

Islamic Aesthetics and Local Wisdom in Malay Traditional Attire: A Study on Baju Melayu

Khairul Azhar Meerangani¹, Shahrul Munir Kaulan^{2*}, Mohammad Fahmi Abdul Hamid³, Siti Nurul Izza Hashim⁴ & Dawami⁵

^{1,3,4}Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Melaka, Malaysia

²Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA Melaka, Malaysia

⁵Institut Agama Islam Tafaqquh Fiddin, Dumai, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

The traditional Malay attire is a significant cultural identity that integrates Islamic aesthetics and local wisdom. These values are particularly evident in the structure and design of the Baju Melayu. This study aims to explore the presence of Islamic aesthetic values and indigenous wisdom in the design and wearing of Baju Melayu, and how this attire contributes to the formation and preservation of Malay cultural identity. Employing a qualitative approach through visual analysis and document study, the findings reveal that Islamic aesthetics are not only embedded symbolically in the design of Baju Melayu but also serve to reinforce national heritage and identity. The Baju Melayu functions not merely as traditional clothing but also as a medium for expressing religious and cultural values. The Islamic principles of modesty, balance, and simplicity are reflected in its design, while local elements such as the sampin, songkok, and woven motifs embody deep-rooted Malay symbolism. In the modern context, the preservation and appreciation of Baju Melayu symbolize the cultural and religious resilience of the Malay-Muslim community. Therefore, this heritage should be continuously strengthened through educational initiatives, value-based promotion, and faith-driven fashion innovation to ensure the sustainability of national identity amid global changes.

Keywords: Islamic aesthetics, Baju Melayu, traditional attire, local wisdom, Malay culture

INTRODUCTION

The historical development of the Malay world is inseparable from the influence of Islam, which entered the region in the 13th century and gradually became the cornerstone of its civilisation. Islam did not only shape belief systems, legal structures, and education, but also deeply influenced cultural practices and lifestyles, including clothing (Abd. Rasid, 2014). Islamic aesthetic values such as moderation (wasatiyyah), modesty, harmony, and refinement were incorporated into the design and wearing of traditional Malay attire. This created a framework of dress that not only fulfils religious requirements but also represents beauty through a local cultural lens (Adilah, 2016). The evolution of Malay attire was significantly influenced by the arrival of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. Beyond religious beliefs and social customs, Islamic teachings also reshaped sartorial ethics and garment structures. For example, the Islamic prohibition of silk for men influenced fabric choices in traditional attire. Furthermore, modesty in dress and the obligation to cover the body in line with Islamic principles became central to the Malay dressing culture, emphasising dignity and self-respect through appropriate clothing.

Traditional attire serves as a key element in expressing a community's values and identity. As Islam became embedded in Malay ways of life, Islamic aesthetics came to be reflected in various aspects of daily living, including clothing. Among the enduring garments inherited through generations, the Baju Melayu for men and

Baju Kurung for women stand as traditional garments that incorporate both Islamic values and local wisdom. For the Malay community, the Baju Melayu is more than a customary outfit; it is imbued with symbolic meanings that reflect cultural roots, religious values, and social structure (Dani, 2010). As ceremonial and traditional attire still widely worn today, the Baju Melayu functions beyond physical coverage; it serves as a medium of expression for values, identity, and heritage that have developed over centuries. In the era of globalisation and evolving fashion trends, understanding the role of the Baju Melayu as a symbol of heritage that unites Islamic values, and local identity is increasingly important. Thus, evaluating how Islamic aesthetics and indigenous wisdom manifest in the Baju Melayu is crucial for appreciating its contribution to the construction and preservation of Malay identity within the broader framework of Islamic civilisation and culture.

Research Problem

Traditional Malay attire represents a crucial manifestation of Malay cultural heritage, evolving in tandem with societal changes and external influences. The earliest references to Malay dress can be traced to the reign of Sultan Muhammad Shah of Melaka (1424–1444), who reportedly issued a royal decree banning garments referred to as *pakaian atas angin* (Arab-Persian styles) and *cara Keling* (South Indian styles), in favour of a more indigenous style consisting of a sarong, tunic, and *dastar* (headgear) (Siti Zainon, 2009). This decree illustrates one of the earliest efforts to shape a distinct cultural identity through localised dress forms. Generally, traditional Malay attire is referred to as *baju kurung*, a term historically used for both male and female garments. Its loose, tunic-like design, worn over the head, reflects the values of modesty and comfort (Aszulhida, Rosmahwati & Zuliskandar, 2022).

Over time, the term *baju kurung* became associated more specifically with women's attire, which emphasizes concealing the body's shape (Hanisah, 2016), while Baju Melayu came to refer specifically to men's clothing, typically consisting of a long-sleeved shirt paired with trousers and complemented by *sampin* and *songkok*. This transformation highlights the evolving role of traditional dress as not merely a cultural product, but a medium through which Islamic values and local wisdom are harmonised in forming Malay identity. In contemporary times, traditional Malay attire faces significant challenges in maintaining its authenticity. Many Baju Melayu and Baju Kurung garments available in today's market have adopted modern tailoring styles, omitting key traditional elements (Siti Zainon, 1995). Features such as *tulang belut* (fine seam finishing) and *pesak* (side panels) have disappeared from contemporary designs (Hasma et al., 2015). The loss of these elements is often attributed to the lack of tailoring expertise, time constraints, and the higher costs involved in producing traditional garments, which makes them more expensive compared to modern versions.

Modern male designs such as 'Slim-Fit' and 'Tailored-Fit' omit traditional features like *pesak* and *kekek*, aiming instead to highlight the male physique for a more "masculine" appearance (Hisyam et al., 2024). Younger generations are more exposed to these modern styles and often regard traditional tailoring — rich in symbolic philosophy — as outdated and irrelevant. In truth, traditional designs reflect deep cultural meanings and aesthetic ideals. When worn correctly, they enhance the grace and dignity of the wearer. However, the loose-fitting structure of traditional garments is often perceived as incompatible with modern fashion sensibilities that emphasize body contouring. The influence of foreign fashion cultures, which often conflict with Malay cultural values, has further marginalised traditional designs. Traditional Malay attire is increasingly viewed as old-fashioned and reserved only for special occasions such as Hari Raya, weddings, Friday prayers, or formal events. Daily wear of traditional attire is now considered odd or out of place (Haziyah et al., 2009).

This signals a weakening of pride in cultural heritage, as modern clothing is more commonly chosen for reasons of social conformity and trend alignment. The declining demand for traditional attire has forced many tailors to shift to modern designs. Today, only a handful of veteran tailors from older generations retain the expertise to produce garments according to traditional patterns. There is growing concern that if these tailoring skills are not preserved and transmitted, the art and form of traditional Malay dress may eventually vanish — remembered only through manuscripts and archival photographs. Future generations may no longer recognise Baju Melayu in its traditional form, mistakenly assuming that the modern adaptations they see today represent the authentic heritage

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review focuses on two core components that underpin the discussion of this article: (1) the concept of aesthetics in Islam, and (2) the role of traditional attire in constructing the local identity of the Malay community. This review aims to identify existing knowledge gaps and establish a theoretical framework for analysing the relationship between Islamic values and traditional Baju Melayu attire.

a) Aesthetics in the Islamic Perspective

Islamic aesthetics refers to beauty that aligns with the values of the sharī'ah, such as moderation (wasatiyyah), purity, and harmony. While many studies have explored Islamic aesthetics in architecture and fine arts, its application within the context of traditional dress remains under-examined. Aesthetics in Islam is not limited to physical appearance or form but encompasses spiritual, moral, and ethical dimensions. Zakaria (2000) asserts that beauty in Islam is a manifestation of truth (ḥaqq) and purification (tazkiyah), which must be consistent with the principles of tawḥīd and the sharī'ah. Islamic aesthetics rejects excess and extravagance, instead upholding principles such as modesty (ḥayā'), decorum (adab), and balance. According to Nor Azlin (2020), Islamic aesthetics in clothing can be seen in colour choices, loose-fitting cuts, modest silhouettes, and symbolic meanings embedded in garments. However, past research has predominantly focused on visual arts and architecture, with limited in-depth analysis of how Islamic aesthetics are embedded in traditional Malay dress, particularly the Baju Melayu.

b) Local Identity and Traditional Malay Attire

Clothing plays a vital role in cultural identity. Baju Melayu has long served as a symbol of Malay identity since before independence. The convergence of Islamic influence and local adaptation renders the Baju Melayu unique as a symbol of the synergy between religion and culture. Traditional attire often functions as a medium of expressing cultural, social, and ethnic identity. Mohd Taib (1989) states that the Baju Melayu reflects not only historical and cultural heritage but also social status, ritual function, and national identity. It is commonly worn in formal, religious, and ceremonial contexts, such as Friday prayers, Eid celebrations, weddings, and royal inaugurations. The inclusion of local elements; such as the sampin, songkok, and ornamental buttons, signifies a deep cultural symbolism reflecting social structures, hierarchy, and Malay values. In the context of identity formation, Hall (1990) posits that identity is not static but is continuously reconstructed through social and cultural practices. Thus, wearing the Baju Melayu is a cultural act that reinforces Malay-Muslim identity in the contemporary setting. While numerous studies have examined the historical or sociological aspects of the Baju Melayu, there remains a gap in understanding how Islamic values and local elements are harmoniously integrated in its design, rendering it a powerful symbol of both aesthetic expression and identity.

c) The Philosophy of Baju Melayu Design

The Baju Melayu represents a symbolic and semiotic system that conveys the wearer's origin, embedded meanings, and contributes to the development of cultural values within the Malay community. Several elements of the Baju Melayu are linked to Islamic values and perspectives. The attire comprises two main parts: a long-sleeved shirt and matching trousers, traditionally complemented by the sampin and songkok. The shirt features two distinctive collar styles; Cekak Musang and Teluk Belanga. The former includes a standing collar, while the latter does not. The Teluk Belanga style, popular in Johor, is typically fastened with a single button symbolising the oneness of God (tawḥīd). In contrast, the five buttons on the Cekak Musang style are said to represent the Five Pillars of Islam (Siti Zainon, 2009). Additionally, the three pockets sewn on the shirt are interpreted to symbolise 'aqīdah (creed), Islam, and iḥsān (excellence in faith). The sampin, worn around the waist, carries its own philosophical weight, symbolising Malay masculinity, modesty, honour, and the regulation of lust (Guslinda & Otang, 2016). The state of Johor is particularly known for wearing the sampin inside the shirt and for tall songkok headgear, stylistic choices that distinguish Johorean customs from those of other Malay states.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical orientation, focusing on visual analysis and document analysis as its primary methods. This approach is chosen to enable the researcher to explore the symbolic meanings and cultural values embedded in traditional Malay attire, particularly in relation to Islamic aesthetics and local identity as expressed through the Baju Melayu. Visual analysis was conducted on various Baju Melayu design variations sourced from images in books, digital archives, official government websites, and cultural institutions such as the Department of Museums Malaysia, as well as visual media including documentaries and costume catalogues. The analysis focused on several key elements; (a) cut and structure of the garment (e.g., cekak musang and teluk belanga); (b) colour schemes and fabric choices; (c) accessories such as the sampin, songkok, and ornamental buttons; and (d) the overall modesty and stylistic coherence in accordance with Islamic principles.

This analytical framework allowed for a detailed interpretation of how Islamic aesthetics and local cultural symbols are embodied in each component of the attire. In addition, a document analysis involving both primary and secondary sources was carried out. The documents reviewed included:

1. classical manuscripts relating to traditional dress customs in Malay society.
2. prior scholarly works discussing Islamic values and clothing.
3. historical and cultural texts, as well as academic references on Islamic aesthetics and Malay identity.
4. national cultural policy documents and official dress code guidelines.

These documents were analysed to identify the discourses, values, and symbols that directly or indirectly influence the formation and preservation of the Baju Melayu as an emblem of Malay-Muslim identity. A content analysis technique was employed to extract recurring themes related to Islamic aesthetics and cultural identity. Data from both visual and textual sources were then synthesised to construct a comprehensive interpretative narrative.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals that Baju Melayu serves not only as a traditional garment but also as a medium for expressing Islamic values and local identity, both implicitly and symbolically. The discussion is organised around three key dimensions: the manifestation of Islamic aesthetics, the symbolism of local wisdom, and the dynamics of identity preservation in the modern context.

Manifestation of Islamic Aesthetics

Traditional Malay attire is a direct reflection of Islamic values and principles that have been embedded in Malay culture since the arrival of Islam in the Malay Archipelago (Leaman, 2004). In the context of clothing, Islamic aesthetics are reflected through fabric selection, modest design, and the use of simple, non-excessive motifs. These aesthetic principles do not merely highlight outward beauty but emphasise modesty and the covering of the aurah as prescribed by Islamic teachings (Didit et al., 2020). The continuous use of traditional attire by the Malay community reinforces Islamic values in appearance and nurtures harmony and cultural-religious tolerance through dress (Efriyeni, 2020). The design of Baju Melayu generally adheres to the core principles of Islamic aesthetics (Mohd Affandi, 1992), including:

1. Simplicity and Modesty: Loose-fitting, non-revealing cuts that conceal the body in accordance with syariah guidelines. Both teluk belanga and cekak musang styles maintain a neat and simple silhouette.
2. Balance and Harmony: The use of neutral or soft colours (e.g., white, black, blue, emerald green) conveys tranquillity and restraint, key values in Islam.
3. Decorum and Modesty (Adab and Haya'): Baju Melayu not only physically covers the body but also symbolises the refined manners and modesty expected in social presentation. The use of the songkok (cap) completes the dignified and respectful appearance.

Hence, Baju Melayu is not worn merely for commercial or ceremonial purposes, but as a reflection of internalised religious values in daily life.

Symbolism of Local Wisdom

Malay attire is the result of evolving social and cultural dynamics within Malay society. Since the time of the Malacca Sultanate, royal decrees shaped traditional dress as a response to external cultural influences, establishing a uniquely local dressing norm (Siti Zainon Ismail, 2009). Elements such as the sampin, destar, and songkok are embodiments of local wisdom that showcase the creativity of the Malay people in forming a distinctive identity, while also functioning as symbols of social status, tradition, and ethical conduct (Norazit, Hashim & Nor Hisham, 1997). Each cut, stitch, and woven pattern in the attire carries implicit meanings related to harmony, decorum, and cultural wisdom. Thus, Malay dress is not only a visual artwork but also a cultural narrative that records and expresses the collective memory and values of the Malay community (Zubaidah, 1994). Key elements include:

1. Sampin: Indicates social rank, occasion, or regional identity based on motif and method of tying. For instance, royal family members wear the sampin differently than commoners.
2. Shirt Buttons and Woven Fabrics: Feature traditional or floral motifs that reflect local aesthetics and craftsmanship.
3. Songkok: Symbolises Malay decorum and Islamic identity, aligned with the national ethos of Islam as the religion of the Federation.

These garments are not merely worn but lived, serving as vessels of meaning and cultural continuity.

When compared with traditional attire in other Islamic cultures; such as the Moroccan djellaba or the Saudi thobe, the Baju Melayu shares core Islamic values of modesty and simplicity. However, its unique features such as the sampin, songkok, and specific tailoring details like cekak musang or teluk belanga illustrate how Islamic aesthetics have been localised through regional customs and symbolism. The Baju Melayu incorporates local weaving patterns, courtly traditions, and Malay philosophy of harmony and humility, making it a distinct yet recognisably Islamic garment. This balance between the universal and the locals sets Malay attire apart as an example of cultural adaptation without compromising religious identity.

Preservation of Malay-Muslim Identity

The preservation of traditional Malay attire plays a critical role in strengthening the cultural identity of the Malay community. According to Ermy and Azmul (2012), national identity is shaped through cultural heritage and the arts produced by its people. Baju Melayu serves as a unifying element that encompasses artistic expression, historical legacy, and ethnic values. It is also appreciated by other ethnic groups in Malaysia, showcasing inclusivity and multicultural identity within the national framework. This attire represents the continuity of a historical tradition and serves as a medium for cultural education, particularly for younger generations. It also plays a strategic role in cultural tourism, where Baju Melayu can be promoted as a national heritage icon with economic potential (Aris, 2012). In the face of modernisation, Baju Melayu remains relevant, especially in religious and ceremonial contexts, such as Friday prayers, Eid celebrations, weddings, and official state events.

Furthermore, the rise of contemporary Muslim fashion has inspired modern adaptations of Baju Melayu that retain its core values. This study finds that Baju Melayu continues to function as a symbol of religious and national identity, even serving a counter-hegemonic role by preserving heritage against the tide of Western modernity (Siti Zainon, 2016). Its use among the younger generation, particularly in religious rituals, affirms its role as a sustained cultural and spiritual symbol. To support these observations, a brief survey was conducted involving 50 university students aged between 18 and 25. The findings revealed that only 18% wore the traditional Baju Melayu more than once a month, mostly limited to religious events or formal functions. When asked about their preferences, most cited modern styles being more comfortable, practical, and "fashion-forward." Some respondents admitted perceiving traditional tailoring as "too old-fashioned" or "inconvenient" for daily use. These responses reflect a growing disconnect between younger Malays and their cultural roots,

underscoring the urgent need for educational initiatives and cultural revitalisation programs that resonate with contemporary youth.

In summary, Baju Melayu represents a "cultural garment of identity" that harmonises religious and cultural discourses. As a product of rich heritage, it embodies both the spiritual and artistic values of Malay civilisation. Hence, preserving this heritage is a matter of cultural and religious significance. Promoting and sustaining Baju Melayu is not merely a cultural endeavour but also an Islamic responsibility. According to Yuszaidi (2018), several proactive steps can be undertaken:

1. **Research:** Comprehensive documentation of traditional Baju Melayu types, motifs, materials, and cultural meanings is needed to preserve this knowledge and guide designers in maintaining authenticity free from excessive modern influence.
2. **Promotion:** Collaborative efforts among stakeholders are vital in promoting Baju Melayu as a symbol of national culture. Digital platforms and social media can play a key role in sharing the philosophy and cultural narratives behind the garment.
3. **Usage:** Public engagement and normalisation of Baju Melayu as daily attire, beyond festive or formal occasions, should be encouraged. The establishment of a National Traditional Attire Day could foster pride and expand its everyday use.
4. **Support:** Traditional tailors who preserve the craftsmanship of authentic Baju Melayu must be supported. Increased demand could motivate younger generations to learn the art and contribute to its preservation.

Additionally, contemporary generations must learn how to care for traditional garments, from washing to storage, to ensure their longevity. Proper care techniques help preserve the delicate textiles and intricate designs of each garment type. Ultimately, Baju Melayu is not just clothing, it is a visual expression of values. Through its artistic beauty and symbolic form, it contributes to the resilience of Malay-Muslim cultural heritage. By valuing and upholding the originality of traditional attire, society can safeguard this legacy for future generations (Aiman Hakim, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study has thoroughly examined how Baju Melayu, as a traditional garment, reflects the Islamic aesthetic values and the local identity of the Malay community. Through visual analysis and document-based research, it was found that Baju Melayu functions not merely as ceremonial attire but as a physical manifestation of the value system, beliefs, and cultural identity of the Malay people grounded in Islam. The Islamic aesthetics of modesty, simplicity, and harmony are visibly embedded in the garment's cut, colour choices, and dressing style. At the same time, local symbolism; such as the use of sampin, songkok, and traditional woven motifs, demonstrates a close connection between the garment and the social and cultural structures of Malay society. Therefore, efforts to preserve the Baju Melayu must go beyond ceremonial appreciation. Empirical data suggests a generational disconnection that requires both cultural and educational intervention. Comparative insights further illustrate that while Islamic clothing worldwide shares religious principles, the Malay interpretation offers unique local textures worthy of preservation. By identifying policy gaps and learning from successful cultural programs, Malaysia can elevate the Baju Melayu as a living heritage, not just in form, but in philosophy, practice, and pride.

To translate these recommendations into actionable outcomes, existing policy frameworks should be reviewed and strengthened. For instance, although national schools encourage traditional attire during formal assemblies, there is no systematic program to educate students about the philosophy and symbolism behind the Baju Melayu. A more comprehensive curriculum, perhaps under Moral or Islamic Studies, could include modules on heritage clothing and its religious significance. Additionally, successful case studies such as Program Kenali Warisan by the Ministry of Tourism and Hari Busana Melayu organised by selected state governments have shown positive engagement. Scaling up such initiatives, alongside incentives for traditional tailors and fashion-based SMEs, could create a sustainable ecosystem that preserves and popularises Baju Melayu.

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