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.

Identity, nation and Islam

Jean Gelman Taylor

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 geniale; 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 Javanesse were covering the upper torso in Western shirt, bowtie and jacket, while retaining the draped, uncut batik dress 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 batik 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 batik cloth for daily wear, so that batik soon seemed to be the ‘traditional’ clothing of all Javanesse. 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 women and ornamentation of the hair. Decorated cloths 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.

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, responding to external pressures to cover up. They wore Chinese style long-sleeved blouses with batik kain. Their uncut hair was arranged in a bun decorated with flowers or jewelled hairpins.

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.”

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 (1945-65), 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 kebayas 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 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 kebaya and pants, 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 slendang evolved...
into a fashion statement in fine fabric for ladies. The Sukarno-era kei, 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 func-
tions, wives of public servants wore identically coloured kebaya and kain in matching batik patterns.

Sukarno defined Indonesians against the world. Sukarno 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 headaddresses. 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 shirts, 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. 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 closures, rather than as representative for all Malaysians. The peeci is worn by government officials for photo opportunities. There are discussions about an Islamic supermarket. 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 great variety of messages from teenagers wearing Muslim fashion and from working women in Islamic outfits. Magazines cover Western fashions as well as featuring Islamic-clad models; they carry many photographs of young girls advertising hair care 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.

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 peeci is worn by government officials for photo opportunities. There are discussions about an Islamic supermarket. 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 great variety of messages from teenagers wearing Muslim fashion and from working women in Islamic outfits. Magazines cover Western fashions as well as featuring Islamic-clad models; they carry many photographs of young girls advertising hair care 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.

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Notes
2. See, for example, magazines aimed at adolescent girls and young women, such as Aneka Yes, Femina and Kerton.
3. See, for example, the fashion photographs of the new kebaya in Femina, 1995 April, 2001.