

A **V**eil **O**ver the **E**ast



Wrapped women.

The rise of an INTENSELY religious class of PROFESSIONALS in Indonesia and Malaysia COINCIDES with both countries' headlong rush towards ECONOMIC MODERNIZATION. A scenario of arresting CONTRASTS AND paradoxes BETWEEN CONTEMPORARY trends and reclaimed or imported traditions HAS RISEN along with it.

About 15 years ago, Santi Soekanto became the first woman in her family to wear a veil. Since then, her mother and four sisters have followed her example. She says: "I have a very democratic

family. I would never pressure my sister or my mom to wear a veil."

Now 33, Soekanto, a devout Muslim from Jakarta, does not shake hands with men, nor does she like to find herself alone with a man who is not her husband or a close family member. She feels it her duty not to watch "revealing" television programs such as *Baywatch*.

None of these stops Soekanto, who works for Indonesia's best-known English language newspaper, *The Jakarta Post*, from specializing in the high-profile, male-dominated field of political journalism. She says she does her best to interview a male in the company of another person, explaining that "there is a clear limitation in Islam about how men and women should communicate."

Although her views on contact between men and women are more extreme than those of other Muslims interviewed for this story, Soekanto represents the

When young people are forced to cover up and people in charge at schools and universities and older students ask them to cover up and at the same time regulate their behavior—that's where control comes in.

face of a new, conspicuously Muslim middle class that is becoming more entrenched in Indonesia and Malaysia. Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim community, about 85 percent of its 190 million people.

The rise of an intensely religious (but not fundamentalist) class of professionals has coincided with both countries' headlong rush towards economic modernization, leading to arresting contrasts and paradoxes between contemporary trends and reclaimed or imported traditions.

In plush shopping malls and department stores in Kuala Lumpur, women in firmly secured scarves and veils hover around the cosmetics and perfume counters, paying Western prices for quintessential Western brands such as Passion and Chanel.

In Jakarta, yuppie women arrive at work in designer suits with their prayer clothes in tow so they can visit the office prayer room up to five times a day.

In 1993, the Indonesian government banned a popular, state-backed lottery after protests by Islamic students and religious elders. Yet, late last year, President Suharto, who is known as a strict Muslim who made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1991, played golf with Sylvester Stallone when the latter opened a Planet Hollywood outlet in Jakarta.

In Malaysia and Indonesia, attendance at mosques are up, and more mosques, Islamic study centers, universities and schools are being built. In Indonesia, several Islamic radio stations have started broadcasting in recent years, and more Muslim-inspired newspapers and magazines are being published. Indonesia established the legal foundations for an Islamic banking system three years ago, and in a recent promotion, the Muslim Bank Pertanian Malaysia offered customers making deposits a free prayer mat or compass which points to Mecca.

Another important indicator of the rise in Muslim consciousness and wealth is that pilgrimages to Mecca by Asians are

increasing dramatically. This year, Garuda Indonesia carried 195,000 pilgrims from Indonesia on 24 aircrafts to the Hajj. In 1991, it used just seven aircrafts to carry 79,346 pilgrims.

An academic from West Java is amazed by the number of her colleagues who were "statistical" or passive Muslims 10 or 15 years ago but who have since made the pilgrimage.

The respected Malaysian newspaper columnist and commentator, Rustam Sani, has noted this trend and other signs of Islamic revivalism in his own country. He believes the Islamic revival filtered through Malaysia and then Indonesia through the influence of students who studied abroad (especially in the Middle East) in the 1970s and '80s, and in the wake of Muslim euphoria at the Iranian Revolution.

"All over the world, Islam is rediscovering itself. I think at first, it rediscovered itself not necessarily at a highly intellectual level. At first, it was trying to reread an identity, it was looking around for what would differentiate it," he says.

He sees Islamic revivalism in his native country as a search for a distinctive identity by ethnic Malays. (They represent the biggest racial group in Malaysia and all are officially defined as Muslims.) However, he believes the Malaysian Muslims' new emphasis on tradition or ritual has not been accompanied by sufficiently rigorous debate. He and many others, for instance, believe the veil was historically specific to the Prophet Muhammed's wives, and is therefore not mandatory for all Muslim women today.

Despite this, Rustam says "there are people who say that you shouldn't ask these questions, that these are accepted procedures and if you raise these questions it amounts to being an apostate."

He adds that his wife, a chief librarian at an Islamic organization in Kuala Lumpur, has come under great official and peer pressure to cover since the spirit of revivalism swept through Malaysia. (The

veiling of women is a practice that was almost unknown in Asia 20 or 30 years ago.)

"You have your house, you have your BMW. You eat in McDonald's send your kids off to plush Islamic schools and you present yourself as a devout Muslim."

Debra Yatim, a short story writer and one of the founders of the Indonesian women's group Kalyana Mitra sees the Muslim resurgence in Indonesia as a new form of nationalism and a direct reflection of the aspirations of a new middle class, many of whom have conservative rural roots and use their religion as a defining attribute. "You have your house, you have your BMW. You eat in McDonald's send your kids off to plush Islamic schools and you present yourself as a devout Muslim," she says.

Among Jakarta's upper-middle classes, Yatim commonly sees contradictions and tensions caused by the coincidence of increasing prosperity and the flight to tradition.

This year alone, she knows of three women who assumed they were in modern marriages but their husbands took second wives without their consent. In every case, she says, these tertiary-educated, careerist women felt their marriages were based on equal rights.

And in every case, Islamic courts sided with the polygamous husbands, despite a 20-year-old secular law requiring that the first wife's explicit consent is needed for a man to take a second wife.

"I find this amazing in this day and age," says Yatim. "Of the three women I know, none of them even dreamed their husbands were seeing people on the side."

Yatim says polygamy is less common now in Indonesia than it was under the Sukarno regime, partly because Indonesia's first president had several wives, while president Suharto and his wife have made clear their preference for monogamous marriage, and are looked upon as role models.

Nevertheless, she believes the "ambiguities" that result from the interplay of

the ultra-modern and the ancient will "fall on our children's shoulders ... I have a feeling we are spawning a very confused generation," she says.

The rise of the new Muslim middle class has a potent political dimension in that both the Malaysian and Indonesian governments have adopted their own agendas of moderate Islam in order to neutralize extremists and their Muslim political rivals.

For instance, many government ministers are members of the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals, which has its own influential newspapers, and pushes for a more Islamic approach to government while stopping well short of advocating religious State.

Even so, in both Malaysia and Indonesia, some pro-Islamic government policies have resulted in a tightening of personal behavioral codes that would be considered extreme by Western standards.

In Indonesia in the late '80s, it was decided registry offices could no longer perform marriages, which meant mixed religious marriages were virtually impossible to procure.

In Malaysia, where economic prosperity and revivalism are both more conspicuous than in Indonesia, Islamic laws governing personal behaviour seem to be more strictly enforced. One man interviewed says he would not dare drink a beer in public now, though he did so during his student days 20 years ago.

In Kuala Lumpur recently, a Singaporean singer was fined for being found in an upmarket hotel room with her boyfriend, under *khalwat* laws which were introduced in the '80s and forbid an unmarried Muslim man and woman to be alone in close proximity.

Norani Othman, an academic and a member of the high-profile Malaysian women's group Sisters in Islam, believes Malaysia's attempts during the past decade to combine official Islamisation policies with more modern lifestyles have thrown



Muslim girls cover their heads or risk the ire of haircutting zealots.

Though support for PAS weakened in the recent federal election, it is still in power in Kelantan, where street signs warn women to cover themselves, and where women have been banned from working night shifts or appearing on stage.

Noran believes it is a "rational enough" approach of the Malaysian Government to seek to neutralize extreme elements by adopting its own Islamic programmes. However, she also believes that because of this strategy, "the present government is constantly driven to adopt policies and strategies that contradict its own agenda... of encouraging a Muslim culture of modernity."

She points out that Malaysian Muslims are routinely cautioned not to question the authority of Islamic judges. (Malaysia has parallel secular and Islamic legal systems and, within the latter, women are not permitted to be judges.) Yet

the Sisters in Islam was formed in 1987 precisely because of complaints about interpretation of Islamic law disadvantaging women in family matters such as divorce and maintenance payments.

Since the '80s, says Norani, official pressure have been added to social pressure to spell out that "if you are Muslim, all your problems must be addressed legally under Sharia [Islamic] law."

A startling example of the mistreatment of women under Islamic law involved the case last year of a leading Malaysian politician who allegedly had an affair with a minor, a 15-year-old schoolgirl, who got pregnant. Eventually the case against the politician (mounted under secular law) was dropped. But because of her pregnancy, the girl, who had helped the police with their inquiries, found herself liable for prosecution for fornication under Islamic law.

up contradictions that "are now at their apex, mainly because the kind of Islamic resurgence that has taken root in most Islamic countries, as well as in Malaysia and Indonesia, since the Iranian Revolution, has been the orthodox, the backward."

In the late 1993, the Sisters in Islam met the Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, to tell him of their concerns about *hudud* laws proposed by the Kelantan Government, the only State government led by the fundamentalist opposition Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS).

Under these laws, those found guilty of crimes such as adultery, armed robbery and apostasy would be subject to punishments including flogging, amputation of limbs, stoning to death and crucifixion. Enactment of this Bill depends on support at federal level — which the Mahathir Government seems unlikely to give.

Girls cover up because of peer pressure. It is not unusual for young men on campus to declare they would only marry a woman who was veiled.

In the Middle East and now in Asia, women put on Muslim garb for spiritual reasons, but also for social and professional gain.

The decision was announced by a deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Department. It provoked a national outcry. In the end, neither the politician, who is now facing separate corruption charges, nor the girl was charged but other men who had sex with her were.

Despite cases like this, Norani passionately believes that because of its multiculturalism (it has large Chinese and Indian populations) and its recent economic prosperity, Malaysia is in a unique position to be a modernist, model State for other Muslim countries.

She believes this will not be easily achieved given that much of the response to rapid economic modernization has been a "flight to something that smells and smacks of radiation."

She also thinks that in many Muslim societies, fear of debate is "endemic" because of possible reprisals from fundamentalists. After being misquoted by a Malaysian language newspaper about her views on polygamy recently, one of the Sisters in Islam was compared to the condemned writer Taslima Nasrin, who went into hiding after fundamentalists issued death threats against her.

The veiling of women, girls and sometimes babies is probably the most emotive and visually striking feature of the rise of Asia's new Muslim bourgeoisie. That this is most common among the better educated, and has coincided with the adoption of some feminist influenced reforms (such as better education for girls), makes it all the more intriguing.

Some Indonesian universities and tertiary colleges tried to ban veils in the '80s. Now, they are permitted in schools and universities, so it is common to see female students in tight jeans and T-shirts sitting in tutorials alongside students in veils, long-sleeved smocks and men's socks.

The Jakarta Post's Santi Soekanto insists there is no peer pressure for women to take the veil; indeed, during the early

'80s, she felt like part of a marginalised minority for wearing it. But now, the student daughter of one of Indonesia's most powerful Muslim leaders—she has long, wavy unrestrained hair—believes some of her friends cover up because of peer pressure. She says it is not unusual for young men on campus to declare they would only marry a woman who was veiled.

Though many people see the new assertion of Islamic values in Asia as a repudiation of western materialism, in a Kuala Lumpur shopping mall I saw one young veiled woman in jeans and a sweatshirt with the letters U.S.A. and the American flag emblazoned on it.

"There are many veils and many levels of veiling. Not every woman in a veil is submissive and not every woman in a veil is progressive," explains a Middle Eastern academic who was recently based in Kuala Lumpur.

She believes it is simplistic to see women covering themselves solely as a manifestation of gender oppression or as a type of Arabic cultural imperialism. In the Middle East and now in Asia, she has seen women put on Muslim garb for spiritual reasons, but also for social and professional gain if they or their husbands want to impress a Muslim hierarchy in business or politics.

She has seen it worn as a result of peer pressure or in the name of being a good (and comfortably kept) wife and mother, or even as a fashion gesture.

Last February, one of the biggest women's magazines in Indonesia, *Femina*, featured a fashion spread on Islamically correct fashions for the fasting month, Ramadan, while one of Jakarta's major department stores, Sarinah, has a section devoted to such fashions called Muslim Corner.

This academic believes predominantly Muslim countries have a preoccupation with controlling women. This is tempered in Indonesia and Malaysia by both govern-

Malaysian Muslim women might work and possess a degree but will always be, primarily, an obedient wife and mother.

ments strongly opposing fundamentalism and urging women to work.

Then again, Norani points out that since Malaysia's Muslim resurgence, state-sponsored family institutes have put renewed emphasis on "moral constructions" of the ideal Muslim woman, who might work and possess a degree but will always define herself primarily as an obedient wife and mother.

At a conference held in Jakarta last year called Islam and the Advancement of Women, Indonesia's State Minister for the Role of Women, Hajjsh Mien Sugandhi, said: "Many Muslim women still live in darkness and backwardness and are restrained by traditional cultural views being put in the name of religion, which are in fact contradictory to the soul and spirit of Islamic teaching."

These views are increasingly endorsed by Islamic modernists in Asia, who are anxious to challenge Western perceptions about Islam oppressing women.

Lily Munir, from the research and development arm of Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia's biggest Muslim organization, thinks the increasing incidence of veil-wearing is part of a search for identity and a reaction against Western values on the part of the young.

Her daughter, a "socially progressive" engineering student, wears the veil partly because it makes her feel more physically secure when she is out at night.

Still, Munir has advised her daughter to steer clear of some undergraduates who declared they were uncomfortable talking to any woman who was not veiled.

"I think this is the influence of fundamentalist elements ... Islam is a very democratic religion that is respectful of religious differences," says Munir.

Zainah Anwar, another member of the Sisters in Islam, researched the effects of revivalism on university students several years ago. Though she thinks attitudes are becoming more relaxed in Malaysia than they were during the '80s, she found

veiled girls were unlikely to attend a student dance, ride a bicycle, watch television in a room with boys or join a campus drama group.

She thinks the key issue raised by the practice of veiling is whether it circumscribes women's behavior.

Zainah, an analyst with the Institute of Strategic and International studies in Kuala Lumpur, says: "That is where my concern is among young people. At our age (the Sisters are in their 30s and 40s), if we should decide to cover up, nothing would change, except our physical look, because we are confident we know what we stand for.

"But for the young people ... when you're forced to cover up and people in charge at schools and universities and older students are asking you to cover up and at the same time regulate your behavior—that's where the control comes in."

Reprinted with permission from the South China Morning Post, 29 July 1995

