The Mughals were the last in a succession of Muslim dynasties ruling over a large part of India. The first emperor, Babur, invaded India at the end of the fifteenth century. His empire was consolidated under his grandson Akbar and nominally lasted until the British exiled the last ruler to Rangoon after the failed rising of 1857. Ruled by a Muslim dynasty, one might assume that the Mughal empire would form part of what John Voll called “Islam as a World System”, a world system which had its basis in the common religion, its centre in Arabia and the Arab language and culture as a common frame of reference.¹

This constitutes an important challenge to our assumptions of globality in at least two respects. On the one hand, it opens up the possibility that globality might not uniquely be brought about by economics and, more concretely, the expansion of a capitalist world order, but permits us to take into consideration other factors shaping interaction and entanglement between localities. On the other hand, it questions the idea of a unique and homogeneous globality. Instead it becomes possible to think about plural and interacting globalities, of zones of intensive communication, but also of zones of non-communication, of fault-lines and of ruptures.

However, posting Islam as the basis from which a world-system evolves is a highly problematic assumption, as it presupposes religion to be the central unifying force which links Muslims from different regions. Moreover, the focus on Islam as the bonding influence leads to its homogenisation—the Islamic globality, no less than the religion, would thus of necessity be Arabo-centric.

The present contribution aims at challenging these assumptions. My hypothesis would be that there was not one pre-modern Islamic world

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system, but at least two (the Ottoman Empire oscillating between an orientation to either of them and the creation of a centre of its own) which partly overlapped: an Arabic one, centred on the sea trade of the Indian Ocean, stretching from the Arabian Peninsula to the East African coast in the west and to the Indian Coromandel coast, Malaysia and Indonesia in the east. The second, land-based one would encompass Central Asia, Persia and India; here the lingua franca, both linguistically and culturally would be Persian. Arabic was of course known to a good number of religiously learned men in India, but before the second half of the eighteenth century, even their knowledge was largely mediated by interpreters belonging to the Persianate and Central Asian world, Sufis as well as scholars. Religion certainly was important to create a feeling of belonging, for some Muslims more and for others less and for some even not at all, but so were language, norms of social interaction and even knowledge of the same poems.

While this hypothesis asks for serious research on Sufi networks and scholarly traditions, on trade routes, migration patterns, and on the creation of genealogies, my paper will proceed on a much lighter vein, following the changes in Indo-Muslim headgear. Though not as serious as following back lines of commentators on classical texts, I hope the topic nevertheless not to be trivial. The choice of headgear—whether imposed by the state, a ruling group or following fashion and individual taste—both creates and expresses an identity, at the personal as well as at the collective level. Wearing or not wearing a turban, tying it in a certain way or dropping it for a cap, a hat or a fez,

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2 See the article by Sanjay Subrahmanyan, “Dreaming an Indo-Persian Empire in South Asia, 1740–1800,” in Explorations in Connected History: Mughals and Franks, ed. idem (Delhi, 2005), pp. 173–210, a fascinating counterfactual musing, posing the question, what would have happened if Nadir Shah had not only invaded North India in 1739 (which he did) but stayed on (which he didn’t, but which he might have done). This in turn serves as a starting point to challenge the teleological assumption that history of necessity evolved towards the creation of a nation encompassing the whole of South Asia and only South Asia. Instead, the cultural and economic links between India and its northern neighbours are drawn out, which might well have led to the formation of a very different polity, encompassing North India (but not the south), Persia, Afghanistan and the southern fringes of Central Asia.
