



Kebaya in the Nusantara Archipelago

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Kebaya has been proposed to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity for the year 2023 as a four-nation representation by Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, and Thailand ("Malaysia in Joint Bid to Nominate Kebaya as Unesco Intangible Cultural Heritage", 2022). These four countries reached such an agreement since Southeast Asian nations all practice the tradition of wearing kebaya. Despite Indonesia's initial plan of nominating the kebaya as a single nomination, it has now been decided that Indonesia will join Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and Thailand in the nomination submitted to UNESCO previously ("Indonesia Sertai Empat Negara Calonkan Kebaya di UNESCO", 2023).

Kebaya is a traditional dress with aesthetic appeal and cultural and symbolic value. Wearing a kebaya is a conventional way for women in Indonesia and other Southeast Asian nations to respect their cultural history, exhibit their identity, and create a sense of belonging. The kebaya is also viewed as a representation of femininity and modesty. The kebaya is a traditional blouse-long skirt combination worn by women in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, and some parts of Thailand. The garment consists of a fitted blouse, usually made from delicate lace, silk, or cotton fabric, with a long, flowing skirt that can be either straight or flared. The kebaya is typically worn with a traditional sarong such as a *batik* or *pelikat* piece of cloth.



Kebaya was primarily worn in Java and Bali in Indonesia, but despite this, its origin is still debated. The word kebaya is said to originate from an Arabic word, *abaya*, which means clothes, while the Javanese in ancient

times called clothes by the names *kebiak* or *bayak*. The name of the garment is also said to have derived from the Portuguese word *caba* or *cabaya*, which means tunic. Before the creation of the kebaya, women in Indonesia wore a *kemben* (a piece of cloth worn to cover the body but not the hands, neck and shoulders) until the 15th century. *Kebaya kutu baru* is said to be the original Indonesian kebaya. The kebaya is thought to have originated from the piece of cloth worn by the royal ladies from the period of the Majapahit kingdom that covered their shoulders on top of their *kemben*. After the arrival of Islam to Indonesia, the kebaya evolved to be a piece of cloth that covered more parts of the upper body. The kebaya later became the royal clothing of the Keraton ladies in the Javanese palace in the 15th century, with materials in the form of silk, velvet or brocade worn with brooches and a long cloth.

In the colonial era in the 19th century, kebaya was used by Dutch ladies as a symbol of differentiating their social status from the local people. This was made evident by the materials used by the Dutch women, such as silk or delicate woven fabric and the addition of lace along the edge. The Dutch ladies also wore the kebaya to adapt to the local climate and assimilate into Indonesian culture. Kebaya was worn with a batik sarong or woven cloth at the bottom. In Malaysia, kebaya wearing is popular among ladies from various ethnicities such as the Malay, Baby Nyonya and Chetti. In Malaysia, among Malay ladies, *kebaya labuh*, also known as *baju belah*, is a long-cut kebaya with a split in the front. The length of the kebaya can reach the knee area or more from the shoulder. Usually worn together with this is either Javanese batik cloth, Pahang woven cloth or Indian *pelikat*. *Kebaya Selangor* is another long-cut kebaya which was mostly worn by ladies in Selangor, Perak, Kedah, Perlis, Melaka and Pulau Pinang.

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Nyonya kebaya (Nyonya refers to the women from the Baba Nyonya community), which is famous especially in Melaka as it is known today, originated from a different style and cut of kebaya. Nyonya Melaka's long baju (*baju panjang*) or in Malay language it is called *baju kebaya labuh* is among the earliest kebaya worn by Nyonya ladies. It was made initially using cotton before gauze from the West arrived. As gauze is a bit transparent, a white inner must be worn with the long kebaya. The kebaya has a *pesak* (a cloth sewn on the sides of the dress) on both sides of the dress and a *kekek* (a triangle-shaped fabric sewn under the armpit) on both sleeves. Since the long kebaya has no buttons, *kerongsang* (brooches) are used as buttons. A *batik* handkerchief attached to this kebaya wearer's shoulder called "bimpo" is considered an accessory to go with this dress apart from a pair of earrings and an *upau* (a small money pouch) attached to the belt used to fasten the batik sarong (a piece of fabric worn as a skirt together with the kebaya).

Another type of Nyonya kebaya is *kebaya renda* (laced kebaya) which was widely worn during the 1920s-1930s. It is a shorter kebaya decorated with embroidery lace along the dress's hemline. The shape of the embroidery lace and additional embroidery usually form a particular pattern of a *kerawang* (fligree embroidery design). The laced kebaya is also worn with a set of chained brooches. *Kebaya biku* was popular during the 1930s-1940s, and it earned its name because of its *biku* (a series of curves on the edge



of a cloth). *Kebaya biku* refers to a form of kebaya with simple scalloped embroidery along the hemline. This type of kebaya has less embroidery scallop decoration, but again, it is worn with a set of brooches which function as buttons. An authentic *kebaya biku* should have its *ketuk lubang* (tiny holes in the fabric), usually at the seams of the pieces of fabric that are joined together for the dress. *Ketuk lubang* also signifies the quality of the kebaya as this is created through a specific sewing technique.

Kebaya kept evolving, and in the 1950s-1960s, a shorter and tighter-fitting kebaya existed. This kebaya has a piece of cloth in the middle that joins both sides of the dress, which resembles the kebayas worn in Bali, Indonesia. This kebaya is not worn with brooches as it

uses snap fasteners (*butang ketap*). Again, this kebaya is worn with a batik sarong; sometimes, a corset is worn underneath the dress. Despite its cultural and historical value, the kebaya has experienced numerous alterations throughout the years as fashion trends and social conventions have changed. The kebaya comes in various forms and modifications today, from the old, elaborate ones worn by the nobility to more contemporary and straightforward ones well-liked by younger generations. Nowadays, many people wear the kebaya as their traditional attire for important events, including weddings, religious services, and cultural festivals. Women who work in the service sector, such as waitresses, hotel employees, flight attendants, and other professionals who want to present

an image of elegance frequently wear it. The Malaysia Airlines female staff's award-winning sarong kebaya is still regarded as one of the best-looking aeroplane uniforms (second only to the uniform of Singapore Airlines) in the world, and it is still the most recognisable image of MAS (Merican, 2015).

In conclusion, the kebaya is traditional symbolic clothing that plays a significant role in Southeast Asia's cultural legacy. It continues to play an essential role in the social and cultural fabric of the area and serves as a symbol of grace, femininity, and cultural identity. The kebaya is a cherished and timeless garment that captures the distinct beauty and richness of Southeast Asian culture, whether donned on special occasions or in daily life.



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