

# **The Journey of the Moroccan Caftan**

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## **Introduction**

Seeing Ivanka Trump wearing the caftan during her last visit to Morocco was very fascinating for me. This shows that our Moroccan caftan became global and favored by many people from different social classes. Since I was a child, I saw my mother and my grandmothers and every adult in the family wearing the caftan in several occasions and they always looked happy and proud every time they wore it. This garment has existed in my life for so long, but I never thought of its origins because I was always sure that it originated from Morocco. I chose to write about a special caftan that I own for more than seventeen years now. It is special because it represents part of my culture that I consider very important and was gifted to me by my husband at my wedding. As a result, I became very attached to it, historically, the caftan does not originate from Morocco, but it is very significant to Moroccans. Particularly the women who always feel happy and proud wearing it although it was worn by men and women at the beginning of its appearance. Also, the caftan allowed many women to become financially independent by producing it. Globally, the caftan became known all over the world and it underwent many changes, but it never lost its value. Today, it is produced by many famous designers worldwide.

## **Traditional Dress**

As we all know humans were born naked, but soon we evolved into creating and wearing clothing. Because of civilization, groups of people around the world started creating their fashion that later on became the traditional dress in the countries that were created, although this fact is hardly recognized. A great example of this process is the U.S where people unintentionally use black in funerals and white in weddings because of cultural tradition, but they do not consider it traditional garment (Sumberg Barbara, 2019). A traditional dress is defined by Sumberg Barbara (2019) as “the

ensemble of garments, jewelry, and accessories rooted in the past that is worn by an identifiable group of people” (p.212). It can be concluded that every tribe uses its special fashion that distinguishes them from other groups to represent their identity. The traditional dress like other types of clothing went through many changes due to several reasons. Historically, in Arab countries fashion was influenced by the need of humans to meet modesty standards, comfort, and simplicity. It also contains religious and geographic influences (location, climate, desert and mountains). Wars also influenced fashion, they allowed an exchange of fashion and history through pictures and observation of old costumes (Mufida Kassir,1978). For example, the weather influences the choice of the material used in sewing the caftan. Silk and cotton are used in the summer, while wool in the winter. In terms of religion, it influenced the length of the dress and its sleeves, which must be long in many religions. Colonization allowed the exchange of styles between colonizers and natives (professor Filip Stabrowski, fall 2019). The economy also caused changes in traditional dresses because trade made certain garments global. This has been a little introduction to the notion traditional dress in general.

### **The History of the Caftan**

Now let us focus on the history of the caftan. “CAFTAN the term “caftan” (from Ottoman Turkish qaftan) is used to refer to a full-length, loosely-fitted garment with long or short sleeves worn by both men and women, primarily in the Levant and North Africa” (Wolff, 2005, p. 212). As mentioned before every garment has come from somewhere. Historically, it was found that the caftan was first created by people in Ancient Mesopotamia. Between the 14th and 18th centuries, caftans were worn by Ottoman sultans and other important figures, such as ambassadors, heads of state, important government officials, etc. (Wolff, 2005, p. 212). In short, at the beginning social class played a big role in assigning who could wear caftans in the empire because it was considered as what we call today “high-end fashion”. For gender, there was a slight difference between men’s and women’s caftans. According to Norma Wolff (2005)

“men’s caftans often had gores added, causing the caftan to flare at the bottom, while women’s garments were more closely fitted. Women were more likely to add sashes or belts. A sultan and his courtiers might layer two or three caftans with varying length sleeves for ceremonial functions” (p. 212). Hence, men’s and women’s caftans differed in style according to gender.

### **The Origins of the Moroccan Caftan**

Caftan was first introduced in Morocco in the 16th century. Because of the Spanish inquisition many of the Muslim and Jewish expelled from Andalusia towards Morocco brought with them their traditional outfits, especially caftans and the required materials to make them (Sinclair Mandy, 2016). In some stories, it was mentioned that caftans became well known from the 12th century after the Islamic period needed by Moulay Ismael, and the garment became popular in Morocco during that period until today (Kassir, 1978). This evidence shows that Moroccans were exposed to caftans a long time ago, which proves the idea that every garment has its origin although opinions might differ regarding the exact date.

### **The Physical Description of the Caftan**

The detailed description of the Moroccan caftan was illustrated by Kassir Mufida who states that it was first worn by men and women, and by both high and middle-class people. She explains that the caftan is a long dress that comes with a belt called *hizam* that is made of gold or silver thread wrapped around the waist. It has a round neckline, and it has a slash in the sides. The front opening is tied with small buttons and loops and the sleeves are straight and long. For the materials used in sewing the caftans, the author goes on to state that the fabric could be cotton, silk or wool, or velvet fabrics. The edges are embroidered with gold and silver thread. The caftan covers the whole body from neck to feet. After examining the description, we could conclude that this garment was influenced by religion that requires Muslims to cover their entire bodies, especially women.

## **Production and Consumption**

For the production and consumption process, this garment is commonly produced and worn by women, although men engage in the production as well. In her article, Mandy Sinclair claims that the different pieces of the garment are produced in the *medina* (the city) by mostly women who are responsible for preparing the colorful threads, the buttons and embroidering the fabric and the belt. For the everyday caftan, cotton fabric is used while silk and fancy fabrics are used in sewing caftans reserved for celebrations, such as engagement parties, weddings and religious holidays. In Morocco, women became aware of the importance of becoming a productive element in society. In her article Nora Fakim (2016) mentioned that women started opening their businesses and employ other women to produce caftans which allow them to become independent in Moroccan society facing all challenges. For use, the caftan is important for most women going to any type of celebration. Women go to their favorite tailor shop to have their caftans made by hand and include specific details to their garment. It is important for many women because it represents their unique style. Others choose to purchase a ready to wear caftan. Caftans were also exchanged by inheritance where many elder women pass their garments to their daughters or granddaughters.

## **Globalization**

Globally, because of the strategic location of Morocco (close to Europe), the Moroccan caftan became popular and went under many changes due to Western influence. Many foreign and international designers were impressed by the gorgeous traditional caftans which inspired them to design their collections. In her article, Fakim (2016) states “with modern cuts, which some families may still frown upon, Ilham designs Kaftans that mix European and Western influences... the designs have a more Western cut with a ‘Moroccan touch’, which explains why they are becoming more successful internationally”. In short, the Western fashion inspires many designers to add some Western details on the traditional dress of Morocco, for example making it more fitted to the body, sleeveless and shorter so that women all around the world could pick

the design they are more comfortable with. Many famous designers started including some caftan details in their collections such as, Christian Dior and Balenciaga. “Tom Ford took the kaftan silhouette to the realm of the erotic for Spring 1966, as designers seeking to inject their collections with an “oriental” touch... and others as Naeem Khan and Elie Saab have brought the kaftan to the red carpet” (Laura Helms, 2018). Famous designers play a big role in making the caftan well known internationally and today the Moroccan caftan is worn by many women around the world. A great example is Ivanka Trump who visited Morocco recently and for the whole time she stayed in Morocco, she was wearing caftans short and long, that she loved so much. I also play a role in popularizing the caftan. When other women and I come to the US, we bring many caftans with me and I wore them on different occasions, many Americans and others from different countries were impressed by the design.

### **The Caftan and the Life Stages of Women**

As a consumer of the caftan, wearing it is very significant for women in social life. As I mentioned before wearing a caftan is very important because it represents part of my culture and femininity. This significance changes over life stages. For young girls, caftans are used to show the mothers of young men that they are single and that they are ready to get married. Once married, the wife uses caftans to represent her family-in-law identity. She spends quiet time picking the fabric and the embroidery to please her mother-in-law. Caftans are also used by old women to show how they contribute to preserving the Moroccan tradition (Godefroit-Winkel, Delphine, and Marie-Hélène Fosse-Gomez, 2014). For production, many women started recognizing their importance in society as producers of caftans. In her article, Fakim mentioned that women started opening their businesses and employing other women to produce caftans and become financially independent. Production of the caftan, either by men or women is a source of income that allows them to survive and be respected in society. Through globalization, the caftan became well known and it became the ambassador of the Moroccan culture. It builds strong relationships between Moroccans and other

people from all around the world. Throughout the globe, many caftan events were organized, and many designers had great collections to present to the audience.

## **Conclusion**

Researching the origins of the caftan, I learned that it does not originally come from Morocco, instead it was brought by the moors fleeing from Andalusia. I also learned that it was initially worn by men and women. This information was new to me, but when I started connecting the dots, I realized that it is true because men in Morocco wear a long loose garment that has long sleeves, but it is named "*foqiya*". Today, we cannot say that men wear caftans because it is unacceptable and embarrassing. When we say caftan, it is strictly assumed that it is worn by women. The caftan of yesterday is the same as today's. Although it went through many changes, they were slight and its value still the same. Today, caftan became modern and global which makes me very proud and happy whenever I see it in international fashion shows. Lastly, I noticed how changing cultural norms influenced our Moroccan caftan design. Longtime ago, it was impossible that women could wear sleeveless or short caftans. Today because of the adoption of the Western culture, it became possible.

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