Lectio Socialis
2024, VOL. 8, NO. 2, pp. 99-134

RESEARCH ARTICLE
DOI: 10.47478/lectio.1489487

Dressing the Empire: Clothing, identity, and social control in the Ottoman millet system

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the intricate relationship between the *millet* system and dressing within the Ottoman Empire, emphasizing how attire served as a potent symbol of communal identity and religious affiliation intertwined with the socio-political fabric of society. By analyzing historical texts, images, and clothing artifacts, the study illustrates how the Ottoman administration employed dressing as a cultural identity marker and a means of religious and social control. The Empire managed its diverse population through the *millet* system by allowing religious communities, or *millet*s, significant autonomy within a structured governance framework. Dressing styles within these *millet*s were not merely functional or aesthetic choices but were imbued with deep symbolic meanings that reflected the complex interplay of identity, status, and religious adherence. Each community's distinctive attire helped reinforce social boundaries and foster a sense of belonging and collective identity among its members. The research highlights significant transitions in the traditional dress codes influenced by political reforms, such as the *Tanzimat*'s push towards modernization and secularization, which gradually shifted public expressions of identity. This shift was marked by a tension between preserving traditional attire and adopting more homogenized, secular dress styles, reflecting broader socio-political changes within the Empire. In conclusion, the article provides insights into how dressing transcended mere personal adornment to act as a crucial medium through which communal identities were negotiated, expressed, and maintained within the Ottoman public sphere. This examination enriches the historical understanding of the Ottoman *millet* system and contributes to broader discussions on fashion, religion, and identity formation.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: 24.05.2024
Revised: 24.07.2024
Accepted: 30.07.2024

KEYWORDS
Ottoman Empire,
Ottoman fashion,
millet system,
dressing,
identity

Introduction

In the intricate mosaic of the Ottoman Empire, composed of religious communities, namely *millet*s, dressing was not merely a matter of fabric and fashion but a profound statement of identity and belonging intertwined with the complexities of the *millet* system. This system, an embodiment of the Empire's approach to religious diversity, delineated the boundaries of communal identities in a society where religion was inseparable from daily life.

As we trace the transformations within this multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire, the significance of attire emerges as a potent symbol of collective and individual identity. Against the backdrop of the Empire's gradual modernization, which threatened to erode

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the visible markers of religious affiliations, dressing became a bastion for expressing *millet* identity. This article explores how the traditional dress codes prescribed by the *millet* system evolved or resisted in the face of modernity. Thus, it uncovers the medium of clothing, shedding light on the nuanced dialogue between appearance, allegiance, and the dissolution of religious distinctiveness that spurred the Empire toward the secular Turkish Republic to come.

Through an analytical gaze upon photos and engravings, this article delves into the sartorial expressions of various *millet*s—distinct religious communities recognized and managed under Ottoman governance. These visual artifacts present more than mere aesthetic value; they are windows into the nuanced identities, social status, and complex interplay of inter-*millet* dynamics that thrived within the Empire. By interpreting the attire and iconography depicted in these images, we peel back layers of historical narrative, disclosing how each thread and motif weaves a story of belonging, differentiation, and adaptation in the face of the Empire's slow march toward modernity. Through this visual exploration, we seek to understand not just how Ottomans from different *millet*s presented themselves but also how these presentations reflected and contributed to the societal norms and evolving cultural landscapes of the time. This examination thus aims to illuminate the silent, yet eloquent testimonies of identity and change inscribed within the Ottoman visual archive, providing vivid insights into the rich mosaic of life during a pivotal era of transition.

This research focuses exclusively on visual sources that address the dressing of Istanbul residents. As the Ottoman Empire's capital, Istanbul was the primary site for implementing clothing regulations and modernization efforts, making it the most relevant location to observe these changes. The city's cosmopolitan nature, with significant Muslim and non-Muslim populations, provides a diverse and comprehensive context for studying identity negotiation and social dynamics. Istanbul's unique position as the administrative and cultural center of the Empire, combined with its varied demographics, ensures a rich and detailed analysis of how clothing reforms influenced its inhabitants.

Theoretical framework: Visible religion and the *millet* system

The study is framed within a set of theoretical constructs that underlie the relationship between dressing, identity, and the millet system. To come to terms with the closed collectivist/communitarian system of the Ottoman Empire concerning religious minorities and varying practices regarding clothes, this research adopts a socio-cultural lens to interpret the symbolism of dressing as a marker of millet identities, drawing on theories of social identity and cultural practice (Özdil, 2021b, 2021a, 2021c). Dressing is analyzed as a performative act that signifies membership, social status, and religious affiliation within the Ottoman public sphere. In this regard, this study explores the symbolic values of "dressing" in a historical context, going beyond its primary use as a material utility. Although some fashion historians refer to this sense of dressing as the "fashion system" (e.g. Welters & Lillethun, 2011, p. xxvii), we will adopt the perspective that it was challenging to apply the modern concept of fashion to the analysis of pre-modern periods, as there was no mass production, and the pace of style change was significantly slower. In other words, we will discuss "dressing" here, not as an ahistorical concept but in a historical context that includes symbolic values as well as material dimensions.

Furthermore, the concept of "visible religion" provides a foundational understanding of how modernization processes have historically influenced the public exhibition of

religious identities. "Visible religion" pertains to the outward manifestations of religious practices and their role in public life.

In contrast, "invisible religion" concerns private belief systems that are not readily apparent in public behavior. This approach situates the discussion in a broader context of how material culture and visual markers mediate the complex interplay between individual identity formation, collective expression, and the state's shifting stance on secularism. Through this theoretical framework, the article aims to dissect the layered meanings attributed to dressing and how these meanings influence and are influenced by the socio-political currents of the time, giving insight into the Empire's struggle with its own modern identity.

Émile Durkheim (2001), one of the founding figures of sociology, analyzes the sociological function of religion within communities as he explores how religious practices and rituals contribute to social cohesion and collective consciousness. His seminal book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, first published in 1912, deals most directly with studying religion from a sociological perspective. Durkheim investigates the simplest form of religion within society to understand the nature of religion itself. Through his analysis of rituals, symbols, and totems, Durkheim reveals how these visible elements of religion play a crucial role in uniting members of a community by providing shared practices and beliefs. Durkheim's explanations of social rituals, sacred objects, and communal beliefs align with what may now be referred to under the umbrella term "visible religion," which entails the outward expressions of religious affiliation, and the social phenomena associated with these expressions.

The *millet* system, in effect, serves as an example of Durkheimian theory in action, with each millet embodying a microcosm of the wider society, upholding its internal cohesion, and affirming its unique identity through visible symbols such as dressing, architecture, and public rituals. These outward expressions of religious life are not mere reflections of individual belief; rather, according to Durkheim's framework, they represent the collective realities and social solidarities of the various millets operating within the broader Ottoman society. This intersection of Durkheim's perspectives on the social functionality of religious life with Ottoman reality accentuates the importance of visible religion in both fostering a sense of belonging among members of individual millets and in maintaining the overarching integrity of the multi-faith Empire.

In the Ottoman *millet* system, a non-liberal, conservative, and patriarchal model of religious tolerance, multiculturalism was a system of non-territorial autonomy in which Muslims and Orthodox Greek (*Rum*), Orthodox Armenian, and Jewish nations had separate local government units based on ethnicity, language, and religion. Therefore, it is also possible to see this system as a model of decentralization based on community (Barkey & Gavrilis, 2016, p. 24; Tosun, 2018, pp. 28–29). In other words, the Ottoman *millet* system was a form of administration and governance that allowed various religious communities to conduct their own affairs with a high degree of autonomy under the oversight of their own leaders while remaining subject to the overarching authority of the Ottoman Empire. Each *millet* was responsible for personal matters such as marriage, divorce, education, and religion for its members, fostering a sense of community and continuity within each group yet intertwined within the more extensive multi-ethnic Empire.

Although the *millet* system was seen as a "federation of theocracies," beyond the freedom to practice their religion, it was a model in which minorities had their own schools, places of worship, laws, judicial bodies, and general freedom in resolving internal issues, especially regarding family status (Kymlicka, 2016, pp. 325–326). However, there was no

individual freedom of conscience, and conversion was suppressed alongside collective belief. In this respect, this religious tolerance, which did not recognize individual autonomy, was not based on liberal principles; on the contrary, it rejected the ideal of personal freedom of classical liberal thinkers, from Locke to Kant and Mill, made a rigid distinction of community, and did not allow much permeability (Kymlicka, 2016, p. 326; Mendus, 1989, p. 56). An important point here is that the Ottomans addressed the subjects not as individuals but as religious communities (Adıyeke, 1999, p. 256; Kurtaran, 2011, p. 62).

Although the Ottomans were not sensitive to the permeability of the boundaries between religious communities and the subjective attitudes of individuals at the level of designing the administrative system, it should be noted that different theoretical approaches addressed the identity negotiation dimension to varying degrees. For instance, on the one hand, primordialism, unlike its predecessor theories like social Darwinism and assimilationism, which emphasize objective factors, also incorporates subjective elements. It emphasizes the significance of emotional and primordial ties, such as nationality, race, language, religion, culture, place of birth, and so on, in the formation of identity. On the other hand, circumstantialism, which argues that ethnic identities are a product of the situations, conditions, and context faced by communities rather than their deep roots, argues that individuals or groups are mobilized in line with the aims of the political elite by taking advantage of their religious, racial, and national (multiple) identities according to preferences that serve their own interests (Konuralp, 2017, 2018, p. 135).

Challenging the primordialist theory on ethnic groupings as fixed entities characterized by fundamental cultural qualities, Fredrik Barth's (1969) work on ethnic boundaries can be transposed as an integral theoretical basis for comprehending the negotiation of identity inside the Ottoman millet system. According to Barth, ethnic groupings should be regarded as entities that are defined by certain characteristics, and social boundaries play a crucial role in maintaining the existence of these groups. The community is perpetuated not by the cultural substance within its boundaries but by the boundaries themselves. However, Barth considers the border to be penetrable; in fact, transactions across the boundary contribute to making the boundary more long-lasting.

Although Barth's transactionalist approach faces criticism for presuming that ethnic identities with explicit boundaries, protected by symbolic border guards such as language, religion, dressing, and diet, are fixed and for not considering the types of ethnic commitment, the resources available to various ethnic groups, and their individual subjective aspects (Francis, 1976; Wallman, 1986), it is helpful in analyzing the Ottoman millet system that has roots in the pre-modern eras.

Similarly, Armstrong (1982) utilizes Barth's overarching methodology to analyze pre-modern communities, specifically medieval Christendom and Islam. However, Armstrong also incorporates a focus on the cultural expressions that Barth had previously disregarded. According to Armstrong, like A. D. Smith (1986), myths and symbols have a crucial function in bringing together populations and guaranteeing their long-term existence. Armstrong examines various aspects, such as a longing for previous ways of life, religious cultures and institutions, powerful mythical narratives associated with empires, and divisions caused by language, to construct fluid ethnic identities.

Following this line of analysis, we can categorize the medieval religious communities as e*thnie*s or ethnic communities. Hutchinson and Smith (1996, p. 6) define these communities as a designated group of people who believe they have a similar ancestral lineage, possess shared memories, have some or all aspects of common culture, maintain an identification with a homeland, and experience an awareness of solidarity across more than

a portion of their fellow members. In due process, the emergence of the contemporary bureaucratic state and capitalism has led to a heightened political significance for ethnic communities that maintained a passive yet acknowledged status as distinct populations, like the *millet*s in the Ottoman Empire, and that mostly converged into nation-states during the 19th and 20th centuries (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996, p. 11).

In the Ottoman *millet* system and as it was used in the Ottoman Turkish language, the word *millet*, which is of Arabic origin and even based on the Holy Quran, did not refer to ethnic or linguistic groups but to the religious communities of the Empire (Eryılmaz, 1992, p. 11). During the era of the Second Constitutional Monarchy (1908–1920), this term started to be utilized in a political context rather than solely in a religious context (Berkes, 2002, p. 408). In other words, under the grip of the Committee of Union and Progress, the term "millet" came to refer to a political community literally similar to the Western concept of "nation." This evolution of the *millet* concept represents the birth of a new mode of politics in the Ottoman Empire, namely Turkism (Konuralp, 2013, pp. 61–62).

Ultimately, the religious communitarian heritage of the Ottoman Empire succumbed to the lure of nationalism as the millet system, which ruled for nearly five centuries from 1456 until the Empire's collapse after the First World War, was replaced by the modern Turkish nation-state. After the Republican Revolution, the Turkish language was purified from Persian and Arabic words. As a result, the word "ulus" was used as a synonym for "millet."

The *millet* system's closed structure prevented the formation of a common Ottoman culture, envisaged governance based on religious and sectarian distinctions, and linguistic commonality was not taken into account. For example, even the neighborhoods where Armenian-speaking Armenian-Gregorian, Catholic, and Protestant people lived were separate. In contrast, Orthodox Serbs, Bulgarians, and Rums/Greeks all worshiped in the Greek language and were affiliated with the Fener Patriarchate as a spiritual, judicial, financial, and administrative center. In the 19th century, after the French Revolution, with the spread of nationalism in the Balkans, these ethnic groups began to strive to establish their own national churches (Adaş & Konuralp, 2020a, 2020b; Konuralp, 2018, 2021; Konuralp & Adaş, 2020).

Similarly, there was no linguistic unity among the Jews, whose numbers increased rapidly with the Ottoman encouragement of immigration from Europe. Again, despite linguistic differences, Muslims of various ethnic groups, such as Turks, Albanians, Pomaks, Bosniaks, Caucasians, Arabs, and Kurds, were considered the main monolithic element of the Empire, with weak ethnic divisions between them (Ortaylı, 1985, p. 997).

For centuries, the *millet*s lived autonomously under Ottoman rule. They were never forced to convert and were exempt from certain obligations compared to Muslims, such as military service, which could sometimes last for life. With Russian support in the Balkans, they began to gain independence and targeted the Christian majority through ethnic cleansing campaigns and massive massacres against Muslims. This brutality forced many Muslims to migrate to Istanbul and the Anatolian heathland of the Empire (McCarthy, 1995; Shaw, 1985, pp. 1003–1005; Wilson, 2011; Yavuz, 2020, p. 355). Western states also utilized the Ottoman millets as a form of "patronage" to destabilize the system with imperialist tactics aimed at penetrating Ottoman territories (Küçük, 1985, pp. 1012–1014).

To unite and strengthen the Ottoman population, which was at risk of falling apart, the Ottomans declared the *Tanzimat* Edict on November 3, 1839. This declaration was made in line with the recommendations of Western powers to democratize the millet system and prevent the mismanagement of the non-Muslim men of religion. However, the reforms had an unintended effect: they weakened the authority of spiritual leaders over their own

millets. This, coupled with the encouragement of Russia and newly independent Balkan states that wanted to expand their territories, led to a rise in revolts among Christian Ottoman subjects (Küçük, 1985, p. 1016; Shaw, 1985, p. 1005).

While the increasing terror caused by the guerrilla organizations of Christian nationalists in Muslim-majority Macedonia and Eastern Anatolia led to genocide against Muslims, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, founded by Bulgarians in Macedonia, and the Hunchak and Dashnak organizations, founded by Armenians in Eastern Anatolia, used the military interventions of the Ottoman Empire to prevent the violence as propaganda material to gain the support of Western powers. It incited Muslims to a sense of revenge (Shaw, 1985, pp. 1005–1006).

As the hundreds of years of rule based on the millet system came to an end with increasing instability, reform efforts based on equality gained momentum in the post-*Tanzimat* period; secular laws and institutions began to be put into practice in order to provide equal rights to all Muslims, Christians, and Jews, regardless of religion, under the idea of Ottomanness or Ottoman citizenship (Shaw, 1985, p. 1006).

The idea of unity and equality among the Ottoman nations, conceptualized as Ottomanism, was found to have an official expression in the Constitutions of 1876 and 1908. Article 8 of the constitution of the First Constitutional Monarchy era, namely *Kanuni Esasi*, adopted in 1876, read: “All of the people who belong to the State of Osmâniyya, regardless of their religion and sect, are called Ottomans without exception” (Özcan, 2007).

On the other hand, especially after the 1856 Edict of Reform, the process and consciousness of Christian communities becoming “nations” in the true sense gained momentum, and constitutionalism, secularization, and nationalization took root with the election of representatives from the people to the church assemblies by leaving the theocratic framework (Küçük, 1985, p. 1023). Therefore, the “egalitarian” efforts of the Ottomans, which were put into practice with the indoctrination of the Europeans, failed to prevent the nationalist tendencies of the Christian millets. In the process, the Ottoman millet system was erased entirely from the stage of history as Muslims, starting with Arabs and Albanians, became divided along the axis of ethnic nationalism. Finally, Turks turned to the national liberation struggle to establish their own nation-state.

Clothing of the religious communities in Istanbul

Building upon the established conceptual framework and historical background discussed previously, this section introduces an in-depth analysis of the principal communities comprising the Ottoman *millet* system. We will examine their distinctive dress practices and illustrate how these traditional community distinctions are prominently reflected in everyday social interactions. This exploration aims to shed light on the intricate interplay between cultural identities and social dynamics within the Ottoman Empire.

The census data from 1905–1906 offers a glimpse into the diverse and varied society of the Ottoman Empire (Table 1). Muslims made up the majority at 74.47%, reflecting the Islamic character of the state, while significant minorities included Rum Orthodox (13.55%) and Armenians (5.38%). Smaller groups like Bulgarians, various Christian denominations, and Jews also contributed to this rich tapestry of diversity.

The 1897 ethnic distribution data for Istanbul, the capital of the Empire, reflects a diverse and cosmopolitan city at the turn of the 20th century (Table 2). Turks formed 56.3% of the population, demonstrating their significant influence on the city's demographic and

cultural aspects. The presence of Rum and Armenian communities at 22.2% and 15.2%, respectively, emphasized Istanbul's role as a center for diverse ethnic groups within the Ottoman Empire while also highlighting its cultural and economic significance. The Jewish community made up 4.4% of the population, adding to Istanbul's historical reputation as a place committed to religious and ethnic tolerance.

Table 1. Distribution of the Ottoman Population by Ethnic Communities (1905–6 Census).

Ethnic/Religious Community	Population	Percentage
Muslim	15.508.753	74.47
Kazak	1.792	0.01
Rum	2.823.063	13.55
Armenian	1.031.708	4.95
Bulgarian	761.530	3.66
Ulah	26.042	0.13
Greek Catholic	29.749	0.14
Armenian Catholic	89.040	0.43
Protestant	52.485	0.25
Latin	20.496	0.10
Maronite	28.738	0.14
Assyrian	36.985	0.18
Chaldean	2.371	0.01
Jewish	253.435	1.22
Gypsy	14.470	0.07
Foreigner	142.018	0.68
Other	4.213	0.02
Total	**20.826.888**	**100**

Source: Directorate of the Administration of Registry and Population Administration of the Ministry of Interior (Dahiliye Nezareti Sicil-i Nüfus İdare-i Umumiyyesi Müdüriyyeti, 1919).

Table 2. Ethnic Distribution of Istanbul Population (1897).

Ethnic Community	Population	Percentage
Turkish	597.000	56.3
Albanian	10.000	0.01
Kurdish	5.000	0.005
Rum	236.000	22.2
Armenian	162.000	15.2
Jewish	47.000	4.4
Serbian	1.000	0
Christian Arab	1.000	0
Total	**1.059.000**	**100**

Source: Karpat (2003, p. 143).

The costume book genre, which constitutes one of the most important sources in terms of fashion history, emerged from travelogues, etiquette books, and costume engravings in the 16th century (Welters & Lillethun, 2018, p. 44). Nicolas de Nicolay's (1568) *Navigations* stood out as one of the finest travelogues. Nicolay traveled to the Ottoman territories in his capacity as France's royal geographer, meticulously documenting local traditions and attire throughout his journey. The album for the 1873 World Fair in Vienna serves as another significant costume book for the Ottoman Empire. The distinguished painter Osman Hamdi

Bey and the French artist and historian Victor Marie de Launay, who worked for the Minister of Commerce, Ibrahim Edhem Pasha, prepared this album (Ersoy, 2004).

The 1873 album *Elbise-i Osmaniyye* depicts Istanbul through five photographs featuring fifteen figures (Osman Hamdi Bey & de Launay, 1873). The album portrays ordinary Ottoman subjects from an ethnographic perspective. As Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay put it (1999, pp. 10–11), Istanbul is the center of agricultural and industrial production for the Ottoman people. Furthermore, it serves as a transit trade warehouse where products from India, China, Iran, and Russia via the Black Sea and America via the Mediterranean are collected and accumulated. The city’s streets are bustling with people wearing unique and diverse clothing. For instance, Persian sellers wear wide and flat caps, while Ottoman officers don fezzes with black suits. Caucasian Russian merchants wear tight frock coats and pleated skirts tightened at the waist with a belt. Ottomans of Rum origin wear top hats, white turbans, and tulle veils that attract the attention of British tourists. Additionally, Asian, European, and African foreigners wear their national costumes, creating a variety of clothing that is perhaps not seen anywhere else in the world. This diversity is a result of the city's status as a trade center as well as the existence of different religions.

People from lower income groups also have specific clothes according to their professions. Figure 1 illustrates the attire of an Istanbulite *saka*, a boatman, and a porter. As members of different artisan guilds, they are protected by the government and their guilds. The clothing of the *saka*, who carries drinking water to the houses, is the same as the general dressing of other workers, except for the additional pieces required for the job. The boatmen have a shirt made of twisted rope called *bürümcük*, a bright and embroidered vest, a red or black *yemeni,* and a fez on their heads. The porters, who are usually of Armenian origin, wear a *mintan* and shalwar made of aba, a felt fabric, a Persian shirt, sturdy wool socks, slippers and *yemeni* worn together, and an embroidered white felt cone with a turban wrapped around it.

The *ayvaz in* Figure 2 is the servant responsible for serving food. He wears a thick and colorful turban, *salta*, vest, and shalwar; colorful woolen socks, red or black *yemeni*s, a striped *futa* (apron), and a white Bursa cotton napkin over his shoulder. The Istanbul gentry (bourgeoisie) in the higher income group could be distinguished by religious or traditional dress *(right*), but with the lifting of dress restrictions and modernization, they also began to wear uniform Western dress *(left*). Osman Hamdi Bey and Marie de Launay (1999, pp. 17-18) provide an insightful observation on the correlation between modern dressing and identity. They compare the Muslim bourgeois figure, who opposes the impact of Western culture and demonstrates their allegiance to customs and traditions by means of their attire, with the Europeanized figure. In contrast, the Europeanized figure’s clothes do not reveal their religion or social class.

Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, pp. 17-18) note that the attire commonly worn by government officials, described as a ceremonial black formal dress comprising a red fez, a black *setre* jacket, and black trousers, had become a symbol of progressiveness. Yet, within the wealthy class, there was a push towards further Europeanization, with some opting for more comfortable and stylish alternatives to the traditional *setre* jacket, particularly when enjoying leisurely activities such as strolling in parks. In major Ottoman cities like Istanbul and Izmir, Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, pp. 17-18) observe a distinct preference among the urban elite for the stovepipe hat, a Western emblem of sophistication, over the traditional fez. However, pragmatism prevails as these individuals often carry a fez with them to avoid offending conservative officials, illustrating the delicate balance between modern inclinations and traditional expectations. Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, pp. 17-

18) acknowledge the unifying power of the newer, standardized attire in reducing religious and nationalistic tensions within the Empire. The adoption of such uniform dress codes had helped to obscure religious differences, protecting non-Muslims from potential harassment by making their religious identity less conspicuous, thus fostering a more harmonious public life. Despite recognizing these practical benefits, they express a nostalgic lament for the loss of the traditional Ottoman attire, which they describe as not only visually striking but also more comfortable and healthful than the restrictive European styles. They fondly recall the old garments' functionality and aesthetic appeal, from the loose shalwar and the unrestricted *salta* to the colorful *yemeni*s and the protective qualities of the cone and turban. Their narrative is tinged with regret over the erosion of cultural identity that comes with adopting Western fashion, hinting at a more profound struggle between maintaining tradition and embracing modernity within the Empire.

Figure 1. A *saka*, a boatman and a porter from Istanbul in the late 19th century.

Source: Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, p. 20).

Historically, this is because the Western European aesthetic, based on the display of body contours, has always had fundamentally different qualities from the Eastern form of loose clothing (Jirousek, 2004, p. 234). Hamdi Bey and de Launay's commentary, which desperately identifies the defeat of traditional "comfort" against the modern without ignoring the achievements of civilization, also approaches the concept of "fashion," which was just beginning to enter the Ottoman agenda at the time, with reservations: "Because fashion, with its armies of tailors, shoemakers, cobblers, women's barbers, and others, is attacking with all its might to defeat us. There is no choice but to surrender to this power," Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, p. 18) add. In other words, modernization and fashion transformed traditional identities by taking them to another dimension.

Figure 2. Istanbul bourgeoisie (*left* and *right*) and the *ayvaz* (*center*) in the late 19th century.

Source: Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, p. 16).

Muslims

Being the *millet-i hakime* (sovereign nation), Muslims formed the dominant element of the Ottoman Empire, with Turks and Turkomans at its core as the state's founders. The Ottomans conquered Turkish principalities in Anatolia after the collapse of the Seljuk Empire and settled Turks in newly conquered lands in the Balkans, thus amassing a sizeable Muslim population that included Bosniaks, Albanians, Kurds, and Arabs following Yavuz Sultan Selim's Egyptian campaign. It is worth noting that Europeans commonly referred to all Ottoman Muslims as "Turks." This confusion was highlighted by Marion-Crawford (2019, pp. 10–11), who stated:

I do not know whether it would be more accurate to define Turks as a nation or as a community of different races united by the common bond of Islam. In any mosque we randomly enter, you can see a Turk, as pale as any Norwegian, with flaxen hair, prostrated and praying next to one of the blackest people in black Africa.

Although there is no clergy class in Islam, as in Christianity, and Muslims are seen as a single ummah, they were divided into different sects and orders within themselves as religious networks. As seen in Figure 3, the attire of the dervishes, sheiks, and mullahs who practiced different religious teachings also varied. For example, in the Mevlevi order founded in Konya during the Seljuk period by Jalaluddin Rumi, a disciple of Sheikh Shahabeddin Suhraverdi, the founder of the *Nurbahşiye* order, dervishes wore a *ferace*, red *yemeni*, *haydariye* (jacket), *tennure* (skirt) and *sikke-i şerif* (holy cone). Mevlevi dervishes are known for their whirling dances and mystical practices. The *sikke* represents the tombstone of the ego, and the white robe signifies the ego's shroud as the dervish strives for spiritual rebirth and union with the divine (Schimmel, 2011). The *Bektaşiyye* order combines Shi'a and

Sufi thought, emphasizing direct personal experience with the divine. Its practices and beliefs are distinct from mainstream Sunni Islam (Karamustafa, 2007). The *Bektaşi*s were a group closely connected with the Janissaries, who were established during the reign of Orhan Gazi. The Janissaries converted to Islam by enlisting Christian children. The *Bektaşi*s wore a headdress, which they made with their own hands from felt, and was called a crown. This headdress had an extension at the end, representing the sleeve of Turkish saint Hacı Bektaş Veli's cardigan. As obligatory accessories, they wore a star-shaped jade stone called a surrender stone on their chest, a crescent-shaped earring in their right ear, a *nefir* (a wind instrument mostly used in *mehter* music) resembling a hunting pipe, and an oak *cilbent* (a rectangular leather bag with a buckle strap on the belt and a front lid that descends like a small box). Apart from the cardigan, they wore a jacket, very wide and pleated *potur* (pants), and red or black *yemeni*s. In the ulema class, which consisted of *talip* or *softa* (student), *danişment* (wise man), *mulazim* (assistant), *mullah* (senior judge), *muderris* (senior educator), *hoca* (teacher) and *mufti* (the highest interpreter of the law), the different ranks were symbolized by gold embroidered cloth ribbons on their white turbans. Their dressing was the same as other Muslims, and their overcoat was called a *biniş*, not a robe (Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay, 1999, pp. 24-29).

The dressing history of the Muslim Turks, who were the dominant element of the Empire, shows a mix of pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions with roots in the steppes of eastern Central Asia. As nomads engaged in animal husbandry, the Turks had developed a form of dress suitable for a mobile lifestyle and unpredictable climates that could include extremes of heat and cold. The basic garments for both men and women were loose trousers and front-opening coats, vests, or jackets, ideal for riding (Özel, 1992; Scarce, 1987, pp. 32–36). Coats, jackets, and vests could be worn over a shirt to provide warmth. These had the advantage over closed tunics in that they could be easily removed one layer at a time as needed, even on horseback. Belts were used to cover clothing and also served as slots for personal items or weapons. Differences in gender or status were indicated by variations in jewelry and other accessories, particularly headgear. Conspicuous and often intricate headdresses were a unique feature of Ottoman dress for both men and women. Ottoman Turks used the choice of textiles, textile ornamentation, accessory details, and the layering order of garments to distinguish gender, class, clans, and communities (Jirousek, 2004, pp. 232–233). Figure 4 shows some examples of these garments.

In Figure 4, the depicted gentleman is clad in attire that epitomizes traditional Turkoman garb, comprising a striped robe, voluminous trousers, and a long sash encircling his waist. This ensemble is complemented by a short jacket, adorned with ornamental motifs, and a tall, meticulously wrapped turban. Such attire is emblematic of Turkoman men's clothing, designed to fulfill both practical functions and cultural expressions (Hole, 2009, pp. 262–263). The attire not only served as a daily wear but also symbolized social status and tribal affiliations within the Turkoman community. The intricate textile patterns and the layering of garments indicated the wearer's wealth and standing.

Figure 3. A Mevlevi dervish, a *Bektaşi* dervish, and a mullah in the late 19th century.
Source: Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, p. 25).

Conversely, the woman in the illustration is arrayed in a long, resplendent robe, cinched at the waist with a broad sash, and a head covering that, while less elaborate than the man's, is nonetheless indicative of social significance. The edges of her robe are embellished with decorative details, reflecting a discerning sense of style and the importance of decorative artisanship in women's clothing within the Turkoman culture. Despite the simplicity of her headgear relative to that of her male counterpart, it nevertheless conveys a level of detail that underscores its social import. Moreover, her adornment with ornate jewelry is a testament to the cultural practice among Turkoman women of using such embellishments to display wealth and status. The attire of the woman not only underscores the aesthetic appeal but also highlights the crucial role played by Turkoman women in preserving and promoting their cultural heritage through their choice of dressing. The decorative elements on her dress serve not only aesthetic purposes but also act as symbols of identity and familial connections.

This illustration transcends its value as a mere depiction of historical attire, serving also as a cultural artifact that illumines the interactions and perceptions bridging the East and West during the early 19th century. It provides insight into the European romanticization of Turkoman traditional attire, contributing to the broader discourse of Orientalism prevalent at the time (MacKenzie, 1995, p. 46).

The wearing of many layers was always a feature of ceremonial or festive dress, as well as a sign of wealth and status (Gervers, 1983). Layering is an exceptional quality of the Turkish dress, creating a silhouette that hides the body shape and balances the luxurious dress with modesty. Not only are the layers worn on top of each other, but the materials of all layers are designed and arranged to create a sumptuous effect (Berker, 1985). The importance of layering as a broader aesthetic and spiritual concept is deeply embedded in culture. Here again, formality is associated with layers. In Islamic decorative arts, the

layering of complex patterns on top of each other is seen as a spiritual metaphor for the nature of the divine order, seemingly incomprehensible but actually planned and meaningful (Ardalan & Bakhtiar, 1973).

Figure 4. Turkoman clothing drawing by a French illustrator.

Source: Charlotte Jirousek (2004).

When Turks converted to Islam, they also adopted the practice of wearing clothes that distinguished Muslims from non-Muslims (Baker, 1986). Men wore turbans, women veiled themselves, and specific colors and fabrics became the symbols of being a Muslim. In Ottoman society, which was comprised of various ethnic groups, legally prescribed attire was a significant indicator of one's religious affiliation (Quataert, 1997).

Figure 5 exemplifies hijab, which is the striking difference between indoor *(on the right*) and outdoor *(on the left*) attire, as a characteristic of the shaping of women's identity through clothing and dress in line with Islamic tradition. Sewn from brocade produced in factories in Damascus, Aleppo, or Istanbul, Turkish women's clothing is completed with a floor-length skirted robe and velvet shoes adorned with pearls and gold embroidery hidden under the wide shalwar, while the sash hanging from the cashmere shawl helps to gather the hem of the robe and make it easier to walk. The hair toilet falls in front of the forehead. The garment is decorated with needlepoint called *bibil*, which is produced in the vicinity of Istanbul. When going out of the house, all this ornate outfit is covered by a *ferace* (abaya) made of broadcloth, merino, or cashmere, depending on the season, and a white muslin veil, which has become more transparent with modernization (Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay, 1999, p. 33). To put it briefly, this photograph subtly reflects the difference between Ottoman Turkish women's private and public lives. The indoor clothing allowed for more personal expression and comfort, while the outdoor attire served as a public uniform that adhered to the societal norms of modesty and decorum.

Figure 5. Turkish ladies and a Turkish schoolchild from Istanbul in the late 19th century.

Source: Osman Hamdi Bey and Marie de Launay (1999, p. 31).

Figure 6 also shows Turkish women with distinctive characteristics. On the upper left and right are Muslim women from Istanbul in their chador and green abaya, dressed outside the home; on the lower left is a Muslim woman from Pera, an exclusive district of Istanbul, in her wedding attire; and on the lower right, a Muslim woman from Pera in her domestic attire. Outdoors, many women opt for the chador, a garment that envelops the body, leaving only the eyes visible, as a sign of modesty and adherence to conservative values. Others might choose an abaya, which is similarly modest but allows for more facial visibility, indicating slight variances in conservatism or marital status, with green symbolizing a connection to Islam. In contrast, wedding attire is much more elaborate, with vibrant colors and floral patterns celebrating joy and marking a significant life event, blending traditional Ottoman and local influences. Meanwhile, domestic attire shifts dramatically; women wear less conservative clothes like floral skirts and patterned vests, allowing for personal expression and comfort within the privacy of home.

The nuances of women's attire, both indoors and outdoors, in the late 19th century were also prevalent in the 16th century. The illustrations published by Nicolas de Nicolay shed light on the attire of the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent. The woman depicted in Figure 7 with the title "Turkish Woman Walking in the City," is dressed in a long, loose-fitting garment that covers her from head to toe, typical of the modest dress codes for Muslim women in the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century. The garment has elaborate patterns or embroidery around the collar and cuffs, indicating a certain level of affluence or social status.

Figure 6. Turkish women.

Source: Dalvimart (1802).

Referring to the Islamic tradition that emphasizes women's privacy, Nicolay attributes women's going to the bathhouse several times a week to reasons such as socializing, relaxing, experiencing worldly pleasures away from men, purity, and the obligation to worship with ablution. He even refers to homosexuality as follows: "They fall in love as passionately as if they were men. So much so that when they see a girl or woman of perfect beauty, they do not stop until they realize that it is a great privilege to have the opportunity to wash with her, to hold her by the hand, and to taste everything according to their taste" (Nicolay, 1568, p. 73). He also alludes to Sappho, the Greek poet from Lesbos, who is recognized as the originator of the term "lesbian." Regarding the engravings in Figure 7 titled "Turkish Woman Going to the Bath," Nicolay (1568, p. 73) writes:

> The worldliness of body, health, superstition, freedom of strength, and freedom of pleasure make it not surprising that the baths are customarily frequented by Turks. Even the stateswomen willingly go there early in the morning to stay until dinner time, accompanied by one or two slaves. One slave carries on her head a leather vase, embossed in the shape of a small bucket for drawing water. Inside this vase, there is a fine and long shirt of woven cotton, another shirt, loose linen creams, and a mineral drug called *rusma*, which is pulverized and soaked in water with lime and applied to areas where they want to remove hair, causing it to fall out immediately with the smoke. This vase, thus garnished, is worn covered with a rich velvet paillon or crimson satin enriched with gold and silver, with hanging silk and gold tassels. The other slave, if there are two, carries a fine carpet with a pillow. In such an apparatus, the slaves go behind their mistresses, who are dressed over their dresses in a fine linen shirt called *Barami*. Upon arrival, they spread the carpet, strip off their clothes, and place their clothes and jewels on it. For their preparation and parade are such that, whether they are Turks or Christian women, they adorn themselves with all their richest clothes and most precious rings to better please others. When entering the bath, they are stripped on the carpet, and the vase is opened with the mouth open and the bottom facing upwards for more convenience in sitting there. The slaves, one on one side and the other on the other, wash them and rub them all over the body as long as necessary. Then they go to rest in a small, temperately warm room. However, during their rest, the girls also greet one another.

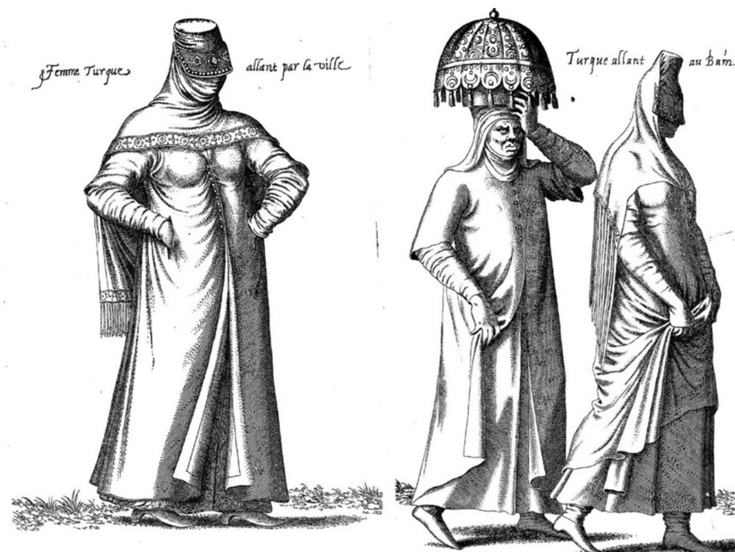

Figure 7. Muslim women in their outdoor clothes (Nicolay, 1568).

The clothes of a noblewoman who resides close to Topkapi Palace is depicted in Figure 8. Welters and Lillethun (2018, p. 114) highlight the similarities between the fashion of Venice and Istanbul during this era when interpreting this outfit:

> The fashionably dressed woman wears a patterned robe, striped sash, headdress, necklace, and chopines (elevated footwear). The chopines show the influence of Venetian styles on Turkish fashion. Both Venice and Istanbul were among the world's top luxury markets in the sixteenth century; fashion news must have traveled easily between these two cities.

Figure 8. "Noble Woman of Turkey."
Source: Nicolas de Nicolay (1568, p. 56).

Rums

"Rum" was historically used to refer to Greek-cultured Orthodox Christians residing in Rumelia and Anatolia. It was derived from "Roman," which reflected the Eastern Roman Empire's heritage (Ergul, 2012, p. 630). Following the Greek independence, this term was

used to distinguish Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians from the Greeks of modern Greece. The Ottomans called the latter "Yunan," implying the Ionian civilization. This term was directly linked to the classical heritage of Greece and its modern nation-state identity. It is essential to understand this differentiation to comprehend how these communities were viewed and governed within the Ottoman Empire. Hence, the most important group within the Rum millet, which includes various linguistic communities, is the Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians. According to the 1895 census, the Rum population was nearly 2 million 400 thousand. However, by the 1914 census, after the cession of Ioannina, Epirus, Macedonia, Macedonia, Thrace and the islands to Serbia and Greece and the independence of the Albanians, it had fallen to 1 million 700 thousand, around nine percent of the total population of the Ottoman Empire (Karpat, 2003, p. 88).

Following the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Rums, the largest minority in the Ottoman Empire, maintained their political creed under the rule of the Fener Patriarchate and took part in state administration. Until the Greek Revolt of 1821, the Greeks enjoyed privileges that other communities, including the Turks, did not enjoy. These privileges included significant roles in administrative and economic sectors, particularly through the influential Phanariots, Greek families who served as advisors and diplomats to the Ottoman court. Additionally, the Greek Orthodox Church had substantial autonomy and influence, which allowed the Greek community to maintain its educational and religious institutions with considerable independence. They were seen as the spokesman and representative of all Orthodox people. So much so that until 1840, the Ottomans referred to all Orthodox people as "Rum" (Karpat, 2003, p. 86). However, in recent years, it has become evident that the *millet* system's presentation of all non-Muslims as a closed category and its treatment of religious communities as identical communities contradicts reality (Özil, 2016).

The language of the Bulgarians, another sizeable Orthodox community, is Bulgarian, which belongs to the Slavic language family. Bulgarians reside in the region between the Danube and the Balkan Mountains, as well as in Thrace and Macedonia. During Mithat Pasha's governorship of the Danube in the latter half of the 19th century, the Bulgarian people made economic progress and developed a large middle class due to his reforms and breakthroughs. This class contributed significantly to the development of Bulgarian nationalism. Through the efforts of Greek educational institutions and the church, the Bulgarians had been Hellenized for a long period. In 1870, after the "Edict of the Bulgarian Erkzahlik" by Sultan Abdülaziz, the Bulgarians gained the right to choose between the Fener Patriarchate and their own church. They were recognized as a separate millet with the establishment of the Bulgarian Church. This was the result of the efforts of this class. Almost all Orthodox followers in the Danube and two-thirds of those in Macedonia preferred the Bulgarian Church. On the other hand, most Romanian-speaking Vlachs preferred the Fener Patriarchate and became Hellenized. The few Vlachs who preferred the Bulgarian Church became Bulgarians. During the Ottoman-Russian War between 1877-78, Bulgarian and Russian forces massacred between two to three hundred thousand Muslims and displaced over one million people. This led to an increase in the Bulgarian population ratio in the region. As a result of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, an autonomous Bulgarian Principality was established. By the end of the 19th century, it was estimated that approximately three million people spoke Bulgarian in the Balkans, including Bulgaria. The 1881-1893 Ottoman Census reported that over nine hundred and fifty thousand Bulgarians lived in the Ottoman Empire (Dadyan, 2020, p. 64; Karpat, 2003, pp. 88–91).

Between 1840 and 1880, the Bulgarian population in Istanbul was approximately 50 thousand. Bulgarians were particularly known for their involvement in the dairy industry

in the city. Istanbul, which Bulgarians referred to as "Tsaringrad" (City of Tsars), has always held great significance for them since the era of the Eastern Roman Empire. In the 19th century, the first Bulgarian religious community administration, churches, newspapers, printing presses, and schools were established in Istanbul. These centers played a crucial role in nurturing Bulgarian nationalism, especially in response to the oppressive policies of the Rum Patriarchate (Dadyan, 2020, pp. 44-45). Interestingly, Istanbul, not Sofia or any other Bulgarian city, served as the central role model for constructing Bulgarian identity (Dadyan, 2020, p. 70). Moreover, the increasing Catholic missionary activities among Bulgarians, taking advantage of the Orthodox Bulgarian-Rum church conflict, led to the establishment of the Bulgarian Catholic Church affiliated with the Vatican in Istanbul in 1860 with the approval of the Ottoman court. However, due to the limited Bulgarian Catholic population, the church remained weak and could not be effective (Dadyan, 2020, p. 50).

If we look at the examples of clothing, there are some differences between the dress of Greek, Armenian, and Jewish non-Muslims, even during the modernization process when the dress laws based on dhimmi law were gradually abolished. Osman Hamdi and de Launay (1999, p. 40) contrast the young Greek girl in Figure 9 (*right*) with the Jewish woman (*left*), whose appearance is more tied to the past and is considered as her opposite pole. With her elaborate hair bun and innovative dress, the Greek girl is, in fact, reminiscent of the Malakoff toilets of the past. The Bulgarian women's costume in Figure 10 consists of a thin cloth, wide-sleeved shirt with an open collar and lace embroidery on the chest, a robe and matching vest, an apron made of woolen fabric, a skirt with cross-stitch embroidery, and a headscarf decorated with colorful tassels and embroidery, giving the appearance of a skullcap. The Bulgarian men's costume, which attracts attention with its comfort, consists of a fez, a vest extending towards the *potur*, an embroidered fur coat, a red sash, a *potur* with various curved patterns, and red marquetry *yemeni*.

Figure 9. Jewish woman, Armenian bride, and young Greek girl from Istanbul in the late 19th century.

Source: Osman Hamdi Bey and Marie de Launay (1999, p. 37).

Figure 10. Clothing styles of Bulgarians living in Istanbul in the 1900s.

Source: Saro Dadyan (2020).

When analyzing the attire of affluent Greek women residing in upscale areas during the 16th century, a period characterized by a more stringent dress code, the indications of refinement and prosperity are remarkable. N. de Nicolay (1568, p. 78) provides a depiction of the clothing worn by Greek women in Pera in Figure 11, describing it as follows:

> The attire worn by Greek Perotte women and girls is incredibly opulent and splendid, to the extent that it may be difficult for those who have not witnessed it firsthand to fathom. They dedicated their utmost attention and exertion towards exhibiting bravery and adorning themselves. Primarily, they display their magnificence prominently as they traverse the city en route to their bathing establishments.
>
> Every bourgeois or merchant woman wears dresses made of velvet, crimson satin, or damask, adorned with gold or silver buttons. They wear taffeta and figured silks from Bursa, as well as multiple chains, bracelets, large bangles, pendants, and displays. These accessories are embellished with various gems, both precious and of lower worth.
>
> The girls or newlyweds adorn themselves with circular headwear made of crimson satin or patterned gold brocade. These caps are embellished with silk and gold bands, approximately two fingers in width, and are adorned with exquisite pearls and other valuable gemstones. Their shirts are crafted from crepe or colored taffeta, intricately woven and adorned with gold, resembling the attire of the Turks.
>
> Dressing well is not just an option, but an expectation. As they stroll through the city, their presence brings to mind the likeness of nymphs or exceptionally courageous brides, surpassing even the court brides in radiance. They accompany reverence and chastity with all forms of voluptuousness. Older women, although richly dressed, are more modest. As they traverse the city, they don large veils made of exquisite white linen that extend down to their thighs.
>
> Widows wear these veils in saffron yellow, walking freely, as can be seen in the following figure.

Figure 11. Greek Women from Pera.
Source: N. de Nicolay (1568, p. 78).

Armenians

Armenians were a Christian community that was highly trusted by the state, and they lived scattered throughout the Ottoman Empire, particularly in Eastern Anatolia and Istanbul. They differed from Armenians in other countries in that almost all of them spoke Turkish fluently in addition to Armenian. Furthermore, their women, like Muslim women, wore veils outside (Figure 12).

In his account, N. de Nicolay (1568, p. 151) characterizes the Armenians as a cohesive group primarily engaged in commercial activities, particularly in the lucrative trade of Levantine goods such as camelots, mohair, textiles, and rugs imported from Syria (Figure 15). Armenians of lower socioeconomic status often pursue careers as craftsmen or dedicate themselves to the cultivation of gardens and vineyards. Their attire consists of lengthy garments, resembling the clothing worn by the Greeks and other Eastern nations. Additionally, they adorned their heads with a blue turban adorned with a combination of white and red colors. Only the Turks are allowed to wear the simple red turban. In his work from 1568, N. de Nicolay (pp. 151-154) provides a detailed account of the origins of Armenian traditions and beliefs, as well as the geographical context in which they have historically thrived:

> Historically, the laws, customs, and way of life of the Armenians closely resembled those of the Medes, including religious practices. Most of their practices mirrored those of the Persians. The Armenians adhere to Christianity as their present faith and religion, practicing their own distinct church and rituals. Armenian Christian practices diverge considerably from those of the Roman Church and even more so from the Greeks. The role of a Catholicos encompasses both temporal and spiritual leadership, distinguishing it from the positions of the Roman Pope or Greek Patriarch. Their services are conducted in the Armenian language to ensure better comprehension by the congregation, who in turn respond in the vernacular. During religious services, individuals stand up to listen to the Gospel and exchange a kiss on the mouth as a gesture of peace and reconciliation. The Armenians observe the Eucharist by using unleavened bread and wine, just like the Latin Church, but in their native language. They abstain from observing Christmas but instead host a grand commemoration on the day of the Epiphany. In comparison to Europe, their

observance of lent is more rigorous, as they completely avoid consuming any animal products and indulgent foods.

Armenia is a region in Asia, named after Aram, a companion of Jason the Thessalian on his Argonautical expedition. Armenia is partitioned into two regions: Greater Armenia, presently known as Turcomania, and Armenia Minor. This region includes Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark is said to have landed after the Great Flood. The river Araxes traverses the plains of Armenia, alongside the renowned rivers Euphrates and Tigris. Despite its historical significance, much of Armenia Minor is now under the dominion of the great Turk, while Greater Armenia is under the rule of the Safavids.

With the reign of Mahmut II, Armenians began to take part in high-level state administration (Toros, 1985, p. 1009). The Armenian community was divided into different sects and had a more traditionalist social organization and culture compared to the Greeks and Bulgarians. According to the Ottoman census taken between 1881 and 1893, the Ottoman Empire was home to approximately 1.1 million Armenians (Karpat, 2003, p. 95).

Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, p. 36) describe the traditional Armenian bridal attire shown in Figure 9, capturing its cultural richness and symbolic significance. They detail the bride's dress as a long robe made from thick cloth, lavishly embroidered with gold and silk. The robe features elaborate and heavy pleats, an open front, and a tail, with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, adding a regal and ceremonial quality to her appearance. Accentuating the bridal ensemble is a white tiara adorned with flowers, enhancing her elegance and grace. The bride's veil, made of fine tulle, adds a layer of mystique and delicacy, while another golden veil, specifically designed to cover the face, adds to the complexity and opulence of her attire. Her hands are tied together, symbolizing perhaps her commitment and the solemnity of the marriage ceremony. Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay note the profound respect shown to the bride, seen as the future matriarch of her family. This respect is not just for her as an individual but also for what she represents—fertility and continuity. The ceremonial attire and the elaborate presentation are said to evoke, perhaps unconsciously, ancient religious sentiments associated with universal fertility. This connection underscores the deep cultural and historical roots of the bridal attire, linking the personal and celebratory event of a wedding with broader themes of fertility and renewal that transcend generations.

In Figure 12, the woman's attire is characterized by its elaborate design and rich textiles, reflecting the socio-economic status and cultural heritage of the Armenian community. The traditional dress includes a long, embroidered robe, often adorned with intricate patterns and vibrant colors that denote not only aesthetic preferences but also cultural symbolism. Like the case for Muslim women, the veil, an essential component of the ensemble, signifies modesty and religious observance, aligning with the broader cultural practices of the time.

As further illustrations, the Armenian man's identity is easily recognizable by the color of his headdress and *yemeni*, as shown in Figure 13, where he is depicted alone, and in Figure 14, where he is shown with a Turk.

Figure 12. An Armenian woman on the street in the 19th century
Source: Bogos Tatikian (1850).

Figure 13. An Armenian man.
Source: Dalvimart (1802).

Figure 14. Armenian (*left*) and Turkish (*right*) clothing in the 18th century.

Source: Saro Dadyan Collection (Akbaş, 2020, p. 84).

Figure 15. Jewish (*left*) and Armenian (*right*) merchants from Istanbul.

Source: N. de Nicolay (1568, pp. 150, 154).

Jews

The Jewish community was dispersed throughout the Ottoman Empire and mainly settled in cities such as Istanbul, Thessaloniki, and Izmir, which were centers of foreign trade. Jews were generally engaged in trade. For example, in Figure 15, there is an engraving depicting a Jewish merchant from the 16th century who is shown leaving on Fridays while wearing a draped garment as he moves through the city of Istanbul.

Along with the local Jews, there were also immigrant Jews who fled from anti-Semitic Christian countries and found refuge in the Ottoman tolerance. The Jewish community did not have linguistic unity as Hebrew was not a common language beyond being the language of worship. Those living in the Arab provinces spoke Arabic, while Sephardim from Spain and Ashkenazic immigrants from Poland and Russia had no common language.

Octavien Dalvimart (1802) created an album of clothing engravings from the Ottoman Empire depicting Jews, who were a persecuted race, enjoying more privileges in Istanbul than in any other country. They were on the same ground as the Turks and, in some cases, even had more freedom. They controlled trade and attained great wealth and prestige in Istanbul. Figure 17 shows a Jew in his traditional dress, while a Sephardic Jewish couple is depicted in Figure 18.

The medical sector of Istanbul was also under the dominance of the Jewish people. As N. de Nicolay (1568, p. 105) noted, although Turkish physicians wear the same attire as the rest of the population, many of the Jewish physicians wear a high pointed cap stained in scarlet red, which can be seen through the drainage line, rather than the yellow *tulbant* that was characteristic of the Jewish people (Figure 16).

Figure 16. A Jewish physician in Istanbul.

Source: N. de Nicolay (1568, p. 106).

As N. de Nicolay (1568, p. 150) notes in the 16th century, "the Jews who live under the domination of the great Turk are all dressed in long clothes like the Greeks and other nations of the Levant." Therefore, the traditional lines in the attire of Jewish men and women in Istanbul in Figure 19 also draw attention. Osman Hamdi Bey and de Launay (1999, p. 40) describe Jewish women's clothing as a bizarre mixture of Northern and Eastern fashions. The outfit in Figure 19 (*left*) is a color illustration of the Jewish women's dress in Figure 9, consisting of a tightly wrapped floral headscarf with a white embroidered border that prevents the hair from showing, a striped or checkered silk robe with a gold-embroidered

border, a belted waist, a cardigan in bright pistachio green, lilac, fawn, etc., lined with white astrakhanum or swan feathers, and shoes.

Figure 17. A Jewish senior.
Source: Dalvimart (1802)

Figure 18. Sephardic Jewish couple.
Source: Silvyo Ovadya Collection (Molinas, 2020, p. 297).

Figure 19. Ottoman Jewish clothing.
Source: Ivo V. Molinas (2020).

Boundary lines in the *millet* system: Colors and fabrics

In historical times, Muslims were distinguished from non-Muslims by allocating certain fabrics and colors specifically for Muslims (Faroqhi, 2004, pp. 24–25). The green turban, for instance, was a symbol of religious privilege and was exclusively worn by *seyyid*s, who were descendants of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Non-Muslims were not permitted to wear this color. However, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, although not a *seyyid*, used green to symbolize his religious devotion (Nahum, 2011). In contrast, the color white was also forbidden for non-Muslims. For example, Jews wearing a prayer shawl with a green cord were advised not to use it to avoid trouble during their pilgrimage to Jerusalem. French diplomat Pierre Belon (1554, p. 400) mentioned in his travelogue that yellow turbans were worn by Jews, while Armenians, Greeks, Maronites, and Coptic Christians wore blue turbans or turbans of other colors because white was only acceptable for Turks (referring to Muslims). However, the use of yarns of colors other than green made white fabric acceptable (Peters, 1985, p. 526). By the early 19th century, Christians and Jews began wearing white turbans with blue or blue-black stripes. Additionally, the shape of the headdress could also be used to distinguish one *millet* from another. For instance, the Armenians were known for wearing a non-elegant and impractical type of *kalpak*, in addition to the black color that had become their trademark (White, 1845, p. 186).

During the 16th century, edicts allocated certain colors to specific groups of people. Jewish and Armenian non-Muslim women were allowed to wear skirts made from a particular blue, black, or navy-blue Bursa fabric. Muslims were reserved yellowish leather shoes, while non-Muslims could wear black shoes (Altınay, 1987, pp. 47–48). The belief that colors ranging from dark blue to black symbolized evil further cemented the idea that these colors were suitable for non-Muslims, and they came to be associated with mourning. However, by the 18th century, mourning attire was no longer used for the funerals of sultans, in keeping with Islamic etiquette. In the 15th and 16th centuries, dignitaries wore dark blue and black kaftans at the funeral of Suleiman the Magnificent, while it was customary to wear old, worn-out clothes as visible signs of grief (Bağcı, 1996).

Jews and other non-Muslims were distinguished from Muslims by their dressing. For instance, in 1702, it was forbidden for Jews and Christians to wear yellow shoes and a red heart, and they were only allowed to wear black shoes and hats instead. In 1730, it was stated that Jews would face the death penalty if their headwear resembled that of Muslims. In 1752, the types of furs that Jews could wear were limited, and only blue and dark-colored cloth and short *kalpak*s were permitted (Molinas, 2020, pp. 315–316).

During the 18th century, the wealthy Ottoman population had the privilege of selecting the colors of their clothes. They preferred bright shades of red and blue, which was revealed through the sample fabrics included in the 18th-century French merchants' commercial correspondence in the eastern Mediterranean. This preference was directly related to income and class, as stated in an 18th-century French Levantine trade manual. A bale of cloth for the upper-income group included several pieces of carmine red, one of lilac and one of violet, one of purple or cinnamon, and three pieces of green. However, the color known as grass green was avoided because of its religious significance. Meanwhile, bales for lower-income buyers consisted of soft-colored fabrics, such as three pieces of blue, two khakis, and two dark violets. It should be noted that even these modest buyers avoided black and dark blue, which were reserved for non-Muslims according to 16th century edicts (Faroqhi, 2004, p. 26).

Red woolen fabric was in high demand, especially the cheapest varieties imported from England, until the mid-18th century, when British merchants temporarily withdrew from the Ottoman market. Fez makers preferred red London fabric dyed with a vegetable dye known as root dye (Davis, 1967, pp. 109–113). Locally produced fabrics during that period included turkey red, a relatively dark shade that does not bleed after washing, which was in high demand among European customers. In addition, some of the Indian fabrics that fascinated wealthy Ottomans in the 1600s and 1700s were successfully imitated by local manufacturers from Aleppo to Ayntab in Northern Syria in the 18th century (Faroqhi, 2004, p. 25).

With its roots in the pre-Islamic Eastern Roman and Sassanid empires, Islamic dress codes also have parallels in medieval Europe, where the Church enforced similar but less stringent regulations for Jews and Muslims (Cohen, 2008, pp. 38–74). However, these regulations disappeared during the Age of Enlightenment, first in Western Europe and then gradually in Eastern Europe and Russia. In 1781, Emperor Josef II of the Habsburg Empire abolished the obligation for Jews to wear the yellow star (Elliot, 2004, p. 107). In the Ottoman Empire, the modernization process led to a gradual relaxation of dress restrictions. By the 20th century, modern dress had become prevalent, especially among non-Muslims in Istanbul, due to Ottoman modernization efforts encompassing many aspects of life.

The Dissolution of Dress Codes in the Ottoman Empire

As well as the primordial counter challenge to change, the circumstantial forces like the interaction of modernizing pressures with traditional organization of the Ottoman society impacted the negotiation of identity. These interactions disputed then existing social order and the markers of identity that kept it intact as the State started reforms targeted at modernization and centralization. Often at odds with the strongly ingrained customs of the *millet*s, modernizing initiatives aimed to produce a more homogeneous and secular public space. Adoption of Western dress forms among the Ottoman elite, for example, marked a change in identity that matched the more extensive socio-political transformations taking place throughout the Empire (Quataert, 1997, p. 409).

Nonetheless, not all *millet*s went through the same cycle of identity negotiation. Reflecting their own historical experiences and socio-political setting, different communities responded to modernization pressures in different ways. For example, the Rum or Greek Orthodox community negotiated their identity differently than the Armenian or Jewish groups given their close ties to the Phanariets and the Orthodox Church (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 1998). The administrative duties and economic privileges of the Greeks let them negotiate modernization with a degree of autonomy that is unattainable for other *millet*s (Karpat, 1985, pp. 213–214). In contrast, other groups, such the Armenians and Jews, on the other hand, had different opportunities and barriers for adaptation. Their historical background, social level, and interactions with the Ottoman government affected their reactions to pressures of modernization. For these groups, negotiating their identity through clothes usually meant striking a careful balance between preserving customs and embracing new looks fit for contemporary setting (Masters, 2001, pp. 92–93).

Furthermore, the negotiation of identity took place at an individual level in addition to the communal one. Members of the *millet*s had to negotiate their own identities within the framework of social norms as well as external pressures. Often in this negotiation, one had to strike a balance between preserving customs and adjusting to modern reality. For instance, a young Armenian merchant in Istanbul might adopt Western business attire to appeal to European clients while adhering to traditional dress codes within his community to maintain social standing.

Social mobility in the Ottoman Empire was primarily facilitated through the state apparatus until the 18th century. The state apparatus was responsible for mediating social mobility, and until the mid-17th century, the expansion of the Empire provided significant opportunities for progress. Thousands of Christian peasant sons were appointed as administrators and Janissaries through *devşirme*, which led to the acquisition of wealth and social prestige. Similarly, poor Turkish nomads regularly became leaders of armies, administrators of provinces, or leaders of administrative units with full social and economic privileges. However, as territorial expansion slowed down, so did mobility through military channels (Morrison, 2024; Yapp & Shaw, 2024).

During the time when the Empire was completing a period of great social mobility and fluidity, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) enacted numerous regulations on tailoring. After this period, clothing laws remained mostly unchanged for more than 150 years, until 1720. During this time, there was little social mobility, and the state was established. However, from the early 18th century onwards, there was a steady stream of dress codes introduced. This was due to the emergence of new groups who challenged the economic, social and political power of ruling dynasties and their supporters. First, new groups of Muslim and non-Muslim merchants developed, thanks to increased international trade and a general increase in the circulation of commodities. Second, with the creation of the system of lifetime *iltizam* in the 1690s, the manorialists became a new and powerful source of political power, linked to the wealth of the state and the functioning of the state apparatus. These changes led to the status derived from wealth competing with the status gained from holding office (Quataert, 2005, pp. 144-148).

During the Tulip Age (1718-1730) in the Ottoman Empire, the new wealth was visible, and the court used competitive displays of consumption to maintain its power and prevent new rival groups from emerging. Sultan Ahmet III and his son-in-law, Grand Vizier Ibrahim Pasha, organized competitions in palace construction, festivities, and tulip cultivation to showcase their wealth. As international trade was just beginning to gain prominence in this period, the primary target audience was the wealthy estate owners. With the Tulip Age and

the rest of the 18th century, a series of dress codes emerged. These laws promoted a status quo that opposed the various forms of dress that were considered too extreme for morality, social discipline, and order. For example, in the 1720s, 1750s, and 1790s, laws were passed that opposed men's and women's clothing that were too tight, too revealing, too rich, too extravagant, or the wrong color. In the 1760s, merchants and artisans were criminalized for wearing ermine furs, which were reserved only for the sultan and his viziers. Similarly, in 1792, women's coats made with thin fabric were banned, and a few years earlier, non-Muslims were prohibited from wearing yellow shoes, a color permitted only for Muslims. This social change and mobilization caused concern for state officials and social groups whose privileged position was threatened. Thus, the state enacted a set of laws to protect its legitimacy and the loyalty of those who belonged to the old merchant circles and the civil service. Ottoman sharia registers show that there were some lawsuits for violations of these laws. However, social change and mobility had become so drastic and beyond the state's ability to control that in 1829, Sultan Mahmud II had to abolish the old social markers based on dress overnight. Instead, he introduced a series of new regulations that required all officials and civilians to wear the fez, which was the same headgear for everyone. Robes and slippers were replaced by redingotes and cloaks, trousers, and black leather boots. Jewelry, fur clothing, and ornaments were abandoned, and beards were shortened. The clergy was exempted from this law, but Ottoman women were ignored (Çiçek, 1996; Elliot, 2004, pp. 106–107; Lewis, 1993, p. 143; Quataert, 2005, p. 148; Soykan, 2000, p. 183).

1829 law meant that people were no longer required to wear clothing that indicated their identity. The law was a precursor to more sweeping edicts in 1839 and 1856 that aimed to ensure equality for all Ottoman subjects, regardless of their religious or group identity. Many people welcomed the disappearance of old markers, which had become strained and eventually collapsed due to increasing social change. Wealthy merchants, mostly non-Muslims, quickly adapted to the new attire, sometimes to avoid discrimination. However, other Ottoman subjects rejected the effort to create uniform clothing and instead created new social markers.

For example, Muslim and non-Muslim Ottoman workers at the bottom of the social hierarchy did not accept the fez (Zürcher, 2004, p. 112). This was not a reaction against equality between Muslims and non-Muslims. Instead, they were seeking solidarity by insisting on their identity as workers and not preserving class differences against a state that was attacking guild privilege (Quataert, 1993, p. 89). They saw the Janissaries as their protectors and were unhappy with the state abolishing economic practices that had long provided protection to workers (Faroqhi, 2000, p. 145). Most, if not all, Muslim and non-Muslim workers insisted on headdresses that identified them as a distinct group (İnalcık, 1994, p. 210).

In the 19th century Ottoman society, there was an increase in social fluidity between various professional and religious groups and ranks. This led to a diversity of dress in which wealthy Muslims and non-Muslims flaunted their new wealth, power, and social prominence in the latest fashions of extravagant dress. This was a way of mocking the 1829 law that sought to impose uniformity, modesty, and simplicity.

Women in the Ottoman Empire experimented with fashion in the private sphere of the home before moving out into the public sphere. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, Ottoman Muslim women wore shalwar and flowing, three-skirted house dresses at home. By the late 19th century, urban elite women switched to the new fashions of crinoline skirts, corsets for a slender waistline, and bun hairstyles at home. This new style eventually moved into the public sphere, where women took care to conceal their body contours with a long-

skirted veil that covered almost the entire body. Over time, this long-skirted veil became more and more transparent, resembling the coats of European women.

Fashion historians are divided along two lines when discussing the meaning of the Western dress adopted by Ottoman men and women. The first group argues that the adoption of Western dress and culture reflects westernization or a desire to become part of the West. The second group sees the adoption of Western fashion in a more complex way, not as an effort to integrate with Western society, but as part of a broader process of civilization that continued throughout the 19th century. Lace dresses or frock coats in the latest Parisian fashions were an attempt to mark social differentiation and modernity through dress, emphasizing being both part of the new rather than the old and superior to those in their own society who did not wear such dresses (Quataert, 2005, pp. 151-152).

Conclusion

The Ottoman Empire officially recognized Orthodox Rums, Armenians, and Jews as non-Muslim communities, establishing relations with them through a non-liberal communitarian multiculturalism model. To manage these communities, the Ottoman palace used the *millet* system, a non-territorial autonomy structure. For centuries, this system has applied the understanding of "visible religion" as a fundamental aspect of identity.

This article examines how dressing functioned as a means of religious classification and social control against the backdrop of the complex interaction between ethnic identities and social dynamics in the Ottoman Empire. The sultan's edicts, which imposed special clothing requirements for different religious groups, required subjects to reveal their religious affiliation through dressing. This obligation not only strengthened ethnic boundaries—in Barth's terminology—but also enabled the negotiation of identity within the religious community within a rigid socio-political structure. The Ottoman modernization process, which dates to the 18th century, influenced this negotiation by introducing new forms of dressing that challenged traditional norms. Thus, the process of identity construction based on primordial ties underwent changes due to circumstantial influences.

When we compare identity negotiation to clothing literature, we also see how visual markers, such as dressing, serve as both symbols of cultural heritage and tools for navigating social structures. For example, Welters and Lillethun (2011) suggest that clothing functions as a visual language that conveys complex messages about status, belonging, and differentiation. Welters (2011, pp. 27–30), who has extensively discussed the role of dressing in expressing and negotiating identity, argue that clothing is not only a reflection of ethnic identity but also a dynamic context through which individuals and communities negotiate their position in a broader socio-political context. She emphasized that dressing is a visual language instrument. In our case, the Ottoman Empire's *millet* system codified and institutionalized this visual language by mandating specific dress codes for different religious communities. These dress codes made religious and social identities instantly visible, strengthening boundaries between different groups and facilitating social control (Chagnon, 2013, p. 263). But the negotiation of identity through dressing was not static. Traditional dress codes began to dissolve as modernization efforts like the *Tanzimat* reforms revealed new socio-political dynamics. For example, the adoption of Western clothing styles by the Ottoman elite symbolized a shift towards modernity and adaptation to European cultural norms. This change was not merely an imitation of Western fashion but also a strategic negotiation of identity that allowed individuals to navigate the changing socio-political environment (Chrisman-Campbell, 2011, pp. 45–46). This exemplifies an ethno-

symbolic synthesis by going beyond primordialist and circumstantialist approaches within the framework of ethnicity theories.

In synthesizing these findings, it becomes apparent that the study of clothing and the millet system within the Ottoman Empire offers valuable insights into the broader themes of identity formation, religious diversity, and the role of material culture in mediating socio-political change. This examination contributes to our understanding of the Ottoman Empire's legacy, providing a nuanced perspective on the challenges of navigating religious diversity and modernity in a complex imperial context. This underscores the enduring significance of dressing as a medium for negotiating, expressing, and preserving communal identities, providing a rich avenue for future research into the intersections of fashion, religion, and identity across historical and cultural landscapes. This insight not only enriches the academic discourse on the Ottoman *millet* system and its implications for identity formation but also sheds light on the broader sociocultural dynamics of clothing as a form of non-verbal communication and social negotiation.

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Acknowledgments

This article is an expanded and refined version of the theoretical approach of the thesis titled "The Role of Clothing in Identity Construction in Multicultural Societies: Ottoman-Turkish Modernization." The article enhances the thesis by diversifying the data used and incorporating a more comprehensive theoretical framework.

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Disclosure statement

The author has declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The author has received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.