

# Identity, Nation and Islam

## Indonesia

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Dress is a powerful signifier of historical time, age, gender, class, religious and political orientations. It is often discussed in relation to fashion and therefore to change. Dress is also frequently examined in terms of 'native' or 'traditional', in contrast to Western or universal dress. In Indonesia, variations in dress shed light on political and religious changes, and mirror contemporary debates about identity, gender and the constitution of the state. Since the fall of Suharto's government in 1998, politicians campaigning in national elections adjust their dress to appeal to specific constituencies.



*Indonesian woman  
in kebaya*

In former times, Indian conceptions of cloth were assimilated into ancient archipelago cultures. Dress styles emphasised loin covering for men and women, and ornamentation of the hair. Decorated cloths bore Buddhist motifs, such as the lotus flower or the Hindu *garuda*; they protected the wearer against physical and mental disease, and could pass on the quality of a powerful person to the recipient. At important life-cycle events, ritually significant cloths were exchanged among family members, and displayed to guests.

Confucian, Islamic and Christian values have also acted on indigenous conceptions and clothing styles through the introduction of stitched items of dress and the preference for the covered body. Royal etiquette on Java required the male torso to be uncovered, but the photographic record shows that, from the mid-19th century, well-to-do Javanese were covering the upper torso in Western shirt, bowtie and jacket, while retaining the draped, uncut batiked cloth or

*kain* for the lower body. From the 1920s, upper class Javanese men wore full Western suits with accessories, such as walking stick and fob watch. Uncovered hair and shoulders were part of the Javanese aesthetic of female beauty, but aristocratic women also responded to external pressures to cover up. They wore Chinese-style long-sleeved blouses with batiked *kain*. Their uncut hair was arranged in a bun decorated with flowers or jewelled hairpins.

In the last decades of the 19th century, factories produced a cheap batiked cloth for daily wear, and batik soon seemed to be the 'traditional' clothing of all Javanese. At the same time, Dutch women introduced the Singer sewing machine to colonial households. Indonesians learned to operate the foot-pedalled, portable Singer. This transfer of technology resulted in the availability of ready-to-wear shirts and trousers for men and *kebaya* (blouses) for women.

### **The badge of modern men**

Young men graduating from colonial schools embarked on a political journey to wrest control from the Dutch. The Western suit became for them the badge of modern men. In these same decades, around the Muslim world, new middle classes were promoting Western costume for women too. Kemal Ataturk banned the veil for urban women in Turkey in 1922, and had his wife photographed at his side in Western dress. In Indonesian societies, veiling was not usual. Women wore an adaptation of the Islamic *hijab*, called the *krudung* that only partly covers the hair and is not pinned to conceal the neck. Javanese girls enrolled in colonial schools began wearing Western frocks, but the adult, married woman on Java continued to wear *kain* and *kebaya* with uncovered hair.



*The hijab worn over the head*

As nationalist leader, Sukarno promoted the Western suit for Indonesian men: "The minute an Indonesian dons trousers, he walks erect like any white man. Immediately he wraps that feudal symbol around his middle, he stoops over in a perpetual bow. His shoulders

sag. He doesn't stride manfully, he shuffles apologetically. [...] We must be divested of that influence which chains us to the cringing past as nameless, faceless servants and houseboys and peasants. Let us demonstrate we are as progressive as our former masters. We must take our place as upstanding equals. We must put on modern clothing."<sup>1</sup>

But only the new Indonesian man was to look like a Westerner. On women, Sukarno said, "I like the unsophisticated type. Not the modern ladies with short skirts, tight blouses and much bright lipstick." As president of Indonesia (1945-67), Sukarno modelled the new male citizen in his suit or military uniform, plus a *peci* or cap he promoted as a symbol of nationalist identity. He continued to favour *kain kebaya* for women. Sukarno did not make concessions to Muslim sensibilities, but promoted this costume without a head covering of any kind. Sukarno

also commissioned new designs for a national batik that could be worn by Indonesians of all ethnic groups.

Indonesia's second president, Suharto (r.1967-98), focussed on calming political life and promoting economic development. His Indonesian man and woman should look alike as efficient members of a globalising world. Businesses, government offices, political parties and educational institutions developed 'corporate' batik uniforms for their employees. In place of the suit, Suharto promoted the long-sleeved batik shirt with trousers, *peci* and shoes as national dress and formal evening wear. Suharto's wife, Ibu Tien, modelled the New Order's conception of women in *kain kebaya*, but with a variation on the Sukarno model in the addition of the *slendang*. Originally a sturdy cloth worn over one shoulder by working women and fastened around babies or baskets, the

The "traditional" female attire; western frock for the primary school-age girl of the Javanese elite, and the male transitional or hybrid dress. Illustration based on 1925 photograph of Mangku Nagoro VII, his Queen and their daughter.



*slendang* evolved into a fashion statement in fine fabric for ladies. The Suharto-era *kain*, tightly wrapped, worn with high-heeled sandals, imposed a small gait and upright posture, signalling upper class status. The Indonesian woman who represented the nation wore her hair uncovered in an elaborate bun or attached hairpiece, and carried a handbag. When attending state functions, wives of public servants wore identically coloured *kebaya* and *kain* in matching batik patterns.

Sukarno defined Indonesians against the world; Suharto defined them against each other. In lavishly illustrated magazines, Indonesia's men and women appear as 'types' in regional dress of elaborately decorated fabrics and ornate headdresses. The growing middle-class toured Indonesia to look at 'natives', dressed in their traditional outfits, in Kalimantan and the Toraja highlands. In New Order Indonesia, regional costume was for local events and weddings, the formal batik shirt and *kain kebaya* were for events associated with the nation.

Such images contrasted strongly with realities for, by the 1970s, Western dress had become the daily wear of two distinct groups. Male and female members of the professional elite wore Western suits to work; men of the working poor wore Western shorts, singlets and T-shirts, and working women wore short skirts and T-shirts. In a striking reversal of Sukarno's call for well-to-do men to leave 'native' dress to the masses, now the poor majority of Indonesians habitually wore mass-produced factory clothes that linked them to modern, global youth, while the upper classes put on romanticised versions of traditional clothing to project images of Indonesia nationally.

Other groups in Indonesian society looked elsewhere for inspiration.



*In some places, women wear the burka which covers their person*





*The krudung can be used to carry a child*

During the Suharto years, experiments with unveiling women came to an end in many Muslim countries. One of the first decrees of the Islamic Republic of Iran ordered women to cover themselves fully in public. In Afghanistan, the Taliban government required women to wear an enveloping gown with a mesh over the eyes that both obscured women from viewers and limited their own vision. Unveiling had never been permitted in countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Elsewhere in the Muslim world, there was a 'voluntary' re-veiling movement.

Some observers argue that Indonesian women began wearing headscarves in protest against the country's *nouveau riche*. Others point to the Islamic missionary programmes financed by the New Order government from the 1990s and to the novel Islamic behaviours of Indonesia's first family, such as establishing Muslim charities and making pilgrimage to Mecca in 1991. To mark the family's new piety, President Suharto 'dressed' his name with Haji Muhammad, while his politician daughter, Tutut, began appearing in public wearing the *krudung*. A sign of changing times may be seen in rulings of the Ministry of Education that banned the headscarf in government schools in 1982 and allowed it in 1992.

### **'Southeast Asian Islamic' style**

Indonesia's garment industry established lines of 'Islamic clothing'. Trousers are now marketed to women as Muslim clothing and sold in matched sets with headscarves and blouses. There is also a lucrative new industry in school uniforms for girls. More fabric goes into the production of these ensembles, so industry prospers by encouraging women to adopt a 'Southeast Asian Islamic' style. Indonesia's television personalities, magazines, modelling schools and dress-making classes now offer an eclectic mix of fashions, Muslim and Western,<sup>2</sup> while Indonesian *haute couture* designers are redesigning the *kebaya* as modern chic in 'off-the shoulder' and 'corset' styles.<sup>3</sup>

President Suharto's resignation brought a succession of short-lived

presidencies, revision of the constitution, and the emergence of a female contender for the nation's top job. In October 1999, Megawati Sukarnoputri was appointed vice-president, then president in July 2001. Three prominent women offered models for Indonesia's first president. Mrs Suharto suggested tradition in her costume of *kain kebaya*. The London-trained ophthalmologist and political campaigner, Dr Wan Azizah, presented herself as a Malay Muslim woman in her ensemble of headscarf and figure-concealing clothing, rather than as representative for all Malaysians. The Philippines president, Dr Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, wears the Western woman's 'power suit' to establish herself as national leader and someone the West will take seriously.

As Indonesia's president, Megawati chose the Western dress and suit, including the pants suit. On visits to predominantly Muslim regions, such as Aceh, she added a *krudung*, suggesting respect for Muslim values Javanese-style. For her official head-and-shoulders photograph the president chose a blouse that suggested the *kebaya* and a batik *slendang* in an Indonesian-Chinese design, pinned with the presidential medal, and uncovered hair. This official image suggests that Megawati wished to represent a nation that values all its peoples, cultures and religions.

Campaign photographs from May 2004 show the four male candidates for president dressed in Western suit plus *peci* or informal, long-sleeved batik shirt, trousers and *peci*. The sole female candidate presents herself in Western dress. Two other images from the presidential campaign are captured in photographs of Generals Wiranto and Susilo. For some political appearances, Wiranto presented himself in the aristocratic costume of Java: chocolate-coloured batik *kain*, headwrapper, and a buttoned jacket in gold, the colour associated in Java with royalty and authority. In this representation of self, appeal is made to Javanese, rather than national, solidarity.

Susilo, by contrast, campaigned in casual Western collared sports shirt and baseball cap, surrounded by bare-headed female supporters in T-shirts. Together they presented an image of the confident, modern Indonesian man and woman.



*Sukarno wearing a peci*

In these campaign images, we see a historic reversal. For Sukarno, the Indonesian male in his Western suit represented modernity and national identity, while the Indonesian woman, wearing a contrived costume from the past, represented the essence of the nation. President Megawati presented the Indonesian woman as modern and the equal of men.

In Indonesia today, batik has lost status, trivialised as a tourist item. Batik's Hindu and Buddhist motifs cause it to be rejected by some Muslims. The *peci* is still worn by government officials for photo opportunities. There are discussions about an Islamic superstate. Muslim causes are promoted by leaders who, like Abu Bakar Bashir, wear white, Arab-style robes. Western photographers create an image of piety in portraits of young girls in Islamic clothing, but a glance at Indonesia's public places reveals a greater variety of messages from teenagers wearing Muslim fashion and from working women in Islamic outfits. Magazines cover Western fashions as well as feature Islamic-clad models; they carry many photographs of long-haired Indonesian girls advertising haircare products. But, in comparison with previous decades, the task of essentialising the nation seems to be a male one now, while women have the task of representing Indonesia as Islamic modern.

## Notes

- 1 Sukarno. 1965. *Autobiography as told to Cindy Adams*, New York: Bobbs Merrill.
- 2 See, for example, magazines aimed at adolescent girls and young women, such as *Aneka Yess*, *Femina* and *Kartini*.
- 3 See, for example, the fashion photographs of the new *kebaya* in *Femina*, 19-25 April, 2001.

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