

# The Rich Tapestry of Kurdish Clothing: Tradition, Identity, and Evolution

## 1. Introduction: Threads of Identity

Kurdish traditional clothing is far more than mere apparel; it stands as a profound and distinctive feature of the Kurdish nation's cultural identity, imbued with significant folkloric value and historical resonance.<sup>1</sup> For centuries, these garments have served as a proud symbol of identity and tradition, deeply rooted in the mountainous regions of Kurdistan, a territory spanning across parts of modern-day Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey.<sup>2</sup> The intricate systems of dress play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting cultural and identity values from one generation to the next.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the visual distinctiveness of Kurdish attire is such that it is often possible to identify an individual Kurd's specific region of origin simply by observing their clothing, highlighting its potent role as a visual communicator of belonging and local heritage.<sup>4</sup>

The world of Kurdish clothing is characterized by its remarkable diversity and its deep-rooted, multifaceted symbolism. These garments are widely celebrated for their vibrant colors, complex and intricate patterns, and the meticulous handmade embellishments that adorn them, with styles varying significantly across different regions and among various Kurdish dialects and tribal affiliations.<sup>2</sup> Each piece of clothing often carries profound historical significance, telling a story that reflects the rich and often tumultuous history of the Kurdish people.<sup>2</sup> The attire is a testament to the Kurdish people's adaptation to diverse and often challenging environments, from the rugged mountain terrains to the arid desert landscapes that constitute their ancestral homeland.<sup>1</sup>

For a people like the Kurds, who constitute one of the world's largest stateless nations<sup>6</sup> and whose culture and language have historically faced, and continue to face, periods of suppression and marginalization<sup>7</sup>, tangible cultural expressions such as traditional clothing naturally assume a heightened importance. Numerous accounts emphasize clothing as a core component of Kurdish identity, history, and cultural authenticity.<sup>1</sup> As one observer noted, "our clothes are a key aspect to our identity, without our clothes we be even more similar to everyone else".<sup>11</sup> Academic discourse further supports this, recognizing that textiles can serve as a significant marker of group differentiation, delineating national, ethnic, geographical, gender, or social identity.<sup>12</sup> In the conspicuous absence of a unified sovereign state, traditional attire becomes a powerful, visible, and mobile assertion of national identity and cultural distinctiveness. It functions as a non-verbal language understood both internally, reinforcing community bonds and shared heritage, and externally, signaling Kurdish presence, resilience, and unique cultural identity to the wider world. This significance is further amplified by the fact that traditional Kurdish clothing has often been targeted during periods of enforced assimilation or political oppression, particularly in countries like Turkey, where bans on

specific garments or colors have occurred.<sup>8</sup> Such actions, paradoxically, elevate the status of these garments, transforming them into potent symbols of resistance, cultural survival, and the enduring spirit of the Kurdish people.

## 2. A Journey Through Time: The Historical Evolution of Kurdish Attire

The historical roots of Kurdish clothing are deeply embedded in the ancient past of the Middle East, mirroring the long and complex history of the Kurdish people themselves. Some of the oldest iconographic evidence and textual references suggest that distinctive forms of Kurdish dress trace back to antiquity, with strong connections to the Achaemenid Persian Empire (550-330 BC).<sup>10</sup> Remarkably, intricate carvings found at the entrance of the Apadana Palace in Persepolis, dating to this period, depict figures adorned in attire that bears a striking resemblance to elements of modern Kurdish clothing, suggesting a continuity of certain stylistic traditions over millennia.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, many characteristic Kurdish garments, particularly certain styles of headwear such as the Median hats, are believed to have their origins in the Medes period, pre-dating the Achaemenids and underscoring the ancient lineage of Kurdish sartorial traditions.<sup>10</sup> Historical accounts from later periods also attest to the distinctiveness of Kurdish dress. For instance, the 13th-century historian Ibn Khallikan provided a description of Kurds wearing clothing made of cotton and a specific type of hat known as the *mandil*.<sup>18</sup> European travelers, from as early as 600 years ago, also documented Kurdish women's attire, often describing it with admiration as among the most beautiful, vibrant, and colorful forms of dress in the entire Middle East.<sup>16</sup> These early observations highlight the long-standing aesthetic appeal and cultural significance of Kurdish clothing.

Throughout its long history, Kurdish clothing has not remained static. While foundational elements have persisted, the attire has undergone a process of evolution, adapting to changing historical circumstances, technological advancements, and cultural interactions. Historically, Kurdish clothing was often more complex and varied in its forms and components than what is commonly seen today; over time, it has evolved towards somewhat simpler, yet still distinctive, forms.<sup>18</sup> A particularly significant change occurred following the Qajar and Ottoman periods, with the increased availability and variety of fabrics influencing the materials and construction of garments.<sup>10</sup> Despite these transformations and adaptations, Kurdish clothing has remarkably retained its core authenticity and is widely viewed by Kurds as a tangible link to a "sovereign history," a testament to their enduring cultural identity.<sup>10</sup> The impact of modernization and the complex political contexts of the regions inhabited by Kurds have also profoundly influenced traditional dress. The rise of modern nation-states in the Middle East, often accompanied by policies of cultural homogenization and Westernization, particularly in Turkey, led to a noticeable decline in the public visibility of traditional Kurdish clothing.<sup>4</sup> For example, the "hat revolution" of 1925 in Turkey, which forbade the wearing of the traditional fez, had a direct impact on traditional headwear customs among Kurds and other groups.<sup>8</sup> In response to these pressures, or due to processes

of urbanization and globalization, Kurds have, at times, adopted the dress styles of their host countries or embraced Western forms of attire.<sup>4</sup> In Iran, for instance, Kurdish women have sometimes adhered to prevailing norms of Islamic dress, including the wearing of the hijab.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in Turkey, secular government policies, such as historical bans on headscarves in universities and government employment, also influenced the way Kurdish women dressed in public spaces.<sup>4</sup>

This historical narrative reveals a consistent and dynamic interplay between the forces of preservation and adaptation. On one hand, there is a deeply ingrained cultural impetus to preserve the "authenticity" and "sovereign history" <sup>10</sup> embedded within the clothing, connecting it to ancient origins such as the Medes and Achaemenids. This reflects a conscious effort to maintain cultural continuity and distinctiveness. On the other hand, Kurdish attire has demonstrated remarkable adaptability. It has "evolved" <sup>18</sup>, incorporated new materials as they became available <sup>10</sup>, and responded to the socio-political environments of the diverse nations across which Kurdistan is divided <sup>4</sup>, as well as to broader trends of modernization. This process is not merely a linear decline of tradition but rather a dynamic negotiation where core identity markers embedded in the clothing are maintained and reasserted, even as they interact with external pressures and internal desires for contemporary relevance. The simplification of historically "more complex and varied" forms <sup>18</sup> can, in this light, be interpreted not as an outright abandonment of tradition, but as a strategic adaptation for survival and continued practical use in changing times.

Moreover, the evolution of Kurdish dress itself serves as a form of historical documentation. The enduring presence of certain ancient elements, such as the aforementioned Median hats <sup>10</sup> or the general forms depicted in ancient reliefs <sup>15</sup>, suggests a long, unbroken thread of cultural practice stretching back for millennia. Simultaneously, the changes observed over time—such as the introduction of new fabrics after the Ottoman and Qajar eras <sup>10</sup> or modifications in style and practice due to political pressures or modernization efforts <sup>4</sup>—also record significant historical shifts, cultural interactions, and the Kurdish people's responses to dominant political and social forces. Thus, a close study of the historical development of Kurdish dress offers valuable insights into the broader historical trajectory of the Kurdish people, their complex interactions with neighboring cultures, and their enduring efforts to maintain their distinct identity in a constantly changing world.

### **3. The Kurdish Wardrobe: A Lexicon of Traditional Garments**

Kurdish traditional clothing is characterized by distinct ensembles for men and women, with considerable variation across the different regions of Kurdistan.<sup>4</sup> Generally, women's attire is renowned for its vibrant and diverse palette of colors <sup>2</sup>, while men's clothing, though sometimes colorful, often features more muted earth tones.<sup>4</sup> A common characteristic is the loose-fitting nature of most garments, a practical adaptation to the often rugged, mountainous environments of Kurdistan and the traditional need for freedom of movement in

daily life and pastoral activities.<sup>2</sup>

## Women's Attire

The traditional attire for Kurdish women is a complex and often elaborate ensemble, which can consist of up to eleven distinct pieces, creating a layered and richly textured appearance.<sup>15</sup>

Dresses and Gowns:

The centerpiece of the woman's outfit is typically a long dress or gown.

- **Kiras (Jli Kurdi)** or **Fistan**: This is a long dress, often floor-length, and forms the primary garment.<sup>2</sup> These dresses are frequently crafted from luxurious fabrics such as silk, velvet, chiffon, or satin. They are renowned for their embellishments, including shimmering sequins, delicate beadwork, and intricate embroidery.<sup>2</sup> Sleeve styles can vary, with some featuring distinctive funnel sleeves.<sup>18</sup> In the Quchan region of Khorasan, the *Kiras* is notably shorter and is traditionally worn with a *shliteh*, a type of petticoat, underneath.<sup>15</sup> The Sorani regional dress for women also includes a characteristic floor-length, funnel-sleeve dress.<sup>18</sup>
- **Xiftan** or **Kaftan**: This term appears in descriptions of the Mukriyani women's costume, where it is part of an ensemble that includes voluminous trousers, a short vest top worn under a sheer, straight-sleeved dress gathered at the hips, a large sash worn on the hips, and a waist-length coat.<sup>18</sup> Some commercial sources also use *Kaftan* or *Xiftan* to describe an outer garment, similar to a robe or coat, worn over the primary dress.<sup>24</sup>

Outerwear:

Several types of jackets, vests, and coats are worn over the dress.

- **Kawa**: This garment can refer to a long, flowing coat, often heavily embroidered, worn over the *Krass*.<sup>2</sup> In other contexts, particularly in the Mukryan region, *Kawa* describes a vest with sleeves, which can be made from various fine materials like Atlas (a thick, patterned silk), Boursayi (velvety fabric), Tor (diaphanous fabric), Khazal, or Zari (lame-like fabric with golden threads). Brides' *Kawas* in this style are often red.<sup>33</sup> Persian sources also refer to a woman's outerwear garment as *Kuli*کلی (Kulicheh), noting it is shorter than the men's *Kawa*.<sup>16</sup>
- **Kolunja/Sukhma**: This is a type of vest or waistcoat worn over the dress.<sup>4</sup> It is often crafted from rich fabrics like velvet or brocade and comes in deep colors such as crimson, jade green, or red. Heavy embroidery is a characteristic feature of the *Kolunja*.<sup>15</sup>
- **Qaba**: A long coat, sometimes worn over the *Kolunja*, that extends to the ankles, providing additional warmth and formality.<sup>15</sup>
- **Helak**: A short bolero-style jacket, typically worn during the warmer summer months.<sup>32</sup>

Undergarments and Trousers:

Layers worn beneath the main dress are also integral to the ensemble.

- **Sharwal/Darpe/Jafi/Awal-krass**: These terms refer to baggy trousers that are wide at the top and taper towards the ankle, worn underneath the dress.<sup>4</sup> They are commonly

made of cotton, sometimes lined for durability or warmth. The material can vary, with finer fabrics used for ceremonial occasions compared to daily wear.<sup>15</sup>

- **Zir-Pirahan** (underdress) or **Zher-krass** (sheer petticoat): These are undergarments worn beneath the main dress.<sup>3</sup> In the Layen region of Khorasan, the *Zir-Pirahan* is specifically described as being made of white floral cotton fabric.<sup>3</sup>

Headwear:

Kurdish women's headwear is diverse and often highly decorative.

- **Klaw**: This refers to a traditional headpiece or cap that varies significantly by region. It can be an ornate and richly decorated part of the attire, sometimes adorned with coins, beads, or intricate embroidery, and can symbolize the wearer's social status or regional affiliation.<sup>2</sup> In the Sorani regional dress, for example, elderly women traditionally wear a velvet skullcap held in place by a beaded chain; this cap serves as an anchor for a backcloth and multiple scarves that are arranged to form a tall turban.<sup>18</sup> The Mukriyani women's costume includes a distinctively decorated velvet or brocade pillbox hat.<sup>18</sup>
- **Shar** (black scarf), **Dasmal** (triangular sheer fabric), **Kulka** (silk scarf with beadwork), and other Scarves: Various types of scarves and head coverings are integral to women's attire. These are often colorful, made from fine materials, and sometimes layered to create elaborate headdresses.<sup>3</sup>

Accessories:

Belts, jewelry, and footwear complete the traditional Kurdish woman's look.

- Colorful belts are commonly worn around the waist.<sup>2</sup> Women's waist shawls, also known as *Shal*, can be remarkably long (up to 8 meters) and wide (around 40 cm), often featuring floral patterns and vibrant colors.<sup>15</sup>
- Jewelry is a prevalent and important aspect of women's adornment. Older women, particularly those with substantial dowries, may wear more expensive and elaborate pieces. Historically, the quality and quantity of a woman's jewelry could serve as an indicator of her family's societal status and wealth.<sup>4</sup>
- Traditional shoes for women are often colorful and may be embellished with embroidery or beadwork.<sup>4</sup> In northeastern Iran, specific types of shoes known as *Kumakh* or *Timaj* are worn; these are typically made of goatskin leather, often dyed green, and feature intricate embroidery with colored silk threads.<sup>15</sup>

Other Regional Specifics (e.g., Khorasan - Layen 3):

The Kurdish women of Layen in Northern Khorasan have a particularly well-documented traditional ensemble, considered one of the oldest forms of Kurdish women's attire in that region:

- **Pacheh**: A distinctive three-piece, wide-legged skirt. The upper part is typically made of cotton, the middle section of wool or velvet, and the edges are often finished with blue or red silk, featuring decorative stitching or cord embroidery.
- **Pirahan** (Dress): This silk dress is longer than those worn by other Kormanj women in the area. It has a simple form with a round neckline, and the front is adorned with locally woven patterns known as *Pikam*.
- **Niv-taneh/Kolaje** (Half-Jacket/Vest): A front-open, long-sleeved jacket worn over the

dress, traditionally made from handwoven *Termeh* fabric.

- **Kole/Bahareh** (Short Coat/Jacket): A short, front-open jacket with shorter sleeves than the *Niv-taneh*, made from striped silk fabric and decorated with ornamental pieces called *pists*, which are made by sewing old silver coins onto fabric.
- **Shal** (Red Silk Scarf): A large, handwoven red silk shawl, entirely patterned with a design known as *peykam e-shal*, draped over all other garments. Young unmarried women traditionally wear a black floral scarf (*Mohammadi Gol*) and are not permitted to wear the red *Shal* until after marriage.
- **Shar** (Black Scarf): The primary head covering, a black scarf with small floral patterns, tied in a triangular fashion around the head.

## Men's Attire

Traditional Kurdish men's clothing, while perhaps less overtly colorful than women's attire in some regions, is equally distinctive and can consist of up to nine pieces.<sup>15</sup>

The Core Ensemble:

The most iconic form of men's dress is a coordinated suit.

- **Shal û Shepik**: This term refers to a complete traditional male attire system, widely recognized and worn, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan and southern Turkish Kurdistan.<sup>2</sup> It typically consists of loose-fitting trousers (*Shalwar* or *Shal*), a shirt (*Kras*), and a matching jacket (*Kawa* or *Shapik*). This ensemble is almost always completed with a wide cloth belt or sash (*Pishten* or *Peshtwen*). The Central Kurdish style of *Şal û Şapik* is characterized by a fitted, collarless jacket that is tucked into gathered trousers which flare at the ankle; this style is often embroidered.<sup>18</sup>
- **Sharwal/Pantol/Rank**: These are various terms for the characteristic baggy trousers worn by Kurdish men. They are often made in muted earth tones but can also be colorful. The trousers are typically gathered at the waist and taper towards the ankle.<sup>2</sup> *Pantol* is also known as *Rank* or, in some dialects, *Patol*. The term *Shal* can also refer specifically to trousers with a particularly wide waist and wide hems, designed to be worn with the *Shapak* jacket.<sup>16</sup> *Dameh-Qapan* is another regional name for men's trousers.<sup>15</sup>
- **Kawa/Chokha/Shapik**: These terms denote the jacket or coat worn over the shirt as part of the *Shal û Shepik* ensemble.<sup>2</sup> *Chokha* is described as a cotton or woolen upper garment; it is called *Kawa* in regions like Saqqez and Baneh, and *Chokha* in areas like Sanandaj and Kermanshah.<sup>16</sup> *Shapak* refers to a woolen upper garment made from a specific material called *Maraz*, traditionally worn with *Shal* trousers.<sup>16</sup> The Central Kurdish style jacket is typically fitted, collarless, and open to the waist.<sup>18</sup> *Ranku choxa* is a more general term used to describe the complete men's suit of jacket and trousers.<sup>27</sup>

Shirts and Vests:

Underneath or over the jacket, men wear shirts and sometimes vests.

- **Kras** (Shirt): Kurdish men traditionally wear plain shirts. In some regional styles, particularly the Central Kurdish style, these shirts feature long, funnel-shaped sleeves

that are often wound around the arms of the outer jacket.<sup>4</sup> In North Khorasan, Kermanj Kurdish men are noted for wearing a shorter white *Kras*, often accompanied by a black, embroidered vest.<sup>23</sup>

- **\*\*\*Pishten/Peshtwen/Shal (waist shawl)\*\*\*:** A large, wide belt or sash made of cloth is an essential component of men's attire, tied securely around the waist over the other garments.<sup>1</sup> These sashes can be exceptionally long (sometimes up to 20 meters) and wide (30-60 cm). The length and elaborateness of the *Pishten* could historically indicate the wearer's social status or importance.<sup>15</sup> Traditionally, the sash was also functional, used for storing small personal items and, importantly, for tucking a dagger.<sup>4</sup> Another term for a waist sash is *Posht Tend* or *Shotik*, described as a six-meter-long floral fabric belt.<sup>16</sup>
- ***Pastak/Faraji/Yelek*:** A vest, often worn over the shirt, sometimes as an alternative to the jacket. For colder weather, the *Pastak* is typically made from wool or felt.<sup>4</sup> The term *Yel* is also used in some descriptions for a short top with long sleeves.<sup>15</sup> *Molki* refers to a specific style of collarless, buttoned vest.<sup>16</sup> *Faraji* (also known as *Kula Bal*, *Pastak*, or *Chokh*) is a heavy felt upper garment designed for cold regions, particularly associated with the Hawraman area.<sup>16</sup>

#### Headwear:

Men's headwear is prominent and varies significantly by region.

- ***Turban/Amamah*:** A turban, wrapped around the head, is a common and iconic feature of Kurdish men's traditional dress.<sup>2</sup> The style of the turban, including its color, the material used, and the wrapping technique, can vary widely depending on the specific region and tribal affiliation of the wearer.<sup>27</sup> For example, black turbans are reportedly popular in Erbil and favored by many tribes, while red turbans may be worn by prominent figures or leaders.<sup>40</sup> The Barzani tribe and Yezidi Kurds are noted for using a red and white checked *kufiya* (scarf) for their turbans.<sup>18</sup>
- ***Klaw/Araqchin* (Cap):** A skullcap, often simple in design, is frequently worn underneath the turban, providing a base for the wrapped cloth.<sup>2</sup> *Araqchin* is a specific term for this type of cap.<sup>15</sup>
- ***Jamana/Jamadani/Pushi/Pech/Kalagheh*:** These are various terms for the scarf or cloth material that is used to form the turban or is sometimes worn as a head cover on its own.<sup>10</sup> The *Jamaneh* is specifically described as the head cover worn underneath the *Amamah* (turban).<sup>40</sup> *Pech* can refer to a three-meter length of floral fabric that is wrapped around the *Araqchin* cap.<sup>16</sup> *Kalagheh* is described as a long black cloth used as a head wrap.<sup>23</sup>

#### Footwear:

- ***Klash*:** This is the traditional white footwear of the Hawraman region, though its use has spread. *Klash* are hand-made, typically from woven cotton fabric for the upper part and durable cowhide for the sole. They are renowned for being comfortable, breathable (keeping feet cool and preventing odor), and uniquely, often ambidextrous (can be worn on either foot).<sup>16</sup> The craft of *Klash* making has also evolved, with some artisans

introducing new materials like silk thread and reinforced soles for enhanced durability and aesthetic appeal.<sup>41</sup>

**Other Garments/Accessories:**

- **Lafka Surani/Lawandi:** This refers to a type of shirt with distinctively wide and long sleeves that end in a triangular extension. These long sleeve-ends are traditionally wrapped around the wrist or arm.<sup>16</sup>
- **Dekhun:** The drawstring used to secure the wide waistband of the *Sharwal* trousers.<sup>10</sup>
- **Puzwana:** Mentioned as a jewelry item or accessory for men.<sup>10</sup>
- **Dagger:** Historically, a dagger was commonly tucked into the large waist sash (*Pishten*) of a Kurdish man, serving both as a weapon and a status symbol.<sup>4</sup>

The detailed descriptions of both men's and women's attire reveal a recurring theme: the multi-layered nature of Kurdish outfits.<sup>4</sup> This layering is not merely for aesthetic effect but is deeply functional. It provides adaptability to the varied and often harsh climatic conditions of Kurdistan, which include cold, mountainous winters and hot summers.<sup>5</sup> The characteristic baggy trousers (*Sharwal*), worn by both men and women, allow for essential freedom of movement, crucial for a historically mountainous and often pastoral lifestyle.<sup>2</sup> Specific garments like the men's *Pastak* (a felt vest) are explicitly designed for cold weather.<sup>15</sup> This suggests that the sometimes elaborate and layered nature of Kurdish dress evolved from practical necessities as much as from purely cultural or aesthetic expressions.

Furthermore, the research highlights a complex and sometimes overlapping terminology for various garments. For instance, the term *Kawa* can denote a woman's long coat <sup>2</sup>, a woman's sleeved vest <sup>33</sup>, or a man's jacket or coat.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, terms like *Sharwal*, *Pantol*, *Jafi*, *Darpe*, and *Awal-krass* are all used to refer to the characteristic baggy trousers, with subtle variations in usage or regional preference possibly accounting for the different names.<sup>4</sup> One source explicitly states that parts of Kurdish garments may have different names in different regions; for example, a garment piece might be known by one name in Qorveh and another in Mahabad.<sup>42</sup> This terminological diversity underscores the significant regional variations inherent in Kurdish clothing, a point emphasized in numerous sources.<sup>2</sup> It implies that while there is a recognizable overarching concept of "Kurdish clothing," its specific manifestations, components, and nomenclature are highly localized, reflecting the fragmented geography of Kurdistan and the distinct tribal and community identities within the broader Kurdish nation. This makes the creation of a single, universally applied lexicon for Kurdish garments a challenging endeavor.

To provide a clearer overview, the following table summarizes key Kurdish garments:

**Table 1: Overview of Key Kurdish Garments**

Garment Name(s) (Kurdish/Other)	Gender	Brief Description	Common Materials	Primary Region(s) if specified
<i>Kiras/Fistan/Jli Kurdi</i>	Women	Long dress, often ornate, various sleeve styles (e.g.,	Silk, velvet, chiffon, cotton, sequins, beads	General Kurdistan



		funnel)		
<i>Xiftan/Kaftan</i>	Women	Outer robe or part of Mukriyani ensemble (dress with coat & sash)	Sheer fabrics, embroidered materials	Mukriyani region, general (as robe)
<i>Kawa</i> (Women)	Women	Long coat or sleeved vest (e.g., Mukryan style)	Embroidered fabrics, velvet, Atlas, Boursayi, Zari	General, Mukryan (specific vest)
<i>Kolunja/Sukhma</i>	Women	Vest/waistcoat worn over dress, often heavily embroidered	Velvet, brocade	General Kurdistan
<i>Sharwal/Pantol/Jaf i/Darpe</i>	Men/Women	Baggy trousers, wide at top, tapered at ankles	Cotton, silk (women), wool (men)	General Kurdistan
<i>Shal û Shepik</i>	Men	Ensemble: baggy trousers ( <i>Shalwar</i> ), shirt ( <i>Kras</i> ), jacket ( <i>Kawa/Shapik</i> ), belt	Wool, cotton, <i>maraz</i> (specialty wool)	Central Kurdistan, Iraqi K., SE Turkey
<i>Kawa/Chokha/Shapik</i> (Men)	Men	Jacket or coat part of <i>Shal û Shepik</i>	Wool, cotton, <i>maraz</i>	General Kurdistan
<i>Pishten/Peshtwen/Shal</i> (sash)	Men	Wide waist sash, can be very long	Cloth, silk, patterned fabric	General Kurdistan
<i>Klaw/Araqchin</i> (cap)	Men/Women	Skullcap, often worn under turban (men) or as decorated headpiece (women)	Velvet, cotton, embroidered, coin/bead decorated	General Kurdistan
<i>Turban/Amamah</i> (men)	Men	Headwrap made from a long scarf ( <i>Jamana/Pushî</i> ) over a cap	Cotton, silk, patterned scarves	General Kurdistan, regional styles
<i>Klash</i>	Men/Women (hist.)	White, woven footwear, ambidextrous	Cotton fabric uppers, cowhide soles	Hawraman region
<i>Pacheh</i> (Layen)	Women	Three-piece, wide-legged skirt	Cotton, wool, velvet, silk	Khorasan (Layen)

Faraji/Pastak (men)	Men	Heavy felt vest or outer garment for cold	Felt, wool	Hawraman, cold mountainous regions
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This table offers a consolidated reference to the primary traditional garments, aiding in understanding the complex and diverse Kurdish wardrobe.

## 4. Artistry in Fabric: Materials, Craftsmanship, and Embellishments

The creation of Kurdish traditional clothing is an art form deeply rooted in the skilled use of diverse materials and meticulous craftsmanship, further enhanced by a rich tradition of decorative embellishments. These elements combine to produce garments that are not only functional but also aesthetically striking and culturally significant.

Commonly Used Textiles:

Natural fibers have historically formed the backbone of Kurdish attire, reflecting the resources available in their environment and the practical needs of their lifestyle.

- **Wool:** Sourced from sheep or goats, wool is a vital material, particularly for men's garments. It is used to create the durable *Shal* (the fabric for trousers and sometimes sashes, which can involve lengths of up to 25 meters of specially prepared wool) <sup>1</sup>, the warm *Pastak* (felted vest or jacket) <sup>15</sup>, and various men's jackets.<sup>32</sup>
- **Cotton:** A versatile fiber, cotton is widely used for items such as the *Jafi* (women's trousers) <sup>15</sup>, the *Zir-Pirahan* (women's underdress, particularly in Layen where it's made of white floral cotton) <sup>3</sup>, women's dresses <sup>18</sup>, and some men's jackets.<sup>32</sup> The uppers of *Klash* footwear are also traditionally made of cotton.<sup>16</sup>
- **Silk:** Prized for its luster and drape, silk is frequently employed in the creation of elaborate women's dresses <sup>2</sup>, the distinctive red *Shal* (women's scarf in Layen) <sup>3</sup>, and even for threads in modern interpretations of *Klash* footwear.<sup>41</sup>

Beyond these fundamental fibers, more luxurious fabrics are integral to ceremonial and high-status Kurdish clothing:

- **Velvet:** This rich textile is a popular choice for women's dresses, waistcoats (*Kolunja*), and coats (*Kawa*) <sup>2</sup>, as well as for the elaborate *Kawa* (sleeved vest) of the Mukryan region <sup>33</sup> and the *Niv-taneh* (half-jacket) of Layen.<sup>3</sup>
- **Brocade:** Often used alongside velvet for women's waistcoats and coats, adding texture and opulence.<sup>18</sup>
- **Chiffon and Voile:** These lightweight, often sheer fabrics are used for women's dresses, particularly the Sorani style dress, creating an ethereal and flowing silhouette.<sup>18</sup>

Specialty local fabrics also play a role:

- **Gurun** fabric is mentioned for crafting women's *Kawa* (coats).<sup>32</sup>
- **Maraz** hair (a type of high-quality goat hair) is used for producing premium *Shal* (the men's garment material, known for its quality in regions like Zakho).<sup>1</sup>

- **Termeh**, a traditional handwoven fabric, was historically used for the women's *Niv-taneh* in Layen, though now machine-woven versions from Yazd are also used.<sup>3</sup>

In contemporary times, modern materials have found their way into Kurdish attire, with synthetic fabrics and brightly sequined materials becoming popular choices, especially for women's coats and festive wear.<sup>18</sup>

Traditional Craftsmanship:

The creation of Kurdish clothing relies heavily on skilled artisanship passed down through generations.

- **Weaving:** Handwoven fabrics are highly esteemed. This is particularly true for the men's *Shal* garment, which requires an intricate process of dyeing and weaving wool, often involving substantial lengths of fabric.<sup>1</sup> The women's red silk *Shal* (scarf) from Layen is another example of prized handwoven textile art.<sup>3</sup> Beyond clothing fabrics, Kurdish rugs and kilims (*gelims*) are renowned for their sophisticated weaving techniques and intricate patterns.<sup>43</sup>
- **Tailoring:** Traditionally, Kurdish clothes are custom-tailored to the individual, not mass-produced or bought ready-made.<sup>32</sup> The specific sewing skills required for constructing complex regional garments, such as those for Layen Kurdish women's clothing, are considered a vital part of cultural heritage, passed down from master to apprentice, and in some cases, have been officially registered as intangible cultural heritage to ensure their preservation.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary Kurdish tailors continue this tradition, often adapting traditional styles to meet modern preferences and tastes.<sup>38</sup>

Decorative Elements:

A hallmark of Kurdish clothing, especially women's attire, is the abundance and variety of decorative embellishments, which add beauty, meaning, and value to the garments.

- **Embroidery (*Sukhmeh*, *Kurdishi*, *Suzani*):** Intricate and vibrant embroidery is a defining characteristic. It adorns women's dresses, coats, vests, and headwear, often featuring complex floral, geometric, or symbolic motifs.<sup>2</sup> *Sukhmeh* is a specific and well-known type of Kurdish needlework, often seen on vests (*Kolunja*).<sup>16</sup> *Kurdishi* embroidery is characterized by its use of bright colors and bold geometric patterns, while *Suzani* embroidery typically features floral and vine motifs.<sup>44</sup>
- **Beadwork:** Beads are extensively used to decorate women's shoes<sup>4</sup>, clothing items, and headwear, adding sparkle and texture.<sup>15</sup>
- **Sequins:** Shimmering sequins are a popular embellishment for women's dresses, coats, and vests, catching the light and adding a festive quality to the attire.<sup>2</sup>
- **Coins:** Old silver or gold coins are frequently used as decorative elements, particularly on women's headwear (*Klaw* or caps)<sup>3</sup> and sometimes on belts.<sup>20</sup> These coins can be heirlooms or carry symbolic value.
- **Tassels:** Decorative tassels are often found on women's shoes<sup>15</sup> and as part of the elaborate headwear ensembles.<sup>18</sup>
- **Patterns:** Intricate patterns, whether woven into the fabric, embroidered, or printed, are a common feature. These patterns are often geometric or floral in nature, and can carry

symbolic meanings.<sup>2</sup> (The symbolism of patterns will be explored further in Section 6). The choice of materials in Kurdish clothing is far from arbitrary; it is intrinsically linked to the garment's aesthetic appeal, its indication of status (such as an expensive *Kawa*<sup>33</sup> or the quality of a woman's jewelry<sup>4</sup>), and its durability (for instance, a well-made *Shal* can last for 30 to 35 years<sup>1</sup>). The labor-intensive craftsmanship involved, such as the intricate sewing process required for a traditional *Shal*<sup>1</sup> or the detailed hand-embroidery of *Sukhmeh*<sup>44</sup>, imbues the clothing with an artistic and cultural value that transcends its purely utilitarian function. The various embellishments—sequins, coins, beads, and tassels<sup>2</sup>—further enhance this value, transforming garments into wearable art. This symbiotic relationship between material, craft, and cultural value means that any decline in the availability of traditional materials or the erosion of specialized craft skills directly threatens the authenticity and richness of Kurdish attire. Consequently, preservation efforts, such as the official registration of traditional sewing skills as intangible cultural heritage<sup>3</sup>, become crucial for safeguarding this legacy.

Furthermore, the decorations and embellishments on Kurdish clothing are not merely ornamental; they often serve as narratives or markers of status and identity. Historically, the quality and quantity of a woman's jewelry, for example, could clearly imply her family's societal standing and wealth.<sup>4</sup> The use of coins on headwear<sup>3</sup> might signify accumulated wealth, serve as part of a dowry, or act as protective amulets. The specific type of embroidery, such as the intricate *Sukhmeh* found on a *Kolunja*<sup>23</sup>, can indicate regional tradition, the skill of the artisan, and the importance of the garment. Even the length and quality of a man's *Pishten* (waist sash) could denote his position within the community.<sup>15</sup> This suggests that the "artistry" inherent in Kurdish clothing is also a sophisticated form of non-verbal communication, conveying rich information about the wearer's identity, social position, cultural background, and regional affiliation within the diverse tapestry of Kurdish society.

## 5. A Mosaic of Styles: Regional Diversity in Kurdish Clothing

Kurdish traditional clothing is not a monolithic entity but rather a vibrant mosaic of styles, colors, and forms that vary significantly across the vast and geographically diverse expanse of Kurdistan.<sup>4</sup> This regional diversity is shaped by a confluence of factors, including local geography (mountainous terrains versus plains), climate, specific tribal traditions, historical influences, and interactions with neighboring cultures.<sup>1</sup> It is a widely held notion among Kurds that one can often discern a person's region of origin simply by observing the nuances of their attire.<sup>4</sup> This sartorial differentiation also reflects the linguistic diversity within the Kurdish language, with distinct styles often associated with speakers of Kurmanji, Sorani, or Zazaki dialects, as well as the historical legacy of various Kurdish principalities and tribal confederations.<sup>2</sup>

### Kurdistan in Turkey:

- **Northern Kurdish Clothing:** Traditional attire in the northern regions of Turkish

Kurdistan (often referred to as Bakur) is frequently characterized by being relatively tight-fitting, bearing some resemblance to rural Turkish and Balkan folk costumes. Men's trousers in this style often feature tight lower legs and a loose, baggy crotch. Neck scarves and waistcoats are common components of the male ensemble. Headgear typically includes loosely wrapped turbans or simple skullcaps.<sup>18</sup>

- **Şal û Şapik:** The Central Kurdish men's ensemble known as *Şal û Şapik* is also widely recognized and worn in parts of southern Turkish Kurdistan, particularly in the Hakkari Province.<sup>18</sup>
- **East Anatolian Women's Costume:** This style, now rarely seen in modern Turkey but preserved among the Kurds of Khorasan in Iran (to where certain Northern Kurdish tribes were deported in the 17th century), is unique as it is the only traditional female Kurdish costume that features a short dress. This dress is worn over baggy trousers and is typically layered with aprons and a sash.<sup>18</sup>
- **Kurmanji Styles:** Kurmanji-speaking Kurds, who form a significant portion of the Kurdish population in Turkey, have their own unique patterns and stylistic preferences in clothing.<sup>2</sup>
- **Sashes and Turbans:** For men's sashes, dark colors combined with paisley or floral motifs are popular in Turkey.<sup>27</sup> Turkish Kurds are also known for wearing particularly extra-large turbans.<sup>27</sup>
- **Regional Preferences:** In areas like Van, clothing styles that are common in Diyarbakir (Amed), Şırnak, and Hakkari are reportedly popular, indicating inter-regional influences and shared traditions.<sup>14</sup>

#### Kurdistan in Iraq:

- **Southern Kurdish Clothing:** This style, often associated with the Peshmerga (Kurdish fighters), has become widely adopted and is now often considered a standard form of Kurdish costume across various regions. For men, it includes baggy trousers that are gathered at the waist and tapered at the ankle. The accompanying jacket is similar in cut to the Central Kurdish style but typically lacks embroidery and is usually found in solid colors or subtle pinstripes. A sash is worn around the waist, and headgear varies but commonly includes a skullcap and a large, fringed square scarf worn as a turban.<sup>18</sup>
- **Şal û Şapik:** The traditional Central Kurdish *Şal û Şapik* ensemble is also prevalent in Iraqi Kurdistan (Başur) and is sometimes named after specific regions where it is worn, such as Badinani, Hakkari (also a region in Turkey, indicating cross-border cultural zones), or Rewanduzi.<sup>18</sup>
- **Sorani Styles:** Sorani-speaking Kurds, predominant in areas like Sulaymaniyah and Erbil, have their own distinct flair in clothing.<sup>2</sup> The predominant Sorani women's dress is an elaborate ensemble that includes trousers, a petticoat, a floor-length dress with characteristic funnel-shaped sleeves, and worn over this, a combination of a short waistcoat, a long coat, and/or a short jacket.<sup>18</sup>
- **Urban Variations:** Within Iraqi Kurdistan, stylistic differences can be observed even between major cities. For instance, in Sulaymaniyah, women's clothing is often characterized by vibrant colors and detailed embroidery, while in Erbil (Hawler), more

muted tones are sometimes preferred, possibly reflecting urban influences and different local tastes.<sup>2</sup> Regional preferences for women's attire in Erbil include *Kiras û Sermil*, *Xiftan*, and *Kiras*.<sup>31</sup>

- **Headwear:** Specific tribal affiliations can be indicated by headwear. For example, men of the Barzani tribe traditionally use a red-and-white checked *kufiya* (scarf) for their turbans.<sup>18</sup> Yezidi Kurds may wear black sashes or also use a red-and-white checked *kufiya*, sometimes worn inside out, as part of their distinct religious and cultural identity.<sup>18</sup>
- **Women's Headgear:** In northern Iraq, women's traditional headgear may include a fez decorated with gold or silver disks and dangling pendants.<sup>27</sup> In some areas, Kurdish women have also adopted the black *abaya*, a long, flowing outer garment common in neighboring Arab cultures, reflecting cultural exchange.<sup>27</sup>

#### Kurdistan in Iran:

- **Mukriyani Costume:** The women's costume from the Mukriyan region (around Mahabad and Saqqez) in Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhilat) is notably distinct. It features more voluminous trousers worn without cotton tops, a short vest top under a sheer, straight-sleeved dress that is gathered at the hips, a large sash worn on the hips (rather than the waist), and a waist-length coat. The headwear includes a decorated velvet or brocade pillbox hat, topped with a large triangular shawl that is crossed over the chest with the ends hanging down the back.<sup>18</sup>
- **Hawraman Region:** The *Shal* garment (often referring to the fabric or the complete men's suit) is historically associated with the Hawraman region, known for its unique cultural traditions.<sup>1</sup> Men in this area may also wear the *Faraji*, a heavy felt upper garment suited for the mountainous climate.<sup>16</sup> The distinctive *Klash* footwear also originates from Hawraman.<sup>41</sup>
- **Khorasani Kurdish Attire:** The Kurdish communities in Khorasan (northeastern Iran), descendants of tribes deported centuries ago, have preserved some of the oldest forms of Kurdish dress. In the Layen village, women's attire includes specific garments like *Pacheh* (a wide-legged skirt), *Pirahan-Zir* (under-dress), *Pirahan* (silk dress), *Niv-taneh* (half-jacket), *Kole* (short coat), the iconic red silk *Shal* (scarf), and the *Shar* (black headscarf).<sup>3</sup> Women in the Quchan area of Khorasan wear a shorter *Kras* (dress) with a *shliteh* (petticoat).<sup>15</sup> Kermanj Kurdish men in North Khorasan are known for wearing a shorter white *Kras* accompanied by an embroidered black vest.<sup>23</sup>
- **Sorani Styles:** Sorani-speaking Kurds in Iran also have their own distinct stylistic variations.<sup>2</sup>
- **General Iranian Kurdish Elements:** Common elements for Iranian Kurdish women include loose trousers, wide, long-sleeved shirts, colorful scarves, headscarves, large hoop earrings, abundant jewelry, and often belts decorated with coins. Men's attire typically includes a *kop* (a vest resembling a loose robe), a sash around the waist, and wide, baggy trousers.<sup>20</sup> Colors in Iranian Kurdish clothing often incorporate red, yellow, and green, reflecting the colors of the Kurdish national flag and expressing a strong

sense of national identity.<sup>20</sup>

- **Sashes:** Similar to Turkey, dark-colored sashes adorned with paisley or floral motifs are popular among men in Iran.<sup>27</sup>

#### **Kurdistan in Syria:**

- **Kurmanji Styles:** Kurmanji-speaking Kurds, who form the majority of the Kurdish population in Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava), have their own unique patterns and clothing traditions.<sup>2</sup>
- **Women's Traditional Outfit:** For women, this often consists of an ornate dress (*krass*) with characteristically exaggerated long sleeves that end in a pointed cuff. This dress is sometimes worn over wide trousers and may be accentuated with an embroidered coat. An array of jewelry and a decorative belt (often silver or gold) are essential components. Headwear typically includes a long scarf, particularly in western parts of Syrian Kurdistan.<sup>27</sup> The dress is often made of somewhat transparent fabric with soft silk threads and decorated with miniatures and shiny metal ornaments, worn over a thin, silky undershirt.<sup>37</sup>
- **Men's Traditional Outfit:** Men's attire in Syria features trousers that billow out from the hips and then nip back in at the ankles, secured with a thick belt made of often-colorful fabric. The ensemble includes a simple shirt and a matching jacket or waistcoat, and is topped with a turban wrapped from a scarf that often features floral or other patterns.<sup>28</sup> In western Kurdistan (areas of Syria), men may also wear the *zbun* (a long robe), sometimes combined with an *abaya* (a long robe of Arab origin), indicating regional cross-cultural influences.<sup>27</sup> The men's attire, known as *Peshm û Pirqez* (jacket and trousers), was traditionally made of sheep wool or goat leather before transitioning to modern fabrics like linen.<sup>37</sup>
- **Headwear:** Women in northeastern Syria may don a fez decorated with gold or silver disks and pendants, similar to styles seen in northern Iraq.<sup>27</sup>
- **Cultural Context:** It has been observed that Kurds in northeastern Syria generally tend to dress more liberally, which may be attributed to more relaxed local religious ideologies or the specific socio-political context of Rojava.<sup>50</sup>

The detailed descriptions gleaned from various sources collectively paint a vivid picture where traditional Kurdish clothing functions as a veritable map of Kurdish geo-cultural identity. The subtle, and at times quite overt, differences in the cut of trousers (ranging from tight to baggy to flared<sup>18</sup>), the style of jackets (embroidered versus plain<sup>18</sup>), the nuances of headwear (such as turban size and wrapping style, or the specific colors of *kufiya* used by groups like the Barzanis or Yezidis<sup>18</sup>), and even prevailing color palettes (for example, the preference for vibrant colors in Sulaymaniyah versus more muted tones in Erbil<sup>2</sup>, or the symbolic use of Kurdish national flag colors in Iran<sup>20</sup>) are not arbitrary. These variations are deeply ingrained local traditions that allow Kurds, often with a remarkable degree of accuracy, to identify each other's origins and affiliations.<sup>4</sup> This intricate system of sartorial differentiation within a broader, unifying "Kurdish" framework highlights the complex interplay of localized identity, tribal heritage, and an overarching national consciousness.

While Kurdish clothing proudly maintains its distinct characteristics, it is not, and has never been, entirely immune to influences from neighboring cultures or the policies of the dominant states within which Kurdish populations reside. This demonstrates that cultural boundaries, as expressed through clothing, are inherently permeable. For instance, in parts of Iraqi Kurdistan, some women have adopted the black *abaya* <sup>27</sup>, a garment traditionally associated with Arab cultures. Similarly, men in Western Kurdistan (likely referring to parts of Syria) may incorporate the *zbun* (a long robe) combined with an *abaya* into their wardrobe.<sup>27</sup> In Iran and Turkey, state-imposed dress codes or broader modernization efforts have also exerted an influence on the prevalence and forms of traditional Kurdish wear.<sup>4</sup> Kurdish attire thus exists in a dynamic relationship with the clothing traditions of Turks, Arabs, and Persians, leading to instances of borrowing and adaptation, even as core Kurdish elements are fiercely preserved and celebrated. This phenomenon is a natural outcome of centuries of co-existence, trade, conflict, and the complex political realities of the region. Indeed, it is explicitly noted that Kurdish dress has been influenced by the local clothes of the host countries in which Kurds live.<sup>12</sup> This ongoing dialogue between tradition and external influence underscores the resilience and adaptability of Kurdish culture.

To better illustrate these regional distinctions, the following table provides a comparative overview:

**Table 2: Comparative Features of Regional Kurdish Attire**

Region	Key Garments for Men	Key Garments for Women	Distinctive Features/Colors/Patterns/Materials
<b>Turkey (North/East Anatolian)</b>	Tight-fitting trousers (tight lower leg, baggy crotch), neck scarves, waistcoats, loose turbans/skullcaps. <i>Şal û Şapik</i> in Hakkari.	(East Anatolian style, rare in Turkey, found in Khorasan) Short dress over baggy trousers, worn in layers with aprons and a sash.	Resembles rural Turkish and Balkan costumes. Men's sashes often dark with paisley or floral motifs. Turkish Kurds known for extra-large turbans.
<b>Iraq (Sorani areas, e.g., Sulaymaniyah, Erbil)</b>	Baggy trousers ( <i>Sharwal</i> , often solid color or pinstripe), plain jacket (similar to Central Kurdish but no embroidery), wide sash, skullcap with large fringed scarf as turban. <i>Şal û Şapik</i> ensemble.	Trousers ( <i>Darpe</i> ), petticoat ( <i>Zher-krass</i> ), floor-length funnel-sleeve <i>Kiras</i> (dress), often with a short waistcoat ( <i>Sukhma</i> ), long coat ( <i>Kawa</i> ), and/or short jacket.	Sulaymaniyah: vibrant colors, detailed embroidery. Erbil: more muted tones. Fabrics include chiffon, voile for dresses; velvet, brocades for outerwear. Barzani tribe: red-checked <i>kufiya</i> for turban. Yezidis: black sashes or red-checked <i>kufiya</i>



			(inside out).
<b>Iran (Mukriyani region, e.g., Mahabad, Saqqez)</b>	(General Kurdish Iranian men) <i>Kop</i> (vest resembling a loose robe), sash, wide baggy trousers.	Distinctive ensemble: voluminous trousers (no cotton tops), short vest top under a sheer straight-sleeved dress gathered at hips, large hip sash, waist-length coat. Headwear: decorated velvet/brocade pillbox hat topped with a large triangular shawl.	Unique women's ensemble structure. Colors in Iranian Kurdish attire often incorporate red, yellow, and green (Kurdish national flag colors). Men's sashes similar to Turkish styles.
<b>Iran (Khorasan, e.g., Layen, Quchan)</b>	(Kermanj men) Shorter white <i>Kras</i> (shirt) with an embroidered black vest.	(Layen) <i>Pacheh</i> (wide-legged skirt), <i>Pirahan-Zir</i> (under-dress), silk <i>Pirahan</i> (dress), <i>Niv-taneh</i> (half-jacket), <i>Kole</i> (short coat), red silk <i>Shal</i> (scarf), <i>Shar</i> (black headscarf). (Quchan) Shorter <i>Kras</i> with <i>shliteh</i> (petticoat).	Represents some of the oldest forms of Kurdish women's attire. Highly specific garment components and terminology.
<b>Syria (General/Kurmanji areas)</b>	Trousers billowing from hips and nipped at ankles, thick colorful fabric belt, simple shirt, matching jacket/waistcoat, turban from patterned scarf ( <i>Jamadani</i> ). Men may wear <i>zbun</i> (long robe) with <i>abaya</i> in western areas. <i>Peshm û Pirqez</i> (jacket & trousers).	Ornate <i>Krass</i> (dress) with exaggerated long sleeves and pointed cuff, sometimes over wide trousers, with embroidered coat, jewelry, decorative belt. Long scarf as headwear in western areas.	Women's dresses often of sheer, decorated fabrics over darker undershirts. Men's attire traditionally wool/leather, now linen/baize. Generally more liberal dress codes observed.

This table aims to systematize the complex regional variations, facilitating a clearer understanding of how Kurdish clothing acts as a geo-cultural marker across the diverse landscapes of Kurdistan.

## 6. Woven Meanings: Symbolism and Cultural Significance

Kurdish traditional clothing is far more than a collection of fabrics and stitches; it is a rich semiotic system, a vibrant tapestry woven with threads of identity, heritage, history, and resistance. Each garment, color, pattern, and embellishment can carry layers of meaning, communicating complex cultural narratives and social codes.

**Clothing as a Primary Emblem of Kurdish Identity, Heritage, and Cultural Authenticity:**

The most fundamental significance of Kurdish attire lies in its role as a powerful emblem of Kurdish identity. It is consistently described as a standout feature of the national cultural identity, possessing immense folkloric value and serving as a tangible and visible link to a shared heritage.<sup>1</sup> The act of wearing Kurdish clothes is a profound expression of pride and a deep connection to one's roots and ancestry.<sup>2</sup> This sentiment is eloquently captured in the words attributed to Seyyed Hossein Nasr: "clothing, after the body, is the closest thing to our essence, and our identity is often closely tied to our clothing".<sup>3</sup> For a nation like the Kurds, who lack a unified state and have often faced pressures of assimilation, traditional garments become an even more crucial and potent expression of their distinct identity and historical continuity.<sup>11</sup> The clothing itself is seen as a repository of "sovereign history," a testament to an enduring cultural legacy.<sup>10</sup>

**The Language of Colors: Symbolic Interpretations of Various Hues in Kurdish Attire:**

Color plays a vital role in the aesthetic and symbolic language of Kurdish clothing. Women's attire, in particular, is renowned for its striking and vibrant use of color.<sup>2</sup> While there is a tendency for older women to wear darker, more muted colors, younger women and girls often favor brightly colored traditional gowns, especially for festive occasions.<sup>4</sup> The traditional dress worn for Nowruz (the Kurdish New Year) is characterized by vibrant, pure colors that explicitly signify joy and the festive spirit of renewal.<sup>37</sup>

Specific colors can carry particular connotations or serve as identity markers. For instance, in men's headwear, the *Amamah* (turban) varies in color according to region and tribal preference: black is reportedly the best-selling and most favored color in Erbil, particularly among the dominant tribes, while red turbans may be worn by prominent figures or leaders.<sup>40</sup>

The Barzani tribe and Yezidi Kurds are distinguished by their use of a red-and-white checked *kufiya* (scarf) for their turbans.<sup>18</sup> Men's sashes can also be color-coded: green sashes may indicate descent from the Hashemites (the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad), while black sashes are traditionally worn by Yezidi men.<sup>27</sup> In Iranian Kurdistan, traditional clothes often prominently feature the colors red, yellow, and green—the colors of the Kurdish national flag—serving as a direct visual assertion of national identity.<sup>20</sup>

Academic studies exploring color symbolism within Kurdish culture, often contextualized by broader Middle Eastern and Islamic traditions, identify a set of basic color terms in Kurdish (*spee* - white, *rash* - black, *suur* - red, *sawz* - green, *shin* - blue, *zard* - yellow, *mor* - purple) and their associated metaphorical links to emotions, concepts of purity, mourning, and social status.<sup>27</sup> Within these broader cultural frameworks, white is often preferred for its symbolism

of purity, joy, and auspiciousness, while black can represent the negative, or historically, in contexts like the Ottoman Empire, was sometimes mandated for non-Muslim populations.<sup>56</sup> Dark colors such as black, purple (*mor*), and dark blue were also associated with mourning in Ottoman society.<sup>53</sup> This complex interplay of indigenous meanings, regional customs, and broader religious or historical influences shapes the symbolic palette of Kurdish attire. The reverence for white clothing among the Yazidis, for example, underscores how specific religious beliefs can elevate the importance of a particular color regardless of garment style.<sup>59</sup>

#### The Stories in Patterns: Meaning of Traditional Motifs:

The intricate patterns found on Kurdish textiles, particularly on woven items like rugs and kilims (*gelims*), are not merely decorative but are imbued with cultural narratives and symbolic meanings.<sup>43</sup> These patterns often feature distinct regional characteristics, such as color-banded borders or specific motifs like the S-shaped designs referred to as "wedding shoes" (as these kilims were traditionally given by the bride's parents to the wedding couple).<sup>43</sup> Other common patterns include the *herati* (fish motif), *gol-o-goldân* (flower and vase), *qafqâzi* (Caucasian-inspired designs), and the "Moses snakeheads" motif.<sup>43</sup> One of the most potent symbols in Kurdish folklore and textile art is the serpent, dragon, or the mythical figure of Shahmaran, the Queen of Snakes. This motif is widely considered a symbol of luck, abundance, strength, and immortality, and its depiction is especially prevalent among Yezidi communities, adorning their walls, chests, and textiles.<sup>7</sup> Geometric shapes are also very common in Kurdish designs, often drawing inspiration from the natural environment.<sup>20</sup> The *boteh* (paisley) motif, for instance, can symbolize life, and variations in its placement or combination with other elements can convey different meanings, such as wrath or peace, or represent concepts like mother and child.<sup>61</sup>

Other symbolic motifs identified in Kurdish rugs, which may have parallels or influence patterns in clothing, include: running water (symbolizing life and fertility), the bird (representing life after death, freedom, and dreams), the camel (a symbol of migration), the snake (representing the undeveloped or primal aspect of human nature), the rooster (denoting awareness, masculinity, and perseverance), the dog (a symbol of loyalty and support), the deer (representing birth and fertility), the eagle (symbolizing power, freedom, and immortality), and the tree (a rich symbol of life, endurance, growth, and the connection between the earthly and celestial realms).<sup>61</sup> These patterns, therefore, transform textiles into a visual archive of Kurdish folklore, beliefs, history, and worldview, often passed down through generations of weavers, who are predominantly women.<sup>43</sup>

#### Attire as Resistance: Historical and Contemporary Use of Clothing in Political Expression and Defiance:

Kurdish clothing has frequently transcended its cultural role to become a potent symbol in the political arena, particularly in contexts of state suppression or conflict. Specific items of Kurdish attire, such as the *keffiyeh* (traditional scarf), *shal u shepik* (the characteristic baggy pants ensemble), and scarves in the colors green, red, and yellow (colors associated with the Kurdish national flag and identity), have been perceived as symbols of Kurdish nationalism and thus as threats by states like Turkey. Consequently, the wearing of such items has, at times, been criminalized or restricted.<sup>8</sup> Legislation has even been passed in Turkey penalizing

the display of emblems of banned organizations on clothing or banners during protests, with punishments including imprisonment.<sup>8</sup>

Despite, or perhaps because of, such restrictions, Kurds have actively reclaimed their traditional dress as a form of political statement and an assertion of their identity. Traditional clothing is visibly worn during election campaigns, on Kurdish television channels, at national celebrations like Newroz, and significantly, in political demonstrations and protests.<sup>8</sup> In these contexts, donning traditional attire becomes an act of defiance against assimilationist policies and a clear affirmation of an unyielding Kurdish identity. The risks associated with such public displays of cultural identity can be severe; for example, an incident was reported in the Muğla province of Turkey in 2015 where a Kurdish man was beaten and forced to kiss a statue of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk simply for wearing ethnic Kurdish clothes in public.<sup>8</sup> The mythical figure of Şamarkan, often woven into fabrics or depicted in art, is also utilized by Kurdish activists as a symbol of resistance against occupation and oppression.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the tradition of women wearing intricately braided hair, especially when paired with traditional attire for events like Newroz, is seen as symbolizing profound strength and resistance embedded within Kurdish identity.<sup>7</sup> This politicization of clothing transforms garments from neutral cultural artifacts into active symbols on the battlefield of cultural and political assertion.

Clothing in Social Life: Garments for Celebrations (Newroz, Weddings) and Mourning Rituals: Traditional Kurdish attire plays a central role in the social and ceremonial life of the Kurdish people. It is most prominently and proudly worn during significant cultural celebrations such as Newroz (the Kurdish New Year, marking the spring equinox) and weddings.<sup>1</sup> The men's Shal garment, for instance, is particularly favored for Newroz festivities.<sup>1</sup> A dedicated "Kurdish Clothes Day," officially observed on March 10th in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, further underscores the importance of traditional attire, with people encouraged to wear their national dress in educational institutions, government offices, and public spaces.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding mourning attire, traditions can vary and reflect a blend of Kurdish customs and broader Islamic practices. Historically, a significant sign of mourning among Kurds, particularly for women, was the cutting of their hair, which might then be hung over the tomb of the deceased, especially a husband.<sup>63</sup> In some old customs, upon the death of an eminent person, family members might tie a yellow piece of cloth to the deceased's clothes, which were then placed on a horseback.<sup>63</sup> The contemporary custom, however, more commonly involves wearing black clothes for a period of forty days following a death to express sadness and mourning.<sup>63</sup>

General Islamic funeral attire etiquette, which likely influences Kurdish practices in many areas, emphasizes modesty and subdued colors. Neutral tones like grey, brown, or black are common, though white can also symbolize mourning (representing purity and simplicity), particularly in some South Asian Muslim communities.<sup>27</sup> Vibrant colors and flashy jewelry are generally discouraged during mourning.<sup>65</sup> For men, typical mourning attire consists of a shirt and trousers, while women are expected to wear ankle-length skirts or dresses, long-sleeved and high-necked tops, and headscarves.<sup>64</sup> Some Turkish traditions related to mourning include the symbolic tearing of the deceased's clothes (referred to as *soyka*); if the deceased is a woman, her headscarf (*yazma*) might be placed on the coffin.<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, one source suggests that some Kurdish women, particularly in Iran, avoid wearing black even in mourning, preferring instead the vibrant colors that reflect their region's landscapes.<sup>22</sup> This presents a notable contrast to the widespread adoption of black for mourning in many cultures<sup>63</sup> and the general Islamic customs favoring subdued colors.<sup>68</sup> This discrepancy may point to regional variations, sub-group specific customs, or a conscious choice to maintain distinct cultural practices even in times of sorrow. The strong Yazidi reverence for the color white, leading them to prioritize it in their attire regardless of the occasion, further illustrates how specific cultural or religious tenets can shape color choices in clothing, even overriding broader regional trends.<sup>59</sup> Detailed information specifically on Kurdish mourning *clothing* (colors, styles) from Kurdish-language sources was somewhat limited in the provided materials<sup>59</sup>, often discussing funeral contexts or general Yazidi preferences rather than specific mourning attire protocols for the broader Kurdish population. The symbolism of colors in Kurdish attire is thus a complex tapestry woven from indigenous cultural meanings (such as the use of red, yellow, and green to signify national identity<sup>20</sup>), specific regional or tribal associations (like the preference for black turbans in Erbil or the distinctive red-checked *kufiya* of the Barzanis<sup>27</sup>), and influences from the broader Islamic cultural sphere (for example, the association of white with purity or the use of dark colors for mourning in certain contexts<sup>56</sup>). This layered system of color symbolism reflects a rich history of cultural interactions, local interpretations, and the assertion of specific identities within the diverse Kurdish world.

## 7. Kurdish Attire in the Twenty-First Century

In the contemporary era, Kurdish traditional clothing navigates a complex landscape shaped by the forces of globalization, modernization, and a resilient commitment to cultural preservation. While Western dress has made significant inroads, traditional attire continues to hold profound meaning and is experiencing a dynamic evolution.

Impact of Globalization and Modernization:

The increasing interconnectedness of the world and the pervasive influence of Western fashion have led to a noticeable trend where traditional Kurdish dress is less frequently worn in daily life, particularly in urban centers. Many Kurds, like people in numerous other cultures, have adopted the dress styles of their host countries or embraced globalized Western fashion trends.<sup>4</sup> This shift is often more pronounced among younger generations, who may reserve traditional garments for special occasions, while older individuals might continue to wear them more regularly as part of their everyday attire.<sup>11</sup>

However, this trend is not one of simple replacement. Alongside the adoption of modern styles, there is a strong and often growing counter-current of renewed interest, pride, and conscious preservation of traditional Kurdish clothing. This is particularly evident during cultural festivals, weddings, and among the extensive Kurdish diaspora.<sup>2</sup> The very act of choosing to wear traditional attire in a modern context can be a powerful statement of identity and cultural affiliation.

Revival and Preservation Efforts:

The Kurdish diaspora, spread across Europe, North America, Australia, and other parts of the

world, has emerged as a significant force in the preservation and revival of traditional clothing. Their desire to maintain connections with their heritage has fueled a sustained, and in some cases increased, global demand for traditional Kurdish garments.<sup>2</sup> This demand supports artisans in Kurdistan and encourages the continued production of these culturally significant items. The diaspora are not merely passive recipients of tradition but active participants who reinterpret and re-energize it, ensuring its relevance in new global contexts and for successive generations. The traditional Kurdish footwear, *Klash*, for example, has gained international recognition and is often worn by Kurds living abroad as a symbol of their identity during cultural events, showcasing their heritage to the world.<sup>41</sup>

Cultural events and festivals, most notably Newroz (the Kurdish New Year), play a pivotal role in showcasing and celebrating traditional attire, reinforcing its cultural importance.<sup>1</sup> The designation of March 10th as "Kurdish Clothes Day" in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq further institutionalizes this celebration, encouraging widespread participation in wearing traditional dress.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, various organizations and dedicated individuals are actively working to preserve specific craft traditions associated with Kurdish clothing, such as the art of *Klash* making, through workshops, exhibitions, and cultural festivals aimed at raising awareness and inspiring new generations of artisans.<sup>41</sup>

The digital age has also opened new avenues for the preservation and dissemination of Kurdish clothing. Online platforms, including e-commerce sites like Etsy <sup>24</sup> and specialized webshops run by Kurdish entrepreneurs <sup>30</sup>, make traditional and modern interpretations of Kurdish clothing accessible to a global audience. This not only caters to the diaspora but also introduces Kurdish culture to a wider international community, contributing to its visibility and continued use.

Contemporary Kurdish Fashion: Designers Blending Tradition with Modern Aesthetics:

A significant development in the twenty-first century is the emergence of professional Kurdish fashion designers who are consciously blending traditional elements with contemporary aesthetics. Designers like Lara Dizyee <sup>46</sup> and Huda Hassan (founder of the Jamana brand) <sup>80</sup> are at the forefront of this movement. They draw inspiration from the rich repertoire of Kurdish symbols, motifs, embroidery techniques, and silhouettes, reinterpreting them within modern fashion paradigms and often using luxurious fabrics to appeal to a global clientele.<sup>46</sup> Lara Dizyee, for instance, explicitly aims to make Kurdish fashion accessible on the international stage, presenting it in a refined and sophisticated manner while striving to maintain its cultural authenticity.<sup>46</sup> Her collections, which have been showcased at prestigious events like Paris Fashion Week, demonstrate a commitment to honoring Kurdish roots while creating pieces that resonate with contemporary fashion sensibilities.<sup>46</sup> Huda Hassan's Jamana brand is inspired by the natural beauty of Kurdistan and aims to create modern, stylish Kurdish clothing that is easier to wear on a variety of occasions compared to some of the more elaborate and strictly traditional garments.<sup>80</sup> This new wave of Kurdish fashion design represents a deliberate, artful engagement with tradition, seeking to innovate while respecting heritage. The challenge for these designers lies in navigating the delicate balance between creating globally appealing fashion and preserving the deep cultural essence and historical resonance of the garments they draw inspiration from.

Even beyond high fashion, traditional tailors in Kurdistan are adapting to changing tastes by offering more modern takes on classic Kurdish suits, such as slimmer-cut trousers and more fitted jackets, to cater to younger customers and members of the diaspora who seek a blend of tradition and contemporary style.<sup>38</sup>

Kurdish Clothing Elements in Global Fashion:

The unique aesthetics of Kurdish clothing have also begun to make appearances, sometimes controversially, in the broader global fashion landscape. The traditional Kurdish shoe, Klash, has gained popularity beyond Kurdistan's borders, with modern designs incorporating new elements like metallic threads and contemporary fabrics, allowing it to be blended with modern fashion trends.<sup>41</sup> This demonstrates how a traditional craft item can evolve and find a new audience.

However, the increased visibility of Kurdish attire also brings the risk of cultural appropriation. One report mentioned an instance where a Turkish designer allegedly presented Kurdish clothes at a Paris fashion festival under the label of "Turkish Anatolian clothes," highlighting attempts by others to claim or co-opt elements of Kurdish cultural heritage.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, Kurdish cultural organizations, such as the Kurdish Women's Society, have actively worked to promote authentic Kurdish clothing on international platforms by organizing fashion shows in countries like Australia and Canada.<sup>14</sup> These efforts aim to ensure that Kurdish culture is represented accurately and that its contributions to the world of textiles and fashion are duly recognized.

The journey of contemporary Kurdish fashion is thus one of navigating authenticity and global appeal. The success of Kurdish designers on international stages indicates a growing potential for Kurdish aesthetics to transcend local boundaries. However, this success also carries with it the important responsibility of accurately representing, honoring, and safeguarding the rich heritage from which these modern interpretations draw their inspiration and meaning.

## 8. Guardians of Heritage: Kurdish Clothing in Museums and Cultural Initiatives

The preservation and promotion of Kurdish traditional clothing are actively pursued through various avenues, including museum collections, cultural organizations, and increasingly, digital platforms. These efforts play a crucial role in safeguarding this vital aspect of Kurdish heritage for future generations and in educating a wider audience about its cultural significance.

Notable Museum Collections:

Several museums around the world house collections of Kurdish traditional clothing and textiles, serving as important repositories of cultural memory.

- **Kurd's Heritage Museum (Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan):** Established in 2015, this museum is dedicated to the preservation of Kurdish heritage. Its collection comprises approximately 1718 registered items, including traditional clothes, intricate jewelry, historical manuscripts, household utensils, and firearms, with artifacts ranging from 50 to 400 years old. Around 200 of these items are typically on display. The museum notably features examples of traditional Kurdish attire and accessories, including pieces

made by Jewish craftsmen in Sulaymaniyah about a century ago, as well as 18th-century Christian jewelry from the same city, highlighting the diverse cultural fabric of the region.<sup>81</sup>

- **Kurdish Textile Museum (Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan):** Located within the historic Erbil Citadel, a UNESCO World Heritage site, this museum is specifically dedicated to preserving and showcasing the rich traditions of Kurdish textile weaving. Its collections include a wide array of handmade carpets, traditional dresses, and various other textiles that tell the story of Kurdish craftsmanship and cultural diversity. The museum enhances the visitor experience by offering live demonstrations of the weaving process and hosting workshops, thereby actively engaging the public with these living traditions.<sup>83</sup>
- **Sulaymaniyah Museum (Iraqi Kurdistan):** As the largest museum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the second largest in all of Iraq (after the National Museum in Baghdad), the Sulaymaniyah Museum holds a vast collection of archaeological pieces from various parts of Kurdistan and Mesopotamia. The Kurd's Heritage Museum is administratively affiliated with this larger institution, benefiting from its established infrastructure and expertise.<sup>81</sup>
- **TRC Leiden (Textile Research Centre, Netherlands):** International institutions also contribute to the preservation and study of Kurdish attire. The TRC Leiden, for example, holds examples of Kurdish clothing in its collections, including garments and accessories from Iranian Kurdistan (specifically the Kermanshah region), such as women's caps, dresses, and waistcoats.<sup>27</sup>

These museums function as more than just passive repositories for old items. The Kurdish Textile Museum, with its live demonstrations and workshops<sup>83</sup>, and the Kurd's Heritage Museum, born from the passion of individuals dedicated to "preserving and protecting such Kurdish relics"<sup>81</sup>, exemplify an active role in cultural revival and education. They aim to connect contemporary audiences with their heritage in a meaningful way, which is particularly vital for a culture whose material heritage may be at risk due to historical political instability, conflict, or displacement.

The Role of Cultural Organizations and Online Platforms:

Beyond museums, various cultural organizations and the burgeoning digital landscape play a significant role in showcasing, preserving, and promoting Kurdish traditional attire.

- Organizations such as the "Revival of Kurd's Heritage Organisation" are directly involved in establishing and maintaining cultural institutions like the Kurd's Heritage Museum.<sup>81</sup>
- Cultural heritage bodies and local communities have actively worked to gain official recognition for traditional Kurdish craft skills. For instance, the unique sewing skills associated with the traditional clothing of Kurdish women in Layen village (Khorasan, Iran) have been registered as an intangible cultural heritage, a crucial step in ensuring their continuity.<sup>3</sup>
- The rise of online platforms has revolutionized access to Kurdish clothing. E-commerce websites like Etsy host numerous sellers offering traditional and modern Kurdish garments.<sup>24</sup> Dedicated online shops, often run by Kurdish entrepreneurs (e.g., Kewsan<sup>2</sup>, Zerin.dk<sup>75</sup>), make these items available to a global market. This not only supports



artisans and sustains demand but also significantly increases the visibility of Kurdish culture worldwide.

- Informational websites and online publications, such as The Kurdish Project <sup>4</sup>, Kurdipedia <sup>87</sup>, Kurdistan Chronicle <sup>1</sup>, and Kurdshop <sup>10</sup>, serve as valuable resources for documenting and disseminating information about Kurdish clothing, history, and culture, reaching a broad international audience.

The proliferation of these online platforms for showcasing and selling Kurdish clothing is a powerful tool for preservation, education, and accessibility, especially for the Kurdish diaspora seeking to maintain connections with their heritage.<sup>2</sup> However, this digital presence and the associated commercialization also present a double-edged sword. While they allow for unprecedented global reach and can sustain demand, issues of quality control and authenticity can arise, as indicated by some consumer experiences.<sup>74</sup> More significantly, the ease of digital reproduction and dissemination can also facilitate cultural appropriation or misrepresentation if not carefully managed by Kurdish communities, artisans, and cultural custodians themselves. The instance of a non-Kurdish designer reportedly presenting Kurdish clothes as belonging to another culture <sup>11</sup> underscores this potential risk, highlighting the ongoing need for vigilance and proactive cultural stewardship in the digital age.

## **9. Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Kurdish Threads**

The traditional clothing of the Kurdish people, in its myriad forms and vibrant expressions, is far more than a collection of garments; it is a profound testament to a rich and resilient cultural heritage. This report has endeavored to explore the multifaceted importance of Kurdish attire, tracing its historical evolution from ancient origins to its dynamic presence in the twenty-first century. It stands as a living historical document, with elements echoing the Medes and Achaemenids, yet continuously adapting to new materials, technologies, and socio-political landscapes.<sup>10</sup>

Kurdish clothing serves as a vibrant and unmistakable expression of both regional specificity and overarching national identity. The diverse styles, colors, patterns, and terminologies found across Kurdistan—from the mountains of Turkey and Iraq to the plains of Iran and Syria—paint a complex map of local traditions, tribal affiliations, and historical interactions.<sup>4</sup> Yet, amidst this diversity, common threads of baggy trousers, layered ensembles, intricate embroidery, and symbolic headwear weave a distinctly Kurdish sartorial narrative.<sup>2</sup>

The artistry inherent in Kurdish clothing, evident in the choice of materials, the skilled craftsmanship of weaving and tailoring, and the profusion of decorative embellishments like beadwork, sequins, and coins, transforms each garment into a potential work of art.<sup>1</sup> These elements are not merely aesthetic; they convey meaning, denote status, and tell stories, making the clothing a rich field of cultural semiotics.<sup>4</sup>

Crucially, in the context of Kurdish history, traditional attire has often transcended its cultural role to become a potent symbol of resilience and resistance. In the face of political suppression and attempts at cultural assimilation, the act of wearing, preserving, and

reclaiming Kurdish dress has become a powerful assertion of identity and a defiant stand for cultural self-determination.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the undeniable pressures of modernization, globalization, and political challenges, Kurdish traditional attire demonstrates remarkable resilience and continues its evolution. It remains a cherished and living tradition, dynamically interacting with contemporary influences while steadfastly holding onto its core cultural significance. The dedicated efforts of Kurdish communities, skilled artisans, innovative contemporary designers, cultural institutions, and the global diaspora collectively ensure that these precious threads of heritage are not lost but are instead rewoven into the fabric of the future.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, the story of Kurdish clothing serves as a microcosm of the broader Kurdish experience. Its ancient roots reflect a deep and enduring historical presence in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> Its rich regional diversity speaks to a complex internal cultural landscape within a notionally unified people, shaped by geography and history.<sup>4</sup> The pressures to abandon or modify traditional forms in the face of dominant cultures or state policies echo the historical and ongoing experiences of political and cultural marginalization.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the determined and creative efforts at preservation, revival, adaptation, and reinterpretation—seen in the meticulous work of artisans, the vision of contemporary designers, the dedication of museum curators, and the passionate engagement of the diaspora<sup>2</sup>—reflect the profound resilience, adaptability, and unwavering spirit of the Kurdish people in their ongoing quest for cultural continuity and self-determination. The enduring legacy of Kurdish threads is a testament to a culture that continues to weave its identity into the tapestry of the world.

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