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The Authority and Symbolism of the Turban in Yemeni Society: Signifier and Signified

Ahmed Abbas Almaljamie^{1*} and Hanif Md Lateh²

¹History and Civilization, University Sultan Zainal Abidin, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia

²Da'wah and Islamic Civilization, University Sultan Zainal Abidin, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia

***Corresponding Author:** Ahmed Abbas Almaljamie, History and Civilization, University Sultan Zainal Abidin, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia.

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Abstract

This study examines the turban (al-'imāma) in Yemeni society as a semiotic object whose meanings have shifted from a utilitarian head covering to a marker of status and, ultimately, to a religious and political emblem. Through a semiotic framework, it investigates the signifier–signified relationship as it appears in texts, images, and social practices, situating the turban within a broader symbolic system that organizes social differentiation, belonging, and legitimacy across tribal, religious, and political fields. Historically, the Zaydi Imamate integrated the turban into a stratified—at times racialized—order of distinction. The 26 September Revolution reduced its official display without erasing its symbolic power. In the present, particularly within Houthi discourse, the turban is redeployed to evoke ancestry, sacral authority, and political entitlement, functioning as a visible medium for symbolic power in Bourdieu's sense. The study draws on classical Arab sources, ethnographic and historical accounts, and cultural semiotic theory (Saussure, Eco, Barthes, Hall, Goffman) to trace how the turban's meanings are produced, circulated, and stabilized. It concludes that the turban remains a living sign: a regulatory device within tribal performance registers, a resource for symbolic capital, and a vehicle for redefining social boundaries and claims to legitimacy in contemporary Yemen.

Keywords: Turban, Qawq, Yemen, Symbol, Tribe, Authority, Semiotics

Introduction

Across societies, clothing is not merely a material necessity or an exterior appearance; through repeated practice in space and time it becomes a repertoire of signs that accrue cultural, social, and political meanings. Garments are not just fabrics that cover the body; they constitute a symbolic system that translates an individual's position within the social hierarchy and reflects identity, affiliation, and authority. Within this frame, the turban—one of the most prominent components of traditional Yemeni attire—emerges as a cultural symbol imbued with connotations of power, prestige, and religious or tribal belonging. Its effects extend to invoking forms of legitimacy—social, religious, or political—consolidated through the symbolic meanings embedded behind outward appearance and reinforcing particular imaginaries of rank and dignity within collective consciousness.

From this vantage point, the present study offers an in-depth semiological analysis of the Yemeni turban—not as a mere head covering, but as a cultural sign saturated with meanings linked to hegemony, authority, and belonging. Through its forms, styles, and modes of wear, the turban produces and reproduces symbolic configurations that exceed its functional dimension, serving to construct legitimacy, foreground social status, and entrench symbolic distinctions among groups within the cultural structure. Adopting a semiotic approach, the research seeks to unpack the symbolic payload the Yemeni turban carries and to show how it shifts from a visual aesthetic appearance into a signifying structure that sustains a particular conception of authority and identity in Yemeni society.

Research Problem

The core problem addressed by this study is the lack of systematic analysis of how the turban is produced as a symbolic sign and how its meanings circulate through discourse and social practice. There is a clear gap in understanding the

mechanisms by which the turban's signifier–signified relation is constructed, as well as in analyzing its symbolic function and its role in shaping social stratification, entrenching authority, or even negotiating it within Yemen's cultural structure. Accordingly, this research seeks to bridge this knowledge gap through a semiotic study of the turban that highlights its symbolic dimensions and explains its semantic transformations within Yemeni society. The aim is to deepen our understanding of the relationship between symbol and power and to reveal the role of popular heritage in producing and reproducing symbolic domination. To clarify the research problem, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What symbolic meanings are attributed to the turban in Yemeni contexts, and what functions does it perform in social practices?
- What is the relationship between the turban and symbolic/social authority in Yemeni society, and how is it mobilized as a tool for producing hegemony or consolidating influence?
- How are the turban's symbolic meanings produced and circulated across discourses and practices within Yemeni society?

Literature Review

Raouf Al-Sharqi (2005), "Political Representation through Symbols": Using cultural studies and semiotic approaches, this study analyzed political symbols in Yemeni dress and concluded that clothing reflects identity and social hierarchy and carries political signs that vary by context.

Martha Mundy (1997), "San'ani Dress, 1920–1957": Focused on urban Sana'a, this study examined dress as a salient social symbol, showing how garments reflected social stratification and cultural values and served as a means of expressing identity and social belonging. It concluded that dress in Sana'a is not mere bodily covering but a complex cultural fabric reflecting social, economic, and religious structures.

Umm Al-Razzaq Jahaf (2005), "Names of Some Traditional Old Yemeni Garments and the Political Symbolism of Dress in Yemen": Documented traditional Yemeni garment nomenclature and their symbolic and social connotations using descriptive and analytical methods, highlighting diversity and symbolism in identity and status [1].

Abdulbari Taher (2005), "Authenticity versus Modernity: President Judge Abd al-Rahman al-Iryani's Attire": Through historical and analytical methods, this study read al-Iryani's attire as a symbol of national identity and tradition with a flexible balance between authenticity and modernity.

Saeed Thabet (2005), "Authenticity in Modernity—A Dialogue of Symbols in the Attire of Judge Abd al-Karim al-'Arashi and Shaykh 'Abdullah b [2]. Husayn al-Ahmar": A comparative analysis showing that both figures' attire balanced tradition and modernity as a medium for expressing identity and political affiliation.

Significance and Research Gap

This study's significance lies in its treatment of the turban as an active cultural, social, and religious symbol in Yemeni society—one that transcends its material function as traditional attire to carry symbolic meanings of dignity, leadership, and authority. While prior works addressed Yemeni dress from multiple angles—political and social symbolism, documentation of traditional garment nomenclature and meanings, and the attire of prominent political figures—they did not undertake an in-depth analysis of the turban as an autonomous symbol, nor did they comprehensively explore its role in constituting symbolic and social authority.

Therefore, this study provides a deeper analysis of the turban as a cultural, political, and social symbol; examines its role within a broader symbolic system that contributes to identity formation and the consolidation of social and political differentiation; and analyzes the semantic transformations of the turban in discourse and everyday practice. In doing so, it opens new horizons for understanding the relationship between cultural symbols and power in tribal, religious, and political contexts, and addresses a notable gap in cultural and semiotic studies pertaining to Yemeni symbols.

Research Objectives

Analyze the semiology of the turban and the patterns of its transformations as a cultural symbol in Yemeni society.

Study the semantic shifts in the turban's symbolism across discourse and practice in Yemeni society.

Elucidate the authority of the turban and the mechanisms of hegemony and power it engenders within the collective imagination.

Research Method

This study adopts a semiotic methodology as an appropriate scientific framework for analyzing the turban as a cultural, social, and political symbol in Yemeni society. Semiotics is particularly suited to the study of signs and symbols and their meanings—whether linguistic or visual—by examining how meanings are produced and circulated across different forms of expression, such as texts, images, and social practices [3].

This approach is also effective for studying clothing as a system of signs: garments are not merely fabrics worn on the body but a visual social discourse that carries implications related to identity, belonging, and authority. Like other elements of dress, the turban is deployed within Yemeni culture to reflect social stratification and is used in highly specific contexts, such as the burial-site investiture of a tribal shaykh, tribal mediation, imamate and preaching, social occasions, or the display of class differentiation—as in the case of sultans who wear two turbans.

The semiotic method enables an analysis of the turban's symbolic structure in terms of its contexts of use and the discourses that surround it, in order to understand how its meanings are produced, re-signified, and circulated among social actors, and what mechanisms of symbolic domination it generates. It also allows for distinguishing between denotation (the turban as clothing) and connotation (the turban as an instrument for imposing authority or accruing prestige), thereby deepening our understanding of the turban's role in shaping collective identity and entrenching patterns of symbolic power in Yemeni society.

Research Hypothesis

This study proceeds from the following hypothesis:

Clothing in Yemeni society operates as an active symbolic discourse, and the turban in particular contributes to producing representations of symbolic authority and its image within the collective imagination. Drawing on semiological concepts, the study examines how the turban shifts from a visual appearance to a mediating sign that reflects complex social and cultural structures and is instrumentalized in the formation of prestige, status, and imagined legitimacy. It further hypothesizes that the turban's meaning exceeds its status as traditional attire to become a social symbol that expresses role and rank, and that its symbolic import varies by geographic, class, and tribal context—where it is invoked in social practices as a sign that confers symbolic authority or prestige upon its bearer.

Dress as a Symbol in Cultural Semiotics

The semiotic approach begins by examining the formation of meaning through processes of textualization and their articulations—not in terms of an essence or origin, but in terms of the procedures by which meaning is produced and the modes in which it is embodied as a vessel for human behavior and its manifestations [4]. Within this horizon, a symbol is understood as something that stands in for something else in signifying it, or represents it by proxy, such that the relation between them may run from whole to part or from the sensible to the abstract: the dove symbolizes peace, the cross Christianity, and gestures may perform symbolic functions, such as a raised hand threatening or two hands raised in surrender [5]. Hence the linguistic view affirms that no perception is possible outside what signs allow; “nothing is clear prior to the emergence of language, and nothing can be perceived outside what signs make possible” [6].

In the Dictionary of Literary Terms, a symbol is defined as anything that takes the place of something else in signifying it, not through exact correspondence but by suggestion or social convention; it is often something perceptible standing for what is abstract, as in the symbols of mathematics [7]. In literature, symbolism conveys psychological impressions through allusion and insinuation rather than direct declarative style. In psychoanalytic theory, symbolism is a primary mode of thinking that remains in the unconscious, where it disguises the meanings of dreams; the meaning of a symbol can be approached through the dreamer's free association.

The French poet Baudelaire described the world as a “forest of symbols.” In *Les Fleurs du mal*, he writes [6]:

Nature is a temple whose living pillars
Let sometimes emerge confused words;
There man passes through forests of symbols.

Malraux held that “the symbol expresses what can be expressed only by it” [8]. Symbols are not necessarily produced or apprehended through a single sensory channel; they remain interpretable insofar as they function as linguistic symbols that say something. Lévi-Strauss had earlier written: “Every culture may be considered as a set of symbolic systems, placing language foremost among them, followed by the rules of marriage, art, science, and religion.” Likewise, Durkheim and Mauss maintain that human communication occurs only by means of symbols [6].

On this basis, dress becomes a semiotic medium rather than mere apparel; it is “that by which the body becomes signifying,” to borrow Hegel's phrase—meaning that clothing, like language, carries meanings and connotations, articulates stances, signals social rank and class belonging, and indeed delineates identity while hinting at modes of self-perception and positioning [9]. Clothing is not only self-expression; it is also an instrument of social communication, bearing symbols that shape how others engage with the individual. In Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, people use symbols and behaviors in everyday life to present a social image of themselves and consolidate identity and status within the group [10].

Accordingly, dress functions as a form of nonverbal communication that conveys messages about status, social position, mood, and stance. Semiotic analysis treats it as a sign-unit composed of a visible signifier and a circulating signified [4]. In cultural semiotics, dress is viewed as a multivalent symbol tied to class, gender, and power—a gateway to understanding social and cultural structures. Barthes likewise argues that dress constitutes a system of signs and

symbols that express identity and generate social and cultural messages; it is not mere fabric covering the body but a nonverbal language that participates in shaping affiliations and attitudes [11,12].

Semioticians distinguish signs from symbols: a sign relation may be direct, causal, or indexical (smoke signifying fire), whereas the symbol rests on social and cultural convention that grants it meaning. Reception of symbols thus varies across groups and cultures: white may signify mourning in one culture, while black does so in another. A normative sign, by contrast, has a single intended meaning within its normative context: a red traffic light means "stop" and nothing else in that context—though it could mean something different if placed on a house door in another setting [6]. This body of theory studies signs and symbols and the production of meaning within cultures; cultural symbols—such as dress and the turban—operate as instruments of power and identity [13].

Analytically, dress is examined as an integrated sign system whose elements interact and within which semantic rules differentiate: color, wrapping technique, material, accessories, and their fit with social occasion and rank. Here, the Saussurean distinction between signifier and signified is useful in unpacking the structure: the signifier is the visible configuration of the garment, while the signified is the socially circulating idea or value to which that configuration points [4]. Both signifier and signified are formed through complex processes: signifiers arise from social convention and mutual recognition, whereas signifieds require acts of abstraction and reduction of lived experience to grasp a generalizable essence (Sapir, 1970). By analogy with the Saussurean dyad, one may view the symbol as closer to the signifier (signifiant), while its symbolic purport approximates the signified (signifié); yet the relation between them is neither isomorphic nor fixed. A single concept (the signified) may be referenced by multiple verbal signifiers across languages: ânes in French and donkey in English both refer to the same animal denoted by himār in Arabic. The signified itself is not a purely natural given but a mental representation bound to a society's condition, history, and traditions, as "Teilhard" argues [6]. In cultural semiotics, symbols like the turban bear meanings that exceed their material form to become instruments of symbolic power that shape social consciousness. As Kleiner puts it: "Clothes make the man; accordingly, the turban tells who that man is and where he stands socially".

In the case of the turban in Yemeni society, this relationship manifests as follows: commonly used verbal signifiers such as 'imāmah, qāwq, samāṭah, 'immah, and kufiyyah refer—albeit to varying degrees—to the general configuration of headgear; the signified is the culturally and socially circulating concept of a piece of cloth wrapped around the head, along with the symbolic values attached to it—beauty, dignity, belonging, and authority—within the local context. Cultural symbols such as dress, turbans, or emblems function as tools of social differentiation and bolster the symbolic power of their bearers. This phenomenon accords with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power: the turban is not merely attire but a device of social domination and distinction within tribal settings [14,15].

The meanings of dress operate on two interlinked levels: denotation, whereby dress is a material object worn, and connotation, whereby it is invested with meanings of authority, dignity, or affiliation, depending on context and receiver [6]. The concept of representation helps trace how the sign is staged in texts, images, and practices: the manner of portraying dress in media or literature, for example, reassigns signifiers to particular signifieds and stamps them with prevailing cultural values. Contextual analysis further reveals how meanings shift with changes in time, place, and symbolic authorities: meaning is not fixed but the product of a network of cultural codes and local referents that overlay one another through intertextuality with other symbols in the same scene.

Applied to the Yemeni turban, the sign articulates within a broader symbolic system in which multiple signifiers reinforce one another: from tribal lineage as an imagined source of prestige, to sharifian descent and the notion of divine right to rule—as articulated in the rhetoric of the imamate among those claiming descent from the Prophet, as a political legitimacy—culminating in the turban itself as a visual signifier that condenses those signifieds into a single, socially circulating form. In this sense, the turban is not understood in isolation but in relation to other symbols and values with which it operates inside the local semantic field. Semiotic analysis thus enables us to distinguish its denotation as headgear from its connotation as a medium of prestige and legitimacy, and to differentiate what is locally conventional from what is transcontextual—preparing the ground for reading the transformations of its symbolism in Yemeni discourse and practice.

The Concept of the Turban

A turban is what is wrapped around the head; its plural is 'amā'im and 'imam [16]. Ibn Sīda notes: it is the garment wound around the head in circular coils. In its simplest form, it is a piece of cloth wrapped once or several times around the head, with or without a skullcap beneath. The term may also metonymically denote the helmet or mail coif. To "turban" someone is to place the turban on him; "he is good in the turban" means he is adept at turbaning [17]. A man is said to be 'ummima—invested—meaning made chief, for the Arabs' crowns were turbans. As a person crowned with a taj is said to be "tawwija" in lexicography, the Arabs would say of a man raised over his people that he has been "turbaned." The Persians "crowned" their kings and so they were called "mutawwaj," while the Arabs said of the one set over his people that he was "mu'ammam." Ṭarafah says:

My uncle, who felled the turbaned chief, Brought low the tyrant with the thrust of his spear.

Among later uses, the turban is a rectangular piece of light cotton or silk, or white zarzaf (a white fabric embroidered with gold, a ceremonial turban used today by Yemenis at weddings). It is layered and then wrapped around the kufiyyah in a particular circular fashion. There are many kinds of turbans. The “mu’adhdhabah” turbans were specific to Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din and his son Ahmad during the monarchical era. The molded turban (muqallabah) was worn by those holding high office in the Mutawakkilite Kingdom and some variants remain in use today. The ordinary turban was worn by other Hashimites and judges; it was not permitted prior to puberty, when the simple kufiyyah would be replaced by it. The manner of wrapping the cloth around the kufiyyah is thought to index the social group to which the wearer belongs [1].

For example, the cloth is wrapped upon the base (the kufiyyah) and tucked in different ways: judges and jurists in Yemen wrap the white gauze several times so that the turban’s folds appear firm and undulating; this is called the mulawwaqa turban and remains prevalent among these groups. Those who call themselves sāda (sayyids) wrap gauze or silk with broad pleats (the muqallabah turban). The etymology of muqallabah indicates that part of the turban cloth once hung down the wearer’s back. This style was common when the Dutch traveler Niebuhr visited Yemen, but under the Hamid al-Din dynasty the turban with hanging ends adorned with tassels on the back was restricted to Imam Ahmad and his family. These ends are called al-’adhbāt (dual: al-’adhbātān) [18].

Although this style disappeared from public view after the 26 September Yemeni Revolution, it remained present in religious seminaries among senior Zaydi scholars— without the hanging ends—and has recently reappeared among senior scholars of the Houthi movement; it is seen, for instance, with ‘Abd al-‘Azim al-Houthi, al-Murtada al-Maḥṭūrī, Badr al-Din al-Houthi (the movement’s founding imam), Isma‘il Hasan alHouthi, and the Houthi Islamic Forum’s secretary-general, ‘Abd al-Majid al-Houthi, among other Zaydi Houthi scholars.

The two ‘adhbah are the pendants that hang from the turban, typically on both sides or with one positioned forward and the other back. One says iṭṭābaba—he fashioned his turban with a pendant or wore it so that the hanging end is visible [19]. Max Müller observed that these pendants in headgear appeared in the attire of Abyssinian kings as an ancient emblem of royal dignity. He compares them to what the kings of Napata and Meroë wore in Nubian and Egyptian antiquities, noting their alignment with Aksumite royal dress and positing a Nubian origin for this feature. He thus raises the question: did this custom pass to the Arabs by emulation, or did it preexist in their traditions before Islam? He also notes that the style of the turban with the ‘adhbah reached the Arabian Peninsula, and literature has debated whether the Prophet Muhammad adopted this custom or whether it was already known before Islam. Müller concludes that the turban with the ‘adhbah was regarded as a mark of standing and leadership and remained present in coronation rites and official dress for certain kings and sultans, particularly in South Arabia and Yemen [19].

Head coverings in Yemen have varied in form, material, fabric, and nomenclature— differences that grew out of social and economic necessities dictating variation in type, shape, and color. Among their older names are al-ma’jar, al-maqaṭṭah, and al-mudmāja. Names still current in Yemen include al-‘imāmah, al-‘iṣābah, al-‘immah, al-dismāl, alqāwq, and al-qabba’, among other local terms sometimes tied to the type of cloth rather than to the generic name of the turban itself [20].

The Turban in Arab Culture

In its older traditional form, Arab dress consisted of three principal pieces: an izār covering the lower body; a qamas or ridā’ covering the upper body; and a turban placed on the head. The burdah (cloak/’abah) functioned as a complementary garment worn by leaders and notables on important occasions and when receiving delegations. The turban, however, occupied the most prominent place among these garments in Arab culture. This prominence is evident in Arabic poetry and proverbial lore transmitted across generations, as well as in literary and historical discourse. Arab poets treated the turban as a symbol of pride and dignity, an expression of social standing and manliness. ‘Antara b. Shaded al- ‘Absie says in one of his celebrated poems:

“And what is pride but that my turban be tightly coiled at the tips, with the sharp, with the dewy blade.”

Here, ‘Antara links the turban to pride, taking the carefully wrapped turban as a sign of courage and honor: “the sharp” refers to the sword, while “the dewy” connotes purity and clarity. Poets of the Jāhili and ‘Abbāsīd periods likewise invoked the turban as an index of gravity and prestige; wearing it signaled self-respect and elicited the esteem of others. Given the turban’s high valuation among Arabs, poets praised its wearers as men of nobility, generosity, and valor. The Kanānī poet says [21]:

“I chose her for lineage though she was a stranger, and she bore him as the full moon, shrouded in a turban. If the youths of the quarter had slandered him unjustly, they would have found nothing but falsehood for insult.”

Accordingly, Arabs were keenly attentive to the turban—its cleanliness and the manner of its wrapping. One of the gravest insults to a man was to disparage his turban. AlFarazdaq euphemistically points to defilement and lowered rank by dubbing a people “greasy of turbans” [21]:

"O sons of 'Āṣim, should you shelter her, then you are shelters for disgrace—turbans soiled and smeared."

Given this elevated status, Arabs adopted the turban as a battle-standard: the clan chief would remove his turban and tie it as a banner, imbuing it with the reverence due the leader's own headgear. Out of respect for the turban, they took it as their emblem and sign [22]. Such was the practice of al-Aḥnaf b. Qays, the chief of Tamīm in Basra, when war broke out between Tamīm and al-Azd; he removed his turban and tied it as a standard to a spear (al-Ṭabarī, 1967). Abū al-Aswad al-Du'alī is reported to have said that the turban "is a shield in war, a protection from heat, a guard against cold, gravity in the council, a defense against mishaps, and an augmentation of stature" [21,23].

With the advent of Islam, the turban's status and symbolism were further consolidated and sacralized. It is related that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was known as "the wearer of the turban," and that he had a turban called al-Saḥāb ("the cloud") and another al-Ḥutakiyyah. To the turban's prior symbolic capital—nobility, generosity, dignity, status, beauty, and leadership—Islamic tradition added a religious aura. Numerous reports and sayings bolster this standing to the point that, upon reading them, one might think the turban did not exist before Islam and was an exclusively Islamic artifact. It was even described as part of the angels' attire: in accounts of the Battle of Badr, God is said to have reinforced the Muslims with angels wearing white turbans—some reports say yellow, others black. Although many of these individual reports are weak, their multiplicity in Islamic sources has been taken to support the sunnah of wearing the turban in practical religiosity [24]. Thus, the imam in prayer should wear it or cover his head; the preacher on the pulpit is to don it; and men of religion—jurists, muftis, students, preachers—perform their roles only while wearing it. With the rise of the Umayyad state, caliphs, governors, and princes adopted distinctive attire that set them apart from the general public—unlike the earliest period, when they did not differ in food, drink, dress, or mounts. In the mid-'Abbāsīd era, scholars, jurists, and ascetics were likewise differentiated by special garments: elongated sleeves, enlarged turbans, the wrapping of the ṭaylasān, and particular caps, so that they might be known and honored [25].

As Islamic conflicts intensified after the assassination of 'Uthmān—beginning with the confrontation between 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah, and later between 'Alids and Umayyads, then 'Abbāsīds—one may say these struggles magnified the turban's symbolism and invested it with unprecedented semiotic weight. In the context of demarcating boundaries between competing legitimacies, the turban became a "semiotic marker" read through color, construction, and form: black for 'Abbāsīd/'Alid affiliation; green in Fatimid imaginaries; white for the general populace—thus turning it into a politico-religious emblem that indexed allegiances and erected hierarchies of dignity and legitimacy.

Ibn Kathīr reports under the events of the year 204 AH that when al-Ma'mūn entered Iraq, the turbans of the people of Baghdad turned green, and they would burn whatever black they found. He then ordered a black turban and placed it upon Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥusayn (his foremost governor and commander), and after him he dressed a number of amirs in black; the people then wore black and returned to it. Al-Suyūṭī notes that in the year 773 AH, by order of al-Malik al-Ashraf Shabān b. Ḥusayn, ruler of Egypt and Syria, the green turban was made a mark distinguishing the ashraf—the Prophet's descendants—from others in their communities [25]. Through this shift from "neutral" clothing, the turban stabilized as an instrument of political, religious, and social signification, and its present meanings continue to draw symbolic force from that foundational moment in the Islamic imaginary (the First Fitnah). Undoubtedly, the turban in its Arab-Islamic context has undergone numerous transformations alongside developments across the Arab world—changes driven by social and geopolitical exchanges over various eras and, later, by the geographical borders concretized after the Sykes-Picot partitions of 1916. Each country in the Arab expanse came to have a distinctive attire marking its people—even relative to neighboring Arab lands. By way of example: the 'iqāl predominates in the Gulf states and parts of the Levant; the tarbūsh and kufiyyah in Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, and some Maghribi countries; and the turban in Yemen, Sudan, Oman, Iraq, and among segments of Maghribi tribes.

It is worth noting, however, that despite broad transformations in Arab dress, the turban continues to enjoy much of the symbolism it accumulated through centuries of esteem.

Those who wear it still command a measure of attention; indeed, one must "do it justice." It continues to confer upon the wearer some of the social and religious connotations that have been sedimented in the popular imagination over centuries. It has held—and still holds—a lofty place among Arabs, retaining in many parts of the Arab world associations of honor and elevation. If the turban is insulted, its wearer is shamed; when a man is wronged and then assured of safety, he may cast his turban to the ground and demand redress—a custom still practiced in Yemen today [26].

The Turban: Status and Symbol in Yemeni Society

It is well understood that clothing in general—and headgear in particular—originated as a practical necessity to protect the face and head from harsh sun, biting cold, and desert dust. Yet this practical function soon exceeded material need to become a culturally and socially resonant symbol. Among Arabs, the turban long operated as both necessity and emblem of manly virtue: it enhanced a man's appearance, elevated his standing among his peers, and raised his rank hence the dictum attributed to 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb: "Turbans are the crowns of the Arabs" [21].

Archaeological and historical studies indicate that the earliest forms of the turban in ancient Yemen date to around the

first century BCE. A Sabaeen coin bears the image of a head wearing an Arab head covering that researchers have dubbed the “ancient Yemeni turban”. Among the Minaeans and Sabaeans (1st–3rd centuries CE), this headband was known and likely used by common folk—farmers, hunters, and warriors—given its appearance on tombstones depicting scenes of hunting, agriculture, and combat. The Qatabanians used several types of headgear, including a band worn by camel drivers that wrapped around the forehead, with a flap hanging down to cover the back of the head between the ears [27]. Wearing the turban in this way was called *i‘tijāj* or *iqti‘āṭ*—placing the turban on the head without wrapping it beneath the jaw [28]. Another style, attested in the first century CE, involved binding a cloth bundle atop the head, winding it around the crown, then twisting one end along the sides of the face while letting the other end protrude triangularly behind the head—known as *taḥannuk* and *talḥī* [28].

Despite archaeological advances, it remains difficult to chart the historical evolution of dress in terms of its political and social symbolism as far back as Yemen’s ancient civilizations. Clothing persisted as a sign of that civilization, inherited across eras with additions and modifications shaped by human development and contact with neighboring peoples and states. Two drivers were key: first, Yemen’s harsh and varied environment; second, its strategic geography—fronting the Arabian and Red Seas, proximate to Africa to the south and west, and connected across the Indian Ocean to Asian peoples in the east—alongside ancient overland ties to the Levant, Iraq, and Egypt. These exchanges significantly influenced customs, traditions, and the diversity of dress [29].

In Yemen, the turban was never merely a head covering, even if it appears so at first glance. It visually condensed core tribal values—honor, generosity, manhood, and presence—and completed a man’s bearing alongside horse and sword. An Arab might be without a sword or horse, but he would not appear bareheaded in public. In contemporary Yemen, the turban still performs this role in concert with the *janbiyyah* (Yemeni dagger) and the rifle (*al-bunduq/al-ālī*). It signals a man’s standing within the group and, aesthetically, confers presence and gravitas. Turbans have been fashioned in colors and styles that reflect personal or tribal identity.

In contemporary Yemeni usage, proverbs underscore the class distinctions associated with headgear. A common saying holds: “The jurist is fine wheat from al-Bawn; the capwearer is barley.” Al-Bawn refers to the fertile plain north of Ṣan‘ā’, famed for its produce; “fine wheat” connotes premium grain. By contrast, the *muqabba‘* (cap-wearer) is a man who dons a cap rather than a turban, associated with common folk among tribes and various trades. The “jurist” references a stratum that historically encompassed *fuqahā’* and judges who oversaw *fatwā* and adjudication in Yemeni districts under the imamate. The proverb’s origin is a woman divorced from her cap-wearing husband who later married a jurist; finding the latter superior, she said [30]: “I want nothing to do with the cap-wearer after I’ve seen the jurist—for the jurist is fine wheat from al-Bawn, and the cap-wearer is barley.”

Multiple elements—fabric quality, color, and method of wrapping—came to function as markers distinguishing social groups. Among these, the *janbiyyah* and headgear are especially consequential in social differentiation: the form of head covering becomes a symbol of social, economic, and political standing, much like the *janbiyyah*. Proverbs invoke headgear metonymically for the group that wears it, as in the saying above [31].

In the social sciences, the social meanings of clothing are pivotal for understanding many facets of people’s lives. Beyond adornment, clothing fulfills numerous needs and communicates social position and rank [32]. In Yemen, the social meaning of headgear has not receded in parallel with other garments; its structural linkage to popular tradition and Yemeni customs has sustained—and even amplified—the turban’s social signification. Its type and manner of wear index the wearer’s economic status and social prestige, and even his regional and tribal origin, given local variations across areas and tribes [33].

‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Maqālīḥ notes Yemen’s unique variety in turban forms and colors: no two people wrap their headgear in exactly the same way, reflecting individuality and tribal identity. He writes: “I often stand in public gatherings, astonished at the diversity in the use and placement of the same head covering. I tried to find two people who wore a cotton, woolen, or silk headcloth in precisely the same manner, and I could not. This variety is almost a psychological condition of heightened self-awareness, whereby each person clings to his distinctive method of folding the same cloth” [34].

In Yemen’s tribal society, the turban plays a central role in consolidating affiliations and social prestige. It signifies status and dignity and is used on social occasions as a symbol of tribal unity and identity. Its wrapping styles and colors index tribal belonging [35]. This aligns with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power, whereby cultural symbols like dress reinforce social hierarchy [14].

The turban’s function in Yemen resembles religious and social symbols elsewhere, such as the Sikh *dastār*, which is inviolable, or the Iranian turban associated with clerical authority [36]. Such parallels underscore clothing’s role as an instrument of power and identity. In Yemen, the turban also couples symbolically with the *janbiyyah*. Notables and shaykhs often wear two cloth pieces: one wrapped as a turban, and the other folded across the shoulder, as seen with Shaykh ‘Abdullāh b. Husayn al-Aḥmar and his sons Ṣādiq and Ḥimyar (leaders of Ḥāshid), Shaykh San‘ān Abū Luḥūm, Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Shāyif and his son Nāḡī (senior shaykhs of Bakīl), and some Madhḥaj shaykhs like ‘Abd al-Qawī Sālim al-Ḥumayqānī; likewise figures such as Judge ‘Abd al-Karīm al-‘Arashī and Shaykh ‘Abdullāh b. Mubārak al-Nahdī.

In governorates such as al-Bayḍā', Ma'rib, Shabwah, and Abyan, the shoulder cloth is sometimes replaced by the ḥabbiyyah—a circular cloth hung on the shoulder, bordered entirely by small tassels.



Figure 1: A Group of Yemeni Shaykhs and Judges (From Right): Judge al-'Arashī, Shaykh al-Aḥmar, Shaykh al-Shāyif, Shaykh 'Abd al-Qawī al-Ḥumayqānī, Shaykh al-Nahdī, and Shaykh Ṣāliḥ Farīd al-'Awlaqī

This symbolism is vividly illustrated in Sa'īd Thābit's comparison of shawl-wearing styles in two prominent figures of modern Yemeni history: Judge 'Abd al-Karīm al-'Arashī and Shaykh 'Abdullāh b. Ḥusayn al-Aḥmar—a comparison highly pertinent to our study. He notes: "Shaykh al-Aḥmar's manner of wearing the shawl is shared by very few tribal shaykhs, notably Shaykh 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Shāyif. Distinctively, al-Aḥmar wraps his shawl around his shoulder but is never seen looping its end around his janbiyyah—a style used by the imam and members of the royal family—which suggests an intellectual stance on al-Aḥmar's part regarding how imamate-affiliated sayyids wore their shawls, whose styles often converged with those of judges and jurists. Coming from the expansive tribal sphere—the majority relative to sayyids, judges, and lower-status groups—al-Aḥmar likely grasped the symbolism of shawl placement in sayyid practice and was unafraid to diverge from it. Rather, his choice respects value standards set by Yemeni society at a particular historical moment, even if it provoked debate over its meanings, given his leading political and social stature. Judge al-'Arashī, by contrast, wears a shawl on his left shoulder split into two: one end draped over his back and the other hanging along his left side".

He continues: "These premises illuminate the psychological and behavioral dimension of each man's attire. Shaykh al-Aḥmar's outfit is marked by strong presence, abundant accessories, vivid colors, and harmonized ornamentation, aesthetically aligned with his complexion, gait, and social position—an overall elegant, coherent, and persuasive presence that has become a fashionable groom's style in Ṣan'ā'. His constancy in dress mirrors his steadiness on principles and issues; his attention to numerous accoutrements translates, operationally, into command of tribal leadership, party chairmanship, and parliamentary presidency. Judge al-'Arashī, by contrast, tends toward a degree of selfeffacement, choosing muted colors and minimal accessories—often just a long dughlu (robe) and a turban. In his political life he seldom combined multiple posts, nor did he build a retinue or constituency; he eventually withdrew from public roles". Sa'īd further observes that al-'Arashī intentionally reveals more of his forehead than al-Aḥmar does—the first signaling precision and scrutiny (as in al-'Arashī's management of sessions codifying sharī'a during his presidency of the Constituent People's Assembly), the second signaling masculine decisiveness (as in al-Aḥmar's conduct of parliamentary sessions and arbitration of tribal disputes). Al-'Arashī's attire suggests a man who takes an afternoon rest; the elaborate, tightly composed outfit of al-Aḥmar suggests otherwise, as a shaykh's majlis awaits him—a field of leadership that begins after prayer and lunch. The staff in the shaykh's hand bespeaks the shepherd's leadership, with followers behind him. The abundance of accessories—cap (muṣṣaddah), long shawl over the back—signals retinue, deliberation, and authority—unlike al-'Arashī. As for the judge's turban, with nothing hanging from it, it connotes attentiveness and listening; the shaykh's turban imposes a gravitas that demands alertness to commotion and a readiness to render clear, decisive judgments.

Thus, in Yemeni society the turban shifts from a piece of clothing to a complex symbolic system with layered meanings spanning practical function, social symbolism, and political authority. It is not only a deeply rooted cultural emblem but an active instrument in producing and reproducing social stratification and symbolic domination in contemporary Yemen. These analyses affirm that the turban remains a living semiotic sign, interacting with social and political transformations while retaining its capacity to generate meaning and entrench authority across generations—preparing the ground for understanding its performative manifestations in current tribal life.

In lived social practice, this symbolism appears in stable daily rituals. If war breaks out between two tribes, turbans are raised aloft for all combatants to see—a signal to cease fighting—precisely because of the turban's symbolic weight; all parties know what lifting the turban means. The turban is also linked to the notion of prestige (jāh): when a mediator casts his turban before the disputants, proclaiming "By God's prestige—this is my turban," he is pressing for reconciliation and assuming responsibility for resolving the case. In many Yemeni tribes today, when a shaykh dies, during his burial tribesmen cast their turbans upon the head of his son who is to succeed him, signaling the conferment of tribal leadership and the absence of contestation—an act of political legitimation. In Yemeni parlance, "'ammamū fulān" means "they installed him as shaykh." Such acts and signs do not function as isolated incidents; they cohere in a performative-symbolic "register" that regulates meaning and legitimacy within the tribal sphere—resonant with contemporary anthropological analysis.

In this vein, Paul Dresch argues that the Yemeni tribe possesses a distinctive linguistic and performative “register” that operates in parallel to the state’s discourse; it has emerged through tribal assemblies that blend vernacular poetry and antiphonal chants (*zawāmil*), generating an alternative political space oriented toward symbol and custom rather than the formal domain of the state. In this space, the visual “flags” of tribal identity—the turban, *janbiyyah*, personal weapon, lineage—converge with sonic and kinetic banners such as poetry and chants to forge a shared identity that transcends individual tribes and regions by standardizing and diffusing signs as a unifying identity. Accordingly, the turban in Yemen is read not merely as traditional attire but as an active sign within this “tribal register”—the normative system that organizes belonging, protection, legitimacy, and asylum—where the symbol both operates and authorizes its bearer to represent and speak for the group. From here we understand practices such as installing a shaykh by throwing turbans upon the heir’s head, or the turban’s roles in mediation and halting blood feuds, as acts of signification that produce legitimacy within the logic of prestige and tribal arbitration [25].

From Cultural Symbol to Emblem of Political and Religious Authority

Over time in Yemen, the turban has undergone significant shifts—from a traditional cultural symbol to an instrument of political and spiritual authority. During the ‘Abbāsīd era, under the governorship of Maʿn b. Zāʾidah al-Shaybānī in Yemen, residents were required to wear the black turban, the ‘Abbāsīd emblem. Later, independent Yemeni polities adopted distinctive emblems, as with the Ṣulayḥīds and the Rasūlīds—the former influenced by Fatimid dress, the latter by Ayyubid attire—though these practices waned after their dynasties ended [29].

Amid ongoing conflict among Yemeni micro-states, official attire evolved and accrued political symbolism, crystallizing under the Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty. Early in their rule, the imams observed that the ‘Abbāsīd black emblem was widely worn; since they opposed the ‘Abbāsīds, they restricted black turbans to carpenters, blacksmiths, construction workers, and similar trades. Butchers, barbers, and weavers wore a different turban called *al-maḥshah*—distinctions that relegated such groups to the lower rungs of the social ladder [29].

The imams classified society into six ranks: at the top, the ruling family; followed by the sayyids; then judges, merchants, tribal shaykhs, and army officers. Farmers, produce vendors, and bakers were placed in the fifth rank; the only group deemed lower were Yemeni Jews. Each rank was distinguished by specific attire. The imam wore a white turban with two pendants (*ʿadhbatān*), while other sayyids’ turbans had no pendant; judges’ turbans were more amply wrapped. Aside from the commoners, the dress of higher ranks did not differ markedly from that of the imam and the “Swords of Islam” [29].

The imam and his sons wore the *ḥullah* of the Hāshimite sayyids, with distinctive markers in turban style: the imam’s sons wore a turban with a single pendant hanging down the back to mid-spine, signaling their status, while the imam’s own turban had two pendants—one descending to his left cheek and another to the back—an insignia specific to the imam [37].

Shaykhs did not have a uniform as sayyids and judges did; their attire differed somewhat from that of ordinary tribesmen and also varied by region in style and color. In northern areas, the *qubbaʿ* was common as headgear: an indigo-dyed cotton cloth wrapped over a skullcap, worn not only by tribesmen but also many artisans. In southern areas, shaykhs and tribesmen—using different qualities and values of fabric—wore a head covering called *muṣaddah* (State’s Raiment in Yemen).

Before the revolution, Yemeni society consisted of closed or semi-closed strata. A judge’s son became a judge—even without practicing adjudication. Shaykhdom passed by primogeniture within shaykhly houses. By contrast, craftsmen and tradesmen could not move into the offices or social positions of higher strata regardless of their economic level. Dress thus became a crucial marker distinguishing strata. A strict system was imposed to function as a decisive visual code. Given the social hierarchy, respectable status had to be accorded the respect it deserved at first glance; any display of wealth inconsistent with one’s rank was not to be broadcast (Yemen as Others See It).

The pre-revolutionary ideology of dress in Yemen worked to distinguish social segments according to economic, religious, and occupational factors. First were the Hāshimites—claiming descent from the Prophet—whose monopoly over the imamate allowed them to anchor political authority in religious legitimacy and build economic power, enforcing loyalty, obedience, and respect for their members regardless of their personal wealth, office, or occupation [38]. Second were the judges—a heterogeneous stratum sharing with sayyids religious learning and distinctive attire, and enjoying public respect for their scholarly standing. Next came the shaykhs (and, in the south, sultans), tribal leaders and highest authorities in their domains, followed by tribesmen and peasants. At the bottom were artisans and tradesmen (State’s Raiment). In practice, the imams’ six-tier system placed ruling families first; then sayyids; then judges, merchants, tribal shaykhs, and army officers; then farmers, vegetable sellers, leatherworkers, and butchers; and, below them, Yemeni Jews (State’s Raiment). Each rank bore distinctive attire, with the turban functioning as the principal visual sign that differentiated these classes. No longer merely a head covering, the turban became a complex symbolic system that fixed an individual’s social position and the respect accorded to him. Beyond clothing, offices, and functions, class differentiation extended to personal names: a butcher, blacksmith, or barber could not bear names reserved for the ruling elite. Names within such trades clustered around monikers like “*Barqūqah*” and “*Murjān*.” The political symbolism

of dress under the imamate was not organically grounded in popular culture; it did not reflect public conviction. It was an imposed, stratified decree that affronted citizens' sensibilities, dignity, and rights—casting a dark pall over the symbolism of official dress and provoking aversion toward those who wore it, given its association with oppression and class discrimination—though this animus softened somewhat a few years after the revolution [29].

In the late 20th century, the imams' authority appeared clothed in the turban and long dughlu, signifying religious authority—far from the trousers and tarbūsh of the Ottoman Turks, who represented secular political power. Yemen then underwent a different political transformation with the September 26 Revolution. President al-Sallāl's suit symbolized revolutionary vigor, a rejection of the imams' attire, and a shift in political culture shaped by contact with counterparts in Cairo, Damascus, and Beirut [31].

The revolution explicitly aimed to eliminate class distinctions and privileges—most conspicuously manifested in dress—and to replace the monarchical imamate with a republican system, ending the sayyids' monopoly on power. Public anger focused on this elite. The attire of the imam, sayyids, and judges became an emblem of the old regime.

For a time, radio broadcasts referred to the "impure turban," a label apparently coined by President al-Sallāl; he later retracted it after protests by pro-republican turbān-wearers, clarifying that he meant only the Ḥamīd al-Dīn family.

Shaykh San'ān Abū Luḥūm recounts in his memoirs that upon arriving in Ṣan'ā' after the September Revolution he reached the Republican Palace. After dinner, he entered a room opposite President al-Sallāl's office with six beds and found Shaykh Yaḥyā Maṣṣūr b. Naṣr wearing a suit. He said to him, "What is this, Shaykh Yaḥyā?" As al-Biḍānī entered, he declared, "This is the dress of honorable freemen, not the dress of reactionaries." Abū Luḥūm retorted, "Liar," and cocked his rifle. Those present intervened; al-Sallāl, hearing the commotion, entered the room and shouted at al-Biḍānī: "We need to heal what's outside, and you're breaking what's inside".

Turban and Imamate: A Symbol of Authority and Racialization

Historically—and at least prior to the nation-state—the turban can be said to have been closely tied to political authority in the broader Islamic and Arab context shaped by Umayyad–ʿAbbāsīd struggles for power. Its symbolism, like that of cognate political headgear (the 'iqāl, tarbūsh, and kufiyyah), remains present in parts of the Islamic and Arab worlds to this day. In Yemen, under the Zaydi imamate in particular and up to the September Revolution, the turban functioned as a sign of political and genealogical legitimacy and as a marker distinguishing those who call themselves Ahl al-Bayt from those outside that lineage. With the fall of the imamate and the establishment of the Republic of Yemen, the turban receded as a political emblem but did not vanish: it persisted in tribal society as a customary symbol and within Zaydi–Hāshimite circles as a religious–political signifier. It re-entered the public sphere with the rise of the Houthis and their overthrow of the state, reactivating its symbolism as a claim to rightful rule through descent from the Prophet's household—indicating that the turban's accumulated meanings endured in social memory, even if dormant in practice.

Confirming the persistence of its genealogical–racial connotations is the continued use of isnād (chain of transmission) around the turban in Sufi seminaries and religious schools in Hadramawt, al-Mukallā, and elsewhere, led by those who identify as Hāshimites and sāda (Ahl al-Bayt). In a video, 'Alī al-Jifri relates that his turban was placed upon him by his shaykh, who received it from his shaykh ... tracing back to the Prophet—"my grandfather," as he says [39]. This narrative hearkens to reports that the Prophet turbaned 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib on the day of Khaybar.

Thus, the marker of lineage—embodied in the turban—translates genealogical privilege into an openly political legitimacy. This meaning finds clear juristic anchoring in texts that stipulate an inherited privilege for those identifying as Ahl al-Bayt, which explains the insistence on a "chain" for the turban and its deployment in the public sphere. The Yemeni novelist Marwān al-Ghāfūrī argues that al-Jifri used the turban as an artistic symbol to claim he does not speak from caprice, which is precisely where the danger of his narrative lies. Al-Ghāfūrī adds that when al-Jifri spoke of the turban's lineage he evidently intended "infused, esoteric knowledge" rather than the literal cloth [40].

This tendency is reinforced by a 1905 fatwa issued by 'Umar al-ʿAṭṭās in the wake of a marriage between a Hāshimite woman and a tribesman. The fatwa distinguishes between two kinds of honor: innate/essential honor and acquired honor. The Prophet's honor, it states, is innate and passes to his progeny, grounded in the belief that God elected him for prophethood prior to creation. No acquired merit, 'Aṭṭās adds, can attain that honor [41]. The norm of restricting Hāshimite women's marriage to Hāshimite men persists in Yemeni society today.

From a discourse-analytic perspective, al-Jifri's coupling of "my grandfather, the Prophet" with "the turban" communicates layered racialized meanings. On the surface, the turban appears a benign religious or cultural custom. At a deeper level, it conveys messages about the supposed ethnic–religious superiority of the Hāshimites. This covertly racial discourse can be more effective than explicit bigotry precisely because it hides behind religion and tradition, making critique and resistance more difficult. As Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation suggests, the meanings attached to cultural symbols are neither fixed nor natural; they are produced through complex social and political processes [42]. In the Yemeni turban's case, racialized connotations have been constructed over centuries of religious and political practice and discourse, until they appear an unassailable truth.

Accordingly, even when Houthi leaders avoid wearing their distinctive turbans in public so as not to trigger republican sensitivities and associations with discrimination, the absence of the signifier does not erase the presence of the signified. The turban “speaks” through practice: in the rhetoric of divine selection (*iṣṭifā*), in religious centers and seminaries and from mosque pulpits, and in the re-drawing of social boundaries along genealogical lines—reproducing its historical content as genealogical privilege and presumptive guardianship.

In contemporary Yemeni usage, the turban (*al-qāwq*) indexes claims of rightful guardianship and selection—core to Houthi and broader Shi'i narratives of *walāyah*. It is the same turban said to have been placed on 'Alī at Khaybar, the same one al-Jifri invoked, and the one worn by Iranian clerics. To deny the turban's signification of sovereignty is, in this narrative, tantamount to denying guardianship and lineage—a point publicly asserted by the Zaydi authority 'Abd al-'Azīm al-Hūthī, a leading figure in the Houthi movement [43,44].

In a pointed rhetorical formulation, 'Iṣām al-Qaysī writes that the *qāwq* “is not mere attire” but a visible proclamation of superiority—“a list of demands and entitlements that the turban declares in eloquent speech without any need for words”—a symbolism that thrives only in a society riven by racism and social fracture (*al-Mashhad al-Yamanī*). AlBaradūnī refuses to reduce the matter to appearance alone; he exposes the content of concealment and circumvention, writing of the veiled invader [45]:

“Invaders whom I do not see, yet the sword of invasion is in my chest—
They may arrive as tobacco in alluring-colored cigarettes,
Or in a teacher's trousers, beneath a reciter's turban,
Or in contraceptive pills within an inkwell's tube.”

Among Yemen's Zaydis, donning the *qāwq*/turban performs a symbolic act that mirrors religious and political authority and summons a historical legitimacy grounded in noble lineage. This symbolic unification of signs explains how easily the turban can move from a local emblem to a broad badge of allegiance and legitimacy in current Houthi discourse. In this way, Dresch's “tribal register”—of which the turban is a pillar—is grafted onto a modern political instrument, with the turban as signifier and noble descent as signified, serving as a mediating device for reproducing symbolic power in Yemen's public sphere. This is why Gramscian cultural hegemony does not rely on material force alone to sustain political domination; it is completed by a cultural hegemony that renders the order “natural.” Within this frame, the turban functions in Houthi discourse as a tool of hegemony linking venerated religious-cultural values to the existing authority. In Bourdieu's terms of symbolic power and symbolic violence, the turban represents a refined modality of imposing and naturalizing hierarchical order: it not only differentiates but legitimizes differentiation and makes its acceptance seem selfevident [15]. The Ahl al-Bayt affiliate need not verbally argue his entitlement to rule; the sign itself dictates the entitlements to others.

Conclusion

The analysis shows a clear trajectory for the turban in Yemen: it began as a functional protective garment; became a marker of presence and dignity; then acquired religious legitimacy; and under the imamate, was instrumentalized as a tool of class-based discrimination. In the present, it is deployed across political and religious domains to signify affiliation and assign social position. The evidence indicates that the turban operates as a visual mediator of identity and status, with meanings that vary by context and shifting balances of power. Tracing it across political transformations—from imamate to republic, and the subsequent rise of the Houthis—reveals its capacity for reappropriation to serve the construction of legitimacy and the reinforcement of social boundaries. In sum, the turban emerges as a sartorial sign with foundational effects on the organization of social relations in Yemen, whose functions and meanings mutate in tandem with the conditions of its use.

Key Findings

Historically, the turban shifted from a functional garment to a symbol of social standing, then to a religious-political emblem; under the imamate it was incorporated into a system of classist-racialized distinction.

Within Yemen's ensemble of sartorial and traditional symbols (e.g., *janbiyyah*, weapons, lineage), the turban contributes to fixing social boundaries and publicizing the reference points that govern recognition and status; it is mobilized within customs and traditions to underwrite legitimacy and enhance symbolic capital. It is part of the “tribal register” that integrates visual, auditory, and kinetic signs to regulate tribal relations.

The renewed activation and use of the turban's connotations (*al-qāwq*)—especially with the rise of the Houthi movement—demonstrate that its accumulated political, religious, and ethnic meanings have remained alive in collective memory. Invoking its symbolism today is an invocation of a list of claims and entitlements that the turban proclaims eloquently, without the need for words.

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