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The Influence of Cultural Acculturation on Kebaya as Women's Clothing

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ABSTRACT

Kebaya is a traditional blouse dress that has been worn by many women in Indonesia since the pre-independence period. This journal discusses the influence of cultural acculturation on kebaya which includes the acculturation of Arab, Chinese, and Indies cultures. The main objective of this study is to determine the influence of cultural acculturation on kebaya and its evolution over time. The methodology used by the author in conducting research is a qualitative research method along with literature study research techniques. The results of the study showed that the three cultures have influenced the development of kebaya, both in terms of design, motifs, and materials. The kebaya, which at the time was solely worn by members of the royal family as a symbol of social status, eventually evolved into women's clothing that could be worn by all social classes. The existence of cultural acculturation is one of the supporting factors for the popularity of kebaya.

Keywords: cultural acculturation, kebaya, women's clothing

1. INTRODUCTION

As a country with a vast territory and an abundant wealth of natural resources, Indonesia has historically been one of the targets of Western colonialism and imperialism. The existence of colonialism for centuries in the Indonesia Archipelago helped bring changes to society in Indonesia and foster the development of local culture, each colonial nation brought its influence and created a new culture known as "acculturation". According to Koentjaraningrat (2005: 155), acculturation is a social process that arises when a group of people with a particular culture are exposed to the elements of a foreign culture in such a way, so that the elements of foreign culture are gradually accepted and processed into their own culture, without causing the loss of personality from the culture itself. Building architecture, clothes, art, language, technology, and even religion all saw significant changes as a result of the introduction of Western culture to Indonesia (Fanna, 2022).

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One of them is the relationship of social interaction that occurs between Indonesian residents and Arabs, where both parties influence one another and produce new customs and cultures as a result (Tamara, 2021). Based on Hamka's theory regarding the arrival of Islam, circa the 7th century, Arabs came to Indonesia through the services of Arab Muslim traders who traded, married native people, as well as spread Islam. With this distribution, the acculturation process was created gradually between the Arabs and the native women. Moreover, Islam regulates how a woman is dressed, so it is undeniable that the arrival of the Arabs also had an impact on how native women dressed during the period.

During the 19th century, there were also many Chinese communities that were growing in the Malay region. The entry of the Chinese nation into Indonesia, of course, it brings influenced of culture and customs, which in turn sparked a process of acculturation between Chinese and Javanese cultures. The origins date back to the trading links between Indonesia and China, which later made numerous Chinese people settle and had descendants of indigenous people who were often referred to as Chinese Peranakan for Indonesia and Baba for Malaysia. This cultural acculturation has an impact on a number of aspects, ranging from building architecture, clothes and fashion, and arts, to culinary (Hartati, 2013).



Figure 1. The lifestyle of the indies cultural society
Source: (Net/Ist, 2021)

Another cultural acculturation is Indies culture, a term that refers to the blending of Dutch culture with indigenous culture. The presence of the Dutch in Indonesia, who started trading activities and then became rulers, has influenced many aspects of the life of indigenous peoples, including cultural characteristics and their outcomes. The word Indies comes from the Dutch language, *Nederlandsch Indie*, or the Dutch East Indies. This culture was initially supported by the celibate lifestyle of Dutch officials because

of the prohibition on bringing wives (except for high-ranking officials) and bringing Dutch women to the Dutch East Indies, resulting in the mixing of blood which gave birth to mixed children and fostering a Dutch- indigenous culture and lifestyle which is called the Indies style (Gultom, 2020).

The turn of the 20th century is seen as a milestone in the history of the Dutch East Indies, particularly for native Javanese women. Their desire to receive equal rights in education has been realized. They are beginning to be permitted to study in girls' schools and even in European schools for natives. The education they get has increased their level of consciousness, which includes awareness of thinking, behaving, and appearance. This also applies to their appearance and how they arrange their own bodies as attractively as possible (Septiani, 2015).

The most important thing in appearance is clothing. A person's image is greatly influenced by their clothing. Clothing serves as a social and cultural skin because with clothing, humans can have confidence in the presence of the people around them. More than that, clothing is an expression of a certain way of life, has symbolic value, and is a reflection of identity, gender, and hierarchical standing. The native aristocratic women who associate with European women have the understanding that appearance is crucial to them. As a result, they feel they have to be '*ahli mancak*', which means they must always seem flawless, alluring, and entrancing by applying makeup and dressing up. Javanese women who appear in traditional clothes, kebaya, and cloth complete with buns will be more attractive to the eye (Septiani, 2015).

The evolution of the kebaya cannot be separated from our evolution as a cultured society. Following the history of our nation, the story of the kebaya was opened. The rhythm of political ups and downs and struggles has an impact on shifting cultural colors and in turn influences the taste and color of kebaya. According to historical records, the word 'kebaya' originates in Arabic, Chinese, and Portuguese, making these three countries intimately tied to the word's origin. There are those who note that the kebaya comes from the Arabic '*habaya*' which means *pakaian labuh yang memiliki belahan di depan*. Whereas 'kebaya' which the Portuguese introduced, was used to designate tops or also called a blouse worn by Indonesian women around the 15th and 16th centuries AD (Pentasari, 2007). With various understandings about the origins of the kebaya itself, it shows that the existence of the kebaya as clothing in Indonesia started with acculturation which gradually then processed into a kebaya that women could wear properly.

According to Taylor, who is cited in (Trismaya, 2018), for Javanese women themselves, the kebaya is a symbol of class and status differences between *priyayi* and common people, which is achieved through textile materials for the kebaya and its lower fabrics. Meanwhile, between Dutch women and native women on the island of Java, this difference can be seen from the style of their kebaya. The color of the kebaya for non-indigenous women is white and lacy with batik cloth produced with influences from European cultures, while the kebaya for indigenous women does not wear lace and is colored other than white, combined with traditional batik cloth. Both Dutch

women and native women used the kebaya as a prestige symbol which was valid in the colonial period at that time, when apparel served as a means of racial categorization. Towards the war of independence and the rise of Indonesian nationalism, indigenous Javanese women wore kebaya as an anti-colonial symbol (Trismaya, 2018).



Figure 2. Indonesian Classic Kebaya
Source: (Dewimagazine.com, 2023)

2. RESEARCH METHODS

The production of knowledge in the field of business research is growing rapidly, but it is still fragmented and interdisciplinary. This makes it challenging to stay on the cutting edge of research, stay up to date with the latest developments, and evaluate the body of data in a certain field of business research. For this reason, the literature review is now more important than ever as a research approach. Conventional literature reviews are often conducted haphazardly rather than according to a set technique, which results in a lack of completeness and rigour. As a result, concerns concerning the calibre and reliability of these reviews may be voiced. In addition to providing an introduction of the various review kinds and some criteria for conducting and evaluating a literature review article, this paper examines literature reviews as a research approach. It also covers typical difficulties and how to produce literature reviews. With its enormous potential for worldwide.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Arab women who participate in trading in the Sumatra region usually wear abayas. Cultural acculturation then took place in the Majapahit era concurrently with the spread of Islamic civilization in Java, which led to women from the royal nobility who were already Muslims beginning to leave the traditional culture of only wearing *kemben*. As it evolved, the kebaya started to be worn by all social classes, including

both nobles or *priyayi* and ordinary people (Karseno, 2022). Indigenous kebaya initially had a design that did not form a body like a kebaya that exists today. The shape is still very simple and looser. The design is simple, which only functions as a cover for the body. They wear a kebaya to cover their chests and batik as a cover at the bottom.



Figure 3. Indo-Arab Woman from Batavia
Source: (Woodbury & Page, 1870)

At the end of the 19th century in Java, kebaya also received influence from China and began to be worn as an everyday dress, often called *kebaya encim* or *kebaya nyonya*. The word *encim* comes from the majority of its users who are married and aged Chinese women because the younger generation has experienced westernization so that less and less people wear kebaya. Meanwhile, the word *nyonya* is a nickname for married women, in this context, they are Tionghoa Peranakan (Gumulya & Octavia, 2017).

The kebaya that was initially worn was a lace kebaya with a cut that was more body- shaping and shorter. The shape of the kebaya was then developed into a *biku kebaya*. Its presence was due to imports of voile cloth from Europe which appeared with various motifs such as polka dots or flowers, triggering creations for peranakans in the Indonesian Archipelago to modify it into a new form of kebaya. The biku kebaya, also known as *kebaya kerancang*, was the first type of kebaya to use embroidery techniques. In this kebaya, lace is no longer used and is replaced by the cut-work technique, which is the technique of cutting the cloth with small scissors so that it has holes and forms like lace *(Gumulya & Octavia, 2017)*.



Figure 4. Kebaya Biku
Source: (Seri, 1949)



Figure 5. Kebaya Sulam
Source: (Ang Eng Nyonya Kebaya, 2020)

After the 1920s and 1930s when sewing machine imports increased from Europe to Southeast Asia, the making of embroidery on kebaya which was previously done by hand shifted to relying on sewing machines. With the ability of the machine to

create embroidery that is more difficult, various motifs, and new designs, the *kebaya sulam* was born. The kebaya design that Chinese Peranakans use usually has special characteristics and its own symbolic meaning, using fauna, flora and object symbols. The motifs on the fabric also have their own characteristics, such as batik cloth which usually has Chinese characteristics with a phoenix motif (Putri & Hidayat, 2021).

In the 19th century when Dutch women came to the Dutch East Indies, the clothes they wore at the beginning of their arrival were long dresses that were so thick and required them to wear a corset on their bodies, along with embroidery or brocade which was characteristic of the clothes worn by Westerners. They still follow the fashions of Europe and create an environment that is reminiscent of their home country. However, Dutch women's attire became simpler in the 20th century, and they started to show interest in native women's clothing, namely the kebaya.



Figure 6. European woman in Java
Source: (Veen, 1865)

Many of those who settled in the Dutch East Indies started wearing kebaya as everyday clothing because they felt it was more comfortable to wear in the tropical climate and the influence of *Babu* or *Nyai* who lived in Dutch homes inspired them to wear it too. However, in order to distinguish the Dutch kebaya from the native kebaya, they added the characteristics of European clothing, which resulted in the acculturation of Indies culture. Dutch ladies wore the kebaya, which had indentations on the body, brocade fabric, and embroidery as adornment. According to the Dutch historian Jean Gelman Taylor, the kebaya is popular among Europeans because it is associated as a form of peace, quiet, and social order (Tifada, 2022).

Over time, the kebaya dress in Indonesia has come under the indirect influence of the Netherlands. One of the most visible influences is in terms of materials. Naturally, the material worn by indigenous women, especially those who belong to very high social strata, differs from the kebaya worn by those from the lower social classes. Since the 19th century, the clothes of noble wives have looked luxurious. As shown in Figure 7, the material worn is made of velvet and there is also decoration on the edge of the kebaya. Not only in Javanese kebaya, but in the Priangan region, the kebaya worn by *menak* or people who have high class is also accompanied by decorations on the borders and collar of the kebaya, which is complemented by wearing a brooch on the front of the shirt *(Putri & Hidayat, 2021)*.



Figure 7. Wife of the Regent of Blora
Source: (Woodbury & Page, 1860)

Even though the clothes worn by women during the colonial period were not discussed specifically, there were regulations regarding clothing that were issued by the Dutch government. In 1870, there were rules regarding how to dress for native people. This regulation is regulated in the *Staatsblad* of April 2, 1870 no. 9 concerning the official attire of native employees. In this *staatsblad*, the contents regulate an official's attire, both in terms of how they are dressed and when to wear European dress, then this dress will also affect a person's level and position. This dress code applies to all native chiefs and officials in Java and Madura. Meanwhile, the regent's wife usually wears a

kebaya made of velvet combined with a batik motif *(Septiani, 2022)*.

The 20th century shows that the clothes worn by upper-class women are the use of batik cloth and hair in a bun. Meanwhile, the clothes worn by slaves or the lower class looked simpler. Apart from the fabrics and accessories worn, the distinction between aristocratic women and native women may also be apparent in their footwear, with the upper class using shoes as a base and the slaves or lower class going barefoot to signify their social status and position.

Gradually, many indigenous women began to wear kebaya not just as clothing to cover their bodies but also for fashion reasons. Kebaya clothing for each location is, of course, made according to a separate set of regulations, depending on the cut, color, or distinctive tribal customs (Putri & Hidayat, 2021). As a result, the kebaya fashion evolved alongside the European influence the Dutch brought to the Dutch East Indies. Indigenous women make kebaya with materials that follow the example of the clothes normally worn by European women, but their use is adapted to the weather on the island of Java.



Figure 8. Kebaya worn by Dutch woman
Source: (Leiden University Libraries, 1916)

When dressing, a woman also has to adjust the place and time, taking into account where and when they will wear their kebaya. Beautiful and luxurious clothes to make it look attractive are recommended to be worn at parties, for example using brightly colored silk fabrics with various motifs. Meanwhile, in an atmosphere of

mourning, it is not permissible to wear clothes that stand out to the eye and are required to wear dark colors because when attending a funeral, Europeans will wear black and Chinese people will wear white. It is a way of expressing their sorrow. However, at that time, there were no special clothes or colors used by the natives to attend funerals, so they only needed to wear appropriate clothes and be able to show empathy and condolences to their families (Septiani, 2015).



Figure 9. Kebaya with Lace
Source: (National Museum van Wereldculturen, 1900)

4. CONCLUSION

The entry and development of various cultures into Indonesian territory throughout history has influenced local culture and resulted in acculturation. The process of blending two or more cultures to create a new type of culture while adapting to the prevailing culture of the society also influenced people's clothing styles at that time, one of which was the kebaya. Along with the times, kebaya has been impacted by a variety of cultures, ranging from Arabic, Chinese, to Indies culture. Each culture brings its own characteristics which are then expanded and applied to become clothes that are commonly worn. Since the kebaya is considered as a symbol of class and status differences, therefore, previously it was a garment worn only by members of the royal family. Although there are still differences in design and features of the upper and

lower class kebaya. However, along with the increasing awareness of the appearance of the indigenous people, the kebaya has become a garment that can be worn by all social classes with various backgrounds and is not only worn as a body covering but also for fashion reasons. The existence of cultural acculturation from various ethnicities, nations, and tribes is one of the supporting factors that makes kebaya have a good place among ordinary people to the upper class.

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