



KERQA

KERQA, the Sufi frock, lit. rough cloak; from Ar. *karaqa* “to tear, to rend,” a term normally referring to the tattered cloak, robe, or overshirt traditionally worn by the Sufis as a symbol of wayfaring on the mystical path. Born out of the penchant of early Muslim ascetics for coarse woolen garments, by at least the mid-ninth century the wearing of such robes of contrition and, especially, the *moraqqa’a* (patched frock) of the penniless wanderer had become emblematic of affiliation with the burgeoning Sufi movement, references to which are common for the period (see, e.g., Massignon, *Passion*, tr., I, pp. 11, 25, 103-5, 107-8, and passim). At the same time, however, the distinctive practice of investiture with the *kerqa* as a mark of initiation into the mystical path does not seem to have become a prominent practice until somewhat later (for speculation on possible origins, see Massignon, *Essai*, pp. 128-30), perhaps first regularly associated with the circle of Abu’l-Qāsem Jonayd Baġdādi (d. 910) as some Sufi authors of later centuries explain (e.g., Šehāb-al-Dīn Sohravardī, *Ejāzat*, fol. 295b; Jāmi, pp. 558-59; cf. ‘Abbādi, pp. 245-46; Massignon, *Passion*, tr., I, p. 72, II, pp. 68, 183, 186).

Between the late 10th and 11th centuries, the terms *moraqqa’a* (also *moraqqa’*, and later *dalq*) and *kerqa* are used almost interchangeably, the former, however, being somewhat more common, such as in the anonymous 10th-century Sufi handbook the *Adab al-moluk* (pp. 26-28) or in Hojviri’s (d. 1071-72) lengthy discussion of Sufi attire in his *Kašf al-maḥjub*. Hojviri, in addition to harshly criticizing those who pretend towards Sufism by outwardly donning the Sufi frock, explicitly associates the *moraqqa’a* with an aspirant’s formal

initiation into the mystical path through being invested with it at the hands of a Sufi master (pp. 49-65), a rite also attested in connection with the Sufi master of Mēhana, [Abu Saʿid b. Abi'l-Ḳayr](#) (d. 1049; Moḥammad b. Monawwar, I, pp. 32-33, 45-48, where the term *kerqa* is used; see further Meier, pp. 356-60). At the same time, the term *kerqa* was often connected with the Sufi practice of *samāʿ*, or the mystical concert, particularly in association with the vexed question of participants casting off or rending (Ar. *karq*) their garments in moments of mystical elation, the pieces of which might then be divided among the congregation to be used as new patches or, in the case of an intact robe, given back to their owner or to the singer as payment (Qoṣayri, II, 747-48; Hojviri, pp. 63-64, 542-44; ʿAbbādi, pp. 156-57; much discussed later, e.g., Abu'l-Najib Sohravardi, pp. 68-69; see further ʿA-M. Sajjādi, pp. 177-95). Such patched and tattered frocks were such ubiquitous features of Sufism that, by the last quarter of the 11th century, Kaykāvus b. Eskandar (pp. 254-56) could write about them as commonplace in his depiction of Sufis.

Although the term *moraqqaʿa* never quite disappeared from Sufi literature, with the increasing institutionalization of Sufism in the 12th to 13th centuries, it began to give way to *kerqa*, which the influential *kānaqāh*-directing Sufi master of Baghdad, Šehāb-al-Din ʿOmar Sohravardi (d. 1234), discusses as being a significant feature of affiliation with the Sufi cloister, drawing a sharp distinction between the *kerqa-ye erādat*, or “frock of aspiration,” and the *kerqa-ye tabarroḳ*, or “frock of blessing” (ʿAwāref al-maʿāref I, pp. 253-60). According to him, investiture with the former is reserved for the true aspirant (*morid-e ḥaqiqi*), being an outer symbol of his absolute inward commitment to his shaikh, whereas the latter is given to those who simply seek the blessing of being token disciples (*morid-e rasmi*) or lay affiliates (*motašabbeh* or *mostaršed*) of a particular shaikh or *kānaqāh*, a distinction reflecting earlier notions of an aspirant being invested with the *kerqa* by different Sufi masters (see, e.g., Moḥammad b. Monawwar, I, p. 47, where the *kerqa-ye aṣl* “the frock of primary affiliation,” is differentiated from multiple *kerqa-yetabarrok*). This distinction is maintained, among other places, in the later Persian Sufi manual of ʿEzz-al-Din Kāšāni (d. 1334-35; p. 108) and is something that Ebn Baṭṭuṭa (d. 1368-69) reports having experienced first-hand at a *kānaqāh* in Isfahan, where a Sufi master invested him with the *kerqa-ye tabarroḳ*, in this case a much prized *kerqa-ye hazār-miki* “many-patched frock” (on which see Dānešpažuh; ʿA-M. Sajjādi, pp. 129-33), on the authority of the initiatic lineage (*nesbat-e kerqa*) of Sohravardi himself (Ebn Baṭṭuṭa, I, p. 125).



Typically, the color of the *moraqqa'a* or *kerqa* has been seen as possessing symbolic significance, certain shades of blue normally being considered preferable because, while alluding to particular mystical verities, it easily hides the dirt associated with voluntary poverty and travel (see, e.g., *Adab al-moluk*, pp. 27-28; Hojviri, p. 63; 'Abbādi, p. 245; Šehāb-al-Din Sohravardi, 'Awāref, pp. 259-60; 'Ezz-al-Din Kāšāni, p. 109; Bākarzi, p. 30; see also 'A.-M. Sajjādi, pp. 167-70). Indeed, discussions of the symbolism of the *kerqa* and *moraqqa'a*, its colors, styles, types, individual parts, and even the symbolic meaning of the letters of its name are readily found in medieval Sufi literature such as in the *Ādāb al-ṣufiyya* attributed to Najm-al-Din Kobrā (d. 1221), where the different colors and parts of the Sufi frock are schematically interpreted as outward marks of the aspirant's progress on the mystical path (Kobrā, pp. 27-31; quoted almost verbatim by Bākarzi, pp. 27-34; précis in Elias, pp. 280-83) and, more elaborately, in the important Persian Sufi manual of the Kobrawi master of Bukhara Yaḥyā Bākarzi (d. 1335-36; Bākarzi, esp. pp. 34-42), or later, in connection with the *fotowwa*, by Ḥosayn Wā'eẓ Kāšefi (d. 1504-5), who methodically describes the special features of the *kerqa* as related to the extensive wardrobe of the *javānmardān* (Wā'eẓ Kāšefi, pp. 151-74; see further 'A.-M. Sajjādi, pp. 207-12).

It should be noted that, due to the preeminence of its association with initiation into the Sufi path, including by the mysterious [Keẓr](#), who is often cited as a bestower of the Sufi frock, the term *kerqa* did not always refer solely to a physical garment, but rather to the received initiatic path or mystical way (*ṭariqat*) of a particular Sufi master; thus, it is used, particularly after the 14th century, as a synonym for a particular initiatic lineage (e.g., the *kerqa-ye* Qāderiya, Sohravardiya, Češtiya, etc.), supported by a chain of transmission (*selsela*) into which a master might designate his successor(s) through investiture with a *kerqa-ye kelāfat* (frock of successorship). As an observable mark of the culture of Sufism and its associated aesthetic, literary references to the Sufi frock abound in medieval Persian literature (see, e.g., Dehḳodā, s.v; 'A.-M. Sajjādi, pp. 249-83). According to Richard Gramlich, investiture with the *kerqa* is no longer very common among the Sufi orders of modern Iran (II, p. 175).

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