

# Contradiction of the Kebaya

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Which of us is not familiar with the kebaya? At the same time, it might surprise us though to realise that the kebaya is something that is loaded with contradictions, depending on the context of where and how it is used.

To begin with, the kebaya possesses an intensity because on the one hand it constitutes something of the everyday. On the other hand however, it is also something quite special. The kebaya is a type of blouse worn on a daily basis by women, but at the same time when used as the national costume it acquires symbolic value. It bestows national identity, it is a cross-ethnic cultural icon, and according to a number of women appearing in Victoria's video, it also contains sacred value.

We give meaning to the kebaya, but the kebaya also gives meaning to us. It not only contains cultural meaning, but also social, historical, personal and even ideological-political meaning.

Why is it that the kebaya was chosen as the national costume for women, when for men it is the western suit as worn by the former Dutch Colonials? If this choice was to provide Indonesian men with a parallel place alongside the European Colonial power of the time, then for women the kebaya is a symbol embedded deep within our "soul" which makes us "pure Indonesian". Women's bodies, then become the personification of the state of Indonesia – which is of course, unique and non-Western.

As an item of clothing, the kebaya possesses an extraordinary diversity of uses, to which aesthetic value is given. Firstly there is a diversity of forms - the Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese and Sumatran (longer kebaya) in various styles from the concealed to the sexy, revealing and often transparent kebaya; a range of fabric choices – from cheap to very expensive including cotton, lace brocade, silk, velvet etc. It can be worn as a daily working garment (by village women), but it can also function as an exclusive blouse for middle to upper class women who wear it to functions ranging from wedding receptions to political events.

Another contradiction regarding the kebaya is that the kebaya itself does not distinguish women apart from each other since it is worn by women of all classes and ethnic groups. The specific characteristics of the type of kebaya and/or accessories however, may however differentiate women according to their class or ethnicity. It can also depend on what the kebaya is worn with - the type of batik kain, expensive handmade or a less expensive printed, and with or without jewellery.

Equally contradictory is the meaning of the kebaya. It became a symbol of freedom with Indonesia's independence, but also represented 'indigenusness' and tied women to notions of the traditional. Furthermore, during the New Order the *Dharma Wanita* kebaya - a kebaya worn by the wives of civil servants (KORPRI - Korps Pegawai Republik Indonesia) – became compulsory dress and functioned more or less as a uniform. It became a symbol of uniformity and control because of its connection to an oppressive regime. Apart from this, there are particular features of the kebaya – its close fit, the use of the corset, and the chignon "sustainable hairdo" whose form is achieved through teasing and hairspray to the point where it resembles concrete, and could even be considered torture. In spite of this, it seems that women are prepared to become victims of fashion – and torture – to reach an ideal of beauty, and not only through the kebaya.

The kebaya gives meaning to us as women. It promotes our femininity because it is sexy, sensual and fitted to our body. Victoria Cattoni, however, exposes the true meanings of the kebaya in her work. She cleverly utilises the kebaya as tool to stimulate

women to speak about their personal perceptions and reasons for wearing it. Her work begins with simply talking about the kebaya, but leads to exposing collective values about women.

Although Victoria Cattoni is a scholar and a video artist, she situates herself as a facilitator and non-intrusive critic. She uses a kebaya (which is familiar to Indonesian women) to open up dialogue about femininity and its construction, and to understand through collective values the origins of constructions of femininity. This is very different to other western scholars who are inclined to impose theories on their 'Cultural Others'. Victoria does not impose herself on the 'Other' nor does she conform to a theoretical position. As an artist she is not trying to manipulate the items or clothes she wears. She simply collects the kebaya, focusing on its diversity of materials, styles, colours and origins, and allows participants to interact with the kebaya in their own way. What occurs is a narrative about woman's self-perception, and how that spontaneously arises from within herself. From the video that I have seen, it is possible to see the religious, traditional and personal values identified with the kebaya being revealed through the interaction with the kebaya. The most dominant theme to emerge is the kebaya's association with the feminine and 'sexiness'. Such perceptions are reflected in all aspects of the kebaya. While the feminine tends to have a positive meaning, sexiness implies something rather more controversial.

The video we are seeing tonight is a snapshot from a process that is structured around finding the meaning, through the kebaya. Most people, especially those Indonesians who are products of current socio-economic/political conditions tend not to be reflective. Yet, it is said "the unexamined life is not worth living". While chaos continues to exist in Indonesia it is necessary to find meaning. This very simple technique of Victoria's could also be used to find other meanings, those associated with other objects found in everyday life such as weapons, chairs, uniforms, newspapers, money - anything whatsoever that has symbolic value. The point which I would like to stress here is - let us find meaning in our lives.

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*Original version in Bahasa Indonesia available upon request.*