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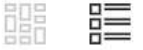
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The ICH element “Craft and practices related to Kebaya” was included in Singapore's ICH Inventory 20 October 2022. It is accessible online on <https://www.roots.gov.sg/en/ich-landing/ich/Kebaya>.

Craft and Practices related to Kebaya

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

[Traditional Craftsmanship](#) [Social Practices, Rituals and Festive Events](#)



Introduction **Craft and Practices related to Kebaya**

Kebaya is an upper garment that is traditionally made from fabrics such as velvet, cotton, gauze, lace, or voile, and at times adorned with embroidery. It is typically identified as a blouse or tunic with the collar extending from the back of the neck down to the hems on either side of the front body. The front is secured with either buttons, pins, or *kerongsang* (brooch), with an accompanying lower garment known as *sarong* or *kain*; a long piece of cloth wrapped and tucked around the waist, which may at times secured with a *tali pinggang* (belt) or *stagen* (cummerbund).

In Singapore, *kebaya* is worn by women from various communities. It has, and continues to be, a central aspect in the representation and display of cultural heritage and identity for Malay, Peranakan, and other communities in Singapore, and is a notable part of our heritage as a multi-cultural port city.

Geographic Location

Kebaya is traditionally worn by women in Southeast Asia, notably in Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. As maritime trade grew over time, *kebaya* gradually became increasingly prevalent in Malay and Peranakan communities, including in Singapore, as a multi-cultural port city, with links across many communities in Southeast Asia and the world.

While the styles of *kebaya* and *sarong*, as well as the materials and embellishments that are worn with them vary across the region, there are generally two basic styles of *kebaya*, namely *kebaya panjang/labuh* (long *kebaya*) and *kebaya pendek* (short *kebaya*). *Kebaya panjang/labuh* is a full-length dress with a front opening that is traditionally fastened with either *kerongsang* (brooch), pins or buttons. *Kebaya pendek* reaches the hip and is recognisable through its distinct figure-hugging characteristic that is made to emphasise the silhouette of the body. The latter style of *kebaya* was especially popular among young women in cities like Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang.

Communities Involved

Kebaya can be worn by women of all ethnicities, although it is most commonly associated with the Malay and Peranakan communities in Singapore, and is worn on both formal and casual occasions. It is important to note that *kebaya* is not just a garment but an important medium in which Malay and Peranakan cultures may be represented, through the various motifs embroidered and distinctive ways it is worn by the wearer, and a reflection of the ornate skills and expertise of the maker.

Given Singapore's Malay and port city heritage which brought together various cultures and influences from around the region, *kebaya* designs commonly demonstrate a blending of cultures. For example, a *kebaya* may feature traditional Javanese motifs and batik patterns such as the *kawung* (palm fruit), or motifs from Malay, Chinese, Indian, and European cultures, be they flowers, animals, mythical creatures, or figurative elements. The embroidery may be found throughout, or along the edges such as the neckline, sleeves, and bottom ends of the *kebaya*, and sewn using embroidery threads with a variety of colours.

Associated Social and Cultural Practices

Kebaya has often been used as a symbol of cultural heritage, with the developments and customs of this traditional dress commonly associated with socio-cultural identity. *Kebaya* has – and especially so in recent years – been a central aspect in the representation and display of cultural heritage and identity to the Malay and Peranakan communities in Singapore. *Kebaya* is commonly worn during festive occasions such as [Hari Raya Puasa \(roots.gov.sg\)](#), [Chinese New Year \(roots.gov.sg\)](#), [Deepavali \(roots.gov.sg\)](#), at important rites of passage such as weddings, formal events, parties, and even non-formal occasions. Additionally, *kebaya* has been adapted and continues to be the attire for both Singapore Airlines and Malaysia Airlines flight attendants, ever since it was introduced by Malaysia-Singapore Airlines in 1968.

The cultural heritage, traditional customs, and identities of the communities are also represented through the various intricacies and accompaniments that are commonly associated with the complete *kebaya* outfit. The wearing of *kebaya*



oftentimes goes in hand with the following accompaniments, and are typically transmitted over generations.

The main accompaniment to *kebaya* is known as *kain panjang/kain lepas* or simply, *kain* (a long piece of rectangular cloth wrapped and tucked around the waist) or *sarong* (a stitched, tubular skirt). Both the *kain* and *sarong* are typically around three metres in length, are made of various textiles such as *batik*, *songket*, *tenun*, and *pelikat*.

Kebaya is also commonly accompanied by a *kerongsang* (brooch) pinned down the chest and used to secure the blouse opening in the front of several variations of *kebaya*. The use of the *kerongsang* typically relates to the weight of the fabric; a *kebaya* with heavier fabric typically features a larger and more elaborate set, while one with a lighter fabric typically utilises only one or two individual pieces which are comparatively smaller in size. The *kerongsang* used may also differ depending on whether it is used with *kebaya panjang/labuh* or *kebaya pendek*. Additionally, a *tali pinggang* (belt) or *stagen* (cummerbund) may be worn around the waist to secure the *sarong*, and for the latter, to give a distinct silhouette to the wearer. Traditional shoes are another popular accompaniment to *kebaya*, with slippers intricately covered with beaded or threaded embroidery known as *kasut manek*, and velvet shoes embroidered with *tekat suji benang emas* (gold thread).

In addition to the various accessories commonly associated with *kebaya*, it is also featured in several traditional performing art forms such as [Malay Dance Forms \(roots.gov.sg\)](#), [Dondang Sayang \(roots.gov.sg\)](#), [Wayang Peranakan \(roots.gov.sg\)](#), and has also been presented in contemporary theatre productions such as [Emily of Emerald Hill \(roots.gov.sg\)](#). Cultural associations such as Sri Warisan and Gunong Sayang Association, for example, put concerted effort into ensuring performers are educated on the various intricacies of *kebaya*. This is to encourage their community of performers to appreciate the cultural and technical significance of *kebaya*, and its distinctive accessories, in order to perform an informed rendition of the dance and the cultures represented. Ensuring that *kebaya* is understood and is worn appropriately, even when it is modified for the purposes of performance, is regarded as a mark of respect for the audience and the communities involved. More importantly, the prominent use of *kebaya* in these art forms serve as representations of the communities' cultural identities and heritage, which extend beyond festive and social events, and towards performing arts – highlighting the versatility of *kebaya*.

In earlier years, the skills associated with the sewing and embroidery techniques were transmitted from mother to daughter over generations. Over time, the craft and practice of sewing and embroidering *kebaya* came to involve men as well. The transmission of knowledge on the different embroidery styles and sewing work has since extended to formal and informal education, as well as workshops and classes helmed by craft practitioners. These platforms continue to impart the mastery of *kebaya*-making to larger segments of society, including the younger generation.

Experience of a Practitioner

Mdm Ratianah Tahir is a craftsperson of *kebaya* and *sulam* (embroidery) in Singapore, and designer and owner of the boutique store *Kebaya by Ratianah* on Bussorah Street in Kampong Gelam. Mdm Ratianah picked up sewing at a young age and began honing her craft after the birth of her first child, taking classes and apprenticing under the tutelage of her sister-in-law and late mother-in-law, both



of whom were skilled at sewing traditional clothing. She sees her role not only as an entrepreneur, but, as a woman in the Malay community who safeguards and promotes the making, wearing and appreciation of *kebaya*.

Seeing a lack of fashion establishments focusing on traditional clothing, Mdm Ratianah decided to start her own business selling *kebaya* and related accessories at Bali Lane in 2005, before relocating to Kandahar Street, and finally to the present location (Bussorah Street) in 2012. Mdm Ratianah's vision is to cultivate an appreciation and love for *kebaya* among Singaporeans, especially the younger generation. Her efforts include a fresher-take of *kebaya* styles by incorporating design elements which appeal to youths – for example, *kebaya* with cat prints, or emoji-like motifs for a more flamboyant take on *kebaya*.

Today, her 29-year-old daughter Putri Nadirah Hassan, helps run the store and manage customers, as well as styling fashion shoots for the shop. Putri promotes *kebaya* to younger customers through social media marketing and promotion of her mother's modern *kebaya* designs. Their philosophy is simple – wanting to share the knowledge and passion for *kebaya* fashion with as many people as possible, and to ensure that *kebaya* will continue to be worn by successive generations of Singaporeans, regardless of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

Present Status

Kebaya is a microcosm of the melting pot of cultures and craft traditions in Singapore and the region, and continues to serve as an important representation of cultural heritage within these communities in both formal and casual settings. There has also been increased interest from women in the communities to wear *kebaya*, and interest from the wider community to make *kebaya*. *Kebaya* has also since evolved to include modern designs and *kebaya*-inspired outfits to offer a wider range of use, and to keep the viability, significance, and practice of *kebaya* relevant to changing lifestyles and preferences.

Aside from the modernisation of *kebaya* styles, current transmission efforts and initiatives include festivals and theatrical productions – this is exemplified by “*Kebaya Homies*”, a 2019 musical presented by The Necessary Stage in collaboration with MI Singapore Fringe Festival, which depicted Malay history and culture through the medium of *kebaya*. Similarly, ‘*Bunga Tanjung*’, an award-winning Malay drama about women in the 1950s, has played a crucial role in bringing *kebaya* back into the spotlight. The Malay Heritage Centre, Malay Heritage Foundation, Asian Civilisations Museum, Peranakan Museum, and Indian Heritage Centre in Singapore are also key proponents of *kebaya*, with past efforts including ‘*Fesyen Forward*’, an art installation featuring illustrations of women in the various styles of *kebaya*, ‘#FilterLife Weekend Festival’, the ‘Armenian Street Party’ which showcased different aspects of Peranakan culture from music to dress, to craft workshops, and an exhibition on ‘*Chetti Melaka of the Straits*’ in collaboration with the Association of Peranakan Indians.

Additionally, practitioners such as Ms Oniatta Effendi, Mr Heath Yeo, and Mr Raymond Wong propagate the craft and practices related to *kebaya* to the wider community in various ways. Ms Oniatta facilitates knowledge exchange on the social history and cultural experience of Malay heritage textiles through regular talks and workshops at her boutique and online posts. Meanwhile Mr Yeo shares and gives live demonstrations of the process of creating *sulam* (embroidery) designs using the manual treadle sewing machine, and Mr Wong holds workshops



and classes on [Nyonya Beadwork and Embroidery \(roots.gov.sg\)](https://roots.gov.sg), in addition to formal courses and classes in educational institutions such as LASALLE College of the Arts. This ecosystem of initiatives and measures serve to safeguard and transmit the intricate knowledge and understanding of the craft and practices related to *kebaya* for the next generation.

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Mdm Ratianah in a sarong kebaya with a Peranakan customer dressed in a lace kebaya labuh paired with batik pekalongan sarong, 2022. (Courtesy of Mdm Ratianah Tahir)



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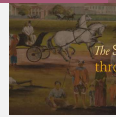
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