

**The Middle Eastern Desert Headdress:  
Fashion, Function, and the Future of the “Mashadah”**

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The desert is a harsh place to live. The hot sun, endless spans of sand, and dust bombard the people of the region constantly. These conditions fueled the need for very specific attire and the inhabitants of the land created clothing that accommodated the needs and lifestyle of living in the desert. Clothing was also heavily influenced by religious beliefs. In a land that is home to a handful of ancient civilizations, it is expected that the enduring cultures of the region maintain some connections to the earlier occupants. Fashion carries significant cultural value, but also offers an opportunity to allow people a possible point of connection, a view into a different world, past and present. I chose to explore the traditional headdress worn in the Arabian Peninsula. While it is known by many names, I grew up knowing it as a mashadah.

My mashadah comes from Yemen, the country of my parents' birth. I purchased it from one of the oldest marketplaces in Yemen. I can't say how long it was sitting in that market, but it became mine during a time when I felt least connected to my culture. I remember, during the exchange with the owner of the small shop, how uncomfortable I felt in the hustle and bustle of the marketplace. I looked like an outsider; my clean foreign clothes sticking out like a sore thumb. I was barely able to answer the shopkeeper's questions in my native tongue. I bought it because during my time there, I had witnessed a handful of dust storms and saw its usefulness to protect me from them. It was also a way for me to blend in and be more like my people. When my cousin and I stopped for food, the worker at the juice stand taught me what he considered a better way to secure the mashadah. By the end of that night, after visiting a dozen shops, the natives made me feel more and more comfortable with our differences. They liked my haircut, made fun of my heavy denim jeans and sneakers, and showed me their American-influenced dance moves. The garment connected us culturally and opened a channel for communication that allowed us to share friendlier conversation. It was truly an impactful experience that helped me feel at home and armed me with a sense of safety amidst the bizarre bazaar.

The Arabian-desert headdress is a garment worn mainly in the Middle East. Regionally, it is known by many names: keffiyeh, kufiya, ghutrah, shemagh, hattah, mashadah, pushi, chafiyeh, dastmal yazdi, or cemedani. The different names reflect the different cultures and countries of origin (Kawar and Einarsdóttir 2010). Each country has its own colors or wrapping style that distinguishes it from the others. Palestinian scarves are culturally black and white, sometimes with green and red accents to resemble the flag (Sheikh 2020). In Oman, it is wrapped like a turban, whereas Saudis drape it over their body and wear it like a hoodie. There are numerous countries claiming to have been the first to use mashadahs making it difficult to trace its origin. While the process of production has changed, it is still comprised of the same material and of similar design to the original style. It is worn today in respect and appreciation of the centuries-old fashion. In modern times, the mashadah has evolved more into a fashion and status symbol than a piece of practical gear for travel that it once was (Al-Suwaidan 2008, L01; Sheikh 2020; Stratton 2007, 18).

Mashadahs are square-shaped by design and come in various sizes but the general measurements are between 40x40 in. and 50x50 in. It is usually folded in half into a triangular shape then wrapped and tied across the forehead. Sometimes an accompanying rope or headband called an agal is used to keep it in place. It is largely accepted that the garment was designed to protect the wearer from the elements of the harsh arid climate of the desert. The breathable fabric can be layered multiple times over the face and nose in a way that provides safety from airborne particulates. It can be worn on the head to also cover the shoulders, neck, and back from the sun, dirt, and sand. This is especially true during sandstorms, which occur often in the region. It can be soaked in cool water to aid in cooling efforts and to filter out finer particulates from the air. During travels it doubles as a towel, absorbing moisture if necessary. Having an extra mashadah on hand to use as a washcloth is also common practice. When rolled, it becomes a strong rope-like instrument that can be used as such or as a makeshift belt. Folding it creates a temporary bandage or sling. It can be used as a small pillow or blanket. It is this functionality that not only preserves the practice of wearing the headdress, but the headdress itself – as it can be repeatedly repurposed for different uses. A headdress can last several generations, switching hands and purpose to meet

the needs of the possessor. The abundant uses of the mashadah have made it a staple in military forces of the region as well, drawing attention to militaries around the world. Mainly worn by Special Forces, American and British soldiers receive a standard issue desert mashadah for tactical use in desert climates, although they call it a shemagh (Kawar and Einarsdóttir 2010; Stratton 2007, 18).

The colors of the mashadah hold significance as well. White headdresses signify purity of faith and of self. The traditional red and white represent purity as well as patriotism or the blood of the nation and people. Black and white mashadahs have become a symbol of freedom and are often worn in solidarity to the millions of Muslim people experiencing oppression and persecution (Al-Suwaidan 2008, L01; Sheikh 2020). The green and white colors have long held the connection to purity, peace, and leadership. Other colors were slowly incorporated throughout its history, representing specific tribes and families. This still holds truth in countries like Yemen and Oman where tribes don their exclusive colors. Some versions have decorative tassels on the corners or along the sides. The Bedouins use it as a symbol of honor and tribal identification. In parts of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh all the way to Malaysia, Muslim women wear it as hijab fashion. As it became more of a fashion accessory, more colors were included to match attire. Once its recognition and appeal reached the West, camouflage colors were used to provide tactical use in warfare to help the wearer blend in to the environment.

Along with the variation of colors are the many different ways to wrap the mashadah, some much more intricate than others. I found these styles were generally named after a country or an associated public figure or leader. When tourists visit Middle Eastern countries and wear the mashadah, they usually do not know how to wear it. They end up either asking for instructions from shopkeepers, or being stopped by a native who is so embarrassed for them that they feel inclined to help. I found several videos online of such interactions and it brought me back to that time in the marketplace. I recall how many people showed me their method of tying the mashadah, how each style came with its own story. The way the mashadah is worn, the level of care and intricacy to the wrapping, the style and design, communicates to the world, impressing thoughts upon onlookers even before a formal interaction takes place.

The mashadah has deep religious and cultural prestige, especially to the Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula; yet interestingly enough historic evidence reveals that many people in the region wore the mashadah even before the arrival of Islam (Kawar and Einarsdóttir 2010). Still, leaders of Islamic faith wear the mashadah with a kufi, thobe, and agal to complete the distinguished outfit. This stylization builds into the mashadah a symbolism that is observed in many diverse cultures, revealing that people all around the world establish deep connections to items of clothing. In the Arab world, it is still common to see political leaders wear the headdress. Almost every image of the monarchs of Arabia has the same black shroud, white thobe, white kufi, red mashadah held in place by an agal. This can be seen as a representation of the attire of the dignified, depicting modesty, piety and humility. The attire adds a level of respect similar to the suit and tie in western culture, though there is an ongoing shift in perception due to modernization, globalization, and politicization in the Middle East and abroad (Al-Suwaidan 2008, L01; Stratton 2007, 18).

In a survey conducted on a random sample of patients from a hospital in Saudi Arabia, it was found that patients preferred their physicians wear formal attire rather than the Saudi national dress, which includes the mashadah. The study went on to suggest that physicians should adopt formal attire and that the institutional dress code policy should be modified to fit these preferences to improving patient compliance and clinical outcomes. Approximately one third of the patients interviewed claimed that they recognized doctors by attire and medical equipment. The white coat has been a Western symbol of the medical profession, borrowed from laboratory workers in the mid-nineteenth century, lending credibility to the doctors who wear them. A similar survey was conducted in another city in Saudi Arabia where a majority of patients stated they liked seeing their physicians in lab coats or in professional attire instead of the traditional Saudi attire. The shift toward Western concepts of professional attire may be attributed to the blending of cultural norms constantly underway due to globalization (Hassan, et al. 2020). Despite this shift in Middle Eastern attire towards Western fashion, the mashadah has made its way to the global stage and onto the fashion runway.

The mashadah is recognizable worldwide and has made its way into fashion trends. Luxury fashion brands such as Gucci, Fendi, and Louis Vuitton have capitalized on the trend. It earned its place as a fashion accessory in the U.S. and later became very popular among adolescents in Tokyo. In an article published by *The New Statesman*, Allegra Stratton writes that Arab peasants had worn the shemagh for centuries and the headaddresses journey into couture fashion is a story of rags to riches. It was not only walked down fashion runways alongside Balenciaga, but went on sale in many U.S. retail stores increasing its accessibility to the global market. It was soon pulled off shelves due to its controversial association to deeply political issues in the Middle East, specifically Palestine. The article goes on to mention that the name shemagh comes from British soldiers during the World War II while stationed in North Africa. Western companies sell the mashadah by its westernized label rather than by any of its original names, which can be viewed as an attempt to disconnect the garment from its historic origins. Nevertheless, its cultural ties remain, even through the commercial saturation of the mashadah (Stratton 2007, 18).

I followed up on this article by reaching out to people who have worn the item at one point or another, friends that were born and raised in the U.S. of varying ethnic backgrounds – none of which were Arab or Middle Eastern. None of them knew the headdress by any of its original names. After identifying it as a shemagh, those who served in the military knew what I was referring to, but those who did not were still confused. I described it thoroughly, explaining its design pattern and comparing it to a scarf, when they were finally able to make the connection. They had purchased the item as an accessory with no knowledge of its background. They all had different reasons for buying and wearing it. The veterans mentioned their deployment in the region, either receiving one from the army or purchasing one after seeing their peers sporting them. They brought up many of its functional uses but also shared their opinion of its attractiveness. They thought it was a cool addition to their look and made them feel safer at times by having their faces covered during missions. The same sentiment regarding its attractiveness came up from the non-veterans, who bought and wore it to accessorize their outfit. One person made a connection to Palestine, claiming to have bought it for the purpose of solidarity.

An interview with an Iranian family – who wished to remain anonymous – painted a different image of the mashadah. The general consensus amongst them was that the mashadah is almost entirely worn by extremists, relating it to the MAGA baseball caps of the United States. The family of five each had a different encounter with the mashadah, which they knew as chafiyeh. The youngest boy associated it with images he sees on television, glimpses of kings and militias a world away. The middle child, a young woman in her early 20s, ties the headdress back to a traumatic experience of a gang of young men harassing her for not wearing a hijab on her first trip back home. Their parents shared different stories about how the mashadah served as a cultural garment worn for special occasions. They mentioned the change of perception, connecting it to the turmoil in the region; many of the young men attempting to uphold traditional values claimed the article of clothing as a symbol. This interview guided me to an academic study aiming to explore this shift in perception.

I never really took into consideration the value and importance of clothing in terms of symbolism and cultural value. After interviewing people from many different countries, I collected a deeper understanding of representational garments. I better comprehend the multitude of differing perceptions that can surround a single object. Our experiences, our societies, our upbringing; all work to shape our sense of reality. Many of us are not fully in control of the mechanisms that shape this fundamental awareness. This lack of awareness causes all the ambiguities people live through in the world today. It's only through diligent work and consideration for others, their cultures, their traditions that we can connect to interpret a more honest reality. I was dismayed to discover that many Arab and Middle Eastern youth did not know or care for the history of their culture's traditional clothing. They know the article of clothing through what they see in media. Their elders only wear it on special occasions such as weddings, during festivals, and Eid, limiting the exposure to the youth, preventing them from building familiarity with it. More so, the youth did not think to ask their family members about the mashadah's history or their relation to it. Media, along with sprawling globalism, is evidently also altering and blending traditions. Reexamining the patient surveys, I wondered about the desire for healthcare professionals to wear white lab coats and questioned how much of this appeal had been propagated by external ideals.

Furthermore, the thoughts of how much of our cultures diffuse upon interaction and the extent of their homogenization ran endless loops in my mind. In this fluid modern age, are we –for better and for worse - at the mercy of the collective? How long before all people adopt global norms? Do all our customs and traditions face the invisible threat of disintegration through integration? Finally, is this change something to fear, steer, or allow its natural unfurling? It is this discovery and these questions that encourages me to find ways to connect people to their heritage through something as routine yet creative as woven threads of fabric.

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