

Reading the Kebaya¹

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*I like wearing this kebaya because... in my opinion...
it makes us look more feminine and elegant²*



Victoria Cattoni, *Kebaya Mix* Video performance, Sukawati, Bali 2003 Plate 1

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² Text/s appearing in italics are taken from spoken texts from a number of interactive workshops conducted with various groups of persons in Jakarta, Bandung, Semarang, Yogyakarta and Bali during 2003.

The *kebaya* can be said to personify a certain ideal of ‘femininity’ within Indonesian consciousness. As the choice of national costume for women beginning during the Sukarno era of the 1940’s, the *kebaya* has come to symbolise a particular construction of female identity signifying traditional values and roles for women. In addition to being the national dress for Indonesian women, one of the *kebaya*’s other functions is as ceremonial blouse for Balinese women, constructed from sheer netting and outlining the contours of the body in a way that challenges definitions of propriety of other cultural groups within Indonesia and abroad.

As a symbol, the *kebaya* is laden with paradoxes: it has long come to symbolize the emancipation of women in Indonesia through a representation linking the *kebaya* to the 19th century “proto-feminist” figure of Raden A. Kartini³ (Hasan 2003 np.). In an annual celebration⁴ commemorating the life of Kartini, young schoolgirls across Java and other regions of Indonesia wear traditional costume, which include the *kebaya*. In this use of the *kebaya* we see the blouse simultaneously representing both ‘progress’ and ‘tradition’.

Among the many uses of the *kebaya* is its choice as daily dress for an older generation of women - the elderly urban and rural poor across Java and Bali. It also functions as a component of formal dress for functions including wedding ceremonies and receptions, graduation and other civil ceremonies, and is a work uniform for women employed in the tourist and hotel industries.

This paper⁵ examines the *kebaya* through its multiple aesthetic forms, functions and meanings, utilising it as a tool for an exploration into constructions of cultural identity and change, in particular in relation to aspects of the ‘feminine’. It looks at how ‘femininity’ sits in relation to cultural, personal and collective identity.

*Kebaya...
when a woman wears it
she looks alluring...*

³ Raden A. Kartini is a national heroine of Indonesia and is considered the first feminist of Indonesia in her struggles against feudalism and colonialism. She was born 1879 into aristocratic Javanese family, forced into a polygamous marriage and died young at the age of 25 during childbirth.

⁴ Kartini Day (Hari Kartini) is a national day held on 21 April commemorating the birth of Raden A. Kartini, in which young schoolgirls across Indonesia wear traditional costume of *kain-kebaya* or other ethnic traditional dress depending on the region and locality

⁵ The original version of this paper - Chapter 2 ‘The Kebaya’ – is part of my recently submitted MVA thesis, *Through the Kebaya: A cross-cultural project – Indonesia and Australia*.

*A person wearing the kebaya
is setting an example of refinement which ought to be followed...*

*Whenever I wear the kebaya
most people tend to show me more respect...
or they're more friendly to me
...more polite than if I wear ordinary clothes...*

*I'm not sure if it's the image of the kebaya as something 'charming'...
or because of my own image that makes it feel strange...
maybe it's something to do with the image of the kebaya itself...
it's not right for me because it has its own character....
it just makes me feel strange...*

...tells us at once that the *kebaya* establishes a certain code of behaviour, of being, of becoming. Is it the form of the garment? The history, culture or mythology it carries with it?

We give meaning to the kebaya, but the kebaya also gives meaning to us...
(Suryakusuma 2003 np.).

Origins and etymology

Derived from the Arabic word *kaba* meaning “clothing” and introduced via the Portuguese language, the term *kebaya* has come to refer to a garment whose origins appear to be a blouse first worn in Indonesia at some time during the 15th and 16th centuries (Lombard 1996). This garment was likely to be similar to what is described as a “long, fitted, flared *kebaya* known as *kebaya panjang*⁶, worn in the 16th century by Portuguese women arriving on the south-western coast of Malaysia (Centre for Korean Studies 1996), situated across the Malacca Straits from Sumatra, in north-western Indonesia. Many sources also cite Chinese influences on clothing of the time, one source comparing the *kebaya* to an open-fronted long-sleeved tunic worn by women of the Ming Dynasty (Hoon).

According to Denys Lombard, the emergence of fitted clothing⁷, including *kebaya* for women and trousers for men, was part of a larger social and cultural transformation occurring in Indonesia at the time, in part, the result of Islam (Lombard 1996), and in part the arrival of Europeans in the Indonesian archipelago in the sixteenth century, the Portuguese followed by the Dutch (Ricklefs 1991). Taylor (1997) points out that the covering of the body that was

⁶ *Kebaya panjang* is a long *kebaya*, popular in Sumatra.

⁷ As opposed to unstitched and loose cloth wrapped around the body.

occurring appears to be the result of two major historical processes - Islamic and European. The generic *kebaya* then, that Indonesians know and recognize today, most likely evolved from a long, semi-tailored blouse of Arabic origins (Cattoni 2002b), but which was also shaped by both European and Chinese influences.

Origins of the form today

The most dominant form of *kebaya* worn on the islands of Java and Bali today, can be visibly traced to the *kebaya* worn in Java and Sunda from the late 19th - early 20th century onwards. Many of the easily recognizable features of today's *kebaya* – a fit designed to signify, if not enhance the torso of the woman; the fold-back collarless neck and front opening; long sleeves; and the type of semi-transparent fabric – are evident in the *kebaya*s of the past century. Photographic records and paintings depicting famous women in *kebaya* – royalty and the wives of important military personnel - from the late 19th century on, provide us with visible evidence of this⁸.



Sundanese Woman in *kain-kebaya*, Date unknown – circa early 20th century, *Sundanese Woman*, date unknown – circa early 20th Century [taken from - Grant, S 1995, *Former Points of View: Postcard & Literary Passages from Pre-Independence Indonesia*, The Lontar Foundation, Jakarta, p. 103], Illustration 1

⁸ The *Museum Ullen Sentalu* in Kaliurang, north of Yogyakarta (Java), has a collection of paintings and photographic records of royalty and important dignitaries dating from 1877.

These *kebaya*s are in stark contrast to the longer and looser-fitting *baju kurung*⁹ worn today by some Muslim women. The form of the *baju kurung* more closely resembles the original Arabic blouse from which the *kebaya* is believed to be derived, and can be interchangeable with the *kebaya*¹⁰.

The *rasukan panjang*¹¹ *kebaya* worn in Java during the late 19th century (Cattoni 2003c), was a knee-cap long, open-fronted shirt of heavy fabric, usually fastened with brooches, and worn over a *kemben*¹². The top of the *kemben* was just visible beneath the over-blouse/jacket. This, according to internationally-acclaimed Indonesian Batik Designer Iwan Tirta (Cattoni 2003d), was the fore-runner to the shorter, front-panelled *kutu/putu baru*¹³ *kebaya* still worn today in Java and Bali. The over-jacket was eventually disposed of, and a new model of *kebaya* came into existence.

Yogyakarta-based Batik designer Ardiyanto (Cattoni 2002b), claims that when discussing the *kebaya* today, we are referring specifically to the blouse from the 1800's and not prior to this. Given these claims, it is coincidental that the first photographic studio in Indonesia opened in 1857 in Batavia (Taylor 1997): our visual records of the *kebaya* being thus limited to this date. Photographic records then enable us to more easily compose a genealogy of the styles of *kebaya* in use since the mid-1800's.

Over time *kebaya* length shortened; new fabrics became available through new trade links; new styles evolved reaching the stage and coming into use via public figures and the printed media. Compared however, with the more radical fashion changes affecting other items of clothing during the past century, key characteristics that define the form of the *kebaya* have endured, suggesting that it has become a 'classic' garment. The *kebaya* retains something of its 'essence' even when worn with jeans, as it is first reported to have been worn by Australian hippies on the beaches of Kuta, Bali in the 1970's (Cattoni 2003d).

⁹ *Baju kurung* is a knee-length loosely fitted long-sleeved shirt/blouse (*kurung* means 'enclosed'), often worn as replacement for *kebaya*. It is also traditional dress for Malay Muslim women in Malaysia.

¹⁰ This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

¹¹ A type of *kebaya* worn in Java during the late 19th century, and usually made of heavy fabric and worn over *kemben*.

¹² *kemben/kemban* is a Javanese breast cloth wrapped several times around upper torso of the body, from the hips to above the breasts. It functions also to hold the *kain* in place.

¹³ A type of *kebaya* which has a cross-piece, known as *beth* or *bev* that connects the two front sides of the bodice. This panel is usually fastened with brooches, clips or safety-pins and can be adjusted for fit, and is commonly worn by older women in traditional settings/occupations in Java. It is still quite a popular style in Bali, although it is becoming less so with the younger generations.

Indigenous dress in the ‘Making of a Nation’

Considering the enormous historical – political and social – shifts that have occurred in Indonesia during the last century, the form of the *kebaya*, has remained relatively unchanged. Its function and meaning however, in contrast to its form, has seen major changes in colonial and post-colonial Indonesia, operating to meet different groups’ political agendas, social needs and aspirations.

During the 19th century, and prior to the Nationalist movement of the early 20th century, the *kebaya* had enjoyed a period of being worn by Indonesian, Eurasian and European women alike, albeit in their designated styles. As Taylor states “Distinguishing class and status was important, and produced variants of the basic costume” (1997 p.105). These stylistic variations are further detailed by Taylor in the following: the *kebaya* of the Javanese royalty were constructed of silk, velvet and brocade; Javanese women belonging to the commoner class wore figured cottons; the *kebaya* worn by Eurasian women was of white cotton trimmed with handmade European lace during the day, and of black silk in the evening; while for Dutch women there was a shorter white *kebaya*. It was even possible for Dutch women planning to travel to the Dutch East Indies to purchase their *kebaya* in the Netherlands prior to leaving (Locher-Scholten 1997). It was customary to combine the *kebaya* with *kain*¹⁴ – a length of unstitched cloth worn on the lower part of the body, often (and incorrectly) referred to in the English language as *sarong*¹⁵.

Kain kebaya means a costume for women composed of an uncut length of cloth wound around the waist and falling to the ankles, and a long-sleeved blouse extending to the hips. This blouse was fastened with brooches rather than buttons and buttonholes. It became the costume of all classes of women in the nineteenth century, Javanese and Eurasian. When Dutch women began migrating to the colony after 1870, it became their costume too.... (Taylor 1997 p.103).

By the 1920’s however, and with the full emergence of the nationalist struggle in Indonesia, European women had all but stopped wearing the *kebaya* because it was identified with notions of ‘indigenusness’ (Locher-Scholten 1997). For the European colonizers, ‘indigenusness’ had become associated with Indonesian nationalism.

¹⁴ An unstitched length of cloth wrapped around the lower half of the body of a woman or man. Often (incorrectly) referred to as *sarong* by English-speaking non-Indonesians.

¹⁵ Similar to *kain*, but stitched to form a tube.

For the nationalists however, indigenous dress was synonymous with traditionalism – “with non-progress” (Nordholt 1997 p.15). Independence was framed within ideals of modernity and progress, with traditionalism signifying colonial oppression. At a time when the Dutch perceived a clear connection between indigenesness and nationalism, the nationalists themselves associated indigenesness with traditionalism. What is clear is that traditional dress induced negative associations for both the Indonesian nationalists and the Dutch colonisers. Indigenous or traditional dress, including the *kebaya*, had begun to acquire political baggage, engendering different meaning for different groups. Nordholt, quoting Beynon, states that during the period of the Japanese occupation of Indonesia (1942-1945), educated Indonesian women prisoners-of-war chose to wear *kain-kebaya* rather than the western dress allocated to them as prison dress (Nordholt 1997 p.17). A different set of political conditions produced a reversal of meaning. In this situation the women employed a cultural code (of traditional dress) to assert their political position, differentiating themselves from their European ‘sister’ prisoners-of-war.

It is paradoxical then, that given the Nationalists’ position on indigenous dress and how it came to be identified with all the negative implications of traditionalism, we find traditional dress for women – *kain-kebaya* - being designated a special place in the formation of the State of Indonesia.

With the proclamation of Independence by the new President Sukarno on August 17 1945, a pivotal image transformed the *kebaya* from mere traditional dress, elevating it to the status of national costume of Indonesia for women. Taylor (1997) describes how the only woman standing amidst the nationalist leaders on this momentous occasion marking the making of a nation - Dutch-educated activist S.K. Trimurti - presented herself in *kain-kebaya*. Both Taylor (1997) and Suryakusuma (2001) have investigated the framing of Indonesian identity at this historically significant event through the specific choices of national dress for women and men. According to both Taylor and Suryakusuma, men, through the costume of western suit, came to signify progress and a vision of the future. This vision of the future could not, of course, take shape nor go ahead without some firm foothold on the past. In this overall picture a ‘traditional’ and essentialist representation of women was needed to balance the scales – one that contextualised tradition within an image of the Indonesian woman. Indonesian woman, in *kain-kebaya* was to symbolise the “essence of the nation” (Taylor 1997 p.114).

Interpreting the symbolic meanings of the *kebaya* within the social or political contexts however, should not be at the exclusion of acknowledging that outside of the political discourses operating at the time, individuals continued to wear traditional dress, women continued to wear *kebaya*. The reality that must be acknowledged is that there were those who did not view their choice of dress as a sign of active or passive participation in any political discourse, but who wore traditional dress for other reasons, as a matter of habit, or conversely through lack of any other alternative. The factor of personal choice, of agency, cannot be left out of the picture.

The *kebaya* under the New Order and onwards

I have discussed the *kebaya* within the historical and political context of the period of the Old Order (1945-1965), since the *kebaya* came to take on significant meanings, often contradictory, during the period preceding and marking the era of Sukarno as President of the newly formed Republic of Indonesia. In contrast, the period of the New Order (1966-1998) under Suharto saw no significant changes to the meaning of the *kebaya* except perhaps in its new function as the uniform for newly established Dharma Wanita – an organisation established in 1974 for the wives of public servants¹⁶ and whose membership was, until recently, compulsory (Robinson & Bessell 2002). The ‘uniformising’ of the *kebaya* for Dharma Wanita was in keeping with what is seen as the New Order’s politicising of women’s organisations and the use of women as political tools (Baso & Idrus 2002). Suryakusuma, who has written substantially about the social construction of womanhood under the Indonesian New Order (1991) (1996) goes so far as to describe Dharma Wanita as an organisation whose roots are embedded in “military thinking” and whose “behaviour and image is strictly controlled” (1996 p.99-100). The actual Dharma Wanita *kebaya* is a rather drab-looking plain fabric blouse of salmon pink worn still today (Apriadi 2004), with *kain*. Stylistically it somehow does resemble a uniform, especially if compared to the ‘sexy’ transparent lace brocade and figure-enhancing *kebaya* favoured by many women in Bali.

Bali’s *kebaya*

In Bali, the *kebaya* has a much more recent history. The Dutch, whose occupation of Bali began as late as 1849 in the north of the island, and whose direct rule did not begin until 1882 (Ricklefs 1991), are believed to have enforced the wearing of the *kebaya*. At the time

¹⁶ The organisation is still active today although its members are more relaxed about what they wear. Some women still continue to wear *kain-kebaya*, but many wear instead more practical versions of the uniform such as blouse and skirt, although still in the salmon pink.

Balinese women's breasts were uncovered¹⁷, except for formal and ceremonial occasions, during which a *sabuk*¹⁸ might be wound tightly around the upper torso, covering the breasts but leaving the shoulders and arms exposed (Jennaway 2003). The women of Buleleng, the regency of northern Bali, therefore would have been the first to adopt the *kebaya*. Singaraja was, at the time, not only the capital of Bali, but also the major port with trade links to other areas of Indonesia, China and India.

Photographic sources however, do not locate the *kebaya* being in use until the early 1920's¹⁹ by which time it was in full use inside the palaces. It is via the royalty and the palaces that the *kebaya* appears to have been disseminated out into the community. New dress codes adopted by members of the royalty returning to Bali from Java were passed down through the caste system²⁰ (Cattoni 2002a). Yet despite the fact that clothing is often used to separate class, there seems to be no evidence of the time to indicate that there were any rules delineating styles of *kebaya* according to caste. Differences in *kebaya* cloth were more likely to be an outcome of differences of wealth status.

In the English-subtitled foreign-made film *Legong: Dance of the Virgins* (1935), produced in Bali in 1935, one can see the central female character's metamorphosis being depicted through her clothing. 'Poutou', who initially appears bare-breasted, reappears throughout the narrative, moving from a loosely draped scarf across her shoulders and breasts, to wearing a semi-transparent and loosely fastened *kebaya*, which is finally worn over an undergarment. The female protagonist commits suicide in the final dramatic ending, but the transition from her uncovered upper torso to her fully clothed and 'decent' body, must be seen as a conscious device for representing ideas of 'progress' and 'mobility', utilising the *kebaya* as the means to achieving this.

The film, which employs both real and staged scenes, includes an actual religious ceremony. In this ceremony most of the women attending are wearing *kebaya*. This is confirmed by informal interviews that I have conducted with a number of elderly Balinese women who

¹⁷ Even today, in villages outside the main urban and tourist centres of Bali, it is not so unusual to see elderly women wearing *kain* without a top.

¹⁸ Means 'belt' but in Bali used to refer to the Javanese *kemben*.

¹⁹ It is possible that earlier photographs exist but this is the earliest photographic evidence I have been able to locate.

²⁰ Bali, then, and now, operates on a caste-tier system of four different levels. Royalty and nobility in Bali make up the two highest castes, the *Brahmana* and the *Ksatria*. The highest caste, the *Brahmana* has historically exercised considerable customary, religious and political power. Today however, with new levels of wealth amongst some of the lower castes in Bali, this distribution of power is beginning to be challenged.

relay their own personal memories of the first appearance of the *kebaya* around the same time. Yet despite its relatively recent introduction into Bali, the Balinese vigorously claim the *kebaya* as belonging to their cultural heritage. In fact, the *kebaya* in Bali is more visible than anywhere else in Indonesia today. It has been adopted with a vengeance²¹, taking certain features of the garment to the extreme: the Balinese *kebaya* in more recent years, has become the most transparent of its kind, provoking much debate and bringing a new moralistic dimension to the discourse on dress codes for Balinese Hindu women²².



Victoria Cattoni *Whose kebaya, anyway?* Digital photograph [Video still], Batungsel, Bali 2003 Plate 2

I prefer wearing a transparent kebaya like this...

²¹ Retail outlets specialising in *kebaya* cloth and other traditional dress items and accessories have multiplied in Bali over the past five years, signalling a growth in fashion consciousness that comes with new wealth. It may also signal a new ethnocentricity and growing 'Hindu' consciousness amongst certain groups of Balinese.

²² This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The President's *kebaya*

When, in her official capacity as President of the Republic of Indonesia, Megawati Sukarnoputri dons *kain-kebaya*, what is she signifying – Nationhood? Tradition? Javanese hegemony²³? Femininity? Is she making a fashion statement? In the days prior to the 2002 annual Bali Arts Festival, which was to be opened by Megawati, there was much gossip about what colour *kebaya* the President would be wearing. As it turned out, the President wore a mid-shade of turquoise blue. Excerpts from two web news articles on July 30 2001 – the day when the first democratically elected President of Indonesia, Abdurrahman Wahid, was impeached and replaced by his vice Megawati – provide an indication of the significance of the new President's appearance and choice of dress. In the first of these news articles (*Wahid to refuse to leave palace if impeached* 2001), reporting on a potentially volatile moment in the history of Indonesia, we find the following attention paid to the President's attire:

Megawati smiled throughout the session and was seen as signalling her readiness to be sworn in as new president by wearing a violet 'kebaya', a Javanese traditional costume for women that is usually used when attending very formal occasions...

The second story (*Indonesia assembly ousts Wahid, Megawati takes over* 2001), posted the same day, again focuses attention on the attire of the new President-to-be:

Megawati wore a white 'kebaya', a traditional Javanese costume for women, and a violet scarf when she was taking the oath...

When interviewed about the *kebaya*, Iwan Tirta (Cattoni 2003d), pointed out that the President did not wear her *kain-kebaya* correctly. As a Javanese woman, and with her particular body-shape, it was more appropriate for President Megawati to adopt the slim and straight (Javanese) line, rather than the more curvaceous silhouette of the 'Sundanese woman'.

Ascribing importance and passing value judgements on the way that female public figures present themselves through their choice of clothing, is neither new, nor limited to Indonesia. So when the most important female public figure in Indonesia, President Megawati Sukarnoputri, represents herself through the *kebaya*, there is bound to be a flurry of

²³ While *kain-kebaya* is the National Costume of Indonesia, it is the traditional dress of the Javaese, Sundanese and Balinese only.

overlapping and conflicting messages, with the *kebaya* as the repository for cultural, socio-political and fashion value judgements and differences of opinion.

From the palace to the street > popular and ‘traditional’ images

While the *kebaya* is worn by a diversity of women from the President to the *jamu* street vendor, the *kebaya* could never be claimed to operate as a social leveller. Women who sell *jamu* (traditional herbal medicine), from young to old, and right across the islands of Java and Bali still today wear *kebaya*. *Jamu* labelling also employs this ‘traditional’ image of the *kebaya*-clad woman to sell its product. In fact, in Indonesia the image of ‘woman in *kebaya*’ sells a variety of products from traditional herbs, to Betadine, to fried chicken. As an icon for the sale of *jamu*, the woman adorning its packaging in her ‘traditional clothing’ - *kebaya* - sells tradition and all the purity and goodness belonging to cultural traditions. Perhaps she also evokes an element of nostalgia for urban consumers, (although it’s harder to see what the connection between traditional values and fried chicken might be).

‘Traditional’ as a way of life, is often less about the differences between rural and urban settings, than about socio-economic and class distinctions. For a generation of women 50 and over, whose occupations and way of life come to distinguish them as ‘traditional’, traditional clothing of *kain-kebaya* is their choice of daily dress. These women, the majority of whom belong to the lower socio-economic group, often work in traditional settings such as markets, are employed as house servants or work in the agricultural sector.



Jamu packaging, Woman in *kebaya*, Illustration 2

The *kebaya* most often worn by these women is the *kutu/putu baru* mentioned earlier, or a version of *kebaya* based loosely on the *Kartini*²⁴ style. For those of the urban-dwelling younger generation, a grandmother who still wears *kain-kebaya* daily embodies tradition, but also signals the portentous loss of cultural roots.

Kutu/putu baru kebaya with kerudung



Victoria Cattoni ,*Bali stills* Video, Bali 2002, Plate 3

*When my grandmother wears a kebaya
she looks beautiful...*

²⁴ A type of *kebaya* based loosely on the original style of *kebaya* worn by Raden A. Kartini and women of her class and era. It is usually of white cloth, and lacking a *bev/beth* is fastened at the centre of the bodice where the two front panels meet.

*Wearing this kebaya...
reminds me of my grandmother who was gentle and caring...
I feel like I should be like my grandmother
if I wear a kebaya like this...*

*I've never bought a kebaya because the kebaya
hasn't been part of my life...
I know about the kebaya from my mother...
my mother didn't always wear a kebaya... she only wore it
to wedding ceremonies or to her husband's office parties...
but my mother's mother... my grandmother...
wore a kebaya all her life*

Within twenty to thirty years it is highly likely that the *kebaya* of daily dress as worn by these older generations of women, will disappear, thus reflecting the dynamics of cultural change.

When is a *kebaya* not a *kebaya*?

For middle and upper class urban women, the *kebaya* has fashion status. Models appearing in the fashion pages of the country's major newspapers and women's magazines regularly wear the latest adaptations of *kebaya* from the country's leading fashion designers. One of the younger generation of designers based in Jakarta, Ghea Panggabean, has been experimenting with the *kebaya* since the 1990's, creating garments that stretch the formal concept of *kebaya*. Produced for an elite market, the *kebayas* of this ilk, constructed from silk organdies and other luxurious cloth, appear to rupture the *kebaya's* traditional function by combining it in diverse ways with other items of clothing.

'Tradition' is carried onto the catwalk clothed in 'fashion'; young educated women who are conscious of their distance to tradition, choose contemporary adaptations of the *kebaya* to wear with jeans or trousers; young girls across Java celebrate *Kartini Day*, paying homage to Indonesia's first proto-feminist constraining their bodies in corseted *kain-kebaya*; an elderly woman (Cattoni 2003a) shows me a blouse which - apart from the lace brocade fabric from which it is constructed - bears little resemblance to what I know as *kebaya*, telling me that this Muslim blouse/jacket - *baju kurung* - can sometimes 'function' as a *kebaya* if the circumstances warrant. Contradiction sits in harmony with itself.



Victoria Cattoni, *Baju kurung* worn by woman standing, Video still, Bandung 2003 Plate 4



Fashion model in contemporary *kebaya*,
Newspaper clipping, *Koran Tempo*, 3 Agustus 2002,
Illustration 3

If it's visual clues we're looking for to define what is a *kebaya* in an absolute way, it may prove difficult to fix on certain characteristics that apply to all *kebayas*, across all functions, socio-economic class, age groups and culture/ethnicity. Nonetheless, it is possible to make some generalisations about the *kebaya* today. A lot of *kebaya* fabric is lace-brocade. Most *kebaya* fabric uses a floral motif either printed or woven into the textile and it's length can fall somewhere from above the waist to below the knee. It usually, but not always, has long sleeves. It is usually fastened at the front, and if not, then gives a semblance of doing so.²⁵ And so it continues, stretching its formal boundaries.

If we can return to the *baju kurung* as an example, we see how what appears to be a long, loose, nondescript blouse can 'become' a *kebaya*. The blouse's function in this case overrides its form. Information such as how, when and where the *kebaya* is worn, and the accessories or items of clothing that are combined with it, may be just as valuable in providing clues to define what is a *kebaya* today.

*These days there are so many outside influences in fashion
That the kebaya could get left behind...
It can be modified though... and still be fun to wear...
and totally cool!
...but the basic concept of the kebaya will not change*

'Femininity', in its different understandings and permutations, is linked to women in Indonesia through the *kebaya*. There is perhaps no other item of clothing that so successfully comes to symbolise this in Indonesia. If the *kebaya* can tell us anything about cultural change it is that cultures are constantly and forever in adaptation and circulation, as are definitions of 'femininity'. Whilst a thread-bare lace *kebaya* worn by a young woman in Bali may challenge others' culturally predisposed perceptions of femininity, we should remain mindful of applying one cultural code to understand cultural constructions of another time and place.

²⁵ Some 'modern' *kebayas* have buttons at the front, giving the impression of being fastened at the front, but actually have a hidden zipper in the back of the blouse. There are two reasons for this. One is practicality, and the other is that it is more suitable for large women I.E. it prevents gaping at the front.

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