

## ***Kebaya Encim* as the Phenomenon of Mimicry in East Indies Dutch Colonial's Culture**

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### **Abstract**

Clothing is not just simply a fashion's matter. It is an artifact of culture once used to differentiate someone based on his/her ethnic identity and position in certain power field. Dutch East Indies colonial government was very aware of this as they issued the rule at 1872 which required every resident to use 'its ethnic clothing' respectively in public areas. But there is exception in the case of the Dutch, *Indo Belanda*<sup>1)</sup>, *Tionghoa Peranakan*<sup>2)</sup>, and Native women's clothing. They had to wear *kebaya* and *batik sarong* (Jean Gelman Taylor, 2009). The clothes worn by indigenous women of Indonesian (particularly in Java), subsequently worn by *Tionghoa Peranakan* and *Indo Belanda*. From 1872 until 1920 Dutch women also wore *kebaya* and *batik sarong* in their house because the clothes were very comfortable to use in the hot and humid tropical region. To differentiate their position as the highest class in the colonial hierarchy, they wore *kebaya* made from luxury fabric and *batik sarong*, which designs was derived from European style in soft colors. On February 10, 1910 the colonial government issued a regulation for the *Tionghoa Peranakan*: "*Wet op het Nederlandsch Onderdaanschap*" (Act on Dutch nationality), on *gelijkgesteld* which means 'equalization'. This equalization led the rich *Tionghoa Peranakan* women to wear *kebaya* and *batik sarong* similar to the Dutch women's. First they imitated the Dutch *kebaya* made of white cotton decorated with white lace. After a while they began to modify their Dutch *kebaya* to white *kebaya kerancang*<sup>3)</sup>. But at last they wore the colorful *kebaya sulam*, which was embroidered with China's ornament design. These *Tionghoa Peranakan's kebaya* was known as *kebaya encim*<sup>4)</sup>. Since the object of study came from the past, this descriptive qualitative research uses philological method. Data is collected from books that discuss the history of Dutch East Indies society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> until early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interpretation is based on the point of view of Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry and hybridity.

**Keywords:** *Kebaya, Gelijkgesteld, Hybridity, Mimicry*

- 1) *Tionghoa Peranakan* were descendants from mixed marriages of Chinese men and indigenous Indonesian women.
- 2) *Indo Belanda* were descendant from mixed marriages of Dutch men and indigenous Indonesian women.
- 3) *Kebaya Kerancang* (cutwork) made by perforate the fabric of *kebaya* after it had been embroidered to make it similar of lace.
- 4) *Encim* means auntie or simply Chinese women

### **1. Introduction**

#### *1.1 Background*

Clothing is an expression of one's identity because when he/she is choosing the clothes he/she is defining and describing him/her-self (Laurie, 1992: 5). But sometimes, in particular context, a person's choice of clothing is determined by certain social norms; and infringement would be at risk. The rules can be used as a means to establish and reproduce various community groups (Nordholt, 2005: 2). Hence clothing is not just a matter of personal taste or fashion. It is a cultural artifact that can be used by an institution in power to differentiate someone's ethnic identity or his/her position in certain field of power.

In 1872 colonial government applied that concept through the ordinance that required every residents to wear their ethnic clothes in public (Achjadi, Judi Knight, and Asmoro Damais, 2005: 29). The reason is that clothing is the most obvious marker of many outward appearances used to differentiate one person from the others, and in turn can identify someone of a specific group (van Dijk, 2005: 57-58). Clothing is an expression of someone's way of life; a statement to indicate that someone comes from a particular group. Besides being used as a marker of ethnicity, clothing was also used to show the Dutch hegemony in colonial society at the time. The main purpose was to prohibit other ethnic groups from using Western clothes. Undeniably that the rule was created to

support the racist apartheid system which divided the population and to establish social stratification based on ethnicity: the Netherlands at the highest position, the Chinese and the Far Eastern nations at the middle position, and the natives of Indonesia at the lowest position (Onghokham, 2005: 4).

*Kebaya* and *batik sarong* were fascinating phenomenon in those days, because they were wore by women from three different ethnicities (Jean Gelman Taylor, 2005; Achjadi, Judi Knight, and Asmoro Damais, 2005: 33). Originally this clothes worn by indigenous women in Indonesia, but then also worn by *Tionghoa Peranakan* and *Indo Belanda* women. From 1872 until 1920 Dutch women also wore *kebaya* and *batik sarong* in their house, because they were very comfortable to wear in the hot and humid tropic region. To differentiate their position as the highest class in the colonial hierarchy, they wore *kebaya* made from luxury fabric and *batik sarong* by which designs was derived from European style in soft colors.

During the early settlement of colonizer in the Netherlands Indies at mid 17th century, Dutch women wore European clothing, which had rattan frame behind their skirt or *crinoline*. However, since the 18th century they were wearing long *kebaya* and *batik sarong* at home, and wearing European's gown as they were visiting the senior official's wife or attending a mass in church (Jean Gelmar Taylor, 2009: 59, 111, 114). At the early 19th century when the Dutch East Indies was controlled by the British Empire under the reign of Governor Thomas Stamford Raffles, there were attempts to westernize the Dutch and *Indo Belanda* women. *Kebaya* and *batik sarong* were considered not decent to wear, because they looked like underwear. *Kebaya* was considered as a chemise, and *batik sarong* as a petticoat. Therefore, they recommended those women to wear again the European's gown to restore the European's dignity (id et 175). However, following the end of British government at the Dutch East Indies, the Dutch and *Indo Belanda* women wore again *kebaya* and *batik sarong*, even the first class ladies wore it (id et 209). Certainly the main reason for wearing these clothes was because they were more convenient to use in the humid, hot tropical country than the European gowns. However, this was often regarded as something degrading, so that differentiation had to be made through the selection of fabrics that were more expensive (white fabric as voile, *paris*, *batist*, and *antekres* imported from Europe); and decorated by lace from Europe and some luxuries (decorative breastpin strung with gold chain). As for the *batik sarong*, they created their own designs (patterns) derived from European's style such as bouquet of flowers, butterflies, birds, or a character from European's fairy tale as Snow White. These *batik sarongs* were different from traditional Javanese batik, which tended to be dark brown, as they had soft pastel colors from synthetic dyes. Subtle differences were used to distinguish their position as first-class citizens.

Changes in Netherland's political system at the early 20th century supported the establishment of a regulation published in 1910. This Dutch nationality law (*Wet op het Nederlandsch Onderdaan*) provided 'equality' (*gelijkgesteld*) for *Tionghoa Peranakan* community. Although they were only Dutch subjects and not citizens of the Netherlands, the 'equalized' *Tionghoa Peranakan* could enjoy European's privilege. This regulation was made as Dutch East Indies colonial government's reaction over a law of Qing Government in China at 1909 which claimed that every descendants of the Chinese were citizens of Qing according to *ius sanguinis* principle (Aritonang, Jan Sihar and Karel Steenbrink, 2008: 910). This was the Qing's effort to get financial support from the overseas Chinese called *hoaqiau*. This equalization indirectly omitted the exclusivity of Dutch *kebaya*, as the rich, equalized *Tionghoa Peranakan* could wear the similar Dutch women's *kebaya* and *batik sarong*. At the beginning *Tionghoa Peranakan* women imitated Dutch *kebaya* made from white expensive fabric decorated with lace. At the next stage they made *kebaya kerancang* still quite similar to the Dutch *kebaya*. The difference was in the replacement of lace to *kerancang* or cutwork (perforated fabric of the *kebaya* embroidered to make it look like a lace). Then *kebaya sulam* (embroidery *kebaya*) appeared in vivid colorful thin fabric embroidered with images of flora and fauna that have symbolic values in Chinese culture (lotus, peony, phoenix, chicken, etc.). This *Tionghoa Peranakan* *kebaya* was known as *kebaya encim*. Therefore it was batik worn by *Tionghoa Peranakan* women that imitated the color and design of Dutch batik. Then the color became brighter, the design used images from Chinese culture (such as phoenix), and the background was filled with thick texture (*tanahan*). The evolution of *kebaya Encim*'s design in the colonial period is interesting to examine for it showed mimicry phenomenon in colonial society.

### 1.2 Formulation of Issue

- a. In Dutch East Indies apartheid's political system, clothing was used as a marker of identity differences and social class to strengthen their position as the highest class in the colonial hierarchy.
- b. The preference of fabrics, colors, decorations, and jewelry of *kebaya* and *batik sarong* design related to the choice of aesthetics (taste) used by Dutch women to confirm their dominant class position.
- c. The design evolution of *Tionghoa Peranakan's kebaya* indicated the phenomenon of mimicry in colonial society.

### 1.3 Objectives Research

- a. Understanding the power factors that determine the type of clothing based on someone's ethnicity background in colonial society.
- b. Understanding that design's evolution of *kebaya encim* was resulted from mimicry in the context of colonial society that involved ethnicity taste.

## 2. Research Methodology

Since the object of study came from the past, then this descriptive qualitative research uses philological method for interpreting visual information about design's evolution of *kebaya encim*. As recommended by Charles Busha and Stephen Harter (1980), the historical research conducted by:

- a. The recognition of a historical problem that is the phenomenon of mimicry in colonial society as theorized by Bhabha.
- b. The gathering of as much relevant information from literatures, which describes the various types of *kebaya encim* in Dutch colonial period.
- c. Make a hypothesis that explains relationships between historical factors (Tionghoa Peranakan women's desire to imitate the Dutch women's clothing, but in their culture white was the color of bereavement so they changed the color of the clothes).
- d. The selection, organization, and analysis of the most pertinent collected evidence, and the drawing of conclusions; and the recording of conclusions in a meaningful narrative.

## 3. Reviews on References: 'Mimicry' and 'Hybridity'

'Mimicry' and 'hybridity' are two concepts used in two essays by Homi K. Bhabha: *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, and *Signs Taken For Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817*. This terminology is derived from ideas and terminology of Freud, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan. Mimicry in colonial and postcolonial literature is most commonly seen when members of a colonized society imitate the language, dress, politics, or cultural attitude of their colonizers. Under colonialism and in the context of immigration, mimicry is seen as an opportunistic pattern of behavior: one copies the person in power because one hopes to have access to that same power oneself. Presumably, while copying the master, one has to intentionally suppress one's own cultural identity, though in some cases immigrants and colonial subjects are left so confused by their cultural encounter with a dominant foreign culture that there may not be a clear preexisting identity to suppress (Amardeep Singh, 2009).

Bhabha used the concept of mimicry, in postcolonial studies, as a camouflage resulting in colonial ambivalence (Bhabha, 1994: 122). Mimicry was considered as unsettling imitations, a desire to sever ties with 'self' in order to move toward 'other' (Sanjiv Kumar, 2011). It is also the desire for a reformed, recognizable 'other' as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite. The menace of mimicry is its double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. Bill Ashcoft (2005: 142) argued that the mimicry of the post-colonial subject is therefore always potentially destabilizing to colonial discourse, and locates a structure of imperial dominance. Bhabha justified mimicry of the 'other' (colonizer) because 'other' visualizes power in colonial world; thus mimicry is a kind of performance that exposes the artificiality of all symbolic expression of power.

On the contrary, postcolonial theorists argue, based on Foucault's ideas of power as something relationally constituted, that the relations between colonized and colonizer are more of a mutual relation in which the colonizer also changes by the relations with its colonies (Frederick Fahlander, 2007: 18). Though mimicry is

almost used in postcolonial studies with reference to colonials and immigrant imitating white cultural and linguistic norms, mimicry could also be reversed. The reverse mimicry was often referred to as 'going native' (Amardeep Singh, 2009). Bhabha (1994: 126) described double vision and double articulation of mimicry (1994: 126) as a result of the representation or recognition of the colonial object. The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing ... it is as if the very emergence of the colonial is dependent for its representation upon some strategy limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself ... so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace (Bhabha, 1994: 122-123). This failure, according to Bhabha, was determined by hybridity that subverts the narratives of colonial power and dominant cultures. Thus hybridity can be seen as a counter-narrative, a critique of the canon and exclusion of other narratives (Kumar Rajiv, 2001). In this sense, hybridity cannot be misunderstood as a simple fusion of new and old elements into a crossbreed of ideology or practice. Such a simplification neglects the inequalities of power and the very basis of human interaction as well as the knowledge ability of the involved agents (cf. Young 1995, Troncetty and van Dommelen, 2005: 193). On the contrary, Bhabha argued that all social collectives, nation states, cultures or small-scale ethnic groups, are caught in a continuous process of hybridity. They all have developed in relation to a larger context and therefore consist of elements of different origins, which they to varying extent have in common (Frederick Fahlander, 2007: 19).

#### 4. Discussion

Tionghoa Peranakan women were descendants from mix-marriages between Chinese-men and indigenous Indonesian women. Before the Dutch colonial government issued the *statuta* about clothing in 1872, their Tionghoa Peranakan's daughter have already worn *kebaya* and *batik sarong* like their mothers.



Left picture: An indigenous woman (Javanese) wore *kebaya* and *batik sarong* (source from *History of Java*, Raffles, Sir Thomas, 1817)



Right picture: A Tionghoa Peranakan woman also wore the similar *kebaya* and *batik sarong* (source from *Batik: Fabled Cloth of Java*, Elliot, 2004: 95)

The picture from *History of Java* showed us the indigenous Indonesian woman in Java wore a dark long-sleeved *kebaya* and *batik sarong* in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. She also wore a carrying cloth for carrying baby and burden. While the picture from *Batik: Fabled Cloth of Java* (Elliot, 2004: 95) show the old Tionghoa Peranakan lady also wore the similar dark long-sleeved in 1880. Since she came from a rich family, she didn't wear a carrying cloth. She also wore white socks and slippers to show her high status.

At the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century Dutch women wore modified *kebaya*. They wore luxurious fabric (white thin cotton) embellished with white lace (sometimes imported from Europe). Thus while the three ethnic wore *kebaya*, the Dutch *kebaya* was more luxurious to differentiate them from other women from different ethnics. They wore *kebaya* in an attempt to adjust to the hot and humid climate of Dutch East Indies. In this case there was a process of mimicry from the colonizer to the colonized (reversed mimicry), which called 'going native' (Amardeep Singh, 2009).

After getting the 'equalization' according to the rules of Dutch East Indies government in 1910, the rich Tionghoa

*Peranakan* women could wear *kebaya* very similar to Dutch *kebaya*. The pictures below show Mrs. The Djie Koei and her three daughters wore the same clothes as the Dutch woman. The picture of the Dutch woman come from *The Social World of Batavia* (that was taken at Batavia in the late 19th or early 20th century), while the picture of Mrs. The Djie Koei with her three daughters in early 20<sup>th</sup> century come from *Butterflies and Phoenixes* that was taken at Temanggung (Central Java) at the same time. Her daughters wore *kebaya encim* that was very similar with white Dutch *kebaya*. Only that the front of *kebaya* was longer and slanted. As an upper middle class



family, they immediately adopted the white lace *kebaya*, which was originally used only by Dutch women.

Left picture: Source from *Kehidupan Sosial di Batavia/The Social World of Batavia*, Jean Gelman Taylor, 2009: 254

Right picture: Source from *Butterflies and Phoenixes*, Judi Knight-Achjadi & Asmoro Damais, 2005: 170

But soon Tionghoa Peranakan women changed their ‘Dutch-kebaya’ to *kebaya kerancang* (cutwork) made by perforating the edging of the *kebaya* then embroidered with colorful threads. However, this *kebaya encim* was still white with a little bit of colorful embroidered threads. Nevertheless white, to the Chinese, has always been the color of bereavement, so while the Dutch *kebaya* was all-white, Tionghoa Peranakan version was soon enlivened with colorfully embroidered edgings of butterflies, birds with elegantly trailing tail-feathers, graceful peonies and orchids, and even spiders, kittens, and bunnies, and was eventually made of colored fabrics. Underneath the thin blouses, they wore chemise, *kutang*, of diverse colors and embroidered designs. Thus, when doing hot work at home, they could discard the *kebaya* and still be decently clothed (Knight-Achjadi, Judi & Asmoro Damais, 2005: 31). This type of *kebaya encim* was called as *kebaya sulam* or embroidered *kebaya*.



Left picture: White *kebaya kerancang* embroidered with colorful thread (source *Butterflies and Phoenixes*, 2005: 36).

Right picture: Red *kebaya sulam* embroidered with flowered design (source *Butterflies and Phoenixes*, 2005: 36).

If we compare the Dutch *kebaya* with *kebaya Encim*, there are some similarities and differences in material selection, color of fabric, collar shape, bottom shape of *kebaya*, length of *kebaya*, and use of lace as seen on this table.

Table 1. Design Comparison between Dutch *Kebaya* and *Kebaya Encim*:

DESIGN ELEMENTS	DUTCH KEBAYA	KEBAYA ENCIM		
	<i>Kebaya Renda</i>	<i>Kebaya Renda</i>	<i>Kebaya Kerancang</i>	<i>Kebaya Sulam</i>
Material	Thin cotton	Thin cotton	Thin cotton	Rubia, voile (see-through).
Color of fabric	White	White	White	Colorful (red, blue, yellow, beige, etc.)
Collar	V-shape	V-shape	V-shape	V-shape
Bottom shape of <i>kebaya</i>	Flat	Pointed to the middle of front opening	Pointed to the middle of front opening	Pointed to the middle of front opening
Length of <i>kebaya</i>	Hip level	Hip level	Hip level	Hip level
Lace	Broad	Broad	Kerancang (cutwork) similar to lace but it could cover a very broad area.	None

After we have analyzed design elements in these three types of *kebaya*, we can make a table to show the hybridization of Java, Dutch, and China cultures.

Table 2. Cultural Influence on Kebaya Encim

DESIGN ELEMENTS	CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON <i>KEBAYA ENCIM</i>		
	<i>KEBAYA RENDA</i>	<i>KEBAYA KERANCANG</i>	<i>KEBAYA SULAM</i>
<b>Shape of <i>Kebaya</i></b>	Java/Indonesia	Java/Indonesia	Java/Indonesia
<b>Color of Fabric</b>	Dutch	Dutch	<i>Tionghoa</i>
<b>Lace</b>	Dutch	Dutch	None
<b>Lace Design</b>	Dutch	None	None
<b><i>Kerancang</i> (cutwork) Design</b>	None	Dutch	None
<b>Embroidery</b>	None	<i>Tionghoa</i> and Dutch	<i>Tionghoa</i> and Dutch
<b>Culture's hybrid</b>	Java (1 element) and Dutch (3 elements)	Java (1 element), Dutch (3 elements), <i>Tionghoa</i> (1 element).	Java (1 element), <i>Tionghoa</i> (2 elements), and Dutch (1 elements)

From this table we can see that *Kebaya Renda* was heavily influenced by Dutch culture although the shape of *kebaya* came from Java's culture. The color of fabric was white, had the symbolic meaning of purity and holiness in Dutch/West culture. Lace and its design also came from Dutch/West fashion. We could say that this *kebaya* was a hybridization of Dutch and Java cultures.

In *kebaya kerancang*, we could see Chinese influence, especially in the color and design of the embroidery. Flowers, and butterflies embroidered in vivid colors. Although the color of the fabric still white, we could see colorful embroidery at the borders of *kebaya*. *Kebaya kerancang* was a hybridization of Dutch, Java, and Chinese cultures.

The most interesting phenomenon could be seen at *kebaya sulam*. We could see that *Tionghoa Peranakan* women developed their own fashion in accordance with their ethnic taste. *Kebaya sulam* became colorful and decorated with embroidery. White fabric were not used for *kebaya* anymore because this color didn't suit with their culture (white is a color for mourning), instead they use colorful fabric. They favor colorful cloth because it means happiness and good luck. The color and design of embroidery came from China and Dutch/West culture. We could see chickens, hens, phoenixes as well as tennis racket in embroidery design. Sometimes composition of the embroidery very crowded. *Kebaya sulam* was a phenomenon of mimicry, because it imitated *kebaya Belanda* (colonizer clothes) but at the same time subverted the narratives of colonial power and dominant cultures. They replace colonizer's taste with their own taste. It can be said that *kebaya sulam* heavily influenced by China culture than Dutch culture.

## 5. Conclusion

*Kebaya encim* showed a phenomenon of hybridity, which occurred in *Tionghoa Peranakan* women to the Dutch women as attempt to indicate their new higher status in colonial society. But at last they realized that they had a different taste from the Dutch's, especially in color preference. For Dutch women, white did not have negative meaning since it referred to cleanliness, purity and holiness. In fact white clothes were cool to wear in tropical regions since it can block the hot air. But for *Tionghoa Peranakan*, white was the color of mourning. They only wear it when their close relative has passed away. Hence wearing white *kebaya* every day was like always mourning for a kin, although it could be used to indicate their equalized status with Dutch women.

Inconvenience on white began to appear by the addition of colored embroidery in *kebaya kerancang*. At least their *kebaya encim* was not entirely white. But it was not satisfying to their taste and fondness of vivid colors. At last they replaced the white fabric with vivid and bright colorful fabric, embroidered with flowers, butterflies, and other animals that have a symbolic meaning in Chinese culture. But sometime they embroidered with artifact from Western culture, such as tennis rackets. So it can be said that in the first style of *kebaya encim*, which was *kebaya renda*, the colonized (*Tionghoa Peranakan* women) tried to imitate their colonizer (Dutch women).

However, because it felt that the complete imitation didn't fit with their sensibility and taste, they modified their *kebaya renda* into *kebaya kerancang*, by adding colorful embroidery. At this stage we could find hybridity of three culture narratives (Indonesia in shape of *kebaya*, Dutch in color of *kebaya*, and China in embroidery design). The most interesting phenomenon is *kebaya sulam*, which subverts the narratives of colonial power and dominant cultures. The white *kebaya* turned to be colorful *kebaya* decorated with embroidery that was more suitable with their ethnic taste. Although Tionghoa Peranakan women want to be considered equal with the colonizers by imitating their clothing, but use white *kebaya* were not appropriate with their culture. At the end they did not really imitate colonizers outfits, but converting to match their Peranakan Chinese culture.

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