THE CROWN OF A MAN: MUSLIM SKULLCAPS, MODERNITY, AND BELONGING IN THE NINETEENTH-TWENTIETH-CENTURY INDIAN OCEAN WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Across the Indian Ocean, Muslim men in different locales wear almost identical skullcaps, referred to variously as *kofia*, *kopiah*, *topi* and fez (amongst other names). This article traces the shifting styles and meanings of these skullcaps during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Zanzibar, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and India. In so doing, it situates the wearing of this item of clothing within broader historical themes, such as Islamic cosmopolitanism, imagined communities, and masculinity. It then links the changing meanings that skullcaps had to broader historical moments, such as the imposition of European colonial rule, anti-colonial resistance, and the emergence of independent nation states. At different times and places, men's skullcaps can be understood as a symbol of the wider Islamic community (*ummah*), of resistance to colonial rule, and of national identities.

INTRODUCTION

As an Indonesian, I found when visiting Tanzania, on the opposite side of the Indian Ocean, that the country invoked in me the feeling of home. The deep cultural and religious values that I grew up with in Indonesia did not prove an obstacle to understanding Swahili society on the eastern African coast. Indeed, when undertaking field work in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar, I discovered there to be deep cultural affinities with Indonesia. A primary example of this, and the focus of this article, is the Swahili cap, known as the *kofia*, which resembles the Indonesian *kopiah*. Both terms originate from the Arabic, *keffiyeh*, which today refers to a twist of a scarf on the top of the head, but generically

applies to adult male headgear or skullcaps.[1] The common origin of the two terms is but one indication of shared cultural and religious symbols and values that can be observed across an Islamic cosmopolis of littoral societies in the Indian Ocean World.

This article's analysis of men's skullcaps in Islamic societies in the Indian Ocean World is informed by wider discussions of Islamic cosmopolitanism, imagined communities, the symbolic worlds of dress, and masculinity. In post-area studies, the Indian Ocean World serves as a framework for examining clothing that circulates among the region's littoral societies.[2] As Burkhard Schnepel and Edward A. Alpers have recently argued, towns and cities (or 'hubs') located on the fringes of the Indian Ocean 'are significant points, indeed "actants" of convergence, entanglement, and divergence in the global streams of human beings, animals, finances, ideas, and other matters, [and are] instrumental in the networks that these streams create.'[3] Cultural forms in hubs 'were always spatially and temporally embedded within [their] sociocultural conglomerates,' creating linkages between their hinterlands and different littoral societies in the Indian Ocean World.[4] Considered in this light, clothes travel the Indian Ocean World with ideas, and they foster a sense of cultural connectivity between different peoples.

Islam has been central to creating links across the Indian Ocean World over the long term, which has fostered a sense of what scholars have referred to as 'Islamic cosmopolitanism.' This term reflects longing and belonging in one *ummah* (communion) of Islamic ethics and cosmology.[5] It is a process rather than a product, where there 'must be multiple, non-hierarchical entry and re-entry into spaces, communities and activities that are shared rather than isolated, mutual rather than exclusive in the challenges they offer and the benefits they confer.'[6] Islamic cosmopolitanism creates a space for Muslims across littoral societies to interact and produce a convention that is embedded in goods and ideas that are exchanged. The Indian Ocean World has been a major area for this

[1] M. Reda Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar: Roots of British domination* (London: Routledge, 1994); Dody Hadiwijaya, "Kopiah/peci sebagai salah satu atribut identitas bangsa Indonesia," *Journal of Applied Science*, 1, 2 (2019), 31-40.
[2] Isabel Hofmeyr, "The complicating sea: The Indian Ocean as method," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 32, 3 (2012), 584-90.
[3] Burkhard Schnepel, "Introduction," in *Connectivity in Motion: Island hubs in the Indian Ocean World*, eds. Burhard Schnepel and Edward A. Alpers (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 4.
[4] Andre Gingrich, "Small island hubs and connectivity in the Indian Ocean World: Some concepts and hypotheses from historical anthropology," in *Connectivity in Motion*, eds. Schnepel and Alpers, 60.
[5] Bruce B. Lawrence, "Islamicate cosmopolitanism from North Africa to Southeast Asia," in *Challenging Cosmopolitanism: Coercion, mobility and displacement*, ed. Joshua Gedacht (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).
[6] Ibid, 46.

exchange. Islamic networks traverse the ocean and connect many regions around it.[7] And, indeed, these networks continue to persist in the present, overlapping since the seventeenth century with various colonial and global networks that also cross the ocean.

As Islamic cosmopolitanism paved a way for longing and belonging in the Indian Ocean, it also preceded the imagined communities of postcolonial nation-states. Benedict Anderson, in his seminal book focusing on the 'imagined community' in the context of nationalism, rightly noted that there is 'a strong affinity [between national and] religious imaginings.'[8] He argued that cosmology that has been built by religion stimulates nationalist narratives, where it allows everyone to access the world of signs.[9] In this sense, Islamic cosmopolitanism became intertwined with anti-colonial resistance that later evolved into nationalist movements, especially in the twentieth century. By co-opting certain signifiers such as clothes, colonial resistances and nationalisms were able to mark their belonging through incorporating the world of sign to imagine their communities.

Dress is not, therefore, simply an attribute that people use in daily or ceremonial life. It is a language that is shaped by the user's own community and self to articulate a set of specific cultural signifiers and sense of belonging.[10] Dress communicates in silence bodily language to accentuate identity markers, as well as to assert and negotiate a position in society. The symbolic world of dress could not be understood without the cultural context in which it has emerged, the historical processes it has challenged, the values it has embroiled, and the self it has emanated. Dress, as an extension of the body, tells a narrative. It is applied to confront and confirm the wearer's position and identity. It challenges and propagates socio-cultural status and values, and it enmeshes and engenders positionality and belonging. And dress is expressive, as elaborated as it is simplified to connote specific temporal and spatial meanings.

Dress is also gendered. Focusing on skullcaps that have largely been worn by men means that this article is also about masculinity. Masculinity, as a social identity, is 'entirely contingent on historical circumstances… Its varied characteristics work both at the level of representation and through physical trappings of material culture.'[11] By analyzing the shift of the usage and meaning of men's skullcaps as a social marker of

[7] Ibid.
[8] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism,* Revised Edition (London: Verso, 2016).
[9] Ibid, 13.
[10] Nira Wickramasinghe, *Dressing the Colonised Body: Politics, Clothing and Identity in Colonial Sri Lanka* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003).
[11] Joseph McBrinn, "Masculinity, fashion, and design history," *Journal of Design History* (2023), 2.

masculinity in Indian Ocean World societies, what emerges is an impression of the historical circumstances of belonging and longing amongst their wearers in different but connected settings.

This remainder of this article focuses on the Swahili Coast (Zanzibar in particular), Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka, and it traces shifts in the meanings of skullcaps across a vast oceanic space in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The analysis is divided broadly chronologically into five sections. The first section discusses the types of Muslim skullcaps that exist in the Indian Ocean World, especially the embroidered cap and fez. The second analyzes the importance of *kofia* as a sign of Swahiliness, where *kofia* stood for higher social status in Zanzibari society well into the twentieth century. The third section contrasts this case study with others, where fezzes replaced 'traditional' embroidered caps during the nineteenth century. It attributes this divergence to processes of modernization and a contestation of sartorial regimes that were imposed by European colonial powers, notably the British and the Dutch in present-day India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. The fourth section discusses the transition of *kopiah* as an attribute of Islamic modernity to a symbol of colonial resistance and nationalism in these latter three places. Finally, the fifth section surveys the meanings of Muslim skullcaps in the postcolonial era, where *kopiah* and *kofia* have become a form of national dress of Indonesia and Tanzania, respectively.

TYPES OF MUSLIM SKULLCAP

Across the vastness of the Indian Ocean, many men in littoral societies wear almost identical hats. They are cylindrical, with shaped straight sides, and adorned with embroidered, crocheted motifs, or they are plain black or red. In Sri Lanka they are commonly called *surattu topi* or *turki topi*. The Malay world designates it as *kopiah*, *peci* (probably from the Turkish word fez), and *songkok*.[12] In India, the conventional cap of the Muslim is called *Turki-topiwalla* or fez.[13] In Zanzibar, they are called *kofia*. Seemingly an innocuous part of dress, skullcaps have embodied the cultural and semiotic. They are also an evolving site of contestation under an Islamic cosmopolis and in the making of national identities.

[12] Hadiwijaya, "Kopiah/peci"; Asiff Hussein, *Sarandib: An ethnological study of the Muslims of Sri Lanka* (Dehiwala: A.J. Prints, 2007).
[13] Shahid Amin, "On representing the Musalman," in *Sarai Reader 04: Crisis/Media*, eds. Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Ravi Sundaram, Ravi S. Vasudevan, Awadhanedra Sharan, Jeebesh Bagchi (Sarai), and Geert Lovink (Delhi: CSDS, 2004), 92-98.

Depending on place, skullcaps are used for public occasions and in daily life. In Zanzibar, men of different occupations, backgrounds, and ages wear *kofia* alongside a kanzu (men's white robe).[14] *Kofia* are part of men's everyday dress that are also worn in state functions, gatherings, funerals, weddings, and other religious ceremonies.[15] In Indonesia, *kopiah* are currently worn by men on public occasions, such as at weddings, when going to the mosque, or during independence celebrations.[16] During Indonesian independence ceremonies (and contrary to gendered expectations in other contexts), flag bearing women also wear *kopiah*. *Kopiah meukeutop,* for example, are won during *adat* (custom) ceremonies, such as at weddings and when going to the Acehnese palace.[17] In Sri Lanka and India, *topi* (fez) are worn during special occasions, and it is rare that they are worn daily.[18] For the most part, therefore, the wearing of Muslim skullcaps is currently limited to public occasions, except in Zanzibar, where it is more quotidian.

It is generally believed that *kofia*/*kopiah* originated from the southern Arabian Peninsula between modern day Yemen and Oman. They have been popular within Indian Ocean littoral societies since the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries.[19] Existing scholarship attests that Gujarati communities in western India contributed to the making and the spreading of *kopiah*/*kofia*. The materials to make *kofia* in Zanzibar were imported from India and Pakistan as Gujarati Khoja settled on the Swahili Coast and in Oman during the nineteenth century.[20] In Sri Lanka, 'surattu' in *surattu topi* refers to the city of Surat in western India, which is famous for its silk fabric.[21] Similar interactions with Gujarati merchants, who contributed to the spread of Islam in present-day Indonesia, can be seen in Aceh.[22] Here, members of one of the Shiite Gujarati communities, the Bohra, still regularly wear *topi* today.[23] In Oman, an embroidered cap is called *kumma*. It symbolizes a national dress, and it differentiates Omanis from other Arabs.[24] Interestingly, many Omanis regard Zanzibari *kofia* as having higher quality and desirability, while many

[14] Zulfikar Hirji, "The kofia tradition of Zanzibar: The implicit and explicit discourses of men's head-dress in an Indian Ocean society," in *Textiles in Indian Ocean Societies*, ed. Ruth Barnes (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 62-80.
[15] Ibid, 62.
[16] Siti Fiqro Najiyah, "Sejarah penutup kepala di Indonesia: Studi kasus pergeseran makna tanda peci hitam (1908-1949)" (Unpublished Undergraduate Thesis: Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel, 2019).
[17] T. Uzir, "Sekilas riwayat kupiah meukeutop Aceh" (2017): https://www.djkn.kemenkeu.go.id/kanwil-aceh/baca-artikel/12548/Sekilas-Riwayat-Kupiah-Meukeutop-Aceh.html [Accessed: 20 Ja. 2025].
[18] Hussein, *Sarandib*.
[19] Hirji, "The kofia tradition of Zanzibar," 62-80; Najiyah, "Sejarah penutup kepala di Indonesia."
[20] Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar*; Hirji, "The kofia tradition of Zanzibar," 62-80.
[21] Hussein, *Sarandib*, 242.
[22] Carool Kersten, *A History of Islam in Indonesia: Unity in diversity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).
[23] Jonah Blank, *Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and modernity among the Daudi Bohras* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
[24] Bhacker, *Trade and Empire in Muscat and Zanzibar*.

Zanzibaris think the opposite – that Omani *kofia* are of higher quality.[25] The difference between some of these skullcaps can be seen in Figures 1-3.

Figure 1. *Kofia*, popular on the Swahili Coast. Made from white cotton with a floral pattern created by numerous perforations, each embroidered with pale yellow.[26]

[25] Ibid.; Hirji, "The kofia tradition of Zanzibar," 62-80.
[26] British Museum, "Kofia" (2002): https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/135075001 [Accessed: 20 Jan 2025].

Figure 2. *Kopiah meukoutop*, popular in Indonesia. Crocheted hat that is made by knitting red, yellow, and teal textiles. Numerous woven motifs decorate the hat.[27]

[27] "A photograph of Teuku Umar's *kopiah*": https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Collectie_NMvWereldculturen,_TM-1552-17,_Hoofddeksel-_Katoenen_hoofddeksel,_voor_1899.jpg [Accessed: 22 Jan. 2025]

Figure 3. *Kumma* cap from Oman. *Kumma* feature a round top attached to cylindrical sides.[28]

While semiotically, *kofia* in Zanzibar retains their 'original' meaning as an embroidered cap, *kopiah* and *topi* experienced shifts in meaning during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Zanzibar, *kofia* refers solely to an embroidered cap. By contrast, the meaning of *kopiah* has become enlarged over time, by both referring to embroidered caps and to fezzes. Fezzes are differentiated from embroidered caps, since they are velvety, truncated, and conical, and they lack surface decorations (see figures 4 and 5). Fezzes are usually colored black or red, in contrast to *kofia*, which are embroidered. Moreover, fezzes are usually manufactured on an industrial scale using sewing machines, and they have few decorations, if any. Decorations or motifs on fezzes are only added once production is complete, unlike on embroidered caps, on which they are incorporated as they are being made.[29]

[28] "Souq Muttrah in Muscat, Oman": https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Kumma#/media/File:Omani_Kummahs.jpg [Accessed: 22 Jan. 2025].
[29] Hirji, "The kofia tradition of Zanzibar," 62–80.

Figure 4. Black *kopiah*.[30]

The gradual replacement of embroidered caps with fezzes in most regions of the Indian Ocean World, except in Zanzibar and Oman, is recorded in many littoral societies. Fezzes became so ubiquitous in parts of South and Southeast Asia that the term *topi*, which hitherto referred to embroidered caps, came to be identified more with fezzes.[31] In Sri Lanka, *surattu topi* were gradually replaced with fezzes as the most popular male skullcap during the nineteenth century. Muslims referred to fezzes as *turki topi,* and they accepted them as their 'traditional' headdress despite their recent innovation.[32] Similar patterns

[30] Photo taken by the author.
[31] William Bamber, "Fez and sherwani: Consumption, self-fashioning and Ottoman influence in South Asia, 1826-1911" (Unpublished PhD Diss: University of Washington, 2022).
[32] Hussein, *Sarandib,* 243.

occurred in Indonesia, even though most Indonesian researchers have yet to differentiate and acknowledge the material historicity of *kopiah* and its links to fezzes. As will be seen, the persistence of *kofia* in Zanzibar and the rise of fezzes elsewhere speaks to wider socio-cultural dynamics under colonial and post-independence rule.

Figure 5. A fez.[33]

[33] British Museum, "Fez (tarbush); hat" (1966): https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_As1966-01-235 [Accessed: 20 Jan. 2025]. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

KOFIA REMAIN DOMINANT IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ZANZIBAR

Why did *mtu wa dini*, a man of faith, in Zanzibar not adopt fezzes, while Indonesians and Muslims in Sri Lanka and India in the nineteenth century did? As will be seen below, sartorial changes in nineteenth-century Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka can partly be understood as a reaction against coloniality and as a contestation of colonization. But in Zanzibar, the status of Muslim/Arab/Swahili did not suffer the perils of disfranchisement until much later, that is, until after the establishment of the British Protectorate in 1890. Common Zanzibari dress, which included the *kofia* and kanzu, emerged during the nineteenth century as a 'civilizational hegemony' through internal cultural dynamics.

The popularity of *kofia* stems from a sartorial regime that was formalized through the cultural phenomenon of *ustaarabu* in the nineteenth century.[34] *Ustaarabu* is one meaning of 'civilization' in Swahili, but it translates as to be 'like an Arab' or to 'become an Arab.' It was a cultural signifier that grew prominence during the nineteenth century in alignment with the growing political and cultural power of Zanzibari Sultan, who originated in Oman.[35] Arab and Islamic heritage dominated the social structure and set the standard for being Swahili under the notion of *ustaarabu*.[36] *Ustaarabu* was not based on static imposition of race. Rather, it was judged based on how one aspired to be Arab and Muslim.[37]

Laura Fair's research stresses the importance of dress as a marker of identity formation in eastern African history.[38] Under the notion of *ustaarabu*, Swahili identities were partly communicated through dress. Ivan Vander biesen observed that free men in Zanzibar sought to emulate Arabs' dress by wearing *kofia*, which marked them as of a higher class than enslaved people.[39] While elites wore colorful and adorned clothes, enslaved people wore plainer, white clothes. Meanwhile, enslaved people, even if they had converted to Islam, were regularly forbidden from wearing caps.[40] The alienation of enslaved people through dress, meanwhile, elevated *kofia* as a status marker that was

[34] Akbar Keshodkar, *Tourism and Social Change in Post-Socialist Zanzibar: Struggles for identity, movement, and civilization* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013).
[35] Ivan Vander biesen, "Social and intercultural relations in nineteenth-century Zanzibar: Dressed identity," *African and Asian Studies*, 8, 3 (2009), 323.
[36] Keshodkar, *Tourism and Social Change*, 30.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Laura Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, community, and identity in post-abolition Zanzibar, 1890-1945* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2001).
[39] Vander biesen, "Social and intercultural relations," 309-31. See also: Mohamed Ameir Muombwa, "Kofia in Zanzibar," *AAP*, 42 (1995), 132-4.
[40] Fair, *Pastimes and Politics*, 123.

highly desirable for formerly enslaved individuals. Recently manumitted men adopted the clothing of the already free.[41] Alongside kanzus, *kofia* become a visual marker status of freemen.[42] By wearing *kofia*, freemen sought to assert their humanity on par with the ruling class, in religion and in social status.[43]

As Jonathon Glassman's research (1991) shows, however, this was not necessarily a peaceful or consensual process.[44] Clothes denoted a level of accommodation by the patron (landowner and higher urbanite class) to maintain their hegemony over their clients, slaves, and other bondspeople. In their struggle for acceptance in *ustaarabu*, however, enslaved people 'often seized new clothes by force. [They] claimed the right to wear a certain articles of Swahili garb.'[45] In this way, 'most (slaves and freedmen) were seduced with "new clothes",' signifying their absorption into the cultural idioms of their enslavers.[46] *Kofia,* therefore, while being a symbol of free social status, can also be interpreted as a signifier of the violence of enslavement. *Kofia*-wearers occupied a prominent role in the dissemination of goods and ideas, enabling them to position themselves as culturally 'higher' than non-Muslims.[47] *Kofia* postulated power, status, and cultural capital.

THE EMERGENCE OF FEZZES IN THE CONTEXT OF ISLAMIC MODERNITY

On the other side of the Indian Ocean World, the transmutation of *kopiah* and *topi* from embroidered cap to fez coincided with the rise of Islamic modernity, which stipulated that the *ummah* needed to embrace an interpretation of 'modernity' to compete with European colonization.[48] While Zanzibar Muslims comfortably bore the prestige of embroidered caps as a marker of both religion and elevated social status, many Muslims in South and Southeast Asia faced relegation into second- to third-class citizens under colonialism, where attire demarcated by colonial rulers as 'traditional,' including embroidered caps, indicated a subordinate position.

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[41] biesen, "Social and intercultural relations," 323.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Jonathon Glassman, "The bondsman's new clothes: The contradictory consciousness of slave resistance on the Swahili Coast," *The Journal of African History*, 32, 2 (1991), 277-312.
[45] Ibid, 310.
[46] Ibid., 311.
[47] biesen, "Social and intercultural relations," 323.
[48] Ahmad N. Amir, Abdi Omar Shuriye, and Ahmad Faris Ismail, "Muhammad Abduh Contributions to Modernity," *Asian Journal of Management Sciences & Education*, 1, 1 (2012), 63-175.

In several colonial societies, dress became a patronym of subjugation. Dressing in what colonial rulers regarded as 'traditional' clothing was instrumentalized by the authorities to differentiate the colonized from colonizer. In this sense, colonial rulers fossilized a version of precolonial costume, making it serve as the stereotype of Otherness. Until the early twentieth century, 'inlanders' or 'natives' were forbidden from wearing European clothes in Dutch East Indies schools, such as STOVIA, which was one of first schools for 'indigenous doctors' and was located in Batavia (present-day Jakarta), the colonial capital.[49] In lieu, they were required to wear what the colonial rulers referred to as 'traditional dress,' according to their ethnicities and religions.[50] In effect, the static imagery of 'unchanging oriental' was enforced partly through dress. According to Kees van Dijk, only locals who were Christian or close to the colonial authorities were allowed to wear 'Western' attire, such as European-style hats, stockings, and shoes.[51]

By contrast, British colonizers in Sri Lanka and India regarded their colonies as markets for their commodities, including cheaper, industrially made English textiles. Therefore, they encouraged many Indians and Ceylonese to adopt and wear British clothing.[52] By the 1870s, English textiles were 30-50% cheaper than locally made textiles and they were perceived in many instances of being of finer quality.[53] Colonial-era consumerism in some ways democratized fashions, which resulted in the intermixing between European and local clothing styles. Thus, wearing a national and ethnic dress was a form of political rebellion against the colonial regime that supported the assimilation of colonized subjects into a metropolitan British culture through dress.[54] Even so, despite the differences between the British and Dutch colonial contexts, across the region, clothing marked entitlements whereby wearing certain clothes embodied rights and privileges, or lack thereof. Colonial social constructions required the exaggeration of physical attributes where headgear was considered an extension of the body.

These categories, however, were not absolute in practice. There were debates among Muslims in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and India on their self-identity in the 'modern' world, which they partly addressed through dress. Adopting European clothing and reverting to a construction of 'traditional' dress were both regularly regarded as

[49] Firdausi Firdausi, Sahrawi Sahrawi, Daruri Aziz, and Moh Tohari, "Kopiah dan sarung identitas pesantren: Histori perlawanan santri terhadap kebudayaan Eropa," *Alhamra: Jurnal Studi Islam*, 4, 2 (2023), 195-206.
[50] Najiyah, "Sejarah penutup kepala di Indonesia," 62.
[51] Kees van Dijk, "Sarongs, jubbahs, and trousers: Appearance as a means of distinction and discrimination," in *Outward Appearances: Dressing State & Society in Indonesia*, ed. Henk Schulte Nordholt (Leiden, NL: KITLV Press, 1997), 45.
[52] Bamber, "Fez and sherwani"; Wickramasinghe, *Dressing the Colonised Body*.
[53] Wickramasinghe, *Dressing the Colonised Body*, 58.
[54] Ibid., 19.

undesirable.[55] There were questions about how to represent modernity through dress in ways that did not equate with being European. While *surattu topi* and *kopiah meukeutop* accentuated one's ethnicity and religion, it also indicated their 'backwardness' according to colonial categories. Meanwhile, new hair styles, bowler hats, and trousers faced alienation, being regarded as an 'imitation' of the west. In this context, Muhammad Abduh, a central figure in Islamic modernism, posited: 'what are we to do when there is no precedent to follow? Are we to stop the clock so that your books and rules remain valid?'[56]

Fezzes became an answer to this dilemma, at least in relation to dress. They emerged as a distinctly 'modern' headdress, although one based broadly on pre-existing embroidered caps. Using William Bamber's terminology, fezzes represented a 'reinvention' of existing dress styles in the context of colonial condescension.[57] As industrialization brought steamships, which cut the time of travel across and around the ocean, the Islamic cosmopolis became connected alongside colonial networks, where ideas and goods spread faster and made it possible for conceptions of 'Islamic modernity' to take hold. Carnal items, such as fezzes, came to signify the communion of modern believers in the face of indignation – a modern *ummah* to reclaim identity as a 'modern' Muslim. The reappropriation of *kopiah* and *topi* to denote fez demonstrated a continuity of male Islamic clothing that aligned with the conditions of industrialized modernity. The masculinity imbued with wearing a fez partly reflected European values. Fezzes' plain colors and design compared to embroidered caps aligned with precepts of masculinity that avoided ornaments, which were regularly regarded effeminate and 'backward,' according to colonial rulers.[58] Thus, adopting fezzes was a political act, where sartorial reinvention served as negotiation between being a 'modern Muslim' in the context of colonialism.

Meanwhile, even though fezzes are called *turki topi* (or Turks' hat) in Sri Lanka, the wider Indian Ocean context necessitates thinking through concepts such as Islamic modernity, in addition to a sense of communion between Sri Lankan Muslims and the Ottoman Empire. Bamber's dissertation on Hyderabadi *topi* in the nineteenth century suggests that pan-Islamism and non-western modernity that started in the Ottoman Empire spread through Muslim communities, especially in the Indian Ocean, as a result of improvements in transportation and production brought about by industrialization.[59]

[55] van Dijk, "Sarongs, jubbahs, and trousers," 39-84.; Wickramasinghe, *Dressing the Colonised Body*.
[56] Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, rationality, and modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2008), 84.
[57] Bamber, "Fez and sherwani."
[58] Bamber, "Fez and sherwani"; Wickramasinghe, *Dressing the Colonised Body*.
[59] Bamber, "Fez and sherwani."

However, it is also important to stress the role of widespread participation in the hajj pilgrimage by Sri Lankans, as well as to Sri Lankan scholars visiting to Cairo, and the enhanced availability of imported goods in Sri Lanka itself. Fezzes were imbued with Islamic modernity alongside the grandeur of the Ottoman Caliph. In a similar vein, Susan Philip's research on Malaysian heritage states that *kopiah* was brought by traders and migrants from various Muslim countries in the nineteenth century.[60] Malaysian *kopiah*-makers focused on adapting design from Aceh probably to cater for large Acehnese and Haj pilgrims in Penang at the time.[61]

The wider political context showed to Muslim men the need to reclaim their manhood in the face of European colonialism, while also drawing on the longer historical construction of the *ummah*. Adopting the fezzes as a 'modern' Muslim headdress postulated an alternative modernity that escaped ostensible 'backwardness' of 'fossilized' precolonial dresses.

FEZZES IN ANTI-COLONIAL RESISTANCE

Fezzes challenged static impositions from colonial rulers that one could not be 'modern' and embody indigenous cultural forms. In this light, it is unsurprising that fezzes also became symbolic of anti-colonial resistance.[62] In events that have since been referred to as the 'Fez Controversy,' on 2nd May 1905, Mr. Abdul Cader, the first Sri Lankan Muslim to be made an advocate, was prohibited from wearing a fez in court.[63] This resulted in the formation of a 'Fez Committee' and the organization of a largely attended and broadly representative meeting of the Muslims of Sri Lanka on 31st December 1905. Around 30,000 of Abdul Cader's supporters protested the colonial government's ruling in the streets of Colombo.[64] Their actions directly contested the colonial sartorial regime. The Fez Controversy sparked an outward manifestation of a collective conscience among Muslims across regions and ethnicities in Sri Lanka, which united them under the common

[60] Susan Philip, "Cultural mapping and the making of heritage," in *Making Heritage in Malaysia: Sites, histories, identities*, ed. Sharmani Patricia Gabriel (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 153.
[61] Ibid, 153.
[62] Hussein, *Sarandib*.
[63] Shamara Wettimuny, "Imagining a 'national headgear': Islamic revival and Muslim Identity in Ceylon": https://www.academia.edu/44767398/Imagining_a_National_Headgear_Islamic_Revival_and_Muslim_Identity_in_Ceylon [Accessed: 20 Jan. 2025]; Shamara Wettimuny, "Protests in Sri Lanka: A historical perspective," *Medium* (10 Apr. 2022): https://shamara-wettimuny.medium.com/protests-in-sri-lanka-a-historical-perspective-289e58908c5a [Accessed: 20 Jan. 2025].
[64] Wickramasinghe, *Dressing the Colonised Body*, 86; Hussein, *Sarandib*, 244-5.

cause of the Fez Committee.[65] Yet, it was exclusively for men – women were not mentioned in the protest – thus emphasizing the masculine importance of fezzes. The protest itself caused economic disruption to the colony, as Muslim businessmen closed their shops and imposed additional costs on non-Muslim costumers.[66] Fezzes became a medium through which to contest the status of Muslim men in official colonial spaces.

The protest also had cross-cultural and trans-colonial linkages. It garnered some sympathy from some non-Muslim associations in Sri Lanka, which sent a letter to the colonial secretary in favor of the protest. Groups of Turks, Persians, and Africans were notable supporters.[67] The Fez Committee also deliberately mentioned in their publications their connection to Indian Muslims and Muslims in the wider British Empire.[68] They noted that Muslim subjects of the British Empire in India were allowed to wear fezzes in official colonial spaces, and they demanded the same right.[69] Contesting the ruling in colonial Sri Lanka, Moulvi Rafi-Uddin, a guest speaker from India, emphasized the linkages between Muslims in the British Empire, both by their citizenship under colonialism and by their faith. The common citizenship of Muslims in India and Sri Lanka, he argued, 'bound' them together.[70] Sri Lankan Muslims thus subversively negotiated their position through the politicization of the fez, using it as a tool to demonstrate their citizenship in the colonial state. Moreover, overlain imperial and Islamic networks encouraged solidarity between Muslims in different colonial spaces. The impact of the process was such that the Supreme Court amended the ruling on 16th March 1906, allowing Mr. Abdul Cader to wear a fez in court.[71]

On the other side of Palk Strait, some Muslims wore skullcaps to signify their patriotism in India. In the mid-1920s, Mahatma Gandhi began to introduce a white cap, similar to a *kopiah*, to symbolize resistance to the British colonial regime.[72] The cap was a representation of sympathy for civil obedience, yet it quickly also became a symbol of political freedom from British colonial authorities. From around 1921, it symbolized solidarity between Muslims and Hindus for the Khilafat cause. Khilafat was a movement in India to support the defeated Ottoman Muslim caliph, the foremost Muslims spiritual leader, after the First World War. Gandhi encouraged all Indians, regardless of religion,

[65] Wettimuny, "Imagining a 'National Headgear'," 12-13.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid, 13.
[69] Ibid, 14.
[70] Ibid, 13.
[71] Ibid, 16.
[72] Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and identity in India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

to support the cause, which was part of a general struggle against the British in India. Yet after the cause receded, Gandhi's cap earned a reputation as 'essentially a Hindu cap in a Hindu fight for a Hindu India'.[73] In opposition, some Muslims ceased wearing caps, or if they sought to use dress to symbolize their sympathy for the nationalist cause, they sometimes wore fezzes emblazoned with a crescent moon.[74] Similar to Sri Lanka, where Muslims were (and remain) a minority, in India, certain types of fez became a symbol of the existence of Muslims in the middle of colonial resistance. Some Muslim representatives in the Indian National Congress wore fezzes with a crescent armband to signify their Muslimness and to differentiate themselves from Hindus.[75]

In Indonesia, meanwhile, nationalists wore fezzes, referred to locally as *kopiah*, regularly during the twentieth century. Depictions of men wearing *kopiah* in nationalist rhetoric had two meanings. First, they symbolized a longing for independence as a nation-state that was led by men.[76] Second, they represented the Muslim community in the new nation-state.[77] *Kopiah*, as a part of national dress, symbolized masculinity and modernity in the new belonging. Unlike India and Sri Lanka, Indonesia was (and is) a Muslim majority nation, which contributed to a closer relationship between national and Islamic symbols. In Indonesia, the black *kopiah* embodied modern Islamic ideals, which also propagated nationalism.[78] H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto (figure 6), a leader of powerful *Sarikat Islam* or Islamic Association in Dutch East Indies, who was influenced by pan-Islamism and Islamic modernity, sew together Islam, nationalism, and socialism in a way culminated in the abandoning of ethnic separations in favor of constructivist national belonging.[79] To accommodate the inclusivity of Islamic Association, he changed his headdress in the early twentieth century from a Javanese *blangkon*, a batik cloth strip, to a *kopiah* or *peci*. This shift meant the adoption of a symbol of what he envisaged to be national unity, which crossed ethnic divides.[80]

[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid, 100.
[75] Ibid, 114.
[76] Hadiwijaya, "Kopiah/peci," 31-40..
[77] Firdausi et al., "Kopiah dan sarung," 195-206.
[78] van Dijk, "Sarongs, jubbahs, and trousers," 39-84; Firdausi et al., "Kopiah dan sarung," 195-206.
[79] Al Makin, "Haji Omar Said Tjokroaminoto: Islam and socialism (Indonesia, 1924/1963)," in *Religious Dynamics un the Impact of Imperialism and Colonialism: A Sourcebook*, eds. Björn Bentlage, Marion Eggert, Hans Martin Krämer, and Stefan Reichmuth (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2016), 249-64.
[80] Najiyah, "Sejarah penutup kepala di Indonesia," 71.

Figure 6: H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto depicted wearing a *kopiah* on a stamp.[81]

Kopiah were also particularly moldable into nationalist narrative because, in the Dutch sartorial regime, they were not associated with a particular ethnicity's costume. Rather, in the early twentieth century, they were popular in urban spaces among Muslims across social class and ostensible ethnic boundaries. *Kopiah* thus became a rallying symbol of unity as well as of the marginalization of the colonized. Sukarno, who was independent Indonesia's first president and a focal figure in the nation's independence movement, had this say on the *kopiah* that he wore until he was deposed from power in 1965:

> Nationalism was only partly translated into dress. The symbol of nationalism was not invested in a special type of garment but in the black cap, the *peci.* Sukarno (Indonesian first president) called the *peci* 'my trademark…our symbol of nationalism'. In his story why this was so, the opposition between

[81] "HOS Tjokroaminoto, 7.5rp (undated)": https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Oemar_Said_Tjokroaminoto#/media/File:HOS_Tjokroaminoto,_7.5rp_(undated).jpg [Accessed: 22 Jan. 2025]

a new, young, and somewhat selfish Western oriented elite and the ideals of a nationalist vanguard whose first concern was the plight of the common people, plays a central role…He decided that wearing the *peci* was the way to show his solidarity with the common people after watching his snobby compatriots file by all with neat bare heads' in the street.[82]

Figure 7: Soekarno, depicted on this stamp, regularly wore a kopiah in public.[83]

[82] van Dijk, "Sarongs, jubbahs, and trousers," 71.
[83] "Sukarno on 10 cent stamp, 1966": https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Soekarno,_10_sen_(1966).jpg [Accessed: 22 Jan. 2025]

In this context, van Dijk has asserted that the usage of *kopiah* among nationalists was to show solidarity with common people. As depicted in figure 7, Soekarno wore a *kopiah* during public rallies to mark his belonging Indonesian society from the 1930s. *Kopiah*, as widely available and with deep roots in Islamic society in Indonesia, was 'ethnicless,' making it able to signify unity for the independence movement. Wearing *kopiah* also contested European symbols of modernity, which focused on European-style dress. *Kopiah* thus became useful a symbol of Indonesian nationalism through which to contest colonial rule.

MUSLIM SKULLCAPS IN POSTCOLONIAL NATION-STATES

Whether in Indonesia, Tanzania, or India, embroidered caps and fezzes served as a representation of Muslims in the newly emerging nation-states from the mid-twentieth century, and as a national dress of belonging. Reminiscent of the anti-colonial struggle and in an attempt to construct postcolonial civilization, the post-independence regimes adopted skullcaps in the nation-building effort. They canonized fezzes (or, in Tanzania, embroidered caps), as a sartorial regime to revamp clothing outside of colonial paradigms.

After the conjoining Zanzibar with Tanganyika to create the new nation-state of Tanzania in 1964, *kofia* ascended into a national dress. As coastal areas economically, politically, and culturally were (and remain in many ways) dominant, the Swahili language and dress became rallying national symbols of Tanzania.[84] The adoption of *kofia* in a national dress did not equate with representing Muslim; instead, it portrayed a modern nation as an alternate civilization than colonial modernity. Swahili language and dress have become central to certain aspects of Tanzanian national identity, whereby the nationalist narrative partly constructed its genealogy based on an interpretation of Swahili civilization. Zulfikar Hirji noted that during his fieldwork on *kofia*-makers, non-Muslims also wear *kofia* and they put forward the idea that Christians and other non-Muslims could also be Swahili.

> 'in the past (*zamani*) it was only Swahili Muslim (*waSwahili na waIslamu*) men who wore the kofia. Today, however, even Christians (*waKristo*) and non-Muslims (*waKafiri*) wear the kofia. It has become the fashion (*staili*).'...While, both of the informants above juxtaposed the notion of

[84] James R Brennan, *Taifa: Maing nation and race in urban Tanzania* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012).

> 'Swahili' with 'Islam', neither refuted the idea that some of the Christians and non-Muslims might also be considered Swahili.[85]

When someone asked 'Is kofia the head-dress of only Muslim men?' Hirji found an interesting response: 'If you argue that the kofia is the dress of Muslim men, why is it that one of our prominent political leaders, who wanted to eliminate Islam from Zanzibar, proudly wore kofias'.[86] Julius Nyerere, the first Tanzanian president (and who was catholic), wore *kofia* in public spheres.[87] He did so to help him politically and to be easily integrated into the Swahili community, which dominated the urban landscape in coastal areas. *Kofia*, similar to the Swahili language, represented a form of national belonging in Tanzania.

In post-independence Indonesia, meanwhile, *kopiah* represent people referred to as *santri*, who are determined by their piety, nationality, morality, and intellectuality.[88] Indonesian depictions of unity in diversity – *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* – regularly portray Muslims and nationalists with *kopiah*. Wearing *kopiah* has also become a form of formalized national dress, where they is regularly worn in state rituals, such as *upacara bendera* – flag ceremony – or in religious rituals and celebrations, such as Eid Al-Fitr and prayers (figure 8). Meanwhile, despite the popularity of *kopiah* across ethnic and class lines in urban centers under colonialism, they have become less ubiquitous outside of religious and national events since then. Their persistence in important religious and national events, meanwhile, indicates the formalization of a sartorial regime imposed by post-independence nationalists during national rituals.[89] The complex meaning of dress in Indonesia suggests that *kopiah*, as a symbol of Islamic modernity, is an aspect of an Indonesian sense of belonging, where secular and religious space is indiscrete.

The formalization of *kopiah* as an Indonesian national headdress is also shown by female flag bearers during *upacara bendera*. The fact that women wear *kopiah* in this context intimates that Muslim skullcaps may be on the cusp of crossing gender boundaries. However, the presence of *kopiah* here also reinforces the centrality of garb hitherto gendered male in Indonesia's national symbolism. Women being required to wear

[85] Hirji, "The kofia tradition," 77.
[86] Muombwa, "Kofia in Zanzibar," 136.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Firdausi et al., "Kopiah dan sarung," 195-206.
[89] Najiyah, "Sejarah penutup kepala di Indonesia," 71

Figure 8: Past and present Indonesian political leaders wearing *kopiah* following the inauguration of Prabowo Subianto in October 2024.[90]

kopiah only if they are a flag bearer indicates an instance in which male clothes have been used to propagate nationalism; it does not necessarily suggest increased universalism in the use of this historically male item of clothing. Outside of the flag ceremony, *kopiah* are, after all, regarded as a male headdress, and women rarely wear it – either in their quotidian lives or in other formal occasions. This applies in Indonesia and in the other regions of the Indian Ocean World under review. In Indonesia, *kopiah* represents formal attire, and the government imposes this historically masculine symbol of nationalism onto another gender to conform to the perception of formal national dress.

[90] "The newly inaugurated President and Vice President of Indonesia and their predecessors pose for a photo with the leadership of the MPR RI": https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_newly_inaugurated_President_and_Vice_President_of_Indonesia_and_their_predecessors_pose_for_a_photo_with_the_leadership_of_the_MPR_RI.jpg [Accessed: 22 Jan. 2025].

Finally, in India, Nehruvian *hum sab ek hain* – 'unity in diversity' – utilizes *topi* (fezzes) to represent Muslims in the national construction of belonging. Yet this approach has been subject to criticism. Shahid Amin has criticized the Indian state's usage of fezzes to represent Muslims, arguing that it is a stereotyping statement of otherness.[91] Even though fezzes transmitted anti-colonial sentiments in the first half of the twentieth century, they are no longer the dress of contemporary Indian Muslims. Fezzes fell out of fashion after India's independence in 1947, as outwardly displaying Muslim identity in the country made one vulnerable to sectarian violence and discrimination.[92] Thus, fezzes are used to symbolize Muslims in India while Muslims themselves no longer (or rarely) wear or identify with them. In an uncomfortable parallel with the colonial regime in India, and as Emma Tarlo has argued, the postindependence government postulates fezzes as a national costume in a way that creates the 'other' and imposes a static imagery of identity.[93]

CONCLUSION

After this exploration of Muslim skullcaps and their changing symbolisms as a male headdress, one might ask what makes them an Indian Ocean thing? As the Indian Ocean is the abode of Islamic cosmopolis, *kopiah*, *kofia*, and *topi* emerged around the Indian Ocean as a headdress of belonging and identity connoting the reality of the sea. Ships, even those implicated in European empire making, nourished ideas and goods through an interconnected network of *ummah*, which manifested in many male Muslims wearing similar skullcaps. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and beyond, although it is not considered in this study), Islam was seen as an alternative modernity to the ostensible hegemony of the European colonial powers. It offered a dignified dress during colonization, where *kopiah*, *kofia*, and *topi* united and symbolized a sense of belonging. Then, after Independence, they were appropriated into national dress, although – as the India case study shows, this was not always a smooth or uncontested process

Whether as an embroidered cap or an industrially manufactured fez, Muslim skullcaps fulfilled a need for a bodily language to express certain ideas and situations: modernity, nationalism, or religion, or even a humane ideal such as dignity, community, masculinity. According to Hirji during a discussion with *kofia*-trader, there was a question

[91] Amin, "On representing the Musalman," 92-8.
[92] Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters*.
[93] Ibid, 94.

on how to read the message associated with wearing a *kofia*, 'How does the person to whom you are sending these messages know how to read them?' The *kofia*-trader jokingly answered: 'Such messages are understood by those for whom they are meant!'[94]

[94] Hirji, "The kofia tradition of Zanzibar," 78.