

Threads of Identity, The Cultural Tapestry of the Jawi Peranakan Kebaya

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ABSTRACT

The Jawi Peranakan is an exemplary instance of the exchange of culture and mixed heritage in Southeast Asia. Developed from the union of Tamil Muslim merchant groups known as the Chulias and the indigenous Malaya, the culture became enriched by the influence of Indian, Malayan, and Islamic culture during the 17th and 18th centuries. One of the salient features of the Jawi Peranakan heritage is the kebaya. Beyond being a garment, the kebaya reflects the history, the social status, and the religion of the community. Originally worn by the indigenous Malaya over the sarong, the kebaya has evolved over the centuries, adapting the various influences from multiple cultures. As the Chulias integrated into local populations, the garment adapted to the ideals of Islam's concept of modesty while effortlessly incorporating the artistic elements of Malaya fashion and the expertise from the fabric arts of India. The kebaya's adaptation reflects the fluid nature of diasporan identity, where tradition blends seamlessly into adaptation. Jewelry like the kerongsang underscores the mixed influences common to the culture known as the Jawi Peranakan legacy. This analysis is concerned with the kebaya's adaptation, its symbolic nature of the mixing of culture, and its preservation of the lively culture. By understanding its history and its contemporary applicability, one can find the essence of the exchange of culture, the building of identity, and the strength of the persistence of tradition. In the kebaya, one can find the lasting influence of the exchange of culture and the perseverance of the distinctive legacy by the Jawi Peranakan towards the multi-cultural fabric of the nation.

Keywords: Jawi Peranakan, kebaya, cultural identity, hybridity, intercultural interaction, Islamic modesty, Malay aesthetics

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Jawi Peranakan populace of Southeast Asia is the embodiment of the richness of the interactions and mixed identities of the region. This unique populace arose during the 17th and 18th centuries from the union of Tamil Muslim merchant men, known as the Chulias, and indigenous Malay women, bringing together the mixtures of Indian, Malay, and Islam. One of the main identifiers for this populace is the kebaya, the traditional dress, which is not only clothing—the kebaya is also symbolic of their historical heritage, indicative of their social standing, and representative of their religion. In analyzing the history of the kebaya through the history of the Jawi Peranakan populace, this analysis uncovers the design elements and the general process of acculturation and highlights the garment's contribution towards the formation of communal identity for the populace of contemporary Malaysia. The kebaya is the embodiment of the significant influence of the interactions across cultures and the commitment by the Jawi Peranakan populace towards holding onto their unique identity. This attire is not only saturated with the culture, but also mirrors the social standing, echoing the prosperity and gracefulness of the jawi Peranakan women dressing thus. The workmanship and creativity also reflect the strong history of perseverance and transformation. The richness in color, the detailed designs, and the luxuriant fabric also reflect the expertise of the populace reconciling their mixed culture against the mixed culture backdrop of the country, the country of Malaysia. Complementary ornaments like the kerongsang also reinforce the mix of the culture constituting the jawi Peranakan identity.

Evolved from the very beginning as the flowing, elongated blouse over the sarong, the kebaya has seen tremendous changes over the centuries, echoing the complex culture interactions constituting the jawi Peranakan identity. As the Chulias adapted into the local populace, the dress also adapted towards conformity towards the Islamic ideals about restraint from dress combined with the aesthetics from the Malaya and the craftsmanship from the Indians. The study is about the history of the jawi kebaya Peranakan, the detailed workmanship and the use as icon for the mix of culture. It is the classic identifier for the mixed identity populace navigating the complexity of identity during contemporary times. This kebaya is reflective of the strong influence from the interactions from the culture and the jawi Peranakan populace's perseverance for the preservation of their unique culture against the country's larger culture. In studying the historical context and the contemporary context for the kebaya, one has the deeper understanding for the culture mixing, identity formation, and the longevity for the practice of tradition for the jawi populace Peranakan.

The Southeast Asian Jawi Peranakan people are such a strong case of cultural hybridity, the product of intermarriage between Tamil Muslim merchants, the Chulias, and Malay women in the 17th and 18th centuries. The syncretism of Indian, Malay, and Islamic cultures produced a distinctive identity, deeply rooted in their traditions, material culture, and communal practices. The most recognizable sign of this identity is the kebaya—a garment that moves beyond the level of fashion to represent

cultural heritage, social status, and religious values. This study looks into the kebaya as a living cultural artifact of identity, tracing its evolution in the Jawi Peranakan community and its application as a reflection of general historical trends of intercultural exchange and adaptation. In its form, craftsmanship, and symbolism, this study aims to illustrate the manner in which the kebaya represents the delicate balance between tradition and change. The blending of Islamic modesty with Malay sensibilities and Indian textile artistry illustrates the manner in which the Jawi Peranakan community reconciled their double heritage while maintaining a unique cultural identity.

Historically, this book traces how the kebaya developed over the centuries—initially from indigenous Malay fashion to its refinement under Indian textile innovations and Islamic designs. It also examines the socio-political significance of the clothes in present-day Malaysia, where cultural identity remains a negotiated site of contest in a multi-ethnic country. Situating the kebaya within the broader context of identity and material culture, this book highlights how clothing is a witness to the survival and resourcefulness of diasporic communities.

Studies of hybrid identities in Southeast Asia have been particularly strong in recent years, and this is true in the context of diasporic groups like the Jawi Peranakan, Chinese Peranakan, and Arab Peranakan. These groups, which have been formed through intercultural marriages and continued economic, social, and religious exchange, are quintessential examples of the complexities of cultural synthesis. Situating the Jawi Peranakan kebaya within this broader context provides a comparative framework through which identity negotiation, material culture, and transregional influences can be examined.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Comparative Analysis of Peranakan Communities

Each of the Jawi Peranakan, Chinese Peranakan (Baba-Nyonya), and Arab Peranakan populations shares similar dynamics of cultural hybridity but takes on distinctive expressions of identity based on ancestral heritage, religious faith, and historical situation. Studies of the Chinese Peranakan (Tan, 1988; Wee, 2011) highlight syncretism between Chinese Confucian practice and Malay aesthetic and linguistic convention, most obviously seen in dress, food, and housing style. As with the Jawi Peranakan kebaya, the Nyonya kebaya also became the icon of feminine identity, embroidered elaborately with motifs symbolizing Chinese iconography and Malay batik pattern (Khoo, 1996). Similarly, the Arab Peranakan community (Aljunied, 2009) mediated their dual Arab-Malay heritage by syncretizing Islamic practice with pre-Muslim Southeast Asian custom, maintaining distinctive dress preferences while adopting local cultural convention.

While all of these communities share cultural hybridity, the Jawi Peranakan's position within the Islamic tradition determined their adoption of material culture. Unlike the more ornate and frequently transparent Nyonya kebaya, the Jawi Peranakan kebaya accommodated Islamic modesty regulations while maintaining the inventiveness of Indian textile design (Noor & Khoo, 2013). This interplay of religion, fashion, and

identity is only one example of a broader historical trend in which diasporic communities selectively borrowed from multiple traditions in the act of constructing coherent, if fluid, cultural identities.

2.2 Theoretical Models of Hybridity and Cultural Adaptation

Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity provides a critical theory for explaining how the Jawi Peranakan negotiated their double heritage. Hybridity theory posits that cultural identity is not essential but is rather constantly negotiated in interactions between dominant and subordinate cultures. In colonial and postcolonial Southeast Asia, hybridity manifests as a space of resistance and accommodation, where groups like the Jawi Peranakan actively reworked their cultural forms under shifting socio-political conditions (Young, 1995). The kebaya, in this sense, is a material form of hybridity—a garment that articulates indigenous Malay sensibilities and South Indian traditions of textile craftsmanship.

Cultural adaptation models (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936; Berry, 1997) also locate processes of how Peranakan societies integrated, assimilated, or maintained cultural uniqueness in context. Berry's acculturation model, for example, holds that diaspora communities can embrace host culture features and maintain essential features of the home culture. For the Jawi Peranakan, this was seen in their dress, where the kebaya kept the Malay shape but employed Indian material and embroidery techniques, evidence of an ongoing negotiation between integration and cultural preservation (Reid, 2001).

2.3 Material Culture and Socio-Political Significance of the Kebaya

Material culture studies (Miller, 1987; Tilley, 2006) provide insightful views of how mundane items, such as dress, function as symbols of identity, status, and affiliation in society. Kebaya, as the Jawi Peranakan woman wears it, is not just clothing but a marker of social location and cultural affiliation. Studies of Southeast Asian dress cultures (Maxwell, 2003; Van der Putten, 2018) demonstrate how dress is often a site of cultural negotiation, where textiles, motifs, and tailoring conventions carry multiple messages about ancestry, social status, and religious affiliation.

Today, the kebaya remains a problematic signifier within debates over national identity and multiculturalism in Malaysia. State agendas for a collective national identity commonly enlist traditional clothing as a platform for the fashioning of ethnic solidarity (Shamsul, 1996). However, as researchers like Milner (2008) and Hussin (2016) argue, such attempts often skirt the intricate histories of hybrid societies like the Jawi Peranakan. The kebaya, in other words, is not just an artifact of history but an ongoing archive of cultural hybridity's survival within socio-political change.

By situating the Jawi Peranakan kebaya within a comparative framework of Peranakan identities and bringing to the fore theories of hybridity and cultural adaptation, this literature review brings to the fore the on-going processes through which material culture brokering and dictates diasporic identity. As a fashion of negotiation between Indian, Malay, and Islamic sources, the kebaya represents the broader historical processes of exchange and adaptation that are the hallmark of

Southeast Asia's multicultural setting. Additional work might be able to explore further how fashion adaptations of the kebaya in the modern period continue to be reworked in the context of globalization and changing cultural discourses.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study is multidisciplinary in scope, combining historical study, textual analysis, and ethnographic study in analyzing the evolution of the kebaya among the Jawi Peranakan people. Through the fusion of these approaches, the study seeks to produce a rich appreciation of the way the kebaya is a cultural marker of identity and hybridity in Southeast Asia. To build a solid historical background, the study draws on primary and secondary sources: Books And Archival Documents: Documents, photographs, and colonial documents in archives such as the National Archives of Malaysia and the National Library of Singapore are examined to follow the historical development of the kebaya.

Oral Testimonies: Accounts of elderly Jawi Peranakan community members and textile craftsmen provide first-hand data on the social and cultural significance of the kebaya over the generations. Material Culture Analysis: Physical observation of kebaya dresses in museum collections, such as the Peranakan Museum in Singapore and Muzium Negara in Malaysia, allows for evaluation of change in design, fabric choice, and workmanship skills.

4.0 Cultural Integration and Strategic Alliances: The Role of Chulia Merchants and Intermarriage in Southeast Asia's Maritime Trade, 1650-1800"

The Chulias, being southeast Indians, were one of the thriving business circles from the year 1650 through the year 1800 for the continent of Southeast Asia. Besides business, their influence permeated the culture and the fabric of the society upon which they arrived. One part of their being absorbed into the culture of the lands upon which they traveled is their intermarriage with local ladies, not only solidifying their presence during the diaspora, but also heavily contributing towards the formation of the culture of the lands. The Chulias were from the town named Chulamandalam, where the town combined the culture from the Arabs and the Muslims and the local culture from the Tamils (Arasaratnam, 1996).

By the 17th century, they had established themselves as key players in the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean, operating within a network that spanned from India to Southeast Asia. Their trade ranged from textiles, spices, and tin to ivory and elephants, connecting the economies of Tamil Nadu with strategic Southeast Asian port cities such as Aceh, Kedah, and Perak. Within this expansive trading network, the Chulias were the typical examples of merchant diaspora. Commercial success depended upon adaptability and the development of solid relations in foreign land. Not only did commercial expertise pave the way for assimilation within Southeast Asian societies but such sociocultural practices as marrying a local woman played a very important role as well. (Arasaratnam, 1996)

The intermarriage of Chulias with local women was one of the strategic and cultural ways that ensured their acceptance and influence in Southeast Asian societies. This marriage institution created familial and economic bonds that facilitated smoother

trade, fostering trust within local communities. Marriage into locals allowed Chulia merchants to solidify alliances with indigenous leaders, gaining access to local markets and resources. In Malay states like Kedah and Perak, where the Chulias often served as royal merchants, intermarriage was a conduit for upward mobility. The children of these unions often became cultural intermediaries, inheriting the linguistic and cultural fluency needed to navigate both Tamil Muslim and local Southeast Asian traditions. This hybrid identity enabled the Chulias to maintain their commercial interests while being deeply integrated into local social hierarchies. (Arasaratnam, 1996)

The intermarriage between the Chulia merchants and the women from the locality brought on significant cultural exchange and a syncretic tradition of its own. These marriages were also a contributing factor toward the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, as the Chulias often introduced their religious practices to the local partners and communities. At the same time, they adopted the local customs, which allowed them to blend seamlessly into the societies they became a part of. The resulting plural societies represented a mix of the Tamil Muslim and Southeast Asian cultures, reflected in their food, dress, and religious observances. Such hybrid societies became centers of multicultural interaction, facilitating not only trade but also the exchange of ideas, technologies, and traditions. (Arasaratnam, 1996) Despite the benefits of intermarriage, the Chulias faced challenges, particularly from European colonial powers like the Dutch, who sought to dominate regional trade. However, the strong familial and social networks established through intermarriage provided the Chulias with resilience. When colonial policies restricted their activities, their local ties enabled them to adapt, often finding alternative trade routes or relocating to emerging hubs like Penang. The tradition of Chulia merchants and their marriages with local women survives today's cultural matrix of Southeast Asia. (Arasaratnam, 1996)

Penang, Aceh, Kedah-these are among the cities which still carry that imprint, from their architecture to their linguistic borrowings. The offspring resulting from these marriages continued to feature both in the region's cultural as well as economic panoramas. The intermarriage of the Chulias with the local women in Southeast Asia was not only a personal decision but also a strategic and cultural mechanism for their integration into foreign societies and the perpetuation of their trade networks. The integration of Tamil Muslim merchants, known as Chulias, with local Malay communities has not only fortified their diaspora but also enriched Southeast Asia's cultural tapestry. By merging their Tamil Muslim heritage with indigenous customs, the Chulias have left a lasting legacy, exemplifying the profound impact of intercultural exchange. In Malaysia, this group is recognized as part of the Malay ethnic community, referred to as Jawi Peranakan. (Arasaratnam, 1996)

4.1 The History and Legacy of the Jawi Peranakan Community in Penang

The Jawi Peranakan is one of the significant phases in the history of the Malayan Peninsula and the greater Malayan Archipelago. Having originated from the intermarriages between the local Malay ladies and the Muslim Indians, Arabs, and beyond, the populace constituted a distinctive identity by fusing Islamic beliefs and

those from the local customs. This strength and ability have etched their impact upon the territory's political, economic, and culture. Their establishment coincided with the British colonial era when Penang was developed as a free port in 1786, attracting diverse immigrant groups. The Jawi Peranakan quickly became integral to the local society, distinguished by their cosmopolitan outlook and socioeconomic mobility (Merican, 2021) As Penang evolved into a major trading hub, the Jawi Peranakan leveraged its strategic location to establish themselves as influential traders and entrepreneurs. They contributed significantly to the island's economy, engaging in local and international trade networks. Their money and power also helped build important places like the Kapitan Keling Mosque. This shows how crucial they were to Penang's economy and culture (Merican, 2021)

Their engagement in journalism and education fostered a modern Malay-Muslim consciousness and contributed to the broader narrative of Malay nationalism. While their distinct identity has become less prominent over time, the imprint of their contributions remains visible in Penang's historical and cultural heritage (Merican, 2021). In conclusion, the Jawi Peranakan community exemplifies a remarkable synthesis of cultural identities and resilience in the face of socio-political changes. Their ability to adapt while contributing meaningfully to society underscores their enduring relevance in the history of Penang and the Malay Archipelago.

"The Jawi Peranakan played their part in shaping culture and mental lives beyond commerce, especially through journalism and publishing. They were responsible for the advancement of modern Islamic thought, education, and societal transformation by patronizing papers like the *Jawi Peranakan* (started in 1876), the very first Malay-language paper in the country. In their writing, the sense of Malay nationhood and solidarity were given expression and traditional Malaya culture mixed and combined with the latest European thoughts, especially in Penang, the capital city, where the city became the seat for mental debates. (Merican, 2021)

The ability to communicate in two languages by the Jawi Peranakan helped them act as the bridge between the two cultures and champion progress. With the rise of increased Chinese and Indians immigration during the 20th century, their prominence began declining from business and various other domains. To ensure their politico social presence, many Jawi Peranakan individuals merged their identity into the general Malaya identity, conforming to the pro- Malaya policies adopted by the British for education and political rule. Even after this transition, their contribution remains noteworthy, for not only did they assist the economic progress of Penang, but also helped form the contemporary Malaya identity, initiate discussions about culture, politics, and religion, and highlight the need for education and the ability for analytical thoughts for the Malaya-Muslim populace. (Merican, 2021). Other than cultural heritage, the Jawi Peranakan people have also made considerable contributions to Southeast Asian economic, literary, and political life. Further evidence in support of this fact is offered through some certain examples that indicate their lasting legacy: Peranakan Jawi merchants traditionally held key positions within maritime trade networks, particularly in Penang, Malacca, and Singapore, where they opened spice, textile, and jewel shops (Reid, 2001). Most of

these businesses became the forbears of contemporary commercial centers. Syed Mohamed Alsagoff is a good example of such an individual, that is, a famous 19th-century Jawi Peranakan businessman who pioneered regional trade and developed important business ventures in shipping and agriculture (Aljunied, 2009). The Peranakan Jawi community was also engaged in publishing in the Malay language. The "Jawi Peranakan" newspaper (1876– 1895) was one of the earliest Malay-language newspapers, which advocated education and social reform (Milner, 2008). Writers like Abdullah Munshi, the long-recognized father of modern Malay literature, contributed to standardizing Malay prose and recording Southeast Asian colonial histories (Barnard, 2014).

The majority of Jawi Peranakan leaders were active in politics and education, particularly in British Malaya, where they demanded greater Malay involvement in colonial administration (Shamsul, 1996). Individuals like Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi were the vanguard of Islamic reformist movements, who promoted education and gender equality in Malay-Muslim society. His journal "Al-Imam" (1906–1908) disseminated progressive readings of Islam and modernist thought (Roff, 1970). Through the synthesis of these contemporary discoveries and particular case studies, this study presents a fuller picture of the evolution of the kebaya's role and the overall contribution of the Jawi Peranakan community to society (Subrahmanyam, 1996).

4.2 The Identity and Socio-Cultural Formation of Jawi Peranakan: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective

The Jawi Peranakan community—a historic community of relatively great significance in Penang and northern Malaysia—is a unique blend, first and foremost, of Indian, Malay, and Arab influences. This essay will attempt to explore the issue of identity formation through historical intermarriages, cultural adaptations, and their eventual assimilation into Malay society. The analysis shall use two very important studies by Omar Bin Yusoff (2005) and Noriah Mohamed (2016) for a wide understanding of the cultural and linguistic hybridity within this community. The term "Jawi Peranakan" fuses the words Jawi, referring to Malay Muslims and Islamic practices, and Peranakan, a term referring to descendants of intermarriages between foreigners and local women (Norah, 2016). The origins of the Jawi Peranakan community can be traced back to Indian Muslim traders, predominantly from South India, who settled in the Malay Peninsula during the 17th and 18th centuries. There is also another group of people, formed when these traders married Malay women, giving birth to a hybrid community comprising both Indian and Malay elements (Omar, 2005). The Jawi Peranakan broadened as some of these cha-chas were of Arab, Bengali, and Afghan ancestry but were bound by a common Islamic faith and the embrace of Malay etiquette. Kapitan Keling himself married a local Malay woman; he became a model for integration into the Malay socio-cultural fabric through intermarriage, which underscored the significance of such a mechanism in establishing cultural legitimacy and cohesion with the majority group (Omar, 2005).

The identity of the Jawi Peranakan community is a fusion of cultural practices from both their Indian and Malay ancestry. Malay marriage customs, dietary preferences, and integration in language. Although some Indian customs had been maintained,

including kinship terms and food practices, the community adopted the Penang Malay dialect as their main language. Over generations, Tamil and other ancestral languages diminished in use, reflecting a shift towards a stronger Malay identity (Noriah, 2016). The community's hybrid nature is also reflected in the realm of their religiosity: Islam acts as a cornering stone for their identity, and hence it puts them in common grounds with the Malay majority while making them distinctive from other communities within the Indian diaspora. Religion reinforced their socio-cultural assimilation further; the Jawi Peranakan families emphasized Malay Islamic rather than Indian norms.

This slow absorption of the Jawi Peranakan into the wider Malay community has been both a boon and a complication. While this opened doors to social mobility and acceptance in Malaysia's plural society, the process also blunted the edges of their hybrid identity. The community, for example, began to adopt the material culture of the wider Malay communities such as their traditional dress and food, which for the most part, replaced their Indian counterparts (Omar, 2005; Noriah, 2016). Trends are similar on the linguistic analysis front as well. The Penang Malay dialect spoken by the Jawi Peranakan community exhibits remnants of Tamil and Arabic influences. In contrast, the younger members of the said group will not necessarily know their ancestral languages and overwhelmingly identify "Malay" (Noriah, 2016). This is indicative of the overall predicament of reconciling conformity to the dominant culture and the preservation of the mixed identity. The Jawi Peranakan is the paradigmatic figure for the complex relationship between the identity formation process, mixing culture, and political and societal adaptation. (Omar, 2005; Noriah, 2016). Having emerged from intermarriage and commerce, their identity is one where the mix is being adapted continuously through the addition one set upon the next. As the group becomes progressively integrated into the Malaya society, the collective is faced with the predicament of reconciling conformity and the preservation of their mixed identity. Experience of the Jawi Peranakan is pertinent for the study of the general implications for the understanding of identity and the culture of integration generally, including for the nation generally and the international context generally. (Omar, 2005; Noriah, 2016).

4.3 The Cultural Impact of Chulia Intermarriage: The Evolution of Jawi Peranakan Kebaya

"The Chulia Muslim merchants that resided on the Coromandel Coast influenced societies in Southeast Asia during the 17th and 18th centuries. This phenomenon has resulted in the blending of Chulia men with local women, serving as a means for cultural and economic assimilation. The most immediate and visible legacies of these unions are the development of women's dress, especially the kebaya worn by the Jawi Peranakan—a community born out of these intermarriages." In this case, the blending of Tamil Muslim culture with the Malay culture leads to the creation of a garment that symbolizes a hybrid identity resulting from intermarriages. As the merchants began settling in the Malay world from Aceh, Kedah, and Penang, a significant amount of cultural exchange began to take place. As Chulia men spent such a substantial amount of time in the local area, their intermarriage enabled them to develop family relations as well as economical ones, integrating them into the local

society. This culture synthesis was facilitated by women, as they serve as nurturers of culture.

They adopted the traditions of Chulias while influencing their Tamil Muslim spouses with the local way of life. The interaction in this way created a hybrid cultural identity that was most evident in language, religion, and dress code. As Watson Andaya (1996) mentions, intermarriages often brought about the adoption of Islamic practices, including dress codes, by local communities. Tamil Muslim influences brought rich textiles and embroidery into Southeast Asia, changing the sartorial landscape. Indian fabrics such as muslin, calico, and silk filtered into local markets through the Chulia merchants and were often given as gifts within marriage alliances (Watson Andaya, 1996).

The kebaya, a long blouse traditionally paired with a sarong, evolved dramatically under Chulia influence. This garment became synonymous with the Jawi Peranakan—locally known as a group of mixed Malay and Muslim Indian extraction—who used this garment to negotiate their hybrid status. Indeed, this adaptation had combined elements of Indian textiles, the Malay aesthetic sense, and Islamic modesty in its dressing style. The Chulias' prominence in the textile trade brought novel patterns, colors, and fabrics to the Malay world. Indian fabrics, celebrated for their quality and brilliance of color, became staples for the production of kebaya garments. For instance, the use of floral and paisley motifs, characteristic of Indian fabrics, further complicated the making of the kebaya. These fabrics also contained gold and silver threads, and the garment thus came to represent a badge of luxury and cosmopolitanism of the highest.

4.4 The Kebaya: A Cultural Synthesis of Identity, Tradition, and Heritage

The kebaya carries the connotation of being a highly cultural synthesis that is the outcome of Southeast Asia's remarkable resilience, making it much more than just a traditional garment. The kebaya, which is deeply ingrained in Malay culture, is a reflection of the history of the area, the changing character of its culture, and its ability to adjust to external influences. The Jawi Peranakan ladies, who are descended from marriages between Tamil Muslim traders and

Malay natives, wear kebayas that go beyond trend. It is a symbol of identification that connects the past and present by embodying tradition, religion, and the development of society. (Mansor, 2021). The historical development of the kebaya, its importance to Jawi Peranakan women, and its continued value in conserving cultural heritage are all examined in this essay.

Chulia intermarriages significantly influenced Islamic values in local dress culture, particularly through the adaptation of the kebaya. The high neckline, long sleeves, and loose fit of the kebaya reflect the fusion of Tamil Muslim and Malay clothing traditions, reinforcing Islamic modesty. The Jawi Peranakan women also strengthened their Islamic identity by adopting the tudung (headscarf). The kebaya symbolized cultural duality—melding Islamic sentiments with Malay practicality—while also serving as an indicator of social status and economic prosperity among Chulia merchants (Mansor, 2021).

These influences shaped the kebaya into a garment that met Islamic standards of modesty while maintaining its cultural roots (Ahmad & Tajuddin, 2022). Over time, it evolved into a versatile attire, adapting to regional nuances and reflecting social changes. In this evolution, the Chulia traders played an important role—they were Tamil Muslims who traded across Southeast Asia. Indeed, they brought high-quality textiles and intricate designs that Malay artisans absorbed into traditional costume, including the kebaya. This integration marked a cultural marriage, melding Malay modesty with Tamil ornamentation, further enhancing the kebaya in aesthetic and cultural importance (Ahmad & Tajuddin, 2022).

The kebaya for Jawi Peranakan women serves as a potent symbol of their multicultural heritage. This reflects their peculiar position vis-à-vis being intermediaries for Malay and Tamil Muslim cultures, embodying the synthesis of tradition, religion, and social identity. The kebaya design highlights femininity and grace that is expected from Malay women by society. To the Jawi Peranakan woman, it serves to represent her role of cultural mediator, navigating through and meshing diverse traditions into one in attire as in daily life, accordingly to Ahmad et al. (2022). The material and art of a kebaya showed, more often than not, social standing. Wealthy families displayed their wealth using high-quality fabrics and intricate embroideries, further highlighting the function of the garment as indicative of status (Ahmad & Tajuddin, 2022). The kebaya was adjusted to fit Islamic principles of dress: looser fits, higher necklines. Originally worn over a sarong, the kebaya was a long, flowing blouse that was elegant and modest. Islamic values brought to the area by Arab and Tamil Muslim traders had a significant impact on its growth, according to historical documents. adaptation allowed the dress to remain modest while retaining its aesthetic value from traditional wear (Ahmad et al., 2022).

The Jawi Peranakan kebaya serves as an example of cultural syncretism for the Jawi Peranakan, where both Malay and Tamil Muslim cultures merge into one unique form of dress. It maintains the basic components of the kebaya—long blouse, usually worn with a sarong—end but differs from other types mainly because of its profound cultural essence, special design features, and observation of Islamic norms. This essay examines the peculiarities of the Jawi Peranakan kebaya and those features that

make it different from other types of kebaya. The kebaya of the Jawi Peranakan reflects the unique identity of the Jawi Peranakan community, a result of intermarriages between local Malays and Tamil Muslim traders. This garment is an emblem of the hybrid heritage that emerged from the blending of Malay customs with Tamil influences. The incorporation of fabrics introduced by Tamil Muslim traders, such as fine silks and brocade, showcases the cultural interplay between the two traditions (Ahmad & Tajuddin, 2022). These textiles, combined with Malay tailoring practices, create a kebaya that is distinct from purely Malay designs. Unlike other kebayas, the Jawi Peranakan kebaya most often features bright colors and intensive motifs, influenced by the Indian sense of beauty, because the Tamil influence has deeply etched its stamp on this community.

The embellishments also bring together the combination of floral motifs from the Malay against the underlay of Tamil-born shapes, thus being unique when it comes to the cultural garment. One of the unique features that is in line with Islamic beliefs is the Jawi Peranakan kebaya. The Jawi Peranakan is more concerned about being modest compared to the general concept of the kebaya, where the concept is about being elegant and female. Looser and bigger designs, such as the kebaya labuh, can hide the body and comply with the Islamic beliefs about the garment and dress (Ahmad & Tajuddin, 2022). Besides, the Jawi Peranakan women also incorporate the hijab alongside the kebaya, thus incorporating the Islamic component into the dress. The emphasis is thus placed on being modest by the Jawi Peranakan kebaya, thus being unique from the general kebaya, where the emphasis is placed on being attractive rather than being religious. Combining the concept of being elegant and being modest, the Jawi Peranakan kebaya attests to the ability by the populace to balance tradition and religion. The kebaya in the Jawi Peranakan ensemble bears differences from other types, since the textiles and accessories used to complete the overall ensemble involve Indian-inspired materials such as intricately patterned brocades combined with Malay-type sarongs of batik or songket. In fact, the pairing of these materials expresses the Jawi Peranakan person's multiculturalism. (Ahmad & Tajuddin, 2022). Another distinctive element of the garment is the kerongsang (brooches) used for fastening. Although kerongsang is widely used in various kebaya designs, the Jawi Peranakan version tends to incorporate more elaborate designs inspired by Tamil jewelry traditions, which further underscores the garment's cultural hybridity (Ahmad & Tajuddin, 2022).

The Jawi Peranakan kebaya is more than clothing; it is a marker of identity and social status. Historically, the materials and craftsmanship of the kebaya signified the wearer's class and wealth. For Jawi Peranakan women, the garment also serves as a symbol of their dual heritage, blending Malay and Tamil Muslim traditions into a cohesive expression of identity (Ahmad & Tajuddin, 2022). The kebaya also plays a role in preserving the community's cultural and religious values. By its modest design and use in traditional rituals, the Jawi Peranakan kebaya connects the past to the present to continue the practice of the culture. The kebaya of the Jawi Peranakan is one of its own kinds, steeped in that cultural syncretism born of Malay and Tamil Muslim traditions. Distinctive textiles, a more subdued design, and the symbolism reflect the community's ability to balance different influences while holding on to

Islamic values. As both a practical garment and a cultural artifact, the Jawi Peranakan kebaya stands as testament to the enduring legacy and adaptability of the Jawi Peranakan heritage. (Ahmad & Tajuddin, 2022).

4.5 The Jawi Peranakan Kebaya: Batik Sarongs, Malay Influences, and European Aesthetics

The Jawi Peranakan is a spectacular reflection of cultural assimilation; it brings together Javanese, Malay, and European influences. This unique dress, as most evident in the kebaya and batik sarong, emerged as the result of the assimilation of the Peranakan Chinese community into local societies of the Straits Settlements and Malay Archipelago. Over time, these garments developed features from each of these influences into a unique, graceful form of dress that This essay explores the key influences on Peranakan attire, particularly the batik sarong, adaptations of Malay clothing, and the impact of European aesthetics on the kebaya. According to Smith (2015), the batik sarong is a defining element of Jawi Peranakan kebaya, showcasing the strong influence of Java through its intricate wax-resist dyeing technique—an art form that has been practiced for centuries.

Peranakans favored batik pieces featuring motifs that resonated with their Chinese heritage, such as phoenixes, peonies, and dragons. These symbolic designs were seamlessly woven into Javanese batik, which was renowned for its rich colors and elaborate patterns (Forth, 2018). In particular, batik from regions like Pekalongan and Cirebon gained popularity among the Peranakans due to its striking hues and Chinese-inspired motifs. These regional variations of batik not only stood out visually but also carried deep cultural significance, representing the fusion of Javanese craftsmanship with Chinese artistic traditions (Roff, 2016) reflects both the cultural heritage and the global exchanges of the colonial era.

The sarong, for one, was wrapped the equivalent of the traditional draping fashion Javanese, being functional and graceful. The cloth wrapped around the figure close, its line graceful even when the figure is in motion. This fashion not only provided for ease but also the dignified appearance of the Jawi Peranakan women (Lee, 2019). The traditional Malay baju panjang, the flowing, long tunic, the traditional garment worn by the traditional dressers, the traditional dressers being the Jawi Peranakans, were adapted by them into one tighter and one for their dignified fashion (Othman, 2020). This adaptation set the start of the transition towards the formal and the decorative garment from the functional one. Therefore, the batik sarong is not only the piece of cloth alone but the combination of the two cultures from the intersection of the Javanese and the Peranakans."The kebaya that was originally Malay, it was the Peranakan women's way of assimilating into the local culture. The kebaya is commonly worn with a sarong and is one of the symbol of Malay outfit.

Apart from the kebaya itself, Jawi Peranakan women added a traditional Malay accessory called kerongsang, a trio of ornate brooches that secured the kebaya. These usually came in the forms of silver or gold with encased gemstones and thus had functional use but at the same time were indicative of a woman's wealth and standing within society (Roff, 2016). The use of such accessories further points out

the accommodation of the Peranakan community with the local Malay fashion yet retaining their distinctive cultural identity. European influence was more evident in the development of the lace-edged kebaya, also referred to as kebaya Nyonya. During the colonial era, European lace and embroidery were highly prized and started influencing the local fashion. Fine, translucent fabrics like voile and organdy imported from Europe became popular choices for Peranakan attires that raised the elegance and femininity of the kebaya (MacGregor, 2017). The use of the lace for the kebaya demonstrated European fondness for the elaborate ornaments and the refined senses. Original lace edging not only added the stylishness for the kebaya, but also the merging of the European and the East senses. European sense of fashion for the shaping of the figure also informed the use of the tighter shapes when constructing the Peranakan kebaya. European sense of fashion for the shaping of the figure also informed the shaping of the figure by tightening the garment and making the garment stylish (Smith, 2015). European fondness for the elaborate ornaments and the refined senses were also demonstrated through the use of the kebaya for the use of the lace. Original lace edging added the stylishness for the kebaya, and also the merging of the East and the West. (MacGregor, 2017). Religious Identity and Negotiations of Malayness: How The Kebaya become a Site of Cultural Contestation

The integration of the Jawi Peranakan into Malay-Muslim mainstream society has at times created internal tensions between religious orthodoxy and cultural heritage. The Jawi Peranakan historically had practiced a spirituality-oriented Indian Sufi-infused Islam with local syncretic practice and strong communal ties (Reid, 2001). However, with the emergence of Islamic reformist movements in Malaysia, pressures to conform religiously at the expense of hybrid cultural practices have developed (Roff, 1970). For example, conventional Peranakan wedding, funeral, and ancestor worship ceremonies have increasingly been abandoned as being un-Islamic (Shamsul, 1996). Others among the Jawi Peranakan do resist these pressures actively by holding on to the past and promoting cultural heritage through grass-root activism, i.e., heritage centers and scholarly documentation drives (Wee, 2011).

State policies in Singapore and Malaysia have also shaped the cultural trajectory of Jawi Peranakan. While state narratives of Malayness emphasize homogeneity, Jawi Peranakan heritage has been selectively suppressed or included in national narratives of Malayness. For instance, Malay culture is privileged in state-sponsored heritage projects, while Indian and Arab aspects of the Jawi Peranakan identity are subordinated (Milner, 2008). This differential cultural absorption has given rise to tension between state governments and heritage activists, who fault that Jawi Peranakan history is taken in by overarching Malay history with not enough appreciation for its unique contributions (Hussin, 2016). Grass roots have reacted with efforts to record and celebrate Jawi Peranakan history via alternative books, cultural events, and social media campaigns (Teo, 2018). While the Jawi Peranakan have to a large degree been assimilated into Malay society, this has been accompanied by internal tension over the preservation of culture, religious syncretism, and identity negotiation. The loss of the Jawi script, the changing attitude towards the kebaya, religious orthodoxy, and state cultural policy all work to serve to sustain the tension between assimilation and heritage preservation. It is these

processes which must be addressed in the context of the resilience of hybrid identities in the context of socio-political and religious change.

Even though the kebaya has strong historical roots within the Jawi Peranakan community, the role of the kebaya within contemporary society is active. Various influences—ranging from globalization to the commercialization of fashion to shifting cultural values—have influenced how the kebaya is perceived, produced, and consumed today. The kebaya has also experienced a revival, particularly with high-fashion labels and independent designers who re-fashion the kebaya in contemporary cuts, fabrics, and adornments. Designers like Bernard Chandran and Melinda Looi have integrated kebaya-inspired motifs within their haute couture collections, combining traditional and contemporary aesthetics (Khoo, 2019).

The internet and social media have also contributed to this resurgence, with fashion bloggers and online influencers wearing new versions of the kebaya, mixing it with Western-cut clothing or wearing it for non-ritualistic, mundane purposes (Noor & Khoo, 2013). Younger Jawi Peranakan women such as themselves prefer to wear the kebaya to less formal events, with looser fabrics and lighter weights to meet the comfort levels of the modern times. In contrast to their forebears, to whom the kebaya was a part of their cultural dress, younger Jawi Peranakan women may prefer to wear it to special events like festivals, weddings, or cultural festivals but not so much as daily wear (Teo, 2018).

There are certain cultural organizations like The Peranakan Association Singapore that encourage kebaya wear among young generations through fashion shows and talks so that it can remain current in modern society (Wee, 2011). In Singapore and Malaysia, where cultural identity is an on-going negotiation, the kebaya has been embraced as multicultural heritage. Utilization of the kebaya in national costumes like the Singapore Airlines' "Singapore Girl" costume demonstrates how traditional attire can be reinterpreted through state-led brand efforts (Milner, 2008). These appropriations sometimes efface ethnic-specific narratives, with cultural ownership and representation concerns invoked (Hussin, 2016).

The kebaya, one of the most resilient cultural symbols of the Jawi Peranakan, has been subject to shifting ideals of modesty and Islamic attire. Where the traditional kebaya was characterized by intricate embroidery and body-fitting silhouettes borrowed from Malay and Indian textile traditions, contemporary preference for more modest Islamic attire, as exemplified in the baju kurung or hijab-fashion, has left the kebaya discarded by some in the community for more religiously suitable alternatives (Hussin, 2016). Such transformation has been debated within the Jawi Peranakan community, with some advocating for cultural continuity in the retention of kebaya, others as an immodest and outdated form of dressing no longer suitable for evolving religious values (Teo, 2018). Fashion designers and heritage activists have attempted to reimagine the kebaya in looser and longer sleeved interpretations to suit modern Islamic sensibilities, but such revivals are contested (Noor & Khoo, 2013).

5.0 CONCLUSION

In essence, the Jawi Peranakan is a true embodiment of the processes of cultural adaptation, endurance, and incorporation, enriching the socio-cultural fabric of Southeast Asia, and notably, the state of Penang, Malaysia. Originating from the union of Tamil Muslim merchant husbands and indigenous Malay wives, the Jawi Peranakan forged their distinctive mixed identity from the complex interlinks of Indian, Malay, and Islamic elements. In the form of the kebaya, the dominant icon of this identity, the traditional garment not only serves its purpose for dress but also testifies to the historical processes and culture the community has accumulated. In its evolutionary processes over the centuries, the kebaya documents the convergence of multiple traditions, proving the ability of the Jawi Peranakan to accept their double identity while contributing substantially towards the culture and economic advancement of the country.

Aside from fashion, their engagement in business, literary work, and advocacy has contributed substantially towards the shaping of the contemporary Malay identity reconciling historical legacies and the contemporary. This attests to the value placed upon education and culture interaction towards building the strong and adaptive nature of the populace. In the ongoing adaptation by the Jawi Peranakan towards the contemporary demands, their culture remains integral towards the country's diverseness. In the continued applicability by the kebaya and various culture activities by the populace, the potential towards the convergence of various culture groups becomes significant towards the enhancement of the global culture. In the final analysis, the history of the Jawi Peranakan testifies towards the value placed upon the diverseness of culture, providing useful insights towards the formation of identity and the potential towards transformation through the mixing of culture.

The process of assimilation of the Jawi Peranakan into the Malay mainstream has been a problematic and negotiated process, with historical, religious, and socio-political conditions. As the group has incorporated aspects of Malay identity, this process has been fraught with tension and resistance. The abandonment of the Jawi script and linguistic distinctiveness, the shifting attitudes towards the kebaya as cultural icon, and the pressures of Islamic reformist movements have all been subject to internal contestation over cultural preservation. State-led efforts to selectively assimilate Jawi Peranakan heritage into national discourses also complicate the process of identity negotiation.

Notwithstanding these pressures, efforts at the preservation of Jawi Peranakan heritage remain in the form of grassroots activism, academic scholarship, and communal-driven cultural initiatives. The persistence of such traditional practice, in the form of modified entities, is a testament to the tenacity of the community in the preservation of a distinctive identity. In the future, recognition and documentation of such struggles will remain critical to the interpretation of the larger dynamics of cultural hybridity in Southeast Asia and in ensuring that the Jawi Peranakan legacy is a part of the multicultural heritage of the region.

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