

Appendix III. A Letter from Mecca by a Modern Sumatran Pilgrim

"Aneka Pakaian Muslim" ("On Muslim Clothing"). From A. A. Navis, *Surat dan Kenangan Haji* ("Letters and Memories from the Pilgrimage") (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1996), pp. 36-43. Translation by R. Michael Feener and Anna M. Gade. Used with permission.

Mecca, 30 April 1994

The Arabs have a distinctive manner of dress. This is especially the case for women, who wear clothes of all black which completely cover the body. Only their faces can be seen, and sometimes it is just their eyes. And, sometimes even the eyes are covered over with a thin veil of black gauze. Such a style of dress is worn in Indonesia today by those who belong to the *AI Arqam* movement. In the past, members of the Kadian branch of the Ahmadiyya wore similar costumes.

This distinctive Arab clothing is fitting for the dry desert, shielding one from the scorching sun and swirling dust. Although this clothing completely covers you up, you do not sweat because your sweat evaporates immediately in the hot desert air.

The Arabs are also known for their love of perfumes. The reason for this is that the custom of the inhabitants of this empty land is such that they are often unable to bathe or wash their clothes. When they pass by me, as I sit praying in the mosque, the powerful scent of their perfume attacks my nose. The scent is even stronger on women. So, it is not surprising that there are so many perfume stores and street stalls of various kinds in the cities of Saudi Arabia, selling everything from cheap Indian generic products to the most well-known name-brand fragrances from France. Even the Indonesian women who live here as guest-workers adopt Arab dress. This is not only to adapt culturally but also because of the climatic conditions here. And, even non-Muslim Arabs such as those from Lebanon and Palestine wear the same distinctive Arab dress. This shows that Arab-style clothing does not automatically mark one as a 'Muslim.'

I cannot understand why Indonesian women who live in a tropical, humid climate would want to wrap themselves up like Arab women do, covering their entire body completely. And there are even some women who cover their faces with the 'chador.' In the same way, I cannot understand why Indonesian men have to adopt the European style as their mode of formal dress because wearing all these many layers of clothes in the heat makes us need to use air conditioning at home, in the office, and even in our cars. Our forefathers used to dress in a way that was appropriate for our tropical climate. Those from Java or Bali went about bare-chested, whether it was in the rice fields or even at palace ceremonies. Malays wore loose shirts of thin cotton, which was appropriate for the humidity of the tropics. Wearing clothes that cover the whole body only causes one to sweat all the more. If one does not bathe or change clothes often, the whole body will start to give off an unpleasant odor.

It seems as if, when it comes to selecting clothes, we seem to pay more attention to appearances and group identity than we do to natural conditions. This may be seen in the

history of Indonesian fashion. From the beginning of this century until the Second World War, the religious scholars of West Sumatra wore various kinds of clothes. Scholars from the area wore a sarong and cap, whereas those who had studied in Mecca or who had already completed the pilgrimage wore a robe and turban. Those who had studied in Egypt wore trousers, a jacket, and a tie with a cap or sometimes a fez.

The same was also true of students of religious schools. Boys wore sarongs and caps, while girls wore long blouses and headscarves, but at colleges male students exchanged their sarongs for long pants. On the other hand, those with a western education or who worked in offices chose clothing in the Dutch style and would make fun of the clothes worn by traditionally-minded and religious people.

Since the Indonesian Declaration of Independence, even the clothes that had a sectarian or social function changed. The most popular form of dress among males from almost every group was that which came to be known as 'national dress,' which was in the European style, consisting of a jacket and tie but also not neglecting to add a black Muslim cap on one's head. Over time, however, caps came to be worn less and less, eventually used only during state and religious functions.

During the 1970s, when issues of 'Christianization' and government pressures on Muslim religious groups marked them as extreme 'right,' a movement arose to respond to such pressures by calling upon God's protection because they felt that there was no other place for them to seek shelter other than in God. Generally speaking, they were not from traditional religious schools. As a symbol of their identity, the women in these groups wore a style of dress that came to be known as the 'jilbab,' which is a different style of dress with a covering like that worn by Rasuna Said [a well-known religious activist from West Sumatra in the early twentieth century]. Many of these groups became quite exclusivistic...

It was also often the case that these exclusive groups energetically upheld these dress codes. I am reminded of a case from the Medical College in Padang [West Sumatra], demonstrating the strong adherence to these codes. The College requested that two female students in the clinic change their headscarves to a style of Muslim dress that had been approved by the Government Board of Education. Both, however, insistently refused. They said that if it was necessary, they were willing to cut little holes in their headscarves when they needed to use a stethoscope. The press had a media frenzy with this incident. One lawyer suggested that the College be brought before the High Court because he believed that it had infringed upon the freedom of religion. One well-known sociologist defended the girls' position by advancing the theory that the inclination to wear 'jilbab' was an act of resistance against psychological pressure from the secular system that dominated the social and political elite, adding that it is better that the 'jilbab' is not prohibited from being worn in any context. He cited the example of a Sikh [a member of a religious group from India] who maintained the right to wear his *tilban* [turban] on religious grounds, even while employed by the police or in military service. This sociologist, however, failed to keep in mind that Sikhs have no problem taking off the *tilban* when playing hockey or soccer.

In the end, both girls simply decided that they would rather continue their education and accept the College's regulation. However, in my opinion, such insistence on wearing the 'jilbab' usually ends once women like this get married. This is a different situation from those traditionally-schooled women who wear 'jilbab.' So what was going on with the insistence of these two Medical College students?

This movement influenced some older women in the city. These older women, especially those who had already gone on the pilgrimage, started to cover their heads with a kind of cap. The clothing which had before then served a social function thus became a symbol of group identity.

Looking at the women from various countries here on the Hajj, one sees that each nation has its own style of dress. In general, they cover almost their entire body except for their faces. When they don their special pilgrim's garb, the women cover their entire bodies except for their faces and the palms of their hands. However, even in this they do not all look the same. Some wear socks, and some do not. City girls, especially those from the chic Jakarta set, really pay attention to their looks. Their clothes are always something special, even when they are dressed as 'humble' pilgrims. They wear special gloves that cover their wrists, while the palms of their hands are bare, and these gloves can be lacy. Young women from other countries, even Arabs, just wear simple clothes, which are not lacy or fancily decorated. Turkish or Iranian women wear cream-colored blouses with long sleeves, and they also wear a triangular scarf as a form-fitting head-covering so that no hair can become exposed. Women from central Africa tend to wear colorful clothing. There is, in fact, no firm rule as to the color of a woman's clothes for pilgrimage. The stipulation of wearing all white clothes is merely a suggestion.

Various kinds of Muslim clothes are worn by Indonesian women, especially while they are on pilgrimage. What about their everyday dress? It serves its purpose. But what about when its function is a way of flouting a specific group identity?

Fashion, or styles of dress which differ between groups, is really a matter of individual preference, although there are some who would claim that this is a fundamental matter. If we remember the history of clothing, over sixty years ago the teaching and views of religious scholars were not the same as now. At that time, there was considerable criticism towards those women who wore dresses or men who wore ties. These two types of clothing were called 'the dress of infidels.' However, in less than one generation, such criticisms all but disappeared. In fact, those from the groups who formerly criticized came themselves to wear ties and their daughters dresses.

One time, twenty-five years ago, I was invited to speak with Col. Nazsir Asmara, regional commander at Bukittinggi (West Sumatra). This discussion was requested by Buya M. D. Datuk Palimokayo, who was later to become the head of the Council of Indonesia Religious Scholars for West Sumatra. Among others who were also present were Dr. Yaqub Isman, later rector of the Padang Teachers' College, Sunariyaman Mustafa, director of Bukittinggi High School, Baharuddin Sjarif, one of the deans of the

State Islamic College Imam Bonjol, and Col. A. M. Ridwan, who was to become a popular leader of a mystical order. The topic of discussion was children's clothing which consisted of narrow-leg trousers and tight jackets. This topic of discussion was extremely sensitive, especially when brought up among influential religious scholars.

During that discussion, all I did was to put forward the issue in the form of a question. I said that the people, especially those in the villages, were accustomed to bathing in the river or on the shore of a lake, and for all intents and purposes they placed no real distance between men and women. When crossing the river, the women would hike up their skirts very high, even if they were walking together with the men. In such situations, parts of the woman's body were uncovered. So, the young people may ask, if parts of the body are forbidden to look at, then why didn't the religious scholars of old ever order the Muslims to build bathrooms in their houses? Or, why didn't they order the Muslims to build a bridge for crossing? Is the essential teaching of the scholars of days past different from that of the scholars of today? What is our answer? This question is difficult to answer, and in the end the discussion turned the topic to the question of young people who did not have any productive occupation.

The tendency of Indonesian women to wear fashionable and lacy pilgrim's garb might be explained in terms of the concerns of city girls who don't want to be 'out of Style.' This extends even to the point that during the pilgrimage or other religious occasions, their clothes function as a mark of status. This makes me ask, is this really a rational aspect of Islam? Or, doesn't it reflect more base concerns? Aside from the validity of each group's understanding, I recognize that it is very important to maintain a tolerant attitude toward all points of view in religious matters. Let it not be that people go too far in defending their own group, all the more so if they also accuse other Muslim groups of impiety. On the other hand, clothing should not become the symbol of a group that tends toward exclusivism or intends to suppress those who do not agree with them. Whatever the case, groups that do not accept the strict Arab model of Muslim women's clothing must accept the reality that difference of opinion does not necessarily mean animosity.