

**Fig. 1.** A bride dressed in her bridal Kaftan (Takchita) on her wedding ceremony.  
Instagram,  
<https://rb.gy/ewkhhn>



# THREADS OF TIME: RHYTHM OF THE VINTAGE MOROCCAN BRIDAL KAFTAN

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In a favourite picture of my mother, she dons a form fitting cheongsam<sup>1</sup> inspired dress that features red satin cord which runs along the tip of a mandarin collar, across the asymmetrical opening in the front stretching from the centre of the neckline to the left upper hip side and terminates at the sleeve and dress extremities where it secures the hem. This pale white straight dress made from silk cotton had red pankou<sup>2</sup> knots only on the collar, flower motif on the chest and embroidered borders along the side slits. Weeks ago, while I was scouring the Fashion Research Collection website for an interesting item to dissect, the woven buttons and side slits (see Fig 2) on a particular garment had piqued my interest because it reminded me of my mum's remarkable outfit that I had hoped to someday inherit. The garment I was drawn to that day, the Vintage Moroccan Bridal Kaftan, is the subject of this analysis.



**Fig. 2.** Moroccan women's wedding Kaftan and robe, side view showing slits on the thobe and jubba. ca. 2010s. FRC2016.02.001. Photograph by FRC team.

The wedding kaftan develops as a compelling sign of history in the Moroccan context, undergoing distinct alterations that mirror not just transformations in societal standards but also Morocco's persisting cultural and religious roots. Drawing on Evans' and Vaccari's *Time in Fashion*, this analysis will support their theory which suggests "the relationship between fashion and time is at the heart of the definition of fashion itself, highlighting both its material and its immaterial aspects" thereby emphasizing that wearing fashion is indeed a way of wearing time (2). This exploration addresses how the kaftan reflects Moroccan historical values in bridal attire and wedding scenes through material analysis as well as object-based analysis with the expectation of unravelling the delicate threads of its cultural significance, design evolution, and contemporary relevance in the fashion sphere.



**Fig. 3.** Male and Female  
Wedding dress with gold  
threads, Fez, 19th Century.  
Oudayas, National  
Museum of Adornment.  
Pinterest, <https://pin.it/6uldT0tyt>

### THE EVOLUTION OF THE TRADEMARK KAFTAN

The word “kaftan” was borrowed from Persia and adopted from the Tatar language. The ancient Kaftan in Morocco was a garment that was initially worn by both men and women, as well as by individuals from different social classes. It is a long, coat-like piece of clothing that is cinched at the waist using a sash called a *hizaam* which not only keeps the kaftan in place but also provides a hold for the silver-hilted dagger that Arab men often carried with them. On the other hand, the female kaftan consists of an inner piece called the thobe and an outer piece called the jubba, which is worn over the garment. The upper area is separated from the lower area with a belt that wraps around the waist, and sleeve usually narrow at the top and wide at the bottom. The garment, which has a front opening held together by numerous small buttons and loops to fasten it, also features side slits with the edges embroidered with gold and silver threads (Al Zubeidi 4; Kassir 5). Kaftans have always covered the whole body from neck to feet which suggests that this garment was influenced by Islamic religion that requires Muslims to cover their entire bodies, especially women. With the advent of the Islamic period, particularly in Morocco, the kaftan began to gain prominence. Originating in the Muslim East during the 8th century, it found its way to Morocco by the end of the 11th century, influenced by the heritage of Andalusians settling in the Maghreb.



**Fig. 4.** Moroccan women's wedding kaftan and robe. Ca. 2010s. Toronto Metropolitan University. FRC2016.02.001. Photograph by FRC team.

Initially donned by affluent men and nobility, the kaftan served as a symbol of opulence ("A Journey of a Takchita/Kaftan"). Although kaftans were exclusively hand tailored simple garments in its early days, they had developed into elaborate designs by the 19th century and begun showcasing a variety of colours, fabrics and embroidery that marked out the wearer as being a person of wealth. By the 20th century, the Moroccan women's kaftan underwent changes to become more close-fitting due to the introduction of French influences and had also adapted to modern production processes. Contradicting Harris' *From Value to Desirability* that posits "what may be valuable in one time and place may not retain its status elsewhere", the Kaftan's value has transcended its North African origin and has found its place in the countries of the Middle East, in the Maghreb, in the Muslim community in Europe and America and in the fashion world (682). Though the value of an object may indeed change across the social matrix, the kaftan is the most common everyday garment for men and women from the 18th century till date.

While Moroccan women used their needlework prowess to make and embroider silks, fabrics and furniture, men exalted leather-made goods like saddles, bags and shoes with theirs (Tazi 37). Heavily detailed versions are worn by brides during the wedding ceremony to publicly express Moroccan ethnic identity through dress. These intricate creations resemble a lively conversation conveyed through flowers, colours, and delightful arabesques, narrating tales of affectionate dedication, invocations, and the domestic realm that defined women's lives (Tazi 31). The Moroccan women's ancient traditional kaftan can still be seen in museums, shops, homes, and in business today (Kassir 56-60).

The bridal kaftan in the Fashion Research Collection of Toronto Metropolitan University is a two-piece ensemble. Its *thobe* is a gracefully flowing V neck A-line dress with additional side gores. It features intricate hand embroidery in golden threads known as *Zari*<sup>5</sup> work (see Figs 5 & 8), with a central panel adorned by defined cord details (*dfirat*) that graces the neckline and the side slits. These embroideries fulfill more than the functions of concealing stitches or arranging decorations; they also define the lines and contours of the garment (Tazi 47). There are lozenge patterns woven into the silk brocade fabric in a densely sequential manner across its entire length. The kaftan cut of the *thobe* and *jubba* are expertly crafted without the use of darts or a central back seam. Cord details embellish various seam lines, including the shoulder seam, armhole seam, gore seam and centre sleeve seam, all as decorative elements. Fastening the *thobe* are delicate ball-like thread buttons 5.5 inches apart after the V plunge (see Fig 9), while the overcoat has a decorative centre front panel with no functional fastener. The cotton voile overcoat displays this exquisite embroidery, featuring scalloped trimmings along the neckline, hem, and the central front sections. It has floral motifs (see Fig 7), at some point in history detailing travel stories, made of gold work embroidery (*Zari*) spread across the garment and the cut work borders along the sleeve hem and frontal section is hexagonal in shape resembling a honeycomb (see Fig 5).





**ABOVE Fig. 5** Double layered Chain stitch with Zari thread; a technique wherein the fabric is braided with gold or silver threads to create ornate patterns. Video by Sumathiswardrobe, 23rd Dec, 2023, Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/LWRoQXoyMCE>



**ABOVE Fig. 6** Kaftan by Zina Guessous. Outfit consisting of a European-style sleeveless underdress and long-sleeved kaftan. ca. 1960 – 80s. V&A Museum collection, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1290954/kaftan-zina-guessous/>

This garment set lacks any maker label, store label, or care instructions making it difficult to tell which artisan or Fashion house had produced it. The garment construction is a combination of two methods at least: the units of both garments are machine stitched and the glistening threading on the inner as well as the designs on the outer fabric are intricately hand embroidered and finished with overcast stitches while the extremities are sealed off with hemming stitches. It would have been made for an average sized woman as the garment's statistics is likely to fit about 2 to 3 bottom sizes with its length at 60 inches and chest width at 25 inches. Kaftans, despite their appearance, offer practicality and share this similarity with kimonos in their ease of cutting, folding, and storage. Additionally, they can be swapped or passed down regardless of size (Tazi 47). This vintage Moroccan bridal kaftan shows noticeable wear along the abdominal, upper back and lower back regions which might be due to oxidized perspiration or failing preservation methods. It is not lined, possibly due to the climate and religious considerations of its origin.

This bridal set bears some resemblance to a minimalistic version which sits in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and was designed by Zina Guessous sometime between 1960 to 1980 (see Fig 6). Zina Guessous (1925 - 1998), a pioneering designer in Morocco, left an indelible mark on the fashion landscape. Her designs, as well as Zhor Sebti's and Tami Tazi's were sought after and garnered attention from international personalities. The comparison between this contemporary bridal set and Guessous' work echoes the interplay of cultural influences with her fusion of tradition and modernity to attain a more appealing silhouette. Mosaik, an e-commerce website, also confirms the approximate date of the vintage kaftan based on pictures of the 1970s styles posted on the platform which have their construction and design elements consistent with this object. Using their price tags, the cost of a vintage Kaftan ranges from 200 to about 3000 USD today. These garment prices will most likely be determined by fabrics used, production time and the complexity of the design elements (E-mosaik.com).



**LEFT Fig. 7.** Honeycomb and decorative in-seam details along the major seams of the overcoat. Toronto Metropolitan University. FRC2016.02.001. Photograph by Author.



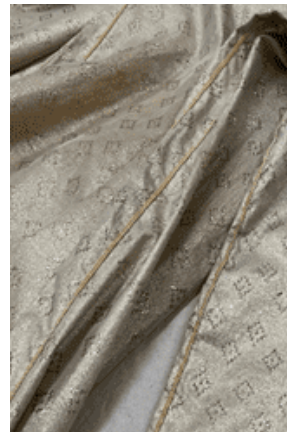
**RIGHT Fig. 8.** Close up of the gold threaded neckline embroidery (Zari). Toronto Metropolitan University. FRC2016.02.001. Photograph by Author.



**ABOVE Fig. 9.** Floral embroidery (Zari work) sparsely distributed across the overcoat. Toronto Metropolitan University. FRC2016.02.001. Photograph by Author.



**ABOVE Fig. 10.** Small handwoven knotted ball buttons, lozenge pattern details. Toronto Metropolitan University. FRC2016.02.001. Photograph by Author.



**ABOVE Fig. 11.** Set in bell sleeves. Al Zubeidi's research shows that the sleeve length, width, angle of inclination and angle of the underarm has changed over the years (82). Toronto Metropolitan University. FRC2016.02.001. Photograph by Author.





**Fig. 12** Moroccan bride in her bridal ensemble with a modern veil pulled over her face. Pinterest., <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/666743919860738077/>

### **KAFTAN SYMBOLISM**

The Kaftan is a clever blend of elegance, refinement, and comfort where the past is not denied ("The Origin of Caftan"). The physical description in the Journey of the Moroccan Kaftan fits our bridal set to perfection (Hassani 3) with just the belt missing, perhaps due to preservation mishaps or design omissions. This bridal set is referred to as a Mansouria/Takchita, which is a traditional Moroccan ensemble consisting of two pieces: an embroidered kaftan made of silk or velvet, topped with a transparent overlay known as Dfina with the overcoat typically matching the color of the kaftan. The soft contrast of the hues (light champagne gold and metallic bronze) of the textiles used in the construction of this bridal attire emphasizes femininity and delicateness which elevates its sophistication while the embroidery symbolizes a disciplined and elegant expression of women's circumstances. As the feminine element of the attire, its role extends beyond ornamentation; when coupled with the fabric type, it serves as the distinguishing factor between various garments (Tazi 31). Kaftan fabrics are predominantly natural in composition and quite sustainable as they are made from cotton, silk fibre brocade, velvet, and taffeta, all highly biodegradable in their natural state, which might explain their premium pricing and utmost desirability. These fancy fabrics enriched with trimmings made of gold and silver threads are used in sewing kaftans reserved for celebrations, such as engagement parties, weddings, and religious holidays (Hassani 4; "The Origin of Caftan").

This garment would have been worn by a bride as a mejdoub<sup>3</sup>, one of her 7 ceremonial wedding dresses, following her henna party during which women adorn their hands and feet with ink expertly applied by a *Nekkasha*. This organic dye derived from a plant is viewed as a representation of fertility, good fortune, and joy during the ceremony (tajvillamarakech.com). This gold embroidered kaftan was formerly paired with a head veil (*haik*) which was religiously symbolic but nowadays, modern women leave their hair open during wedding processions. Veiling the bride's facial openings, attaching small sachets of incense to her attire, and adorning her hair with fragrant herbs are customs performed with the dual purpose of shielding her from the evil eye as well as the jnoun<sup>5</sup> to avoid misfortune (Rouse 2). To harness some of the bride's power, Moroccan grooms wear white turbans, white gowns and hooded capes called djellaba and silk belts symbolizing masculinity and honour (Rouse 114, 117). Modern Moroccan men sometimes wear suits during the ceremony. Weddings play a significant role in upholding the cultural uniqueness and religious principles of the Moroccan community. They also emphasize the ideas of fertility and the growth and continuity of the society. The observation that women's traditional roles undergo a marked transformation following marriage also explains why the bride's gown holds such a prominent significance (Rouse 2).

### **FASHIONING IDENTITIES**

Tami Tazi likened Embroidery to a performance, akin to a recital that unfolds through the expressive power of the artisan's skill in her book, *Caftans* (31). The embroidery crafted or commissioned by women acknowledges a precious heritage of nameless inscriptions explaining the history of their potentiality. Through their embroidery, young women had the opportunity to showcase not only their good taste but also a distinct refinement in their character and manners. The meticulous reproduction of precise and conventional patterns, including geometrical and floral motifs, served as a means for women to illustrate their condition and display their sense of moderation (37). Unmarried young women who are preparing for marriage use kaftans to showcase their individuality offering them a unique form of personal expression that doesn't clash with Moroccan social norms. They use these beautiful garments to connect with potential mothers-in-law rather than potential partners (Godefroit-Winkel, Delphine, and Marie-Hélène Fosse-Gomez, 2014). Married women find special meaning in their kaftans, using them to build stronger relationships with their mothers-in-law. Meanwhile, older women use kaftans to express the shared identity of Moroccan women. During wedding ceremonies, they take on the role of tradition keepers, upholding social customs (Sadiqi 2003). Acquiescing with Harris' beliefs in this phrase, "textile clothing actively creates roles and relationships, engendering the tips and balances we refer to as social differentiation", examining the value of the kaftan makes it evident that this garment has always been a marker of status and purpose (685).



**LEFT Fig. 13** Kaftan by Zhor Sebti, embroidered with red silk and black beads. ca. 1970 -80s. Victoria & Albert Museum Collection, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1299529/-dress-zhor-sebti/>



**RIGHT Fig. 14** Kaftan by Tamy Tazi, silk bourette decorated with embroidery. Ca. 2010. <https://www.h24info.ma/culture/portrait-tamy-tazi-lamie-dyves-saint-laurent-qui-a-modernise-le-kaftan-marocain/>

The conventional style of the kaftan, whether worn independently or with a dfina, has persevered with minor variations, maintaining its T-shape consistently across social status, ethnicity, gender, and age. This cut has undergone minimal evolution over the centuries and across regions which have been closely linked to the emancipation of women in Morocco. When laid out, it reveals a straightforward design imbued with an almost abstract form of elegance. This characteristic, reminiscent of kimonos, is sufficient on its own to account for the enduring qualities of the garment (Tazi 47).

Pioneers of Moroccan haute couture, like Zina Geussous, [Zhor Sebti](#) and [Tamy Tazi](#), played a pivotal role in transforming the kaftan (see Fig. 13 & 14). Changes in cut and materials have made it more tailored and elegant while retaining a connection to its historical significance. The contemporary kaftan has evolved significantly, catering to the modern woman's desire for modernity, convenience, and originality. Designers have adapted the kaftan to meet these expectations, resulting in more fitted, modern, and elegant designs that remain respectful of its legendary past. The traditional "T" cut, which was considered heavy and less appealing, has been replaced with a closer-fitting, body-flattering design, making it a preferred choice for Moroccan women of all ages ("The origin of Caftan").



**ABOVE Fig. 15** Boutique advert depicting Moroccan Fashion Influence, Hippie Appropriation era, 1960s.  
Pinterest, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/666743919860737449/>



**ABOVE Fig. 16** Ellie Saab, Spring Summer 2021 - Look 21. Tag-walk.com, [https://cdn.tag-walk.com/zoom\\_nw/ellie-saab-css20-0020-9c52a2.jpg](https://cdn.tag-walk.com/zoom_nw/ellie-saab-css20-0020-9c52a2.jpg)





**Fig. 17** Moroccan robe. Fashion Research Collection (2016.02.002).

Many foreign fashion designers incorporate kaftan-inspired designs into their collections, showcasing the garment's relevance on international runways (See Fig 15 & 16). Similarly, celebrities worldwide, including those outside of North African or Middle Eastern descent, have embraced the kaftan as a stylish and comfortable option for red carpet events, fashion galas, and social gatherings. Kaftans often serve as popular souvenirs for tourists visiting Morocco or Middle Eastern countries, contributing to the global appreciation and recognition of the garment. In recent times, Influencers and fashion bloggers often feature kaftans in their style content, contributing to the garment's popularity and introducing it to diverse audiences on social media platforms.

The donor of this garment, Carolyn Archibald, also brought in a similar traditional women's bat winged teal blue jersey robe (see Fig above) with less detailed embroidery on the neckline and sleeve hem compared to its counterpart. This would have been a utilitarian kaftan as opposed to a bridal attire because of its simplistic features. The kaftan's global relevance lies in its adaptability. It can be customized to suit diverse preferences, making it a versatile garment for the international fashion scene. Its timeless appeal transcends borders and continues to gain recognition in the global fashion market, making it relevant not only for brides but also for fashion enthusiasts, designers, and those who appreciate the beauty of cultural diversity. The inherent characteristics of the kaftan position it as a garment with the potential for sustainability, aligning with the growing awareness and demand for more eco-conscious fashion choices.

## **CONCLUSION**

As an African Muslimah and Bridal designer, I will argue I share the same sentiments as the wearer as well as the maker of this Kaftan. The careful construction of the fully covered regalia with its flowing silhouette and elegant hand-woven embroidery reflects the traditional values of modesty and professionalism which I personally uphold. Also, paying attention to similarity in cultures, the kaftan is reminiscent of my tribal traditional outfit (Iro ati Buba) not only in its gender and cultural roles but also in the shape and method of construction. These historical garments, including kimonos and many others, closely follow the principles of Zero Waste Fashion design with fabrics woven to the desired length and cut pieces in rectangles and squares leaving little to no scraps. With these stated, we can all agree that several other reasons had subconsciously prompted me to study the kaftan outside those small, knotted ball buttons.

Using the Dress and the African Diaspora methodology created by Professor Carol Tulloch as well as the Observation Checklist from Mida and Alexandra's Dress Detective in this analysis, my curiosity and expertise have benefitted from understanding the evolution and historical significance of this garment. To engage with this garment creatively, I have generated a picture using the Image FX AI platform, with a prompt to depict a Moroccan bridal evening scene set in the 1950s. In the scene, a bride and her sister are dressed in kaftans in an imagined leisure setting, which allows us to explore Moroccan clothing cultural references and design aesthetics in clear articulation. The intent was to draw inspiration from the craftsmanship and elements of a kaftan and interpret them creatively encouraging visual storytelling after the thorough object-based research phase. More importantly, with the rapidly changing technologies in the fashion industry such as 3D garment simulations and AI driven design tools, designers are advised to perfect their prompt usage to adapt to these shifts (Jun et al. 21). Just as using prompts in fashion design allows us to preserve and reinterpret traditional craftsmanship, the Vintage Moroccan bridal Kaftan, with its timeless elegance and traditional importance, serves as a reminder of the enduring significance of cultural heritage and artistry.

- Cheongsam – Figure-fitting one-piece traditional Chinese dress that features a standing collar, asymmetric collar and two side slits.
- Djellaba – Long, loose-fitting outer robe with full sleeves that is worn in the Maghreb region of North Africa, Male caftan variant with hood.
- Pankou knots – Chinese name for the traditional knotted buttons used on a cheongsam
- Mejdoub – A gold and embroidered Moroccan traditional outfit worn by a bride
- Zari work - This cut work technique is made with a fine needle that has a hook at the end used to make series of chain stitches as you pull it through.
- Jnoun - plural form of jinn from which our word “genie” is derived. The Qur’an attests to their existence, but they are not limited to Islam; there are Muslim (both Arab and Amazigh) jnoun as well as Jewish, Christian, and pagan jnoun.
- Iro and Buba (traditional wrapper and native blouse); The main component of the traditional attire of a woman from the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria. It is made of asooke fabric (indigenous handwoven cotton). This set is only complete when paired with gele (head gear) and ipеле/iborun (draped on the shoulder made from the same fabric as the gele or worn over the iro). A Yoruba bride dons this attire for her traditional conjugal service.
- Image FX prompt: “A vintage-inspired 1950s scene with two stylish Moroccan women dressed in retro bridal outfits. One woman sits on an armchair reading a mushaf, wearing a rich vintage golden takchita (two layered wedding dress) with intricate Zouaq detailing and embroidered inner sleeve peeking, paired with vibrant bridal accessories. The other woman lounges on the floor, holding a red rotary phone, dressed in a long contemporary purple velvet outer kaftan with green lining and an obvious purple brocade inner garment peeking and green sleeve hem trimming which reflect European influences on Moroccan fashion, blending French lacework with a structured silhouette, light fabrics, and modernized embroidery incorporating orange and gold with a part of her feet covered in henna. The background features warm earthy tones, ornate lamps, and beautifully draped curtains, evoking an ethereal Moroccan empire mid-century palace aesthetic.”



**LEFT Fig. 18.** Nigerian Yoruba Woman wearing a complete traditional attire (Iro, Buba, Gele and Ipele), made from Sanyan Aso-oke.

**BELOW Fig. 19.** Image FX generated image by author.





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