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Shooting street style in Indonesia: A photo essay¹

ABSTRACT

Street-style blogs have become a major Internet phenomenon in the last few years, luring millions of readers and documenting everyday fashion in diverse cities around the globe. But the Southeast Asian island nation of Indonesia, despite an abundance of other varieties of fashion blogs and a population with some of the highest percentages of social media use in the world, remains decidedly off the street style map. This photo essay seeks both to understand why and to begin filling in that gap. Through full-colour and black and white photographs taken by the author on a recent trip to Indonesia, along with reflections and thoughts inspired by the photographs, it investigates the vibrant and idiosyncratic expressions of style happening in Indonesia today. But it also questions the very qualification of these images as 'street style photographs.' Does street style have to happen on 'the streets', this essay asks, to be street style? For if so, Indonesia's urban model seems to preclude participation. And does 'cool,' that occult quality ascribed to the subjects of street style photographs, translate to an Indonesian context? This essay both adheres to, and calls into question, the conventions of street style photography to document the myriad meanings of 'style' and 'street' in contemporary Indonesia.

KEYWORDS

street style
Indonesia
photography
blogs
fashion

1. All photographs by Brent Luvaas.

INTRODUCTION

In March 2012, I started a street-style blog, *Urban Fieldnotes* (<http://www.urbanfieldnotes.com>), as both a research instrument for studying the practice of street-style blogging and an open-source forum for documenting my preliminary thoughts on the subject. Then, after shooting and posting style pics in my home base of Philadelphia for some ten months, in January 2013 I had the opportunity to expand the scope of the project considerably, when I was invited to a workshop in Jakarta, the bustling capital city of Indonesia on the densely populated island of Java. Indonesia is a profoundly diverse place, with no shortage of sartorial styles to call its own. The Southeast Asian nation is an archipelago of some 17,000 islands and is home to more than 200 distinct ethnic groups, with their own languages, customs, textile and clothing traditions. It is also home to the world's largest Muslim population, with some 88% of its more than 230 million citizens subscribing to the faith. But this is only part of Indonesia's style story. Indonesia has one of the world's fastest growing fashion industries. Garment production and textiles, now the second-largest sector of Indonesia's economy (Chongbo 2007), is helping drive an impressive economic growth rate of some 6% per year over the last decade. Accompanying this growth has been a massive expansion of Indonesia's middle class, from around 4% of the population in 1998 to estimates as high as 40% today. Indonesia now has dozens of high-end couture designers, a thriving cottage industry of hundreds of local independent clothing labels (see Luvaas 2012), and an upwardly mobile population hungry for new designs and products. Needless to say, I was eager to see what I could find shooting street style there.

I should probably also mention that Indonesia is a place where I lived for more than two years, first as an exchange student in 1996 and later as a researcher for my book *DIY Style* (2012) in 2006. I knew its fashion scene pretty well before heading there to shoot street style, and I had just published an article (Luvaas 2013) on personal-style bloggers in Indonesia, a group hundreds strong and growing, with some national semi-celebrities like Diana Rikasari and Evita Nuh in their midst. But try as I might, I could not find any active street-style blogs in Indonesia. There had been one, *Jakarta Street Looks*, a few years back, but it had already quietly fizzled out. The only other remaining one I could find, *Jakarta Street Journal*, was devoted largely to industry events and contained only a few, sparsely updated posts on style outside of those events. I wanted to know why. Why does one of the world's fastest growing fashion industries, with its own expansive community of personal-style bloggers produce so few *street-style* bloggers? What is it about Indonesia that makes it less prone to that particular – and enormously popular – type of representation?

This photo essay, shot 'on the streets' of Jakarta, as well as Bandung – a city some three hours south-east by train from Jakarta and one of Indonesia's biggest manufacturers of outsourced clothing – goes some way to answer that question. I do not, however, offer a clear-cut hypothesis or argument here. Street-style photography does not lend itself to such pithy summations. Instead, I present only some necessary context for understanding these pictures, along with brief reflections about what I encountered while shooting them. My intention is for the images to present their own form of argument, articulating more effectively than I can through words alone the place of style in Indonesia today.



Figure 1: Lea on Jalan Kemang Raya in South Jakarta.

PLACING THE 'STREET' IN 'STREET STYLE'

Does fashion trickle down from the elite (Veblen 1994; Bourdieu 1984) or bubble up from 'the streets' (Polhemus 1994; Aspelund 2009)? And do the styles on the sidewalk really inspire the fashions on the catwalk, as decades of literature in fashion studies have now claimed? If so, then Indonesia's fashion industry is in bad shape. Its streets are a congested mess of motorbikes and rickshaws. Its sidewalks are packed with food vendors and pirated CDs. Fashion, as we understand it in the western world – that practice of stylized experimentation characteristic of the upwardly mobile and the creatively inclined (Polhemus 1978), simply does not happen on the streets of Indonesia. There is no room for it. The very notion that fashion starts on 'the streets', a premise, incidentally on which street-style blogs depend, presumes a romanticized model of street life passed down in the European tradition from Baudelaire, an intoxicating blend of dandies and scoundrels that defy the bourgeois conventions of the settled and the genteel.

This is not what Indonesian streets look or feel like. The streets in Indonesia are not pedestrian zones where smartly dressed *flâneurs* go to promenade (Benjamin 2002). Parades of edgy, avant garde style do not happen there – indeed, it is an open question as to whether they happen anywhere at all. As Sophie Woodward (2009) has argued, street style is largely a 'myth', fabricated and promoted by fashion magazines, and yet it is a western myth, modelled on a very specific type of European pedestrian zone. To the extent that parades of style happen in Indonesia, they happen in malls. And that is where I had to go to shoot street style there. Malls, with their canned lighting and brand-name chain stores, malls that recreate the mythology of 'the streets' indoors.

CURATING COOL

The street-style bloggers I have interviewed for my larger project often imagine themselves as documenting trends on city streets the way curators of some turn-of-the-century museum of mankind salvaged the traditions of disappearing tribes. But there is a significant difference: archivists attempt to get representative samples. Street-style photographers document exceptions. They are interested in 'style', that 'superadded, rare, desired quality' (Johnson-Woods and Karaminas 2013: 13), that applies to probably no more than one in a hundred people. And how do street-style photographers recognize style? The answer I have invariably received from every street-style photographer I have interviewed is this: they just do. Photographers sense a quality in a person – a particular stance, a mode of presentation, a way of moving through the world – that is distinctly bold and stylized, and they react to it, the more instantaneously the better. When you think about it too much, the theory goes, you tend to get it wrong.

So what problems, then, does shooting in a foreign context pose to a street-style photographer? How does one recognize style in a place where the bodily hexis (Bourdieu 1980) of cultural elaboration is so utterly different? Does 'cool' cross borders? Does it even make sense to talk about 'cool' in a place so far from urban America, that racially charged milieu in which the stylized indifference of 'cool' became a fixture of the modern personality (Leland 2004). I do not know. I can tell you, however, that in Bandung and Jakarta, my style radar – cultivated over months of shooting in Philadelphia – was



Figure 2: The permanently jammed streets of Jakarta.



Figure 3: The vendor-packed streets of Bandung.



Figure 4: Zikra, taking refuge in the upscale Plaza Senayan shopping centre in Central Jakarta. Notice the Hermès scarf, similar to that worn by Rinanta in Figure 11, but worn quite differently here.



Figure 5: Ragil, an employee of Lee Cooper, dressed head to toe in their products outside their retail outlet at the Pondok Indah Mall in South Jakarta. Is this street style or mall style? In a country seeking to move 'the streets' indoors is there a difference? And does it matter if he is wearing this outfit 'for himself' or 'for his job'?



Figure 6: Firmansyah, in local 'indie' clothing label Began, standing before their 'distro' (retail distribution outlet) on Jl Trunojoyo in Bandung. In Philadelphia I would attribute 'hipster' status to anyone wearing this outfit. But is Firmansyah a 'hipster'? It somehow seems like the wrong word for him. As does 'cool'. He is stylish, no doubt, and on trend. But is he cool? Or something else besides?



Figure 7: Cindy at Aksara Books on Jl Kemang Raya in Jakarta was without question the 'coolest' person I shot on this expedition. She was hip, 'with it', not outwardly impressed by the idea of being on my blog. She also, however, had spent six years in Australia, which begs the question as to whether 'cool' as such has relevance here. Or is cool a kind of imposition, a foreign sensibility with little local application?

malfunctioning. I hesitated. I questioned myself. I felt ill-equipped to pick out the stylish among the many.

HIJABER STYLE

What Indonesian street style lacked in ‘cool’, at least as I had understood it back home, it made up for in colour and conviction. Colour is everywhere on the streets – and in the malls – of urban Indonesia: colour, that is, and prints, some employing local patterns, some sampling from an international repertoire of tie dye, paisley and plaid. Urban Indonesian women, it would seem, have turned to colour and print in a big way, taking risks with both of a sort I have seldom seen in the United States – batik with hounds tooth, ikat with stripes. Colours ranged from bright pink and orange to rich blues and golds. And the women taking the biggest risks bar none were the ‘hijabers’, those modest Muslim women making their declarations of faith into expressions of personal style.

Hijabers have become much more visible in Indonesia in recent years. During the authoritarian Suharto regime, which ruled Indonesia from 1965 to 1998, Islam was continually minimized in political life, some might say ‘suppressed’ (Hefner 2000; Rudnycky 2009). Suharto’s New Order government considered hardline (*santri*) Islam a threat to national sovereignty and sought to promote the ‘tolerant’, mystically oriented traditionalist (*abangan*) brand of Javanese Islam (see Geertz 1960; Beatty 1999) in its stead. But when student revolt brought down the regime in 1998, a new era of openness and freedom of expression, commonly known as *Reformasi*, took hold, and in keeping with an increasingly familiar brand of irony, it also brought more fundamentalist strands of Islam into the open. Far more women began to cover their heads, a practice often frowned upon by the older generation of the Javanese majority (see Brenner 1996), and seen as almost a rebellious act throughout much of the 1980s and 1990s, a declaration of faith against common social expectations. During my first time in Indonesia, back in 1996, I would estimate that about one in twenty women I came across in Java covered their heads. In 2013, it must have been closer to one in three. But this does not mean women were dressed more conservatively or ‘traditionally’. On the contrary, as anthropologist Carla Jones (2010) has documented, the rise of piety has produced numerous innovations in Islamic fashion. Designers like Dian Pelangi and Irna Mutiara design exclusively for observing Muslim women, producing brightly coloured, intricately draped garments that have garnered international attention. Workshops are held in upscale Jakarta suburbs, providing make-up and self-presentation tips to the Muslim and upwardly mobile (Jones 2010). And every bookstore I stepped into this past January had a section devoted to ‘hijab style’, full of books of tips and tricks for tying and draping, often stacked high on the bestseller tables. There is even a network of personal-style bloggers in Indonesia, known as the Hijabers Community, devoted exclusively to hijab style. And designer Dian Pelangi, a member of that community, recently put out her own book of street-style photographs, titled, appropriately *Hijab Street Style*.

I found the visibility of hijabers in public space rather inspiring. These women are bold and striking. But it brought forth a number of questions for me. Has, for instance, the increasing presence of Islam in public life enabled expressions of fashion for women once frowned upon as immodest or imprudent? Has the professed modesty of the hijab made forms of



Figure 8: Siro in a trim, sophisticated take on the hijaber look at Paris van Java Mall in Bandung. I asked her what brands she was wearing and she told me she neither knew nor cared. Good for her.



Figure 9: Dicka in tie-dye, stretch pants and a headscarf at the Pondok Indah Mall in upscale South Jakarta. She seemed genuinely surprised that I would want to photograph her, describing her own style as 'whatever is in the closet' (apa ada di lemari), but she let me anyway.



Figure 10: Indah flaunting patterns and colours at Pondok Indah Mall in South Jakarta.



Figure 11: Rinanta and Rininta at the Paris Van Java mall in Bandung, Indonesia. Rinanta's headscarf is Hermès. The rest of her outfit is 'unbranded'. Rininta's headscarf is unbranded. The rest of her outfit is Mango.



Figures 12a and 12b: Colours, patterns and textures outside Bandung Indah Plaza.

expression acceptable that once were taboo? And do women experience this development, this stylization of Islam, as a new liberation or constraint? Why, after all, has Islam's fashion explosion been so specific to women? Why has there not been a comparable phenomenon for men?

IMPORTING SUBCULTURE

Where men's fashion has been most conspicuously articulated in Indonesia is in a decidedly more secular realm, that of 'alternative' urban styles labelled locally as 'indie' or 'underground'. As Wallach (2008b), Sen and Hill (2000) and Baulch (2007), among others, have documented, these are



Figure 13: Ali, modelling the look that dominates the Indonesian indie scene and underground on Jl Trunojoyo in Bandung. He is wearing a cap by local indie brand Oink!, a Kizaru T-shirt and a pair of homemade Chinos.



Figure 14: Rudi of Hope Fast Hope, a tattoo and apparel company on display at 'Independent Clothing', a showcase of local brands in front of the Bandung Indah Plaza. Rudi is part of a generation of Bandung punks, now in their early thirties, who draw stylistic inspiration from the Chicano hardcore bands of East Los Angeles.



Figure 15: A more modish indie couple outside an indie fashion event in Bandung.



Figure 16: An 'underground' scenester in the black-clad uniform of subcultural cool, passing Bandung Indah Plaza.

imported subcultural styles that came to Indonesia first through a variety of unofficial circuits: from cassette tapes dubbed off of passing European tourists, from mail order catalogues sent for from abroad, through to well-worn magazines passed hand to hand among friends. Punk and metal were already present in Indonesia by the early 1980s, but they became further elaborated on in the 1990s as both an alternative to the commercial schlock pumped out by a state-controlled media industry (Baulch 2007; Luvaas 2013), and as a cry of protest against the authoritarian Suharto regime (Wallach 2008a; Lee 2011). Underground scenesters were deeply involved with the protests that eventually brought down the regime in 1998, and once it had fallen, such styles only proliferated more rapidly. In a newly open media environment, with an Internet infrastructure firmly in place by the end of the 1990s, nearly every variety of imported subcultural expression was able to move freely and easily throughout the urban centres of the archipelago. Today, Indonesia is a hotbed of punk, post-punk, new wave, no wave, noise and every variety of metal imaginable. There is hardly a music or fashion scene anywhere not represented somewhere in the archipelago. And yet, underground looks remain a male-dominated mode of expression, with somewhat conservative, even ascetic tendencies (Wallach 2008b). In Indonesian subculture, the simple black T-shirt reigns supreme.

CONCLUSION: THE TROUBLE WITH REPRESENTING PLACE THROUGH STREET-STYLE PHOTOS

So what can I say about style in Indonesia after shooting there for three weeks this past January? What can I claim to have learned about place, space and meaning from documenting a people through their stylized exceptions? Well, perhaps there is not all that much I can say that has not already been said thousands of times already: that Indonesia is vast and varied; that its quiltwork of cultures is impossible to accurately characterize without a great deal of hedging; that it is highly syncretic and appropriative, drawing from multiple other places and cultures, whether by inspiration or imposition. There is no 'Indonesian' style, just as there has never been an Indonesian culture or character. There is no singularity of vision. And yet there are tendencies and moods that I hope emerge from these photos, patterns just on the verge of crystallization. Hijabers, for instance, with their colourful play on high fashion excess and modest piety, have risen to public prominence in the last decade. But so have punks, indie kids and metalheads. There has long been something fundamentally democratic at work in Indonesian fashion, a sheer irrepressible diversity of influences, none ever able to fully dominate another. But the democratization of Indonesian style tells us little about Indonesia's place in the larger fashion world, a place still tenuous and marginal at best. Indonesia has been largely left out of representation in the street-style blogosphere, just as it has in the fashion world more generally. Street style, as currently conceptualized, remains foreign to Indonesia for reasons articulated here, and Indonesia, consequently, remains off the street-style map. I hope these pictures succeed in evoking something of the dynamism and variety of style in Indonesia today. I hope they succeed in making visible something of what still remains without representation.



Figure 17: Novee and Lucky at the Paris Van Java Mall in Bandung, bucking the hijaber trend while sticking to its bright colours and bold simplicity.



Figure 18: Ghea, Ali and Gendis, a group of friends with a diverse fashion sensibility, complicating any efforts to generalize the state of women's fashion in Indonesia today.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Luvaas, B. (2014), 'Shooting street style in Indonesia: A photo essay', *Clothing Cultures* 1: 1, pp. 59–81, doi: 10.1386/cc.1.1.59_1

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Fashion, Style & Popular Culture

ISSN: 20500726 | Online ISSN: 20500734

3 issues per volume | Volume 1, 2014

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