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Indonesian Muslim Fashion Styles & Designs

EVA F. AMRULLAH

Until a few decades ago Islamic clothing was not very common in Indonesia, but more recently it has become a trend, not only amongst those wearing it, but also as a production sector. *Busana Muslima*, the term used for female Muslim dress in Indonesian, denotes any outfit including a head covering. With this trend of wearing Islamic clothing, various styles have emerged making Muslim fashion one of the hottest topics to be discussed by wearers and non-wearers of fashionable Islamic clothing alike. What have been the impulses leading to the growth and dissemination of Muslim fashions in Indonesia? Where do these fashionable styles of Islamic dress come from? And how are Indonesian designers themselves involved in this complicated circuit of the dissemination of Muslim fashions?

Terms used for Islamic styles of dress in Indonesia are sometimes confusing for those more familiar with terms used in the Middle East. *Kerudung* and *jilbab* both refer to women's head coverings. They may be used interchangeably, but *kerudung* usually refers to a long transparent shawl which covers a woman's hair. The *jilbab* is a longer piece of cloth that almost completely covers a woman's body except for her face and hands. The term *cadar* is used for the face-veil.

In specific settings, such as Islamic madrasas and Islamic *pesantren* (boarding schools), Islamic styles of dress, such as head coverings, have a long history, but the public display of head coverings remained limited; in fact, until the 1980s it was mainly worn by those women who

With the growing popularity of Islamic clothing in Indonesia in recent decades, Muslim fashion has become an increasingly hot topic among wearers of Islamic clothing. Indonesian Muslim fashion consists of various styles and trends, influenced by transnational factors yet maintaining a local flavour. This article traces the development of Muslim fashion in Indonesia and explores how Indonesian designers are involved in the production of sophisticated Islamic clothing designs.

had performed Hajj. Also, the wearing of face-veils was by and large limited to the adherents of the Darul Arqam, a Malaysian-based Islamic movement. It was only in the 1980s that face-veils became more visible with the spread of the Tablighi Jamaat whose female adherents mostly wore this style of dress. The face-veil has become more widespread since 2000 with the growth in popularity of some Salafi groups.

There have often been tensions about the issue of veiling. In the early phase of the New Order regime, wearing Islamic clothing was considered a form of resistance to the state authorities. In 1982, the Department of Education and Culture even decided to prevent female students of secondary educational institutions from wearing a head covering at school, on the grounds that this practice was seen as a violation of the basic code of school uniform. By the late 1980s rumours had spread that veiled women were spreading poison – *jilbab beracun*/poison *jilbab* – under the folds of their clothing. It was only in 1991, that the state, in an effort to co-opt the Muslim community, allowed Muslim women again to wear head coverings at schools and government offices.

From the 1990s on there has been an upsurge in wearing fashionable styles of Islamic dress and motivations to wear these styles of dress and their meanings have multiplied. This greater popularity ties in with the more general greater prominence of Islam in Indonesia. This is, for instance, evident in the growth of women's *pengajian* (prayer groups) led by young *da'i*, Islamic teachers. Some of these charismatic religious teachers, such as Abdullah Gymnastiar, Jefry al-Buchori, and Ahmad al-Habsy, wear fashionable Muslim dress and have inspired Muslim women to adopt not only Islamic clothing but the more fashionable types. Some of these young teachers have even been hired as icon figures for Muslim men's clothing by Indonesian Muslim fashion designers.

Yet, wearing Islamic dress is not only a sign of personal piety, but may also reflect individual and communal identities. For some it is part of a life-style, while in some settings like in Islamic *pesantren* it has been imposed from above. Since 2001 the Indonesian government also has implemented a programme of regional autonomy, which has resulted in some provinces such as Aceh and Bukulumba (South Sulawesi) adopting or preparing to adopt Shariah law, including the obligation to wear Islamic dress.

Influences from abroad

The history of the advent of Islam to Indonesia has significantly influenced the particular styles of dress worn in Indonesia. When ulama and traders from abroad came to Indonesia they not only brought with them ideas and goods, but also the fashion styles from their countries. Styles from Saudi Arabia as well as from Yemen became popular, especially when the men from those countries started to marry Indonesian women. Still the use of the Arabian abaya, a head-to-toe wrap covering the whole body, in early Indonesia was not as popular as the use of shalwar qamiz, a tunic

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Model wearing a design by Up2date

PHOTO BY AZMI, 2008



PHOTO BY ROWELL L.S., 2005

In Indonesia it is mostly worn by male members of the Tablighi Jamaat. The jubba, finally, is an ankle-length garment worn by Indonesians of Arab descent, Salafis, and Indonesians who recently returned from the pilgrimage to Mecca.

With Indonesian Muslim fashion designers becoming active producers in this transnational flow of commodity, they have also been invited to export their styles and to even launch boutiques in other countries like the early example of Anne Rufaidah who exported her designs to Saudi Arabia from 1984 to 1985 and Tuty Adib in Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. The popularity of Indonesian Muslim fashions has been greatly enhanced through fashion shows held abroad such as those by Anne Rufaidah in Malaysia, Algeria, Dubai, India, and those by Shafira in London and neighbouring countries. In January 2008, Shafira launched its new theme "Unity in Diversity" which aimed to design fashionable clothing suitable for Muslim communities from highly diverse backgrounds. Shafira is also planning to open showrooms in Middle Eastern countries and Southeast Asia.

The media have been crucial in popularizing the work of Indonesian Muslim fashion designers. Muslim women's magazines are full of advertisements promoting Islamic fashion and selling beauty products. The three big magazines focusing on Islamic fashion are *Noor*, *Paras*, and *Alia*, which promote a moderate use of body coverage, such as the use of *kerudung gaul* (street *kerudung*) which consists of a simple veil worn with pants, such as blue jeans, and a tight long-sleeved T-shirt. Two other Islamic magazines that had already emerged earlier are *Ummi* and *Annida*. They promote a more body-covering type of Islamic fashion, which mainly consists of a full cloak or a loose tunic with long skirt and a large veil or even unadorned face veil. These journals are strictly against street *kerudung* because it does not cover most parts of a woman's body. Since the turn of the century the Muslim fashion industry has made ample use of websites to propagate its products.

Indonesian designers have also created what has come to be known as *kerudung instan* (instant veil) and *cadar instan* (instant face-veil). They are called instant because they are ready to wear and are designed to fit perfectly so that the wearers do not need accessories such as pins and /or a bandana to tighten their grip. Furthermore, not only have they fashioned new styles, but Indonesian Muslim designers have developed their own fabrics. In 2008, for example, the new trends in Muslim dress use fabrics made of traditional Indonesian *tenun* (traditional weave) while in 2007 batik was very popular. These materials, including also silk, are mostly used for long blouses with pants or skirts and complemented with trendy veils. Even the most conservative styles of Islamic dress, such as the abaya and the face-veil have an "Indonesian touch," as can be seen in typically Indonesian colourful abayas and colourful embroidery and beads on the face-veil.

To sum up, whereas Indonesia has imported styles and designs from abroad, Indonesian designers have turned these into local styles. Whereas it is true that in the past external influences contributed to the introduction of Islamic dress, *busana Muslima* itself is the creation of Indonesian Muslim fashions' designers. They are not only confident of their design skills, but also prefer to use Indonesian cultural products like batik, *tenun*, embroidery, and silk. They have become producers and even propagators of fashionable styles of Muslim dress in these transnational fashion industry circuits.

worn over long pants, from the Indian Peninsula. This is because, first, shalwar qamiz resembles local styles such as *baju kurung* from West Sumatra or *kebaya panjang* (long *kebaya*) from Central Java with the difference that shalwar qamiz is combined with pants while the latter two are usually combined with skirts or sarung. Secondly, shalwar qamiz with its combination of tunic and long pants used to be preferred by Indonesian women active in the public sphere who felt they could move more freely by wearing pants. Lastly, for early designers themselves, like Ida Royani and Ida Leman, they feel that it is easier to modify shalwar qamiz than abaya. It has been mainly the very strict and conservative groups that have adopted Arabian styles such as the Tablighi Jamaat and some Salafi groups.

Indonesian women graduates from Middle Eastern Islamic universities, in particular from al-Azhar University in Egypt, also play a significant role in the flow of Muslim fashions to Indonesia. When these female students return home, they bring with them the Islamic dressing styles popular at the time. In the late 1990s, for example, many al-Azhar graduates brought a new type of material for veils which was colourful and transparent. They also introduced ways of tying and arranging the veil that were in style where they had been studying.

Indonesian designers

Starting around the late 1990s and early 2000s, Indonesia witnessed the birth of sophisticated Islamic clothing designs. In 1993, an association of Indonesian fashion designers called APPMI (the Association of Indonesian Fashion Designing Entrepreneurs) was established which paid much attention to Islamic styles of dress and stimulated their development into modern commodities. In 1996, APPMI created a division specializing in Muslim dress which provided a conducive atmosphere for the growth of Muslim fashions' industry in Indonesia. The designers who are active in this division are mostly female. These female designers do not only design clothing for Muslim women but also for men, teenagers, and children. However, Muslim dress especially designed for men in Indonesia is not as popular as Muslim dress for women. Male Muslim dress is usually worn only on special occasions such as in Islamic festivals. One of the most common styles of Muslim dress for men is the *koko* style which resembles male Chinese clothes. The *kurta* style includes a loose shirt with loose shalwar pants, originally worn in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka.

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