

*Identity and Values of Malaysian Muslims among Women and
Their Metaphor in Fashion*

Hanisa Hassan, Biranul Anas Zaman, Imam Santosa
Bandung Institute of Technology, Indonesia

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Abstract

In the Malay world, metaphors were commonly used to describe something indirectly, for example ones attire. Evidence of metaphors used to describe women's clothing can be found in many Malay literature and historical annals as the main source to suggest the looks of the Malay woman during that time. This is because; other solid evidence such as textiles had long perished within the years. The metaphors, symbols and belief in the Malay community was then visualised the identity of Malay through attire and the accessories at that time. The attire carried a coding system in the traditional society that indicated social status or hierarchy and developed to become the visual identity of the Malays. The post traditional era however had new sets of metaphors and symbols, reflecting new meaning and identity of the contemporary Malay. Being a Malay woman nowadays carries a bigger challenge; to identify herself as Muslim, Malay and a modern person. This study is to determine the later sets of symbol in the modern society that reflects the modern identity of the Malaysian Malays via clothing. It will use symbolic-interaction method (in the branch of ethnography) to describe the metaphors or symbol used in the past and present of women's attire. Data will be gained from series of interviews, documentation and visual evidences. All the data will be analysed and written as findings to conclude this study.

Keywords: metaphors, symbol, Malay women, attire

a. Background

Introduction

The word identity derived from the Latin word of 'Idem' that carry out the meaning of 'the same' (Hoffstaedter, 2011). Identity also refers to the individual's sense of self in relation to others and to society as a wholeⁱ. Identity will become an important issue once it is confronted with crisis, especially when the stabilisation or certain characteristic is being questioned, uncertain or changed. Changes are due to many cultural elements such as social, knowledge, technology and economy.

In general, the Malay is an ethnic group that lives in the Malayⁱⁱ Archipelago within the South East Asia (Zain, 2003). They inhabit the archipelago of Southern Thailand, Malay Peninsula, Singapore, Brunei, West Kalimantan, Temiang, east coast of Northern Sumatera, Riau, Jambi and Palembang in Indonesia. (Tuanku Luckman Sinar Basyarsyah, 2002). Etimologically, the Malays are known through their way of living such as clothing, eating, speaking, action or body language. All of this are considered as the language and sense of the Malays (Yusuf, 2009, p. 2).

After the independence of Malaysia in 1957, the definition of Malay had been generalised in Article 160 (2) of the Malaysian constitution as 'those who were born as Malaysian, a Muslim, using the Malay language, following the custom of the Malays and lives in Malaysia or Singapore'ⁱⁱⁱ. (Muslim, 2011) The Article 160 (2) had combined all the different Malay groups under one, known as *Melayu* (Malay). Due to this, many had a mix understanding about Malay values and how they should portray themselves collectively. In general, the Malays have similar values which are the Malay language, Islam (the religion of Malay) and the Malay monarchy (which also representing the Malay custom). The Malay is the largest ethnic group in Peninsula Malaysia, comprises of 66.7% in total of Malaysian population^{iv}. In Malaysia, the Malays are automatically become a Muslim by law^v thus this situation had created a dilemma for identity especially among the urban Malays. This group of Malays, that later refers as the "new Malay" has different approach in dealing with their visual identity which is almost opposite from the 'traditional Malays'. The traditional Malays are still dominant in the rural areas throughout Malaysia, but migration to big cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru had changed their 'mentifact' and artefact within the Malay concept, resulting a 'rebranding' in the Malay identity (Yusuf, 2009, p. 41).

A woman in Malay society (still in practise) is the mother of their children and also wife. Example of a common stereotype phrase dedicated to women is, "a woman should be in the kitchen no matter how high they had learnt." This reflects an example on how the Malay society depicts their woman should be in a family/ society. In the older days, young women in the Malay society are trained to become a good housewife and seldom get the chance to further their studies. They normally get married at a young age. As a symbol of a decent Malay, their way of dressing becomes very dominant in the eye of the society. Being a Malay and Islam made them carry a heavier duty as to uphold their identity as a good Muslim too.

Traditional attires such as *baju kurung*^{vi} and *baju kebaya*^{vii} (refer image 3 & 4) are some examples of decent clothing that reflect the Malay identity as a Muslim. The elements in these traditional clothing reflects the symbol of decent women such as, by covering the entire body except their face and hands, which are also part of the

teachings in Islam. The word *baju kurung* itself symbolised the meaning of “kurung” which is ‘to bracket’ or hide the body from others to see. In the past, the *sarong* (long skirt) is made to ankle length, so that the feet of unmarried maiden can be seen by their future husband. According to the Malays, they believe that pink heels symbolises a virgin.

Besides that, the way they wear a sarong also signifies their marital status, whether they are single or married. A traditional Malay sarong comprises of three main parts (refer image 1). The sarong itself becomes an indication or marital status among women and it can only be found in the traditional way of Malay clothing. Wearing the ‘head’ motif at the back means, she is married, wearing it at the side signify a widow and wearing it in front shows that the wearer is still single/ virgin. A sarong also used as head covering and to carry a baby. Some researchers said that the ‘head’ in the sarong motif representing the symbol of a mother for being the main individual in raising her children. The whole concept of the traditional Malay clothing is an evidence of acculturation between the religion of Islam and the Malay culture which later be visually translated as the Malay identity (besides language and custom).

b. Argument

The improving of Malay economy as the outcome of the New Economic Plan (NEP) had caused mass migration of Malays to urban areas, for betterment of economy. Being away from their ‘roots’ far from the villages and mixing around with a multi-ethnic environment eventually made them developed a new culture instead (Yusuf, 2009). Changes in idea/notion and action amongst Malays had also changed their appreciation on cultural objects. The change on cultural objects indicates the enculturation process had taken place in the society. The adaptation of cultural objects, (which in this study-clothing) is very significant to be examined since it reflects the internal faith and values among the Malays. The survival of Malay elements lies in the hands of the urban Malays which numbers are growing, due to the expansion of traditional villages into towns.

Attire reflects similarities of certain ethnic group and its uniqueness. Continuous changes however may eventually erode the ethnic identity. During the traditional era, Malays can be easily be recognised through their visual appearance such as clothing (apart from typical Malay face/skin features), but when they came into contact under the British occupation (1824-1957) during the colonial era, the traditional attires had been westernised especially by those who were living in major towns. Ultimately, on the 21st century, globalisation had forced the Malay culture to compete with other popular cultures throughout the world. Any culture that is unable to adapt will eventually replaced with more popular ones across the globe. With the introduction of internet, foreign cultures are no longer a stranger to the Malays, as they are given options to choose whatever culture they like to be adapted with their lives.

The current Malays are facing demolishing of identity and values in the areas of emotion, action and artefacts. Identity of the Malays becoming more and more ‘globalised’ and the world’s hegemony in fashion trend had made the Malays’ attire no longer unique but rather similar to others. Traditional symbols, metaphor or meanings are no longer significant to the modern Malay society, as it does not bring any meaning to the society. Pragmatism changed the peoples’ view towards

traditionalism; most prefer to be practical rather than sentimental. This study is to look into the changes among the ‘new Malays’ in Malaysia, targeted to those who live in major towns in the Klang valley (Kuala Lumpur and its vicinity).

In summary, the research statements can be summarised as below:

- a) Changes of values within urban Malays had caused modification of identity among Malay via clothing.
- b) Globalisation had demolished the intrinsic meaning in Malay attire such as symbol, metaphor and values which are the root of Malay artefacts (clothing).

c. Method and Analysis

Since this study covers the issues of social anthropology such as identity, values and cultural objects, qualitative method will be used to rectify the above-mentioned research statements. The method used is symbolic-interaction which can describe the relation between symbols and cultural object that reflect the identity of the Malays. Howard Backer in his book entitled *Art Worlds* (Saul, 1984) suggested that the segments in the art world should be seen from the perspective of sociology. The approach suggested that the art world should be analysed like an industrial product, meaning that it has to analyse in the aspect of form and function but not forgetting the aesthetics aspects during the process.

Theory related in defining “identity” such as “the labelling theory” by Becker (1963) is being used to understand the fundamental scenario among the Malays in Malaysia; since according to him, ‘labelling’ will enhance ones identity. (in George Ritzer, 2001, p. 441) In order to find the answers to the above-mentioned research statements, purposive sampling was used via interview as primary data, supported by text and visual documents. The informants (sample) will be answering matters related to the issues of Malay identity pertaining to the object of clothing. Respondents will be selected from modern Malays whom parents are/were from traditional villages (*kampung*). This is to make certain that, they are able to tell the changes or compare between the past and present. Respondents are those from the ‘stake holders’ such as designers, researchers/ writer (professionals), fashion students and end users. Observation using digital images or videos will be used as data that will support the claims made by the interviewers. List of the respondent groups are stated in the following table:

TABLE 1: Category of respondents

Category	Number of respondents taken for this study	Location
Researchers/ writers on Malay culture/ fashion lecturers	5	Kuala Lumpur
Malay fashion/ costume designers	2	Kuala Lumpur, Selangor
End users: professionals-	4	Kuala Lumpur

art related respondents		
Others: fashion students	4	Shah Alam, Kota Bahru, Seremban.

TABLE 2: Category of areas discussed

Category	Discussion:
Identity of a Malay woman	Malay in values or idea (mentifact), action and cultural object.
Metaphors or symbol in contemporary clothing among the Malay women: if any. (currently: the past 10 years)	Metaphor/ symbols related to current way of clothing Year:2000-2012
Symbols/ metaphor that they knew from the past	Symbols/ metaphor taught to them through generation(s)

d. Findings

Through series of interview among the respondents, the data indicated vast changes in the Malay livelihoods, contributed by massive improvement in information and transportation systems. Technology gave them easier access to fashion trends outside Malaysia with wider interaction to other cultures across the globe. Cheaper and improved transportation facilities had given them the chance of having actual experiences with other countries; (via holiday, staying abroad) or through working in other towns/ cities across Malaysia. In regional scale, cultural transformation was materialised through trade agreements such as AFTA, ASEAN, APEC, and others. Changes in daily activities had changed the way they look at things such as clothing. 'McDonaldization'^{viii} had taken away the uniqueness of Malay identity and changed the cultural object such as clothing into something alike to anywhere else around the world. Identity is no longer determined by ones ethnic group or through what they wear but more on the elements of what they think (idea) and how they will look collectively in a global society.

Modern metaphors and symbols had been taken away from the traditional concept, resulted loss of the Malay visual identity. But fortunately, it does not mean that they had forgotten their roots. Almost all respondent mentioned that they understand their custom very well, which connects them with the past. Most of them still wear the traditional attire during Islamic celebrations or functions such as *Eid Mubarak* (Aidil Fitri), *Eid Adha* (Aidil Adha) weddings, funeral or formal government occasions to reveal their Malay identity via clothing. But apart from that, it carries no social code or traditional meaning that refers to one's status or hierarchy in the society.

Modern metaphors and symbol in the contemporary society depict the followings findings:

- Habitual strategy: wearing a T-shirt stating a place meant “I had been here”. It also symbolises their rank in certain group/ community that they are able to be there. This theory is mentioned by *Pierre Bourdieu* in describing power through habitual strategy- a contemporary way to differentiate oneself in a community. (George Ritzer, 2001)
- In the past, the way someone wears a ‘sarong’ or placement of flower on the hair of a woman will give a clue about her marital status (refer image 2), but nowadays, marital status is quite hard to tell. A global symbol of a ring is mostly worn on the ‘ring finger’ to signify one is married or engaged. Most Malays still practices, wearing a ring on the left hand signifies that one is engaged, whereby wearing it on the right hand (ring finger) symbolises that one is married. Wearing henna on the bride’s hand is still largely being practice until today but with more intricate decoration on hands compared to just covering the nails the past. Most motifs are meant to ‘beautify’ the bride rather than ‘signify’ anything in the current practise.
- As for the younger generations (teenagers), some were asked to wear sarong or traditional attire during visiting their relatives in the villagers, so they will look decent through the eyes of the family/ community. Many of them mentioned, rather than that, no other reason or meaning was explained. To them, wearing traditional attire is just to respect their family’s request, but not to portray who they are as individual or Malay. (refer image 5)
- Modern symbols in contemporary attire like t-shirt prints, shows what they belief in, what they support (politically, sport’s team, etc), their interest (art, music), their status (single, alone, availability) that signifies their personality. Most of it shown in a form of visual such as writings, symbol of motifs on printed materials, such as t-shirt. Mostly has no relation with traditional symbols or meanings.
- Colours no longer reflect hierarchy in the modern society, but during certain formal occasions that involve the Malay ruler (Sultan or the king/ *Agong*), certain dress code and forbidden colours are always mentioned. Until now, colours like yellow and ivory white are forbidden during court functions as they are reserved only for the Malay ruler (Sultan)

e. Conclusion

The findings showed that there are different ways in perceiving life in the modern society which had changed the cultural object intrinsically. Result from the interviews showed that, the newer generations however still understand and respect their custom/religion very well, but it is not a must to show it off through clothing. Globalisation had won the hegemony in fashion compared to the traditional attires, resulting similarity in fashion and lessens their identity as an ethnic. But generally, they still have some essence of Malay notion when dressing up themselves especially among women; whereby wearing something too exposed is still an unpopular scene in general. Wearing something that covers the whole body including the hair is commonly seen among Malays, but the attire reflect them more as a Muslim rather than being seen as Malay (refer image 6). This is also due to the process of McDonaldization in the Islamic fashion scene that had somehow won the hegemony to most Malay women. Current fashion however does not have the richness of symbols and metaphors as seen in the Malay culture. Being a Malay is no longer determined by the appearance but more importantly in what they belief in

(notion/idea) collectively. Unfortunately, attire is no longer important as it no longer important or a must to show your racial identity; but the good thing is, it will always be remembered and used during Malay-related occasions until today.

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Source: <http://sociology.about.com/od/Works/a/McDonaldization-of-Society.htm>

<http://pmr.penerangan.gov.my/index.php/maklumat-kenegaraan/296-perlembagaan-malaysia.html>

Image 2: http://www.flickr.com/photos/khai_lomo/3458088313/ (1.5.13)

Image 2: <http://eliefibresz.blogspot.com/2011/02/selamat-tinggal-sanggul-bunga.html> (1.5.13)

Image 3: <http://www.glogster.com/thiirahatl/baju-kurung-teluk-belanga> (10.4.13)

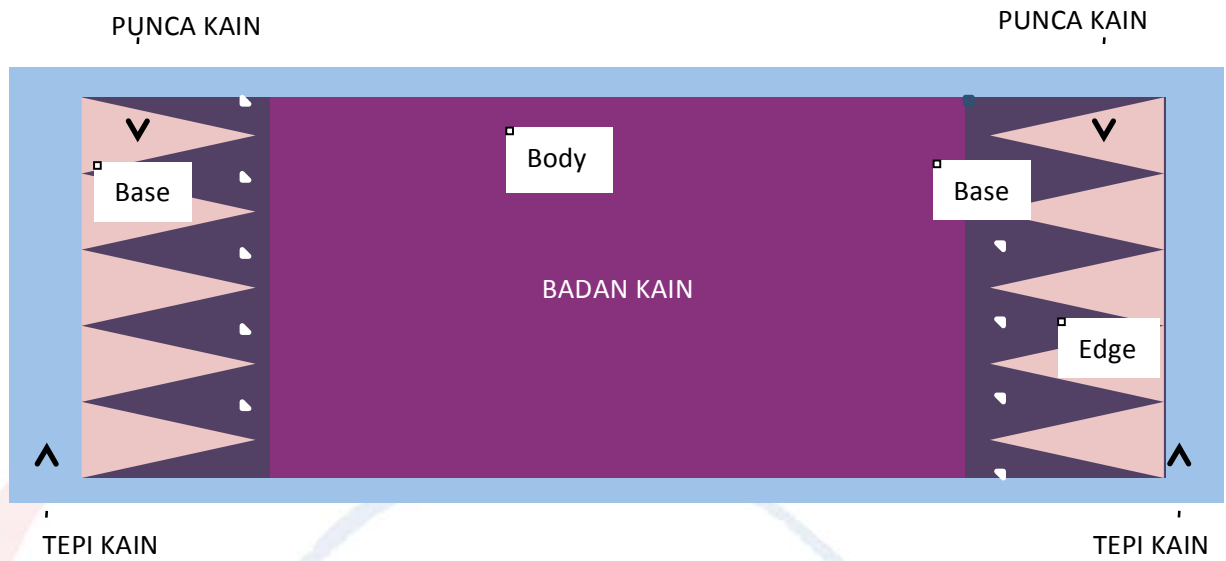
Image 4: <http://melakamajujaya.webs.com/pakaian.htm>. (10.4.13)

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List of Images

Image 1: The structure of a typical motif placement in Malay textiles found in sarong such as batik and *tenun* (woven) materials.: A: *Kain panjang* (long cloth), B: Kain sarong (*batik or songket sarong*)

A. *Kain panjang* structure



B: Structure for a typical Malay sarong

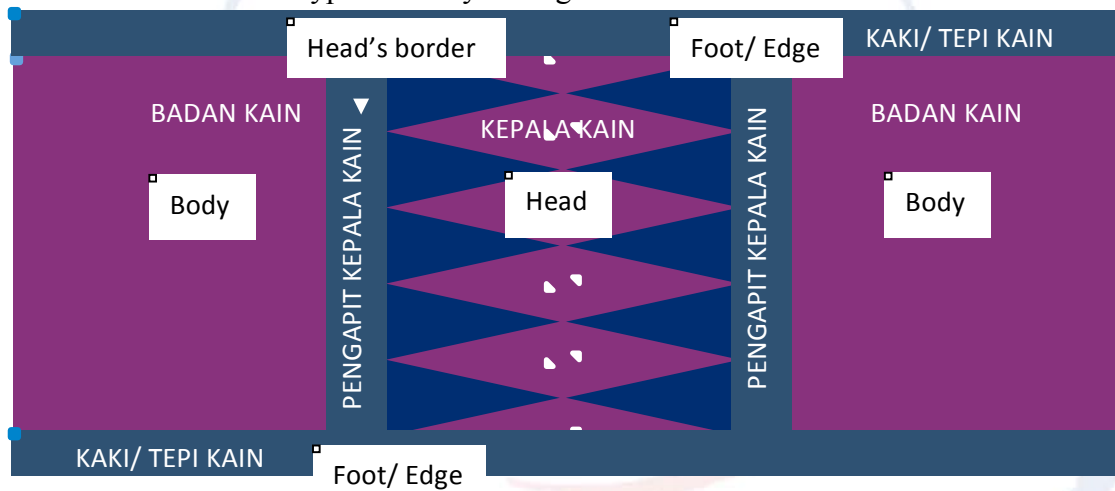


Image 2: Meaning of *WUJUH S HAH*oun in the past Malay society

		
A virgin: bun is placed	Widow: bun is placed	Married: either one or two

above the neck.	above the neck with a flower on the left side	buns, placed loosely on the neck. Flower is optional, but normally placed below the bun. (courtesy: Yustika Yusuf)
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Image 3: *Baju kurung teluk belanga* with *songket*



Image 4: *Baju kebaya*



Image 5: Wearing traditional attire for youth during formal function is more toward respecting the elders.



Image 6: Common sight of today's Malay teenagers. Wearing blouse and pants are more practical to them compared to the traditional Malay attires. Covering their body does not have to be traditional attire but can also be in modern fashion. Visual identity as a Muslim is more important than highlighting their race.

Footnote:

ⁱ Ewick and Silbey, *The Common Place of Law*: see Engel and Mungler, *Rights of Inclusion*

ⁱⁱ Gugusan Kepulauan Melayu sebagai “rantau Asia Tenggara yang hampir-hampir berbentuk segi tiga, bermula di Pulau Nikobar di Timur Laut ke Pulau Solomon di Tenggara, dan dari Luzon di Utara ke Rotti dekat pulau Timor di Selatan”. Kawasan yang luas itu dibahaginya kepada lima kumpulan: Kepulauan Indo-Malaya, Kepulauan Timor, Kepulauan Maluku dan Kepulauan Papua (Zain, 2003)

ⁱⁱⁱ Article 160(2) in Malaysian constitution stated that, “The Malays must be Muslim, Malaysian citizens who were born in Malaysia, using the Malay language, following the Malay custom and live in Malaysia or Singapore”. Source: *Jabatan Penerangan Malaysia*. (12.3.12)

^{iv} "Malays are the dominant ethnic, 66.7 percent, followed by the Chinese 24.6 percent and Indians. 7.4 percent.
Source: http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2010&dt=0122&sec=Dalam_Negeri&pg=dn_07.htm#ixzz2MiYAaaVK © Utusan Melayu (M) Bhd (22.1.10)

^v Refer Article 160 (2) Malaysia constitution

^{vi} *Baju kurung*: The Malay women started to wear the *baju kurung* in the 19th century. The attire comprises of a tunic and a sarong, made by various materials such as batik or *tenun* (woven textiles). It is also known as *Baju kurung teluk belanga* (Shawal, 1994).

^{vii} *Baju kebaya*: *Kebaya* is famous among the traditional women since the 1800, was said influenced by the Portuguese and the merchants from the Middle East during the rise of Malacca. It comprises of a kimono-like tunic with opening on the front which always worn with brooches as fasteners. It is also accompanied with sarong made from batik or *songket* and also head coverings like shawl made from sarong batik. (Shawal, 1994)

^{viii} *George Ritzer* takes the central elements of Max Weber’s work and expands and updates them, producing an analysis of the impact of structural change on human interaction and identity. It is not about McDonald’s itself, but rather how the principles of the fast food industry have come to dominate all parts of American society and the rest of the world. Source: <http://sociology.about.com/od/Works/a/McDonaldization-of-Society.htm> (12.3.12)

