

# The Kebaya, in Parts

Asikin Hasan

A day in March. Victoria and I meet to discuss the technical aspects of exhibiting her work in Jakarta. She has just come from Semarang carrying with her two large suitcases, about a two-thirds as tall as herself, packed full of kebayas. Victoria is physically rather slight to be dragging two such large and heavy cases from one city to another. Moreover it struck me as amusing to find a foreigner transporting so many kebayas around the heart of Indonesia. Victoria and I, aware of this anomaly, share a laugh. Nonetheless, I am aware that she has seriously embarked on an exploration of their significance.

About three years ago, after having spent most of the previous three years in Indonesia outside her native Australia, Victoria found herself focusing her attention on the meaning of the kebaya. The kebaya for Victoria, is not just an Indonesian blouse, but a key to increased comprehension of Bali and Java. She has searched literature on the kebaya, and interviewed anthropologists, artists, designers and women active in diverse fields for their responses, until the kebaya has taken on significance within a broad social, political and particularly feminist spectrum.

Under the New Order Regime, the kebaya had become a symbol of the identity of Indonesian women: not only did it become the duty of all functionaries' wives, including the president's, to wear the kebaya to all formal occasions, but a near-sacred symbol to be worn for marriages and Independence Day anniversaries. Even though there is no connection between the kebaya and Kartini, the proto-feminist from Jepara whose activities encouraged the emancipation of women, on the anniversary of her death the kebaya is worn to symbolize the continuing feminist struggles.

Today, the many available forms of kebaya demonstrate the dynamics of a rapidly changing society. While 'jamu' (traditional medicine) vendors wear traditional kebayas, urban upper-class women don kebayas which show-off the latest fashion trends.

Victoria's approach to her subject has been a conscious avoidance of both theorizing and creative artistry. Rather, she sees herself as a gatherer and commentator on the realities of the kebaya. Her sympathetic attitude allows participants to feel comfortable in volunteering and contributing to her project.

The results of her on-going inquiry were first shown in video performance works in Lithuania in the year 2000, and Finland in 2001. More recently, Victoria has begun to play with interactive video, not only with the willing participation of Balinese women, but also with her fellow-Australians. In a more recent work, 'tamasya kebaya', presented in Darwin, Australia last year, the video installation performance consisted of two parts: in the first, a succession of women were invited to try on kebayas while commenting on their feelings and thoughts, this being videoed; in the second part, this unedited video was projected into the exhibition space to become part of the installation.

At present, Victoria is running workshops in several places in Bali and Java. Reactions differ: some feel wearing the kebaya provides a unique pleasure; others feel it an inappropriate costume nowadays; still others comment that it restricts movement and makes them feel awkward; yet the close-fitting kebaya, open at the neck, convinces others that wearing it is sexually enticing.

Thus these interactive experiences become differing translations and readings for those confronting the kebaya and its potential meanings.

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Bahasa Indonesia version available on request.

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