

# The Influences of Contemporary Fashion to the Development of Men's *Baju Melayu* in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse contemporary fashion influences that occurred in Malay men's *Baju Melayu*. Observations of modern contemporary *Baju Melayu* visual images from local designers were performed to identify the development of form, silhouette, colour, styling, and accessories. Analysis showed that the Malay men's *Baju Melayu* faces many changes in forms, silhouettes, colours, styles, and accessories in line with technological evolution, fashion openness, and the new lifestyle of the Malay men in Malaysia. The study hopes that local designers' new contemporary approaches can still portray Malay identity and sustain it over time.

**Keywords:** *Influences, Contemporary Fashion, Malay Men, Development, Baju Melayu*

## INTRODUCTION

The contemporary design of *Baju Melayu* has become a new trend used during cultural events and various activities. The role and function of clothing leads to a form of expression of a person's identity and social status (Hartati et al., 2020). Traditional clothing is one of the specific cultural characteristics of a society. In general, the function of clothing is to cover the body. It is then matched with accessories and unique features that distinguish the status and identity of one community from another.

The culture of tradition and modernity are two important concepts and have become the main direction of this research. In other words, the meaning of the culture is the determinant of society's values, beliefs, morals, and worldview. At the same time, modernization is a transformational social change in terms of impact and progress regarding the effects of the changes (Norazit, 1997).

### **Problem Statement**

According to Yusmar (2009), the Malay community is dynamic and open, accepting the newness in their clothing. Modernising Malay traditional Baju Melayu is blended with selected elements to accommodate the current lifestyle context. As time progressed, modern fashion created a homogenous look resulting from less variety. According to Hoed (2002), the problem began when modernity and creativity faced stigma from customs and traditions, which halted the development of creativity without recognizing that the custom itself was a mixture of many cultures. Selected elements developed new designs to accommodate the current context, which may have involved a different interpretation of beauty (Hanisa, 2016).

To understand the development of new style and trend changes in modern contemporary *Baju Melayu*, visual images, and component analysis will deconstruct each design into more minor elements so that the changes in the visual text can be understood and recognized.

### **Research Objectives**

Based on the objectives and problems discussed, the study aims to identify the elements and added value used in constructing the contemporary *Baju Melayu* today. The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify design elements and new added value in the manufacture of contemporary Baju Melayu in the modern era of Malaysia.
2. How the new element and contemporary design reflect the character and culture of modern Malay men in Malaysia.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The meaning of clothing can be explained by two different substances that are physical in nature where the material is involved. However, the second meaning is more spiritual, non-material concerning practices, beliefs, cultural traditions, and beliefs.

### **Malay Traditional Clothing: Baju Melayu**

In early societies, clothing was associated with a material element that had its unique function, which gradually received changes because of the civilization process. However, according to Zubaidah (1994), the meaning of clothing is something that binds the body to control elements that can hurt the body from weather, protect the *Aurat* or dignity and provide comfort in movement. History explains that Malay clothing undergoes an evolutionary process through the influences received from civilised nations such as India, China, Arab, and Europe (Siti Zainon, 2009).

Malay traditional clothes for men are similar for every country, consisting of two popular types: *Baju Melayu Teluk Belanga* and *Baju Melayu Cekak Musang*. The *Baju Melayu Teluk Belanga* is also

known as *Baju Melayu Johor* because it has expanded in the state. According to Azah (1990), this costume began to be worn over a hundred years ago, in the days of Sultan Abu Bakar residing in Teluk Belanga, Singapore. At that time, the use of this shirt evolved and became the daily clothing of the Malay community there.



Pembesar-pembesar Pahang berpakaian baju kurung, seluar Aceh, samping dan tengkolok aneka gaya sekitar 1900. Gambar Muzium Negara Malaysia

**Figure 1. A Malay chieftain and his follower attired in a complete set of *Baju Melayu* with *Tengkolok* and *Keris*.**

(Source: *Museum Tekstil Negara*, 2012)

Next, the *Baju Kurung Cekak Musang* is like the *Baju Kurung Teluk Belanga*, except on the neck, where it has a collar. This shirt was worn in Johor during the reign of Sultan Ibrahim ibni Sultan Abu Bakar. *Baju Kurung Cekak Musang* has an upright neck, and the front is covered by three, five, seven, or nine buttons. The neck shape of *Baju Kurung Cekak Musang* is thought to be influenced by Indian culture and the Middle East.



**Figure 2. Original cutting of men *Baju Melayu Cekak Musang***

(Source: *Museum Tekstil Negara*, 2012)

## **The Development of Malay Costumes**

The Malay costume also gains influence from society, culture, and religious factors, which is the most significant factor in the design of the Malay costume (Saliken, personal communication, 2018). Traditional costumes symbolise a nation's civilization, including the Malay community that considers traditional dress plays an important role that is valuable and respected (Siti Zainon in Fatimah Mohamed Anwar 2019). The development of the Malay costume began in the 14th century in the palace. This development thus made *Pakaian Cara Melayu* a continuation of the Malay way archetype that developed along with the golden age of the Malacca Sultanate. Culture activist, Siti Zainon (2009), said the concept of *Pakaian Cara Melayu* is proven by the design features of traditional Malay clothes that are accepted as among Malay cultural identity. The fact is that the official Malay clothing was built by the royal system. This is where if someone is dressed up completely, then these people are allowed to enter the castle.

Meanwhile, modernity or modernization is recently used to describe an old social process called social change. In other words, the concept of modernization is a social process that is closely related to economic development.

## **The Malays in Malaysia**

Malaysia has a variety of uniqueness, especially in terms of cultural heritage (Norhasimah et al., 2014). Malaysia has become a unique country because of a clash of cultures that took place hundreds of years ago and is now assimilated as a Malaysian culture. The Malay community is the largest race in Malaysia, and based on Dani Ahmad (2010), Malay represents about 60% of the total population. The Malays distinguish themselves between religion and belief, which is Islam. The advent of Islam has brought significant changes in the Malay community's politics, law, economy, and culture (Izziah Suryani et al., 2012).

## **Social Culture Changes**

Social change is a change in society that involves changes in a community structure or due to the development in its environment, such as changes in the population composition system, geographical conditions, social system changes, or changes in its social structure. In terms of language, the term social change is defined as a subject of change, transition, or switch (Kamus Dewan, 2007) and as described by Farley in Abd Rasid (2018); Al-Tanubi (1995); Kamus Dewan (2007) who defines social change as a change in behaviour patterns, social relations, institutions, and social structures at certain things and times. In addition, the term change is also defined as the difference between current and previous situations.

## **Social Culture in Malaysia**

In Malaysia, the diversity of multiracial and religions has given this community a rich cultural diversity. Malaysia is a country that is very special in terms of its people and its communities. Malaysians who live in various ethnic backgrounds are divided into two primary groups, which are the Bumiputera and the non-Bumiputera. This is a fact of the historical process of growth and development of life and the government of Malaysia. Therefore, each race in this country inherits various forms and characteristics of social culture.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The data collection method used in the study is qualitative, through the reading and observation of visual data on modern contemporary *Baju Melayu*. The selected design was used as primary data. All the designs were collected from websites and local magazines and compared to the traditional *Baju Melayu* to identify the new elements. The changes were interpreted using related theories supporting this study's findings.

Advances in technology, economics, education, and openness to styles and fashion trends have changed modern contemporary *Baju Melayu* in Malaysia. For example, the influence of neat designs, such as Western clothing has led to the commercialization of slim-fit *Baju Melayu*.

### Theoretical Background

#### Adat in Malay Dressing

The Indigenous Malay community is concerned about the custom in their daily lives. The Malay custom expression itself pointed out that the tradition of wearing a Malay dress, which is “*adat memakai pada yang sesuai, adat duduk pada yang elok, adat berdiri tahukan diri*”. This Malay phrase describes what is necessary for orderly behaviour in a person's life, indicating that a person must put things in place, and the handle should behave accordingly. In accordance followed by the customary conditions as was emphasised in others Malay phrases, “*elok baju kerana sejudu, elok pakaian kerana sepadan*”.

At the same time, the religious beliefs of Malay practised Islam requires the Malay community to have a dressing style. The Malay should highlight their admirable attitudes and behaviour, show good self-personality was not damaging or degrade the Malay clothes they wear. Besides, there are also expressions of Malays customs that give advice, such as when wearing *Baju Kurung* should avoid being arrogant.

Malay custom expressions are explicit that the lives of the Malay people have rules in the affairs of dressing. They are cautious in determining the customs of wearing Malay styles, putting it on the high values of religion and culture of dressing. A few samples of the saying are as stated below:

“*Adat pakaian orang melayu, pantang mendedahkan aib malu: atau dikatakan:*

*adat memakai pakaian melayu pantang membuka aib badan,*

*pantang menyingkap malu diri”*

“*Apabila memakai tidak senonoh, nama rosak maruah pun jatuh”*

“*Apabila memakai membuka aurat, tanda hidupnya tidak beradat”*

“*Apabila memakai tidak sesuai, aib terdedah malu terburai”*

“*Apabila memakai tak tahu diri, kehulu kehilir orang mengeji”*

This assertion shows that before wearing the Malay traditional costumes, especially the Malays should not wear the costumes with any style of administration but should base on the intrinsic value of the form and culture of the Malay people. This is because all of them contained a piece of advice from the oldest Malay. These rules become a necessary dress code that everyone must understand and follow. This situation is clear that the Malay people are trying to choose clothes to suit themselves and their position,

try to wear clothes properly, keep from breaking the taboo in costumes, and show good behaviour in their daily life.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### Analysis on the Development of *Baju Melayu*

Examples of the most well-known traditional *Baju Melayu* are shown in Figures 3 and 4. The classic *Baju Melayu* is built on a tube-shaped, loose-cutting silhouette. Most traditional costumes consist of a top shirt, waist (*samping*), and bottom piece of clothing (long pants).

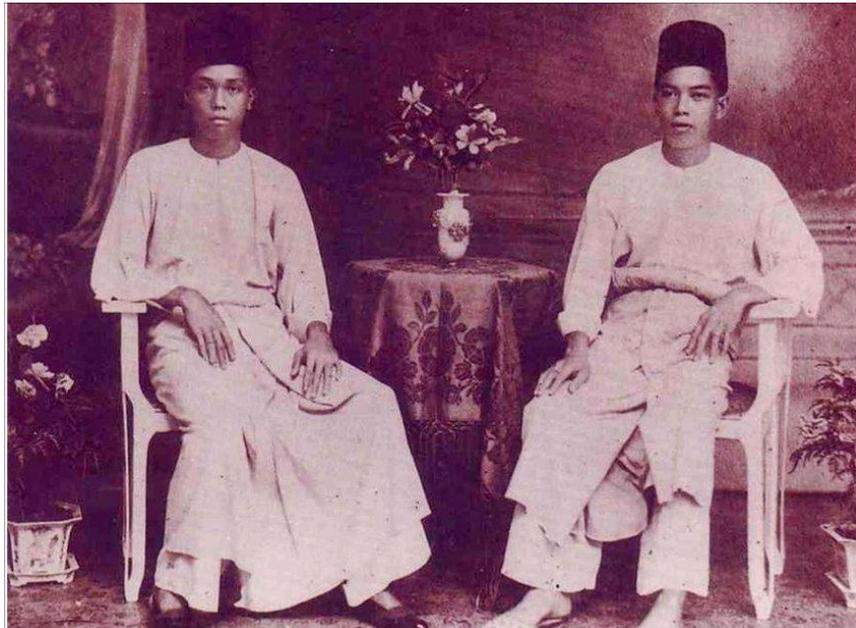
The top shirt of a *Baju Melayu* is made using an easy-fit blouse with a traditional cut, which is sloppy and loose to the body. The classic *Baju Melayu* had loose, long sleeves with a length that ended at the wrist. A *Kekek* (similar function to gusset). This portion gives the arms a hidden influence. The *Pesak* is a panel with a geometric shape that, when put together, takes on the shape of a trapezium. The purpose is to increase body size and allow for a loose-fitting traditional *Baju Melayu* shape. Either *Teluk Belanga* or *Cekak Musang* is the shirt's neckline. Three pockets are on the top. Two different sorts of button styles are one button for *Baju Melayu Teluk Belanga* and five *Kancing* for *Baju Melayu Cekak Musang*.

In the meantime, the waistline and bottom portion were constructed in a rectangle-shaped pattern, starting from the waistline, and ending at ankle level. The long pants were worn at the bottom while the *samping* was worn at the top. In this era, the cut of the classic trousers is sloppy and below the ankle.

From commoners during the Malacca era, it was said that the materials used were cotton and satin with plain fabric. Meanwhile, songket woven fabric is usually only worn for royalties. In terms of accessories, the *Baju Melayu* is usually matched with headdress accessories which is a traditional headdress (*Tengkolok*), Malay cap (*Songkok* and *Kopiah*), and foot accessories which are traditional (Malay *Capal*), and Western formal shoes.



**Figure 3. Traditional style for *Baju Melayu Cekak Musang***  
(Source: Muzium Pahang)



**Figure 4. Traditional style of *Baju Melayu Teluk Belanga***  
(Source: Muzium Pahang)

### **Comparison on the Development of Traditional and Modern *Baju Melayu* Style**

Samples of modern contemporary designs of men's *Baju Melayu* were collected from fashion magazines and websites. All the images of modern contemporary men's *Baju Melayu* were collected from a random Malaysian fashion designer. The following main findings are based on the analysis.



**Figure 5. Traditional *Baju Melayu***  
(Source: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka)

### **Table 1. Visual Analysis of Traditional *Baju Melayu***

Component Analysis	Interpretation
<p><b>Silhouette</b></p> <p>The costume's silhouette (general shape) was more varied, loose, moderate, and fitted cutting shape.</p> <p><b>Style</b></p> <p>Top: Modern <i>Baju Melayu</i> is semi-loose cut</p> <p>Waist</p> <p>Accessories: The <i>samping</i> from <i>songket</i> and <i>Pelikat</i> sarong</p> <p>In terms of <i>samping</i> length, it becomes shorter.</p> <p>Bottom: The cutting of the modern pants is different from the traditional pants (baggy), where the pants are a cleaner shape and slimmer</p> <p><b>Head accessories:</b> Malay cap/<i>Songkok</i></p> <p><b>Footwear accessories:</b> Modern <i>Capal</i></p>	<p>The sleeve of the <i>Baju Melayu</i> worn by the Malay men during this period also slowly changes from a baggy sleeve to a straight semi-loose sleeve to the end of the wrist.</p> <p>Malay cap monopolised the whole trend of men's headdresses during the modernization era.</p> <p>The <i>Songkok</i> has gone through several modifications.</p> <p>The colour of <i>Songkok</i> is more varied, sticking with the black colour.</p>



**Figure 6. Modern Contemporary Baju Melayu**  
 (Source: Saiful Sin)

**Table 2. Visual Analysis of Modern Contemporary Baju Melayu**

Component Analysis	Interpretation
<p><b>Silhouette:</b></p> <p>The costume's silhouette (general shape) was more varied, loose, moderate, and fitted cutting shape.</p> <p><b>Style:</b></p>	<p>Modern contemporary <i>Baju Melayu</i> is fitted cut without <i>Kekek</i> and <i>Pesak</i> and replaced by using a zipper either on the side of the body or the back of the shirt. The sleeve of the <i>Baju Melayu</i> also changes from a baggy sleeve to a fitted sleeve with a cuff.</p>

<p>Top: Modern Contemporary <i>Baju Melayu</i> is fitted cutting.</p> <p>Waist Accessories: The <i>Samping</i> from plain cotton fabric</p> <p>In terms of <i>samping</i> length, it becomes shorter.</p> <p>Bottom: Fitted modern western pants</p> <p><b>Head accessories:</b> Malay cap/Songkok and modern haircut.</p> <p><b>Footwear accessories:</b> Modern shoe</p>	<p>The design of this shirt cutting, known as <i>Baju Melayu Kemeja</i> comes with a more fitted cut and has a contemporary modern element on the shirt. As seen in the Figure above, this contemporary modern shirt cutting of <i>Baju Melayu Kemeja</i> can be categorised as smart casual clothing. It can be styled for various and different occasions.</p> <p>Elements of a contemporary on this modern shirt can be seen on the top of the shirt where it has a yoke, shoulder band, sleeve band, and button placket with a Nehru collar. For the pants, the cutting is based on the skinny cut with a pocket and zip.</p> <p>In terms of colour, this attire used dark colour, which is dark purple and matched with grey on the few panels on top of the attire to give attractiveness and masculinity to the wearer. The costume colour is dominated by dark purple, and the combination of grey on the shoulder band, sleeve band, collar, chest, and waistline were depicted by the Western scholar as emphasising wealth, courage, energy, joy, flamboyance, and the status of the wearer. The application of these colours makes the wearer look energetic and cheerful mood.</p>
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**Figure 7. Modern Contemporary *Baju Melayu***  
(Source: Zerry Zamri)

**Table 3. Visual Analysis of Modern Contemporary *Baju Melayu***

Component Analysis	Interpretation
<p><b>Silhouette:</b> The costume's silhouette (general shape) was more varied, loose, moderate, and fitted cutting shape.</p> <p><b>Style:</b> Top: Modern Contemporary <i>Baju Melayu</i> Teluk Belanga is fitted cutting. Bottom: Fitted modern western pants</p> <p><b>Head accessories:</b> Modern haircut.</p> <p><b>Footwear accessories:</b> Western shoes.</p>	<p>Modern contemporary <i>Baju Melayu</i> is fitted cut without <i>Kekek</i> dan <i>Pesak</i> and replaced using a zipper on the side of the body.</p> <p>The sleeve of the <i>Baju Melayu</i> is fitted until the end of the wrist.</p> <p>The hipster <i>Baju Melayu</i> Teluk Belanga enhanced the fabric's surface on the front, which is fully adorned with the modern geometric motif with varieties of colour, which could enhance more sophisticated elements and versatility effect on the attire which is usually the men's festive attire mostly comes with plain colour. This modern outfit is matched with fitted pants with a pocket and zip as an opening for the bottom parts.</p>



**Figure 7. Modern Contemporary *Baju Melayu***  
 (Source: Bernard Chandran)

**Table 4. Visual Analysis of Modern Contemporary *Baju Melayu***

Component Analysis	Interpretation
<p><b>Silhouette:</b> The costume's silhouette (general shape) was more varied, loose, moderate, and fitted cutting shape.</p> <p><b>Style:</b> Top: Modern Contemporary <i>Baju Melayu</i> is fitted and shortcutting.</p>	<p>Modern contemporary <i>Baju Melayu</i> is fitted cut without <i>Kekek</i> and <i>Pesak</i> and replaced using a zipper on the side of the body.</p> <p>The sleeve of the <i>Baju Melayu</i> is fitted until the end of the wrist.</p> <p>The collection of Sepetang Raya by Bernard Chandran also features <i>Baju Melayu</i> designs influenced by Mao's suit pieces. This modern outfit is</p>

<p>Waist Accessories: The <i>samping</i> from brocade with modern motifs</p> <p>In terms of <i>samping</i> length, it becomes shorter.</p> <p>Bottom: Fitted modern western pants</p> <p><b>Head accessories:</b> Modern haircut.</p> <p><b>Footwear accessories:</b> Western shoes.</p>	<p>matched with fitted pants with a pocket and zip as an opening for the bottom parts.</p> <p>The Mao suit is the Chinese version of a Western business suit. Initially, the Mao suit included baggy pants and a tunic-style button-down jacket with a flipped collar and four pockets.</p> <p>To make it linked with the current trend, the designer makes a few changes to this attire which is still applying elements of Malay clothing such as Cekak Musang collar, modern readymade <i>samping</i> as waist accessory, and for the bottom parts, this modern outfit is matched with fitted pants with pocket and zip as an opening and paired with western shoes. The overall look gives attractiveness, wealth, masculinity, and a modern lifestyle.</p>
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Based on the visual analysis, the adjustment made to the styles and trends on the development of new design modern contemporary *Baju Melayu* brings a new look to this attire. As shown in Table 1-4, all the silhouettes for the men's *Baju Melayu* are from tubular shapes. Meanwhile, in terms of styles and trends, facing a few changes. For example, the cutting from baggy and loose are changed to semi-fitted and fitted on the modern contemporary *Baju Melayu*.

The global trend has influenced changes in the local fashion scene where smart casual is applied to the *Baju Melayu* styling. Designers used the concept of the Western shirt, such as applying an armband, cuff, front button opening, and welt pocket, showing the openness of Malay men nowadays in Malaysia in fashion. The overall outlook is more stylish and acceptable. The costume's cutting and decorative elements looked modernised and referred to that period's dressing taste. The traditional elements are still visible and never put aside because the Malays' five pieces of dressing style were still maintained.

Several features of modern contemporary *Baju Melayu* attire can be identified. The main feature of modern Malay shirts is without *Kekek* and *Pesak*, as found in traditional Malay clothes. Modern *Baju Melayu* is slim loose shirt cutting. The modern festival *Baju Melayu* is worn with two (without *samping*) or three pieces (with *samping*). In addition, because the modern *Baju Melayu* has no *Kekek and Pesak*, found that most of these shirts are slim fit; cutting is added with zip extensions on the sides of the shirt to enhance the comforting sense to the wearer. This modern contemporary *Baju Melayu* has been modified to look more attractive and has its character through the cutting evolution.

Before the advent of modernity and the influence of hipster style in *Baju Melayu*, men's trousers are made with a straight cut and baggy style. However, in the modern and contemporary Malay style, many trouser suits were created with a slim cut to highlight the style of modern men's clothing. In addition, in traditional pants in ancient times, most of them had no pockets. This is because men's *Baju Melayu* has three pockets, and the trousers are worn inside the *samping*. However, for modern trousers and western-style pants today, from the data gathered, the researcher found it has an additional pocket on the side of the pants. This situation is noticeably different because most contemporary fashion designers have made changes where modern and contemporary Malay shirts are created with only one pocket on the chest or directly without the pocket on the shirt.

All these changes are often related to popular trends and are followed especially by today's modern generation. In the old days, the patterns, and colours that Malay men liked were simple patterns and

primary colours. However, today's modern Malay men also like to wear clothes with unique patterns and bright colours.

Regarding head accessories, the researcher concluded that using *Songkok* is very popular as a head accessory for Malay men in styling the *Baju Melayu*. However, the latest hairstyle in Malaysia can be considered one of the popular options because it can be seen in fashion magazines and on social media, the modern men's hairstyle that takes the trend of head accessories. The study also found that this trend's changes are closely related to the change of clothing worn by Malay men today. According to the local magazine editor Affifudin Omar (2012), fashion hair styling can make men look more sleek or smart and suitable to match with the modern and contemporary pieces of *Baju Melayu* nowadays.

Researchers summarise that the trend of footwear accessories for the Malay men's *Baju Melayu* in Malaysia can be divided into traditional Malay *Capal*, western-style shoes before modern *Capal*, and fashionable shoes and slippers today are the latest sandals. This is because the young group in the modern day has now been flooded with various brands and types of shoes for everyday wear or festival wear, such as loafer type, seen as the popular choice in today's generation.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings show the evolution and modification of Malay men's *Baju Melayu* in terms of style, trend, and development of cutting. The main style of the Malay men's festival costume in Malaysia is imitated and gets inspired by the Malay royalties, surrounding, and fashion tastes. When discussing modern styles, hipster elements are one of the significant sources of changing the Malay men's festival attire, especially on the *Baju Melayu*. Additional values like embellishment, cutting, and accessories occurred due to the current fashion trends of a specific time. We must recognize that fashion and trends will change over time.

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