

## *Baju Kurung* or *Baju Kebaya*? Framing the History of the Brunei Women's Fashion

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the relationship between women's fashion in Brunei Darussalam and the historical factors that influenced the evolution of the former in the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s. By employing a qualitative visual analysis method, this study analyzed photographs of Brunei women published in the national newspaper *Pelita Brunei* from the 1960s to the 1980s. Document review and thematic coding analysis were employed to frame and examine the historical context within which Brunei women's fashion experienced a significant spectrum of trends. The findings of this study indicate that the evolution of women's fashion in the 1960s and 1970s was primarily due to a combination of domestic and external influences such as the growth of popular entertainment, education, government's role, and, to a considerable extent, the societal expectation towards women and the Islamic resurgence in the Southeast Asian region. In comparison, in the 1980s, Brunei women's fashion was characterized strongly by Islamic ideals due to the declaration of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB) as the State Philosophy, concomitant to Brunei's independence in 1984. Based on these findings, this article proposes some potential research directions that can be pursued by future research.

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini menyelidiki hubungan antara busana wanita di Brunei Darussalam dan faktor-faktor sejarah yang memengaruhi evolusi gaya busana wanita di tahun 1960-an, 1970-an, dan 1980-an. Dengan menggunakan metode analisis visual kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis foto-foto perempuan Brunei yang dimuat di surat kabar nasional *Pelita Brunei* dari tahun 1960-an hingga 1980-an. Tinjauan dokumen dan analisis pengkodean tematik digunakan untuk membongkar dan memeriksa konteks historis di mana mode wanita Brunei mengalami spektrum tren yang signifikan. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa evolusi mode wanita pada tahun 1960-an dan 1970-an terutama disebabkan oleh kombinasi pengaruh domestik dan eksternal seperti pertumbuhan hiburan populer, pendidikan, peran pemerintah, dan, sampai batas tertentu, masyarakat. harapan terhadap perempuan dan kebangkitan Islam di kawasan Asia Tenggara. Sebagai perbandingan, pada tahun 1980-an, busana wanita Brunei sangat dicirikan oleh cita-cita Islam karena deklarasi Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) sebagai Filosofi Negara, bersamaan dengan kemerdekaan Brunei pada tahun 1984. Berdasarkan temuan ini, artikel ini mengusulkan beberapa penelitian potensial. arah yang dapat ditempuh oleh penelitian masa depan.

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### INTRODUCTION

The history and study of fashion are topics that receive sporadic academic attention, irrespective of the universal recognition of how history greatly influences fashion (Riello & McNeill, 2010; Taylor, 2002). A growing scholarship concurs on the role that fashion plays in making history and the representation of fashion and the sense of dressing as indicators and sources of information about people and their lives at specific points in time (Barnard, 2014; Roche, 1994). Jarvis (1998) argues that the study of fashion before the 1960s is an obscured topic for historians due to the rapid



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temporal evolution of fashion as styles can be constantly replaced by another. However, as the globalization waves had deepened and bestowed remarkable political, economic, and cultural transformations worldwide since the 1970s, history was gradually conceived as a significant backdrop of fashion.

The correlation between local fashion and history in the context of Brunei Darussalam is seldom studied. As shown in the following discussion, past studies on the country's dressings and fashion mention some historical events in the context of Brunei's fashion but without further questioning or analysis. In other words, history was merely adopted as an inert background for describing the local fashion scene. Thus, this paper aims to consider and examine the relationships between local fashion, specifically women's dressings in Brunei, the historical developments experienced by the country, and any other critical social and cultural environments from which fashion derives its influence and significance. By examining the pictorial evidence retrieved from *Pelita Brunei*, the investigation also focuses on adopting traditional Malay dresses, *baju kebaya* and *baju kurung*, during three main decades, the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s.

In discussing the origin of fashion and women's dressing in the Southeast Asian region, specifically in Brunei and Malaysia, past studies generally identify the arrival of Arab, Indian and Chinese traders to the region, which greatly influenced local women's fashion. It was noted from a Chinese report that even the King of Brunei in 1225 wore Chinese-influenced attires (Antaran, 2001). Hussin, Nawawi & Haji Mohamed (2013) also argue that foreign influences from the merchant traders inspired the cutting and style of women's traditional dresses in Malaya. Although it is difficult to argue with certainty its actual origin, *baju kurung* was first introduced to the Indonesians by Muslim merchants from India, and the cutting of the *baju* was inspired by Middle Eastern '*habaya*' fashion. Similarly, another Malay traditional dress, *baju kebaya*, **was also believed to have been borne out of the Arabs' '*habaya*,' which was "a long tunic with a front opening"** (Antaran, 2001, p. 15).

To demonstrate further the relationship between fashion and local historical context, Wahsalfelah (2010) argues that the discovery of oil in 1929 brought about significant and far-reaching developments in Brunei, particularly in the 1950s. The oil wealth also led to the rapid and transformative expansion of education provision, which offered more meaningful opportunities for the population to

study abroad, ultimately exposing them to diverse influences that influenced their way of dressing. Similarly, Hassan, Basri & Abdul Hamid (2000) also identify the degree of influence of the education factor on women in Malaya, where they became more 'independent' and 'active' and consequently led them to be more daring to delve and branch out from the traditional mold of being a housewife which was upheld by past generations. Consequently, this progressive environment influenced their fashion as well.

In addition, Antaran (2011) pointed out the growing popularity of cinematic entertainments in Brunei in the 1950s, which substantially influenced society and could have also impacted local fashion. The findings of Antaran's study are in line with Hassan, Basri, and Abdul Hamid's (2000) study that argues fashion and dressing sense of the Malaysian society in the pre-independence period were influenced by prominent figures in the entertainment industries. The authors also argue that the capacity to seek out and purchase fashionable clothing was intertwined with the boom in the rubber industry, which led to the rising popularity of the cinematic industry and other entertainment outlets such as magazines and newspapers.

Islam has also been identified as another significant driving force in transforming women's dressing (Hanzaee & Chitsaz, 2011; Hussin, Nawawi & Haji Mohamed, 2013; Mustafa, Tasir & Mat Jusoh, 2018; Wahsalfelah, 2010). Specifically, these studies have shown how the guiding principles of Islam intricately influenced and defined the emerging trends in women's fashion, prompting more in-depth examinations of the relationship between religious faith and the contemporary template of women's fashion.

This paper will further clarify the relationship between history and fashion by framing the historical context that led to the evolution of women's fashion in Brunei in three decades: the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s. Factors such as education promotion, entertainment growth, and Islam, identified by past studies, will be considered and further examined in this paper to assess their impacts on Brunei women and their mode of dressing. Other factors such as the societal expectation toward women, the promulgation of the first written Constitution in 1959, and the declaration of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islamic Monarchy) in 1984 will be incorporated into the cardinal focus of this paper and discussed in depth in examining the evolution of women's dressing during the period under study.

## METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research method. Document review was utilized, primarily pictorial analysis, by gathering pictures published in a local newspaper, *Pelita Brunei*. Pictures are still images taken to capture the moment or scene of a particular time, either for aesthetic or memory purposes (Cross & Peck, 2010). It plays an essential role as they have the archival trait (Setiada, 2017), enabling people to get a sense of reality when the photograph was taken, making it a form of realistic representation of the past (Halabi, 2011). Thus, the purpose of pictures for this paper act as a vital visual source and reference in assessing the relationship between history and local fashion in Brunei. Through the pictures of women retrieved from different periods, the authors observed and evaluated the adaptation, transformation, and other processes of change that occurred in the historical context of Brunei women's fashion.

*Pelita Brunei* was chosen as the sole source of the photographs, essentially due to its standing as the only government-sponsored national newspaper covering and reporting on events in the country. As Tanacković, Krtalić, and Lacović (2014) argued, newspapers reflect social and cultural values of a particular place and time and pertinent information that could not be found elsewhere. Hence, *Pelita Brunei's* parameters succinctly reflect the Brunei government's stance or frame of mind when it encompasses formal events and leisure activities to transmit and disseminate relevant information and news to the population. The newspaper also provides the date and the contextual description of the photographs, which increases its reliability compared to undated personal pictures or other sources such as fashion magazines. Such details are undoubtedly crucial to minimize historical inaccuracies.

In this study, a thematic analysis is employed to indicate the association and patterns of women's dressings and historical events during the period under study. The original historical premise becomes the foundational framework for the data analysis. One of the first steps in the data analysis is to examine each photo's historical context and what it depicts. It assisted the authors in projecting possible questions and identifying new emerging themes that differ from the original premise. Such questions and analysis effectively led to the elucidation and opened up more factors that equally influenced women's dressings. Moreover, document reviews also facilitate the data analysis to determine the common themes in neighboring countries, such as

Malaysia, which help entail more similar traits in how the transformation happened - in other words, cross-referencing with other countries to see the familiar or connected patterns.

## THE 1960S FASHION: INFLUENCES OF SOCIETAL EXPECTATION AND EMERGING CELEBRITY CULTURE

The beginning of the 1960s was a pivotal historical moment for Brunei as it symbolized the country began to run her self-government and had full authority in her internal affairs, although it remained guided by the advice of the British Government (Al-Sufri, 1998). The country was in the process of rebuilding its system of governance with its preferred system and practices. This historical process was borne out of the 1959 Constitution promulgated in September of the same year.

The constitutional reforms aimed to localize the governing system while maintaining an acceptable level of British presence in the system to look after Brunei's external affairs and security. The declaration of the hierarchy in the government includes the appointment of His Majesty the Sultan as the supreme Head of State and the declaration of the Malay Language as the country's national language. Equally important is the pronouncement of Islam as the official religion with His Majesty the Sultan as the head of the state religion (Hussainmiya, 2000).

In selecting relevant images of Brunei women in consideration of the 1959 Constitution and Islam as the state religion, it is a natural preference to initially opt for pictures of women in religious events. One of the earliest pictures that appeared in *Pelita Brunei* in 1959 shows women in a religious event before the promulgation of the Constitution in September of that year (Figure 1). Although most of them did not cover their hair, the women wore clothing that was not tight-fitted, demonstrating their respect for the event's content.

Fast forward to 1962, almost three years after the declaration of Islam as the official religion of Brunei, women were seen wearing a sheer headscarf to cover a large part of their hair, as illustrated in Figure 2. The authors also identified several more pictures of women attending adult classes (*kelas dewasa*) wearing a headscarf, which was transparent, opaque, and shorter. This clothing mode was the leading dressing standard for religious schools and events in the 1960s.

On the one hand, the women's dressing appears to contradict the Islamic dress code, which essentially requires Muslim women to cover their



**Figure 1.** Women and children listening to the Quran recital in conjunction with Eid Al-Adha (Pelita Brunei, July 01, 1959)



**Figure 2.** Female Religious Teachers listening to a health briefing in the hospital during their religious workshop (Pelita Brunei, September 19, 1962)

'awrah' (parts of the body that must be covered) except for their face and hands by wearing loose-fitting and non-transparent clothing (Badawi, 1982). As shown by the photographed women, the transparency and shortness of the scarf negate these requirements. In the sense of covering, most of the women in the picture had their hairs only partially covered, to which some were possible with a lace scarf, exposing the front of their heads. The placement and styling of their scarves were still showing body areas that ought to be covered, including the neck and bosom. Only the looseness of their *baju kurung* fulfilled the Islamic requirement.

On the other hand, however, based on the authors' further analysis of the government's official announcements published in *Pelita Brunei*, it is evident that the government at that time emphasized more on persuading the Muslims in the country to observe the physical practices of Islam, as opposed to the dressing sense of the population. For instance, banning alcohol for Muslims was first tentatively suggested in 1955 and reiterated on December 15, 1958 (*Pelita Brunei*, 1958). Another Islamic regulation passed was on the issue of 'khalwat' or intimacy, which could lead to severe penalties im-

posed by the government. A government-sponsored movie, *Gema Dari Menara*, was later released in 1968 to raise public awareness of burgeoning social problems such as gambling, drinking, and breaching Islamic principles of men-women interaction (Slater, 2013). It further indicates the country's priority in curbing forbidden deeds through warnings and consolidating Islamic laws.

The authors also identified another subtle yet forceful factor influencing Brunei women's dressing in the early 1960s. During this period, fashion magazines and big screens were becoming popular among Brunei women, which led to the emergence of different styles regarded as modern fashion. Figures 3 and 4 below show women dressed in *baju kurung* with sleeves tailored off just below the elbows. Examining further the reports on Brunei women and their fashion style, they considered *baju kurung* the epitome of appropriate attire for a Malay woman. Most parents preferred their daughters to wear this piece of clothing. This preference is undoubtedly a clear reflection of the societal expectation toward women during the period. Naemah binti Yusuf, the 1960 *Ratu Kebaya*, mentioned in her interview, despite her liking for *baju kebaya* and *sarong batik*, she still preferred to wear *baju kurung* to the office where she worked as a clerk in *Pejabat Perbendaharaan Brunei* (Pelita Brunei, 1960b). Her preference was mainly because, "menghormati perasaan orang tua2 (tua-tua) yang lebih suka pada baju kurung itu." (Pelita Brunei, 1960b). It means *baju kurung* was not only accepted as appropriate attire for the workplace but also represented respect and courtesy towards elders.

Naemah's viewpoint clearly illustrates how women ensured that they fulfilled societal expectations through their dressings. As *baju kurung* defined conservatism, society would accept the wearer without question. Whereas *baju kebaya* and *sarong batik*, whose cutting could immodestly flaunt one's figure, could raise some eyebrows, although *baju kebaya* symbolized modernity, it was fashionable and was highly pursued by women at that time. Moreover, Brunei women were expected to retain the demureness of Malay women. Thus, taking this argument further, the authors argue that, even though Islam was not yet fully implemented in the 1960s, Brunei women nevertheless observed cultural modesty in their dressing mainly due to societal expectations.

It is also interesting to note that, at the same time, the Brunei government called for greater female participation in society in the 1960s. Analyz-



**Figure 3.** Bruneian students at Kent College, Jesselton (Pelita Brunei, January 20, 1960)



**Figure 4.** Naemah binti Yusuf, the Ratu Kebaya of 1960 in baju kurung (Pelita Brunei, May 4, 1960)

ing further the news reports during this period, the authors identified a considerable number of reports which demonstrated the government's encouragement for women to venture out and be more proactive within their society so that they could place

themselves in the society on par with men in many fields (Pelita Brunei, 1960d; Pelita Brunei, 1961a; Pelita Brunei, 1961b). The government also encouraged women to take up social roles and activities which were not necessarily congruent and consistent with gendered expectations. It is worth noting that the government's encouragement came about amid parents' hesitancy and concerns over the increasingly changing roles of women in society, particularly in the areas of medical professions that were misconstrued as unIslamic practices (Pelita Brunei, 1960c).

Irrespective of the normative standing of the perception of women and their expected roles in society, Brunei's women responded well to the government's call. They became more actively involved in their community and slowly broke out of the traditional mold of Malay culture, which dictated that women undertake their domestic responsibilities solely. They participated in various social events, took up employment, voluntary work, and pursued education. For instance, Naemah mentioned her participation in social and voluntary groups such as tailoring, cooking classes, and the St. John Ambulance paramedic team, which in her view, was also adopted by other modern girls (*"saperti lain2 gadis moden"*) (Pelita Brunei, 1960b, p.6). Thus, modern girls or women could be translated as independent, acquired education and, like Naemah, could articulate their fashion preferences.

By the mid-1960s, the rapid expansion and growing popularity of the film industry in neighboring countries gradually became the new root of influence for women's fashion in Brunei. According to Antaran (2001), since the 1950s, Malay films produced in Singapore and Malaysia have become extremely popular in Brunei. The unprecedented emergence of celebrity-driven culture in the two countries led to a rapid emulation of fashion trends, as projected by Malay movie starlets such as Saloma. For instance, when a tight buttoned-up and almost skintight blouse, resembling a short *kebaya*, with a form-fitting skirt which was the quintessential style from Malaysia, became popular, Brunei women were also immediately showing up in similar dressing style, as illustrated in Figure 5.

Brunei's version of *baju kebaya* in the 1970s consisted of two pieces: a short *kebaya* and *kain batik* as the skirt. Investigating further the source of this kebaya style, the authors found that the style is similar to the 1950s sketches found in Malaya's old magazine, *Majallah Fashion* (Hasan, Basri & Abdul Hamid, 2000). It was rather figure-hugging and considered one of the fanciest styles or trends.



**Figure 5.** Three UK-trained Radio Brunei Presenters with Geoffrey Seymour in Brunei (Pelita Brunei, February 17, 1965)

This particular fashion style was termed “*baju moden*” (Hasan, Basri & Abdul Hamid, 2000, p. 20), which, as the name suggests, is a modern rendition of Malay traditional *baju kebaya*. It could be a risqué route for Malaysian fashion designers who advocated innovative aesthetic expressions in their design. Still, they remained attached to the traditional root of the Malay costume, illustrating a delicate balance between modernity and society’s conventional expectation of women. Moreover, *baju kebaya* could also represent a status symbol and is widely accepted by Indonesian women (Annisa, Rohman & Noermijati, 2020). Thus, due to this subtle connection between modernity, status, and *kebaya*, *baju kurung* was increasingly seen as traditional, or even much more traditional, than its modern counterpart, the *kebaya*. The status of traditionalism embodied by *baju kurung* has remained until today (Nuridin, Hartati & Mahat, 2020).

#### THE 1970S FASHION: ISLAMIC RESURGENCE, MEDIA, AND EDUCATION AS SOURCES OF EXPOSURE

The fashion trends of Brunei women in the 1970s began with a continuation of the 1960s styles. *Baju kebaya* or *baju kurung* option remained ubiquitous throughout the decade. One would also observe that *baju kebaya* had been gradually embraced by society and thus became a part of mainstream fashion. Although the styles of *baju kebaya* were mainly



**Figure 6.** Bruneian students before their departure to Singapore (Pelita Brunei, February 2, 1972)

inspired by those worn in Malaya, Brunei’s *baju kebaya* showed a much looser cutting, gradually morphing into a style that resembles a modern blouse with puffer and looser sleeves, as shown in Figure 6.

The fashion style of Brunei women also showed Western influences. The pictorial evidence showed women wearing trousers and elbow-length sleeved shirts. Flared-leg trousers and blouses were worn for activities such as sports or cleaning campaigns for charity (Figures 7 and 8).

Women’s trousers first became popular around the 1970s with the rise of feminism in the United States. With the technological advancement of media and modes of communication, the fashion trends in Brunei gradually experienced an increased variety of styles, almost imitating what had been represented in television, film, and magazines. The Women’s Equity Action League’s endeavors for feminist organizations had gradually opened opportunities for women to gain better education and work outside their home, which was reflected in their fashion styles which incorporated elements of masculinity such as trouser suits and tuxedos (Hills, 2007).

In addition, the rapid expansion of the education system in Brunei during the decade and the sending of female students overseas for higher education became a constant source of exposure to myriad fashion trends and fashion-forward alternatives. There were only 427 female students enrolled in Malay schools in Brunei in the 1950s (Haji Mail, 2006), and the reason for this low enrolment of female students is due to the long-standing adherence to the local adat which secluded women to protect them from the prying public eyes, and thus reinforced “high standards of cultural refinements such as good manners, courtesy and more importantly, purity” (Kumpoh, 2007, p. 19). It is a contrasting milieu compared to when formal education was first introduced in the country in the first half of the century.



**Figure 7.** Female students from *Pusat Tingkatan Enam Jalan Muara* carried out a cleaning campaign (*Pelita Brunei*, February 12, 1975)



**Figure 8.** Women participating in the *Sukan Ria* event (*Pelita Brunei*, August 11, 1976)

As the decades progressed, such cultural adherence began to wane as education increased in importance and gained utmost priority on the government's agenda. Due to the necessity of being literate for better employment opportunities, preferably for stable positions within the government

system, education became the fundamental requirement of employment (Hj Mahmud & Kumpoh, 2017). This changing perception brought the pinnacle to female students' enrolment in Malay schools in the country, with 8252 students in 1974. English education was also gaining popularity, with a massive number of 4513 female students attending English schools in 1978 (Hj Mahmud, 2019). Similarly, the emergence of Arabic schools also caught the parents' attention, mainly due to the growing perception that Arabic education would guarantee better employment prospects than Malay education qualifications. Moreover, successful completion of the Arabic education in Brunei would offer an opportunity to pursue higher education overseas, such as Al-Azhar University in Egypt and Al-Juned Institute in Singapore (*Pelita Brunei*, 1976).

From the pictorial evidence of female students in religious education (Figure 9), one would notice that, apart from the usual, loose-fitting *baju kurung*, they also wore headscarves that partially covered their hair. Analyzing further the pictures of Brunei women in *Pelita Brunei* in the later 1970s, one would notice an increased frequency of pictorial evidence showing headscarf-wearing women published in the newspaper (see Figures 10, 11, and



**Figure 9.** Female students leaving for Kaherah to pursue education at Al-Azhar University (October 13, 1976)



**Figure 10.** Dayang Zainab Hj Md Taha, a radio presenter, interviewed a guest (*Pelita Brunei*, December 19, 1979)



**Figure 11.** Dayang Salmah Abd Rahaman (left), a radio presenter, interviewing Ustazah Rohani Pawi (*Pelita Brunei*, December 19, 1979)



**Figure 12.** Audiences watching the military showcase (*Pelita Brunei*, December 26, 1979)

12).

One of the main factors that led to Brunei women's increasingly pervasive wearing of headscarves in the 1970s is the global Islamic resurgence, particularly in the Southeast Asian region. Muslim-dominated countries in the region, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, and the countries with considerably sizeable Muslim populations, such as Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, intensified their endeavor to uphold and strengthen Islamic ideals and precepts (Mutalib, 1990). For Brunei, the global re-ascendancy of Islam in many ways reinforced the constitutional standing of Islam as the state religion. Many Islamic activities and practices were adopted, including celebrating essential dates in the Islamic calendar, such as the declaration of the new Hijra year. Moreover, graduates' return from Al-Azhar University lends more stability to the transformative Islamic developments in education provision, banking institutions, and managing religious affairs in the state (Mansurnoor, 2012). Conversion to Islam also increased as groups of established *daie* actively conducted da'wah programs and promoted the ideals of Islam to the non-Muslim population in the 1970s (Kumpoh, 2011; Kumpoh, 2020).

The impact of the Islamic resurgence in Brunei is also manifested in the government's call for



**Figure 13.** Muslim women's dress code (*Pelita Brunei*, October 17, 1979).

women to observe proper Islamic dressing, as announced in *Pelita Brunei* in October 1979. This announcement is the very first inducement by the government on Muslim women's dress code, which showed the proper way to wear a headscarf that should cover the head and hair (Figure 13). At the same time, the clothing should be thick enough to avoid transparency that shows the skin and should be loose and not accentuate one's body curve (*Pelita Brunei*, 1979).

These conditions essentially fulfill the requirements of the ideal Muslim dress code, which, as mentioned earlier, requires women's dress or clothes to cover 'awrah,' the whole body except for the face and hands, based on a confirmed consensus (*ijma*). As mentioned earlier, Islam does not permit women to wear clothes that conform to their body shape, which is a provocation against Muslim modesty. As a result, and as demonstrated in the figures above, women began to observe closely and wear a headscarf in public (Mansurnoor, 2008).

It is also interesting to observe women's preference to match headscarves with *baju kurung* compared to *baju kebaya*. One could straightforwardly take this as an iteration of the preference of the 1960s' modern girl to meet the conventional societal standard. However, this preference could also indicate a mainstream shift to a modest dress code for much more collective reasons, rather than solely for religious or cultural practices, as we can observe in the next decade.

#### THE 1980S FASHION: INFLUENCES OF MIB AND MALAY CULTURE

In many ways, the growing preference for Muslim fashion was in tune with what came next in Brunei's history in the 1980s. Brunei declared her independence from the British in 1984 and concomitantly promulgated Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) as the

State Philosophy. As the State Philosophy, MIB incorporates the three integral aspects (Malay, Islam, and Monarchy) that makeup Brunei's ideological foundation as a sovereign and self-governed country. Malay for the people and language, Islam as the religion it stands for, and Monarchy as a governing system led by a sovereign ruler (Haji Serudin, 1998). MIB also serves ideological and political functions in building the nation, the national ideology, and later defining the Bruneian identity. Evidently, "Malay-ness and Muslim-ness are profoundly significant in understanding the Bruneian identity" (Kumpoh, Wahsalfelah & Hj-Othman, 2017, p. 18). As MIB not only defines the attitudes and characters of the Bruneian society but also encompasses the people's way of life, fashion, and dressing is therefore not an exception to have received and impacted by the state philosophy (Haji Serudin, 1998; Kumpoh 2011).

It is worth noting that the government did not release any official statements similar to those in the 1970s about women's dress code after the announcement of MIB. However, the evaluation of the pictorial evidence in the post-MIB announcement period identifies a considerable increase of women with headscarves and loose-fitting clothing photographed in public and formal events. Moreover, by introducing MIB into the education system as compulsory modules or courses, students attending formal occasions such as university orientation and graduation must adhere to the dressing mode prescribed by the Islamic principles (Figures 14 and 15).

However, this is not to say that there is no pictorial evidence showing women without head-



**Figure 14.** UBD graduates with their family at the first convocation of the university (*Pelita Brunei*, September 27, 1989)



**Figure 15.** Students participating in a televised national quiz (*Pelita Brunei*, July 18, 1990)



**Figure 16.** Female students during the examination for typing class (*Pelita Brunei*, February 17, 1988)

scarves. There are definitely, as illustrated in Figure 16 below. It demonstrates co-existence and tolerance where women were not forced to cover up. They still had the option of what to wear but were also encouraged to observe the appropriate standard according to their context and environment (*Pelita Brunei*, 1992a; 1992b).

From the above discussion, it is clear that the main factor influencing the dressing mode of Brunei women in the 1980s was internally driven. The declaration of MIB, in many ways, set the tacit requirement for women working in government agencies to adhere to the Muslim dress code, and more women adopted headscarves as part of their uniforms (Wahsalfelah, 2008). In fact, due to the Malay and Islam component of the State Philosophy, *baju kurung* which represents the essence of Malay culture, and its loose cutting fulfills the Islamic requirement, was also increasingly worn and transpired as the formal dress for official events and ceremonies.

In line with past studies (Barnard, 2014; Davis, 2014; Roche, 1994; Slade, 2009), the above findings recognize the significance of fashion as a convincing historical representation and depiction of a country's or society's social, cultural, political, and religious landscapes. The novelty and changes that fashion demonstrates and what is considered by a society fashionable at a particular time can be taken as a contemporaneous expression of development and transformation that it experiences. Such articulation of fashion as a historical construct has become more prominent in recent times, mainly because the historiography of fashion seems to be perpetually fixated on modernity and materiality and only complies with luxury and commercialization (Braithwaite, 2014; Van de Peer, 2014).

In addition, as this study demonstrates, the quotidian experiences of ordinary people can also be explored through fashion. The above examination of the Brunei women's fashion trends indicates

their leisure activities, religious classes, schools, and professional training. It means everyday fashion could transcend beyond the notion of ordinariness and triviality. Hence, the above findings can contribute to the emerging scholarship and theoretical concern that pushes for more investigation on the permeation of fashion in everyday life (Buckley & Clark, 2012; Horton, Ferrero-Regis & Payne, 2016; Weiner, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

Assessing the three decades collectively, this paper demonstrates how history defines the evolution of women's fashion in Brunei. Based on the above pictorial evidence, we can confidently use the word 'progression' to describe the fashion evolution of the Brunei women during the period under study. This study also found that external influences significantly impacted women's fashion in the 1960s and the 1970s. In contrast, domestic affairs in the 1980s have been identified as an impetus for the 'return' of *baju kurung* and the adoption of headscarves among Brunei women. By the end of the 1980s, one can also observe how women's dress morphed into the main dress code for government works and formal functions. This paper also demonstrates the credibility of photographs to function as evidence to support historical investigation and interpretation. The provenance of visual images retrieved from *Pelita Brunei* further strengthens the credibility and eliminates potential evidential distortion. By framing the historical context of the visual images, the authors were able to scrutinize the details within the frame of the pictorial evidence before reconstructing the historical depiction and the forces that shaped it. In other words, the images 'spoke' to the eyes and minds of the authors, conveying fascinating accounts and the complexities of the environment captured by the images. Finally, several avenues are worthy of being pursued by future research. One of the avenues is to investigate the adoption of *baju kebaya* in Brunei after the 1970s. While *baju kebaya* grew in prominence as a status symbol in other countries, as discussed earlier, *Pelita Brunei* recorded fewer women in *baju kebaya* in its 1980s edition, and almost none appeared in its publication in the 1990s. Has the growing prominence of *baju kurung* as Brunei's national dress and a symbol of national identity led to the disappearance of *baju kebaya* from the local fashion scene? It could also be due to the widespread observance of the State Philosophy that resulted in the return of societal expectation with a 'MIB twist', which necessitates the Bruneian society,

not just women, to preserve the traditional and cultural values of the Malays. We will pass these concerns on to future research to investigate them more extensively.

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