



'ABĀ'

'ABĀ' (in Arabic, also 'abā'a and 'abāya), a loose outer garment, generally for men, worn widely throughout the Middle East, particularly by Arab nomads. In Iran the 'abā' is used almost exclusively by religious scholars. In its most common form, that prevalent in Syria and Arabia, the 'abā' has the form of a loose cloak; open in the front, it is kept closed neither by buttons nor by belt. It is without sleeves, but the arms are passed through side openings which serve also to keep the 'abā' in place on the shoulders. The 'abā' worn in the Arab East is generally made of thick wool, woven in alternating black (sometimes brown) and white stripes. Notables tend to wear 'abā's of brighter color, particularly red and green, with gold or silver embroidery on the shoulders. Plain black 'abā's are rarely encountered except among the North Arabian tribes. The 'abā's worn by women in Syria and Arabia are virtually indistinguishable from those of the men (R. P. A. Dozy, *Dictionnaire détaillé des nomes des vêtements chez les arabes*, Amsterdam, 1845, pp. 292-95). It is worth noting that the 'abā' has been worn by non-Muslim communities in the Arab East, despite the frequent sumptuary distinctions that differentiated religious groups from each other. In Lebanon, the 'abā' is worn by Maronites and Druzes as well as Muslims, although among the Druze it is only the 'āqel (religious dignitary) that is permitted to wear the 'abā' (Margaret Clark Keatinge, *Costumes of the Levant*, Beirut, 1955, pp. 6-7).

The 'abā' is also known in Egypt (although generally designated there as 'abāya). The nomad 'abā' of Egypt is the same as that of Syria and Arabia, but that worn by certain groups in the cities is considerably different. Equipped



with sleeves of varying length that terminate either above the elbows or beneath the wrists, it is also longer than the knee-length Bedouin ‘*abā*’, descending all the way to the ankles. It is made also out of coarse, thick wool, and is generally a winter garment adopted by the poorer classes (E. W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, reprint London, 1954, pp. 31-32, 34).

From Egypt the ‘*abā*’ also spread into North Africa. The ‘*abā*’ of the Berbers of Mزاب is identical with the Syro-Arabian garment; it is designated, however, as *zergouta*. Elsewhere in Algeria the ‘*abā*’ is long, like that of urban Egypt; in the west it is sleeveless, but in the east, it has short sleeves and also a hood, being virtually indistinguishable from a *ǧallāba* (George Marçais, *Le costume musulman d’Alger*, Paris, 1930, pp. 15-17).

The use of the ‘*abā*’ in Iran has been far less general than in the Arab lands and seems to date only from about the Zand period (late 18th cent.), although it may have been used earlier by the tribes. Now confined, like so many other items of traditional dress, almost exclusively to the clergy, the ‘*abā*’ was worn by almost all urban males of whatever social standing during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Iranian ‘*abā*’ also is woven generally out of coarse wool, traditionally on hand looms, although lighter materials are sometimes used for ‘*abā*’s intended to be worn in the summer; broadcloth and silk ‘*abā*’s are known to have been worn, the latter generally imported from Damascus, by the affluent. The ‘*abā*’ cloth manufactured from wool has two basic varieties—thick for cold weather and thin for warm. Its colors are usually brown of various shades and black, rarely white. In the Zand and Qajar periods (late 18th and 19th centuries) striped ‘*abā*’s called *mokaṭṭat* were also worn; and a striped cloak similar to the ‘*abā*’, called *šowlā*, is still worn among the Baḳtīārī tribes. Tribal people of Dašttestān (in Fārs province) wear a thin, white woolen ‘*abā*’ known as *čoka* (communication by Mr. A. Afnān). The ‘*abā*’s of the wealthy were sometimes embroidered around the neck with filigree work (*malīla-dūzī*).

The finest ‘*abā*’s are those made of camel’s hair, which normally have a light brown shade. The better variety is the thick kind, particularly that called *sang-kʷorda* (“stoned,” i.e., polished). To make ‘*abā*’s of this sort, the cloth was soaked in a gelatinous liquid (trite juice in some areas), left to dry, and then



rubbed with pumice stone to remove the nap and smooth the surface (communication of Mr. J. Ziāpūr). Some Iraqi immigrants have recently set up ‘*abā*’ looms in Qom.

The ‘*abā*’ used to serve a range of needs among the poor. It could be used as a blanket or rug, folded as a pillow, employed to wrap goods, or as a tote-bag, serve as table-cloth or be made into a shade against the summer sun. M. A. Jamāl-zāda well describes the multiple uses of the ‘*abā*’ in traditional Persia and its place in Persian lore in a long passage in his *Sar o tah-e yak karbās* (Tehran, 1956, pp. 216-18).

Among the places well known for their manufacture of ‘*abā*’ cloth were Nā’īn, Šūstar, Būšehr, and Baĵestān of Gonābād. The ‘*abā*’s of Nā’īn were often made of camel’s hair, and were intended for winter wear; those of Šūstar were made of fine material and worn mostly by religious scholars; and those of Būšehr were relatively inexpensive and intended for summer wear. Baĵestān is known for its fine, summer ‘*abā*’s. Fallāḥīya in Behbahān is also said to have been reputed for its light and very fine ‘*abā*’s (Mr. J. Ziāpūr’s communication).

The ‘*abā*’ was also an item of traditional Turkish dress, worn above all by the initiates of the Sufi orders. It was indeed the distinguishing mark of a Sufi, akin to the *kerqa* or *moraqqa*’ in earlier Sufi custom. The association of the ‘*abā*’ with Sufism gave rise to a number of expressions that have become fixed idioms: e.g., *abasī yanmak*, to fall in love (lit., “to have one’s ‘*abā*’ burned”), *abaya bürünmek*, to die (lit., “to be wrapped in one’s ‘*abā*’;” see Abdūlbaki Gölpınarlı, *Tasavvufan dilimize geçen deyimler ve atasözleri*, Istanbul, 1977, pp. 1-3). The Turkish ‘*abā*’, generally made out of heavy wool, was also worn by the poor, particularly in winter; when the weather began to turn cold, it would be said, “now is the time to get out the ‘*abā*’.” Although there was then an association of the ‘*abā*’ with poverty, spiritual or actual, those of prosperous standing but darvish-like disposition would also on occasion wear ‘*abā*’s. In the early part of the 17th century, the wearing of the ‘*abā*’ even became the fashion of Ottoman high society, when the minister Abaza Mehmet Paşa (d. 1634) suddenly abandoned his elegant and immaculate dress for an ‘*abā*’: he was imitated even by Sultan Murad IV.

The ‘*abā*’ makers of Istanbul used to have their own market as late as the end



of the 19th century; although the market no longer stands, memory of it is preserved in the name, Abacılar Caddesi, a street near Zindankapısı. (See Reşad Ekrem Koçu, *Istanbul Ansiklopedisi*, İstanbul, 1958, I, pp. 1-2; idem, *Türk Giyim, Kuşam ve Süzlenme Sözlüğü*, Ankara, 1967, pp. 7-8).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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