

NEGOTIATING WITH MODERNITY: Veiling in the Early Twentieth Century of Indonesia

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Abstrak

Meski praktek jilbab sudah dikenal di Indonesia sejak abad 17, sejarah mencatat jilbab mulai dikenal lebih luas sejak awal abad 20 bersamaan dengan masuknya modernisasi dan Islamisasi di Nusantara. Modernisasi yang dikenalkan bersamaan dengan kebijakan politik Etis kolonial Belanda memberi peluang lebih luas bagi perempuan untuk mendapatkan akses pendidikan di sekolah. Pada saat yang sama, revivalisme Islam yang dimotori oleh Muhammadiyah juga turut mendorong perempuan untuk terlibat aktif mengenyam pendidikan. Namun, dorongan bagi perempuan untuk terlibat dalam aktifitas publik melalui pendidikan juga dibarengi dengan seruan untuk menutup aurat mereka di ruang publik sebagaimana ajaran Islam dan diikuti dengan segregasi di beberapa aktifitas perempuan. Artikel ini berusaha melihat kompleksitas praktek jilbab di masa akhir kolonialisme Belanda sebagai bentuk negosiasi perempuan muslim dimana wacana modernisasi, revivalisme Islam dan nasionalisme berjaln kelindan turut mempengaruhi praktek tersebut.

Kata Kunci: *Jilbab, Modern, Indonesia*

Introduction

Veiling has attracted various discussions by scholars in Indonesian history. This is because the common symbol of Islamization has been often associated with the veiling. This has been also argued because veiling has not simply denoted muslim women dress to cover their bodies, rather historically has showed a complex negotiation between muslim women and the world around them. The scholarly research on veiling has revealed the facts that veiling has been not monolithic phenomenon in Indonesia, it has transformed significantly from its practice in the early of Islamization of Indonesia to the present day of Indonesia.

The first historical record on veiled women reported by Andaya in Indonesia was found in Makassar in the seventeenth-century worn by noble women where one chronicler mentions that this was also the custom in the holy city of

Mecca.¹ In this period, the tradition of *hijab*, the arabic name of veiling, was brought to the Indies and influenced women to adopt it implying the tradition of segregation between men and women of the Arab. The story recalled by Andaya about Sultana Taj al-Alam Safiyat al-Din Syah in Aceh in the sixteenth century confirms this phenomenon. Sultana who succeeded her husband to be a ruler in Islamic court of Aceh spoke to men behind a screen.² Andaya also reveals a treatise from Java calling women to retreat into domestic sphere based on Quranic doctrine saying “a free woman who does not stay in her house is like a slave.”³

However, although the practice of veiling in Indonesia after the seventeenth century had been

¹Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb : Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, (USA: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 85.

²Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb*, 85

³Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb*, 86

lack of scholarly studies, Dewi believes that the veiling practice of noble women in that period in Makassar had been not commonly adopted by Javanese women until the nineteenth century.⁴ She argues that the photographs of women available in that periods show the dominant dress of Javanese women was *kemben* worn by either noble women or lay women.⁵ Furthermore, the discourse on veiling after that period has been interwoven with the various influences within different social and political situation in each period. Although does not focus specifically on the veiling issue, Dewi sees the veiling practices in the early twentieth century was in lining with the spread of Islam in the Indies leading to the establishment of Islamic reformist movement.⁶

In addition, the practice of veiling in Suharto period had been flavored by the strict state control on religious appearance including veiling practices which was banned in government offices and in non-religious state schools.⁷ Differently, the veiling discussion after reformation era has been mushrooming with the phenomenon of veiling within the decrease of the state control, globalization, the more freedom of choices of women as well as free market influences.⁸ Thus, I

contend that veiling practice in Indonesian history cannot be detached from the social and political change at that time. While scholars mostly focus on the veiling discourse and phenomenon in the Post Suharto period, this paper will investigate the practice of veiling in the early twentieth century of Indonesia in which the early growth of modernization, nationalism and Islamic revivalism has shaped significantly for the emergence of veiling practices in the beginning of Indonesia.

Women in the early modernization of Indonesia

The early twentieth century has been argued as the emergence of the idea of nationalism, modernization and the revival Islam in the Netherland Indies--a name before Indonesia found.⁹ This period was also mentioned as an era when the Dutch colonial implemented the Ethical Policy giving an opportunity for Indies people to involve in establishing their national future.¹⁰ As a consequence of this policy, the Indies people had enjoyed more freedom in interacting with new ideas of nationalism, feminism as well as Islamism which had been massively brought by globalization and modernization, either introduced by the colonial or from overseas.

The Indies women's condition in the late nineteenth century had been argued experiencing the hardship life when the men had become forced labor to service Dutch Economic prosperity.¹¹ Women peasant had also had famine due to poverty compounded with the outbreak of typhoid epidemic.¹² At the same time, by the end of Diponegoro war, the noblemen had been also challenged by the decline of their supremacy in political and military authority. One of the result of this was Florida's example of Elite man

⁴Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, "Javanese Women and Islam: Identity Formation since the Twentieth Century", *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, April 2012, 114.

⁵Barbara Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, *Javanese Women* 114.

⁶Barbara Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, *Javanese Women* 117.

⁷Nancy J. Smith-Hefner, "Javanese women and the veil in post-Soeharto Indonesia", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 66 (31), 2007, 397.

⁸See Suzanne Brenner, "Reconstructing self and society: Javanese Muslim women and 'the veil'", *American Ethnologist* 23 (24) 1996; Nancy J. Smith-Hefner, "Javanese women and the veil in post-Soeharto Indonesia", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 66 (31), 2007; Sunesti, Yuyun, "Tubuh dalam Persepsi Perempuan Berjilbab di Yogyakarta (Sebuah Kajian Etnografi Feminis)", Tesis, CRCS UGM Yogyakarta, 2007; Eva F. Amrullah, "Indonesian Muslim Fashion Styles and Designs", in ISIM, Review 2/Autumn 2008; Firly Annisa, "Representation of fashion as Muslima Identity in Paras Magazine", in Johanna Pink (ed.), *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption: Politics, Culture and Identity between the Local and the Global*, (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing); Carla Jones, "Fashion and Faith in Urban Indonesia", in *Fashion Theory*, Volume 1, Issue 2/3; Carla Jones, "Materializing piety: Gendered anxieties about faithful consumption in contemporary urban Indonesia", *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 37, No. 4, November 2010; Deni Hamdani, Hamdani, Deni. *Anatomy of Muslim Veils: Practice, Discourse and Changing Appearance of Indonesian Women*, (Germany: Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011);

Rachel Rinaldo, *Mobilizing Piety: Islam and Feminism in Indonesia*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013);

⁹Robert Pringle, *Understanding Islam in Indonesia: Politics and Diversity* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet PTE, 2010), 54. See also Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, "Javanese Women and Islam", 117.

¹⁰Robert Pringle, *Understanding Islam*, 55.

¹¹Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, "Javanese Women and Islam", 114.

¹²Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, *Javanese Women* 115.

of royal Surakarta who defended their power by writing women's literature showing their persistent domination over women. In their work, they defined an ideal woman who should be totally submissive to men and responsible for domestic duties.¹³ Although this noblemen work was not the only one factors influencing the seclusion of women in the public sphere, it can be used to portray women's situation at that time.

The subordination of women was also reported by Aryanti arguing that the women's seclusion was the common practice of women in Java in the early twentieth century.¹⁴ Although she views the Javanese women's subordination was not bad like purdah system in Pakistan, the results of this exclusion for women were obvious. Beside the traditional view placed women in domestic sphere, they were also excluded from public education.¹⁵

It has been argued that the wind of change of Indonesian women condition occurred after Dutch implemented the Ethical policy supporting Indies people in experiencing various kinds of modernization. Blackburn argues that the successfully Dutch parliament allowing Dutch women to vote in 1919 encouraged the Dutch to have a colonial policy having sensitivity to women issues.¹⁶ The issues concerned by the Dutch following their Ethical Policy were the education of girls, intermarriage between Europeans and 'natives and their offspring as well as prostitution associated with the army.¹⁷ Western education promoted by the Dutch had affected women to be actively and bravely speaking out to the public as well as expressing their perceptions and needs.¹⁸ As a result of this was the growth of many women organizations in Java and outside of Java voicing the variety of concerns, such as Putri Mardika (1912) promoting the idea of men and women's

equality in the progression of the nation; Perikatan Perhimpunan Isteri Indonesia (PPII) (1928) encouraging the national consciousness of women; and "Aisyiyah (Muhammadiyah Female Branch) in 1917 focusing on muslim women in dealing with Islamic values and European styles of progress.¹⁹

Within this period, Kartini, claimed as the first Indies women promoting education for women, was the common role model for many women organizations giving spirit of women emancipation in the public.²⁰ That was why in 1913 the Kartini Fonds (Kartini Fund), a private foundation, was created to provide Dutch-language education for Javanese Women.²¹ Although the education for Indies girls was not the priority for their Ethical policy, the Dutch authority still provided subsidy for this 'Kartini schools'.²²

Beside of spirit from Kartini's idea of women emancipation, a message given by Ahmad Dahlan, a founder of Muhammadiyah, to send girls to the school was also the great support in this issue.²³ His popular statement in provoking women and liberating them from the exclusion was his dialogue with his female students:

Aren't you ashamed of showing your awra to men?" Ahmad Dahlan asked his female students. "It would be a deep embarrassment, Sir!" They replied. "Then why do you go to male doctors when you are ill, even when you deliver your baby [and let them see your awra]? If you are ashamed, then continue studying and become doctors, so that we have female doctors for women. How excellent that is! (Salam 2009 , p. 136)²⁴

This dialogue has been believed as the primary spirit for women at that time to not only practice their religious doctrine, but also achieve

¹³Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, *Javanese Women* 115.

¹⁴Tutin Aryanti, "Shame and Borders: The 'Aisyiyah's Struggle for Muslim Women's Education in Indonesia", in Zehavit Gross, et. Al. (Eds), *Religion, Gender and Education in a Chaotic Postmodern World* (Springer 2013), 84.

¹⁵Aryanti, "Shame and Borders",84.

¹⁶Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State in Modern Indonesia*, (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17.

¹⁷Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State*, 18.

¹⁸Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State*, 18.

¹⁹Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, "Javanese Women and Islam", p 117-118.

²⁰Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, "Javanese Women", 118. See Also Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State*, 18.

²¹M.C. Ricklef, *History of Modern Indonesia since c. 1200*, Third Edition, (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 200.

²²M.C. Ricklef, *History of Modern*, 200.

²³Tutin Aryanti, "Shame and Borders.."

²⁴Tutin Aryanti, "Shame and Borders", 83.

a prestigious profession in community which was usually belong to men's tradition. Following this message, Aisiyah was established to encourage many more women to go to schools and liberate themselves from their traditional subordination.

Although having many criticism from conservative Muslim families who refused to send their girls to schools by arguing the schools was managed by Dutch associated with infidel, Dahlan and Walidah, Dahlan's wife and one of Aisiyah's board, convinced them by saying that "the Dutch education was a way of releasing women and Muslims from backwardness and the colonialism." In addition, Dahlan and Aisiyah organization was intending muslim girls to gain not only public education but also religious education by providing Islamic schools in the afternoon after their public school in the morning.²⁵ This is because they argued that muslim women should be liberated from traditional views and practices placing them in the subordination position under men. Therefore, they urge them to return to Islamic guidance which they argued can bring women to be equal with men as partners rather than the secondary agents.²⁶

However, although promoting an equality between men and women, Aisiyah still emphasized women to be good wives for their husbands by being obedient wives and devoted mothers for their families.²⁷ The involvement of women in the public also uttered the ideas of veiling and sex segregation which then attracted Western feminists' criticism which women have no authority on their own bodies and persistent under male domination.²⁸ On the other side, Aryanti argues that those practices had indeed successfully liberated women from the traditional practices of discrimination.²⁹

Veiling in the Early twentieth Century: Between Modernization and Islamization

Although veiling has been known already worn by muslim women since the sixteenth century, it has commonly known starting to be muslim women's identity in Indonesia since the early twentieth century when the idea of modernization and Islamization had mutually intertwined. Modernization brought the idea of nationalism, feminism as well as everyday life styles from the secular western tradition had to go hand in hand with the growth of Islamic revivalism came from the Middle East reformist movement brought by the Indies' scholars from either their education in the Middle East or their pilgrimage from the Holy Land, Mecca. One of the influences from these both intertwining was the practice of veiling showing the negotiation between the western modern values as well as Islamic revivalism experienced by the muslim Indies at that time.

It has been argued that the idea of veiling re-emerged in the early twentieth century promoted by Aisiyah organization in responding to the promotion of public education for women in the Indies.³⁰ At that time the idea of gender equality encouraging women to have public education like men had been captured by Muhammadiyah and Aisiyah figures simultaneously with the effort to return muslims to the original of Islamic doctrines. This brings about them into a consequence allowing women to have public activities but at the same time they had to cover their bodies as Islamic doctrine requires them to do so. It was argued that since this period, *kemben* as the traditional dress worn by the Indies women before 1920s was changed by what we called the Malay-Indonesian dress consisting of *kebaya*, *sarong* and *kudung* which was mostly worn by the Indies muslim women, particularly among *santri*.³¹

Following veiling, another issue came up in dealing with this situation was the notion of sex segregation separating female and male schools and the other activities. Muhammadiyah argued

²⁵Tutin Aryanti, "Shame and Borders, 86.

²⁶Tutin Aryanti, "Shame and Borders, 86.

²⁷Tutin Aryanti, "Shame and Borders, 87.

²⁸Tutin Aryanti, "Shame and Borders, 84.

²⁹Tutin Aryanti, "Shame and Borders, 84.

³⁰Tutin Aryanti, "Shame and Borders, 84.

³¹Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, "The Javanese Women and Islam", 120.

that the separation is required as women had to hide their *awra* to men as women's body is a temptation to men.³² Beside school, Kauman village, a base of Muhammadiyah in Yogyakarta also established *Langgar Wadon* (female mosque) in facilitating women to do *Jumat* prayer while male do it in *Masjid Kakung* (male mosque), another name for Masjid Gedhe Kauman. In addition, one of Muhammadiyah figures in Kauman also built a small girls' Islamic reading groups in his house to accommodate women Islamic education.³³

At the same period, the promotion of veiling had been competed by the mushrooming of western fashion styles adopted by the Indies women. Since the colonial Dutch had suggested to not wearing *sarong* and *kebaya* for *totok* women, women born in the Netherland then emigrated to the Indies, the growth of modern western fashion was obvious.³⁴ Scholten states that even before 1920, this typical indigenous clothing had disappeared among *totok* women since Catenius-van der Meijden, an Indies born who had a concern on the typical Indies outfit, gave an advice in her writing for *totok* women to leave this Indies clothing when they were in board ship.³⁵ Limiting to wear it was also promoted for Europeans to only wore this outfit in the Indies at home in the morning and till about ten years later it was not acceptable practice among them anymore.³⁶ However, according to Beata van Helsdingen-Schoe, the rejection to wear the Indies outfit was basically a fear of being *verindischen* (native).³⁷

It was argued that about 1920s and 1930s the female fashion among *totok* women in the Indies was completely westernized.³⁸ In facilitating this changes, several magazines was sent from Europe in special women fashion edition. Requested by the Association for Housewives in North Sumatera, the collection of their library was

completed with fashion magazines which was 17 magazines of 34.³⁹ Besides magazines, the ease to get this western fashion was also facilitated by the stores opened selling this outfit in many areas in the Indies.⁴⁰

Scholten sees this process of modernization and westernization especially in the form of fashion also influenced the elite Indies women who had access easily to communicate and interact with the colonial women.⁴¹ Since many *priyayi* women were also involved in the Association of Housewives founded by *totok* women, they had been influenced by the modern ways of life brought by European women including their clothes. Although the number of non-elite women who adopted this European outfit was not clearly recorded, the photos portraying the massive adoption of this fashion among urban women was can be found easily in many documents of Indonesian history.

In responding to this modernization of fashion, *Aisiyah* published magazines called *Soeara Aisijjah* appealing and suggesting muslim women strongly to wear veiling to cover their *awra*, parts of body which cannot be seen by men. The magazine published in 1938 clearly explained how muslim women should wear *kudung*, as their obligation as *muslima*.⁴² It told the readers how to wear perfect *kudung* by giving example pictures of women wearing improper *kudung* and explanations how to wear the perfect ones. Although not clearly stating to reject the modern westernized form of fashion among Indies women, the urge to wear veiling for muslim women indicated that Islamization went hand in hand with modernization-westernization faced by the Indies women at that time.

In addition, besides Muhammadiyah, the wearing of *kudung* was also appealed by the *Islam Raja* magazine which one of the readers gave an opinion emphasizing that *kudung* did not lower the status of women rather a form of their submission

³²Tutin Aryanti, "Shame and Borders", 88.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial State: Essays on Gender and Modernity in the Netherland Indies 1900-1942* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000), 128.

³⁵Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial*, 128.

³⁶Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial*, 128.

³⁷Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial*, 128.

³⁸Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial*, 130.

³⁹Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial*, 136.

⁴⁰Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial*, 131-132.

⁴¹Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial*, 140.

⁴²Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, "The Javanese Women and Islam", 122.

to follow Islamic doctrine.⁴³ Much later, this practice was also promoted by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) with more tolerant form of *kudung* than Muhammadiyah already promoted.⁴⁴

However, the veiling practices and the segregation of women in public sphere were not fully acceptable by some Islamic leaders at that time. One of them was Hadji Agus Salim, a prominent Islamic modernist and nationalist, who in his speech at the second convention of the League of Young Muslim (Jong Islamieten Bond, or JIB) in Solo in 1926 argued that rather than Islamic tradition, the veiling and the segregation of women was Arabic custom.⁴⁵ In that convention, he urged the members of JIB to be able to differentiate between Arabic and Islamic teachings as well as to free from that false Arabic custom which did not originate from Islamic doctrines.⁴⁶

Veiling Negotiation: Being a Modern Muslim Women in the Colonial Period

Apart from its debate, veiling in the early twentieth century denoted the closer connection between women and Islam leading to the new identity construction of the Indies muslim women. This encouraged the new perception of their rights, status as well as obligation for women within the modern-Islamic discourse in the late colonial period of the Indies. Additionally, the practice of veiling also reveals the complex negotiation of muslim women with the social and political situation around them. I argue that the phenomenon of veiling in the early twentieth century show both complicated and strategic forms of muslim women's negotiation.

The complicated form of negotiation can be seen from the adoption of veiling by muslims women as it was going hand in hand with the acceptance of the idea of modernity promoted by the European feminists supported by the Ethical policy of Dutch colonial to bring women to the public for gaining the same access with men.

Indeed, this idea of liberating women from their subordination inspired by the Europe feminism was adopted by muslims especially Muhammadiyah members by encouraging muslim families to send their girls to the school. However, the Europe feminists strongly criticized the following effort on women's veiling and segregation among men and women in the public by Muhammadiyah as it indicated the un-serious effort to liberate the Indies women.

European Feminists, who relied their arguments on Western universalism theories, viewed that the veiling and segregation showed the continues subjugation by patriarchal rules which women do not have rights to control their body.⁴⁷ The idea of *kodrat* which also reminded by Muhammadiyah's leaders to the female members for not forgetting their roles as wives and mothers was also seen by them as an ambiguity position of that muslim organization to urge women to the public but at the same time asking them again to focus on their private life.

For this situation, the complicated negotiation formed in the effort of Muhammadiyah to urge women to have public education with men to deal with modern feminism idea of gender equality as well as to leave their traditional kind of subordination by Javanese custom was trapped by another form of domesticating women offered by Islamic tradition. However, I argue that this point of view was less relevant as viewing the reality of colonial social and political condition through the eye of women in the colonial power perception.

Thus, viewing this from the postcolonial perspectives by looking at the power relationship between the colonial power and colonized people and culture, the veiling practices of muslim women in this late colonial period can be seen as the strategic negotiation by the Indies people in dealing with the culture of colonialization. As Scholten reported that the early twentieth century was the massive promotion of European fashion styles influenced the colonial women as well as the elite and urban Indies to adopt this new kind of outfit and left the Indies custom of *kebaya* and

⁴³Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, *Javanese Women* 121.

⁴⁴Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, *Javanese Women* 121-122.

⁴⁵Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, *Javanese Women* 122.

⁴⁶Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, *Javanese Women* 123.

⁴⁷Tutin Aryanti, "Shame and Borders..", 84.

sarong. Therefore, the appealing to wear veiling in combination of *kebaya* and *sarong* can be argued as a kind of defending the Indies-Islam culture and rejecting the modern westernized fashion.

Although connecting veiling to the idea of nationalism was also questioned due to its adoption from the Arabic tradition, the rejection to be different with the colonial custom by adopting the other culture could be argued as another part of being different with the colonizer. Emma Puradireja's, a Sundanist Women's leader, survey in early 1939 showing the composition of the members of two different women's organization in Indonesia confirming the larger number of women in women's organization based on religion compared to women's organization based on religiously neutral⁴⁸ can be used to analyze this phenomenon. The spreading women associating with Islamic organization which was down to village level could be a huge capital to counter the modern westernized culture compare to women associating with the nationalist movement organization which was typically consisting of small urban and educated women. The proof portrayed by Aryanti that the European dress was mainly adopted by elite and urban women showed the strategic position of veiling negotiation as a notion of anti-colonial culture by the Indies people.

Thus, both the complicated and strategic kind of veiling negotiation denoted the complex relation of veiling within Indonesian history. It has not a monolithic phenomenon providing a single meaning, rather intertwining each other. Complicated negotiation means that the notion of veiling emerged from the complex relation of the practice with the social and political situation at that time. The strategic negotiation shows the practice of veiling within the colonial period in which the anti-colonialism was the goal to liberate the Indies from the domination of colonial culture.

Conclusion

The veiling practices in the early twentieth century of Indonesia cannot be apart from the social

and political influences during that period. The modernization brought by Colonial Dutch as well as Islamization promoted by modernist muslims had encouraged the emergence of veiling as well as had shaped the meaning behind the practices. Veiling worn by muslim women in this late colonial period emerged as a kind of negotiation of three emerging identities in the Indies: modern-western, indigenous and Islam. Therefore, the negotiation was complicated in one side and on the other side could be seen as a strategic way of the colonial cultural refusion.

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⁴⁸Susan Blackburn, *Women and the State*, 20.

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