

Design Principles and Visual Aesthetics as Cultural Manifestations in the Malay *Baju Kurung*

Aszulhida Aman^{1*}, Ros Mahwati Ahmad Zakaria², Zuliskandar Ramli³

¹Institut Alam Dan Tamadun Melayu, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor. Kolej Kemahiran Tinggi MARA Rembau, Pemas, Negeri Sembilan

^{2,3}Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu (ATMA) university Kebangsaan Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Clothing constitutes a fundamental aspect of every society and human civilization, including within the Malay world. The main traditional attire for women in Malay society is the baju kurung, a garment of refined principles and profound cultural value. Emerging from local cultural practices and external influences assimilated into Malay culture, the baju kurung evolved as a complete ensemble. Paired with the gracefully flowing kain ombak beralun, it embodies the principles and values upheld by the Malay community. This study adopts a qualitative approach, whereby the baju kurung is examined through the lens of design principles and visual aesthetics, which are expressed in its artistic enrichment. The research further explores the interrelation between design principles and the craftsmanship of the baju kurung, a garment that has been meticulously developed and preserved by the ancestors of the Malay people. The key principles highlighted in this study include balance (both symmetrical and asymmetrical), movement and variety. In addition, this study discusses the fundamental design principles that underpin the construction of the baju kurung.

Keyword: principles; design; baju kurung; Malay world.

INTRODUCTION

The baju kurung is a traditional Malay women's attire that has been preserved for more than six centuries. Beyond its function as clothing, it embodies cultural identity, values, and artistic expression. This paper examines the baju kurung through design principles and visual aesthetics, highlighting its role as a cultural manifestation of Malay civilization. A qualitative approach is applied, drawing from literature, observation, and cultural analysis. The baju kurung reflects principles of balance, symmetry, movement and variety with inspirations deeply rooted in nature and Islamic artistic traditions. Clothing is a fundamental element of every society and civilisation. In the Malay world, the baju kurung has been the principal attire for women and symbolising refinement, identity, and cultural values. More than a garment, it functions as a cultural artefact that embodies both aesthetic qualities and social principles. This study investigates the baju kurung as a manifestation of artistic design and cultural identity, with a particular focus on its underlying design principles and aesthetics.

Traditional costumes are often shaped by cultural interactions and natural inspirations. Ke Wang (2017) notes that Chinese costumes integrate traditional artistic elements into garment design, demonstrating how attire reflects cultural philosophies. Similarly, the baju kurung draws inspiration from nature, as seen in the flowing kain ombak beralun that symbolizes the rhythm of ocean waves. The purpose of clothing extends beyond mere physical adornment; it also reflects the level of civilization achieved by the Malay community over the centuries. Early human civilizations, identified as existing between 3500 BCE and 1500 BCE (Abbas & Norwani, 2006), have inspired societies worldwide, including the Malays, in developing garment designs rooted in their natural surroundings. These influences contributed to the establishment of distinctive design principles in the creation of traditional attire.

Although certain Western scholars argue that Islam rejects artistic expression, archaeological findings in Malay-Islamic regions such as calligraphic inscriptions, ornamental decorations, and architectural embellishments suggest otherwise (Budi & Syamun, 2018). These discoveries illustrate that art constitutes an integral element of Malay society, embedded within various aspects of life, including the creation of traditional clothing.

The enrichment of traditional Malay attire also embodies implicit principles that invite deeper interpretation. While the basic construction of the *baju kurung* employs only simple lines and forms, the embedded values and decorum provide profound symbolic meanings, reflective of Malay customs and ways of life. Beyond the underlying philosophy, the design principles of the *baju kurung* further signify the cultural sophistication of the Malays, who drew inspiration from natural phenomena in the creation of this traditional garment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a result from the artistic works inspired by nature, it is evident that several principles are employed by artists in the creation of their works. Similarly, the *baju kurung* also adopts design principles in its construction. According to Paul Hekkert (2006), human psychology tends to focus on patterns derived from the environment. This can be interpreted through the Malay textile tradition, which often originates from inspirations drawn from natural surroundings.

The principles of art refer to the methods of arranging and organizing elements of form to produce a complete work of art (Made Suparta, 2019). Such arrangements give meaning and impact to the audience of these artistic creations. The same applies to traditional Malay attire, which integrates multiple design principles to imbue it with both cultural value and practical function. These principles form the foundation of visual art, emphasizing aspects such as unity, balance, rhythm, and harmony (Uswatun & Fuad, 2020). Consequently, these principles shape Malay artistic expression, which is rich in natural elements and symbolic values.

Design principles are the foundation for generating ideas on how elements of art and design are applied in artistic creation (Aris Darisman, 2012). They allow the audience to interpret artwork based on implicit meanings embedded within them. In the Islamic context, art is understood as the pursuit of beauty. Al-Ghazali defined beauty in Islam as both the external form perceived by the physical eye and the internal form comprehended by the spiritual eye (Budi & Syam'un, 2018). This view reflects Malay and Islamic perceptions of art, which parallel Western concepts of design elements and principles, yet are deeply rooted in spiritual and cultural values.

Art appreciation may be observed through two primary aspects: the desire to examine artistic elements and aesthetic beauty within the work, and the expression of feelings and emotions derived from lived experiences through art (Norhayati & Humin, 2016). Such appreciation can be applied to the study of the *baju kurung*, where every design, cutting, and structure of the traditional attire carries embedded meanings. Although the Malay community historically did not receive formal education in textile production, they nonetheless demonstrated remarkable skills and creativity (Ismail, Abd Rasid & Hassan, 2016). This is evident in the wide range of Malay textiles produced, which are characterized by diversity, uniqueness, and aesthetic ingenuity and have been used until now.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on cultural observation and interpretative analysis. Primary data is derived from visual examination of the *baju kurung* in terms of form, lines, and motifs, while secondary data is sourced from academic works, historical texts, and cultural studies. Analysis is conducted using principles of design which is balance, simetry balance, movement and variety, as the framework for interpretation.

Other than that, the qualitative method on this research analyzing the design elements and principles present in the *baju kurung* as one of the cultural heritages of the Malay community. In addition to data derived directly from the garment itself, the design elements and principles are examined as primary aspects of analysis by collecting information on Malay traditional attire and its relationship to artistic and design principles. Although the *baju kurung* may appear simple compared to traditional Western garments, such as the elaborate costumes

of the Renaissance period, it nonetheless embodies diverse principles, as well as profound values and functions for its wearer.

The explanation of design principles and aesthetics will be elaborated according to the elements identified in the *baju kurung*. These principles also carry symbolic meanings within clothing that has been created by the Malay community for centuries. The arrangement of each element reflects the values of the Malays, who uphold customs and Islamic teachings that have been passed down through generations.

Principles Of Design and Art

Design principles represent a method and approach in the organization of artistic elements to convey specific meanings in the creation of an artwork. The principles of design and art refer to aspects that cannot be interpreted merely through the naked eye; rather, they serve as a framework to interpret the underlying essence of an artistic work. They function as a method for discerning implicit meanings embedded within artistic expressions. In the creation of the traditional *baju kurung* of the Malay community, these artistic principles are also applied and can be interpreted through the garment's structure and cut. Among the design principles manifested in the *baju kurung* are symmetry, balance, movement, and others.

In addition, there are organizational principles in structured composition that can be analyzed from the different types of *baju kurung* attire, such as those found in Palembang society. The creation of artwork must consider principles of composition, as they are considered essential in shaping aesthetic forms. An artistic work is understood as an organic whole in which every part or element plays a role not only in its individual framework but also in relation to all other parts or elements (Liang Gie, 1996: 18–20). Hence, in this regard, no artistic component can stand alone but must interact cohesively with other components to constitute an organic whole. (Effriyeni, Tjetjep & Triyanto, 2020).

Harmony, balance, symmetry, movement, variety, unity, and contrast are among the elements found in the principles of design. These principles can be observed in the design of the *baju kurung* across the Malay world. Although at first glance the attire appears simple, it encompasses multiple layers of interpretation that symbolize both the garment and its wearer.

According to Norhayati and Humin (2016), every product or work of art embodies complementary aspects such as refinement, craftsmanship, design, function, and form. These elements are also evident in the *baju kurung* discussed in this study. Each element represented by the *baju kurung* symbolizes the sophistication of Malay civilization. The specific principles of design and art embedded in traditional Malay attire will be further discussed in the following section. In this discussion, several design principles embodied in the *baju kurung* are analysed as follows.

Balance

The cutting of the *baju kurung* demonstrates balance in its structural pattern, where the garment is tailored in several sections—such as the bodice and sleeves—which are then joined into a single body piece. This composition forms the foundational structure of the traditional attire, rendering it balanced between the left and right sides of the garment.

However, this differs from certain earlier versions of the *baju kurung*, particularly during the 1970s, in which the traditional attire of Malay women was sewn with a pocket on the left side. This addition disrupted the garment's overall symmetry, creating an impression of imbalance, as the pocketed side appeared visually heavier than the other.

Balance can be divided into two categories: symmetrical and asymmetrical balance. The concept of symmetry has long existed, dating back to the 18th century when the Greek term *symmetria* and the Latin *symmetros* were used in reference to Roman architectural theories. Vitruvius, in his 16th-century treatise *Ten Books on Architecture*, described symmetry as the spatial order of objects within architectural forms.

The measurement of balance in a work of art is not solely determined by the symmetrical placement of objects at the center of a composition (Made Suparta, 2019). It also involves the proportionate arrangement of elements

according to size and spatial distribution. Within the context of the *baju kurung*, symmetry is observable in the design of its structural pattern, particularly in the alignment from left to right. The division along the central axis of this traditional garment results in two visually identical sections.

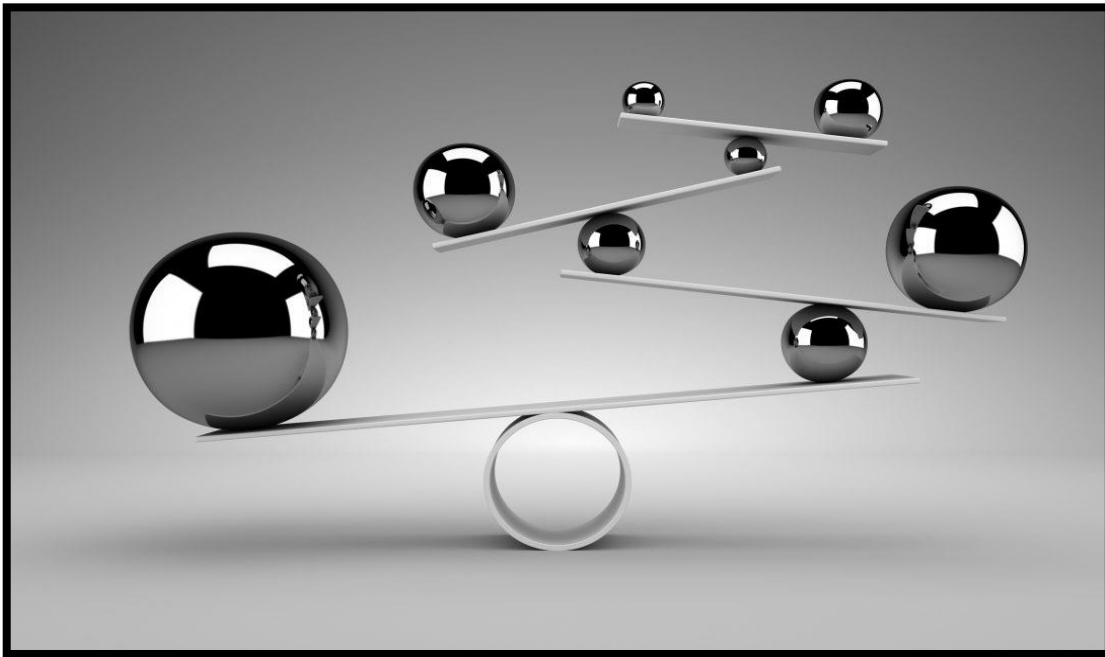


Figure 1 illustrates balance as one of the principles of design and art.

Source: Pinterest website.

The diagram below demonstrates an element comprising spheres of varying sizes, where the larger sphere initially appears visually dominant. Nevertheless, upon closer interpretation, the composition reflects an equilibrium despite its asymmetry, thereby exemplifying the principle of balance in the context of art and design. The arrangement of patterns and the placement of colours employed in the design contribute to a composition that appears visually balanced.



Figure 2 illustrates symmetrical balance within the principles of design and art.

Source: Pinterest website.

These two figures above clearly demonstrate the characteristics of symmetrical balance, despite being composed of various shapes and colors. The symmetrical quality is evident through the balanced use of color and the precise placement of lines. In relation to the *baju kurung*, symmetry is reflected in the balanced cuts of the garment, where the right and left sides are identical in the design of both the body and sleeves. Interpreted from a design principal perspective, this traditional Malay attire does not exhibit imbalance but instead embodies a complete and harmonious equilibrium overall.

This balance is derived from the simple geometric cut of fabric, which is transformed into a garment of complete value and function. The uniqueness of this traditional attire lies in its identical rectangular cuts of varying sizes, which are then assembled into a complete outfit. The meaning of balance in design principles refers to a condition in which an artwork or design produces a visual arrangement that is stable and harmonious. It conveys the impression that the objects or elements within the composition will not appear tilted, falling, or lopsided. With the presence of balance, the artwork appears orderly, with equilibrium maintained between the left and right, as well as the upper and lower parts, thereby creating a sense of comfort and calmness for the viewer.

Symmetry Balance

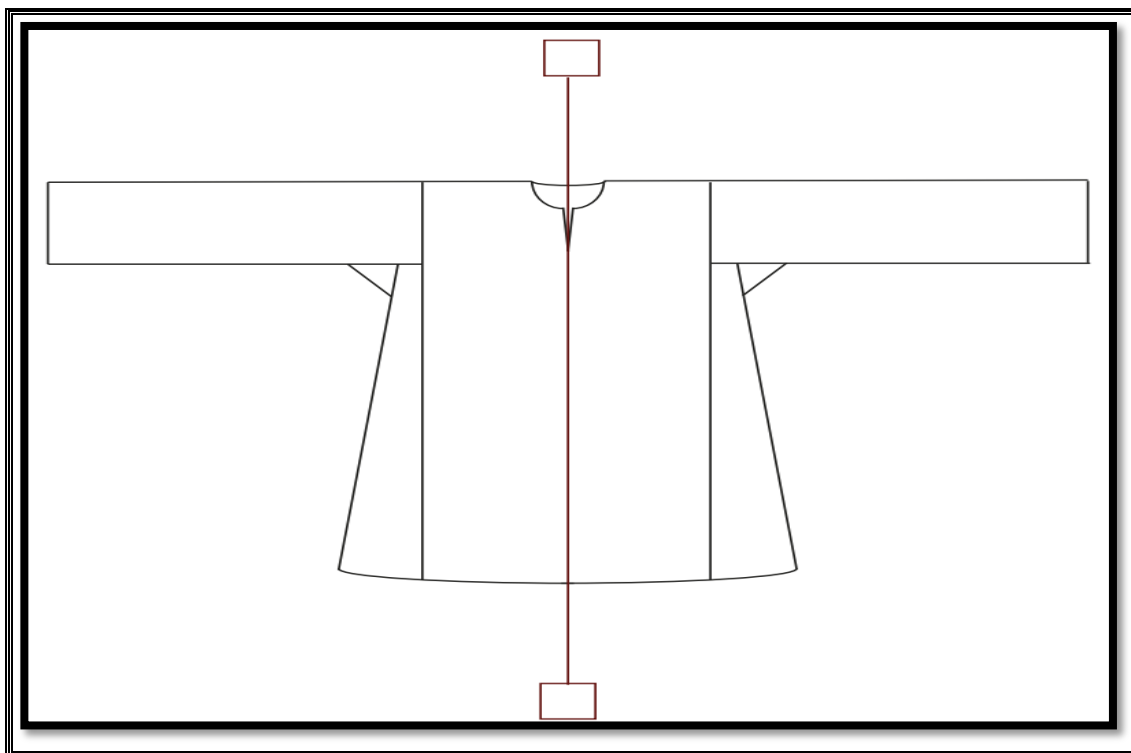


Figure 3 illustrates a *baju kurung* with a central split, symbolizing symmetrical balance.

Source: Author's illustration.

The illustrated *baju kurung* provides a significant interpretation that this traditional Malay attire exemplifies the principle of symmetrical balance, achieved through geometric fabric cuts that collectively construct a garment conceptualized by the Malay community and transmitted across generations. The symmetrical balance is manifested through the right and left sections of the *baju kurung*, in which each structural component—comprising the body, sleeves, *kekek*, and *pesak*—is designed in identical proportions without additional modification, thereby maintaining equilibrium throughout the garment.

This structural composition reflects not only the technical precision of Malay tailoring but also a cultural philosophy that values balance, harmony, and continuity. The reliance on geometric cutting techniques has inspired the creation of a traditional women's attire that continues to endure in contemporary fashion contexts. Despite the proliferation of modern design trends, the *baju kurung* has retained its symbolic relevance and aesthetic functionality, signifying a heritage of design that has been preserved, adapted, and legitimized as an enduring cultural identity

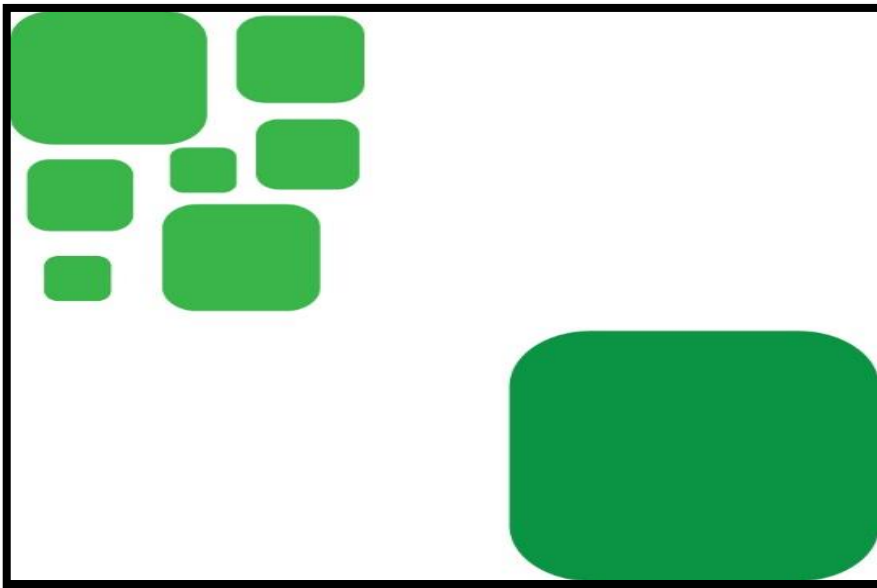


Figure 4 illustrates asymmetrical balance within the principles of design and art.

Source: Pinterest.

The figure above demonstrates symmetrical balance, although at first glance the patterns appear to differ in size. However, when assessed through the principles of design, the composition reveals a balanced arrangement. If a single point is added to one side, the image above would no longer be considered balanced, as illustrated in the figure below. The addition of a small object on the chest area of the *baju kurung* disrupts the overall symmetry, rendering the design unbalanced in terms of design principles.

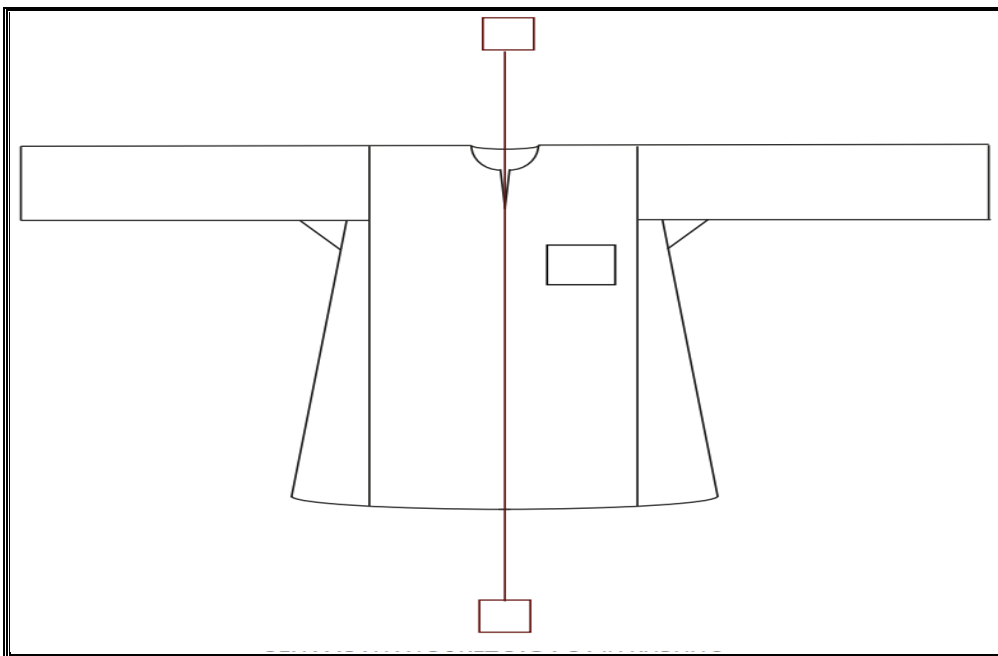


Figure 5: *Baju kurung* with an added pocket and creates a condition of asymmetrical balance

Source: Author's illustration.

As previously stated, there are two types of balance, namely symmetrical balance and asymmetrical balance. The figure above illustrates asymmetrical balance, where the addition of a pocket on the *baju kurung* creates a lopsided appearance, in contrast to symmetrical balance. This type of balance is not typically applied in the pattern construction of other traditional Malay women's attire such as the *baju kebaya* or *baju Kedah*, in which the design consistently retains its symmetrical balance.

Movement

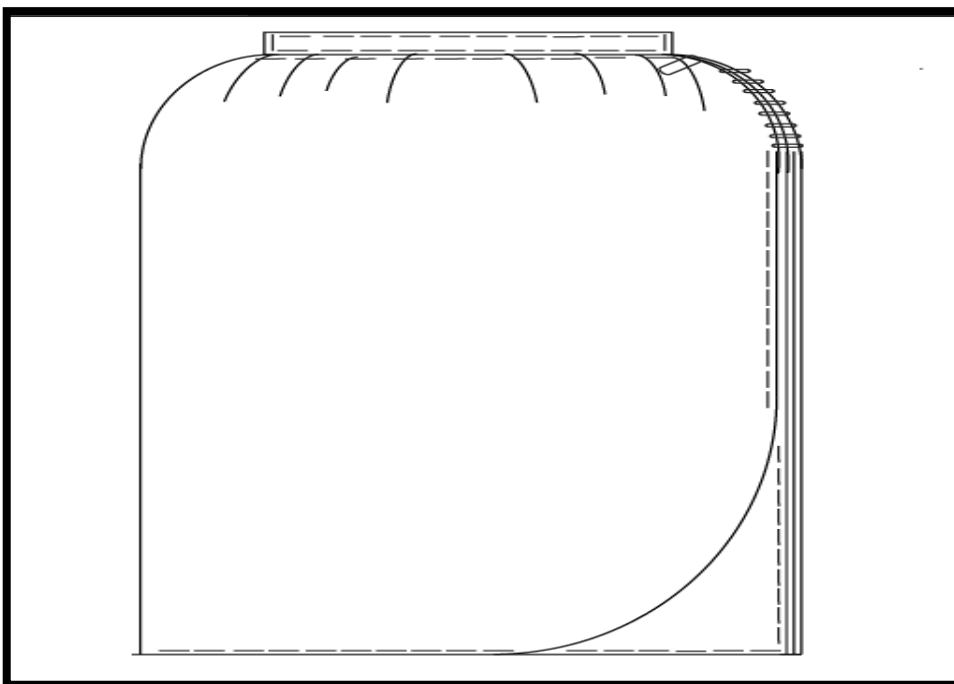
In addition to balance, another design principle applied in traditional Malay women's attire is movement. This is reflected in the paired fabric known as *ombak beralun* (literally, "rolling waves"), named after the pleated edge that resembles the flowing form of ocean waves. This characteristic can be interpreted through the design principle of movement as embodied in the fabric of the *baju kurung*. Moreover, the *sarong* that accompanies the attire visually evokes the rhythmic motion of waves lapping along the shoreline.

Beyond its aesthetic role, this element of movement in Malay women's clothing also serves a functional purpose. Apart from covering the body, the *ombak beralun* pleats make the garment more practical, allowing the wearer greater ease of movement when walking.



Figure 6 illustrates the principle of movement in design and art.

Source: <https://inklingcreative.ink/movement/>



The figure above refers to the *kain ombak beralun* (wave-patterned cloth) created by the Malay community.

Source: Illustration by the author.

The *kain ombak beralun*, or wave-patterned cloth, constitutes a complementary garment to traditional Malay attire. Fundamentally, it is a piece of woven sarong cloth produced by the Malay community, which was adapted for multiple uses such as a sarong, head covering, bathing cloth, cradle cloth, and so forth. When it is worn as part of traditional dress, the *kain ombak beralun* is fastened at the waist and folded several times on one side only.

The impact of this single-sided folding is that, as the wearer moves, the fabric appears to undulate like waves. This effect is not easily perceptible to the naked eye but becomes evident when examined through the lens of design and artistic principles. The movement created by these folds provides the wearer with comfort and practicality when they dress the *baju kurung* paired with the sarong. However, in contemporary times, younger generations tend to show less interest in *kain ombak beralun*, because it appears less aligned with modern fashion trends.

Variety

In addition to the principles discussed above, there is another principle, namely variety. Variety is one of the core principles of design and art within the discipline of visual arts. It represents the incorporation of multiple values, styles, techniques, and media in the creation of an artwork. The application of variety can, in turn, generate the principle of unity. In the design of the *baju kurung*, various fabric cuts are assembled to form a complete garment, paired with a sarong. The element of variety within the *baju kurung* lies in the different sizes and shapes of fabric pieces joined together, such as the *kekek* and *pesak*. The *pesak* itself is diversified by the Malay community, as there are multiple types found in traditional attire, including the *pesak biasa*, *pesak gantung*, and *pesak buluh*.

Variety in the *baju kurung* is further reflected in the construction process, where different fabric sections such as the body, sleeves, *kekek*, and *pesak* are combined. Additionally, this variety is evident in the decorative stitching techniques applied to the neckline, which may include *tulang belut*, *mata lalat*, and *cengkerang* finishes.



Figure 7: A Kelantanese girl plucking tobacco leaves paint by Hoessein Enas

Source: Pinterest website

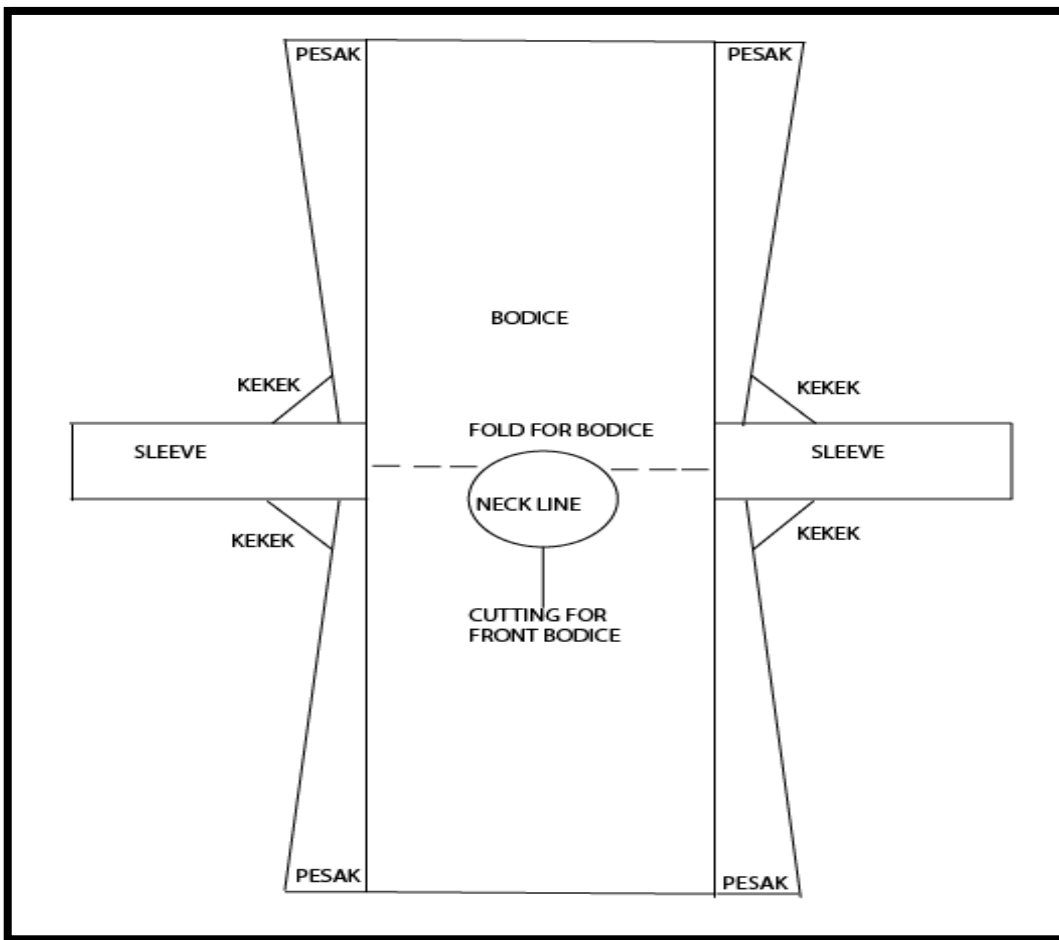


Figure 8: Variety of cutting in geometry shape in the *baju kurung*.

Source: Illustration by the author.

As can be observed, the *baju kurung* pattern consists of more than one fabric piece, namely the body, sleeves, *kekek*, and *pesak*. Through this variety of cuttings, once assembled, it forms a proper garment suitable for wear. The diverse pieces of fabric also vary in measurement, yet they can be combined and matched with one another. This element of variety is further evident in the different styles of *pesak* used in the *baju kurung*, such as the *pesak buluh* and *pesak gantung*.

In addition, the variety in dimensions of each garment component—such as width and length, which differ according to the preferences of the women wearing it—contributes to the comfort and adaptability of the *baju kurung* as an attire tailored to the wearer’s needs.

CONCLUSION

The *baju kurung* exemplifies the interplay between design principles and cultural philosophy, where elements of balance, harmony, and symmetry are not merely aesthetic but also symbolic of the Malay worldview. Its enduring presence in contemporary fashion demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of traditional design within evolving cultural contexts.

The production of textiles and clothing in the Malay world has long existed and continues to endure to this day. Although parts of this heritage are increasingly forgotten, and some traditional Malay garment cuts are on the verge of disappearing, certain styles such as the *baju kurung kekek* are still worn, albeit less commonly than in the past. These traditional garment patterns embody beauty and uniqueness inherited from the ancestors of the Malay people, created without the foundation of formal education. In essence, the craftsmanship of the Malay community was initially passed down for family use and daily needs. However, over time, it flourished and evolved into a source of livelihood.

Although originally intended as artistic creation for practical purposes, each garment or textile produced carries profound meanings and specific functions. These meanings and functions can only be fully understood within the Malay cultural context. Unconsciously, each garment crafted holds within it a refined principle of creation, reflecting the long-standing Malay civilization.

The interpretation of the *baju kurung* suggests that every cut and detail within the garment symbolizes the manners, customs, and beliefs of Malay society, which are deeply embedded within its cultural values. This translation of the *baju kurung* emphasizes its timeless suitability, ensuring that it remains relevant and appropriate to be worn across generations.

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