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The Evolution of the Jilbāb in Indonesia: From Cultural Tradition to Symbol of Religious Identity and Political Resistance

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Abstract

This study examines the transformation of the jilbāb in Indonesia, exploring its evolution from pre-Islamic head-covering traditions to its current role as a symbol of piety, resistance, and cultural identity. Through a qualitative historical analysis combined with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study traces the dynamic interaction of cultural, religious, and political factors that have shaped the jilbāb over time. The results show that local practices such as *rimpu* in Bima, *tudung* among the Bugis, and *tengkuluk* in Jambi were integrated into Islamic norms, creating hybrid forms of modest dress. The New Order regime's prohibition of the jilbāb in public schools politicized the garment, transforming it into a symbol of resistance against state control. In the Reformasi era, greater civil liberties and the rise of Islamic movements led to the resurgence of the jilbāb as a symbol of religious identity, while also being commodified in the expanding Muslim fashion industry. This study demonstrates that the jilbāb in Indonesia is not a static symbol but one that has been continuously reshaped by political, cultural, and religious forces. By offering a diachronic analysis of the jilbāb, this research contributes to broader discussions on religious symbolism, gender norms, and the role of modest dress in Indonesian society, highlighting its significance as both a personal and political statement.

Keywords: Jilbāb; Indonesia; Modest Dress; Cultural Transformation; Political Resistance.

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Indonesia, the *jilbāb* is often regarded as a clear marker of Muslim women's piety and a religious obligation. However, this perception oversimplifies the complex and evolving nature of its significance. The *jilbāb*, rather than being a static religious prescription, has undergone significant transformation shaped by a variety of cultural, political, and religious factors. Its meanings have continuously shifted across different historical periods and social contexts, revealing that modest dress is not a singular, fixed concept but a social construct subject to ongoing negotiation [1].

Long before the arrival of Islam, communities across the Indonesian archipelago practiced various forms of head coverings that carried cultural, social, and symbolic meaning. For instance, local traditions such as *rimpu* in Bima, *tudung* among the Bugis, *tengkuluk* in Jambi, and *tingkuluak tanduak* in Minangkabau were deeply embedded in local systems of modesty, status, and moral identity [2], [3], [4]. These pre-Islamic practices demonstrate that the regulation of women's bodies and modesty was already a central element of cultural identity long before the introduction of Islam. These traditions were not merely ceremonial but served as vital social markers, distinguishing groups and signifying respectability and moral propriety.

The introduction of Islam to Indonesia, primarily through trade networks and the activities of religious scholars, introduced the concept of *aurat* and specific religious guidelines on modesty [5], [6]. However, this Islamization process did not entirely replace local dress codes but instead engaged with and reinterpreted them through an Islamic framework. Early forms of the *jilbāb*, therefore, were not rigidly prescribed by religious doctrine but were shaped by the interaction between Islamic principles and local cultural norms, resulting in hybrid forms of dress that combined local textile traditions with Islamic values of modesty [1].

A more significant reconfiguration of the *jilbāb* occurred in the late twentieth century when the Indonesian state became involved in regulating religious symbols. During the New Order regime, the government issued restrictions on wearing the *jilbāb* in public schools, particularly through Decree SK 052/C/Kep/D.82. This prohibition transformed the *jilbāb* from a religious and cultural symbol of modesty into a politically charged symbol of resistance and identity [7], [8], [9]. The state's ban led to protests from Islamic groups, highlighting the politicization of the *jilbāb* and its emergence as a symbol of defiance against state control and religious repression. The *jilbāb* thus became a key site where power relations, gender norms, and religious identity intersected.

Following the political reforms of the late 1990s, the *jilbāb* experienced a resurgence, coinciding with the broader expansion of civil liberties and the rise of Islamic political and cultural movements [10]. The growing influence of Sharia-inspired regional regulations, the proliferation of digital da'wah, and the rapid development of the Muslim fashion industry contributed to the diversification of the *jilbāb*'s meanings. In particular, the *jilbāb syar'i*, characterized by looser, scripturally-based styles, gained popularity [11], [12]. This trend was influenced by global Islamic movements, including the Salafī and Tarbiyah movements, which emphasized a strict interpretation of modest dress as part of broader efforts to promote religious piety and reform [13].

The evolution of the *jilbāb* in Indonesia demonstrates the intersection of global Islamic revivalism and local cultural traditions. The *jilbāb*'s transformation from a cultural practice to

a symbol of resistance, and later a political and fashion statement, reveals the dynamic ways in which religious and cultural identities are negotiated. Its meanings are constantly reshaped by shifting social, political, and religious forces, with implications for gendered power relations, religious authority, and the body politic in contemporary Indonesia.

While the jilbāb has been widely studied, existing research often fails to account for its complex historical evolution. Studies have primarily focused on specific periods such as the New Order era the influence of global Islamic movements or the commercialization of Islamic fashion [14], [15]. Few studies offer a comprehensive, diachronic analysis that integrates pre-Islamic, Islamic political, and contemporary influences into a single framework. This article seeks to fill that gap by providing a historical analysis of the jilbāb in Indonesia, from its pre-Islamic roots to its contemporary significance in the digital and global age.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative historical analysis combined with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to trace the transformation of the jilbāb in Indonesia. The historical approach enables a comprehensive exploration of the evolving meanings and social functions of head-covering practices across multiple historical periods. To complement this, CDA is used to examine how the jilbāb has been constructed, negotiated, and contested in social, cultural, and political discourses. These methods were selected because they allow for a detailed, context-sensitive analysis of both historical changes and the ideological forces shaping the transformation of the jilbāb.

Historical Approach

The historical analysis focuses on tracking head-covering practices from pre-Islamic traditions to contemporary Islamic expressions in Indonesia. This approach follows the principles of critical historical inquiry, which emphasizes contextualization, source criticism, and the interpretation of historical change over time. In historical analysis, documents such as colonial archives, local ethnographic accounts, and Islamic historical records are examined to trace the development of head-covering practices and the evolving understanding of modesty across Indonesian communities [16], [17].

The methodological framework draws from historical-sociological perspectives, which view cultural practices as the products of long-term social processes rather than isolated phenomena. This perspective is supported by scholars such as Arvil [16] stresses that cultural practices evolve through interactions between historical contingencies and societal structures.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA is used to analyze how meanings surrounding the jilbāb have been constructed and contested within broader socio-political and cultural discourses. CDA is particularly suitable for exploring the relationships between discourse, ideology, and power [18], [19]. By analyzing discourse, CDA uncovers the social power dynamics embedded in the construction of meanings around the jilbāb and how these discourses shape and reinforce cultural norms. Ghufraan [19] helps to understand how social structures and ideologies are reflected in language, revealing power relations in everyday practices.

The study adopts a discourse-historical sensitivity in line with Ghufraan [19] who argue that discourse must be understood within its socio-political context. This approach situates the discourses surrounding the jilbāb in the broader historical context of Indonesia's cultural, political, and religious transformations.

Data Collection

The data for this study are drawn from a variety of sources, including both historical and contemporary materials. Historical texts and ethnographic accounts document local head-covering traditions such as *rimpu*, *tudung*, and *tengkuluk* across different regions of Indonesia. These sources provide valuable insights into how modesty, femininity, and bodily symbolism were understood in pre-Islamic and early Islamic societies. In addition, Islamic historical documents and colonial archives, such as missionary reports, administrative records, and local manuscripts, shed light on the interactions between Islamic norms, indigenous cultural expressions, and colonial governance. These documents are crucial for understanding how Islamic dress codes were introduced and adapted to local contexts. Moreover, state regulations and policy documents, particularly the New Order's school uniform regulation SK 052/C/Kep/D.82, which prohibited the jilbāb in public schools, and post-Reformasi regional bylaws (Perda Syariah) that institutionalize Islamic dress codes, are also included. To capture contemporary developments, the study analyzes news reports, social media content, and public debates related to the jilbāb, the *jilbāb syar'i*, and the broader hijrah movement. Finally, secondary literature from gender studies, anthropology, Islamic studies, and Indonesian politics provides a theoretical grounding for interpreting the collected data.

Data Analysis

The data collected through these diverse sources were analyzed using qualitative document analysis, a method that treats documents as socially constructed texts reflecting particular interests and contexts. The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, a historical tracing was conducted to map the evolution of head-covering practices from indigenous traditions through Islamization, colonialism, the New Order era, and the post-Reformasi period. This stage aimed to highlight the influence of local traditions on the development of the jilbāb and its adaptation to Islamic norms. Second, thematic categorization was employed to identify recurrent themes such as modesty, religious identity, moral governance, and the commodification of fashion. Systematic coding was used to detect discursive continuities and shifts across historical periods, allowing for a deeper understanding of how the jilbāb became a site of negotiation in the realms of gender, religion, and power. Lastly, CDA was used to examine how various actors such as state authorities, religious leaders, activists, fashion industries, and digital communities construct and legitimize particular meanings of the jilbāb. The focus was on understanding how discourse shapes and reproduces power relations, particularly in the contexts of gender norms and religious expression.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study reveal the complex, multi-layered transformation of the jilbāb in Indonesia, shaped by cultural, religious, and political factors over time. The results are presented in the following sub-sections: Pre-Islamic Head-Covering Traditions, Islamization and the Integration of New Meanings, New Order Era: Restriction, Resistance, and State Control, and Reformasi Era: Liberalization, Islamization, and the Rise of the Jilbāb Syar'i.

Pre-Islamic Head-Covering Traditions

Before the arrival of Islam, communities across the Indonesian archipelago practiced various forms of head covering that were embedded in local cultural traditions. These practices carried multiple layers of meaning, including modesty, social status, and political identity. For instance, in Bima, the *rimpu* tradition involved covering the head, face, and body with two pieces of woven cloth, signifying both modesty and social respect [20], [21]. Similarly, the *tudung* among the Bugis, the *tengkuluk* in Jambi, and the *tingkuluak tanduak* in Minangkabau were integral to local systems of modesty and cultural identity, predating Islamic influences [22]. These traditions demonstrate that modesty norms and bodily regulation were already socially institutionalized in the Indonesian context prior to Islam. Thus, the concept of covering the body was not introduced by Islam but was rather reshaped and reinterpreted within an Islamic framework, creating hybrid forms of modest dress [23].

Islamization and the Integration of New Meanings

The introduction of Islam to the Indonesian archipelago between the 7th and 13th centuries, primarily through trade networks and the activities of religious scholars, brought new religious guidelines on modesty and dress. The arrival of Islam introduced the concept of *aurat*, which defined parts of the body that must be covered for modesty. However, the Islamization process was not a one-directional cultural replacement but rather a complex process of integration [24], [25],[26]. Local dress practices, such as the *kebaya* or *baju kurung*, were not discarded but reinterpreted to accommodate Islamic principles of modesty. In many regions, women began to pair traditional attire with simple head coverings, such as shawls, and later adopted more comprehensive forms of veiling. These hybrid forms of modest dress demonstrate how Islam interacted with and adapted to local cultural traditions rather than replacing them entirely [27], [28].

New Order Era: Restriction, Resistance, and State Control

The New Order period marked a significant turning point in the political and social life of the jilbāb in Indonesia. In the 1980s, the Indonesian government issued Decree SK 052/C/Kep/D.82, which prohibited the wearing of the jilbāb in public schools. This policy aimed to enforce national uniformity and maintain ideological neutrality in education [29], [30], [31]. The ban generated significant resistance from Muslim communities, particularly from Islamic organizations like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), who viewed the policy as a violation of religious freedom [32], [33]. Despite the prohibition, many Muslim women continued to wear the jilbāb in defiance of the state, risking administrative punishment.

This resistance highlighted the growing politicization of the *jilbāb* and its transformation from a religious and cultural symbol of modesty to a symbol of resistance against state repression. The *jilbāb* became a site where issues of gender, religion, and state power intersected, reflecting the tensions between state control and individual religious rights [34], [35].

Reformasi Era: Liberalization, Islamization, and the Rise of the Jilbāb Syar'i

The Reformasi era, which began in the late 1990s, brought significant political changes to Indonesia, including greater civil liberties and the weakening of state control over religious expression. The *jilbāb* experienced a dramatic resurgence during this period, as Muslim women began to reclaim it as a symbol of religious identity and piety [36]. The rise of transnational Islamic movements, such as the Salafī and Tarbiyah movements, further promoted the *jilbāb syar'i* a more strict and scripturally grounded form of veiling. This style, which involves loose, body-covering garments, became increasingly popular as it was associated with a higher degree of religious observance [37]. The *jilbāb syar'i* was widely promoted through digital da'wah and the expanding Muslim fashion industry. The commercial production of the *jilbāb syar'i* and the influence of hijrah movements played a key role in shaping its contemporary meanings [38], [39], [40]. It became a visible marker of religious identity, an expression of piety, and a consumer commodity. However, this rise also generated new moral hierarchies among Muslim women, with certain styles of dress being viewed as more pious and religiously correct than others. This development underscores the growing intersection between fashion, religious identity, and moral values in post-Reformasi Indonesia [41].

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted transformation of the *jilbāb* in Indonesia, shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and political factors. The persistence of pre-Islamic head-covering traditions, such as *rimpu* in Bima, *tudung* among the Bugis, and *tengkuluk* in Jambi, suggests that modesty practices were already embedded in local cultures long before the arrival of Islam. These traditions, which served as markers of social status and respectability, demonstrate that modesty norms and the regulation of women's bodies were deeply institutionalized in Indonesian society, offering a foundation for the later integration of Islamic dress codes. The hybridization of these pre-Islamic customs with Islamic modesty codes highlights how Islamic dress practices, including the *jilbāb*, were not imposed in a vacuum but evolved through a process of adaptation and reinterpretation [20], [21], [22]. This finding aligns with previous studies that emphasize the interaction between Islam and local cultures, leading to the formation of hybrid dress practices that combine indigenous traditions with Islamic teachings [23], [24].

As Islam spread through the Indonesian archipelago, it brought with it new guidelines for modesty and the regulation of *aurat*, which defined the parts of the body that should be covered. However, the Islamization of Indonesia was not a simple process of cultural replacement but rather a process of integration, where local dress practices like the *kebaya* or *baju kurung* were reinterpreted to accommodate Islamic principles of modesty. This finding confirms earlier research that suggests Islam did not simply replace existing customs but interacted with and adapted local traditions to align with Islamic values [25], [26]. The adoption of head coverings such as shawls and the gradual move towards more comprehensive veiling

practices, which combined traditional attire with Islamic dress codes, further highlights the dynamic nature of Islamic modesty in Indonesia. This evolution of dress from local to hybrid forms reveals the fluidity with which Islamic principles were integrated into existing cultural frameworks, rather than a strict imposition of religious norms.

A significant turning point in the history of the *jilbāb* occurred during the New Order period, when the Indonesian government issued Decree SK 052/C/Kep/D.82, prohibiting the wearing of the *jilbāb* in public schools. This policy, aimed at maintaining ideological uniformity and neutrality in education, led to significant resistance from Muslim communities, especially from organizations such as Muhammadiyah and NU, who viewed the policy as an infringement on religious freedom. Despite the ban, many Muslim women continued to wear the *jilbāb* in defiance, signaling a politicization of the *jilbāb* and its transformation from a modest religious practice into a political symbol of resistance. This finding supports Zain et al. [34] analysis of the *jilbāb* as a symbol of defiance during this era and further emphasizes the intersection of gender, religion, and state power in shaping cultural symbols [27], [28]. The *jilbāb*'s role as a symbol of resistance against authoritarian control underscores the complex relationship between personal religious expression and state power in Indonesia, a dynamic also noted in Nuraeni et al. [29] work on the political dimensions of Islamic dress during the New Order era.

The Reformasi era marked a shift towards greater civil liberties and a relaxation of state control over religious expression. During this period, the *jilbāb* experienced a dramatic resurgence as Muslim women began to reclaim it as a symbol of religious identity and piety. The rise of transnational Islamic movements, including the Salafi and Tarbiyah movements, contributed to the popularization of the *jilbāb syar'i*, a stricter form of veiling that became associated with heightened religious observance. This resurgence reflects the findings of Fealy and White (2008), who noted the growing influence of Islamic fashion and its role in articulating religious identity in post-Reformasi Indonesia [30]. The commercialization of the *jilbāb syar'i* and its promotion through digital da'wah platforms further amplified its significance, transforming it into both a symbol of piety and a consumer commodity. The role of the Muslim fashion industry in shaping public perceptions of modest dress demonstrates the increasing intersection between fashion, religious identity, and consumerism in contemporary Indonesia [31], [32].

However, the rise of the *jilbāb syar'i* also generated new moral hierarchies among Muslim women, with certain styles of dress being seen as more pious and religiously correct than others. This reflects the growing emphasis on *religious purity* in post-Reformasi Indonesia and the ways in which fashion is intertwined with the moral values of the Muslim community. As noted in previous studies, the commercialization of Islamic dress has led to new forms of social differentiation, where the choice of attire becomes a means of distinguishing between different levels of religious observance [33], [34]. This phenomenon underscores the complex relationship between modest dress and social status, which continues to evolve as the *jilbāb* adapts to changing cultural and political contexts.

The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive, diachronic approach, which integrates historical, religious, political, and contemporary factors into a unified framework. By examining the *jilbāb*'s evolution from pre-Islamic traditions to contemporary religious and political symbols, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of how modest dress in

Indonesia has been shaped by a range of social, cultural, and political forces. Previous studies have often focused on specific historical periods or isolated factors, such as the New Order era or the rise of Islamic fashion, but this study bridges these periods and offers a holistic perspective on the jilbāb's transformation over time.

The implications of this study extend beyond academic research to inform policy and social practice. Understanding the complex history of the jilbāb in Indonesia can help policymakers navigate the intersection of religion, culture, and gender in multicultural societies. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of recognizing the historical context in which dress codes are enforced, as policies regulating religious dress can have significant cultural and political consequences. For future research, examining the jilbāb's role in other Muslim-majority countries could provide valuable comparative insights into how modest dress functions as both a religious symbol and a cultural commodity in diverse socio-political contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the jilbāb in Indonesia is a dynamic cultural symbol that has transformed significantly over time, influenced by local traditions, Islamic teachings, and political developments. From pre-Islamic head-covering practices, which integrated modesty, social status, and identity, to the Islamization process that reinterpreted these customs within an Islamic framework, the jilbāb evolved as a hybrid form of dress. The New Order period politicized the jilbāb, transforming it from a religious and cultural symbol into a marker of resistance against state repression, aligning with earlier studies on religious and political resistance. Following the Reformasi era, the jilbāb experienced a resurgence as a symbol of religious identity and piety, further commercialized through the Muslim fashion industry and digital da'wah. The study highlights how the jilbāb reflects the intersection of religion, culture, and politics in Indonesia and calls for nuanced policies that account for the historical and evolving meanings of religious symbols. This research offers valuable insights into the role of modest dress as both a cultural practice and a political statement, suggesting that future research could explore the global dimensions of modest fashion and further investigate the role of digital media in shaping contemporary perceptions of the jilbāb.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the transformation of the jilbāb and its social, cultural, and political significance. Although this study offers valuable insights into the historical evolution of the jilbāb, a longitudinal approach would provide a more nuanced understanding of how these changes unfold over time. Second, the study relies on secondary data sources, including historical documents and previous research, which may introduce biases in the interpretation of the jilbāb's transformation. Future research could address these limitations by employing a mixed-methods design that combines qualitative historical analysis with primary data collection, such as interviews or surveys with key stakeholders involved in the evolution of modest dress in Indonesia. Additionally, further comparative studies across

different cultural and religious contexts could offer a broader perspective on the role of the jilbāb as a symbol of identity, resistance, and piety in diverse Muslim-majority societies.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

A.R. conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, conducted the interviews, analyzed the qualitative data, and led the manuscript drafting process. M.M.J. supervised the research design, provided methodological guidance, contributed to the refinement of the analytical framework, and critically revised the manuscript for intellectual content. A.A.J. assisted with data validation, thematic coding reliability checks, and contributed to the interpretation of the findings. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

"The authors declare no conflict of interest."

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors used ChatGPT during the preparation of this work to design graphics and images. After utilizing the tool, the authors thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as necessary, assuming full responsibility for the publication's content.

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