



KEL'AT

KEL'AT (Ar. *kel'a*, pl. *kela'*; or *kal'at*), an Arabic term used in the Iranian cultural area (Iran, India, Central Asia) to refer to gifts in general, but in particular to a robe of honor given by a superior, especially the ruler, to a subordinate. The tradition of bestowing a garment of honor as an indication of special favor and a standard symbol of investiture dates from ancient times in the Middle East (see, e.g., *Genesis* 37.3). The Arab poet Ka'b b. Zohayr satirized the prophet Moḥammad and therefore was condemned to death by him. But the prophet bestowed on him his own mantle (*borda*) as a symbol of security and favor when the poet recited a verse in praise of the prophet and the people of the Qorayš (Ebn al-Aṭir, II, pp. 274-78).

The granting of a *kel'at* or robe of honor was an important signifier in the political process. Deserving followers were rewarded, while erring magnates, who repented, received a *kel'at* to signal their renewed loyalty. Visiting royalty, ambassadors, and other dignitaries, including Europeans, also would receive robes of honor (*Chronicle of the Carmelites* I, pp. 480, 559; Speelman, pp. 257-58). At New Year, governors and other high officials would receive robes of honor, which meant that they were confirmed in their posts: "The withholding of the yearly robe of honour to a provincial governor is generally the sign of the royal disfavour, and the despatching of it often the token of the recipient's confirmation in office . . . The New Year's festival is generally the time of the despatch of the official dresses of honour from the capital" (Wills, pp. 255-56). The royal favor was not always a robe of honor, for "a khalaat may be anything, a jewelled sabre, a dagger, a shawl, or a shawl-kaba (Persian



coat,) [sic] which is put on in great form and worn during the remainder of the day” (Holmes, p. 177; see also Wills, pp. 255-56). The custom persisted until the very end of the Qajar dynasty, although after the 1890s the custom seems to have been a less regular affair.

Imperial Iran. **Gift giving**, in particular of robes and jewels, by the king was a characteristic of Iranian culture and is attested for the Achaemenid empire. As in later times, the king or prince would give robes to his governors, generals, nobles, and other officials to express his favor for services rendered. The practice also served to sustain their loyalty. The robes of honor ceremony took place in public at the royal court or at some major event. Those not present at court received the robe at a public ceremony in their town. The so-called Median robes were particularly prized. The color of the robe was a reflection of rank, for not every robe was equal, nor was every recipient. Those fortunate to have received a royal robe and/or gifts would show it off in public, as Mithridates did, when he received a handsome robe from **Artaxerxes II** after the battle of **Cunaxa** in 401 BCE (Briant, p. 318; tr., pp. 305-7). **Nowruz** was the time par excellence for the exchange of gifts, and at court a clerk made note of these, as well as the royal gifts, including robes of honor. This custom continued to be respected throughout the imperial periods and down to the 20th century (Boyce, p. 799). As in later centuries, these robes of honor were woven in royal workshops, many of which were in Khuzestan, the center of the textile industry in Sasanian times (Pigulevskaya, pp. 163, 168).

The caliphate (659-1258). The Omayyad caliphs adopted the custom of awarding robes of honor and other items—such as swords, neckpieces (*ṭawq*), tall conical hats (*qalansuwa*), crowned caps (*tāj*), and horses—from the Sasanian and Byzantines. The custom became more general under the ‘Abbasids. The robes and other gifts were given for services rendered and to cement the recipient’s loyalty. Initially the recipient just wore the robe on the day that he had received it, while the next day he would wear his normal dress; later the robe was worn for a longer period. The robes were often adorned with an embellished hem and/or Qur’an verses. Such inscribed textiles were known as *ṭerāz*. This term is also used to denote the special manufactories that made them, which were established in particular in Khuzestan. When at court, the ceremony took place in public on Friday. Otherwise it took place wherever the recipient might be, also during a public ceremony such as described in the case of **Sultan Maḥmud of Ġazna** (‘Oṭbi, tr., p. 182). As under the Achaemenids, there was a gradation in the robes



indicating the rank of the recipient, as was also the case under the Saljuqs, who had at least seven grades of robes. By the end of the 9th century, if not earlier, it also had become customary to give robes and other gifts on the occasion of the appointment of a governor. The time was determined by astrologers to ensure an auspicious hour. The number and composition of the gifts depended on the rank of the recipient. The Buyid [‘Azod-al-Dawla](#) received seven robes of honor, a number that was very much desired; this complement was known as *al-ḳela’ al-kāmela*. The robes were black, which was the caliph’s court color. After the ceremony the recipients showed the robes and other items received with it in public by riding around town (Spuler, 1952, pp. 290, 327, 350-51, 369, 479; Busse, pp. 216-221; Bürgel, pp. 39, n. 2, 66, 82, 91, 107, 123, 133-34, 156).

Mongols, Il-khanids, and Timurids (1258-1501). Under the Mongols and their successors, it remained customary for the ruler to give gifts, in particular a robe of honor and its accessories, to governors, officials, and foreign visitors to reward them for services rendered. It became standard procedure that a governor receive a robe, a sword, a drum, and a specially gilded and ornamented appointment document upon his investiture (Spuler, 1968, pp. 247, 283, 306, 309). Viziers under the Il-khans also gave robes, such as the vizier of Tabriz, who gave away seventy robes for Shaikh Şafi-al-Din and his companions (Ebn Bazzāz, p. 941). The later Il-khans continued the same practice (Naḳjavāni, I/1, p. 223; I/2 pp. 252-53, 423; II, p. 128), and there was even a budgetary provision for the expenditures of the giving of robes of honor (‘Abd-Allāh Māzandarāni, fol. 136a; tr., p. 247). Likewise, during Timur’s reign, governors along the route that the ambassador [Clavijo](#) traveled gave him robes of honor during a public ceremony. He also received them at Timur’s court in Samarqand. “For such is the custom of all who come to the lord, to give something, and thus respect the custom of giving and taking presents” (Clavijo, p. 121; see also pp. 98, 104, 121, 142, 193). Robes of honor, according to rank, and other gifts (*jüldü* “remuneration, reward”; Doerfer, I, p. 294) were also given to deserving persons under the Qara Qoyunlus and [Aq Qoyunlus](#) (qq.v.; Fażl-Allāh Ḳonji, p. 70).

Safavids (1501-1736). Under the Safavids the *ḳel’at* also consisted of a robe of honor with many additional accoutrements in rising number depending on the importance of the recipient. For example, Rostam Beyg, the Aq Qoyunlu ruler (r. 1493-97), gave Solṫān-‘Ali Mirzā a full complement of *ḳel’at* that included a crowned cap (*tāj*), an aigrette (*jeqqa*), a mace (*gorz*), a dagger



(*kanjar*), a gem-studded sword, and a purebred Arabian horse with gilded reins (Montazer-e Şāḥeb, ed., p. 30). The *kel'at* for an important person usually included one or more Arabian horses with gold and gem-studded reins (Kvāndamir, IV, pp. 505, 516-17, 518, 556, 566; Montazer-e Şāḥeb, ed., pp. 72, 196, 231, 238; Qāzi Aḥmad, II, pp. 623, 676, 690, 749, 857, 887, 1078). What the texts usually refer to as the *kel'at* proper could take various forms. Those especially honored would receive a *kel'at-e kāṣṣ*, which was a robe worn by the shah himself, or from his wardrobe (Kvāndamir, IV, pp. 388, 454, 480, 496; Montazer-e Şāḥeb, ed., p. 188). On the occasion of Nowruz, which was one of the major occasions when robes of honor were bestowed, the shah handed out the so-called *kel'at-e nowruzi* (Qāzi Aḥmad, II, p. 1021). Sometimes, in case of a special official, the shah bestowed a *kel'at-e sardāri*, as in the case of the ruler of Gilān (Montazer-e Şāḥeb, ed., p. 157). The garment that constituted the robe of honor was usually referred to as a *qabā*, *jobba*, or *bālāpuš* (Kvāndamir, IV, pp. 505, 518; Qāzi Aḥmad, I, pp. 57, 623.)

It seems that robes of honor ceremonies became less elaborate with the passage of time in that only the robe of honor, without the belts, daggers, and horses, was given, or it may be that these later records only referred to grants to lower-ranking officials. The *kel'at* given to Mir Moḥammad Bardsiri (around 1670), for example, consisted of a surcoat (*qabā*), a turban (*mandil*), and a sash (*čahār dar'ī*; Bardsiri, p. 467). Mollā Jalāl-al-Din Monajjem, in the early 17th century, mentions the bestowing of *kel'ats* consisting of *qabā*, *bālāpuš*, and *mandil* (Jalāl-al-Din Monaj-jem, p. 389). The trend was towards simplification and lower cost. Engelbert Kaempfer reports that “the robe of honor consisted of a double surcoat, both parts of which reach till the calves, and is made of gold or silver brocade, or of a costly fabric embellished with flowers. Sometimes also a turban and a sash are given, however, very seldom a golden sword.” He adds that “often, these robes of honor were passed on to other people by the recipients, to reward a service rendered to them” (Kämpfer, p. 66; *Chronicle of the Carmelites* I, p. 480; for some richer gifts in the 1690s, see Naşiri, pp. 56, 59, 106, 153, 252).

It is clear from these descriptions that *kel'at* grants were an expensive custom. Manşur Beyg Qepčāq, for example, received a *kel'at*, together with a crowned cap (*tāj*), a studded aigrette, an Arabian horse with studded reins, all of which amounted in value to around 12,000 tomans (Montazer-e Şāḥeb, ed., p. 148). Even if not everybody received such an expensive robe of honor, sometimes the sheer number of the grants also added up to substantial sums. For



example, [Shah Esmā'il I](#) (r. 1501-24) gave 4,000 Qezelbāš a *kel'at* each, at a total cost of 30,000 tomans, or 7.5 tomans per person, which for many was more than an annual salary (Montaẓer-e Šāḥeb, ed., p. 544). Shah 'Abbās II (r. 1642-66) gave almost 8,000 *kel'ats*, each consisting of gold-brocaded velvet coats lined with sable fur; gold-brocaded overcoats (*bālāpuš*) made of gold and silver cloth and shot silk; turbans entirely made of gold and silver cloth; gold-brocaded and single-colored sashes (*čahār-dar'i*); and costly fabrics of many colors in 1038/1628-29 (Moḥammad-Ma'šum Ešfahāni, p. 47).

In the highly stratified Safavid society, great attention was given to have the presents reflect the status of the recipient. What might look like a number of gaudy dresses to an uninformed observer were signs of different social status to a Safavid courtier. Shah 'Abbās I (r. 1588-1629), on the occasion of the defection of the Jalāli tribe from Diārbakr, bestowed 2,000 *kel'ats*. The leading magnates received a gold-brocaded and gilt surcoat, a gold-brocaded velvet long overcoat, a gold-brocaded sash, a gem-studded aigrette, and a fine horse and saddle. Other ranking persons were grouped in upper, middle, and lower ranks. The upper ranks received a gold-brocaded surcoat of shot silk (*dārā'ibāf*) and a long overcoat made of figured and non-figured velvet and a colorful turban, and some received a sash (*čahār-dar'i*). The middle ranks received a surcoat made of *milak* and multi-layered (*moṭabbaq*) fabrics, a velvet jerkin (*kaftān*), and a yellow head sash; while the lower ranks received a silken surcoat made of cotton (*qoṭni*) and shot silk, and a turban (*dastār*; Eskandar Beg, II, p. 775; tr., II, p. 971; see also Chardin, V, p. 272). This stratification continued under [Nāder Shah Afšār](#) (r. 1736-47). At a Nowruz celebration, Nāder Shah gave away 12,000 sets of *kel'ats*, of which the cost of a set for the highest category was 100 tomans, for the medium category 50 tomans, and for the lowest category was 10-20 tomans (Marvi, III, p. 1088).

The nature of the *kel'at*, as well as the method of its bestowal, did not change during the 18th century (Golestāna, p. 266; Mar'aši, p. 126; Nāmi, p. 120). Nāmi mentions that various expensive fabrics were stored by the Zand court for the making of *kel'ats* (Nāmi, p. 47). In the Safavid period they were mostly made by the private sector, mainly in Yazd, Kashan, Shiraz, and Isfahan, as part of the city's tax burden (Floor, pp. 82-90).

In the Qajar period, the number of robes of honor handed out each year was in the thousands (Morier, p. 206; Fraser, pp. 219-20). The annual confirmation of a governor was signaled by the dispatch of a robe of honor by the shah. According to William Richard Holmes (p. 177), "It is customary for the person



to whom the dress is sent to meet the bearer of it a short distance from the town. In some places there is a house built for the purpose, called a *khalaat-pooshaun* [*kel'at-pušān*], as at Tabreez [Tabriz]; but, where there is none such, the nearest village on the road by which the messenger arrives is generally the appointed place.” The governor and the city’s notables would wait for its arrival. “The *kalāat* is usually sent from the capital by the hands of some person of consequence, generally some favoured servant of the Shah, and this man is sent down that he may receive a present, generally large in amount, from the recipient, and may bring back the usual bribe to the Prime Minister for retention of power, or even the same thing to the king himself” (Wills, pp. 255-56; see also *Kārang*, pp. 632-34). The governor would don the robe of honor and ride through town to show the populace the sign of royal favor. The entire ceremony was accompanied by festivities (Holmes, p. 177 with description of accompanying festivities; see also Wills, pp. 256-58; Gmelin, p. 220; Olearius, p. 715).

The ceremony of the grant of the *kel'at* became less important after the 1870s, partly due to the influence of the European fashion of dress, and the *jobba* went out of style (Mostawfi, I, pp. 98, 117; *Šari'at-panāhi*, pp. 194 ff.; *Ḥosayn-Beygi*, pp. 193-41). “The jubas are made of the finest cloth, very amply cut. They have a standing collar and long sleeves. These sleeves are from one to two feet longer than the arm, and are often allowed to hang down empty when the garment is worn out of doors; but when in the actual presence of guests or a grandee, they are used to keep the hands hidden (a token of respect to those present), and the many wrinkles formed by the excessive length of these sleeves are supposed to be their beauty” (Wills, p. 319; see also Speelman, p. 19, editor’s note). The inevitable consequence was that most of those craftsmen whose livelihood depended on the *kel'at*, namely, the gold brocade weavers (*zaribāf*) of Isfahan and others like them, went out of business. The same held for the shawl weavers in Kerman, since most of their production had been on orders from Tehran to be used at the New Year *kel'at* presentation ceremonies (Mirzā Ḥosayn Khan, p. 97). A timid effort to bolster the *kel'at* custom, in particular the use of shawl, provided some temporary relief to remaining craftsmen, but could not hide the fact that the custom had lost its social and political function. In 1928, the *kel'at* ceremony was formally abolished by the government (Makki, V, p. 71; *Qānun-e mottaḥed-al-šakl šodan-e lebās*, Art. 1).

In Central Asia, where the same custom of the bestowing of robes of honor



was in vogue, the term *kel'at* became the appellation for everyday robes by the early 19th century, if not earlier. These were often thin, decorative garments or thick, full length robes, for either summer or winter use. In cold weather, more *kel'ats* were worn over one another; hence cold weather could be referred to as a three- or four-*kel'at* cold (von Schwarz, pp. 258-62, 386). The term *kel'at* entered into the Russian language denoting various kinds of robes. It is also possible that the West European word “gala” (known since 1625) has been derived from the term *kel'at*. For the Indian subcontinent, see Stewart Gordon (2003).

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