavid Iran, turbans were typically

very large, made of multicolored cloth and adorned with jewels and feathers, despite a prophetic injunction against such ostentation (see, for example, the picture of Shah ʿAbbās II and his court reproduced in A. Welch, *Shah ʿAbbās and the Arts of Isfahan*, New York, 1973, pp. 84-85). The traveler Chardin reported that the average turban weighed between twelve and fifteen pounds. Coarse white cloth was used to give the turban substance, body and shape, and it was then covered with silk or gold embroidered cloth. The ends of the turban would be knotted together in the front, with plumes implanted in the knot (Sir John Chardin, *Travels in Persia*, London, 1927, p. 214). Again in the Safavid period, it appears that the *ʿolamāʾ* outstripped other turban wearers in the size of their headgear, and massively large turbans became a symbol of their class. The poet Ṣāʾeb Tabrīzī made frequent satirical reference to the size of *ʿolamāʾ*s turbans (e.g., Dehḵodā, s.v. *ʿamāma*).

The tendency to particular association of the turban with the *ʿolamāʾ* was greatly accelerated in the 19th century. The Ottomans adopted a succession of new forms of headgear, finally settling on the fez, and in Iran under the Qajars the tall lambskin cap known as the *kolāh* largely displaced the turban. J. Polak, who arrived in Iran in 1852, noted that in the quite recent past, the folds, size, form, and color of different turbans had served to distinguish the inhabitants of various cities, but that in his time the turban was worn only by ethnic minorities—Kurds, Afghans, and Baluchis—and, among city dwellers, by the *ʿolamāʾ* and members of other learned professions, such as druggists and physicians (Polak, *Persien: das Land und seine Bewohner*, Leipzig, 1865, I, p. 140).

In the aftermath of World War I, the westernizing autocrats who ruled Turkey and Iran sought to banish the turban completely from their countries. In November, 1925, Ataturk promulgated the hat law, which prohibited the wearing not only of the turban but also of the fez, the *kalpak* (a brimless fur hat), and all other forms of traditional headgear. Numerous people were executed for their refusal to abandon the turban for European hats, and one religious scholar, Iskilipli Aṭıf Hoca, was put to death for briefly condemning the wearing of European headgear in a book published before the promulgation of the law (see A. Hoca, *Frenk Mükallitliği ve Islam*, new ed., Istanbul, 1975, pp. 19-22). In imitation of Ataturk's measure, Reżā Shah promulgated a uniform dress law in December, 1928, which made it obligatory for men, except those *ʿolamāʾ* who could pass a written examination on religious knowledge, to abandon the turban and other forms of traditional

headgear in favor of a round peaked cap—similar to a kepi—known as the Pahlavi cap. In 1935, this cap was abolished and European style hats became obligatory. Efforts to enforce the revised law and to remove turbans even from the heads of men praying in mosques were in large part responsible for the Mašhad uprising of late 1935.

The attempts made in Turkey and Iran to proscribe the turban reinforced its symbolic value, while restricting the numbers of those who wore it. Various religious groups in Turkey, such as the followers of the Naqšbandī Shaikh Erzurumlu Süleyman Seyfullah Efendi (d. 1946) and the Nurcus, have given great importance to the wearing of turbans (white turbans in the case of the former, green in the case of the latter), especially while performing prayer; the founder of the Nurcu movement, said Nursi (d. 1960), defiantly appeared in public with a turban throughout his life. In Iran, the turban (black for *sayyed*s and white for others) became a sign of the besieged dignity of the *ʿolamāʾ*. The sumptuary restrictions enacted by Reżā Shah were experienced by them as part of a comprehensive anticlerical program, while Ḵomeynī has called for the forceful removal of turbans from the heads of those unworthy of the dignity bestowed by the garment (*Ḥokūmat-e eslāmī*[3], Nağaf, 1391/1971, p. 202), a penalty that has been enacted several times since the revolution of February, 1979.

Despite the almost exclusive association of the turban with the *ʿolamāʾ* in modern Iran, it is still worn by peasants and others in rural areas of eastern Khorasan: A length of white material, generally muslin, is wound around a cylindrical hat; its tail reaches to the waist and hangs down the front of the body (J. Żīāʾpūr, *Pūšāk-e īlhā, čādornešīnān, va rūstāʾīān-e Īrān*, Tehran, 1347 Š./1968, pp. 192, 196). Baluchis and Kurds also still wear turbans. The Baluchi turban is made of colored cloth with two long ends, one of which hangs down in front of the body and the other, behind (ibid., pp. 180-81). The Kurdish turban consists of a length of striped cloth known as *kolāḡī* wound around a conical hat; the tassels that border the *kolāḡī* are allowed to hang down over the face (ibid., pp. 67, 71).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Given in the text.