

# Asia, Power, and Robes of Honor

By Stewart Gordon

More than three decades ago, my wife and I ventured overland from Istanbul to Delhi. At Herat, on the western border of Afghanistan, my wife met a group of women—a matriarch, her daughters, and daughters-in-law. Although they shared no common language, my wife accompanied them over several days while they bought and sold in the markets. The matriarch liked my wife and on the day we left insisted that she accept her old, black, beautiful, fully embroidered cloak. The women showed her how to drape the cloak and with gestures suggested that she always wear it. The cloak became my wife's outer garment across all of Afghanistan. She was treated with the highest respect in bazaars, shops, and all public spaces. Weeks later in Kabul, a local explained that the cloak's embroidery pattern signaled that the wearer was under the protection of one of the most powerful border tribes of western Afghanistan. Anything less than courtesy might provoke armed retaliation. This was my first hint that robes were far more than something to keep one warm.

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The embroidery pattern on this robe, given as a gift in 1973 to Sara Gordon, the author's wife, indicated that the wearer was under the protection of one of the most powerful tribes of western Afghanistan.

Source: Saudi Aramco World website at <https://tinyurl.com/yy3qztby>. Photo courtesy of the author.

A few years later, I researched the income and expenditure documents of the eighteenth-century Maratha kingdom of western India. One item, *sarupa*, was a mystery. The term did not appear in Marathi-English dictionaries. Mentions in British colonial documents were frustratingly vague. I asked every historian of Asia I encountered if he or she had seen the term. Those who knew Persian recognized it as a slight variant of *sar-o-pa*, which translates “from head to foot.” Also known as *khilat* in Arabic, the terms referred to a ceremony at which a king bestowed on someone he wanted to honor new elegant robes, including a cloak, shirt, pants, a turban, a waist-wrap, and shoes.

## Ibn Battuta on the Road

Consider the historical evidence for the practice of *sar-o-pa* 400 years earlier than my Marathi documents of the eighteenth century. In 1335 CE, Ibn Battuta set out from his native Morocco on the Hajj to Mecca. From there, he joined caravans through the Middle East, Persia, Central Asia, and India, and traveled by ship to the Maldiv Islands, East Africa, and China. During his travels, rulers bestowed *sar-o-pa* on Ibn Battuta more than



Map of Ibn Battuta's travels. Source: Britannica.com at <https://tinyurl.com/yxp6nzhw>.

Ibn Battuta and his companions were conducted to an adjacent robing hall, where each donned a new shirt, sash, pants, turban, shoes, and outer robe.

two dozen times. The ceremony appears more than sixty times in the plethora of stories he heard and recounted. Let us travel with him and encounter sar-o-pa as he did:

- At Izmir, on the Mediterranean coast of present-day Turkey, the sultan sent Ibn Battuta “a Greek slave, a dwarf named Niqula, and two robes of *kamkha*, which are silken fabrics manufactured at Baghdad, Tabriz, Naisabur [Nishapur], and in China.”<sup>1</sup> Ibn Battuta’s identification of this fabric with China is quite correct. The warp could be silk or cotton and the weft thread of gold. The first syllable of *kamkha* is derived from “chin,” the Chinese word for gold.<sup>2</sup>
- At Tabriz, in western Iran—“This amir told the sultan [Abu Sa’id] about me and introduced me into his presence. He asked me about my country and gave me a robe and a horse.”<sup>3</sup>
- At Mogadishu, east Africa—“One of the shaikh’s came to me. Bringing me a set of robes. . . . They also brought me robes for my companions suitable to their position.”<sup>4</sup>
- At Kwarizm (on the south shore of the Caspian Sea) Ibn Battuta “took leave of the amir . . . and he presented me with a robe of honor; the *qādi* too gave me another, and came out with the doctors of law to bid me farewell.”<sup>5</sup>

Ibn Battuta’s most luxurious robing took place shortly after his arrival in Delhi. He stood before the sultan of Delhi in a vast hall called *Hazar Ustan* (“Thousand Pillars”).<sup>6</sup> Facing the sultan were his highest officials and nobles—all in elegant silk robes. On each side was a row of judges and Muslim teachers of the city, and further back in the hall were distant relatives of the Sultan, lower-ranked nobles, and military leaders, all dressed in luxurious silk robes.

Ibn Battuta and his companions were conducted to an adjacent robing hall, where each donned a new shirt, sash, pants, turban, shoes, and outer robe. They emerged to the acclaim of the assembled nobles and were then deemed “suitable” to take their places in court. It was a good day for both Ibn Battuta and his companions. The sultan offered all of them employment in his government.

Rulers also stored thousands of luxurious robes at the ready for the ruler’s twice-yearly presentations—in the summer and winter—to his nobles. He also presented robes to his nobility on auspicious occasions, such as his birthday, his own marriage or the marriage of one of his sons, or return from a successful campaign.

Rulers also presented at their pleasure to any individual they wished to honor, for example, a poet for a witty couplet, a wrestler for a good match, a guide who successfully led the royal entourage through a forest, or a particularly brave soldier on the battlefield.<sup>7</sup> At Zafari, a port on the southeast coast of Yemen, Ibn Battuta saw ships coming and going:



Illustration from Rashid al-Din's fourteenth-century *Jami' al-Tawarikh* (*Universal History*) shows Mahmud ibn Sebuktakin, the first independent Ghaznavid ruler, receiving a richly decorated robe of honor from the caliph. Source: *Saudi Aramco World* at <https://tinyurl.com/yy3qztby>. The artwork is in the collection of the Edinburgh University Library/ Bridgeman Art Library.

*It is their custom that when a vessel arrives from India or elsewhere, the sultan's slaves go down to the shore, and come out to the ship . . . carrying with them a complete set of robes for the owner of the vessel . . . and also for the captain and . . . for the ship's writer.<sup>8</sup>*

The sultan of Morocco bestowed sar-o-pa on Ibn Battuta when he returned home after twenty years of traveling.

Even Ibn Battuta's extensive travels did not encompass the totality of the zone of sar-o-pa. A century before Ibn Battuta, the kingdom of Genghis Khan stretched from Mongolia and northern China in the east across the length of the Silk Roads. Enormous revenues flowed in. Some of this wealth was translated into extraordinary ceremonial robes, consisting of a solid-color warp silk with gold thread woven into an ornamental weft. Robes differed in the color of the silk warp; banquets required participants to wear the correct color.<sup>9</sup> Marco Polo estimated that the court of Kublai Khan (Genghis Khan's grandson) bestowed more than a dozen on each courtier, totaling more than 150,000 of these robes each year.

#### **Sar-o-pa on the Edges of Europe**

Europe was, on the whole, outside the sar-o-pa zone. For example, when the Pope anticipated the arrival of an envoy from Genghis Khan, he apparently knew that he should bestow a robe on the envoy but knew nothing of what sort of robe it should be or the surrounding ritual expected. He contacted the court of Constantinople, which, he correctly assumed, had experience in such matters.<sup>10</sup>

Some high-value robes did, however, circulate into Europe. In 1644 CE, the Czar of Russia sent a spectacular robe to Queen Christine of Sweden. The cloth was woven and embroidered in Persia and presumably had come to Russia as an ambassadorial gift. There is no indication that Queen Christine ever wore the robe, but it stayed in the state treasure house and can today be seen in the Staats Museum.<sup>11</sup>

A delightful incident of sar-o-pa involved Queen Elizabeth I of England and the Ottoman Empire, centered at Istanbul. In the last decades of the sixteenth century, both England and the Ottomans were enemies of Catholic Spain, England as a Protestant country and the Ottoman Empire as Muslims. In 1594, shortly after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, Elizabeth promoted the Ottoman connection by sending presents, including pieces of gold cloth and a jeweled portrait miniature, and a letter to the Safiye Sultan, Queen Mother of Mehmed III (r. 1593–1603). At the time, she was one of the most powerful individuals in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>12</sup> Along with a reply to Elizabeth's letter, Safiye sent "an upper gowne



This coat of cut velvet was made in Iran for the Czar of Russia, who in 1644 gave it to Queen Christine of Sweden. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y2z2zev24>. Photo by Göran Schmidt.

of cloth of gold very rich, and under gowne of cloth of silver, and a girdle of Turkie worke, rich and faire,” plus a crown studded with pearls and rubies. It is possible that Elizabeth knew of the *khil'at* ceremony's role in diplomacy and that fabulous robes circulated among rulers in the Asian world. Elizabeth apparently enjoyed wearing the luxurious Turkish robes. Master politician that she was, Elizabeth probably kept her court and the Spanish spies guessing whether she was signaling a new Ottoman connection or merely enjoying exotic dress.<sup>13</sup>

#### How Did Sar-o-pa Work?

Sar-o-pa, at its most basic, was a ceremony that established honorable loyalty and service between kings and grantees. It did not require a common language, ethnicity, region, or religion. The ceremony was understood from China on the east to Morocco and Spain on the west and from central India north into the broad steppe region of Central Asia.

In practice, however, sar-o-pa constituted a nonverbal language of extraordinary subtlety and complexity. In the Middle East, only men initiated the ceremony. In Central Asia, noblewomen also bestowed *khil'at*. When Ibn Battuta left the Golden Horde to accompany one of the *khatuns* (wife of a khan) to Constantinople, “each of the *khatuns* gave me ingots of silver . . . The sultan's daughter gave me more than they did, along with a robe and a horse, and altogether I had a large collection of horses, robes, and furs of miniver and sable.”<sup>14</sup>

In the best of times, the robe signified a personal bond with an adult ruler securely on the throne of a successful, solvent state. Such a ruler expected to employ the one he robed, and the recipient expected to serve his ruler with his talents and his life, if necessary.

Often, however, reign and rule were much less secure.<sup>15</sup> Many rulers were, in fact, usurpers or rebels with only as much loyalty as military success could generate. Many rulers were minors; loyalty was only to the faction that controlled the throne. Some rulers were women. Though a queen might offer robes of honor, loyalty often depended on the army's judgment of her personal ability to lead.<sup>16</sup> Rather than a simple ceremony of royal largesse, for these less legitimate rulers, presentation of robes of honor was probably a clarifying moment of support or nonsupport by a crucial noble.

Wars of succession often opened with a lightning strike to secure the storehouse of sar-o-pa robes. A succession war between two heirs to Genghis Khan's empire, for example, began with one claimant seizing 300 artisans who produced the robes. His opponent sent money and gems to other production centers to buy what robes he could.<sup>17</sup>

Robing was also central to ceremonies of dishonor. In India, a succession war raged across India in 1657–1658. The winner, Aurangzeb, captured his brother, Dara Sikoh, and paraded him through Delhi:

*Dara was now seen seated [backward] on a miserable and worn-out animal, covered in filth: he no longer wore the necklace of large pearls which distinguished the princes of Hindustan, nor the rich turban or embroidered coat; he and his son were now habited in dirty cloth of the coarsest texture. His sorry turban [resembled] that worn by the meanest of people.*<sup>18</sup>

It is worth noting that sar-o-pa was a language understood by many people beyond kings and courts. They used simplified versions of the ceremony in everyday life. The twelfth-century documents of Jews in the Aden–India trade, for example, mention robing captains when their ships arrived safely. Ibn Battuta himself robed a guide during his travels.<sup>19</sup>

#### An Ancient Custom

Sar-o-pa could express subtle meanings and bridge ambiguity because, like other languages, it had developed over centuries and had been a public feature of hundreds of courts. During that period, court kings developed local variants of the ceremony and welcomed men from far away, who described how the ceremony was performed at their home court. Though space does not permit more specifics, let us make passing reference to some of the



The use of silk robes in diplomacy between China and the nomads beyond the Great Wall began in the first century of the Common Era.

The main focus of this gouache miniature, dated ca. 1615, is the weighing of the prince against gold and silver to be distributed to the poor; it also shows, in the foreground, several dozen robes of honor, folded and arranged on trays. The painting appears in the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangir* (*The Memoirs of Jahangir*). Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y5kex2qm>.

evidence of honorific robing before the time of Ibn Battuta. The ceremony was common at the Abbasid Caliphate, the Islamic Empire centered at Baghdad (750–1258 CE), and incidents of sar-o-pa appear in Islamic literature from the time of Muhammad onward. Robes figure prominently when the Eastern Roman Empire and the Caliphate competed for the loyalty of Armenia in the ninth and tenth centuries.<sup>20</sup>

The use of silk robes in diplomacy between China and the nomads beyond the Great Wall began in the first century of the Common Era. China needed horses and cattle raised by the nomads of the eastern steppe, and the nomads needed food and iron from China. War was frequent, but in periods of trade and diplomacy, silk robes played a crucial role. Only China produced silk, and political leaders in China gifted silk robes to nomad chiefs on cessation of hostilities, for protection, and as dowry. Nomad chiefs, in turn, bestowed them on their leaders to demonstrate power, success, and largesse. The robes also ameliorated a problem common to all nomad leaders: how to keep a military loyal. Elegant robes were bestowed only from “the hand” of the leader and differentiated recipients from common soldiers. With every wearing, the robes helped remind recipients whom they served.<sup>21</sup> When the Buddhist monk Xuanzang traveled the Silk Roads in the first decades of the seventh century, he found silk robes in common use. He noted in his memoir, for example, that at Lake Issy Kul in what is now Kirghizstan that the king and his nobility all wore Chinese silk robes when Xuanzang was introduced in the tent of royal audience.<sup>22</sup>

With the rapid political and military spread of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries, formal honorific robing reached the remainder of North Africa and Spain.

At roughly the same time as Xuanzang, there is good evidence for sar-o-pa investiture in Persia during the Sassanian period (fourth to seventh centuries). In a yearly cycle, the king bestowed robes he had worn on his nobles, accompanied by weapons, gold, silver, jewels, and horses. By the fifth century, the ceremony was well-established in Central and Southwest Asia, especially in the Byzantine Empire, which borrowed many cultural forms from the Sassanians. Elite silk textiles were readily available both from China and the looms of caravan cities like Bukhara and Tashkent, whose craftsmen had taken up silk weaving.

By 500 CE in the Byzantine Empire, complex investiture replaced simpler Roman ceremony in accession to office within the church and for ambassadorial exchanges, bureaucratic promotion, and personal recognition by the emperor. Successful conquests by the Byzantine Empire spread sar-o-pa–influenced investiture to the entire Black Sea region, present-day Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary.<sup>23</sup>

Robing was everywhere in the Southwest Asian world from which Islam arose in the late seventh century. It is suggestive that the Qur'an mentions ceremonial robing several times in the context of the rewards of paradise to the faithful:

*Allah will deliver them from evil that day and make their faces shine with joy. He will reward their steadfastness with robes of silk and the delights of Paradise . . . They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and rich brocade and adorned with bracelets of silver.*<sup>24</sup>

With the rapid political and military spread of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries, formal honorific robing reached the remainder of North Africa and Spain.

The oldest description of the ceremony yet located is in the last book of the Hebrew Bible, which recounts the story of Esther. She managed to save her coreligionists by clever tactics and brave conversation with King Ahasuerus. Scholars agree that the story is set in Persia and was likely written down a century or so before the Common Era. In the story, the king asks Haman (his chief administrator and villain of the story) what would be a suitable ceremony of honor. Haman, thinking that he is to be honored, replies:

*Have them bring a royal robe that the king has worn and horse that the king has ridden, one with a royal crown on its head. Then have them hand the robe and the horse over to one of the king's most noble princes and have him robe the man . . . and have the prince lead him on horseback through the city square . . .*<sup>25</sup>

This ancient ceremony is uncannily similar to Ibn Battuta's treatment by the fourteenth-century emperor of Constantinople:

*The [Christian] emperor was pleased with my replies and said to his sons, "Honour this man and ensure his safety." He then bestowed on me a robe of honour and ordered for me a horse with saddle and bridle, and a parasol of the kind that the ruler has carried above his head, that being a sign of protection . . . it is one of the customs among them that anyone who wears the ruler's robe of honour and rides on his horse is paraded through the city bazaars with trumpets, fifes, and drums, so that people may see him.*<sup>26</sup>

#### Sar-o-pa in the Modern World

Sar-o-pa remained in active use in Central and Southwest Asia, Persia, Afghanistan, India, China, and North Africa through the nineteenth century, slowly yielding to European colonial practices and the modern nation-state. Because sar-o-pa expressed a generalized personal fealty, it fit poorly with colonial efforts at social control, which required precisely defined rights and responsibilities. As part and parcel of cultural and racial dominance, the colonial rulers insisted on hats and pants—and, by and large, rejected elegant robes.<sup>27</sup>



This fragment of a robe of honor dates back to approximately 1000 CE in Baghdad. Sewn into it is a certificate of office: "For the use of Abu Said Zandanfarruk ibn Azamard, the treasurer." Source: Saudi Aramco World at <https://tinyurl.com/yy3qztby>.

Across the robing world, the lawyers and military men who led movements of independence found sar-o-pa hopelessly courtly and old-fashioned.

Sar-o-pa has, however, not entirely disappeared. The Roman and Eastern Christian churches use elaborate investiture and robes on assumption of office. Tibetan Buddhists regularly place a prayer shawl on one they honor. In a few African countries, a robe is placed on an honored guest.

Some years ago, I was on a long flight home to the US from Asia and struck up a conversation with my seatmate. He was an American engineer who had completed oversight of the construction of a bridge in Kirgizstan. A group of government employees accompanied him to the airport. On the tarmac, they pulled out a robe, shirt, loose pants, waist-wrap, and shoes. To his utter surprise, they insisted that he put on the robe before he boarded the plane. He asked me what in the world was going on. I told him that he had served honorably, and for an hour, we talked of robes, service, and honor across the Asian world.

### And Why Does Sar-o-pa Matter?

It is all too easy to conflate Asian history with the history of the current nations of Asia. The sar-o-pa ceremony, with all its complex and subtle uses, reminds us of a different Asia. Across the vast continent, men and women moved—as brides, mercenaries, envoys, clerics, doctors, traders, and pilgrims. Thousands upon thousands of people traveled every year. A soldier might serve in Samarkand or China. A cleric might find employment in Morocco or India. The sar-o-pa ceremony established a relationship of respect and honorable service in hundreds of courts across the Asian world. The luxury fabrics would have been familiar even if there were regional differences in the flow of the ceremony. The palaces along the way looked much like the ones from which travelers departed. The ceremony's long, long history suggests that it functioned well in a variety of ecological systems, religions, and regions. Perhaps it worked because the robe provided a connection that was both intimate—from the hand of the king—and public—bestowed before the entire court.



Sir Anthony van Dyck's 1622 portrait of Robert Shirley shows the robe Shirley wore as ambassador of the Safavid court of Persia to England. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y3q9zamy>.

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Pirates and bandits, of course, made all journeys dangerous. So did monsoon winds and snows in the mountains. Still, it was a world without visas or passports in which talented men and women crossed borders and brought new machines, cuisine, currencies, news of political alliances, weapons, books, and ideas. We can imagine a world that welcomed these travelers with the safety and respect of the sar-o-pa ceremony. Study of sar-o-pa changes the way we think about mobility and opportunities across a vast Asian world, perhaps catalyzing discussion of the consequences and effects of dividing Asia into nation-states. ■

## NOTES

1. *The Travels of Ibn Battuta: A.D. 1325–1354*, vol. 2, trans. H.A.R. Gibb (repr., New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Pvt. Ltd., 1993), 446.
2. Some robes, especially in the Ottoman Empire and in India, were bestowed with a “receipt” sewn in that stated the gold content.
3. *Travels*, vol. 3, 345.
4. *Travels*, vol. 2, 376.
5. *Travels*, vol. 2, 549.
6. *Travels*, vol. 2, 383.
7. These occasions are well-documented in the royal biographies of the Mughal period. See, for example, the *Akbarnama*, the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, and the *Shahjahannama*.
8. *Travels*, vol. 3, 735–736.
9. Thomas T. Allsen, “Robing in the Mongolian Empire,” in *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 305–315.
10. Incidentally, the Pope had sent an envoy to the court of Genghis Khan with a letter proposing an alliance against the “Turks,” the Muslim rulers of the Middle East. Genghis Khan’s reply basically said, “Peace is good. Surrender now.”
11. Livrustkammaren, Hallwylska Museet, Stockholm (#314). Published in Jennifer Harris, ed., *Textiles, 5000 Years* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 82.
12. S. A. Skilliter, “Three Letters from the Ottoman ‘Sultana’ Safiye to Queen Elizabeth,” in Samuel M. Stern, ed., *Documents from Islamic Chanceries* (Oxford: Bruno Cassier Ltd., 1965), 119–159. See also S. A. Skilliter, *William Harbonne and the Trade with Turkey, 1578–1582* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), and Leslie P. Pierce, *The Imperial Harem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). The garments appear in an inventory of Elizabeth’s clothes. See Janet Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d: The Inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes Prepared in July, 1600* (Leeds: Money, 1988).
13. S. A. Skilliter, “Three Letters,” 119–159.
14. *Travels*, vol. 3, 497–498.
15. See the role of robes of honor in Ibn Battuta’s description of the accession of Nasir al-Din as the sultan of Muttra on the Malabar Coast of India. *Travels*, vol. 3, 64–65.
16. The power and independence of noblewomen is a striking feature of steppe empires and their sedentary offshoots. For Ibn Battuta’s discussion of khatuns, see *Travels*, vol. 2, 480–489.
17. Allsen, 307.
18. Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, AD 1656–1688*, trans. Archibald Constable, 2nd ed., rev. by V. S. Smith (repr., Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1989), 98.
19. S. D. Goitien, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 5 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 88.
20. Antonys Eastmond and Lynn Jone, “Robing, Power, and Legitimacy in Armenia and Georgia,” in *Robes and Honor*, 147–192.
21. Xinru Liu, “Silk, Robes, and Relations between Early Chinese Dynasties and Nomads Beyond the Great Wall,” in *Robes and Honor*, 23–35.
22. Shaman Hwui Li, *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, trans. Samuel Beal (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co.), 45.
23. Elizabeth Pilz, “Middle Byzantine Court Costume,” in Henry Maguire, ed., *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1979), 39–53.
24. *Al-Quran: A Contemporary Translation*, trans. Ahmed Ali (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 18.
25. *Esther*, trans. Carey A. Moore (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), 62–63.
26. *Travels*, vol. 2, 506.
27. Photographs of the nobles of the princely states of India in the first decades of the twentieth century show some in suits and others in flowing robes.

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