

History of baju kurung



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The *baju kurung*, a kind of regional clothes for Malay female, includes *baju* and *kurung*. In Malay language, *baju* means clothes and shirts; *kurung* means confinement, imprison. *Baju* is a kind of frock coat, whose sleeve length is to the wrist; *kurung* is a kind of skirt, which is of the ankle length. Additionally, with a 200-year-long history, the *baju kurung* was invented by Sultan Abu Babar, who is the father of Modern Johor. In 1800s, when aiming at creating the *baju kurung*, he considered two main factors: conforming to the rules of their religion and being aesthetically pleasing. As the time goes by, the *baju kurung* has developed into three main kinds of styles. The original style is the Traditional *Baju kurung*. The hemline comes below the knees. Another style is the *Baju Kurung Kedah*. It is similar to the traditional one, but its *kurung* is cut shorter in the hem so that it is below the waistline. The last style is the *Baju Kurung Modern*. It is the modern pattern for women. There are many differences between the modern cut and the traditional cut, for example, the collars in the modern one is commonly accessorized with some sumptuous buttons, while the tradition one seldom has this kind of decoration. Since Malaysia is an Islam country, Islam requires that a woman's clothes should cover the whole body except hands and face. Consequently, compared with modern clothes, the *baju kurung* may look conservative. However, many Malay women still prefer the *baju kurung*.

As Malaysia is an Islam country, the *baju kurung* not only meets the requirement of the religion, but also shows the unique culture of Malaysia. To conform to religion duty is one of the reasons why Malay women wear the *baju kurung*. Islam, with a more than 1300 years long history, has a great influence on the Muslim and a stringent requirement about women's clothes.

As Koran, the holy book of the Islam, says, “ Prophet, tell your wives and daughters, and the women of the faithful, to draw their wraps a little over their faces. They will thus be recognized and no harm will come to them. God is forgiving and kind” (Koran, chapter33, verse59). Furthermore, “ The clothes for the Muslim women should not be so glamorous that it can attract the attention of men”(Asma and Paul, 2003, pg189). Meanwhile, an attire of the *baju kurung* with a sleeve-length frock coat and a long blouse, covering the whole body of a woman, loose enough and not revealing the figure, just fits the requirement. As a fact, 64. 3% of Malay women pointed out they wore the *baju kurung* because of their religion. Besides, as a unique part of Malay culture, wearing the *baju kurung* among Malay women has been considered as a common way to show their cultural identity. As one Malay woman said, “ Not only Malay women, but also many Malaysia-Chinese girls enjoy wearing the *baju kurung* to present that they are in Malaysia,” which indicates that they are really proud of their culture.

What’s more, with the development of Malay culture, the *baju kurung* , which combines the merits of tradition and modern fashion, brings Malay women, especially young women many benefits. First, the modern *baju kurung* adds more beauty, elegance, and safety to Malay women. “ The *baju kurung* is gradually modernized as the fold on the right side of the skirt are varied, boarded, they do not always start from the waistline, and may be shorter and various in length: the modern attire of the dress moves great individually”(Broch-Due, Rudie, and Bleie, 1993, pg297). With the development of modern fashion, and many kinds of colours and embroideries to choose, various kinds of the *baju kurung* are designed to

meet the requirements from individuals. In fact, 90% of Malay women said that the *baju kurung* was beautiful, and they enjoyed wearing the *baju kurung*. Additionally, “The *Baju kurung* is loose enough, the ladies who are fat or pregnant can look elegant when they wear *baju kurung*” (Anonymous, para. 9). Covering the whole body but not wrapping up women’s body, the *baju kurung* makes women more elegant. Meanwhile, the *baju kurung* brings much safety. “It must be loose enough, so as not to describe the shape of a women’s body. So wearing the *baju kurung* makes me feel comfortable and safe, especially from naughty eyes which love to stare at women’s body” (Broch-Due, Rudie, and Bleie, 1993, pg199). While in some extent, the *baju kurung* may cover women’s physical beauty. With a consideration of safety, the *baju kurung* is practical and acceptable. Second, as a kind of national clothes, the *baju kurung* is widely worn in formal occasions, such as wedding, and funeral. One Malay young woman said, “When a woman is wearing the *baju kurung*, she is generally considered polite, respectable, and genteel.” From this view, the *baju kurung* is a kind of formal dress for certain occasions in Malaysia. Third, the *baju kurung* is comfortable and cool. It is true that Malaysia is a tropic country, when Malay women are wearing the *baju kurung*, it may be considered hot and stuffy. However, 80% of Malay women explained that it was not hot at all. Made of cotton or silk, women who wear the *baju kurung* no longer feel hot and uncomfortable.

In short, due to bringing mental and practical benefits, the *baju kurung*, as an unique traditional clothes, is acceptable by many modern Malay women. Moreover, to a Malay Muslim woman, wearing the *baju kurung* not only expresses her loyalty to Islam, but also displays Malay culture to foreigners.

At the same time, the *baju kurung* makes women beautiful, elegant, safe, formal, and comfortable. That's why the *baju kurung*, as a kind of traditional clothes, can be developed and inherited until today. All in all, if one traditional clothes intends to last longer, it can learn from the *baju kurung*, to make a successful combination tradition and modernization.

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