

# **From Kartini Kebaya to National Clothing: The Development of Indonesian Women's National Fashion from the 19th to the 24th Century**

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**Abstract.** The issue of kebaya has recently become an interesting topic of discussion because apart from Indonesia, several neighboring countries also have traditional clothing similar to kebaya. Even Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, and Thailand have registered their kebaya as intangible cultural heritage to UNESCO. The problem in this article is how the Kartini kebaya became the national clothing in Indonesia. This research aims to understand the process of kebaya as Javanese traditional clothing becoming national clothing in Indonesia. The relevance of this research is related to kebaya as an Indonesian cultural product that has become an icon of the Indonesian nation. The research method used is by using historical methods that begin by tracing the origin of kebaya in Java and Indonesia, as well as its development until it is designated as the national clothing of Indonesian women. The results of the study show that the Kartini kebaya is one of the types of women's clothing in Indonesia that is polite and makes the wearer look elegant and authoritative, in accordance with the personality of the Indonesian nation. All women in Indonesia accept this type of clothing as their national clothing

**Keywords:** Kebaya Kartini, national clothing, Indonesian women, national personality

## **1 Introduction**

The issue of kebaya has recently become an interesting topic of discussion because in addition to Indonesia, several neighboring countries also have traditional clothing similar to kebaya. Even Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, and Thailand have registered their kebaya as an intangible cultural heritage to UNESCO [1,2]. In 2023, Indonesia will also officially register kebaya as an intangible cultural heritage at Unesco [3]. The problem in this article is how the Kartini kebaya became the national costume in Indonesia. This research aims to understand the process of kebaya as Javanese traditional clothing becoming national clothing in Indonesia. The relevance of this research is related to kebaya as an Indonesian cultural product that has become an icon of the Indonesian nation

## **2 Methods**

The research method used is to use historical methods that start by tracing the origin of the term kebaya, followed by tracing the causes of kebaya development in Java and in other regions in Indonesia. The next stage is to examine the development of the kebaya until it is designated as the national clothing of Indonesian women. All tracing

work related to the origin of kebaya to its development into Indonesia's national clothing was carried out online.

### **3 Result and Discussion**

#### **3.1 The Origin of the Term Kebaya**

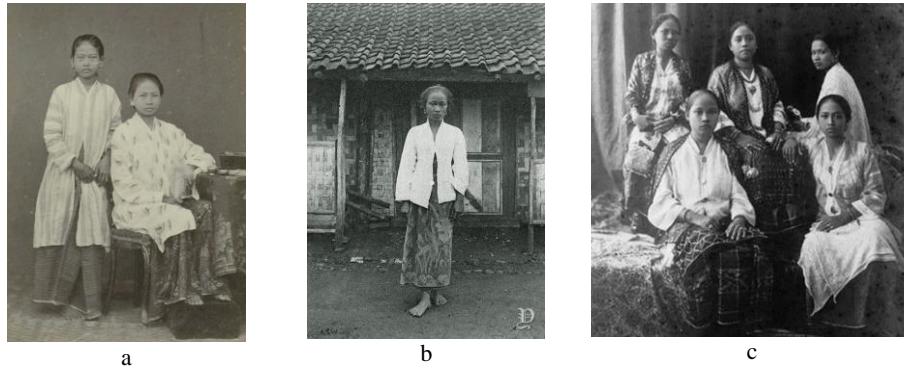
According to the Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language, kebaya is a long-sleeved upper garment for women, worn with a long cloth [4]. The term kebaya is a term popularized by the Portuguese to refer to kaba or qaba, the Arab outer garment in the form of a long tunic that is open at the front and loose. The Portuguese call it cabaya [5]. This term was popular in the 16th century, in accordance with the role of the Portuguese in that century who did a lot of exploration looking for sources of spices in the archipelago [6,7]. The term kebaya was then widely used by the Malays, especially Javanese, as well as other areas in Asia that had been influenced by the Portuguese [5]. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are kebaya in various places in the archipelago, such as in Sumatra, Java, and Sulawesi.

#### **3.2. Penyebab Perkembangan Kebaya di Indonesia**

The cause of the development of kebaya in the archipelago cannot be separated from the spread of culture carried out by the Portuguese who massively traded in the archipelago. The trade that lasted for quite a long time, namely throughout the 16th century. Not only related to spices as the commodities they were looking for, but they also spread Christianity, art (keroncong), several languages adopted from Portuguese, and family names. Most of the Portuguese influence was in Eastern Indonesia, in accordance with the location of spice producers in the archipelago [6].

Why did kebaya develop in Java and various places in the archipelago? This is none other than the emergence of a new culture in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, namely the beginning of the development of Islam in the archipelago [6, 7, 8]. Islam requires its followers to cover their bodies. This is what then caused kebaya to be widely used by various ethnic groups in Indonesia, the majority of whom are Muslim.

Initially, kebaya was only worn by Javanese nobles [Fig. 1a]. It was not until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that commoners and peasant women in Java began wearing a simpler version of the kebaya, using pins (peniti) to fasten the blouse [Fig. 1b]. Through trade and diplomatic relations, the influence of the kebaya spread to nearby regions such as Bali, Malacca, Sulawesi, and Sulu and Mindanao [Fig. 1c] between the 17th and 19th centuries. The kebaya soon began to take on various forms and styles throughout the region.



**Figure 1.** Various Types of Kebaya

### 3.3. Establishment of Kebaya as Indonesia's National Clothing

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, kebaya was increasingly used by Javanese people, so that this type of clothing was claimed as a characteristic of Javanese women's clothing. One of the figures who later popularized this clothing was R.A. Kartini, a daughter of the Regent of Jepara who often corresponded with her friends from the Netherlands [9, 10, 11]. The kebaya worn by R.A. Kartini was very distinctive, so it was later called the Kartini kebaya [12].

During the Indonesian independence revolution, kebaya was used by female fighters as a way to show their nationalism. In the following period, many female figures used kebaya as clothing worn at formal events, such as that worn by mothers when attending the Indonesian Women's Congress. At the 10<sup>th</sup> Indonesian Women's Congress attended by President Soekarno, it was stated that the Indonesian Revolution could not proceed without the involvement of women. At that time, all women who attended the congress wore cloth and kebaya. Therefore, President Soekarno later stated that the official clothing for Indonesian women was the kebaya. This provision was then formalized with the Decree of the President of the Republic of Indonesia Number 9 of 2023 which stated that July 24 is National Kebaya Day. The determination was based on the reason that the kebaya is a cultural asset and historical value contained when President Soekarno attended the 10th Indonesian Women's Congress.



**Figure 2.** President Soekarno and Mrs. Fatmawati attending the 10<sup>th</sup> Women's Congress

#### 4 Conclusion

The results of the study show that kebaya was chosen as the Indonesian National dress because it has a long history related to the development of Indonesian culture. Kebaya did not only develop in Java, so kebaya belongs to all nations in Indonesia. Kebaya is a polite dress, which can show the character of the wearer.

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