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Muslim Style in South India

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Abstract

This article presents ethnographic material from contemporary Kerala, where recent shifts in Muslim women’s dress styles (shift from sari towards *salwaar kameez*; adoption of *pardah*; use of Arabic *abaya*) have come under critique. We show that commentators fail to take into account the degree to which all Indian women—not simply Muslims—are heavily constrained in dress by issues of modesty and “decency.” Dress codes for all communities and both sexes have been continually reworked since the nineteenth century. Muslims’ recent changes are prompted by a shift away from Hindu idioms and towards more Islamic

idioms of modesty; changes index Indian Muslims' growing realization (also apparent in other spheres) that much of India's putatively common culture is actually rooted in Hindu practice. We also show that while popular and ethnographic focus alike falls upon women, men are also deeply caught up in respecting dress codes. But concerns with *decency* are always negotiated within desires for *fashion*. Kerala's Muslim community is more than averagely high spending and Muslims are especially interested in dressing well and participating in worlds of fashion, which may be vernacular *ishtyle* (Indian film driven) or global (brands).

KEYWORDS: India, dress, Muslim, Gulf, *pardah*

While most discussions of veiling tend to compare “Muslim” and “Western” styles,¹ in India it is Hindus who form the dominant majority community against whom Muslims are compared. Dress in India is produced, performed, and read through an opposition between the putatively “Indian” and the “Western,” but is at the same time powerfully shaped by the opposition between “Hindu” and “Muslim.” In the southern state of Kerala discussed here, the picture is even more complex, partly because of south Indians' pride in their social conservatism (“tradition”) but also because Kerala contains a significant, wealthy, and powerful Christian minority. Self-consciously oriented towards “the West” and to a “modern” aesthetic, Christians act as innovators in Kerala's public sphere, introducing styles of dress that would otherwise be less widespread. Issues of “decency” and “modesty,” “fashion” and “backwardness” are openly debated and contested in Kerala's multi-community public sphere. Debates have become particularly heated since the 1990s, when many south Indian Muslim women (like their Sri Lankan neighbors) have taken to wearing what is locally known as *pardah*² or “decent” dress, a form of contemporary veiling linked to pan-Islamic trends, which leaves only the hands, feet, and face uncovered (see *Milli Gazette* 2004; cf. Tarlo n.d.).³

Discussions of dress—both popular and academic—commonly focus on Muslim women. However, issues of *decency* in dress also preoccupy Muslim men as well as south Indian women from non-Muslim backgrounds. This article is based on two years' recent fieldwork in Kozhikode, a northern Kerala (Malabar) mixed but Muslim-dominated area. Our analysis is also informed by insights from earlier periods of fieldwork in a Hindu-dominated region of central Kerala (Travancore), which has a negligible Muslim population.

Kozhikode: A Cosmopolitan City

With a population of roughly 500,000, Kozhikode⁴ is the third largest city in Kerala. It has a rich and complex history of maritime trade dating back to the tenth century, and by the twelfth century had become a commercial hub between West Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. It also has long-standing trading links with the Arab world, which continued right up to the 1970s. More recently, since the 1980s, Kozhikode's economy has become dependent upon revenues and remittances from Gulf migration. This diverse history contributes to the city's popular reputation for "cosmopolitanism." As a result, for local Muslims, dress objectifies the triple-strandedness of a highly specific self: south Indian Malayali, pan-Islamic, and Arab-connected. At times these orientations are in tension, as when claims for a specifically south Indian aesthetic pull against recent reformist imperatives towards *pardah* for women. While it is often noted that women are the cultural and symbolic bearers of community identity (Nelson 1999; Tarlo 1996; Yuval-Davis 1997), it should be pointed out that men's bodies are also, albeit more subtly, marked as Muslim, something widely overlooked in popular and academic literature alike.

Kerala Dress Styles

Kerala prides itself upon being a relatively secular state, not prone to the extremes of communal disturbance or religious chauvinism found in north India. In the Indian context, secularism is defined as the constitutional guarantee of equal respect for all religions, even if this is not always upheld. In Kerala, as elsewhere in India, dress codes increasingly mark out the religious identities of the different groups living within a plural state.

To some extent it is possible to plot the geography of dress in Kerala according to the densities of different religious groups in different areas. Kozhikode is considered a conservative town because of the strong Muslim presence in contrast to Ernakulam, a city with a Christian majority where dress codes are more permissive. There, fashion items such as jeans or sleeveless T-shirts (for women) and Bermuda shorts (for young men) are a common sight. Such items are rarely seen outside of this Christian-dominated city and are considered inappropriate dress by all Muslims and by many Hindus. In Thiruvananthapuram (formerly Trivandrum) city to the south, where the Hindu influence is strong, gold-bordered cream handloom cloth known as *cassava* is frequently spotted, worn both as a female sari or male *mundu* (waist-cloth).

Women's Dress

Known as *Westerns* across India, European-style skirts, trousers, T-shirts, and so on have made hardly any inroads into Kerala. Young unmarried women up to around the age of twenty who come from very progressive families may wear these items for college or socializing. Such girls are most likely to be urban, middle-class, and from the Christian community or from the long-standing immigrant Gujarati Hindu community. But for any family, formal or even semi-formal occasions *Westerns* would not be considered appropriate. In line with wider south Indian currents, and in contrast to much of Southeast Asia or even neighboring Sri Lanka, *Westerns* carry the slight smack of license and immodesty.

Over the twentieth century, the sari has gradually replaced various regional dresses to become a quintessential pan-south Asian female garment (Banerjee and Miller 2003). Worn from about seventeen-years-old onwards, it is in this area a six-meter piece of fabric draped over a floor-length underskirt and blouse.⁵ However, there are considerable divergences of style. Hindu and Christian women leave the sari end (*pallu*) draped over one shoulder. Some Muslim women still use the sari end to cover their heads, but more often nowadays women are matching the sari with a separately bought *mafta*—a headscarf of chiffon or polyester in a complementing shade and pattern. Underneath the sari, Christian and Hindu women wear short blouses (leaving the midriff exposed) and short, tight sleeves—and often implore tailors to make the blouse sleeves as tight as possible. The tight sleeves relate both to ideals of attractiveness—one wants to show off plump and shapely upper arms—but also, to different idioms of modesty. Sleeveless tops are widely considered immodest in Kerala and not much used outside of very sophisticated urban upper-middle-class circles. For Hindu women, modesty is about wrapping, restraining, and binding: clothes are tight, wound around the body, and jewelry such as anklets and bangles contain the bodily extremities. There is an emphasis on binding, sealing, and restraining (see Fruzzetti 1981: 16; Shulman 1980). Young Hindu girls and women wear a waist-chain, unlike boys, who need to wear these constraining, protecting, binding items only until toddlerhood is over; older married women wear bangles and necklaces. Bangles, waist-chains, anklets, and so on are specifically feminine adornments associated with ideas about female vulnerability, permeability, and need for protection and containment of feminine power (Fruzzetti 1982; Marglin 1985; Tapper 1979).

While Muslim girls also use waist-chains, anklets, and so on, recently a different logic of modesty and protection has become visible. The idea of female vulnerability being best protected by binding and wrapping is being supplanted by more orthodox Islamic idioms of modesty and protection. Here, tight clothing is seen as no longer appropriate. Muslim women now refuse to wear the short-sleeved midriff-revealing sari

blouse that was common right up until the late 1980s, and instead now match their saris with a long-sleeved, loose, long, and fully lined blouse, so that the body shape is not revealed. This makes the matching blouse pieces that are sold with saris useless to Muslim women, as the *piece* (less than one meter) is never big enough to make up a blouse in this long and loose style. Muslim women resort to non-matching blouses or to clever tailoring which adds sections in and keeps the “matching” part for a sleeve trim at the wrist (Figure 1).

This simple ethnographic point exemplifies a wider issue: the degree to which things long heralded as “Indian” in fact turn out to be structured by the needs and values of dominant high-caste Hindu communities (in the Kerala case, the Nayers). Kerala’s famous *cassava dressu* is a prime example. Whenever one speaks of “Kerala dress,” when state institutions such as banks hold “national dress days,” when there is a cultural program, tourist brochure or indeed anything purporting to showcase Kerala’s regional specificity, women will be shown wearing short, tight red sari blouses under the cream and gold-bordered handloom sari (the *cassava*), which is instantly recognizable throughout India as coming from Kerala. The bright red blouse (a color auspicious to Hindu women) is matched with a large red *pottu* or *bindi* (forehead spot), and jasmine garlands adorn loose hair. This “Kerala traditional dress” was actually invented and adopted in the nineteenth century by high-caste Hindu women. It is nowadays adopted by lower-caste and Christian women alike as emblematic of regional affiliation but is almost never worn by Muslims. Furthermore, using a *pottu* or *bindi*

Figure 1

A reformist organization’s cookery contest entrants wearing *pardah* or long and loose *salwaar kameezes* carefully teamed with matching *mafta* (headscarves). The contest judges who are elite Muslim women from outside the area are wearing costly silk saris and using the tail to cover their hair. Photograph: Caroline Osella.



Figure 2

Girl wearing the school uniform of *salwaar kameez*.
Photograph: Matthea de Jong.



(even a fashionable adhesive decorative one) which signifies feminine auspiciousness, is considered inappropriate for Muslim women, as is wearing hair loose and adorned with flowers. What is dubbed “Indian” or “Malayali” turns out to be high-caste Hindu and ultimately excludes Muslims (cf. Simpson 2004).

Difference is also evident in Hindu attitudes towards the *salwaar kameez* (Figure 2), the long tunic worn over loose pants and matched

with a shawl, which has become the Kerala unmarried girl's dress since the 1990s. Hindu villagers were initially very hostile to replacing their half-sari or *pavada*-blouse (skirt-blouse plus breast-wrap) with the *salwaar kameez*, commonly (although incorrectly) known throughout Kerala as the *churidar* (a usage followed here). It is perhaps an index of these garments' perceived exotic foreignness that consumers and even shopkeepers in Kerala are unclear about terms. In north India and Pakistan, where the dress originates, the basic style of long tunic and loose pants is known as *salwaar kameez* (women) or *kurta-pajama* (men's version), or sometimes "*Punjabi suit/suit*." This terminology is not heard in Kerala. In north India, *churidar* refers specifically to a style in which the pants are very tight around the leg, showing the calf outline, but in Kerala, the term *churidar* has been adopted to refer to any form or design of women's *salwaar kameez*. The *churidar* is often scornfully referred to as "Muslim dress" or even "Pakistani dress" by older Hindu men. Young Hindu and Christian women receive complaints from elders when they venture out in the *churidar*. The use of pants rather than a skirt was thought unseemly. "What are these legs?" one grandfather roared. Still now, the *churidar* among Hindus is thought of mostly as an unmarried woman's outfit, and only the most *modern* married women will use it. For formal wear, a sari is considered essential.

By contrast, it was pleasure rather than hostility that greeted the *churidar's* arrival on the fashion scene among Muslims in the late 1980s. Here was a dress for teenage girls and young women that, unlike *pavada* and blouse, did not accentuate and reveal the body's shape, but was loose. Moreover, while the blouse could ride up from *pavada* and reveal a strip of midriff, with the *churidar*, the body is decently covered from neck to ankle with no threat of exposure. The *churidar* is widely preferred in daily use and even at parties and pre-wedding functions. Saris are brought out by married women for weddings, but on no other occasions are they considered compulsory. Specially elaborate *churidars* are considered suitable as formal wear by young Muslim married women and mothers, a group that among Hindus would clearly be expected to don saris. The *churidar* has then been enthusiastically adopted and holds a respectability among Muslim women that it does not have among Hindus.

Styles of *churidar* vary by community (to the extent that one can often easily guess a woman's religion and ethnicity from her *churidar* alone). This is the main reason why Kerala women still vastly prefer fabric pieces for stitching over ready-made clothes. Hindus and Christians use short, tight sleeves and have the top tailored to a body-fitting shape. By contrast, Muslim *churidars* should be long, the tunic well down to the mid-calf, loose, with full or at least three-quarter sleeves, with baggy pants, lined to prevent any transparency or cling that might reveal a woman's body-shape or allow her brassiere strap to be discernable from behind. Even opaque fabrics like silk are lined to prevent cling.

Interestingly, bare arms are a greater source of anxiety and policing than bare heads. While all Muslim women keep well covered outside of the home, inside they often go with no head covering, although they never go sleeveless even in the bedroom.

Another aspect of the Muslim *churidar* is that the neckline is always covered by the *mafta* headscarf. Even when women remove outer *pardah* dress in women's rooms at functions, they keep the *mafta* headscarf on. So while Hindu women often favor designs around the neckline of a *churidar*, Muslim women prefer designs on the bottom hem, where they can be admired. The preponderance of neckline designs in *churidar* piece shops is another example of how fashion is majority-driven and is another motivation for many Muslim women to learn to sew and embroider for themselves.

Wholesalers and retailers all agreed in interviews that fashion in Kozhikode—as elsewhere in India—is heavily influenced by the movies. Each new film introduces a new style, color, and pattern, and this is then adopted two or three months after the film's release. While there are clear fashion seasons when new styles come in and when everyone buys new clothes such as the two Eids, the summer hot season and the rainy season, movie-related fashion trends appear all year-round, and businesses keep up with them. As Tarlo notes, since economic liberalization, fashion seems to have speeded up, with new styles appearing continually (1996: 337). At Eid 2003, Jamilla, a twenty-nine-year-old married woman with two children, and a migrant husband in Saudi, appeared wearing a *salwaar* with flared sleeves and loose parallel pants. She told us that the next fashion just coming in would be “*jubba* style”—loose, with very long and loose sleeves. “This will be comfortable,” she remarked; “you'll still get the breeze to your arms, like this one I'm wearing now. But this flared sleeve is not good; when you pray, you need your arms covered totally, and this flared sleeve slips up. A long *jubbah* sleeve will be better.” The fast and cheap *churidar* piece market enables women to negotiate the demands of modesty with the desire for fashion.

Specificity of Muslim Dress

It is often claimed that even fifteen years ago, *pardah* was not in use amongst Muslims in South India. It is said that Muslim women even wore their saris with tight, midriff-revealing short-sleeved blouses, like their Hindu counterparts. The post-1980s take up of *pardah* has been heavily criticized by non-Muslims as a *foreign*, not local (*nadan*) custom and an unwelcome innovation attributed to Arab influence via the Gulf. Post-reform changes in dress appear to provoke extreme anxiety, if not resentment, among non-Muslims. Hindu men complain that it is unfair that Muslim men can see Hindu women's bodies while non-Muslims are denied the pleasure of seeing Muslim women's bodies. However, in reality, a white *pardah* dress was in use up until the 1960s, while many older Muslim women can still be seen wearing the old-fashioned style

Indian *burqa* (cf. Jeffery 1979). Clearly, what has actually happened is that a lapse in veiling from the 1960s to 1980s has been followed by revealing or, as commentators have specified in other contexts, a new veiling (El-Guindi 1999). The “newness” has two aspects: first, the styles now in use are quite different from the old tent-like white *pardah* or black *burqa*, and secondly, contemporary veiling is indicative of a more developed consciousness towards Islam and is linked to global styles of Islamic “decent dress” in which only the face, hands, and feet are revealed (cf. Tarlo n.d.; Brenner 1996). At the same time, what is interesting in Kozhikode is that, in contrast to what is often reported in other ethnographic locales, wearing *pardah* is neither a one-off move, nor necessarily indicative of the weighty ideological decision it appears to represent in Java (Brenner 1996), Egypt (Mahmood 2005), Bangladesh (Huq 2008) and the UK (Tarlo n.d.). Many women who sometimes wear *pardah* (for example, if going to the bazaar) do not necessarily wear it at other times, for example when just going one street away from home to a ladies’ sewing class. This is similar to the situational veiling described by Stimpful (2000: 176) and Shirazi (2000) among Singapore Malay and Iranian migrant women, respectively.

Kerala Islamic reformism, represented by organizations such as the Kerala Naduvathul Mujahideen (KNM, founded 1952), has combined calls for the adoption of an orthopraxy based on a textual adherence to the Koran with a commitment to an overall modernization of community practices. Critical commentators like to “blame” reformist organizations like Jamaat-i-Islamiya or KNM for promoting *pardah*. Such criticisms need to be put into context against arguments commonly made by Muslims themselves that an increased awareness of and adherence to the requirements of piety is a natural progression towards self-perfection, a trajectory that has speeded up in Kerala since the translation of the Koran into Araby-Malayalam (Malayalam language written in Arabic script) in 1853 and into the vernacular in 1961. From this perspective, the appearance of the KNM (*mujahid*) reform movement in 1952 is a *result* and not a *cause* of increased Islamic awareness (Mahmood 2005; Metcalf 1992). Critics also accuse the Muslim community of “turning in on itself.” Here, they fail to put Islamic reform into perspective against the degree to which modernity and literacy in Kerala have prompted all communities, not only Muslims, into reflexive processes of reform. Non-Muslims also generally fail to appreciate the fact that the imagined secular public sphere in Kerala (as in India more widely) is actually—albeit sometimes quite subtly—nuanced as “Hindu,” a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “banal Hinduism” (Jeffery *et al.* 2006).

Muslims attribute their use of *pardah* to two main currents: a heightened sense of what is right and moral, prompted by social reform movements such as KNM; and a growing sense of marginalization and insecurity as a minority community. India has, in the last two decades, witnessed an oppressive climate of Hindutva (Hindu chauvinistic

nationalism), which has undoubtedly prompted greater attachment to an Islamic identity amongst Muslims.⁶

It is notable that Muslim women also talk of convenience: they often go out of the house, and sometimes into town, wearing only a *maxi* (house-dress) and *pardah*. This is much easier than putting on a sari or *churidar*. “You put the *pardah* on top and—there! You are ready to go! No need to dress!” they said, a point conceded even by critics of *pardah* (see e.g. Basheer 2003).

While many working-class and lower-middle-class women buy black or dark cloth (most commonly green, blue, brown, maroon) and stitch their own *pardah*, since the early 1990s *pardah* has been industrially manufactured in Kerala. There are innumerable small producers and two major manufacturers that advertise in the regional press, on billboards and television and have outlets across Kerala: Hoorulyn and Lamia (Figure 3). According to De Jong, who undertook interviews with managing directors of both companies, Hoorulyn has increased its sales since its inception in 1992 from 100 dresses to 10,000 by 2002 (2005). The commonest “local style” *pardah* dress consists of a floor-length coat made of soft or more durable cotton or polyester (depending on the budget) with tight sleeves and a little discreet embroidery or decoration on the cuff and down the front. It is matched with a *mafta*—for daily use, usually a plain black or cream cotton headscarf. As with *churidars*, *pardah* and headscarf is a negotiated dress that seeks to maximize modesty while not ignoring fashion and glamour. *Maftas* range from simple coarse cotton among working-class women to more glamorous and expensive soft fabrics for party wear, chosen carefully to match the *churidar*. Fancy scarves in shiny fabrics or with brand names are particularly desirable, as are scarves of obvious foreign origin. But

Figure 3

Advert for Hoorulyn *pardah* dress. Photograph: Matthea de Jong.



women do not have anything like the range of fashionable scarves described in Turkey (Sandıkçı and Ger 2005).

The recent take-up of the Arabic *abaya* as a more glamorous and costly form of *pardah* is of course largely attributable to recent Gulf migration. Women under thirty tend to prefer this sophisticated garment, made of thin black opaque material, and which may have flared sleeves, embroidery, silver thread-work or stone-work. Women told us that those who are young and slim prefer the more form-fitting *abaya*, while those who are more matronly choose the looser and less conspicuous local *pardah*, and it is certainly true that the *abaya* is mostly seen on the under-thirties. Sometimes the *abaya* is a locally bought or stitched *duplicate* and sometimes it has been brought by a husband or brother on leave from his job in the Gulf. The *abaya* carries considerable symbolic capital, both because it is more costly than local *pardah* (between 1,000 and 6,000 rupees as opposed to 200 to 500 rupees⁷) and because it hints at Gulf connections and a standard of living and consumption only available to those linked to the migrant remittance economy (Figure 4). At Kozhikode's stylish upmarket air-conditioned showroom "House of Pardah," imported *abayas* were available ranging from 4,000 to 6,000 rupees with top-quality *mafta* scarves in good fabrics from 60 to 120 rupees. In the Gulf the *abaya* is worn by high-status wealthy Arab women, which adds to the garment's symbolic capital in the Indian context (cf. Thangaraj 2004).

It is important not to confuse the specific garment—*abaya*—with *pardah* generally, and to assume that the appearance of the *abaya* means that it is mainly Arab influences that are bringing *pardah* into



Figure 4

A young fashion-conscious mother wears the glamorous *abaya*; her small son is dressed in a stylish *jubbah* top. Photograph: Caroline Osella.

contemporary Kerala. This is the common move made in Kerala public discourse, where “Arab influence” on “our women” is deplored and becomes a focus of exaggerated fears. Thangaraj (2004) describes similar preoccupations in Sri Lanka, where housemaids return from Gulf migration wearing the *abaya*. Far more Muslim women are wearing locally made and designed brands of *pardah* than are wearing imported *abayas*. The *abaya* is simply one garment that has been incorporated into a local repertoire of contemporary veiling.

Muslim Aesthetics

Muslim women are very fashion conscious; they spend more on clothes than other communities and have a taste for expensive *churidars*. In the local bazaar, shopkeepers agreed that the average lower-middle-class Hindu woman would have five or six *churidars*, with a couple of good silk saris for functions. Muslim women may have ten or twelve *churidars* and four or five saris and the items they choose are typically more expensive. These differences do not reflect relative community wealth but rather a difference in willingness to spend on personal consumption items. Muslim women want to wear clothes that look expensive, and which objectify their social position as wives and daughters of men in the “business class” (even if their husband is actually just a worker in a bazaar shop).

One outsider was criticizing the Muslim community, saying, “We have social functions all the time also, but we don’t wear something new every time; yet they do—how can they afford this?” The answer is that Muslim women with menfolk in the clothing trade can afford plenty of clothes because they get them free or at wholesale rates. Muslim women are also enthusiastic attenders at stitching and embroidery classes. The *churidar* is where Muslim women fully enjoy their penchant for fashion; at women-only functions and spaces, women admire each other’s clothes and always dress as extravagantly as they can manage (cf. Fugelsang 1994 for similar ethnography in an African Muslim context).

Churidar fabrics arrive mostly from other parts of India. Upmarket shops stock a few pieces of *foreign* material—prestigious and costly, if not necessarily better. Mid- and mid-upper-market retailers buy from Bombay and Bangalore; bottom-end retailers buy from nearby Tamil Nadu and cheap Gujarat. Shops can be tied into the local or the Gulf economy, or both. Whereas strictly local shops claim that the monsoon is a relatively dead time for business; stylish upmarket shops claim to be most busy at this time for this is when Gulf migrant families come home on vacation and stock up on new clothes. Upper-middle-class Gulf wives on annual vacation will buy up to twenty *churidar* sets to stitch and take back for the year.

Most Muslim women prefer to shop at the new *shopping malls* (open-air multi-story concrete structures) in the bazaar, where shopkeepers understand local tastes. Shopkeepers claim that Muslim women are

unwilling to spend highly on the quality of the fabric, preferring to place emphasis on display and spectacle. Upmarket shopkeepers lamented women's lack of knowledge about quality and their unwillingness to spend on it. At the same time, top-end and bottom-end alike capitalize on this tendency by selling *churidar* sets where the flimsiest and cheapest of fabrics—polyester and thin cotton—are married with heavy “fancy work.” “Work” is highly valorized. The term covers decorations in fabric, from hand and machine embroidery to appliqué, beadwork, and other forms of embellishment. Special prestige (and cost) attaches to styles coming from distant Muslim places, such as Lahore. Various grades of synthetics are glamorized with names like *summer cool* or *art silk*, but shopkeepers confirmed that customers rarely discussed the fabric as such. Rather they discussed the color, design, and *work*.

In Kozhikode Muslims are distinguishable from Hindus and Christians by their commitment to cutting-edge fashion, their disdain for “classic” and *simple* cotton floral prints and their increased fondness for strongly colored synthetics and glitzy *work*. In rural Malappuram such tastes are further emphasized by Gulf-rich Muslims who have developed this distinctive “Muslim style” even more strongly.

Muslim Men's Dress

Whilst women's Muslim identity is increasingly emphasized through dress practices, Muslim men's identity is down played, though not entirely invisible. Their adoption of mainstream dress demonstrates cultured taste and a modern outlook, which is in stark contrast to national stereotypes of Muslims. In popular representations—such as school plays or television serials—Muslim men invariably appear as rural and uncouth: dressed in an ankle-length checked *lungis* (rough cotton waist-cloths) held up by wide belts, wearing a vest and skullcap over a shaven head and a beard and talking in rough Malayalam (cf. Ansari 2005). Here, markers of class—the *lungi* and vest—and community—shaven head, skullcap, and beard—are brought together to define Muslims as Kerala's “backward others.”

While the *lungi* and vest combination are in fact common everyday attire amongst all of Kerala's rural and urban working class, in Kozhikode urban Muslims have long been open to fashion and new styles. Pre-Independence photos show urban Muslim men mixing a number of styles: wearing white *mundus* and white shirts; *coats* (jacket) and shoes—symbols of wealth, sophistication, and engagement with colonial fashions. The *fez*, or *turkeytopi*, along with the *valatopi* (white hat),⁸ were both high fashion and political statements for young men right up until the late 1930s, when they were briefly replaced by the *Jinnahtopi*—the hat worn by Jinnah, the all-India leader of the Muslim League pre-Independence.

With the 1950s popularization of trousers (*pants*)⁹ came a split in men's styles, still observable today. Kozhikode bazaar traders and government employees continue to wear the *mundu*, a garment strongly coded as “south Indian” and “Keralite.” Gulf migrants always wear trousers when away (unlike Pakistani migrants, who are identifiable in the Gulf by their *kurta-pajamas*), but on return to Kozhikode they revert to the *mundu*. Politicians or wealthy businessmen also like to be seen in public wearing the *mundu* as a populist move but in many contexts they will wear trousers. The *mundu/pants* divide (as among Hindus) is also generational. Those born after the 1980s are unlikely to be seen wearing a *mundu*. Just as Muslim women seem to be shifting from the sari towards a wider use of the *churidar*, even for formal wear, young men are abandoning the *mundu* for *pants*.

While many Muslim men claim to be visually indistinguishable from Christian and Hindu men, specific *mundu*-wearing styles mark out religious identity in subtle ways. Not only do Muslim men prefer *mundu* borders to be wide and colored (green, brown, and blue borders being most popular), but unlike Hindu and Christian men, they never use gold (*cassava*) borders. Moreover, Muslims normally fold the *mundu* to the left, hold it up with a belt, wear it ankle-length and never fold the end up to make it knee-length (Figure 5).

For shirts and pants, adult Muslim men go for both ready-made and individually tailored garments. In contrast to women who, even at the top end of the market, always prefer to buy fabric and have garments stitched according to their own preference, men prefer whenever possible



Figure 5

Muslim men and women separated by a cloth partition. The men are wearing either *mundu* (wraps) or trousers with their shirts. Photograph: Filippo Osella.

to buy *ready-mades*. The acceptability of most *ready-made* designs across communities is itself indicative of the lesser differentiation of “modern” male dress by community as compared to female dress.

Those men who work outside the bazaar—in professions or business—use trousers, and tend to follow wider fashion trends; photos from the 1970s show men wearing wide bell-bottoms, while currently many are wearing chinos. Muslim youth styles also seem to follow pan-Kerala trends. However, even standard shirts and pants show subtle signs of distinction. For example, the shirts and pants preferred by Muslim men are relatively sober in design, color, and fit, and are never too tight or fashionable. “Decent” Muslim men, whether “traditionalist” or committed to reformism, never wear jeans: this is something that marks them as clearly different from Hindu and Christian young men, for whom jeans are perhaps the most desirable item of clothing. Reformist-minded Muslim teenagers dress instead in a “preppy” style, with sober smart shirts and chinos, or classic pants. Again, while Hindu men often prefer sandals, Muslims commonly match pants with shoes. Most importantly, Muslim men do not wear the 22-carat gold jewelry enthusiastically worn by men of other communities in Kerala, and which has become particularly popular in post-Gulf migration times.

However, some of Kerala’s teenage boys follow high fashion and have become known as the *freak boys*. They wear whatever is the latest, and the more outrageous the better: bleached jeans with holes in the knee; lurex shirts; shirts which are made to look like fur; impossibly tight trousers. While this *style* is more commonly associated with lower-class Muslim boys from the fishing, laboring, and servant communities along the beach-side, *freak style* is also a sign of lesser commitment to the reformist wave of discreet and *decent* dress and, indeed, to the idea of dress restrictions as an aspect of one’s Muslim identity. *Freak boys* will certainly wear jeans.

As among women, commitment to religious reformism and *decent dress* in no way implies a lack of interest in fashion. The distinction between preppy (respectable) chinos and *freak style* is indicative of what Sanjay Srivastava describes as the difference in India between middle-class *fashion*, tied into global trends and working-class *ishtyle*, a more vernacular fashion that draws strongly on Hindi films (Srivastava 2007), such as the Tamil movie *Boys*, or the Malayalam movie *4 the People*. Another source of male fashion is the “silicon city” of Bangalore, home to software industries and global styles, where many young men go for visits or for work. In the Gulf, Malayali migrant young men seem to wear the same as their Kozhikode counterparts, since the branded global fashions available locally are far too expensive. As among women, migrants’ clothes are generally bought in bulk when vacationing in Kerala.

Young men’s styles then follow class and rural/urban divides, with the lower class and/or rural tending to adopt hyper fashion and louder

colors. While rural people used to visit Kozhikode for clothes shopping, now even branded fashion shops are available in smaller towns.

More so than among women, men's clothes move in a very stratified market. There are two zones of Kozhikode selling big brand franchises (e.g. all-Indian Raymonds; Lee jeans; Van Heusen). Another area caters for a mix of big brands and cheaper brands. These zones have just one or two upmarket women's boutiques among a lot of men's shops. The cheap end of the fashion market moves fast and changes several times a year, while expensive fashion brands shift styles just once a year.

While some reformist-inclined Muslim men claim that religious injunctions advise that one should not be openly fashionable, there is nonetheless a widespread ethic of enjoyment—evident in furnishing styles, house-building, wedding celebrations, food and clothes, and exemplified in the concept of “*making jolly*” (Liechty 2002; Osella and Osella 2007).

The problem of “what to wear” has been hotly debated by Malabar Muslims at least since the middle of the twentieth century. Reformist sympathizers often pointed out that while in the past “Muslims had shaven heads, skull caps and beards,” nowadays, “we turned it upside down: we keep our hair but we don't have beards any more!” Contemporary critique is extended to those who continue to wear the markers of non-reformist Islam: men who wear skullcaps or the white *mundu*, *talakettu* (white turban), and have shaven heads and beards. The reformist critique of “traditional” Muslim styles of self-presentation has two dimensions. On the one hand, it argues that normative styles are just one of the means through which the orthodox establishment tries to maintain a hold on Muslims, upholding “traditions” that have no base in the Koran. On the other, it suggests that styles appropriate for religious scholars (the *ulema*) are not necessary for Muslim men at large, who must engage with and adapt to the complex demands of everyday life. In this reformist critique, the use by non-*ulema* men of beards and shaven heads (as among the unreformed Muslim population) contributes to the negative stereotyping of Muslims and is considered an index of a more generalized Muslim “backwardness”—a state of affairs in which the Muslim community is seen to continue to lag behind the more “developed” Kerala Hindu and Christians.

Conclusions

Indian and Kerala public discourse, and private fears expressed among many Hindus and Christians, criticize Muslims' recent new veiling as: alien; Arabic; due to Gulf migration; and unnecessary. Here, De Jong (2005) is certainly correct in arguing against making such a sharp division between Muslim dress codes and those of other Indians. Hindu women in Kerala also generally find sleeveless sari blouses and Western

dress decadent and immoral. It is certainly not the case that only Muslim women are constrained in their choice of clothing or preoccupied by the issues of modesty and femininity. The issue then becomes that of defining what counts as *decent*, and it is here that different idioms of modesty come into play. *Pardah*, contrary to what is often assumed, is not new to Muslims in Kerala but was widely in use in the past. Most of today's elderly (aged seventy plus) grandmothers have never gone out unveiled. What we are seeing is the rejection by women in their forties and fifties of the dress codes they followed in their youth, while younger women also search for increasingly "*decent dress*."

It is also not the case that only women are preoccupied with balancing *fashion* and *decency*. With increased knowledge and the confidence engendered by the rise of reformist organizations like KNM, Koranic and pan-Islamic definitions of modesty for men and women alike are taking precedence over previously dominant local idioms, which as we have seen were never neutral. Overall, processes of reasoned debate about dress are guiding women towards better observance of *pardah*, at the same time as they are leading to shifts in men's dress, which move them away from nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century customary "Muslim styles," such as skullcaps and beards. As women become more easily distinguished, their men become less so.

Arab and Gulf influences—long-standing and reinvigorated rather than appearing *ex nihilo* post-1970s have certainly widened the repertoire of styles of *decent dress* available to Muslim women (Osella and Osella 2007). But these influences certainly do not, as anxious Hindu critics suggest, bring alien forms into Indian life. Young Muslim women with an eye for *style* are taking up the glamorous *abaya*, but young men are certainly not adopting either the *thob* (long robe) or the gold watches commonly used by Arab men. Indian Islamic reformism moves according to its own local logic and does not march to a Saudi (or Arab) beat (Osella and Osella 2008). The *abaya* is a status symbol and an index of youth, sophistication, and wealth; it must be understood as a sub-set of Indian *pardah* dress and not as the prototype.

To conclude, Muslim men and women alike are currently negotiating contemporary global and pan-Indian fashions within the requirements of a generalized modernist, populist, and vernacular orthopraxy that has been gradually discovered since the 1920s, and which is part of a general growing awareness of Islam, not so much as a customary communal identity but as a living faith which places demands on the individual believer (Huq 2008; Mahmood 2005; Mule and Barthel 1992; Robinson 2004). And while men and women make extremely complex moves—negotiating global and local trends—Muslim enjoyment of life continues to place a premium on fashion and the pleasures of dress, considered by most Muslims, including religious scholars, to be legitimate.

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Notes

1. Localized communities have, since the nineteenth century, been drawn into the broad (but problematic) categories of “Hindu” and “Muslim” (see e.g. Gupta 2002).
2. We are transliterating from Malayalam according to local pronunciation and use, as *pardah*, rather than the more common (in the literature) *purdah*.
3. A University of Calicut survey suggests that across Kerala's northern (Muslim-dominated) region, *pardah* increased from 3.5% in 1990 to 32.5% by 2000 (cited in Basheer 2003). We observed in 2002–4 around Calicut city a far higher percentage: perhaps around 50%, with 90% usage in the old Muslim area of the city, Thekkepuram.
4. Formerly known as Calicut.
5. See Tarlo (1996) and Banerjee and Miller (2003) for discussions of how sari lengths, draping styles, blouses, and age of adoption shift across time and region.
6. Events indicating the aggression of the Hindu right include the destruction in 1992 of the Babri Masjid—a north Indian mosque at Ayodhya, which was destroyed by a Hindu mob while police and government officials looked on; the 2002 massacre of Muslims in Gujarat, and communal violence in Marad (just outside Kozhikode), Kerala, in 2002 and 2003.
7. Rs 80 = £1 = US\$2.
8. Taller than a skullcap and produced in north Malabar, the *valatopi* was the preferred headdress of urban Muslims.
9. Pre-Independence, trousers were worn almost exclusively by the most sophisticated and anglophile members of the middle class. In the 1950s, trousers become fashionable firstly amongst college students, standing for India's drive towards modernization and progress.

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