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### **Azerbaijani Cultural Heritage Tradition - Kelaghayi (Documentary Flow and Source Studies)**

#### **Abstract**

Women's headscarves have been used for various purposes in different cultures for thousands of years. The headscarf has been characterized as a symbol of religious affiliation and family status, as well as an indicator of social status. The headscarf, which has passed through a historical path where religion and fashion are polarized, has a centuries-old tradition. In ancient times, the headscarf, which arose from the need to protect the head from rain and sun in the Mesopotamian civilization, over time became a religious symbol and at the same time began to be accepted as a symbol of distinction and authority in society. The article examines the forms, meanings, and essence of women's headscarves in different periods, as well as the kelaghay, which has not lost its importance and spiritual value for Azerbaijani women over the centuries, from a comparative and historical perspective.

**Keywords:** History of women's headscarves, Headscarf traditions in different nations, Documents and sources about the headscarf



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## Azerbaycan Kültürel Miras Geleneği - Kelağayi (Belgesel Akışı ve Kaynak Çalışmaları)

### Öz

*Kadın başörtüsü binlerce yıldır farklı kültürlerde çeşitli amaçlarla kullanılmaktadır. Başörtüsü, dini mensubiyetin ve aile statüsünün bir sembolü olmasının yanı sıra sosyal statünün de bir göstergesi olarak nitelendirilmiştir. Din ve modanın kutuplaştığı tarihsel bir yoldan geçen başörtüsü, yüzyıllara dayanan bir geleneğe sahiptir. Eski çağlarda Mezopotamya uygarlığında başı yağmurdan ve güneşten koruma ihtiyacından doğan başörtüsü, zamanla dini bir sembol haline gelmiş ve aynı zamanda toplumda bir ayırım ve otorite sembolü olarak kabul görmeye başlamıştır. Makale, Azerbaycanlı kadınlar için yüzyıllar boyunca önemini ve manevi değerini kaybetmeyen kelağayın yanı sıra farklı dönemlerdeki kadın başörtülerinin biçimlerini, anlamlarını ve özünü karşılaştırmalı ve tarihsel bir perspektiften incelemektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kadın başörtüsü tarihi, Farklı milletlerde başörtüsü gelenekleri, Başörtüsü ile ilgili belge ve kaynaklar

### Introduction

During the Sasanian dynasty of ancient Iran, the headscarf was used as a symbol of submission. There is information about its use in different ways in many cultures. In early Jewish civilization, hair was considered a sign of beauty and at the same time, as personal property, it had to be covered so that others could not see it. Married women were required to cover not only their hair but also their faces. The tradition of headscarf was supported in Christian and Jewish communities, but how women covered their heads varied according to political systems, geography, and ethnicity.

After the spread of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, Muslims continued the tradition of headscarf and incorporated it into their beliefs. Although the use of the headscarf for women during this period was seen as a social restriction, this period in history was a period when women were given more freedom.

The sense of shame and modesty is one of the main characteristics of the Islamic religion. The holy book of Islam, the Quran, commands men and women to behave in accordance with chastity (Mammadov, 2013; Mammadov, 2022b). Thus, wearing the headscarf "hijab" is to protect women's chastity and privacy from strangers. Although some accept this cover as a command, and others as a recommendation, in general, Muslims use the headscarf in a wide geographical area. According to the claims of the Muslim Reform Movement, the "Quran" hijab is used in the context of both men and women. According to them, the hijab is a pre-Islamic garment. The "Quran" recommends how to wear and use it.

There are verses in the "Quran" related to the headscarf and its use. In verses -30, 31, 60 of the "An-Nur" surah; in verses -33, 53, 59 of the "Azhab" surah, instructions and recommendations are given about the use of the hijab by women. Specifically, verse 31 of the "An-Nur" surah states that "Tell the believing women to lower their gaze and draw their headscarves over their bosoms." Verse 59 of Surah Al-Ahzab states, "Tell your wives, your women, and your daughters to cover themselves. That is more appropriate for them to be recognized and not to be harassed" .

### **1. The main part**

In Iran and Afghanistan, women are required by law to wear the hijab. According to the Penal Code, which came into effect in Iran in 1983, women who do not comply with the hijab rules are subject to a "74-lash" punishment. There is even a "Morality Police" organization in Iran made up of women that monitors the proper use of the hijab by women.

In ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, noble women from the upper classes also covered their heads. According to Roman church law, in the early Christian era, women who came to church to worship were forbidden to show their hair. The greatest missionary in the history of Christianity, the apostle Paul, supports this rule in chapter 11 of the most widely printed book in the world – the Bible, "First Book of Chronicles" (Askerova & Mammadov, 2025; Ismayilov & Khalafova, 2022a). The apostle Paul, whose name was included in the list of "100 most influential people in history", has the following thoughts on this: "It is necessary for a man to cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God. But a woman is the glory of a man. Man was not created for the sake of a woman, but a woman for the sake of a man. Judge for yourselves whether it is permissible for a woman to pray with her head uncovered? A woman who wants to pray with her head uncovered should have her hair cut off. If it is considered shameful for a woman to have her hair cut off, let her cover her head".

The Roman Catholic Church issued a decree in the Middle Ages (1600s) on the need for women to cover their heads. The elegant headgear of that time was widely used in Europe from the late 12th to the early 14th centuries. This garment, which covered the head and neck, was made of popular fabrics. Over time, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Puritans (supporters of the Protestant sect) in Great Britain accelerated the formation of the reformist movement led by Elizabeth I in the churches. They tried to save the Church of England from Roman Catholic customs. The Puritans were looking for a simpler and more practical way for women to cover their heads. In the 1700s, most women wore a linen hat, both for decency and practicality. These

hats evolved over the centuries, from small sizes to large, fashionable headpieces. However, the more hair a hat covered, the more conservative it was considered.

Over time, the social nature of hats has also changed. In the 1800s, hats were intended to protect women's hair from dirt, smoke, dust, etc. In addition, we should note that wearing hats at that time was considered an important attribute for health. Thus, by protecting their hair under a hat, women reduced eye and skin infections by reducing the likelihood of touching their faces with their hands. After a while, hats also became a fashion accessory, perfectly complementing women's clothing.

In the Western world, which is mostly Christian and Jewish, covering women's hair in public was one of the most important aspects of religious beliefs. In 1786, a law was passed in the American state of Louisiana that forced black African women to cover their heads in order to distinguish them from white women. According to the law, women of color had to cover their hair with a piece of cloth called a "tignon." That is why this law was called the "Tignon Law." (Kushzhanov & Mahammadli, 2019b; Mahammadi, 2024). However, black women decorated this headdress with feathers and stones, giving the tignon a new meaning as a symbol of rebellion.

At the beginning of the 19th century, women's hats became more popular as headwear and began to be used as an element of clothing that protected from the sun's rays, rain, etc. At the same time, the types and materials of headwear indicated social class, status, taste and family situation. Women's head covering was perceived as a sign of respect for values. Over time, hats made of various materials gained value not only for practical purposes, but also as a fashion indicator, becoming one of the main elements of fashion. Women now covered less of their hair and used hats simply as an element of tasteful clothing. Refusal to wear the hijab has become one of the symbols of the struggle for freedom and rights in a number of Muslim countries. Thus, for the first time in the 70s of the 19th century, the hijab was demonstratively abandoned in Egypt. In Azerbaijan, this process took place at the beginning of the 20th century. The statue of the "Free Woman" erected in Baku during the Soviet era, depicting a woman throwing off her veil, is a symbol of this event (Khalafova & Ismailov, 2024 a; Ismayilov, K., Ismayilov, N. & Mammadova, 2019). The idea of a woman's visible participation in public life as a free individual was brought to the fore during this period. Similar ideas were also included in the UN statements: "The niqab that covers the face is a violation of human rights and can lead to the marginalization of Muslim women" (Qasimli & Məhəmmədli, 2024a).

The kelagay is a square-shaped headscarf made of silk thread, mainly worn by Azerbaijani women. The production of the kelagay dates back to very ancient times. There is information about the widespread use of a headscarf by women, similar to the modern kelagay, among court women in the 6th-5th centuries BC, during the time of the Iranian Shah Darius I. (Takhirov & Ismaylov, 2011; Mammadov, 2022a). The work "Hudud al-Alam" (a geographical treatise written in the 10th century) contains information about the production of headscarves in the city of Barzand. Widely spread in the Middle East and among the peoples of the Caucasus, kelagayis vary in both color and size. Older women wear mainly dark and wide-sized kelagayis, while young women wear white and colorful, small-sized kelagayis. Women usually wear dark-colored kelagayis during mourning ceremonies, and colorfully patterned kelagayis during wedding ceremonies (Kushzhanov & Dashqin, 2019a; Nadir & Sevda, 2022; Qasımlı & Məhəmmədli, 2024a). In Azerbaijan, kelagayis were once considered the foundation of a newly established family, and during the embassy ceremony, the engagement ring wrapped in a red kelagayi was presented to the bride's house. The patterns applied to kelagayis have fascinated people for centuries with their richness and symbolic motifs. Each decorative motif has a deep symbolic meaning and mythological roots that go back to ancient times. It is no coincidence that the concepts in kelagayi depictions coincide with the images and elements reflected on carpets woven in Azerbaijan and ceramic objects found there.

In the Middle Ages, kelagayis were usually decorated with patterns in the form of buta. These patterns served as a kind of seal, indicating which master or manufacturer the kelagayi belonged to. The masters would dip their right fists in paint and leave a mark on the fabric, decorating it with patterns. Over time, this buta form created with a fist was improved and transformed into a more precise and stable seal form.

According to researchers, the application of kelagayi patterns is carried out according to a system. The patterns on the kelagayi symbolize the structure of the world and the universe (Kazimi & Mahammadli, 2021; İsmayilov & Məhəmmədli, 2024). The border on the edge of the korpek means a mountain and protects people. The border in the middle depicts the other world. As can be seen from the patterns, the other world is more complex and colorful.

In the Middle Ages, small enterprises engaged in the production of kelagayi existed in the territories of Azerbaijan. According to the ideas of historian Mais Jafarov, kelagayi were previously made individually, but later they began to be produced by special enterprises. (İsmayilov &

Khalafova, 2022b; Ismayilov & Aliyeva, 2023). The German publicist and traveler Georg Adam Forster, in his information from 1784, indicated that up to 400 tons of silk were sent from Shirvan to Astrakhan. A significant part of this silk fell to the share of the production of kelagayi in Basgal. At that time, along with the cities of Sheki, Ganja, and Shusha, Basgal was known as one of the largest silk-growing centers of Azerbaijan.

Basgal kelagayi enjoyed great fame in world markets in the 18th century, which was reflected in the travelogues of travelers who traveled to the Caucasus at that time. In 1862, the Russian traveler Pyotr Pashino noted in the newspaper “Kafkazskiy Vestnik” (“Caucasian News”) that the silk fabrics made by artisanal methods in the Basgal province, including kelagayis made from these fabrics, were not inferior in artistic characteristics and quality to the examples of the textile industry of the time.

The Azerbaijani national women's headdress - kalagay, made of pure silk fabric, is closely associated with the development of sericulture in Azerbaijan as an attribute. It should be noted that silk production in Azerbaijan began in ancient Nukha (Sheki) (Qasımlı & Məhəmmədli, 2024b; Kenzhebayeva, Urmurzina & Mahammadli, 2018). The prominent Azerbaijani educator and ethnographer Rashid bey Efendiyev, in his essay "Sericulture in the Sheki Province of Azerbaijan", compares Nukha with China, the homeland of silk. Rashid bey Efendiyev also noted that in the 19th century, French specialists visited Sheki to study the technology of feeding silkworms. The passage of the “Great Silk Road” through Azerbaijan greatly facilitated the export of Sheki silk and silk products to other countries (İsmayilov & Khudiyeva, 2023; İsmaylov, , 2015). It should be noted that among these products, the demand for kelagayi was the greatest. Travelers from the Netherlands, England, Italy and other European countries noted in their travelogues that they came across women's headdresses made of fine, elegant silk in trading places located in various cities of Azerbaijan. These kelagayi differed in the variety of ornaments of the provinces.

The famous Italian traveler Marco Polo, who traveled from Italy to China through the Central East and Central Asia, noted in his travelogue the successes achieved in the field of sericulture of these regions, emphasizing the beauty of silk products produced in Shamakhi and Barda. (İsmayilov, Mahammadli & Gasimli, 2023b; Karabalina, Maydangalieva, Satygalieva, Ahmetalina & Mahammadli, 2018).

In 1862, Azerbaijani kelagayi were first exhibited at the World Exhibition held in London. Nasir Abdulaziz oglu, a weaver from Basgal, who participated in the exhibition, was awarded a silver medal and a special diploma for the exquisite kelagayi and the delicate kanovuz fabric he

displayed. Speaking about this, he noted that “The English ladies did not allow the public to see the kelagayi. They bought all the kelagayi at the exhibition at once. I was left staring in amazement. I should have taken a lot of kelagayi. God willing, I will take more next time” (İsmayilov, Mahammadli & Gasimli, 2023a; Kushzhanov & Dashgin, 2019a; Mahamadli, 2018).

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the centers engaged in traditional kelagayi production in Azerbaijan were concentrated in only two centers - Basgal and Ganja for political and economic reasons. Cheap factory goods imported from Russia were crowding out artisanal and handmade products. On the eve of World War I, there were workshops in Basgal with 150 looms, where more than a million kelagayi were produced annually. Since the Basgal dyeing houses were not enough to dye so many kelagayi, the kelagayi were sent to Ganja, Shamakhi, and Baku to be dyed (İsmayilov & Khalafova, 2023; Məhəmmədli, 2024). The seasonings “shah buta”, “khyrda buta”, “saya buta” were most often used in decorating Sheki and Basgal kelagayi. Colorful kelagayi called “sogani”, “albukhari”, “istiotu”, “yelani” gained great fame in Azerbaijan and the world. The ornamental wooden molds used to decorate kelagayi were mainly made of walnut and oak.

In the examples of Azerbaijani oral folk literature, poetic ideas about kelagayi were reflected in the epics, goshma, bayati, gerayli, and mainly in ashug poetry. There are also many works of art dedicated to kelagayi. Examples of bans include Saraf Shiruyen’s poem “Kelaghayi”, Rufat Ahmadzadeh’s “Striptize with kelagayi”, and Shamo Narimanoglu’s story “Kelaghayi” (Muhammadli, 2023; Heydar, 2023; Bayramov & Məhəmmədli, 2025).

The following interesting ideas were reflected in the documents of the “First Congress of Caucasian Handicraft Workers” held in Tbilisi in 1902, in which Azerbaijani kelagayi manufacturers also participated: “Although the kelagayi masters were illiterate, they left their European colleagues behind in terms of craftsmanship. The products they made amaze people with their artistry, beauty and quality. However, the looms and machines used in Europe are not available here. The kelagayis they made are the fruit of hard work and skilled hands.”

The launch of the “Kelaghayi” Silk Center in the Basgal settlement of the İsmayilli region in 2003 and the creation of the “Kelaghayi Museum” here familiarize visitors with the ancient historical traditions of kelagayi and allow them to participate in the process of product preparation. According to many fashion designers, kelagayi must be modernized and new samples must be produced. Traditions have been formed over several centuries regarding the women's silk

scarf - kelagayi, which is one of the unique examples of Azerbaijani national culture (İsmayilov & Bayramova, 2022b; İsmayilov, 2022). It should be noted that the development of sericulture in Azerbaijan is associated with the production of kelagayi. (Balginova, Maydangalieva, Satygalieva & Mahammadli, 2018). Thus, in Azerbaijan, kelagayi weaving, which has a two-thousand-year history, has been continued by many generations. Of these, the Shamilovs, descendants of Shovketziya Shamilov in the city of Sheki, are considered the most skilled masters of kelagayi weaving.

On November 26, 2014, at a meeting of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee on the Intangible Cultural Heritage, kelagayi weaving in Azerbaijan was included in the Representative List under the name "Symbolism and Traditional Art of Kelagayi" (İsmayilov, Mahammadli, & Khudiyeva, 2022). Kelagayi was added to the national costume of Azerbaijani women as an element of clothing several centuries ago. The reason why it has not lost its fame and importance to this day is that, unlike other clothing elements, it remains a part of the clothing of women of all ages.

### **Conclusion**

The kelagayi is a mental memory and, being passed down from generation to generation, bears witness to both happy and sad days of women. It is possible to say with complete certainty that the centuries-old tradition of production and covering is experiencing its revival today. One of the reasons why the kelagayi has never gone out of fashion is that it is not just a piece of clothing, but its symbolic motifs. The Azerbaijani people have always considered the women's veil sacred as a sign of respect for mothers and women. Thus, according to national-mental values, the women's veil carries deep historical and cultural meanings and has been considered sacred in many cases. This is especially evident in traditional family and rural environments. There are several reasons why women's headscarves, including the kelagayi, are considered sacred in Azerbaijan and have never fallen out of fashion and value: A symbol of honor and dignity - according to the national values of the Azerbaijani people, a woman's veil symbolized the honor of her family and herself. Removing the veil or revealing it in front of a stranger could be considered an act that harmed the family's honor in a certain sense. Religious and moral values - According to Islam, the hijab or headscarf is intended to protect a woman's chastity. Although the tradition of covering the headscarf dates back to pre-Islamic times, in a country with deep Islamic traditions, this headscarf has also been accepted as a religious symbol. Symbolic and mystical meanings - in folk beliefs, the veil was sometimes considered to have mystical and protective



powers. For example, in some regions, women paid special attention to wearing the veil during prayer or when visiting holy places. Family symbol - in some regions, the bride's wearing the veil was a symbol of her loyalty to the family and family values. Even the passing of the veil from one generation to another is a common custom. Based on the research, it can be concluded that the kelagayi, as an example of Azerbaijani cultural heritage, is not just a piece of silk. It is a symbol that keeps alive both national identity and mental values. As a relic of years and generations, a symbol of cultural memory, the kelagayi is in the wardrobe of almost every Azerbaijani woman in Azerbaijan. Respect for the kelagayi is always at its peak, as is respect for women, and even if it is not used sometimes, it is preserved in the most precious place in the house. It can even be seen in the homes of Azerbaijanis living outside the borders of our country. Because the kelagayi is one of the mythical and mystical forces that protect the family traditions of Azerbaijanis. There is a history in each of its patterns, a feeling and emotion in each of its colors. The kelagayi is the language of the Azerbaijani woman's soul that speaks in silence, from joyful wedding days to the silence of mourning. Thus, the kelagayi is an example of the cultural heritage of the Azerbaijani people with material and spiritual value. It is not just an element of clothing, but also a work of art that combines historical, aesthetic, symbolic and spiritual values. The inclusion of “Kelaghayi Art – Culture of Making and Wearing Silk Headdresses” by UNESCO in 2014 on the “Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity” shows how valuable and universal cultural significance the kelagayi has. The kelagayi is presented not only in the “Kelaghayi” museum in Baskal, but also in the State Museum of Art of the Eastern Peoples in Moscow, the National History Museum in Baku, and the Azerbaijan Art Museum as an example of art that plays a major role in the daily life and life of our people. We can say with certainty that the kelagayi will always live as an integral part of the clothing of the Azerbaijani people - women. Because the kelagayi tradition is kept alive not only by those engaged in this art, but by the people themselves as a whole. The kelagayi is one of those headdresses that is always needed. Despite the rapid changes in fashion, the size of the cover and the shape of its patterns still remain the same. It can even be considered one of the longest-lived headdresses in the world.

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