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Jilbab in Indonesia: The Contestation Between Power Relation and Social Identity¹

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Abstract

As part of religious symbols, jilbab in Indonesia has shown a significant change. Not only because the proliferation of this Islamic fashion is visible across the multiple sites in this country, but also because Indonesia doesn't have a historical and cultural background on Islamic fashion. Since the arrival of Islam in the 13th century, the distinctive symbol for *Muslimah* or women Muslim was like *kerudung*, or kind of headscarf combined with *kebaya* or *baju kurung* which used to be related to Melayu tradition. However, during this two decades, Islamic fashion has been developing in such tremendous way which seemingly create such a hybrid culture of fashion among the Muslims. If this transformation should be correlative with piety, how can we read Jilbab phenomenon in Indonesia?

It's a library research. The writer tried to relate the current phenomenon, religious issue as well as historical perspectives to support the data and analysis.

The research shows that as part of religious symbols, jilbab is not predominantly seen as a sign which associates to a certain ideology or theological framework. Jilbab is much more seen as religious and social phenomena in which power relation contribute in driving the change both by providing and eliminating the room for it to develop. For example, during the New Order, the authority was so powerful and controlled the religious life including the ban of jilbab among the public sphere. This policy did not only create a resistance among the Muslim but also potentially provide a similar pattern for the following power. For instance, when the next regime gives freedom to the religious life and jilbab could eventually change the feature of Indonesian Muslims, in several areas, this kind of fashion has become such compulsory and turn into social identity. Even, like in Aceh, or West Sumatera, in line with the district autonomy policy, people think that they have a right to determine their identity including to make jilbab as compulsory for school uniform. Hence, in some decades, there's a shift in perceiving jilbab, from theological perspective to religio-social identity.

Keywords : Jilbab , contestation, power relation, social identity

A. Background

In the last 15 years, the industrial mode of Islamic women urban in Indonesia has shown a significant change. Versions of long-sleeved and floor-length garments, and loose and fitted had become so common as to indicate a trendy transformation of a subgenre dress and personal appearance that, until the early 1980s, was unusual as to

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seem rare and foreign². The proliferation of Islamic fashions is visible across multiple sites in Indonesia, from the shopping mall and television shows to university campuses and elementary school. In short, this kind of dresses and fashions has transformed into another type of industrial mode which regularly change and develop.

A part from the modernization impact or the religious tradition of the East, this phenomenon is quite interesting, because Indonesia does not have a historical and cultural background on Islamic fashion. Since the arrival of Islam in the 13th century, the distinctive symbol for *Muslimah* or women Muslim was only *kerudung*, or kind of headscarf combined with *kebaya* or *baju kurung* which used to be related to Melayu tradition. However, during this two decades, Islamic fashion has developed in such tremendous way which seemingly create such a hybrid culture of fashion among the Muslims.

Research Question

Furthermore, if a transformation in fashion should be correlative with piety of Muslim, how can we read jilbab phenomenon in Indonesia?. This paper are going to discuss this topic further in terms of the role of the state in driving the change.

B. Theoretical Framework.

Jilbab is part of religious symbols. Religions view religious texts, rituals, and works of art as symbols of compelling ideas or ideals. Symbol help create a resonant mythos by

² Jones, Carla. Fashion and faith in Urban Indonesia. Fashion Theory Journal vol . 11 pp 212. 2007

expressing the moral values of the society or the teachings of religion, foster solidarity among the adherents, and bring adherents closer to their object of worship³

Furthermore, Clifford Geertz has written: "Meanings are 'stored' in symbols: a cross, a crescent, a feathered serpent. Such religious symbols, dramatized in rituals and related in myths, are somehow felt to sum up, for those for whom they resonate, what is known about the way the world is." Such summary symbols, rich and teeming with significations, are limited in any given culture, limited to guard their value as sacred referents. Because the reliability of sacred symbols is taken for granted in a culture, as self-evident windows onto meaning, "individuals who ignore the symbols," Geertz notes, "are regarded not so much as evil as stupid."⁴

Related to the topic, an article '*Fashion and faith in Urban Indonesia*, Carla Jones interestingly discusses about the development of Jilbab in Indonesia. She suggests that urban Indonesian women have increasingly chosen to adopt a form of Islamic dress called *Busana Muslim*. This shift could be read as an index of two apparently contradictory or mutually exclusive phenomena, a rise in Islamic piety and a rise in consumerism. Through consideration of Islamic fashion as commodity fetish, she argues that the commodification of Islamic dress in urban Indonesia has not been a straightforward process, but rather an arena for Indonesian Muslim to think about the relationship among faith, gender, and materiality.⁵ Jones's focus in this article is a fashion development. Although she discusses a little bit about the historical

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_symbolism

⁴ Cob, Kelton. *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005

⁵ Jones, Carla. *Fashion and faith in Urban Indonesia*. *Fashion Theory Journal* vol . 11 pp 212. 2007

development of Jilbab, especially during the Soeharto era and the change in this contemporary age, she mostly concerns about the urban community.

In this article, I will focus on the role of the state in providing as well as eliminating the room for the Jilbab industry to develop and create a new trend among the Muslim

C. Historical Roots of Jilbab in Indonesia

Historically, the only women for whom headscarves were typical were older women who had completed the hajj, and they wore a gauzy, loose kerudung rather than the more opaque and close fitting jilbab.⁶

Patricia Spyer has argued that during the 19th century, Dutch colonizers in the Aru islands of the East Indies used knowledge of fashion, both through its production and consumption, to negotiate rule there. While the Europeans fashion market (feathers and pearls for French design in particular, the value of which the island's producers were deemed to be unschooled), they simultaneously mocked islanders' use of European-style clothes as instances of failed mimicry⁷. In this sense, fashion was a tool of determination to form such boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized people. That why, the emergence of having a national identity in the form of fashion which reflect Indonesian's culture was necessary. After the Independence, Indonesian Muslim cloth was much signified with the form of kerudung or selendang, the headscarf combined with kebaya or baju kurung for the Melayu tradition.

⁶ ibid

⁷ Ibid, p: 214

D. Jilbab in the Suharto era

Tracing back the historical background of Indonesian Muslim fashion in the era of Suharto is one of the most interesting phase. The supremacy of state which's supported by military power has led this nation to be secular and rejected any kind of religious power, party, as well as symbols, including jilbab. As Hefner explained in *Civil Islam*, during the ten years leading up the New Order, the military had slowly expanded its power by, among other things, doing the battle against what it called forces of the 'extreme Left' (Communist) and the 'extreme Right' (Muslim separatist).⁸

By the beginning of the New Order the armed forces command was more ideologically unified than ever. A defining characteristic of the New Order was its claim that the military, as the ultimate guardian of the state, had a permanent right to participate in political affairs. Anthony Reid also adds that under Suharto's New Order the reconstruction of the past became more purposeful, effective and militarized. This force has a potential intervention in determining and control the state or national ideology including religious life. It's a fact this regime had been trying to separate the state and religion. By not mentioning that there's a process of secularization in this era, the state policies and political acts toward religious life indeed strengthened that mode. the armed forces command was more ideologically unified than ever. Here, there's no excuses and bargaining for Islamic ideology especially in politic and social life. For the sake of nationalism, some political parties like Masyumi and religious organization were much seen as a threat which's believed to lead this nation and Muslim implemented the *Syaria* law. This regime has even been successfully transformed some religious

⁸⁸⁸ Hefner, Robert. *Civil Islam*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey.: 2000, p :95

parties into a national one, i.e. PPP (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan) as fusion of some Islamic parties, like Masyumi and NU , and PDI (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia) as a fusion of some Christian and nationalist parties .

The impact of this mainstream policy was not only on politic, in which religious identity like Islamic party was seemingly blurred and transformed into a national one, but also on cultural- religious sphere. By acknowledgement of Pancasila as the only ideology perceived in this country the government seemed to marginalize religion and lock up the possibility of Islamic state and things which's connected to radicalism or fundamentalism. One of the implication is to ban the use of religious symbol including jilbab in the public sphere.

This prohibition was based on the assumption that the religious symbols could eventually trigger of such religious sentiment among various religious propagations. Religious symbol as well as jilbab is believed as a form of *dakwah* which in some ways would probably disturb the other religion or religious tolerance.

Besides, jilbab is often related to religious fundamentalism. During the 1980s and 1990s, the political context partly influenced a visible rise in explicitly Islamic identities among young people, visibly displayed by young⁹. Certain kinds of political and religious upheavals in the world especially in the Gulf Sea like Iran revolutionary (1979), Afghanistan war (1979) ,and internationally movement of Al – Ikhwan Al Muslimin, inspired an awareness of Indonesian young Muslims to use jilbab like those in Arabian Peninsula. This is another thing that government concern or worry about. If religious

⁹ Jones, Carla. *Fashion and Faith in Urban Indonesia*. Fashion Theory Journal vol . 11 pp 217. 2007

symbol is closely related to the piety, someone who wears the jilbab can be interpreted to be more pious who could even be more radical than the others.

Various legal prohibition on jilbab like SK 052/C/Kep/D/1982 about the Jilbab's prohibition in the State's schools and Directive of Higher Education General Directory no 1128/D/0/84 and no 3206/D/T/92 about the prohibition of using jilbab in official photograph were actually forms of violation toward religious rights. These regulation also indicated the government policy to eliminate the radical and fundamentalism elements in the religious world.

E. Meaning of Jilbab

As part of religious symbols, for some Muslims, Jilbab sometimes is much more seen as a social identity. Being a good Muslim is often reflected by using Jilbab, Hijab, or Cadar. The first requirement of using the jilbab, generally based upon What Allah states in The Aquran:

"And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts from sin and not show of their adornment except only that which is apparent, and draw their head covers over their necks and bosoms and not reveal their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women (i.e., their sisters in Islam), or their female slaves whom their right hands possess, or old male servants free of physical desires, or small children who have no sense of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as

to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn unto Allah altogether, O you Believers, in order that you may attain success.[An-Nur, 24:31]

For most of Muslim, including in Indonesia, this verse is understood to be a compulsory for the adult Muslim covering the entire body except what has been specifically excluded in public. The term Hijab or jilbab, includes not only dress and covering the body, but methods of behavior before members of the same and/or opposite sex, promoting privacy for females and prohibiting loose intermingling between males and females, and thereby encouraging modesty, decency, chastity and above all, respect and worship of Allah¹⁰

However, this interpretation is still debatable. In some interpretations, Hijab is much more related to the Arabic tradition which had been existed before Muhammad SAW era.

In Indonesia, Jilbab is part of a religious symbols which's in a semiotic analysis can thus to function as a sign. According to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913), who coined the term *semiology*, a sign is a whole consisting of *a material signifier* and *immaterial signified*. The signifier can thus be dots, lines, shapes, sound, or whatever physical, concrete entity that we link to or associated with, some idea or notion¹¹. In this term, we can say that jilbab is a signifier and muslimah dress is a signified.

For Saussure, we can't say that a signified (muslimah dress) is such kind of explanation of signifier (jilbab), because there's no biological connection between both. The

¹⁰ http://islamic-world.net/sister/hijab_in_quran.htm

¹¹ Gripsrud, Jostein. *Understanding Media Culture*. Oxford University Press. New York: 2002, p101

relation between signifier and signified is merely accidental or arbitrary, based on codes of convention of particular place and time in a certain cultural, social and historical background and situation. According Saussure, this is part of the pragmatic dimension of semiology. Pragmatic here means 'determined by the specific situation i.e. by place, time and purpose of communication.

The interpretation of Jilbab as a religious symbol or Islamic identity is only could be explained in Indonesian context and some parts of the world. In Arabic world in which Islam is origin for example, this kind of dress is merely perceived as a cultural tradition, not only for Muslim but also for other religions. This tradition has also existed long before Islam came to this area. In a similar context, in other part of the world like Eastern Europe or sub-tropical countries, this similar kind mode is also identified with winter's code which protects them from the extreme weather, or just part of fashion style, similar with hat, scarf or any style of accessories.

Furthermore according to Barthes, to get a comprehensive understanding, at least there are two steps of signification: denotative and connotative¹². To correlate jilbab and piety is based on the connotation that religious symbol eventually make the believer closer to God or the object he believes. The hajj supposed to cover her *aurat* also based on the assumption that to fulfill the fifth pillars of Islam, a Muslim should be more pious. Hajj is also related to the 'calling' of God. Only the chosen people can perform hajj.

These connotation then become a myth in which people believe that in some ways jilbab is related to piety and Islamic tradition. As mentioned above, the government of New Order also used this connotation when they banned Jilbab in the public schools and

¹² Faiclough, Norman. Language and Power. Addison Wesley Longman .1988 , p: 194

associated the users with the rebellions against the regime. Jilbab was connected to Islamic radicalism or Arabic influence, because Indonesian Muslim has already had their own tradition.

F. Jilbab and Power Relation

In his essay, "The Subject and Power," Foucault defines the exercise of power as "a mode of action upon the actions of others." The exercise of power can be either positive or negative. Considered from a positive point of view, it involves the "governing"—understood in the broadest sense as training, shaping, or directing toward a goal or set of goals—of human beings. In the types of power relations, Foucault insists that we are dealing with relations among *free* subjects.¹³ In the case Jilbab of Suharto era, the power of government in directing the religious life was influential. Robert Hefner also argues that a powerful strategy of The Suharto regime involved suppressing political, particularly through quashing political parties and student organizing, leaving religious organizations and identities as primary sites for critique of the status quo, usually on moral ground. It was in the face of both New Order political restrictions and the proliferation of consumers' thrill that and Islamic critique of the moral order of things became appealing¹⁴.

Prohibition was not only a form of violation of human right on religious life but also an indication of the government 'paranoid' on Islamic radical movement at that time. By relating Jilbab with rebellion or radicalism, the government had a reasonable reason to control and abide the elements which were contradictory with the government policy

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Jones, Carla. *Fashion and Faith in Urban Indonesia*. Fashion Theory Journal vol. 11 pp 217. 2007

Moreover, Foucault says, each society has its own regime of truth – that is the type of discourse it accepts and makes function as true¹⁵. One of his central aims, therefore, is to discover ‘ how men (and women) govern (themselves and others) by the production of truth(.. the establishment of domains in which practice of true and false can be made at once ordered and pertinent’¹⁶ . In this sense, the most remarkable formula of the government was the way to constrain Pancasila as the sole ideology in this state. As a consequence of this, there’s no space for people to be different. The implementation of this *azal tunggal* which’s completely supported by military back of, also eliminated the radical and fundamentalism movement, including a problems of minority group. There’s no room for being different and everybody must accept this doctrine.

However, after the New Order, there’s in fact a change in politic and religious freedom including jilbab. The wind of Reformation has brought this style into a new phase of fashion. Various styles and designs of *busana muslim* which reflects individual faith then become nationally developed. The growth of this fashion is not only for the quality and style but also the user. Nancy Smith-Hefner has found that from fewer than 3% of middle-class female university students who choose to wear jilbabs on the Gadjah Mada University campus in the late 1970s, and over 60% do in 2005. And in a different survey, Johan Linqvist has argued that among working class migrant in the island of Batam, the percentage of women who wear Jilbab is the highest in this country¹⁷. This indicates that the absence of power in term of religious control indeed gives a room for a religion as well as religious identity to develop drastically. The progress is so

¹⁵ Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Pearson, Longman : 2005 p.128

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Jones, Carla. *Fashion and Faith in Urban Indonesia*. *Fashion Theory Journal* vol . 11 pp 217. 2007

significant that in less than two decades, it eventually changes the feature of Indonesian Muslims.

Moreover, since the nation belongs to Capitalism of the world, the rise of piety on religious style will consequently give a room for the rise of consumerism. The frequently change of Muslim fashion style has created a new trendsetter in Indonesian fashion industry. This is what Karl Marx's critique of the commodity form and capitalist production. Amrih Widodo also argues that the concept of fetish is perhaps the best-suited analytical lens through which to interpret the rise in Islamic consumer goods in Indonesia, for the fetish concept frames objects as having both economic and religious values. ¹⁸Marx's description of the commodity as a fetish is reflected in the current face of Indonesia Muslim.

G. Jilbab and Social Identity

The fall of the New Order regime brings a lot of impact on the social life. In the early of reformation era, people seemed to celebrate the euphoria of freedom from military and government oppression. Religious and political movement tried to formulate and determine their identity in both social and state life. As Foucault points out, "where there's a power there's a resistance". The state was so powerful in Suharto era, that 's why, it's too risky against the regime. Although there were some resistance or even insurgence concerning religious and human right issues like the Tanjung Priuk and Aceh cases or some various case of jilbab's prohibition, but the scale was minor. The

¹⁸ ibid

government could restrained those cases effectively that they didn't blow up into a national scale.

However, the resistance always exists. As Tillich mentions, a symbol can go into hibernation, ready to be awakened when the condition was right¹⁹. This is what happened in the religious life in Indonesia. The era of reformation is considered as an awakening movement, in which people feel free to determine their ideology, including jilbab. The emergence of PERDA (District law) *Sharia* in some districts of Indonesia is one of a drastic evaluation of the previous era. In line with the district autonomy policy, the societies believe that they have a right to determine their identity.

In the case of West Sumatera for example, Lyn Parker in her article *Uniform Jilbab* says that jilbab is a potent symbol of Islamic identity²⁰. Being prohibited for such a long time, some districts in Indonesia started to make regulation on jilbab and considered as compulsory for school uniform since 2004. One of them is West Sumatera. This province holds the matrilineal tradition with Muslim majority. Most of school principals, in consultation with teachers, have recently made the jilbab compulsory school uniform in many senior high schools, both academic and vocation (Students at Islamic senior high schools, under the control of the Department of Religion, and students at private Islamic schools, have long worn the jilbab). Why did schools in West Sumatra decide to make the jilbab compulsory? Parker found that in Bukittinggi the decision was part of the national move towards regional autonomy and the local push to 'return to the nagari'

¹⁹ Cobb, Kelton. *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005

²⁰ Parker, Lyn. *Uniform Jilbab*. *Inside Indonesia - a quarterly magazine on Indonesia and its people, culture, politics, economy and environment* – July 1, 2005

not Islamic clothing, and that its adoption goes hand-in-hand with the revival of adat (custom) and the return to the surau (traditional Islamic prayer-house)²¹.

This local policy is quite remarkable in terms of how a certain society tries to formulate its own identity. By not mentioning that there's such Islamization or an effort to realize an Islamic state, this policy in fact shows those indications. Hiding behind the cultural tradition this local government seems to ignore such religious sensitivity among the plural society.

A part from seeing this policy as a kind of 'rebellion' toward the previous authority, this law is most likely inspired also by Malaysia's tradition. Sharing a similar neighborhood, West Sumatra and Malaysia have a comparable historical root of culture, Melayu. There are three pillars of 'Malayness' in Malaysia: *bahasa, raja dan agama* (language, ruler and religion). They were instituted during the colonial period within the framework of colonial knowledge informed by colonial investigative modalities and inspired by social Darwinism²². These pillars automatically strengthened the idea that Islam is the sole religion to be a national religion. Because virtually all Malays are Muslim, and a Malay who abandons Islam is no longer legally considered as Malay – the federal Constitution defining a Malay as 'a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conforms to Malay custom'²³.

In this tradition, jilbab is not only about ideology, but more perceived as social and cultural identity. To get this point, there should be an authoritative power to lead and control the rule. Although the compulsory of jilbab in this area is not as strictly as Aceh

²¹ ibid

²² Syamsul A.B. A History of an Identity, and Identity of a History: the Idea and Practice of 'Malayness' in Malaysia Reconsidered. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 32 (3) pp 355-366 October 2001.

²³ Federal Constitution, article 160 (2)

which has a special autonomy to implement *sharia law* with jilbab is one of the focus, implementing this kind of policy certainly causes any pros and cont.

Moreover, in fact, there are numerous reasons why women wear jilbab. Although the basic requirement of this tradition is stated in Al-Quran, but to relate this issue with piety is also debatable. For instance, as being released by LSI (Lembaga Survey Indonesia) on June 13, 2011, there's only 20,8% of woman respondents who believed that jilbab or covering the *aurat* is indeed a compulsory, and it's a reason why they use it. The other reasons are family enforcement or influence, fashion style, feel protected and safe, school or campuses compulsory, etc.

Hence, if in the New Order, the reason why a woman wearing jilbab was much more close to ideology, in this era it is more perceived as a social identity. Since the fall of Suharto era, Indonesian Muslims are signified by various types and characteristics with or without jilbab on them. Moreover, the absence of authoritative power in religious life has given a room for a fashion industry development and change the feature of Indonesian Muslims.

H. Conclusion

Discussion about jilbab is a sensitive topic, because it concerns on the basic right of Muslim identity. It's not only about fashion style, social identity or part of consumerism as getting popular today, but also the power relation which controls it. During the Suharto era for example, authority was so powerful and controlled religious life including the jilbab. Some policies which banned the use of Jilbab in this era would only

created a potential resistance. That's why, after the New Order, when the next regime gives a freedom to a religious life, jilbab could eventually change the feature of Indonesian Muslims.

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