

The Kaftan: How can culture change the meaning or representation of a garment?

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Figure 1: Naeem Khan. Yellow kaftan, Spring 2013. Photo by Alessandro Viero. Source: Vogue

The kaftan, a traditional garment with ancient roots, has crossed over to diverse cultures and undergone significant transformations throughout history. The kaftan is a traditional garment rooted in ancient Mesopotamia and has evolved over centuries across various cultures and regions. The kaftan, a full-length, narrow, robe-like garment with full-length sleeves and various neck and front styles, is commonly worn as a coat or overdress. Its versatile design allows it to function as a loose gown or tunic, and it can be made from materials such as wool, cashmere, silk, or cotton. The use and fabrics of the kaftan vary across cultures (*Kaftan* 2023). Over time, the

kaftan spread to different parts of the world, including the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, adapting to local styles and preferences.

Examining the origins of the kaftan provides insight into its early form and purpose, rooted in the rich history of Mesopotamia. The exploration of the kaftan's historical roots in ancient Mesopotamia unveils a profound understanding of its initial form and purpose.

Mesopotamia, encompassing present-day Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, often regarded as the cradle of civilization, serves as the birthplace of the kaftan, and delving into this historical context offers a lens through which to comprehend the garment's foundational essence. Originating as a simple, loose-fitting robe with wide sleeves, the early kaftan in Mesopotamia held a functional purpose that was intricately interwoven with the socio-cultural dynamics of the time. By examining the kaftan's inception in this ancient region, one gains not only a historical perspective on its design and construction but also an appreciation for its role within the societal fabric of Mesopotamian civilization. Despite its Mesopotamian roots, the kaftan has been embraced by communities in Southwest Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, with the Jewish and Russian populations adding their own adaptations. In the mid-twentieth century, kaftans made their way to America, showcasing their global journey and cultural significance (Srivastava, 2022). This research embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the kaftan's cultural transformation, seeking to unravel the intricate layers of its historical journey and cultural symbolism while examining its adaptability to contemporary trends. By investigating the materials, styles, and influences that shaped the kaftan's evolution, this study aspires to elucidate the profound cultural significance embedded within its fabric. Furthermore, the research endeavors to shed light on how the kaftan's meaning and representation have been shaped by cultural contexts over time and how it

has adapted to the dynamic landscape of modern fashion, reflecting the interplay between tradition and contemporary influences.

The initial iteration of the kaftan in Mesopotamia laid the foundation for its historical evolution, marking it as a simple yet significant piece of clothing with a design that provided ample comfort and flexibility. The term "kaftan," originates from Persian. Historically, Ottoman sultans, spanning from the 14th to the 18th centuries, adorned themselves with lavishly decorated kaftans, using them as prestigious rewards for important guests, dignitaries, and generals. This garment is worn by both men and women in various styles across the Iranian plateau, North Africa, and West Africa. In the early 20th century, Western fashion saw the gradual integration of kaftans, inspired by Middle Eastern and North African cultures. Designers like Paul Poiret and Mario Fortuny pioneered kaftan-like dresses, departing from the rigid, corseted styles of the time. While this shift was not immediately embraced, it laid the groundwork for a liberated fashion era, exemplified by 1920s flappers. The U.S. saw the true rise of kaftans in the early 1960s when Vogue editor Diana Vreeland, enamored by Moroccan kaftans, popularized them in the fashion world. By 1966, designers like Emilio Pucci and Yves Saint Laurent incorporated kaftans into their collections, and celebrities, including Elizabeth Taylor, embraced the trend. The kaftan's popularity persisted into the mid-1970s, waning in the 1980s with the rise of body-conscious fashions (Helms, 2018). However, a resurgence occurred in the past decade, with designers like Stella McCartney reintroducing kaftans into collections, emphasizing their comfort and versatility. Today, kaftans remain a beloved choice during warm months, symbolizing a fashion legacy that transcends passing trends. Traditionally worn in hot climates, the loose silhouette of the kaftan facilitates proper ventilation, contributing to a cooling effect on the body.

Exploring the aspect of "Materials Used and Construction Techniques" in the context of the original kaftan is essential for gaining a foundational understanding of its early form. This involves an in-depth investigation into the types of fabrics chosen for crafting the kaftan and the techniques employed in its construction during its early stages. The Turkic Kaftan is the oldest dress that can be traced back to the Hun and Gokturk periods. The ancient caftan is crafted from linen cloth, woven as a single bolt of fabric, and cut using a "semi-straight" structure. The garment takes shape through the assembly of triangles and trapezoids, some of which are pieced together from smaller fragments of cloth. This construction method, characterized using geometric shapes and patchwork, is a common feature in traditional garments of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. The caftan's design, rooted in this construction technique, reflects a cultural continuity and shared heritage across these regions (Caftan, 2023). Modern Kaftans are worn all seasons, and the materials and techniques used vary, in the winter heavy cloth is used like jersey and velvet, while in the summer more breathable fabric is used like cotton and silk. Traditional Kaftans are longer compared to more modern designs, the length of the kaftan of your choosing depends on your measurements and preferences. Modern kaftans offer customizable features, allowing individuals to choose their preferred neckline (scooped, V-neck, button-down) and sleeve types (tight, bell, wide). This modernization reflects a fusion of traditional styles with contemporary design elements, providing individuals with the flexibility to tailor their kaftan to specific occasions and fashion preferences (Oakes, 2023). Examining the materials, such as silk or cotton, and the specific construction methods, including sewing and decorative techniques, sheds light on the craftsmanship and artistry associated with the original kaftan. Textiles produced in Turkey, specifically in Istanbul and Bursa, exhibited a diverse range, drawing from both local sources and more distant origins like Venice, Genoa, Persia (Iran), India, and China. The crafting

of kaftans, a traditional garment, utilized a diverse selection of materials, including velvet, aba, and tafta etc. The preferred color palette encompassed indigo, kermes, violet, “pişmiş ayva” (cooked quince), and weld yellow (*Kaftan* 2023). Furthermore, the incorporation of Turkish elements into an Arab aesthetic was evident in the use of silk or woolen vests adorned with couched gold thread or silk embroidery. This assortment of materials and colors underscores the abundant and varied textile traditions that played a role in shaping the design of kaftans in Turkey.

The choice of materials not only influences the garment's aesthetic qualities but also speaks to the cultural and environmental considerations of the time. In today's time, Kaftans are made using ancient techniques while assimilating into modern fashion trends. The brand Pippa Holt Kaftans is transparent in its manufacturing process and the artists behind the garments. Their process consists of each artist having artistic control to make each piece unique. The kaftan is handmade from start to finish; the yarn is often sourced from locally cultivated cotton. The cleaning of the cotton involves a meditative, time-consuming procedure where weavers remove all seeds. The cleaned fibers are placed on a special bed of leaves, and with the use of sticks, they are struck to soften the cotton, making it ready for spinning. The specific brown cotton utilized is known as coyuchi, representing natural wild Oaxaca brown cotton. Additionally, in the preparation of the loom, weavers engage in measuring and tying the warp threads, ensuring proper alignment of all threads and components. This meticulous process includes counting all threads to achieve the precise measurements for the intended weaving. In the weaving process, artisans employ backstrap looms to create kaftans (huipils). Seated, they tie one side of the loom to a tree and secure the other to their back to manage tension. The huipil takes shape as a bobbin is passed through the warp threads, and the machete, a blade-shaped tool crafted by a man in the

town, is used to shift the threads. The strength of the hit determines the structure of the huipil, and multiple thread pieces with various colors are often used simultaneously. Upon completion, the woven piece is cut from the remaining threads, and artisans, predominantly women but now also men, hand-sew large textile panels together using a special macramé technique. The duration of this process ranges from three days to two weeks. The finished garment undergoes careful washing with natural soap, followed by drying and ironing. Additionally, understanding the construction techniques provides insights into the functional aspects of the kaftan, such as its fit, drape, and durability. This exploration serves as a crucial foundation for comprehending the historical and cultural significance embedded in the early form of the kaftan.

The artistic elements incorporated into the kaftan, such as embroidery, patterns, and ornamentation, carry rich cultural meanings. Kaftans stand out for their versatility, making them suitable for both formal and casual occasions. Whether embodying a bohemian vibe with a wide-brimmed hat and sandals or adding glamour with embroidery and sequins paired with bold jewelry and heels, kaftans offer diverse styling options. In 2023, popular kaftan styles include the timeless Classic Kaftan symbolizing cultural heritage, the modern elegance of Kaftan With a Belt, the carefree grandeur of Maxi Kaftan, the fusion of classic charm and modern appeal in Kaftan Dress, the stylish ensemble of Kaftan with Pant showcasing fashion evolution, the cultural celebration of past and present in Kaftan with Dhoti Pant, the exquisite sophistication of Organza Kaftan for formal events, and the opulent luxury of Velvet Kaftan, perfect for special occasions. Examining these artistic elements provides a deeper understanding of the cultural expressions woven into the fabric of the kaftan.

The spread of the kaftan to different regions and different cultures changed the meaning of the dress. Its evolution in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia is one aspect of the kaftan

being used in culture where symbolism, color, design, and techniques play a role in where the garment is from. The variations witnessed in each cultural milieu not only reflect the garment's adaptability but also unveil the intricate interplay between tradition, regional styles, and personal preferences.

Exploring how the kaftan adapted to Middle Eastern cultures, incorporating regional styles and preferences. The Middle East, a region steeped in history and cultural diversity, became fertile ground for the adaptation of the kaftan. Exploring the kaftan's journey through Middle Eastern cultures reveals a rich tapestry of regional styles and preferences. In Arab fashion and lifestyle, kaftans are not just a trend but essential wardrobe items for modern modest women. They hold a pivotal role in daily ensembles, serving as everyday attire for various activities, whether staying at home or socializing. Arab women often complement kaftans with layering pieces like abayas (*Everything there is to know about kaftans* 2023). The garment seamlessly integrated into the cultural fabric, incorporating specific design elements that resonate with the aesthetics and social nuances of each community. Whether worn during rituals, ceremonies, or as everyday attire, the Middle Eastern kaftan emerged as a symbol, telling a unique story of cultural synthesis.



Figure 2: Artist unknown (Moroccan). Caftan, early 20th

century. Silk and metal wrapped thread; brocaded. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1970.84.6. Bequest of Clarissa Gwendoline Condon, 1968. Source: The Met

Investigating the kaftan's journey to North Africa and the modifications it underwent within this cultural context. As the kaftan traversed through the vast landscapes of North Africa, it underwent intriguing modifications within the unique cultural context of the region. Moroccan embroidery styles were notably influenced by the Turkish empire, and the use of gold thread embroidery is said to have originated with Turkish rule. Initially worn by palace dignitaries and women, the kaftan became popular among the middle class in the late 17th century. Today, kaftans in Morocco are worn by women across social groups, with the term commonly referring

to a "one-piece traditional fancy dress." Two-piece versions, known as takchita, are also prevalent, often worn with a large belt, and the term Mansouria is associated with the innovative two-piece kaftan fashion introduced by Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur (*Kaftan* 2023). The garment became a canvas upon which North African cultures painted their distinctive patterns, colors, and embroidery, creating a kaleidoscope of visual storytelling. The North African kaftan, thus, became more than a garment; it became a cultural emblem, reflecting the region's history and artistic expressions.

Central Asia, characterized by its nomadic traditions and diverse ethnic groups, witnessed the presence of the kaftan, adapting in unique ways within this dynamic environment. Understanding the kaftan's role in Central Asia reveals a blend of nomadic practicality and cultural aesthetics. In Southeast Asia, Arab traders first wore the kaftan, as shown in early images. As Islam spread, religious communities in the region adopted this style, calling it different names like "jubah" for a robe and "cadar" for a veil or chador. The kaftan became a distinctive and culturally significant garment for these communities in Southeast Asia (*Kaftan* 2023). The garment's evolution in this region reflects the nomadic lifestyle's influence on design and functionality, showcasing how the kaftan became a versatile piece catering to the specific needs of Central Asian communities.

The kaftan's journey across various regions was not merely passive assimilation; instead, it actively absorbed and integrated influences from different cultures. In Russia, the term "kaftan" refers to a men's long suit with tight sleeves. The Russian kaftan, influenced by Persian and Turkic styles, became widespread in the 19th century, particularly among peasants and merchants. Today, it remains a part of Russian folklore, and traditional clothing, and is used as ritual religious attire by conservative Old Believers. French designer Paul Poiret further

popularized it in the early 20th century. In the 1950s, designers like Christian Dior and Balenciaga featured kaftans in their collections. The kaftan became a symbol of American hippie fashion in the late 1960s and 1970s, influenced by ethnic styles from the "hippie trail". As the garment traveled from one region to another, it encountered diverse traditions, materials, and craftsmanship techniques. The influences from these different regions left a mark on the kaftan and understanding these cross-cultural influences sheds light on the interconnection of fashion.

The impact of globalization on kaftan design reveals how the garment has adapted to global fashion trends. The kaftan, with its simple silhouette, seamlessly adapted to the fashion trends of various decades. In the 1970s, it could be adorned with beads, and intricate patterns, or maintain a sleek and minimalistic design, exemplified by Halston. The kaftan, associated with exoticism and comfort, became a widespread fashion choice in America, from high-end to mass-market. Although it faded from high fashion runways in the mid-1970s, designers like Tom Ford revived it in the erotic realm for Gucci in 1996. Throughout the years, designers such as Temperley, Matthew Williamson, Naeem Khan, and Elie Saab have continuously reinterpreted the kaftan, showcased its Bohemian mystique, and brought it to the red carpet with intricate beadwork and embroidery (Helms, 2018). The kaftan's bold yet versatile silhouette allows designers to infuse their unique styles while preserving its universal appeal of comfort and modesty for women worldwide. Globalization has facilitated the exchange of design influences, materials, and manufacturing techniques, leading to a fusion of traditional and contemporary elements in kaftan design.

Throughout the research, we have traced the fascinating journey of the kaftan, unraveling its origins in ancient Mesopotamia, and following its evolution across diverse cultures. The kaftan, with its versatile design and resilient nature, has stood the test of time, adapting to the

preferences and styles of each region it encountered. The kaftan's cultural impact extends beyond its function as a garment. It has become a symbol of cultural synthesis, embodying the unique stories, meanings, and artistic expressions of the communities that embraced it. From the Middle East to North Africa, from Central and Southeast Asia to the West, the kaftan has transformed into more than just clothing; it has become a cultural emblem reflecting the rich history and diversity of each region. The exploration of materials, construction techniques, and artistic elements has provided a deeper understanding of the craftsmanship and cultural significance embedded within the kaftan. In today's globalized society, the kaftan continues to adapt and evolve, seamlessly integrating into modern fashion trends. Its bold yet versatile silhouette allows contemporary designers to infuse their unique styles while preserving its universal appeal of comfort and modesty for women worldwide. The kaftan's resurgence in recent years, marked by designers reintroducing it into collections, emphasizes its enduring legacy. We affirm that culture indeed plays a pivotal role in changing the meaning or representation of a garment. The kaftan's cultural journey is a testament to its adaptability and the dynamic interplay between tradition and contemporary influences. As we continue to witness the kaftan's evolution in the modern world, it serves as a living canvas reflecting the ever-changing tapestry of global fashion and cultural interconnection.



Figure 3: By Diwali Sen Bhalla Source: Vogue

Citation

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