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The Ubiquitous T-Shirt and Fashionable “Islamic Dress” Cultural Authentication in Turkey

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Introduction

Complex patterns of dress exist in Turkey, a country that in its formative years approximately 80 years ago espoused western ways as its ideal. Because of its geographic location, Turkey’s largely Turkic population, which is 99 percent Islamic, has a history of wide ranging and varied cultural contact with other groups both before and after the Turks entered the Anatolian plain in the 11th century.¹ The dress of Turkey, rich in historical forms from both rural and urban traditions, has been transformed over the years. Patterns of dress were affected by political events, particularly the events associated with the forming of the new Turkish Republic in 1923. Turkey strived to be western in its popular and political thought. Urban populations responded to Atatürk’s call for modernization and for women to give up their veils in favor of western forms of dress.² The New Republic created a separation of mosque and state in the political arena, with implications for women’s dress. A symbol of the Islamic faith, the wearing of a headscarf was prohibited by employees while working in public venues or attending public universities, following the political confrontations in 1980.³

As a result of the political events associated with the establishment of the new Republic, transformations in women’s dress also occurred in rural areas as well, albeit more slowly (Jirousek 1996). Rural individuals and village groups have reacted over time to the external influences of trade, technology and political events. With the incorporation of the global market economy and a greater variety of inspirations and products available, among them T-shirts and jeans, rural individuals have drawn together elements of traditional and modern dress to create forms of dress that are distinctly theirs. These forms and patterns of dress, not unlike the historical ensembles, are imbedded with meanings that function to maintain a social order and act as a marker of social and cultural traits (Breu 1999). While a disparity of practices associated with dress continues to exist between rural and urban communities, the clear differences in rural and urban

¹ For a history of Turkey, see Douglas A. Howard, *The History of Turkey* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), and Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1977).

² It is likely that urban Turkish women who discarded veils and followed the prevailing western styles of the 1920s found comfort in the cloche, which they wore at that time, because of its ability to cover all of the hair.

³ See John Norton, “Faith and Fashion in Turkey,” in *Languages of Dress in the Middle East* eds. N. Lindisfarne-Tapper and B. Ingham, 149-177 (Richmond, Surry: Curzon Press, 1997); Marlene Breu and Ronald Marchese, “Social Commentary and Political Action: The Headscarf as Popular Culture and Symbol of Political Confrontation in Modern Turkey,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, 33.4 (2000): 25-38.

dress are becoming less evident as the younger rural residents adopt dress that is produced and distributed within the mass-fashion system.



Fig. 1. Store front in Bergama, Turkey. Photo by Author.

A majority of the urban population continues to adopt dress from the mass fashion system (fig. 1). Turkey is a major producer of apparel for Europe, and produces for the US, Russia, Central Asia, and other areas. Despite this prevalence of fashionable western dress in the cities, a resurgence of interest is evident among segments of the urban population to express religious and political ideologies, particularly through dress. Increased numbers of women are wearing a large overcoat and headscarf (fig. 2) or a black *çarşaf* (a large shapeless garment that covers the entire woman except for her face). Most recently, women have been adopting items of fashionable dress in a manner that conforms to social norms regarding dress, while allowing for religious expression (fig. 3).



Fig.2 Women in a shopping district of Istanbul, Turkey. Photo by author.

Cultural Authentication

This paper presents two examples of cultural authentication in the dress of present-day Turkey: incorporation of the ubiquitous T-shirt by both rural and urban women, and transformation of current fashionable dress into a distinctive Islamic dress for young women in the urban areas. In the first example, I will discuss five features of the T-shirt that have contributed to its selection and incorporation into the dress of village women

and, in a different mode, into urban women's dress. The first example illustrates the adoption of the T-shirt by rural women, in which it is combined with other garments that are considered traditional in Turkey, and adoption by a select group of urban women who combine the T-shirt with items that are produced in the mass-fashion system.



Fig. 3 Woman in Istanbul, Turkey. Photo by author.

In the second example, I will illustrate the adoption of several items of fashionable dress that have adapted well to the need for Islamic women to obscure body configuration and cover the hair. These women have adopted fashionable dress offered in the mass-fashion market and combined it to cover the body in a manner appropriate for the expression of Islamic ideals. In both examples an authentication has occurred within the context of use.

The Ubiquitous T-Shirt

Life continues to be hard for women in Turkish villages. They work in the fields during the summer months to process food for their families, food that they may also sell in local markets to supplement income or become the family's sole income-producing activity. A large number of women in the villages today have selected the T-shirt, incorporated it into their village dress, and authenticated it in the manner in which it is worn rather than in a change to the garment itself. Women are buying T-shirts that are produced for mass distribution, and wearing them with their traditional *şalvar* (baggy pant) or skirt made of fabric that is associated with village dress (fig. 4).

There are several reasons why I believe this selection and incorporation has taken place. First, T-shirts are easily and cheaply produced in Turkey. Many are produced for distribution within the mass-fashion system and they are readily available in local markets. Secondly, T-shirts can be selected large enough to conceal the shape of the female. This has been an important standard of dress for most rural women, who generally reveal little of their body configuration except definition of a large bust. At the rural level, this practice is more a result of social standards than overt expressions of their

Islamic religion. Thirdly, the knitted structure and simple construction of T-shirts allow for movement required to complete daily tasks. They fold and store flat, as did the older forms of traditional dress. Fourthly, T-shirts are a “tablet” for communication appropriate for a culture that has a history of women using the symbolic nature of dress in place of verbal expression (Breu 1999). T-shirts often display Disney characters or other motifs, or words in English or Turkish. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, T-shirts offer an opportunity for rural women to adopt something that is considered part of modern, mass-fashion dress while falling within acceptable boundaries of dress appropriate in village life.



Fig. 4 Women in a village near Bursa, Turkey. Photo by author.

Urban women who subscribe to the religious tenant of concealing the natural body without covering the hair often select T-shirts, usually without messages, to wear with long skirts in the city. This practice follows the social need to conceal the body configuration but is more closely tied to religious ideals than in the rural village examples.

It is interesting to note the use of language in the adoption of the T-shirt. Phonetically it is called a “T-shirt” but is spelled with Turkish letters (*t-şört*), thus creating a new word in the Turkish vocabulary. The Turkish word for “shirt” is *gömlek*.

Fashionable Islamic Dress

The second example of authentication of dress is found in the transformation of currently fashionable dress into a distinctive Islamic dress for young women in urban areas. Turkey’s political and religious climate has changed over approximately the last 10 years, resulting in greater evidence of overt expression of religious ideologies, particularly in dress. Examples include demonstrations and confrontations at public universities and in parliament for the right of women to wear a headscarf, currently banned in public buildings and universities, and the development of a headdress that covers women’s hair but does not fall within the definition of a headscarf. Some of these events have resulted in court cases, but the ban on head scarves in public buildings has been upheld (Labi 2004: 34).

Since the 1970s Islamic women who desire to openly express their Islamic faith have been distinguishing themselves from the fashion-forward modern Turkish woman by wearing a long, large-cut coat and large headscarf that covers the hair, neck and shoulders (Norton 1997) (fig. 2). Middle-aged and older women who continue this practice find ample supplies of coats in the domestic market (fig. 5). Interestingly, some of the younger women have adopted these coats, but with fitting through the mid-section, giving a more fashionable appearance.



*Fig. 5 (left) Coats for sale in a Turkish market. Photo by author.
Fig. 6 (right) Turkish Islamic women in Istanbul. Photo by author.*

Most recently, young women who want to express their religious ideologies are using current fashions that adapt to the need to cover their bodies and obscure body configuration. They have transformed fashionable dress into ensembles that are unique to their subculture and that set them apart from the larger culture (figs. 6 and 7). Ensembles consist of tunics, long over-blouses, long skirts, pants, and jeans jackets, all of which can be easily purchased in markets in a range of fashionable colors. These garments are always worn with a coordinating headscarf, usually of contemporary design, presenting a fashionable alternative to covering with a large-cut coat and traditionally patterned headscarf or black *çarşaf* for wear in public places. These fashions are readily available in Turkey's mass-fashion system (fig. 8). Figures 9, 10, and 11, from a U.S. mail order catalog, show the type of fashionable dress that is also available in Turkey. Copy that accompanies figure 11, stating, "The black tunic jacket covers a multitude of sins. Anything underneath it fades away and the focus becomes the long, lean line it creates,"

illustrates the ability of such garments to conceal the overall configuration of the body.⁴ Women who do not dress to show their Islamic beliefs wear similar garments without a headscarf and usually in a more body-revealing manner (fig. 12).



Fig 7 Turkish Islamic women in Istanbul. Photo by author.

Fig 8 Turkish couple in Istanbul. Photo by author.



Figs. 9 (left) and 10 (right) Courtesy Spiegel Catalog.

⁴ See *Spiegel Catalogue*, Spring 2004, p. 22.

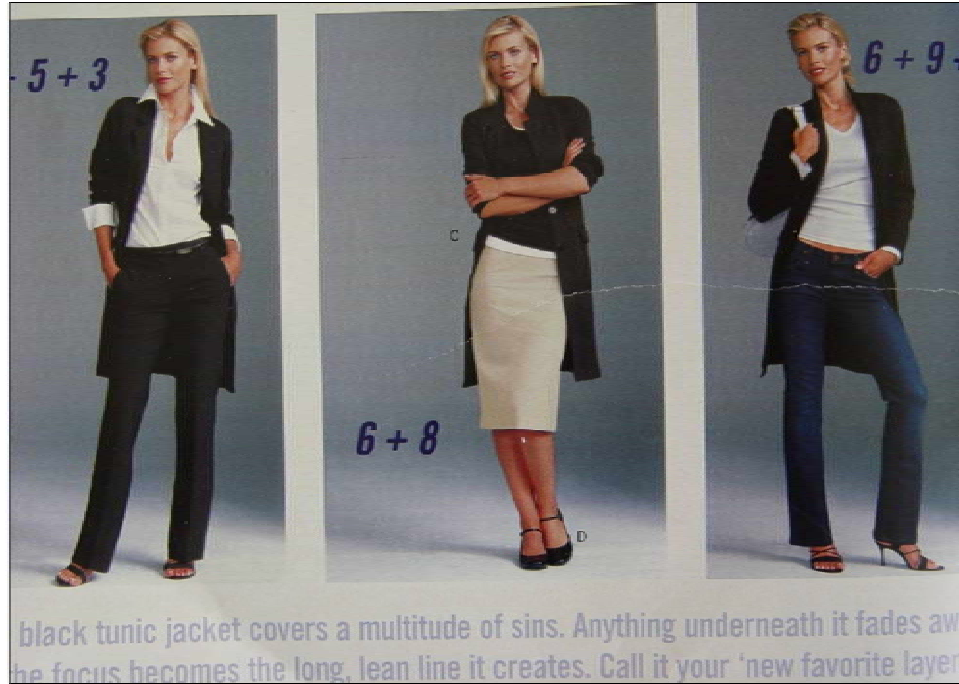


Fig. 11 Courtesy Spiegel Catalog.



Fig 12 Women in Istanbul. Photo by author.

Through selection of fashionable dress that is readily available, these women have created a distinctive look by their particular combinations in conjunction with the headscarf, which holds great symbolism in Turkey in relation to the issue of religious expression (Breu and Marchese 2000). They have authenticated these fashionable looks, not because of the objects themselves, but because of the context and manner in which

they are worn. These ensembles distinguish the young women as a group that does not deny fashion but follows rules of dress appropriate in their social structure. It allows for internal cohesiveness while distancing them from the larger culture that has adopted mass-fashion dress without any display of religiosity.⁵

Summary

I have given two brief examples of authentication of dress by Turkish women who have adopted and incorporated the T-shirt and who have created a fashionable look to meet the requirements of Islamic dress with the use of dress produced within the mass fashion system. It is safe to say that among the factors that are responsible for this trend are a global fashion industry that has a strong presence in Turkey and improving economic conditions responsible for increasing the spending power of larger numbers of people. It will be interesting to observe the nature of these practices as fashions change, especially away from the loose-fitting garments necessary for the women to meet their social and religious ideals.

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⁵ Evidence of a trend toward the use of fashionable dress for outer wear by Islamic women choosing to reflect their religious convictions in dress has surfaced in popular literature. The *Chicago Tribune*, (19 August 2002:4) reports that a company in Turkey now produces a bathing suit for Turkish women who want to dress as a faithful member of the religion. The loose-fitting suit includes a headscarf, top with long sleeves, and pants. Outlines of the body are obscured. According to the article, the company also produces a man's swimming trunk that extends from the belly button to the knees, as is required by Islamic precepts. The New York edition of *India Abroad* (New York Edition, 4 July 1997:46) reports that Egyptian women in large numbers are buying veils in bright colors from high-fashion "hijab" stores in Cairo. A shopping mall in the city, called the Salaam Center for Veiled-Women caters to Islamic women. There they can buy regular fashions along with brightly colored veils. According to the article, Islamic groups are embracing the practice in the belief that any expression of Islam is desirable and may lead to other Islamic practices. The secular government, which does not favor veiling, is concerned because of the growing religious revival that is seen in the Middle East.