

# Kebaya:

## Knowledge, Skills, Traditions and Practices

Multinational nomination for inscription onto the UNESCO  
Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

## Examples of *kebaya*-wearing in Singapore



In March 2023, five Southeast Asian countries: Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand joined hands for the first time to submit a multinational nomination to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity.

This multinational nomination aims to celebrate *kebaya* as a form of shared history in the region, and an ICH element that transcends ethnicity and religion, facilitates dialogues and unites Southeast Asian communities.

*Kebaya* continues to be actively produced and worn by many communities today, and the nomination is an opportunity to promote cross-cultural understanding amongst different communities in the region.

This booklet provides an overview of the significance of *kebaya*, with a focus on its practice in Singapore, and shares the highlights of the UNESCO nomination process.



Performers dressed in *kebaya* at the Malay Heritage Centre's "Closing Fest."



Ladies dressed in *kebaya*.



Members of Gunong Sayang Association dressed in *kebaya* for a performance at Heartbeat@Bedok.

Members of Chitty Melaka (Peranakan Indian) Association dressed in *kebaya*.



# What is *Kebaya*?

*Kebaya* is a front-opening top that is often adorned with intricate embroidery and worn with fasteners such as *kerongsang* (brooches) or buttons. It comes in a variety of lengths, typically ending at the hip or below the knee.



Some of the many types of *kebaya*.

# Community Involvement

Across the nominating countries, various communities and groups are involved in the making and safeguarding of *kebaya* and its associated skills. These include families, cultural experts, practitioners (craftspersons and designers), *kebaya* activists, formal groups and associations representing cultural communities, business associations, advocates for *kebaya*, private collectors, performing arts groups that wear *kebaya*, educators for fashion design and textiles, as well as youths and students who study and design *kebaya*.



Participants dressed in *kebaya* for a parade, Brunei Darussalam.



*Kebaya* makers engaged in a panel discussion, Indonesia.



Performers dressed in *kebaya*, Thailand.



Girls dressed in *kebaya*, Malaysia.

# *Kebaya's Contributions to Sustainable Development Goals*

The nomination of *kebaya* contributes to the recognition of the role ICH plays as a driver of sustainable development. More specifically, “*Kebaya: Knowledge, Skills, Traditions and Practices*” contributes to the following sustainable development goals:

## **Gender Equality**

*Kebaya* is associated with women’s cultural identity and empowerment. It highlights contributions of women to the element and the economy. Although *kebaya* is a women’s garment, male and female practitioners share their knowledge, thereby contributing to dialogues between different genders.



*Kebaya-maker Ratianah Tahir at work, Singapore.*



*Kebaya-maker Raymond Wong conducting a class, Singapore.*

## **Quality Education**

Through formal training in *kebaya* making, students gain an all-rounded education of craft skills and an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural meanings of *kebaya*. By gaining exposure to *kebaya*, they would be encouraged to explore and learn about other forms of ICH too.



*A student learning how to tailor kebaya, Brunei Darussalam.*



*Students visiting a kebaya exhibition, Thailand.*

## Inclusive Economic Development

*Kebaya* provides employment opportunities for individuals and small businesses, reducing poverty and encouraging sustainable livelihoods.

## Peace and Social Cohesion

*Kebaya* is a unifying element that connects diverse cultures and communities, and encourages mutual respect across the participating countries which have a combined population of 385 million.



State officials and community representatives from participating countries at a joint workshop to prepare the nomination file in Jakarta, Indonesia.

# Cultural Meanings and Social Functions

*Kebaya* represents the unique blend of cultures across Southeast Asia, provides a sense of identity and symbolises shared heritage. It is worn by women of various communities and ages as daily or casual wear, and as formal dress at official events, weddings, celebrations, wakes and cultural festivals (e.g. Hari Raya, Lunar New Year and Deepavali). Its motifs and colours reflect various cultures and influences, represent different meanings, and often relate to specific occasions.

*Kebaya* is also represented in performing arts (e.g. dances), contemporary theatre (e.g. the Singaporean play “Emily of Emerald Hill”) and film (e.g. the Indonesian film “Kartini” and the Malaysian film “Cik Ayu Mee Sanggul”).

As living heritage, the design and craftsmanship of *kebaya* are constantly evolving. Despite variations in the making and wearing of *kebaya*, it is a common cultural element that transcends ethnicity and religion, facilitates dialogues and unites communities across Southeast Asia. It reminds people of their cultural roots amidst modernity and globalisation.



*Kebaya* is worn in this folk dance named “Gotong Royong” performed by Sri Warisan and Gemilang Tari, Singapore.



*Kebaya* is worn in weddings, Singapore.

# Safeguarding Efforts

## Transmission

The making of *kebaya* involves specific skills and knowledge which are transmitted formally in schools and non-formally within families. Crafts, skills and knowledge related to *kebaya* are formally taught in courses and workshops, in addition to non-formal transmission through family and friends.

Practitioners such as Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd conducts programmes on the socio-cultural significance of *kebaya* in performing arts. Students in fashion-related courses at institutions such as LASALLE College of the Arts, and the Textile and Fashion Industry Training Centre undertake design projects on embroidery and sewing of *kebaya*. *Kebaya* are showcased in physical and online exhibitions, *kebaya*-making workshops and classes for the public, such as Azie D'closet Kajang's *kebaya* sewing workshop in Malaysia.



*Kebaya*-maker Heath Yeo conducting an embroidery workshop, Singapore.



Students attending vocational training in tailoring, Malaysia.

## Research and Documentation

A range of video documentaries, publications and papers have been produced by academics, experts, cultural associations and government agencies. Agencies, universities and communities will continue with their research efforts (e.g. Nanyang Technological University's research on *kebaya* in Peranakan identity and the Thai Peranakan Association of Phuket's research on wearing *kebaya* in everyday life). Various books featuring *kebaya* (e.g. "Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion in an Interconnected World, 1500-1950" by Peter Lee) and video documentaries (e.g. Singapore's ICH Inventory video on "Craft and Practices related to *Kebaya*") have also been published.



Screenshot of Singapore's ICH Inventory video on "Craft and Practices related to *Kebaya*" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSy4OXkum-w>).

## Promotion

In Singapore, public talks on the socio-cultural significance of *kebaya* have been conducted by various community members such as cultural entrepreneur Oniatta Effendi. There have also been various programmes organised by museums and cultural institutions such as Malay Heritage Centre and Asian Civilisations Museum in collaboration with communities/NGOs, and exhibitions such as National Heritage Board's "Love, *Kebaya*" travelling exhibition, and LASALLE and Singapore Fashion Council's "#SGFASHIONNOW" (2021/22). Similar promotional efforts have also been organised in other countries such as Brunei Darussalam's "Fashion Designer Alliance Showcase," Malaysia's "The Secret of *Kebaya*" exhibition, and various displays at the Jakarta Textile Museum (Indonesia) and Peranakan Phuket Museum (Thailand).



Ladies in *kebaya* at Eurasian Association Gallery, Singapore.

A lecture and panel discussion on the journey of *kebaya* and the women who wear them, with Oniatta Effendi and *Kebaya* Societé, organised by Malay Heritage Centre.



## Community Participation

Community participation is crucial in the preparation of nominations. For this nomination, communities from all five countries attended meetings to share their views, proposed safeguarding measures and contributed to the preparation of the nomination file. They also provided photos, video footage and consent for the multinational nomination via letters and videos.

## Joint Workshops

Community representatives from the five participating countries joined state agencies for a series of workshops in Port Dickson, Malaysia in November 2022 and Jakarta, Indonesia in February 2023 to discuss the nomination file. Before the submission of the nomination file in end March 2023, communities met online to refine and finalise the nomination file.



Joint workshop in Port Dickson, Malaysia.



Joint workshop in Jakarta, Indonesia.

## Discussions among *Kebaya* Community in Singapore

A community network of 51 stakeholders, “*Kawan Kebaya*” (Friends of *Kebaya*), was formed. It comprises cultural practitioners, representatives from cultural associations, students and researchers involved in the making and wearing of *kebaya*. *Kawan Kebaya* members attended various focus group discussions organised by NHB from August 2022 till March 2023 to share information about *kebaya* and discuss safeguarding measures, and also provided letters of consent and support for the nomination.



A focus group discussion held with members of *Kawan Kebaya*.

Youth participation was a crucial part of the nomination process too. Students from fashion, art and design courses, and NHB’s Youth Panel shared their views on the *kebaya* nomination in a focus group discussion, and proposed suggestions for digital outreach efforts.



A focus group discussion held with youths.

## Public Engagement Efforts in Singapore

The “Love, *Kebaya*” travelling exhibition features different types of *kebaya* from the region, and showcases the craft behind *kebaya*, its significance to our region’s shared cultural identity and living heritage, and the multinational nomination. Members of *Kawan Kebaya* also actively contributed to the exhibition by sharing *kebaya* pieces and their stories as practitioners and members of the community who create, safeguard and transmit the knowledge, skills, traditions and practices of *kebaya*.



“Love, *Kebaya*” travelling exhibition at National Museum of Singapore.



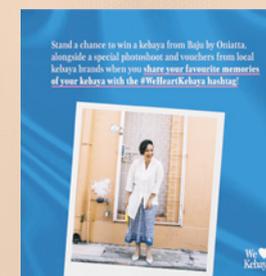
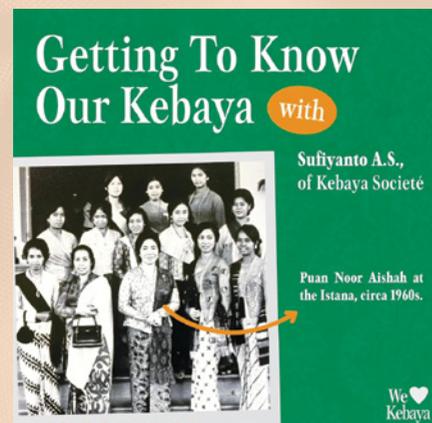
“Love, *Kebaya*” travelling exhibition at Gardens By The Bay, Singapore.



*Kawan Kebaya* members Ratianah Tahir, Oniatta Effendi and Raymond Wong with the *kebaya* pieces they were commissioned to create for the “Love, *Kebaya*” travelling exhibition.

## #WeHeartKebaya Digital Campaign

NHB launched a digital campaign and giveaway contest to encourage users to post on their Instagram or Facebook accounts using the hashtag #WeHeartKebaya, and share stories behind their *kebaya* and what it means to them. These entries were part of the public support for the nomination of *kebaya* onto the UNESCO Representative List of the ICH of Humanity, and attracted over 200 contributions. The digital campaign also included Q&A posts on the multinational nomination, the historical and contemporary significance of *kebaya*, and the various communities involved.



Screenshots from the #WeHeartKebaya digital campaign.

# Singapore's ICH Inventory

The ICH Inventory on <https://www.roots.gov.sg/ich-landing> comprises the traditions, rituals, crafts, expressions, knowledge and skills that we practice and pass on from generation to generation. “Craft and Practices related to *Kebaya*” was added onto the ICH Inventory in October 2022.



Screenshot of ICH Inventory article on “Craft and Practices related to *Kebaya*.”

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our craftspersons, non-government organisations, associations, groups, institutions, schools and partner government agencies in Singapore and the other participating countries – Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand – who supported the multinational nomination of “*Kebaya: Knowledge, Skills, Traditions and Practices*.”

The nomination file, comprising the nomination form, photographs, videos and supporting evidence of consent by communities, were submitted to UNESCO in end March 2023.

The results will be announced in December 2024.



Participants at the joint workshop in Port Dickson, Malaysia.



Some photos in this booklet have been contributed by communities across the submitting countries.

The floral illustrations within the booklet have been designed using assets from Freepik.com.

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