

Other ways of looking at

Balinese feminism

On the occasion of Kartini Day, two interesting events occurred in Bali, each providing its own way and opportunity to reflect on the living conditions of Balinese women.

The first was the launch of a small book: *Wanita Bali Tempo Doeloe*, by Darma Putra. It consists of a series of articles analyzing writings published by Balinese women since the early days of Dutch occupation in the 1920s to the 1960s. Such a historical approach relativizes "feminist theory".

What remains is not the arguments, but the long-term sociological impact on society, the changes brought about to the mentality of the people. Women's emancipation is thus not right or wrong: It is just a process. And this process is indeed fascinating.

Darma Putra shows, for example, that, unlike their modern sisters, the first Balinese women to receive education were not reluctant to be assertive. The idea of "progress" ruled the day and they wanted to benefit from it. They fought "backwardness" wherever they saw it: in education, marriage (polygamy), gender equality, hygiene and other fields. They were even aware of the risks entailed by the exotic image attached to them and fought for having the breasts of their Balinese sisters hidden from the lascivious gaze of non-Balinese: Hence the popularity of the *kebaya* (blouse).

Outwardly opposed to tradition, Balinese women were catching up in all things modern and Western.

The book does not cover the role of women during the war of Independence (1945-1949),

but the image women gave of themselves in articles written in the 1950s is strikingly different from that depicted above. Progress, such as seen in the West, was now ambiguous.

Jean Couteau

Contributor
Denpasar

It represented a danger. The writers, proud of their educational achievements, now protested against immorality, prostitution, premarital sex — all supposedly Western imports.

This "moralist" discourse accompanied an outward political discourse that was antifeudal and antiimperialist, in the fashion of Sukarno's Indonesia. It is interesting to note that this post-independence period saw the perception of Raden Ajeng Kartini — a Javanese woman famous for having written letters about women's living conditions at the turn of the century — as a role model for Indonesian women: Women should be "equal" to men, yet follow them (*ngekor*) as mothers to their children.

What the book does not discuss is what Balinese women said during the New Order. But what we witnessed was the ideologizing of limited emancipation via the cult of Raden Ajeng Kartini. Women made tremendous inroads through their penetration of all levels of education and the work market, but were stuck in a dependent position as "mothers" and refused formal

legal equality, whatever the claims of the regime to the contrary. Their dependency was enshrined, with Kartini's unwitting help, as corresponding to the implementation of Eastern values.

The result is now before us: Most modern Balinese women activists now don't look to the West for a model of emancipation, but to their own roots: They say that Hindu religion, far from condoning gender inequality, asserts equality. It is the misinterpretation of the *Veda*, they say, that leads to the inequality witnessed in daily life.

Balinese feminism has thus

become fully indigenized. Published by the Bali Jani Foundation, Darma Putra's book, which also contains reprints of some of the women's articles, is a good introduction to the struggle of Balinese feminists.

The second event was an installation held at Paros Gallery on Friday 20 by Australian artist Victoria Cattoni on the theme, *Kebaya*. Paros Gallery is currently the most "open" contemporary gallery in Bali. Situated off the road in a Balinese kampong, it blends perfectly in the traditional surroundings of Banjar Palak, Sukawati, where it is located. Its "non-commercial"

and friendly atmosphere makes it a favorite meeting and exhibition place for local and foreign artists.

Such an environment perfectly suits Victoria Cattoni, 42, whose video installations, like other exhibitions she has held in the last few years in Indonesia, deal with daily aspects of Indonesian women's life, which she brings to the fore as a means of enhancing their awareness about their living conditions.

After flowers, she now works on the theme of the *kebaya*, this symbol par excellence of the Indonesian woman, and of "femininity" in



Paros Gallery

An image from a video exhibition on Indonesian Kebaya (traditional-style blouse for women) by Australian artist Victoria Cattoni. The kebaya has long been regarded as symbol par excellence of the Indonesian women and “feminine” in Indonesia.

Indonesia. She has gathered a collection of some 80 *kebaya* of all kinds and tastes — tight, loose, transparent and revealing, dark and “puritan” etc. She asks women, young and old, slim and fat, to try on themselves several of these *kebaya*, and, looking at themselves in front of a mirror, to comment what they see, how they feel, what they like and dislike, etc.

Meanwhile, the process is recorded on video. She has in this way gathered an important corpus of “discourse” of ordinary women about themselves, and about women in general. It is this video that she is exhibiting in her show.

The idea underlying the exhibition is that every moment of one’s life and activities is significant. We usually only acknowledge the creative aspects of our culture — verbal language, literature, art, behavioral norms etc. — but tend to pay little attention to its most banal sides: Daily gestures and objects, ordinary dress, outward behavior, etc. To Victoria, on the contrary, banality itself is most meaningful. It carries our subconscious self, our unspoken system of values. By focusing on it in her works, she undertakes to reveal its role and makes us conscious of the hidden values it carries, thus giving us greater leverage to act upon it.

If there is a dress that is “banal” in Indonesia, it is the *kebaya*, indeed. Few of the women who wear it are aware of its past and significance. When wearing it, some say that it makes them feel “Indonesian”, as it was the costume worn by Raden Ajeng Kartini, the “Mother” role model of Soeharto’s Indonesia.

When told in the discussion that the *kebaya* was of mixed colonial origin — some say it was Portuguese, others Chinese or even Afghan — their whole perception of its “Indonesian-ness” is shattered, because suddenly it is

embedded in a wider geographical context.

As for the *kebaya*, they try on, they are of various types and origins — from the relatively loose and well-covering *kebaya* from Islamic western Sumatra to the well-corseted and transparent *kebaya* from Java and Bali. When putting these *kebaya* on, women discuss their bodies, their sex-appeal, shyness, their wish to please or their need to cover themselves up. Thus, they reveal their perception of themselves and the expectation of the community toward themselves.

The *kebaya* thus turns into an exploratory tool for women, leading to a greater awareness of their living con-

ditions and thus to a greater liberty. In short, when looking at the video, we are made witness to a process of awakening. We also see Victoria construct her own discourse about women’s discourse — a discourse of hope and optimism.

Interestingly, Victoria doesn’t speak. She doesn’t seize “power” with the purpose of making Indonesian women “conscious”, as too many Western feminists and other Western do-gooders would have tended to do. Instead, she offers no theory, no teaching from the “West”. She “shuts up”, letting Indonesian women put on *kebaya*, smile or smirk about them and sometimes, when they feel suitable, discuss them. Low-key Victoria is the facilitator. We learn from her installation/performance in a passive, intercultural way — a kind of dialogue that doesn’t reveal its name.

So, what we see at the Paros exhibition, beyond the show, beyond the *kebaya* and beyond Victoria herself, is a kind of genesis of a certain idea about women’s freedom.

We hope Victoria continues to explore the unspoken aspects of Indonesian women and society.