

The Kebaya: Weaving Southeast Asian Unity Through Shared Heritage

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The kebaya's recent inscription on UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list celebrates its five Southeast Asian co-nominating countries' shared cultural heritage.

In Southeast Asia's culturally diverse landscape, identifying a unifying thread amongst its people is not a straightforward task. While attempts at delineating a shared Southeast Asian identity can tend towards homogenisation, the role of arts and heritage in fostering mutual understanding reveals a nuanced reality. We share pride in aspects of our shared culture, yet cultures have evolved distinctively, shaping us into *separate* but closely-connected societies. While seemingly paradoxical, arts *and* heritage can promote a celebration of diversity and commonalities, crucial in Southeast Asia's cultural context.

The successful multinational inscription of the *kebaya*, a traditional Southeast Asian women's garment, on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2024 offers valuable insights. This achievement, shared by Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, marks the largest multinational nomination in Southeast Asia to date, and demonstrates the potential for joint celebrations of shared heritage to foster multinational cultural understanding and cooperation.



Figure 1: Members of the Chetti Melaka Association in *Kebaya*. Photo courtesy of the National Heritage Board.

Diverse Practices, Stakeholders, and Approaches

The *kebaya's* origins are as diverse as the region that celebrates it. While now strongly associated with the diverse communities of Southeast Asia, its precise origins remain disputed. Most acknowledge that the *kebaya* blends sartorial influences from Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Arab styles. Consequently, the nomination process had to navigate various opinions on how best to represent the *kebaya* on the UNESCO list.

Nominations for inscription on the UNESCO list are formalised through a nomination dossier, which includes a nomination document—with strict word limits—that represents the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) element as practiced among all nominating states. Multiple discussions were held among stakeholder communities in the five countries to share what the *kebaya* meant to them, and how the practice should be represented in the definitive inscription that would introduce the *kebaya* to the world.

Once it was decided that Singapore would participate in the multinational nomination of the *kebaya*, the National Heritage Board (NHB) organised a series of focus group discussions with Kawan Kebaya, an informal network of stakeholders based in Singapore comprising cultural practitioners, representatives from cultural associations, and researchers involved in the wearing and making of *kebaya*. This allowed the NHB to understand, from the stakeholders' perspectives, the cultural value ascribed to the *kebaya* in Singapore's context, and the stakeholders' views on safeguarding measures for the future.



Figure 2: *Kebaya* and Berkain Workshop by Kebaya Societé at Wisma Geylang Serai. Photo courtesy of the National Heritage Board.

An Instrument for Regional Conversation and Co-Creation

While the *kebaya's* nomination may have initially sparked diverse perspectives among practitioners across and within participating nations, its inscription was met with unanimous acclaim and celebration.

As living heritage, the *kebaya* has evolved uniquely within its various communities. This diversity underscored the importance of extensive community and stakeholder engagement throughout the nomination process. The deeper understanding and connections fostered among those communities by this engagement enabled not only the success of the nomination, but also the birth of new inspiration for the *kebaya's* promotion and transmission.

Through the nomination process, Singapore's *kebaya* community developed a broader appreciation of the garment's significance across ethnic groups both locally and internationally. This shifted their perspective of the *kebaya* beyond its physical form to encompass its rich cultural narratives, traditions, and societal relevance.

As a joint nomination by five Southeast Asian nations, the *kebaya* nomination process evoked a sense of regional identity and pride. Content producers such as Kebaya Societé (@kebaya_societe) historicised the *kebaya* as a fashionable icon of the Malay Archipelago, piquing younger audiences' interest. Groups and individuals within the local community involved in the making, wearing and promoting of the *kebaya* organised events to share stories, as well as knowledge of the traditions and history of regional fashion including and beyond the *kebaya*. Among them was Oniatta Effendi, founder of Baju by Oniatta and Galeri Tokokita, who organised talks on batik and *kebaya*, involving speakers from Indonesia and Malaysia.



Figure 3: Focus group discussion of with Kawan Kebaya. Photo courtesy of the National Heritage Board.

In celebration of the inscription, the five nominating countries presented “*Kebaya: Knowledge, Skills, Traditions and Practices*” at the 19th session of the Intergovernmental Committee in Asunción, Paraguay, an exhibition featuring various *kebaya* outfits, the communities involved in its making and wearing, and the garment's importance to these communities.

In addition to raising awareness of the *kebaya's* shared heritage, the various outreach and education events organised by the *kebaya* stakeholder communities present opportunities for intercultural dialogue and foster a sense of unity and harmony across national borders.

From Beloved Icon to Source of National Pride

When news of the *kebaya's* successful inscription broke, it generated considerable excitement. Practitioners and stakeholders appeared in media outlets to talk about Singapore's first multinational listing on the UNESCO ICH list. There was a renewed interest in the garment, with many Singaporeans searching for heirloom *kebaya's* or purchasing new ones.

A new understanding of shared cultural roots between Southeast Asian nations emerged. Many on social media expressed surprise that the *kebaya* was also worn in Thailand. The *kebaya* additionally became a bridge between generations, with young people becoming intrigued about the garment worn by their elders. The nomination campaign showed that the *kebaya* is both a traditional and dynamic garment, continuing to hold cultural significance for Southeast Asians in the homogenising face of modernisation.

Building Capacity Beyond Heritage

The nomination process' success extends beyond the inscription. It has provided the National Heritage Board's team the opportunity to build capacities for joint celebration of shared heritage elements in the region. While the team's experience was specific to multinational ICH nominations to the UNESCO list, there are some shared lessons for the wider culture sector:

1. Including diverse community stakeholders and empowering them to be front and centre of the nomination process allow for better understanding of nuances in a deeply personal cultural heritage practice.
2. Fostering closer relationships within the practising cultural community and creating opportunities for stakeholders to come together facilitate crucial dialogue that gives rise to mutual recognition, respect and understanding amid diverse values, traditions, forms, and cultural experiences.
3. The multinational nomination demonstrates the value of culture as an effective platform with which to promote cross-cultural understanding and unity in Singapore and across the ASEAN region.

From Kebaya to Chingay

On 5 November 2024, both Singapore and Malaysia announced their collaboration to jointly nominate the Chingay street parade for inscription on the UNESCO Representative List. The ensuing positive public reaction suggests this campaign will be equally productive. Many had previously been unaware that Chingay is celebrated not only in Singapore but also in Malaysian cities such as Johor Bahru and Penang. The positive response seems to indicate that Singaporeans do view multinational nominations as a useful channel for cooperation and mutual understanding.

Multinational cultural collaborations, as exemplified by the *kebaya's* UNESCO inscription, forge deeper regional bonds and mutual understanding, proving that shared heritage can be a powerful catalyst for unity in diversity.

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