Headscarf and Veiling
Glimpses from Sumer to Islam
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Introduction

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For years now, a piece of cloth has been the focus of many public and private debates. Ideologically charged to a high degree and politically instrumentalised on a regular basis, the headscarf is probably the most argued-about piece of garment of our times. Although the sight of women wearing headscarves or veils in the streets of European cities has become familiar in recent years, the topic continues to fascinate and polarise at the same time. The debate about headscarves has caused fierce discussions about Muslims and – to a lesser degree – with Muslims, and continues to do so. In Germany, Switzerland, and France, teachers were dismissed because they refused to take off their headscarves while in Austria, an extension of the ban on headscarves in elementary schools is under discussion at the time of this writing. At an open forum at the University of Frankfurt on 16 January 2020 – accompanying the exhibition *Contemporary Muslim Fashion* – Naïla Chikhi, an Algerian-born women's rights activist, referred to the headscarf as the "uniform of Islamism".[1]

No other garment in history has become the object of more cultural fantasies and projections than the Muslim headscarf and it still serves as a fiercely contested symbol of various sociopolitical positions today.

During the economic crises of the 1970s of the past century and the associated social changes in Egypt, the headscarf quickly rose to popularity as a religious answer to women's work, compulsory schooling for girls, and the ubiquity of the visual media. In response

1 Chikhi 2020.

to Western lifestyles, the custom of wearing headscarves was reinvented as a Muslim-feminist alternative that no longer bore the stigma of conservatism but became a modern cultural phenomenon to which new and complex meanings were assigned.

Iranian women of all ages, the so called "mothers and daughters of the revolution", have used their headscarves in a quite different way. In the wake of Vida Movahed's silent protests in 2018 they climbed on junction boxes and other public objects, removed their headscarves, and held them up in the air in protest against the regime in Tehran.

It is surprising that a simple, elementary piece of garment can provoke such strong emotions. Opponents and advocates of the use of headscarves in public refer to a wide range of historical interpretations. Many of them are heteronomous assignments of meaning that do not allow room for ambivalence. They reveal much more about those who created them than about the headscarf itself or its bearers. Some people view it as a symbol of the oppression of women in the name of religion or a patriarchal society. For others it is an indispensable part of their individual practice of religion. And some use it as a symbol in their sociopolitical confrontation with secular regimes they reject.

Headscarves are a part of almost all traditional Near Eastern apparel, documenting long-established social structures. They can be used as fashion accessories carrying meaning in colour, design, or style. In this way they play important roles in female social discourses. They can equally serve as prestige objects, which often provide a considerable increase of esteem within the social environment. And, of course, they are political symbols in various autocratic regimes in the Middle East built on religious foundations.

In the context of a perceived cultural conflict between the West and the Muslim world, the headscarf has become a highly emotionally charged buzzword. The Turkish-born feminist Nilüfer Göle wrote in 1996:

> Women's bodies and sexuality reappear as a political site of difference and resistance to the homogenising and egalitarian forces of Western modernity. The contemporary veiling of Muslim women underscores the insurmountability of boundaries between Islamic and Western civilisation.[2]

On the other hand, the first Arab Fashion Week in Riyadh between 10 and 14 April 2018 showed how open these borders are. While Arab fashion designers such as Arwa al-Banawi presented designs inspired by European fashion – e.g. trouser suits – Jean-Paul Gaultier's

2 Göle 1996, 1.

long wide dresses and see-through veils showed an undisputable passion for oriental style.

But the headscarf could as well be simply an expression of a self-determined female life-concept founded on religious principles. During a "headscarf march" organised by the collective "Respect, égalité et dignité" on 3 September 2016 in Avignon, women held up signs that read "Ce n'est pas de la provocation juste ma liberté de conscience".[3] And Carla Amina Baghajati, head of the School Board of the IGGÖ (Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich), never tires of stressing the importance of what a woman has in her head, and not what she wears on it.

Such a self-determined life-concept could be quite temporary. I remember very well a high school student in Austria, whose family came from Egypt, and who went through phases of wearing and not wearing the headscarf. She started wearing it on family request but dropped it after some time. Later she used it again, this time out of her own conviction. As far as I know, she finally dropped it after graduation.

So, what is the headscarf? Is it a religious necessity, and if so, in which religious contexts? Is it a political signal, and if so, for what? Is it a sign of social discrimination and therefore alien to European culture? Is it part of traditional attire and thus an indication of premodern attitudes?

As with many other cultural-historical questions, the answers are extraordinarily complex and often ambiguous. We can only try to shed some light on various aspects and by doing so come closer to possible answers. But it will be necessary to recognise the complexity and heterogeneity of the phenomena and to clearly separate the different issues from each other. And we should always keep an eye on historical developments. Such developments are not limited to recent history. Sometimes they go back a long way into the past and sometimes they connect the remotest epochs.

One such example is the case of Muazzez İlmiye Çiğ, a renown Turkish Sumerologist who faced a court trial for stating the historical truth that the veil was used millennia ago to distinguish daughters of rich and influential families working in temples from other groups of women.[4]

In 2004, at the age of 90, she published a book about her convictions as a person brought up in the spirit of Kemal Atatürk and a lifelong feminist.[5] *Vatandaşlık Tepkilerim* (My Reactions as a Citizen) is a compilation of political articles she published in the 1990s and let-

3 *Le Dauphiné* 2016.

4 Eko 2016, 1-4.

5 Çiğ 2004.

and letters she wrote to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan when he was mayor of Istanbul. In one of these letters she argues that the veil was used during the Sumerian period in the third millennium BCE to distinguish women of different social levels from each other. The example she gave were priestesses who celebrated the Sacred Marriage Rite which included ritual sex.

Therefore, she argued, veils and headscarves are no appropriate symbols for woman's morality or religious devotion. Her argument that linked the headscarf with ritual sex prompted an Islamic-oriented lawyer in Izmir, Yusuf Akin, to file a complaint against her for inciting hatred by insulting people because of their religion.

Muazzez Çiğ was taken to court in 2006, facing a verdict of eighteen months in prison in case of conviction. When the trial started on 1 November, fifteen secular lawyers showed up to defend her for free, and the state prosecutor himself asked the judge to drop the charges. The court ruled after less than half an hour that as a scholar her actions did not insult Islam and therefore did not constitute a crime. Muazzez Çiğ was acquitted of all charges.[6] In the meantime, the International Association for Assyriology had drafted an appeal for dismissal of charges against the Sumerologist, which almost 150 colleagues signed. It was suspended when the news of the court ruling spread.

Muazzez Çiğs's case casts a light on the interconnections between the political and religious systems of today with the cultural heritage of Mesopotamia. Against this background, the papers in this volume attempt to cover the cultural spectrum from the cultures of the Ancient Near East to present day Islam. They were originally presented at an international congress, *Il velo femminile dall'Antico Oriente all'Islam* / *Kopftuch und Schleier vom Alten Orient bis zum Islam* held at the University of Graz in March 2020, only days before the general academic lockdown in Austria and Europe.

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6 Arsu 2006.

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