

# A Study on the Development of *Baju Kurung* Design in the Context of Cultural Changes in Modern Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

*The baju kurung is a type of traditional dress used by Malay descendants in the Nusantara. The baju kurung is prevalent in countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia (Jambi, Riau, Padang, Banten). Although these countries might refer to the style using different names, the baju kurung is defined by its similar cut and pattern. The advancement of current fashion has changed the concept and understanding of the baju kurung, which is closely related to changes in Malay cultural phenomena. This study examines modifications to baju kurung designs to determine if the style still represents the identity of Malay women. This study takes a qualitative approach by applying the aesthetic morphology analysis method to understand how design developments correspond to the cultural changes in modern Malaysia. This study focuses on the current development of baju kurung designs by using several samples of baju kurung designs by local Malay designers as the primary data. Historical references of baju kurung are used to identify variables that may have changed in modern designs. The findings indicate that the development of modern baju kurung corresponds to a cultural development process that has slightly altered the visual identity of Malay women living in Malaysia.*

**Keywords:** baju kurung, culture, identity, modern Malay

## INTRODUCTION

The word "fashion" implies many related terms such as clothing, mode or costume. Fashion can be divided into two main categories: clothing in general and the logic and ideology that applies to the area of clothing (Svendsen 2006: 12). Clothes consist of whatever material used to cover the body. Any material meant to cover the body can be considered "clothing" artefacts. Because the sole purpose of clothes is to cover the body, without intrinsic cultural or religious significance, clothing is different from fashion. The term "fashion" refers to clothing in an extensive range of domains in various aspects of the arts, politics (economics and social issues) and science (technology and scientific knowledge), and it captures the interest of modern society. The term "costume" typically refers to culture, identity, social fields and structural problems in a marginal society. This study will focus on the use of clothing from a Malay ideology standpoint and how it relates to Malay culture, observed through cultural changes represented in modern fashion.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, when discussing the *baju kurung* in the context of cultural changes in modern Malay society, this study will focus on fashion and its link to the universal cultural system of the society, technology and the economy.<sup>2</sup> According to Roland Barthes, "*Fashion itself is a cultural system of meanings.*" Therefore, changes in the form and style of the *baju kurung* most likely signify cultural changes. This view is also supported by Gilles Lipovetsky who states, "*Fashion is a specific form of social change, independent of any particular object...*" (in Svendsen 2006: 13).

Malay clothing patterns evolved over a long period of time beginning in the prehistoric era. Malay clothing used natural sources until Malays acquired fabrics such as cotton and silk from Indian and Chinese traders (Groeneveldt 2009: 174–185). Malay fashion subsequently became associated with the culture of the archipelago, resulting in its unique identity. The *baju kurung* is one of the oldest Malay clothing styles. Because the Malay

kingdom is extensive, the similarities in *baju kurung* patterns can be observed in other regions of the Malay Archipelago such as Bengkulu, Jambi, Riau, Padang, Aceh and Palembang in Indonesia (Ompusunggu 1998).

The Malay *baju kurung* underwent many changes in form and meaning. The word "*kurung*" means to "encase the body" of the wearer, which corresponded with Islamic dress guidelines for women. Similar to the Judeo-Christian<sup>3</sup> tradition, flaunting the body is forbidden in Islam. This regulation was incorporated in the way Malay women dressed and fashion that was interpreted as "modest". From the Malay perspective, modesty is synonymous with Islamic teachings that forbid any flaunting of intimate body parts, particularly when a woman is not at home. Sultan Mansur Shah banned Muslim women from wearing only a *sarong* from the bust downwards during the Melaka sultanate.<sup>4</sup>

Although the *baju kurung* was designed specifically for women, the men's *baju kurung* became known as "*Baju Teluk Belanga*" during the era of Sultan Abu Bakar Seri Maharaja in 1862 (Shawal 1994). The top was made from the geometric pattern of the *baju kurung*, which was usually paired with woven material or *batik* as the *sarong* (Photos 1 and 2). The position of the focal pattern on the *sarong* reflected a person's marital status or rank in traditional Malay society (Hassan 2013). In addition, making *baju kurung* from *songket* silk fabric was often associated with the royal court's community during the feudal era, and most people would have lacked the permission to wear such clothing due to the social hierarchy. After the British occupancy, starting in 1824, the Malays experienced an early modernisation stage during which the feudal social order was abandoned. The introduction of new technology to deliver information, such as television, movies and printed media, influenced the way people dressed. Previous studies of this period have referred to the "westernisation" of the Malay culture. When Malaysia entered the post-independence years, the Malays lost their identity, as evidenced by various interpretations of Malay women's identity through fashion.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The current explanation perceives tradition as shifting and continuously defining new meaning based on what is inherited from the past. The artefacts produced by Malay society are also prone to changes because they must incorporate the factor of "newness" to stay relevant or "modern". Because the Malay community is dynamic and open, changes in their clothing also reflect the changes in their cultural phenomena (Yusof 2009). As such, their identity continues to develop by creating cultural objects, such as clothing, that fit the current environment and time. Changes to fashion among the Malays signal a shift in support of tolerance towards values and divergent thinking. This occurred when modern Malays based in Malaysia started to explore global possibilities in the economy, technology and knowledge. These explorations motivated them to face the advent of modernity and contributed to an unclear notion of one's identity (Svendsen 2006: 64). In the past, *baju kurung* or "*baju Melayu*" were worn by Malays as a "tool" of identity. As time progressed, modern fashion created a homogenous look that resulted in less variety in fashion. Trans-ethnic marriages had also changed the physical look of typical Malay features. Hence, the changes to the Malay environment definitely emerged from the development of thoughts and actions by the Malay society that consequently inspired their cultural objects, such as clothing. In the modern environment, creativity relies upon whether the society is able to expand. The problem began when modernity and creativity faced stigma from customs and traditions, which halted the development of creativity without recognising that the custom itself was a mixture of many cultures (Hoed 2002: 108–109). By maintaining a custom based on sentimental values, many failed to understand the changes to the existing society that were occurring. This effect may have shaped different cultural objects to suit current needs. For instance, the development of the modern *baju kurung* was a mixture of aesthetic elements that may contradict the concept of "traditional beauty". New designs blended selected elements to accommodate the current context, which may have involved

a different interpretation of beauty. To determine which elements have been preserved, omitted or modified, Derrida suggested selected item(s) be deconstructed similar to a "text" to understand the components.<sup>5</sup> According to him, any form of text (including visuals) was related to *signifiant* and *signifié*; however, the relationship was not static and unstable. For example, certain types of motif placement on Malay *sarong* denoted rank or status in the traditional era, but they may no longer have similar connotations in modern society (Hassan 2013). The *sarong* was used in the past by Malay society as a social code. This example demonstrates that the relationship between a "text" and its meaning may not be relevant at all times, and it may be interpreted differently by the society as time progresses. Therefore, this study aims to identify the current elements found in modern *baju kurung* design that have similar cultural connotations as in the past and to identify how the designs reflected the identity of Malay women.

To understand the development and changes in modern *baju kurung* design, compound and component analysis will deconstruct each design into smaller elements so that the changes in the visual text can be understood and recognised. Munro introduced this suggested methodology in Aesthetic Morphology, and it will be explained further. The findings of this study will indicate that modifications to the modern design of *baju kurung* suggest the connection between cultural transformations in Malay society and that the elements in the *baju kurung* visually form the image of Malay women. Thus, this study aims to address the following questions:

1. What has changed in modern *baju kurung* design and how do new styles differ from the traditional form and style?
2. How do the changes in designs reflect the identity of Malay women and cultural changes in the modern setting?

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method was used to analyse the components of *baju kurung* by applying the method introduced by Munro (1970: 387)<sup>6</sup>. A case study approach was selected because this study focuses on a specific sample of designs selected from the top three Malay designers in Kuala Lumpur. The selected designs, which were used as primary data, were collected from local fashion magazines and websites and compared to the traditional *baju kurung* to identify the new elements. The changes were interpreted using related theories that support the findings of this study.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Clothing is one of the many artefacts produced by any society; it is a cultural phenomenon that indicates the level of civilisation in a society. An artefact is a product of thought and activity of a society that reflects cultural phenomena<sup>7</sup> that may vary from one culture to another. For example, the form and style of the *baju kurung* worn by the northern women in Peninsular Malaysia, such as Kedah, reflects their participation in agriculture, mainly rice cultivation. Their activity is reflected in the style of their *baju kurung*, which was made practical for such activity. The top blouse has shorter sleeves and blouse length than *baju kurung Teluk Belanga* used in the southern part of Peninsular Malaysia.

The processes of learning our own culture, such as adaptation, acculturation and enculturation, were derived from the "culture existence phenomena" that incorporate thoughts, activities and artefacts of a society. For example, acculturation is a process of 'renewal' that blends or adapts local elements from different culture(s) (Herskovits 1958: 2). The adaptation happens voluntarily, unlike "assimilation", which always involves "domination" of a minority community, eventually leading to involuntary changes that create a "new culture". Conversely, 'enculturation' is the process of selecting certain cultural elements that are either being used

or abandoned by the current society. Thus, the form and styles of today's *baju kurung* (the artefact) may vary as society constantly adjusts its thoughts and activities based on current lifestyle.

In addition to the concept of cultural existence phenomena, J. C. Flugel also discussed changes in clothing in his book "*The Psychology of Clothes*". He mentioned that humans cover their body for three main reasons: decoration, protection and modesty. Many scholars overlooked his point in "decoration" and suggested that the main reason for covering the body is to protect the body from extreme weather conditions (Ismail 2006; Shawal 1994).

The decorative aspect produces decorated textiles with a myriad of motifs and colours that suggest another method of "protection". In some cultures, this method of protection was referred to as animism. They believed that certain motifs in the textiles have powers of protection or healing from spirits. Many types of ancient textiles, such as *Pua Kumbu* in Borneo or *Endek* in Bali, had such motifs, and this differs from the main purpose of clothing as many scholars have suggested.<sup>8</sup>

This observation is also supported by a theory that suggested clothing that covers the entire body came from countries with colder climates.<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon can be witnessed through the Hindu-Mahayana artefacts found across the archipelago that represented women with bare tops and *sarongs* covering them from the waist down. Minimal body coverings suggested warm climates in such regions. *Sarongs* were no longer used to cover only the torso and below; an additional piece was introduced to cover the body (*kemban* cloth) and head (*kelubung* cloth). The Malays might have adapted the form by shortening it and wearing it with a *sarong*. The *sarong* is the oldest form of textile<sup>10</sup> representing the Malay identity. It is normally made from hand-made materials such as *songket*, *tenun limar* (*ikat*-woven) or *batik*, which was introduced to *Tanah Melayu*/Malaysia by the Indonesians.<sup>11</sup>

Given the presence of traders from throughout the world in the Malay Peninsula as early as 1300s, some scholars have suggested that the form of *baju kurung* might have been inspired by Middle Eastern merchants who wore robes (Shawal 1994). The women's form of

*baju kurung* was initially a long, loose tube-like shape made from a thin cotton-based material such as calico (unbleached cotton), chintz (glazed calico) and printed cotton, obtained through barter trade from Indian traders (Groeneveldt 2009). This view has been supported by other writings. *Hai Goa Kuan Chi* mentioned that the Sultan wore a thin white cloth with green floral motifs that was similar to a "robe" (*jubah/abbaya*), draped his head (with a turban) and wore shoes (Ismail 2006). Groeneveldt (2009) also wrote that "the elements of Persian-Arab was a long robe made by calico". All these specifications of *baju kurung* were based on Islamic guidelines.

However, the Islamic guidelines contradicted the Malay interest in body embellishment, such as women wearing excessive accessories or revealing their body before Islam, which was then later translated onto textile decorations, such as in *songket* and *ikats*. Islam also forbids living motifs such as animals and humans, nature became the major source of inspiration. Many motifs on traditional textiles, such as *pucuk rebung* (bamboo shoots), *tampuk manggis* (mangosteen), *awan larat* (clouds) and *gigi yu* (shark's teeth), were nature inspired.

## ANALYSIS

### **The Traditional Form of *Baju kurung Teluk Belanga* and the Modern Style**

Photos 1 and 2 are examples of the most traditional *baju kurung*. Its original form was made from geometric patterned fabric in a loose and long shape. For commoners, it was usually worn with a plain material or *batik sarong* whereas *songket* woven fabric and silk materials were only for the royalties. A shawl or headscarf usually completed the *baju kurung*, which was normally worn when a woman left the home.





**Photo 1** *Baju kurung* for commoners, the dress is usually plain cotton, with *batik sarong*.  
Source: *Busana Melayu*: Zubaidah Syawal (1994).



**Photo 2** *Baju kurung* worn with weaved *songket*, brocade or *telepuk* (weaved Indian cloth).  
Source: *Busana Melayu*: Zubaidah Syawal (1994).

Photos 1 and 2 also reveal the neck style called "*leher Teluk Belanga*," which was made famous by the Sultan of Johor (Shawal 1994). The neck was always completed with a special technique of complicated stitching called "*tulang belut*" (Photo 3).

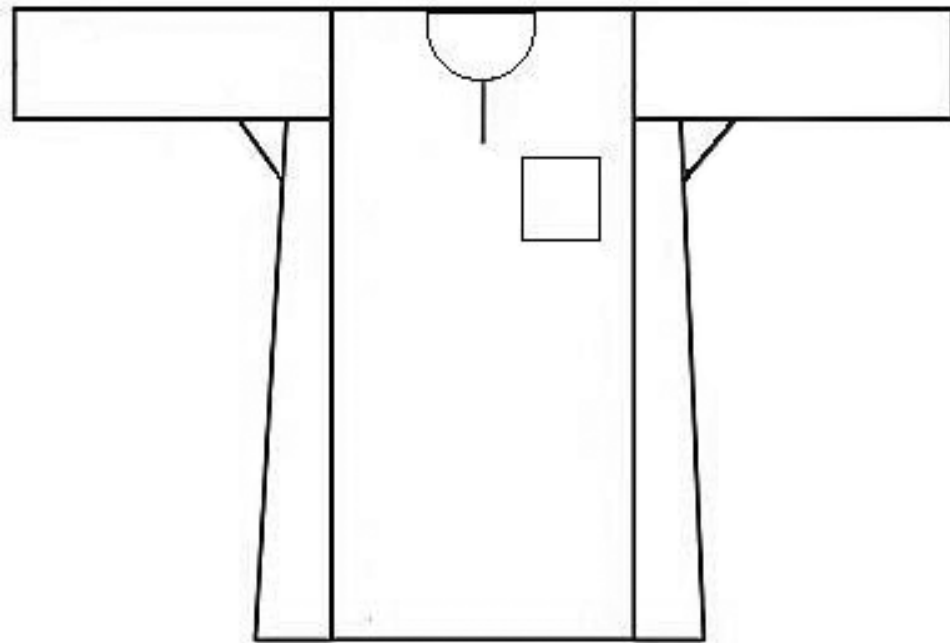


**Photo 3** *Tulang belut* stitching on collar of *baju kurung*.

Source: <http://repairseluarluiselatan.blogspot.com/2011/09/ruang-kemahiran.html> (accessed 19 April 2015)

The sleeves were sewn to a "*kekek*" - a panel at the underarms of both sides, which were also attached to the *pesak* (Photo 4). The top blouse was purposely made loose so that it still fit women when they were married and became pregnant. The *baju kurung* was usually worn with a *sarong* sewed in a tubular form on each side. The *sarong* was always worn with pleated fold on the side in a style called "*ombak mengalun*".

Traditional *baju kurung* usually had a patch pocket on the front or side pocket between the *pesak*. For commoners, the top blouse was completed with a *sarong*, shawl and a simple sandal made from leather or wooden block such as "*terompah*" (Photos 5 & 6). During the Malaccan Empire, leather sandals were considered an exclusive gift, normally presented by merchants, which were only worn by the royalties and their close family members.



**Photo 4** Traditional pattern of *baju kurung* (Ismail 2006).

The traditional fabric was normally narrow due to the use of body looms. Therefore, most traditional materials, including sarongs, were attached to make the material sufficiently wide to comprise a complete outfit. Photo 4 explains the master pattern to construct a traditional form of *baju kurung Teluk Belanga*.



**Photo 5** Wooden slippers used in traditional era. Source: National Museum Indonesia, sandal from Lebak Banten (n.d).  
Photo by Hanisa.



**Photo 6** Another form of wooden slippers with leather strap on top. Source: National Museum Indonesia, sandal from North Sulawesi (n.d).  
Photo by Hanisa.


**Table 1** Summary of pattern seen in *baju kurung Teluk Belanga*

Component	Form / pattern	Effect on body
Bodice	Geometric- rectangle	Gives a loose fitting effect on body, concealing the body in a tube-shaped top.
Sleeves	Geometric- rectangle	The shape of arm is concealed.
<i>Kekek</i> (similar function to gusset)	Geometric- square	Gives an allowance for underarm to make the sleeves more comfortable to move.
<i>Pesak</i> (panel on the side of bodice)	Geometric: trapezoid when sewn together	Expands the size of bodice to give allowance for a loose-fitting shape. Furthermore, traditional weaved fabrics always had smaller width which had to be attached with other pieces/panels to accommodate the size for bigger bodice.
Neckline	Organic: circle with front slit for opening	Basic shape to ease the head to slip from the top.
<i>Sarong</i>	Long rectangle shape that is sewn together at the end which is formed into a <i>sarong</i> .	<i>Sarong</i> is normally pleated manually on the side of the waist and held with a belt, called ' <i>ombak mengalun</i> ' style. It is still loose fitting; it is easy to walk since there is a big allowance at the bottom of the <i>sarong</i> .

### Comparison of the Traditional and the Modern *Baju Kurung* Style


Samples of modern *baju kurung* designs were collected from fashion magazines (namely *Nona* by Karangkrak) and the Internet. Images of modern *baju kurung* were collected from renowned local designers, such as Salikin Sidek, Dato' Radzuan Radziwill and Rizalman Ibrahim, who specialise in traditional-style designs (Table 2–4). The following main findings are based on the analysis.

**Table 2** Designs by Salikin Sidek

Compound analysis	Component analysis	Cultural interpretation
 <p data-bbox="233 1289 413 1312">Source: Salikin Sidek</p>	<p data-bbox="465 656 512 678"><b>Head</b></p> <p data-bbox="465 691 817 808">Decorated with golden hair accessories (<i>cucuk sanggul</i>) complete with a hair bun, without head covering. Other accessories are spotted (earrings) but they are not as dominant.</p> <p data-bbox="465 837 525 860"><b>Bodice</b></p> <p data-bbox="465 873 817 1084">The neckline style remains as <i>Teluk Belanga</i>. The pattern that formed the bodice is similar to the traditional cutting; however the side panel or <i>pesak</i> is made slightly curvy so that it will somehow show the waist in a subtle way. Material used is made from traditional weaved <i>songket</i> with light blue background decorated with gold thread flower motif.</p> <p data-bbox="465 1114 817 1159">Replica of 3-tier gold <i>dokoh</i> or traditional necklace is worn as an accessory.</p> <p data-bbox="465 1188 532 1211"><b>Bottom</b></p> <p data-bbox="465 1224 817 1360"><i>Sarong</i> is still being used with traditional <i>songket</i> material but the pattern is similar to a long skirt. Pleated style of <i>ombak mengalun</i> is not in used for this design. The length of the skirt reaches the ankle, not to the floor.</p>	<p data-bbox="841 656 1193 799">Absence of long shawl or <i>selendang</i> indicates that the piece might not always accompany <i>baju kurung</i> as a set. It also indicates that, without the presence of a shawl, modern women may opt not to cover their hair.</p> <p data-bbox="841 837 1193 1123">Accessories such as <i>cucuk sanggul</i> or 3-tier <i>dokoh</i> were formerly used by the royalty. Having such accessories in common models suggests that such a regulation is no longer observed by modern society. The same goes with the use of <i>songket</i> material, which was only reserved for royalty and their family; now it is available for those who can afford it. This is an indication that current society no longer practices discrimination through materials made in modern settings.</p> <p data-bbox="841 1188 1193 1396">The simpler way of wearing the <i>sarong</i> shows that practicality is most important for busy women in current settings. The waistband replaced the belt that also affects the styling of <i>sarong</i> that omits the <i>ombak mengalun</i> pleating. However, by having the same visual effect of <i>sarong</i> underneath the top, the look of <i>sarong</i> remains relevant in the Malay society.</p>

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Table 2 (continued)

Compound analysis	Component analysis	Cultural interpretation
	<p><b>Head</b></p> <p>The hair is straight and long, without any bun (<i>sanggul</i>). Absence of hair accessories and shawl creates a casual or simple look on the model.</p> <p><b>Bodice</b></p> <p>The top tunic has similar basic geometric patterns like <i>baju kurung</i>, but the neckline is made wider without the <i>Teluk Belanga</i> styling. The length of the top is still similar to the traditional length of <i>baju kurung</i>, but the sleeves are made shorter. The end of the sleeves is decorated with beading (or maybe lace). Visually, it shows the absence of <i>pesak</i> and <i>kekek</i> since the width of the bodice is already big enough to cover the whole body. Motif-wise, it looks like tie and dye (<i>ikat-celup</i>) with white horizontal lines on beige. Material looks like silk crepe with semi-transparent effect, creating softness that can be visually felt by viewers. The inner yellow corset worn with similar colour as the outer tunic gives a resemblance of traditional <i>kemban</i> usually worn during the pre-Islamic era.</p> <p>The usage of 3-tier <i>dokoh</i> with smaller decorations makes it more modern compared to the previous ones.</p>	<p>Simpler hair styling indicates the life style of modern women who prefer minimal or no ornaments on their hair. Such look also suggests a simpler lifestyle and freedom among modern women who are no longer tied to certain guidelines set by their society. However long hair indicates a perfect Malay image rather than short hair; the latter is preferable among modern women or those familiar with the West.</p> <p>Kaftan-like tunic, with more room to move suggests agility and freedom among modern Malay women. Semi-transparent material, which is worn with a corset is a marriage between modern Western influence and traditional pattern on top. As many would say the design may not conceal the body, the style however is similar to <i>kemban</i> that reveals the upper body among women during pre-Islamic era in the Malay Peninsula.</p>

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**Table 2** (continued)

Compound analysis	Component analysis	Cultural interpretation
	<p data-bbox="407 651 801 675"><b>Bottom</b></p> <p data-bbox="407 699 801 821">The way the <i>sarong</i> is draped shows that the model was asked to wear the <i>sarong</i> using a belt. This can be seen in the picture since the fold is not made neatly like a skirt that normally has a neater fold.</p> <p data-bbox="407 846 801 943">The design on the <i>sarong</i>, however, is using the traditional pattern of <i>samrinda</i>; with horizontal and vertical lines, which are very prominent in most traditional textile designs.</p>	<p data-bbox="807 651 1189 821">The tunic is loose, made more like a blouse rather than <i>baju kurung</i>. The <i>sarong</i> which is paired with the tunic was not sewn like a skirt which indicates that it can also be paired with trousers or skirts. The different motifs between the tunic and <i>sarong</i> also indicate that the pairing is quite flexible.</p> <p data-bbox="807 846 1189 943">In the past, a shorter length <i>sarong</i> indicated an unmarried maiden; nowadays, it is mere styling that is purposely made to show off the shoes.</p>


**Table 3** Designs by Rizalman Ibrahim

Compound analysis	Component analysis	Cultural interpretation
	<p><b>Head</b></p> <p>Absence of shawl or any form of head covering in this dress may suggest that the design is not made only for Malays. Netting as an accessory instead of traditional ornaments on the hair shows adaptation to modern fashion, which is also interpreted through the shorter cut and blonde hair style.</p> <p><b>Bodice</b></p> <p>The top piece has similar length (knee length) as the traditional form but is slightly curvy (rather than a loose fitting). The neckline still uses the <i>Teluk Belanga</i> shape with piping/satin tape finishing. Absence of <i>pesak</i> and <i>kekek</i> on the side has made the silhouette of the wearer more dominant, with synthetic material that looks soft and clings onto the body.</p> <p>The plain greyish blue tunic top, decorated with horizontal black lines at the bottom of the tunic and on the sleeves looks modern, even though traditional motifs are not used. Sleeves are kept long and loose with black coloured ribbon decoration on the shoulder to enhance the design of the tunic.</p> <p><b>Bottom</b></p> <p>The <i>sarong</i> is made in the form of a long skirt, with similar fabric and design that matches the top. The length is up to the ankle and matches the black shoes. This simple, straight skirt replaces the side pleated <i>sarong</i> that used to be worn together with the traditional <i>baju kurung</i>.</p>	<p>Without the hair being covered, the design of this outfit does not imply that it is only made for Malays. Simplicity of hair decoration and blonde hair also suggest modernity and the target market for this design that focuses on modern Malays in urban areas and also for non-Malays. The appearance of netting on the face is merely decorative, but it reflects western influence in local designs.</p> <p>The hourglass silhouette of the top is a total opposite from the loose-type tunic shape; this indicates the shifting of the concealing concept to revealing the shape of body. Absence of traditional motifs shows versatility of the <i>baju kurung</i> that can be styled with any kind of materials to suit the trend. The main element of <i>baju kurung</i> such as the length of the sleeves and top are still relevant until today; the appearance of <i>Teluk Belanga</i> neckline connects the past to the present.</p> <p>The long skirt that replaces the <i>sarong</i> shows practicality. Even though it is a skirt, visually it looks similar to the <i>sarong</i> when it is paired with the long top. Even though modern material replaced the traditional fabric, the look and feel of the overall design still resembles the <i>baju kurung</i> but with a more modern styling.</p>

Source: <http://bmalaysia.com/pages/4848912-rizalman-x-tesco-rama>

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Table 3 (continued)

Compound analysis	Component analysis	Cultural interpretation
	<p><b>Head</b></p> <p>The head does not apply any component of accessories. Basic and simple hair style with neither accessories nor shawl accompanies the outfit.</p> <p><b>Bodice and bottom</b></p> <p>This outfit is actually a piece of abbaya or robe. It uses <i>baju kurung</i> elements as inspiration such as <i>Teluk Belanga</i> neckline but is decorated it with beading/buttoning.</p> <p>The robe looks like a two-piece outfit because the placement of the lines is vertical for the top and sewn together with horizontal lines at bottom piece.</p> <p>The sleeves are still made long and slightly loose with vertical lines. Brown shades with a hint of light blue makes the design look simple but pop at the same time.</p>	<p>Absence of shawl or head covering suggests two things;</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It shows that wearing a shawl or head covering is an option to modern Malays, since many also opt not to wear them.</li> <li>2. The dress is made not only for Malays but for other races too.</li> <li>3. Simple hair style without accessories suggests a modern professional working woman with sleek appearance.</li> </ol> <p><i>Abbaya</i> is a popular style that hit the local market recently. It is very popular among Malay women because of its flexibility and easy to wear character.</p> <p>As many designers tried to copy the abbaya style from the Middle East, the designer has localised the design by incorporating local elements to the outfit.</p>


**Table 4** Designs by Dato' Radzuan Radziwill

Compound analysis	Component Analysis	Cultural interpretation
	<p><b>Head</b></p> <p>The hair is decorated with flowers; similar to the traditional era, the positioning of the flower indicates status. In this case, however, the flower decoration is meant to beautify the overall look of the model, without any relation to her marital status.</p> <p><b>Bodice</b></p> <p>The neckline retains the <i>Teluk Belanga</i> style with a brooch to cover the collar slit. The top is similar to the traditional style of <i>baju kurung</i> but the <i>pesak</i> (translate) and <i>kekek</i> (gusset) are made smaller in "<i>pesak gantung</i>" (translate) style; the <i>kekek</i> is also made in the shape of a trapezoid rather than a square. In this pattern, the top is made smaller at the bust line and loose at the hips.</p> <p>The sleeves are made long but most probably the alteration has been made to the pattern sleeves so that they look a bit slimmer on the arm with a bigger wrist.</p> <p>The motif used is '<i>bunga tampuk buah kesemak</i>' or persimmon fruit; this used to be a very popular motif in traditional <i>songket</i> fabric. The colours include a grey background with golden thread <i>songket</i> motifs.</p> <p><b>Bottom</b></p> <p>The designer is using a similar type of <i>songket</i> material to match the top, with the main (head) design placed at the front. The <i>sarong</i> does not use the <i>ombak mengalun</i> (translate?) style but has a simple pleat in front. The <i>sarong</i> is made using a pattern of long skirt, with proper waistband and opening. It is not worn with mere <i>sarong</i> and belt like the past.</p>	<p>Again, the absence of head covering or <i>hijab</i> shows that the traditional outfit no longer has to be paired with it. It also indicates the head covering is still an option by many even though it is a must to cover the hair and neck for Muslim women. However, not wearing the <i>hijab</i> may also be a sale strategy; this does not limit the design to the Muslim market only.</p> <p>Adjustment from the loose pattern to a slightly fitted one at the bust line shows that the design accommodates current trends.</p> <p>Adjustment made on the <i>sarong</i>, using a skirt pattern instead of a typical <i>sarong</i> shows practicality to suit the current lifestyle of women.</p> <p>Placement of motifs or usage of <i>songket</i> does not imply any social status like in the past, but merely shows the design that suits the current fashion.</p>

Source: <http://www.thestar.com.my/story/?file=%2F2006%2F10%2F19%2F15740473>

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Table 4 (continued)

Compound analysis	Component analysis	Cultural interpretation
	<p><b>Head</b></p> <p>Simpler hair style with minimal accessories. Again, the absence of the shawl or <i>hijab</i> is common in current designs.</p> <p><b>Bodice</b></p> <p>The top blouse has very few elements taken from the traditional styling of <i>baju kurung</i>. From the overall look, the only element remaining is the long sleeves. However, the material is made from black lace with a see-thru effect that shows the skin colour.</p> <p>The neckline is modern, with the opening most probably at the back.</p> <p>The overall fabric is made from synthetic material with light blue and black finishing and decoration. A belt with decorative ribbon is a modern addition to the blouse. The shorter length of top blouse is not familiar in <i>baju kurung</i> except for Kedahan <i>baju kurung</i> which has a shorter top.</p> <p><b>Bottom</b></p> <p>The skirt has a trumpet shape that gives a flair at the bottom. The skirt uses a totally modern cutting without any elements of traditional <i>sarong</i> in terms of motifs, type of material or cutting. The soft fabric gives a nice flair effect when walking.</p>	<p>The blonde hair and modern styling suggest that this design is meant for everybody, without limitation of race or religion.</p> <p>The only element retained is the two-piece outfit with a long sleeve blouse; the rest is inspired by modern styling.</p> <p>The bodice and skirt resemble an hourglass shape, which differ from the original loose pattern in <i>baju kurung</i>. It shows that femininity is shown through the shape of women's bodies, which dominate current fashion worldwide.</p> <p>The blouse and skirt have similar inspiration as the concept of the 2-piece <i>baju kurung</i>; however when too many elements are compromised, the look and feel of the <i>baju kurung</i> have been diminished in this design.</p>

**Table 5** Comparison on each component of traditional vs modern *baju kurung*

Component	Traditional style	Modern style
Headgear (shawl, <i>selendang</i> , <i>kain kelubung</i> [ <i>sarong</i> ], etc)	Always accompany the set of <i>baju kurung</i> among women, especially when going out.	An optional piece.
Hair style	Length of hair normally long, bun is common among Malay women. Accessories such as hair pin ( <i>cucuk sanggul</i> ) and positioning of flower on the hair bun indicate marital status among the ladies.	Most models have shorter hair or long hair is tied in neat hair bun. A traditional replica of hair accessories (not worn daily) is normally adorned in photo-shoots. Indication of status no longer appears through hair style or its accessories.
Neckline	<i>Teluk Belanga</i> with finishing using <i>Tulang Belut</i> stitches.	Some designers still incorporate the traditional style, but some also opt to style the clothes according to current trends.  <i>Tulang Belut</i> stitches are rarely used nowadays, due to its complicated and time-consuming stitching. Instead, many modern designs use piping, lace or beading as finishing and decorations on the neckline.
Bodice shape	Loose fitting tunic that hides the shape of the body  Geometric pattern	Varies from loose tubes to hourglass shape.  The usage of modern pattern with dart emphasizes the body shape rather than concealing it.

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**Table 5** (continued)

Component	Traditional style	Modern style
Pattern: <i>Pesak</i> (side panel), <i>kekek</i> (gusset), <i>kocek</i> (pocket)	The side panel and gusset are used as the width of traditional fabrics is too small (since body loom is used). The extension on each side using <i>pesak</i> and <i>kekek</i> are to enlarge the top blouse, making it more comfortable to wear.	Some designers still incorporate the pattern in their modern design with slight alterations. But many opt to dismiss that part since modern materials have wider length (up to 60 inches or more).  Hourglass-shaped top does not need separate pieces as the pattern is organic, not geometric.
Sleeves	Rectangular shape, giving a loose effect to the sleeves.  The length is long until the wrist.	Still loose but some adjustment has been made which is not necessarily in rectangular shape.  Most designs still keep the length of sleeves up to the wrist.
<i>Sarong</i> / skirt	<i>Ombak mengalun</i> folding style on the <i>sarong</i> is common, whereby one side of <i>sarong</i> is pleated together and tied on the waist using a belt. Another common one is folding the end to the front and securing the top with a belt. Positioning of the main motif is important since it will indicate marital status and rank of the wearer in the community.	Most modern designs are practical, to suit the active lifestyle of modern women. Therefore, the <i>sarong</i> is made like a skirt with proper opening using zip and waistband. It is more convenient to wear and easier to maintain the fold as it is already sewn together.

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**Table 5** (continued)

Component	Traditional style	Modern style
Materials	<p>Traditional types of woven fabric such as <i>songket</i>, <i>Samarinda</i> weave, with techniques like <i>telepuk</i>, <i>limar</i> (tie-dye), <i>ikat pelangi</i> (rainbow), <i>batik</i> and many more are used.</p> <p>The fabrics are normally made from natural fibres such as imported cotton and silk (via trade).</p>	<p>Some traditional materials are still used and produced by artisans in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia; however the price is rather costly. Due to that, many designers opt to use modern materials (such as polyester, satin, etc), which are cheaper, easier to maintain and more durable.</p>
Motifs/ lines	<p>Most designs in traditional textile such as <i>songket</i> or <i>tenun</i> (weaved) materials had limitations in the loom; most patterns used in vertical or horizontal lines. Some motifs in traditional <i>ikat</i> (tie) also have organic lines or lines such as in <i>limar ikat</i> or <i>batik lukis</i>.</p>	<p>Modern techniques allow the fabric to have unlimited motifs, which are no longer limited to certain types of designs. This has provided designers the flexibility in choosing the motifs and colours,</p>
Colours	<p>Colours are limited due to natural dye used.</p> <p>Certain colours were meant only for royalty such as yellow or white. Golden thread materials such as <i>songket</i> with full weaved motifs also indicate status in the traditional society.</p>	<p>Unlimited colours due to modern technology that has produced a wide range of hues.</p> <p>Colours and materials no longer have relation to status. But for some occasions related to palace ceremonies, certain dress codes or colours (such as not wearing full <i>songket</i> materials, or one colour) still apply.</p>

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**Table 5** (*continued*)

Component	Traditional style	Modern style
Footwear	<i>Terompah</i> (wooden sandal) or leather sandals. During the Malacca sultanate, sandals were just worn among royalty and their family members.	Many choices and styles range from cheap materials to the expensive brands. Footwear are worn by all, without discrimination based on their status, whether they are royalty or commoners.

Based on the visual analysis, the adjustments made to the form and style of the traditional *baju kurung Teluk Belanga* (in particular) are summarised in Table 5. Unnecessary or irrelevant pieces of clothing or accessories were no longer used in current designs due to several factors. Trends influence the styling in fashion, whereas technological factors change the way the pattern is constructed. New knowledge regarding proportion based on mathematical configuration<sup>12</sup> has made the top blouse shorter than the skirt to display balance in height through visual perception<sup>13</sup> (Horn & Gurel 1981: 317–319). To reduce costs, timely tailoring of unnecessary parts (such as patch pockets or *tulang belut* finishing) were omitted to accommodate mass-market sales and current trends. However, such finishing is maintained in some custom designs at additional cost. Such detailing can be found in most Salikin Sidek designs.

Previous indications of "code" pertaining to status through motifs or accessories that were linked to social connotation were no longer relevant in modern society. For example, the positioning of the main design in the *sarong* (*kepala kain*) during the traditional era, which was used to informally indicate marital status or rank, is no longer pertinent. This phenomenon was mentioned by Derrida who wrote, "When the signified object no longer gives meaning to the society, such practice will cease to exist".

The noticeable variation to the shape of the *baju kurung* from a tube silhouette to an "hourglass" is the most significant element in the modern trend. The shift indicates that the

inner beauty is now translated into a physical look, perceived through the hourglass shaped dresses that dominate the markets. Although most Malay women in Malaysia know that revealing their bodies is forbidden in Islamic teachings, many seem to neglect it. Designers also opt to disregard this guideline based on the modern perception of beauty. The global trend has influenced changes in the local fashion scene where the concept of beauty is often associated with having a sexually attractive figure.<sup>14</sup> The phenomenon of having a perfect figure has influenced the styles of women's fashion worldwide and has also acculturated into the modern *baju kurung* form. This result indicates that the body has taken the focus in shaping Malay fashion. Jean Baudrillard made a similar observation that, "the body has taken over the souls, moral and ideological role as an object of salvation." The body has become a particularly privileged fashion object (Svendsen 2006: 76).

Flugel explained this matter. He believes contemporary society feels trapped between decorum and the whims of the latest fashion (Barnard 1996). Consequently, a compromise is made between custom, religion and current trends, and it is interpreted by modern fashion. It is similar to the compromise made to allow Malay women to work, which was not a common practise in the traditional era.

Interestingly, based on the analysed data, a few elements are still relevant to modern designs, such as the length of sleeves (which should still be long) and the long skirt. Every part of the body is covered thoroughly, even if lace or sheer materials are used on uncritical parts of the body such as the sleeves. It indicates that the Malays do not accept revealing one's skin through clothing, but revealing the arms is somewhat tolerable. This signals that although many elements contradict Malay customs, the designers play an important role in selecting the appropriate elements to be incorporated into their designs. Such consideration demonstrates that the enculturation process occurs when particular elements are selected based on customs and current acceptance level of changes by the Malays.

Non-Malays donning *baju kurung* is also a sign of other races recognising Malay artefacts. Thus, the style is no longer exclusive to Malays. However, when it is paired with

a headscarf, it automatically represents the image of a Malay-Muslim, therefore making the style an identification tool for ethnicity. This observation indicates that the modifications to *baju kurung* in today's context (when it sometimes looks similar to a blouse and long skirt) has weakened the visual identity of Malay women, unless it is combined with Islamic elements such as a head covering. Other elements that may enhance the Malay characteristics in clothing are classical materials such as woven textiles (i.e., *tenun Pahang* or *songket*, locally made *batik*) or traditional techniques used (i.e., the *Teluk Belanga* collar with *tulang belut* finishing). When these traits are combined with other styles, they may enrich the Malay elements but not necessarily enhance one's ethnicity.

The *baju kurung* is still relevant for many Malay ceremonies such as engagement, weddings and funerals. Traditional attire is also worn as uniforms, particularly in schools, the government sector and government agencies. Even so, the interpretations of the "Malay image" remain in the modern version of the *baju kurung* with the addition of the head covering that enhances the Malay Muslim identity. Alterations on its form and styles were made relevant to accommodate modern settings and the lifestyle of current Malay society.

## CONCLUSION

The changes in Malay women's identity through the evolution of the *baju kurung* indicate the creative developments designers have made in an attempt to sustain culture with a modern twist. The changes should not be viewed as an opposition towards Malay customs but rather as a positive input that will enrich Malay artefacts. This view is appropriate to the characteristics of Malays who are open to other cultures.<sup>15</sup> However, changes in the forms and styles of Malay *baju kurung* should always be based on the values prescribed by Islam, such as modesty, decency and appropriateness. Because the Malays in Malaysia are bonded by Act 160 (2) of the Federal Constitution that ties religion and race,<sup>16</sup> local designers should consider appropriateness when styling given that they also represent themselves as Muslims.

Inappropriate ways of dressing (i.e., those that are vulgar or revealing) will create confusion among non-Muslims because such images of Muslim and Malays are incongruent.

The development of the modern *baju kurung* is also an evidence of change in dynamic cultural systems, particularly knowledge, technology and economics, which can be seen through the ideas, artefacts, and activities of society. Further research on the current development of Malay clothing in relation to current designs is constantly needed because fashion changes continuously. This research was based on a case study, therefore the findings may not represent general discoveries, but they may suggest similar outcomes in other related studies.

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## **NOTES**

1. Being modern became synonymous with being new (Lipovetsky *in* Svendsen 2006, 25).
2. The universal cultural system consists of language, knowledge, social issues, technology, economics, religion and arts. In most modern societies, the concentration will be on the scope of knowledge, technology and economics (Koentjaningrat 2008).

3. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Flugel indicates particularly provocative body parts must be obscured from view. Common decency developed after the collapse of the Greco-Roman civilisation. Flugel (1971).
4. The Indian way of dressing called "*pakaian cara keling*" was banned starting in the era of Sultan Mansur Shah when Islam became the official religion. Sejarah Melayu: 60 in Ismail (2006).
5. Derrida mentioned that each culture can be as structured as language, where it can be divided and deconstructed to understand its meaning. Meaning must be understood by society to be useful. Hoed (2002: 66–67).
6. Compound analysis will distinguish the main parts of each design (such as the top, bodice, and skirt/*sarong*). Each compound will later be analysed into smaller details on each component by breaking the elements into designs, such as form, colour, and texture, to determine the differences or similarities in the modern *baju kurung*.
7. *The Concept of Culture and Social System* by A. L. Kroeber and T. Parsons in American Sociological Review, XXIII-5 (1958: 582–583) in Koentjaraningrat (2011).
8. The "protection" reflects the animism beliefs that certain motifs or colour in tradition textile may have the power of healing or protecting the wearer. It can be witnessed in many traditional textiles across the archipelago. Kartiwa, 2010.
9. Tailored garments were developed first in cold climates. They were cut and sewn to the shape and body, thus creating clothing with greater insulating abilities. Marilyn J. Horn (1981: 41).
10. Azah Aziz, 2006: 139.

11. The *batik* trade in Pekalongan is an important factor of the expansion of *batik* designs to other regions that was made to suit the design preferences in other regions. Hasanudin (2001: 203).
12. *Golden Mean Rectangle* theory in (Marilyn J. Horn 1981, 317–319).
13. Because the waist length is normal and the legs are slender and well shaped below the knee, the alteration in visual length should be concentrated between waist and knee (Marilyn J. Horn 1981, 384).
14. Women's sexuality and women's dress in Western art have always been portrayed as one. The conception of female nudity conformed with the aesthetic favoured in the period. The nude is seen in the imagination, and it is likely to replicate the ideal form bestowed on women's body dress styles of the day. Hollander (1980) in Davis (1992: 81).
15. The Malays have a compromising characteristic that opens them to other cultures. Yusuf (2009: 125).
16. Article 160(2) defines a "Malay" as a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay customs and (a) was born before Merdeka Day born in the Federation or in Singapore or born of parents one of who were born in the Federation or in Singapore, or is on that day domiciled in the Federation or in Singapore; or (b) is the issue of such a person. <http://www.kptg.gov.my/sites/default/files/article/perlembagaanpersekutuan.pdf> (Accessed 3 January 15).

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