



Women's Perspective on the Surakarta *Kebaya* based on Biographies of Gusti Noeroel and Utami Suryadarma

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Abstract. The *kebaya* is a national dress for Indonesian women. This paper analyzes the development of the Surakarta *kebaya*s used by Gusti Noeroel, a princess who lived in Mangkunegara Palace, and Utami Suryadarma, the daughter of a high rank police officer from Surakarta. They were selected as the subject of this research because they used the *kebaya* consistently throughout their lives despite their interaction with modern culture. This study used a historical approach, especially on women's position in Indonesian society and the development of Indonesian culture and *kebaya* design. The data were collected from various publications. Gusti Noeroel and Utami Suryadarma were educated noblewomen. They interacted with modern culture from various nations, while consistently using the *kebaya* as a characteristically Indonesian dress. The model they initially wore, the Surakarta *kebaya*, developed by changing the collar and the length and by applying a tighter fitting design. In addition, the material used changed according to the times. We can conclude that these princesses' abilities to adjust the *kebaya* according to each era, made their *kebaya* designs always up to date.

Keywords: *Gusti Noeroel; Surakarta kebaya; Utami Suryadarma; women's studies.*

1 Introduction

The *kebaya* is a national dress for Indonesian women. The *kebaya* was officially inaugurated as a national dress in 1972 through Presidential Decree of the Indonesian Republic No. 18 year 1972 and State Law No. 9 year 2010 concerning clothing in protocols, which state that the national dress is part of flag ceremony procedures at official state events [1]. The use of the *kebaya* in Indonesia goes back to times long before Indonesia's independence and before it was inaugurated as national dress. Various ethnic groups in Indonesia with their own traditional clothes have fused in the *kebaya* as a unifying piece of clothing.

A previous research related to *kebaya* is the study entitled *The Visual Characteristics of Indonesian Traditional Clothing for First Lady in 1945-2014*

written by Suciati as her dissertation in 2017. There are still many factors related to the *kebaya* that need to be studied. One of them is related to the cultural values in the environment of the Mangkunegara Palace and the daughters of nobles in Surakarta who interacted with modern culture.

This research analyzed the development of the *kebaya*'s visualization and cultural values contained in the *kebaya*, especially the *kebaya*s used by Gusti Noeroel, a daughter of the king of Mangkunegara Surakarta, and Utami Suryadarma, a daughter of an *ambtenaar* (civil servant under the Dutch colonial rule) in Surakarta. Both were selected as research subject because they can represent Indonesian women who conserved the wearing of the *kebaya* throughout their lives despite their interaction with modern culture.

2 Theory

The theories used in this study are women's studies, aesthetic theory, and cultural theory. Cultural concepts are related to cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is the result of cultural activities that are recognized as mutual property by a nation or ethnic group, which is also often placed as a signifier of a shared national or ethnic identity so that there is a substantial 'borrowing' of cultural elements, both one-way and two-way. Often there are also cultural products that are the shared inheritance of two or more nations/ethnic groups, as a result of the contact that has occurred in the history of these nations. Resemblance between cultural heritages can occur due to ethnic group migration in large numbers to an area outside their home region, or a process of interplay without migration that can occur in the long term [2]. Another concept proposed by Sedyawati is that creativity is part of the realm of traditional art. Traditions in art are not something that cannot change and develop.

This research used a female or feminist perspective, which is a perspective based on a feminist theoretical framework with the following assumptions:

1. That women need to be accepted and valued as fellow human beings who have the potential (ability) to develop;
2. That the image of women being 'incompetent, weak, dependent' is a disparaging cultural product so it needs to be balanced with the image of women being intelligent, independent, bright, courageous, able to make decisions, successful, ethical, and having other positive characteristics;
3. That women have the ability to develop environmental conditions and are very likely to contribute to social, economic, political and personal development;
4. That women have various kinds of human qualities to improve the quality of life in general as well as men;

5. That a variety of common beliefs and attitudes towards women that are heavily influenced by myths and various negative stereotypes stemming from socio-cultural influences that harm the development of women's self and status can be changed or eliminated. [3].

Another theory used to understand the development of the *kebaya* in this research is the theory of creativity. Creativity means creating or making something that is commonly known by many people in a different shape, composition, or style. The different shape that is created or made is an innovation without or with change of the main function. Creativity is the effective ability to create [4].

Damajanti continues by stating that the values of 'novelty' and 'authenticity' always correlate with creativity. Through a series of researches, Morgan (1953) states that the universal factor in creativity is novelty and novelty requires originality. There must always be fresh ideas.

3 Methodology

This research used historical methods, women's studies, and aesthetic theory. The historical method was used to understand the use of the *kebaya* in Java, especially in the area of Surakarta, from one period to the next. Through this historical explanation, the shift and development in the appearance of the *kebaya* can be discovered.

Women's studies were used to understand the position of women in Indonesian society, so the correlation between *kebaya* design in relation to the position of Indonesian women can be understood, specifically that of Surakarta women. The aesthetic theory used in this paper is related to the value of beauty that is present in Indonesian traditional clothing, especially the *kebaya*.

The data in this study were obtained from a literature review of the biography of Gusti Noeroel, *Streven naar geluk* (Pursuit of Happiness) and Utari Suryadarma's autobiography entitled *Me, Soeriadi & the Motherland*. Both books were the main source for understanding the development of the *kebaya* used by these two highly placed women in Surakarta.

4 The Development of the *Kebaya* and its Meaning for Javanese Society

4.1 The History of the Use of the *Kebaya* in Indonesia

In Thomas Stamford Raffles' book entitled *The History of Java*, which was first published in 1817, it can be seen that cloth was used on a statue of the goddess

Durga, known by the Javanese as Loro Jonggrang [5]. In the illustration, Durga uses a cloth with a *kawung* batik motif; it does not use a *kebaya*. The upper part of her dress resembles women's clothing from India.

In the realm of puppetry, especially *wayang kulit*, female figures such as Dewi Drupadi and Dewi Woro Sumbadra use a cloth and a *kemben* (a traditional female torso wrap) that covers the chest area [6]. Information on women's clothing figures in the realm of puppetry can be found in the book *The Mighty Women in Java in the XVIII and XIX Century* by Peter Carey and Vincent Houben. Still in the realm of puppetry, Kunti has been illustrated using clothes that cover his body and arms in the book entitled *Art of Indonesia* by Frits A. Winger, first published in 1959 [7]. Kunti's illustration with long *kebaya*-like piece of clothing was taken from the book *Het Javaansche Tooneel, Deel De Wajang Poerwa*, by J. Kats from 1923.

Anthony Reid [8] states that all immigrants from Europe and China who came to Southeast Asia were surprised by the nakedness of the population in the area, both male and female. They were barefoot, bareheaded (except for Muslims) and even naked from the waist up. Clothes that were sewn to cover arms or legs apparently only recently entered Southeast Asia, except Vietnam. When the Portuguese arrived, robes were only used by Muslims or those who were closely related to them (especially the Tagalog people), by higher Burmese circles, or as something that was used sporadically here and there by those who could afford it. Rarely did people use sewn clothes because of friendly weather and the absence of sewing skills. Another obstacle that made robes develop slowly was the belief that the body is something beautiful.

The *kebaya*, defined as loose clothing on the upper body used by women, seems to follow the example of Portuguese clothing, as can be seen with the people of South Sulawesi. The material used is very thin so it shows the woman's body [8]. In this article it is explained that the spread of Islam changed dress habits in Java. Women added one more garment besides a *jarik* (cloth), which was a shawl wrapped around the top of their body so that it covered the chest. In a painting from 1598 it can be seen that women in Java (Banten) were still bare-chested in daily life. The above explanation shows the process of development of women's clothing in Indonesia. Foreign influences introduced full clothing to the people of *Nusantara* (archipelago) and eventually also the *kebaya*.

4.2 Philosophical Meanings of Javanese Traditional Women's Clothing

In Javanese society, traditional clothing has philosophical meanings that are related to one's behavior and hopes as well as prayers in human life. Javanese

women's traditional clothing includes *kebaya*, *jarik* (cloth), *sangsangan susun* (jewelry), *bingel kana* (jewelry), *pethat gunung* (jewelry), and *sanggul ceplok* (bun). The meaning of traditional clothing is explained by Sri Wintala Achmad in his book *Javanese Philosophy: Revealing the Philosophy, Doctrine, and Javanese Ancestral Life Practices* [9].

Kebaya is a simple form of clothing for women who are expected to be modest and appear as they are. *Kebaya* shows the gentle attitude of Javanese women but behind this, Javanese women should also have the courage to face *bebaya* (danger).

Jarik are used by women and men with different rules. *Jarik* is a long cloth worn to cover the lower body. The *jarik* is referred to as *aja serik* (don't be jealous) in *jarwo dhosok* (Javanese explanation of the origin of words). The philosophical meaning is similar to the understanding that humans should not be jealous of each other, because jealousy can cause humans to act emotionally and recklessly.

A *jarik* is usually worn at official events by folding it to a certain size at the front (*wiru*). *Wiru* is referred to as *wiwiren aja nganti kleru* (don't be mistaken in the end) in *jarwo dhosok*, meaning that anything can have beauty and harmony.

In the Gandhakuti inscription from 1042, it is written that not all members of the community are allowed to use fine fabrics. Those who have privileges are allowed to use anything inside the palace. They are allowed to wear clothing with a *ringring banantèn* (fine cloth) pattern, *patarana benantèn*, a gold colored fabric, *patah* pattern, *ajon* with a grasshopper pattern, a flower pattern, yellow color, a lotus flower motif, a seed pattern, *awali* cloth, *dulang pangdarahan*, *dodot* with a green lotus flower motif, *sadangan* with saffron color, *nawagraha* cloth, *pasilih galuh* cloth [10]. The Panumbangan inscription mentions the right to use cloth that is drawn with gold is exclusive to certain people in the royal court [10].

Based on that inscription, it can be seen that there was a hierarchy in the use of clothing in Javanese society. Clothes with velvet, silk, ornaments from gold or lace could only belong to royals and nobles. In addition, there were rules that should not be violated and other factors such as the high cost of materials made of gold, velvet and silk.

Within the Surakarta Palace there were also a strict rules for the use of clothing. Clothing is adjusted to the social stratum of its user as well as the intended occasion. Women's clothing also reflects the age of the wearer, the status of the

wearer (teenager or married), and the level of her position in the royal circle (child, grandchild, or great-grandchild of the king). Not everyone is allowed to wear particular attributes or signs, unique jewelry, batik cloth with a particular motif or pattern, or bun decorations. A full set of jewelry can only be used by children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren of the king. Other relatives are only allowed to use a pair of *subang* (earrings) without bracelets and necklaces [11].

5 Gusti Noeroel and Utami Suryadarma

5.1 Gusti Noeroel's Biography

Gusti Noeroel was the daughter of K.G.P.A.A. Mangkoenegoro VII (King of Mangkunegara Surakarta) with G.R.Ay. Mursudarijah, who after her marriage changed her name to Gusti Kanjeng Ratu Timoer. Gusti Kanjeng Timoer was a noblewoman from the Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat Sultanate as the 12th daughter of Sultan Hamengkubuwono VII. Gusti Noeroel's parents married on 6 September 1920 in Yogyakarta.



Figure 1 Gusti Noeroel at 20 years old [12].

Gusti Noeroel was born on 17 September 1921 in Surakarta by the name of Gusti Raden Ajeng Siti Noeroel Kamaril Ngasarati Koesoemawardhani. She passed away in Bandung on 10 November 2015. Gusti Noeroel was the only daughter of the royal couple. She had half-brothers from six different mothers. Picture of her can be seen in Figure 1.

Gusti Noeroel went to junior high school (*MULO*). Her wish to continue her education at a higher level was denied, but later she went to the *Van Deventer School* (a women's school) in Solo to learn various skills such as cooking, sewing, and childcare. Gusti Noeroel herself had several other skills, such as dancing, horse riding, and playing the piano.

On 24 March 1951, she married R.M. Soerjarso Soerjosoerarmo, a military officer who later became the first Indonesian military attache in the United States. Gusti Noeroel married at the age of nearly thirty. Many men were attracted to her, including President Soekarno. She avoided having to lead a life as a second wife after reflecting on the life of her father and mother.

Gusti Noeroel traveled abroad, to the Netherlands among others, and after her marriage she lived in the United States for some time, accompanying her husband on duty. Interestingly, she decided to keep wearing the *kebaya* to express her identity.

5.2 Utami Suryadarma Biography

Utami Suryadarma's full name was Raden Roro Oetami Ramelan and she was born in Sragen, Central Java on 2 February 1917 and died in Jakarta on 16 January 1996. She was the fifth daughter of Raden Ramelan and RA Soemirah. Her father was an *ambtenaar* (Dutch Indies government civil servant) whose position was quite high as *chef van de Solosche recherche* or Solo regional police chief (Solo is another name for Surakarta). One source states that Utami's father was a *wedana* (district chief) in Surakarta. Although her father was an employee of the Dutch government, Utami said that her father often discussed Indonesia's independence and how to expel the invaders from their homeland. Her father was also a member of the Budi Utomo organization [13].

The decision to use Utami Suryadarma as a subject in this research was based on her writings, her attitude towards her homeland and her contribution to her homeland. In addition, she grew up in Javanese culture in the city of Solo. According to her, Solo was a city that did not have much influence from western culture, because not many Dutch people had settled in the city. Utami affirms that this condition was advantageous because Solo could maintain a genuine culture and a unique atmosphere. Solo still is one of the strongholds of Indonesian culture [13].

Utami and her sister, Utari, studied at the *Europeesche Lagere Meisjesschool* in Solo, a Dutch-language elementary girl school. They went to school together with the daughters of Sri Susuhunan X, the king of the Surakarta Kingdom. Utami, thus indirectly learned about the culture of the palace because she was

good friends with the palace's daughters. Utami displayed a great spirit of learning. She continued her education at the *Oostersch-Letterkundige Afdeling* of the *Algemeene Middelbare School* (Eastern Literature Department of the General Middle School) in Solo. Her goal was to continue to a higher education in the field of law or at the Faculty of Eastern Literature and Philosophy in Leiden in the Netherlands, but this did not happen because her father didn't want her to continue her education, in addition to the financial aspect.

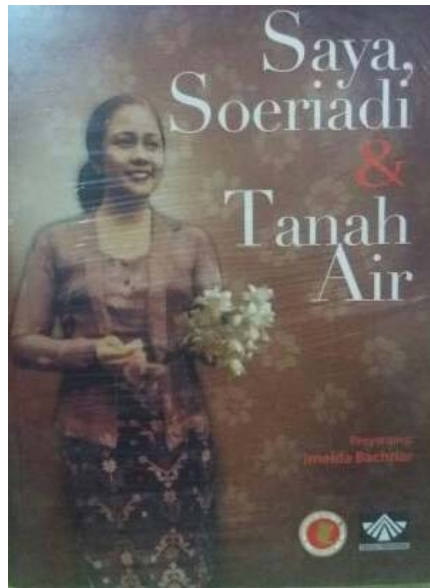


Figure 2 Utami on the cover of her autobiography [13].

Utami married Soeriadi Suryadarma on 3 June 1938, whom in the future he write autobiography book in Figure 2. The interesting thing about Utami were her moderate views. She rejected some of the customs in Javanese wedding ceremonies, for example, she refused to have the hair in front of her forehead to be *paes* (cut and made up). She also refused to wash her husband's feet and bow to him. Her husband had the unconventional view of considering women and men equal.

Based on the above explanation, Utami Suryadarma was a Javanese noblewoman with modern views as an indigenous woman. She and several other women who were able to speak English and Dutch were entrusted by President Soekarno to explain Indonesian culture to the delegation of the Three Nations Commission (America, Australia and Canada) at the Yogyakarta State Palace in 1947. Because of these women's skills and intelligence, the Three Nations Commission delegation got the impression of Indonesia as a civilized nation.

The figure of Utami Suryadarma on the one hand had a progressive view, but on the other hand she never left the traditions of the nation. She was very impressed with Indonesian culture. One of the cultural products she always glorified was the *kebaya*. Utami Suryadarma always used a *kebaya* and *kain* to express her Indonesian identity. Her second granddaughter, Amaranila Lalita Drijono, revealed that one form of her grandmother's nationalism was wearing a *kebaya* on every occasion. According to her grandmother, the *kebaya* was not just a national dress but also a symbol of self-identity as a person with an independent personality [13].

6 Analysis of the *Kebaya* Designs worn by Gusti Noeroel and Utami Suryadarma

6.1 *Kebayas* of Gusti Noeroel from 1930s-1990s

Gusti Noeroel had an interest in designing clothes, make-up, styling and photography, inspired by films and magazines. She shared this interest with her mother, G.K.R. Timoer. Gusti Noeroel obtained her formal education at *Van Deventer School*, which taught her sewing, cooking and embroidery. With these skills, she had the ability to develop her own *kebaya* designs in various models. Below are the designs of *kebayas* used by Gusti Noeroel from the 1930s to the 1990s. There is no information available for some of the designs of the *kebaya*, but they can be classified according to the narration in her biography.

There are four periods in the life of Gusti Noeroel that influenced the designs of her *kebaya*, namely her childhood period, her teenage period, her adult period, and her post-marriage period. From the available data it can be seen that during her childhood, Gusti Noeroel used a *kutubaru* design of *kebaya*. Apparently, the habit of wearing *kutubaru kebaya* went back to when she was a toddler. At the age of 8, Gusti Noeroel attended official activities with her father wearing a *kutubaru kebaya*. She wore *kutubaru* style *kebayas* until her old age.

As a teenager, Gusti Noeroel wore a *kebaya* model that followed the shape of the body; the wearer's waist curve is visible. The length of the *kebaya* is to the bottom of the pelvis so that it makes the wearer look more slender. The period in which she wore a *kebaya* reaching to the pelvis was until the 1950s. After that, Gusti Noeroel used *kebayas* that reached a few centimeters above the pelvis, i.e. they were shorter than the *kebayas* she used before the 1950s.

In the 1960s, Gusti Noeroel used brocade material for her *kebayas* with a model that fitted tighter, following the curves of the body. Brocade *kebayas* were used by Gusti Noeroel at official events with a so-called Kartini model until the 1990s. Based on her biography, in the 1990s, Gusti Noeroel wore the *kutubaru*

kebaya during meetings of soldier's wives. The development of her *kebaya* design can be seen in Figure 3.

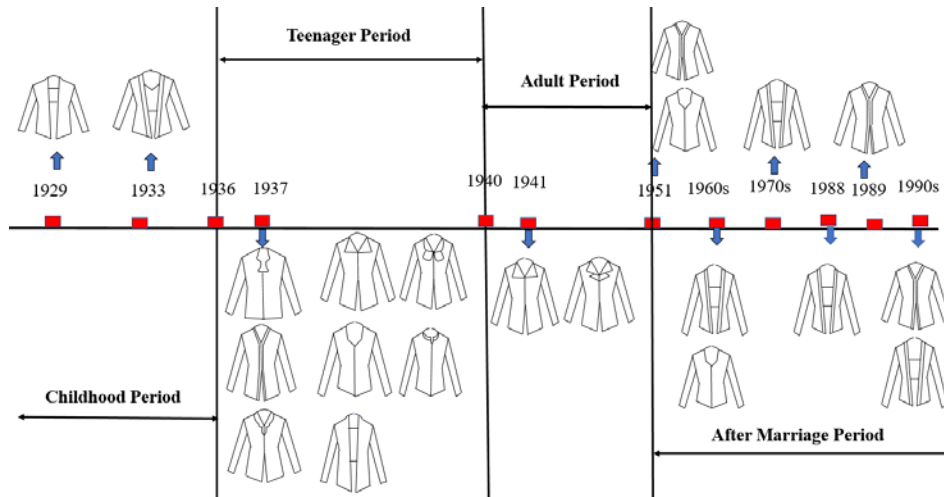


Figure 3 Development of Gusti Noeroel's *kebaya* designs.

In her old age, in line with the development of fashion in Indonesia, Gusti Noeroel wore more practical clothing such as a blouse with embroidered padding on the chest and muslim-style trousers that were developed in Indonesia. Gusti Noeroel's *kabayas* had many variations for the neck hole. Sometimes it looked like a shirt collar, but overall the specific *kebaya* model was still very recognizable.

6.2 *Kebayas* of Utami Suryadarma from 1930s-1980s

Based on photographic data from the Utami Suryadarma autobiography, the development of the *kebayas* she wore from the 1930s to the 1980s can be traced. It can be seen in Figure 4, that in the 1930s the *kebayas* worn by Utami tended to be loose, not really following the shape of the body, currently called the Kartini model. The upper part of the *kebaya* covers almost the whole upper body. The *kebaya* materials look like it they were cotton or chiffon with floral motifs combined with batik cloth. The batik cloth was folded in *wiru* style, which does not look tapered but tends to widen. In a photo of Utami's engagement with Suryadarma on 2 February 1938 she is seen wearing a *kutubaru* type of *kebaya* with a floral motif.

In 1940, the upper part of Utami's *kebaya* appeared to be made curvy to resemble a heart shape without the fold on the sides. The *kutubaru kebaya* tends to be short with its length reaching to the pelvis, a style that became characteristic for Utami's *kebayas*. In the period of the 1960s, the material used

for her *kebaya* was see-through brocade with a floral motif. In that period, Utami chose the *kutubaru kebaya* as her *kebaya* model.

She still wore the *kutubaru kebaya* in the 1970s period, for example at the Women's Peace Conference in Stockholm, Sweden in 1975. In the 1980s, for example at the inauguration of a monument at Adisucipto Airbase Yogyakarta in April 1980, Utami can be seen wearing a *Kartini kebaya* with a shawl that covers her right shoulder.

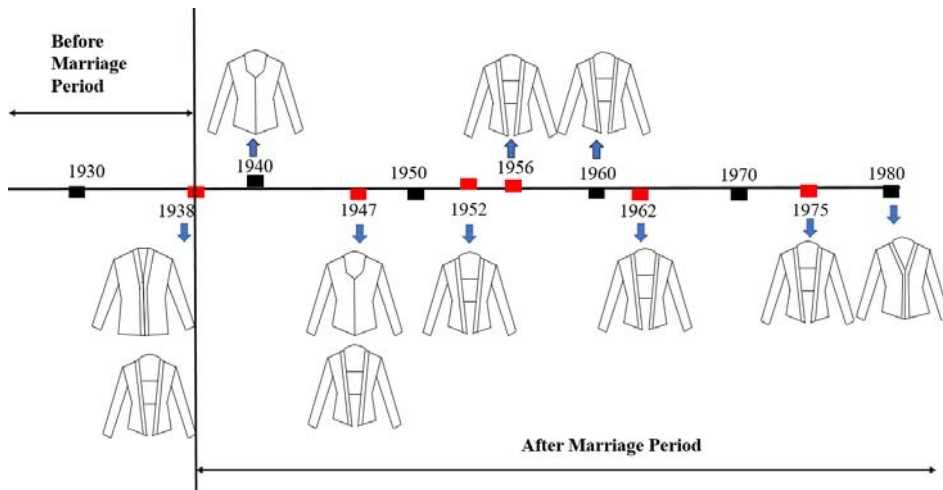


Figure 4 Development of Utami Suryadarma's kebaya.

The explanation above shows that in the period from 1930-1980, the most dominant model of Utami's *kebayas* was the *kutubaru kebaya*. The design of the *kutubaru kebaya* worn by Utami followed the shape of the body. In her biography she says that the *kebayas* of Bandung women had an impact on the design of her *kebayas*:

"Bandung is a cheerful city suited for its residents. The women are charming, like to dress up, make jokes, and also like to seduce and flirt. In society, they act more freely than women in Central Java. They not only like to dress up but are also experts in dressing up. This is very different from the situation in Central Java, where women are not allowed to show their bodies in their clothes. In Bandung, this is actually an art."

When she visited Solo after her marriage, the *kap-naad* that she had sown to her *kebaya* stirred the people in Solo, including her father and mother. *Kap-naad* are stitches that go from the waist to the hip in women's clothing [13].

If we pay attention to the timeline of the development of the Utami's kebaya designs, it can be seen that in the 1930s the *kebayas* she wore looked loose and straight; they do not follow the shape of the body. In the following period, there was a shift in her *kebaya* model that did follow the shape of her body. In 1980, during the inauguration of the National Monument, it appeared Utami wore a Kartini model *kebaya* that was different from the *kutubaru kebaya*, with a tendency to show a wider chest. This shift could be related to her increased age so she decided to wear a more closed *kebaya* model again. The shift also happened in the use of material, starting with cotton material that is not see-through and then shifting to a lacey material that shows the wearer's skin. In the end, in 1980, Utami chose a material that was not see-through.

7 Conclusion

Gusti Noeroel and Utami Suryadarma experienced several social, political and cultural periods in Indonesia: the Dutch colonial period, followed by the Japanese occupation, the fight for independence, the Old Order and the New Order, while Gusti Noeroel also experienced the Reformation and the Post-Reformation period. Each of these periods had an influence on the development of the *kebaya* designs worn by these two women from Surakarta.

Both of them spent part of their lives, especially their childhood and their teenage years, in Surakarta under the influence of the cultural tradition of the palace. Gusti Noeroel herself was the daughter of the king of Mangkunegara Surakarta, while Utami Suryadarma's father was a Dutch government employee who had a vision for his daughter, even though he did not allow her to pursue a higher education. Both were women with modern views who realized the importance of equality between women and men. Utami refused to have a traditional wedding ceremony that, according to her, lowered the position of the woman. Gusti Noeroel firmly refused to be a second wife. Both had the ability to speak Dutch and English and expressed their aspirations at international meetings.

Their life's journey and having the views of modern women did not change their appreciation for their Indonesian cultural heritage, in this case, the use of the *kebaya* as a national dress. They made it their signature dress as Indonesian women.

The *kebayas* they wore followed the development of the economy and fashion in Indonesia, for example with the emergence of brocade fabric as well as fabrics with specific motifs. They developed the *kebayas* they wore with a great deal of creativity, especially Gusti Noeroel. Utami adjusted the model of her *kebaya* after she had moved to the more open city of Bandung. The variations of

kebaya models they wore were based on the fabric used and the length of the *kebaya*, the loose *kebaya* model became more body curve shaped, as well as the high and low chest parts of the *kutubaru kebaya* type. Both were also able to lift the *kebaya* into a dress that could also be used abroad. Their creativity made this traditional type of clothing still comfortable in different climates from Indonesia's.

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