

Mualaf Chic: Conversion and Mediation in Indonesian Pious Sociality

Carla Jones

University of Colorado Boulder

Abstract:

Scholars of the visible rise of public forms of Islamic piety movements in Indonesia in the past two decades have noted its transnational character. Unsurprisingly, Arab inspiration has been prominent, as direct clerical influence and indirect aesthetic prestige. In this article, I suggest that another feature of this shared religious community relays a slightly different allure, that of accessing and domesticating foreignness through conversion and cosmopolitanism. I analyze this through examples from pious fashion celebrities who have large and passionate Indonesian audiences. Analyzing two genres, Indonesian pious celebrities who amplify their appeal through situating themselves in foreign settings, and foreign converts to Islam who have large Indonesian social media audiences because of their adoption of Muslim piety, I ask how the affordances of fashion facilitate a unique process of accessing the allure of the foreign that preclude its total domestication. I focus particularly on the example of Ayana Jihye Moon, a Korean woman whose conversion to Islam has created a substantial Indonesian fan base. Her “journey to Islam” suggests alternate circuits in contemporary Indonesian Islamic culture and by extension, the role of the foreign in Indonesian conceptions of authority.

Keywords:

conversion, fashion, foreign, hijrah, Indonesia, Korea

“She is so humble,” my Indonesian friend Dinny said. Speaking of her admiration for the Korean Instagram celebrity Ayana Jihye Moon in 2019, she continued, “she is so beautiful.” And then, after a moment, another friend added, “she suffered so much, and took such risks to be a good

Muslimah.” Comments like these highlight a potent intersection of piety and style that are at the heart of the booming pious fashion and lifestyle industries in contemporary Indonesia. Beauty and modesty produce prestige and wealth in the publicly pious environment of urban Indonesia, qualities that intensify in the primarily social media channels that fuse *dakwah* with capitalism. As this field, itself a vibrant and elite social scene, has become distinctively Indonesian, its transnational character may be less apparent. In this article, I suggest that the historically translocal character of Indonesian Muslim piety is particularly well suited to the celebration of cosmopolitan lifestyle that social media celebrity affords. Including an otherwise fantastical, frivolous, and feminine field broadens the transnational inspiration that saturates Indonesian experiences of Muslim piety beyond its understandable focus on Arab influence. Ayana’s stardom highlights how aspiration blends hardship and glamour to remind followers that piety can be simultaneously difficult and fabulous. In what follows, I suggest that cosmopolitanism and conversion treat the foreign as a substance to be selectively mined. They emerge as thrilling affective partners, each amplifying the other in ways that play with alterity and domestication. Considered in the context of the global features of Indonesian pious celebrity, Ayana is an example of a new twist on a familiar figure: the chic *mualaf*, or chic convert.

Situating the foreign

Scholars of the visible rise of public forms of Islamic piety movements in Indonesia in the past two decades have noted its transnational character. Unsurprisingly, Arab inspiration has been prominent, as direct clerical influence and indirect aesthetic prestige. *Arabisasi* has been evident in formal educational, philanthropic, and clerical exchanges between Indonesia and the kingdom of Saudi Arabia as part of the kingdom’s global strategy to export its influence through religious authority and oil wealth. Soft power, in this sense, integrates aesthetic, commercial, and intellectual fields into foreign policy so as to mitigate competing political threats via cultural influence. This approach is not limited to Saudi Arabia. For some majority Muslim countries, a new strategic terrain dubbed “moderate Islam” has

become a field in which to claim a future global role in the face of extremist movements such as ISIS. As Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid (2018) argue, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Morocco, and Indonesia each benefit from figuring Saudi Arabia's soft power initiatives as cultural and religious threats, and frame themselves as legitimate and historically authentic models of tolerance or sophistication. Taking soft power strategies such as these seriously can highlight apparently peripheral social fields, such as fashion or beauty, in transnational debates about global influence. Placing these fields closer to the center of our analytical frames, in tandem with their intermittent appearance in foreign policy, allows us to see the complex ways they animate elite anxieties about national autonomy and personal aspirations to cosmopolitanism. For pious Indonesian women, both celebrities and not, performing beauty across national borders is entirely consistent with religious aspiration.

Arab presence in Southeast Asia has long been contested. Arab, *qua* religious, style has been one of many translocal influences in the region. While Muslims around the world honor the fact that the Qu'ran was revealed in Arabic and that the Prophet Muhammad was an Arab man, in Indonesia, these facts have contributed to complex cultural transformations that reveal how politically and semiotically dense Arab connections have become. Historical analyses of Islamization in Southeast Asia have asked whether the arrival of Arab merchants in the 13th century was a process of "conversion or adhesion" (Reid 1988, 140), noting that simple recitation of the *syahadat* was not a definitive indication of conversion. Rather, the adoption of previously foreign dress and diet were more reliable signs of a religious revolution. Engseng Ho describes the imperial and mystical landscape of the Indian Ocean as one in which the translocal exchange of influences in food, dress, and affiliation facilitated otherwise distant relationships, marking descendants of Hadhrami travelers with genealogical links to the prophet (*sayyid*) as simultaneously cosmopolitan *and* minorities (2006, 305). These affiliations were later used by Dutch colonists in the Indies as categories of racial control, marking residents of Arab descent against *pribumi* and other "foreign Orientals" (*vreemde oosterlingen*) whose residence may have predated European rule but whose classification as

foreign foreclosed full membership in native life (Mandal 2018, 74). Thus segregated, Arabness itself framed Arab cultural life as a “fanatic” foil against which to pose apparently more moderate local Muslims.

By the early 20th century, the intersection of Arabness and Islamic critique informed its own “*umma* below the winds” (Laffan 2003), facilitating a religious foundation for resistance to colonial rule. These connotations have remained relevant in the recent period of religious purification over the past two decades. What began as student interest in the 1980s in discovering religious interpretation abroad as a way of critiquing authoritarian rule at home has now become a complex, sensory, and commercial landscape of global and local sources in a post-authoritarian era. In this landscape, Arab connections and style have been central features of the religious reformist and democratic *reformasi* movements. Although for many young activists, travel to the Middle East and facility with Arabic language and religious expertise signified substantial cultural capital, it has also fueled recent resentments. As Sumit Mandal (2011) argues, the rediscovery of Arabness has been central to national aspirations among some Southeast Asian Muslims to be considered essentially moderate. This narrative relies on a perception of the Muslim world as singularly centered in the Arab sphere, thereby assigning extremist and masculinist valences to an Arab essence and allowing peripheral Muslims to claim a more moderate stance by virtue of their ethnic and geographic distance (Lücking and Eliyanah 2017).

An expansive perspective on the role of foreignness and religious and political power is helpful here. It not only decenters an Arab focus but invites us to consider the aesthetic heart beating at the core of contemporary phenomena such as social media and religious celebrity. Seen in this light, foreignness is not simply a threat that must be domesticated, but a potency to harness and deploy, even in the service of generating new centers (cf. Steedly 1999). Southeast Asian patron–client relations have a long history of being produced and conserved through claiming people, or audiences, rather than territories (Heine-Geldern 1942; Tambiah 2013). Although this resonates with a similar logic at the core of socially mediated fame, it may also illuminate how conceptions of foreignness and potency intersect. As

Martin Slama (2020) has argued, recent religious and political initiatives in Indonesia have invoked historical patterns of selective deployment of foreignness as a long-standing local practice. In analyzing these forms of recruiting the foreign for local power it helps to recall that Southeast Asian kingdoms, some predating the arrival of Islam, rested on myths about foreign figures or “stranger-kings” (Braginsky 2015) whose power was anchored in their capacity to appear from outside, to arrive as a “supernaturally potent figure who enters a particular society and installs himself as ruler” (Slama 2020, 291). These figures did not reject the concept of a center. Rather, they configured it through themselves in ways that could only last as long as they were recognized as simultaneously foreign and legitimate. Foreignness was therefore an attractive mix of foreign and local, but one which was largely limited to male figures. For example, their authentication to local audiences in part relied on marrying local women.

Thinking of these dynamics through the concept of figures is helpful for teasing out how to think about the role of the foreign. A figure, as Joshua Barker, Erik Harms, and Johan Lindquist argue (2014), is both a unique individual and a familiar symbol, emblematic of an era or a moment. Building on James Siegel’s (1998) idea of new types of sociality, types may precede and exceed any individual and therefore correspond less to any particular person, yet they circulate and resonate in ways that are powerful because they may also uncannily correspond to distinct individuals. Preachers, kings, descendants of the prophet, and we might also add, religious social media stars, are arguably figures in this sense. Each channel and translate power external to the self or to the region into personal power. Returning to the complex figure of the sayyid is illustrative here of stranger-kings and to a lesser extent the *kyai*, or local preacher, which Clifford Geertz (1960) described as a cross-cultural “broker.” For example, a sayyid who has a large following (*habib*, literally “beloved”) is beloved in part because of their capacity to draw an audience, and in part because of their figuration as a diffracted yet living presence of the prophet in the Indonesian present. Hadhrami descendants whose lives and families have been situated in the archipelago for generations may have “become Indonesian” and occupy a range of high-profile and respected

positions, yet this is arguably in part because of their status as still alluringly, partially foreign (Alatas 2011).¹

Contemporary Muslim entrepreneurs, preachers, and, significantly, social media celebrities in Indonesia known as *selebgrams* (a portmanteau of *selebriti* and Instagram) traffic in a newly precarious but profitable arena of mediated piety which reanimates some of these origins in the power of the foreign. Each of these genres plays on the relationship of inspiration as a religious and productive concept that invites analysis of the prevalence of figures with active, attractive relationships with difference. Many of them are converts, minorities, mixed children of Indonesians and non-Indonesians, or people simply known for frequently traveling abroad. They relay embodied experience of the world outside of Indonesia to Indonesians. We might recognize these religious celebrities as wealthier and more public versions of what Fenella Cannell (1999) has described as the appeal that beauty pageant queens, spirit mediums, and performers in the Christian passion play hold among Bicolanos in the Philippines. As a person who possesses an unusual ability to attract a galaxy of powerful others, male transvestite beauty queens (*bakla*) intimately access alterity through its trappings, by wrapping a male body in glamorous femininity, and almost, but not perfectly, emulating American beauty standards. For these figures, embracing alterity is to fleetingly dance with the protective power of the other, sometimes at the personal risk of losing the self, but its efficacy only holds if that power remains undomesticated.

Considering these examples together accentuates the salience of appearance. Like the radiant beauty of the pageant queen, appearances do not simply reflect or signify some deeper or truer process of translation but are the very medium through which to access the external power that might protect and enhance the self. Again, this has historical origins. As John Pemberton has argued (1994), the social zone known as *cara* (fashion, manners, or style) became a technique by which royal families in colonial Java faced the foreign domination that was Dutch rule, by positioning Dutch clothing, accessories, and etiquette equally alongside their broader repertoire of available powerful tools such as batik and sacred heirlooms. This created

the twinned effect of simultaneously elevating and reducing Dutch style by making it both more spiritually potent in a Javanese sense and more nonsensical to Dutch colonial officials (1994, 67).

Although historically and socially varied, these examples emphasize attention to the foreign that seeks a balance between domestication and admiration. In the highly capitalized, digitized, transnational yet affectively intimate context of contemporary social media, skilled practitioners craft new alloys of national and transnational references to create new forms of community with thrilling new codes of belonging which also emphasize appearances. Male and female preachers alike can selectively access the celebrity universe of the selebgram. Celebrity preachers who can deftly deploy a mix of global and personal semiotic references can enhance their status, endear themselves to followers, and potentially convert that visibility into income (Kloos 2019; Millie 2017; Slama 2017). For example, celebrity preacher Abdullah Gymnastiar mixed Sufi references to love and beauty with declarations of affection for his wives and quotations from American self-help figures (Hoesterey 2016) until his followers abandoned him in the wake of his second marriage in 2006. Similarly, Felix Siauw uses Arabic phrases, textual references to Qur'an and hadith, slang Indonesian, and evocative images to craft a reputation as a “casual but dogmatic” preacher using visual persuasion in the service of Islamist proselytizing (Hew 2018, 61).²

Many of these figures emphasize their conversion status as evidence of their journeys and therefore their unique capacity as conduits for others' transformative *hijrahs*. By citing the C. E. 622 migration in which Muhamad and his followers fled Mecca for Medina, these celebrities narrate otherwise personal or idiosyncratic life changes in a genealogy of recognizably epic movements out of sinful pasts and into more vigilant, pious futures. Siauw in particular stands out as a Chinese Indonesian convert (Hew 2012), yet even preachers who were raised Muslim, such as Gymnastiar, Arifin Ilham, Jefri al-Bukhari and Yusuf Mansur have presented their personal biographies as conversion narratives. Repeatedly retelling their conversions has at least two effects: it highlights the transformative potential of Islam (even in the

absence of traditional religious training) and emphasizes outsider status by holding the past in permanent relief with the present (Burhani 2020; Howell 2008). Rather than erasing a sinful past, hijrah stories underscore that past, reanimating conversion as positive life change while recalling the life that preceded it. Reminding disciples and fans alike of a celebrity preacher's pre-conversion life may seem counterintuitive, but it is arguably essential to their appeal. It maintains their insider status as outsiders.

Female *selebgrams* in particular, typically fashion designers or influencers, mix image and affect to summon and cultivate audiences that share features common to those of religious discipleship. Feminine public figures in this genre may not be religious experts per se, but pious lifestyle stars, modeling enthusiasm for piety and beauty in equal measure. As influencers, their employment and reputations are intimately enmeshed, their capacity to affect their followers algorithmically informing their compensation. What they sell, however, is both material and immaterial. This combination, what Annisa R. Beta (2020) describes as a unique form of dakwah, emphasizes a sense of intimacy and a general sense of “feeling” close to their followers. Some of the world's best-known Muslimah influencers are Indonesian, even as their global audiences consider them more Muslimah than Indonesian. In part because of their reliance on Instagram, but also because of their intersection with the appearance-focused orientation of the fashion and beauty industries, these women rely heavily on the ability to post photographic content that conveys a vision of them as both pious and cosmopolitan (cf. Abidin 2016).

Consider Dian Pelangi, whose Instagram account boasts over five million followers. Dian selectively shares glimpses into her life via her social media channels, promoting her clothing and headscarf lines, her sponsoring brands, her family, and her global travels. If that intimacy converts access to private aspects of an influencer's life into public affection, it is equally in conversation with a parallel cosmopolitanism. In July 2020, Dian shared previously unseen photos and video of the moment she and her husband watched her home pregnancy test turn positive in a hotel room at the Ritz Carlton hotel in “Jerusalem, Palestine” in December 2019 (Figure 1).

Images such as these share the joy she and her husband felt long before their news was public while situating her in a circuit of travel that many Indonesians may imagine as part of their religious universe, even if they cannot personally visit (Lücking 2019). Indeed, her decade-plus celebrity began as a teenager, posting outfits-of-the-day to her blog, composed of global brands such as Zara or H&M in combination with an accent piece of her own design and set in a variety of locations such as her home, her school, and importantly, her travels to Australia, Egypt, and around Indonesia. Although she is a globally recognized celebrity, her primary motivation in producing images set in global capitals has been for her Indonesian audience (personal communication, March 6, 2014). In tandem with these glamorous settings, her accompanying texts and styles telegraph humility and sincerity, qualities that are highly valued in a crowded and commodified visual economy, in turn creating economic value.



Figure 1: Dian Pelangi sharing her positive pregnancy test from December 2019, in the Ritz Carlton Hotel, Jerusalem, Palestine with her Instagram audience (Pelangi 2020).

The “release of affects” (Spyer and Steedly 2013, 26) images can generate in conditions of intensely mediated contemporary life thus initiate, as Karen Strassler (2020) has argued, a circuit of demands between images and audiences. Emphasizing this dynamic requires us to engage the “fantasy of transcendence” that images evoke (Morris 2009, 6), the dream that they exist beyond the vernacular or the foreign, beyond translation itself.

Imagining an Indonesian center

Situating fashion and celebrity in these broader questions of foreign and national sources of power invites us to consider the role of a range of institutions in Indonesia that are invested in the possibility of making Indonesia a new center on the world stage. Imagining an Indonesian center involves exactly that, imagination, harnessed to initiatives designed to achieve these dreams. Among the most prominent in the past decade have been formal and informal strategies by the Ministry of Religion, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Indonesia’s largest Islamic organizations, *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiyah*, to position Indonesia as a global leader in “moderate Islam.” *Nahdlatul Ulama* especially took up this challenge by actively promoting “*Islam Nusantara*,” a concept which emerged in the months leading up to the organization’s 2015 annual congress, which was organized around the theme of the unique correspondence between broad Muslim values of inclusivity and specifically Indonesian qualities that preceded and now enhance Islam’s presence in the region (Sahal and Aziz 2015). Framed in the language of soft power, *Nahdlatul Ulama* representatives asserted that Indonesia is the legitimate inheritor of a uniquely tolerant, friendly, and diverse orientation to theology and community because of its archipelagic, connective, and “in-between” geographic and cultural roots. *Islam Nusantara*’s focus on resilience, gentility, and compassion have been strategic in domestic efforts to quell radicalization in Indonesia and have been publicized by Indonesian foreign diplomatic efforts in the US and Egypt (Hoesterey 2018).

Although apparently peripheral to this agenda, a closer analysis suggests that women’s bodies and appearance have been a deliberate, although marginalized,

feature of this mission. Presenting Indonesia as the worlds' largest majority Muslim country, yet one where modestly attired women remain *anggun* or elegant illustrates how women's appearances are summoned to serve as evidence of Indonesia's religious moderation. Feminine beauty garbed in Indonesian textiles and taste implies an antidote to other genres of pious femininity, particularly Gulf-style abayas, that are presumably less friendly and less moderate. This approach brings together two key state goals, often expressed through competing ministries, around global Islamic leadership: foreign diplomacy and economic development. Positioning Indonesia as the *kiblat*, or center of the modest fashion industry, hoped to reorient the higher value design roles associated with Western fashion centers via clear reference to Islamic geography (Tempo 2016; Republika 2019). It also underscored how appearances are alternately saturated with intense moral valences or dismissed, as the context demands.

The creation of a new government bureau in Indonesia in 2015, the *Badan Ekonomi Kreatif* represents the most formal expression of new development strategies around soft skills in Indonesia. This initiative celebrates a national cultivation of creativity that requires rendering the non-technical into the technical, so as to facilitate the insertion of otherwise messy cultural and economic forms into global assemblages. Now a subsection of the Ministry of Tourism, it situated the post-development hyperbole of "creative classes" (Florida 2002) and the "4th industrial revolution" (Schwab 2017) in the particular context of religiously spectacular Indonesia. At the center of this new initiative is fashion, representing 56 percent of the creative economy and now seen as a potential driver of national development, alongside more muscular industries like oil or mining.

Modest fashion has been particularly high profile in these campaigns, in an attempt to lead the fastest growing sector (\$300 billion) of the global garment industry (Usher 2018). Women's labor in the mass garment and textile industries is thus harnessed to the feminized, and often the female staffed world of fashion design. The rhetoric of Indonesia as the *kiblat* of the modest fashion world predates the formation of *Badan Ekonomi Kreatif* but has now been integrated into its broader fashion agenda emphasizing

diversity and beauty as uniquely Indonesian. Further, fashion shows have become features of the foreign diplomatic and cultural budgets for Indonesian embassies. Consular offices in Los Angeles and Houston, in the US, and embassies in Amman, Moscow, New York City, Paris, and Seoul have regularly hosted fashion shows featuring modest fashion designers over the past decade.

Although Indonesian diplomatic and economic initiatives dovetail in their optimism about the potential for fashion to achieve multiple national goals, they face well-known barriers to entry for non-Western creatives in the global fashion system. Like many countries with large export-oriented garment industries, Indonesia has struggled to achieve credibility as a source of fashion design and remains associated with low-waged fast fashion production. The system may celebrate creativity and even elevate eccentric individuals as unique specimens of genius, yet nonetheless reproduces a map of centers and peripheries (Leshkovich and Jones 2003). Designers in global capitals are recognized as autonomous authors of artistic expression inspired by global travels, while the peripheries outside of those capitals are undifferentiated raw cultural materials feeding a system which Minh-Ha Pham argues rests on “racial plagiarism,” (2017).³ For designers and influencers in Indonesia, this landscape has created opportunities and barriers, some of which can produce national boundaries that prevent the sort of transnational influence these initiatives aim to transcend. While asked to perform indigeneity abroad, they may find that it is less effective in attracting Indonesian consumers, who want to see global aesthetics available at home. Being either unable or unwilling to suit those rules may limit their access to state funding.

Let us return to examples of how individual designers and influencers have navigated this demand for presenting versions of Indonesian beauty abroad and access to the foreign at home. As Dian Pelangi’s global reputation has grown, her travels have become a mix of personal and sponsored, by Wardah Cosmetics and the Indonesian government. Wardah, an Indonesian skincare company that is branded as *halal* (although almost all personal care products in Indonesia are halal given the Muslim majority market) and “for Indonesian

women,” invests heavily in key “brand ambassadors,” of which Dian is one of the most prominent. These ambassadors are Indonesian actresses, designers, singers, or other celebrities whom Wardah sends abroad for extensive photoshoots to produce content for the brand’s advertising and for the celebrities’ social media channels. Borrowing from the language of foreign diplomacy, these ambassadors fuse their own faces with the face of the company in the service of promoting a genre of modest beauty that is friendly, global, beautiful, and, importantly, Indonesian.

A brief reading of the styles these ambassadors display in foreign settings reveals how cosmopolitanism and inspiration intersect in ways that selectively borrow from the broader fashion industry’s rhetoric of aesthetic inspiration, divine inspiration, and her customers’ aspirations to both upward mobility and increased piety (cf. Fealy 2008, 29). When presenting collections outside of Indonesia, Dian has opted for looks that emphasize local textile traditions such as *batik* and *songket*, in effect celebrating the officially ecumenical aesthetic narrative of diversity and tolerance. Yet fashion shows for consulates and embassies are primarily marketed to and attended by the Indonesian diasporic community, offering them a reflection of Indonesia yet rarely expanding the audience beyond the national. In addition, shows that are hosted in formal show calendars typically emphasize Indonesia as a site of ethnic diversity and handmade clothing (Indonesian Agency for Creative Economy (BEKRAF) 2019).

These trips have provided inspiration for Dian’s domestic collections in Indonesia. For example, her October 2018 collection was inspired by her September 2018 visit to New York as a Badan Ekonomi Kreatif and Wardah sponsored designer to New York Fashion Week. Although the textiles she showed in Jakarta were created through wax-resist dyeing, and therefore technically batik, the overall style was inspired by the Drake song “Nice for What” which she felt had been the sonic backdrop to her weeklong visit to New York City. Her use of black, baseball caps, and logoed sashes combined to evoke an edgy street style, rather than Indonesian tradition (Figure 2). Similar examples include modest fashion designers Anandia Putri of IKYK (an abbreviation for “I Know



Figure 2: Dian Pelangi's Fall 2018 runway show, October 2018, Jakarta, inspired by her trip to New York City a month earlier (Salsabila 2018).

You Know,” a bit of dialogue from the US TV show “Friends;” @iky2011) and Rani Hatta (@ranihattaofficial), both of whom have openly embraced urban styles from Japan and Korea, countries with limited historical relationships with Islam (Figure 3). Both designers claim that the monochromatic, athletic, and pyramidal forms of the Korean *hanbok* and Japanese *kimono* are inherently more modest than either the sheer and form-fitting Indonesian *kebaya* or the trendy versions of modest wear prominent in Indonesia. Both argue that what might seem like either androgynous or even masculine styles are in fact more feminist than Indonesian styles. Both use black and neutral tones in their collections, yet distinguish their color choices from associations with black abayas. Both set many of their fashion shoots in Korea and Japan with local models and have devoted, non-Muslim customer bases there (Jones 2018). Yet neither have received as much funding or recognition from the Indonesian state, in part because their looks are insufficiently recognizable as Indonesian. Their use of imported textiles and apparently foreign shapes make them less valuable ambassadors for a uniquely Indonesian version of Islamic modesty. In short, what they are exporting is not as easily recognizable in the narrative of Islam Nusantara because they appear to be importing foreignness, rather than exporting Indonesian aesthetic moderation.



Figure 3: IKYK 2017 Fall collection, inspired by the Korean *hanbok* (Jakarta Fashion Week 2018).

One could easily interpret the allure of the foreign in many of these examples as a fawning affection for the non-Indonesian. Considering the fact that Indonesia represents one of the largest markets of Korean state investment in exporting popular culture, these examples might seem like simple evidence of the success of those strategies. In what follows, I suggest we consider a more complex interpretation. How might fashion generate the kinds of affordances that make fantasy and worship partners in mediation? How might style itself be the border that mediates the “alien character” (Rutherford 2003, 23) of the foreign without domesticating it?

The pleasures of difference

Wardah’s newest and perhaps most talked-about brand ambassador is not Indonesian. Twenty-four-year-old Ayana Jihye Moon is a Korean citizen, resident of both Seoul and Jakarta, and teenage convert to Islam. She manages an Instagram account (@xolovelyayana, “Proud Korean and Muallaf”) with three million followers and a YouTube channel. She posts variously in Bahasa Indonesia, English, Arabic, and Korean across her social media sites.

She is sponsored by four major Indonesian companies and is a frequent guest speaker on celebrity talk circuits like HijrahFest. As she tells her

hijrah in her 2020 biography, written in Indonesian and published in Jakarta, she grew up in South Korea as a daughter of an upper middle-class family who was committed to educating her well (Moon 2020c). Their plans were consistent with a period in Korean history during which wealthy families could expect their children to benefit from Korea's rise to global prestige following the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s. National development plans targeted technological prowess and popular culture, presenting Korea as a model of modernity in Asia. Although this period has produced precarity and pressure among Korean youth (Jung 2017; Rea 2018), when viewed from afar, Korea appears as an example of centrally guided national development which supports a wide array of industries, from cars to music, positioning Korean popular culture as the soft power component of a complex project designed to establish Korea as an admirable, independent country in spite of limited natural resources. Simultaneously recognizably Korean and yet lacking obviously traditional references, Korean popular culture appears to have achieved an elusive developmental goal. Launched as a "wave" (*hallyu*) by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 1997, Korean music, fashion, beauty products, and general youth cultural style has therefore been no less central to Korean modernity than its industrial accomplishments (Huat and Iwabuchi 2008). As Ayana's fame has grown, she has become a more visible representative for both Indonesian and Korean diplomacy. On January 27, 2020, she was formally hosted at the Korean embassy in Jakarta by the Korean ambassador, recognizing her unique, hybrid ambassadorial role. Inversely, Ayana completed her first *umroh* in November 2019 through the auspices of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, even though she is not a citizen (Figure 4).

Indonesia appears to be an example of a country where Korea's cultural export strategy has succeeded. SM Entertainment Group, the powerhouse studio credited with promoting Korean TV and musical content, opened an office in Jakarta in 2018 dedicated to facilitating fan relations. Korean dramas and music offer Indonesians a world that is predominantly feminine, populated by female stars, androgynous male stars, and female fans. Yet, as Bart Barendregt and Lusvita Nuzuliyanti have argued (2018), K Pop in particular has created a genre of fandom in Indonesia that feeds a sense



Figure 4: “Marriage booklet...No! Vaccination booklet.”
Ayana’s preparation for *umroh* in 2019 (Moon 2019a).

of feminine community, with fans reinforcing their devotion to their stars and each other. Co-opting the language of religion itself, fans refer to visiting Korea as pilgrimages, borrowing the terminology of religious achievement (using the terms *hajj* and *ziarah*), and view their affection for secular performance as consistent with their own piety. Indonesian religious tourism companies increasingly offer tours to Korea, in addition to the Middle East and Turkey, adding Korea to a global circuit of sacred leisure destinations. Conversely, the growing Indonesian diaspora in Korea has produced a large secondary market for Indonesian Muslim preachers who can earn substantial honoraria meeting with Indonesian expatriates.



Figure 5: One of Ayana’s first photographic introductions as a “Korean Muslim,” (Moon 2017).

Yet Ayana's popularity complicates that interpretation. She is neither a singer nor an actor. Rather, her appeal lies in the idea that she ostensibly rejected much of what Korean modernity offers. She describes how, as a teenager, she read as much as she could about Islam and the Middle East, finding it difficult to access resources from Seoul. She found Islam a soothing release from the stress of education and Korea's competitive culture. Using the Internet, she quickly found herself drawn to photos of women in hijab and was more enthusiastic about the Indonesian styles than those she saw in Iran or elsewhere (TRANS7 OFFICIAL 2018). She became interested in Indonesian pious celebrities, such as Dian Pelangi and Ria Miranda, as icons of pious beauty. These women later facilitated her introduction to the selebgram universe. After secretly applying for and winning a university scholarship for study at University Teknologi Malaysia, she informed her parents she would be moving there. Their dismay was founded, she says, in her secret conversion to Islam at 16, following nine years of curiosity and study. She describes Korea as an "atheist" society where Islamophobia is widespread, making Islam her first and only religion. Unable to wear a hijab in high school, she was determined to follow through with her plans to study abroad even though her parents refused to support her financially, in an attempt to force her to rethink her conversion. In spite of the ease with which she privately converted, she says she did not fully feel Muslim until she was able to begin wearing a hijab, and that was only after she began living in a majority Muslim country. She credits Islam with transforming her personality from fragile and "sensitive" to now confident and "positive" (Hijrahfest Official 2019).

The affordances of beauty and fashion

Ayana's hijrah has therefore involved much more than a simple conversion story, but rather a transformation entailing religious and cultural training. She continues to study Arabic and Indonesian, placing her fascination with Indonesia in the same field as her attraction to Islam. Indonesian talent scouts invited her to visit Indonesia in 2017, following the release of photos and videos of her in Malaysia wearing hanbok and hijab together (Figure 5). In 2018 she replaced Inneke Koeshawati as a Wardah brand ambassador,

a celebrity known for having “converted” from young sexy actress to covered mother. The other Wardah sisters (*kakak/adik*) welcomed her into their social media circuit in a series of coordinated, friendly events, including domestic trips and celebrating *lebaran* with Dian Pelangi’s extended family (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Ayana celebrating *eid* Indonesian style in 2018, at Dian Pelangi’s family home (Moon 2018a).

Wardah’s late 2020 lush brand video commemorating the company’s 25th anniversary emphasized its hybrid global and Indonesian orientation with the theme “Your Beauty is Ready to Face the World” (WardahBeauty 2020). In it, the ambassadors appear as tourists in Indonesia and around the world and perform as scientists in Wardah’s Jakarta laboratories. Ayana appears strolling through a traditional Korean neighborhood wearing hanbok and hijab (Figure 7). Dian Pelangi appears taking a bow at the end of her New York Fashion Week show in 2019.



Figure 7: Ayana appearing as a 2020 Wardah ambassador in Korea. “Hello world, what’s new with you?” (WardahBeauty 2020)

In describing her fascination with Ayana’s journey, my friend Dinny particularly admired Ayana’s humility about her beauty, “Her face is already instantly popular because she has the Korean style of beauty that Indonesian women love, but it is only prettier with hijab,” she added, reinforcing the popular position that Indonesian women enhance their beauty by covering. “It’s like she has the best of both! She has struggled, but she appears flawless.” Many of the comments on Ayana’s social media posts simply exclaim “You are so beautiful!” What Alvaro Jarrin (2017) describes as the affective transformation that beauty industries promise applies well here, highlighting how soft power initiatives have exported Korean bodily aesthetics along with beauty products. Embodied and intimate, beauty underscores the material and immaterial qualities of longing for transformation that Ayana illustrates. Her Instagram posts signal her awareness of this fascination and regularly explain that her appearance is the result of spiritual commitment rather than cosmetic intervention. In one Instagram post from 2018, she reminded fans that her natural eye color is brown, that she only wears tinted lenses for “work,” and that her skin seemed to be lightening as a result of wearing a jilbab and covered clothing (Figure 8). This is in spite of the fact

that one of Wardah's primary lines is called White Secret. If soft power can involve strategic uses of femininity, it is helpful to consider that Wardah's chosen look for Ayana is the makeup line which the company's branding calls, in English, *soft* and *flawless*. In Wardah's brand palette, softness refers to pastel-colored clothing and makeup colors that emphasize perfection in the form of pale skin and pink lip colors. It contrasts with some of the darker colors in their broader palette but is also, according to the company's former head of PR, their most popular color scheme (Oktavia, personal communication, July 31, 2017). The softness of the highly polished and almost monochromatic faces in the promotional aesthetic echoes similar features in the Korean beauty industry, projecting a story of religious moderation (*wasatiyah*) through luminous, flawless femininity.⁴



Figure 8: Muslim dress enhancing soft, pale, flawless beauty (Moon 2018b).

The narrative progression linking hijrah with pastel softness is especially apparent in a series of interviews Wardah produced in 2019. In them, Ayana was interviewed by Dewi Sandra, a fellow Wardah brand ambassador also known for her hijrah from the world of entertainment and for her cosmopolitan upbringing as the daughter of a British father and Indonesian mother. Sandra's pre-hijrah image as a hip hop and R&B singer who favored dark colors and bold bodily performances. Sandra frequently speaks at religious festivals alongside preachers such as Felix Siauw. In the Wardah

interviews, both Sandra and Ayana wear Wardah’s distinctive pale blues and meet in a pastel-hued café (WardahBeauty 2019). The conversation unfolds in a mix of Indonesian and English, while Sandra invites Ayana to share her hijrah story and her dreams about a possible future Indonesian husband while tasting Indonesian sweets. As Ayana compares each dish to its Korean parallel, Sandra announces that Ayana has become a “real Indonesian.” By professing a taste for Indonesian food, gratitude for her Wardah sisters, and enthusiasm for modest fashion, she appears as a beautiful curiosity, converting Indonesian fascination with Korean culture into a figure who adores Indonesia (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Dewi Sandra interviews Ayana about her *hijrah* and her taste for Indonesian food (Moon 2019b).

Ayana’s charm, however, is more than simply a goal for others to achieve, but rather an example of how hard yet rewarding religious transformation can be. Her conversion is therefore a mix of glamour and suffering, eliciting from her fans both admiration and sympathy. If, as Talal Asad (1996) has argued, conversions are not simply about changing religions but about “converting to modernity” itself, we might rethink the urge to read her account as simply an example of syncretic hybridity. Her conversion story appeals as an inversion. Attempting to acquire fluency in a new national

setting, even while remaining a “proud Korean,” reorients the apparent hierarchy of Korea as a more advanced society than Indonesia. Indeed, although she is beginning to develop business relationships in Korea, her income is largely based on commercial relationships and consumer devotion in Indonesia. To quote Dinny again, “She has suffered such hardship. Her parents rejected her. She is still struggling to learn Indonesian and speaks with such a cute Korean accent.” Conversion here entails more than religious change. The fantasy of joining a “translocal community of co-religionists” through conversion (Keane 2006, 114) also entails training oneself into a new habitus and new tastes, themselves sensory acts of translation. One of the consistent crowd-pleasers in her frequent television interviews in Indonesia is her impulsive exclamation of “Masya Allah!” to which her interviewers or fans respond in kind, situating them in a call and response community of fellow travelers on a journey to religious competency. Her vlogs on YouTube convey the small delights and challenges of navigating daily life in Seoul as a Muslimah. She shares videos of her shopping, doing laundry, and cooking, allowing her followers to witness the pleasure of mastering a set of skills and rules that are familiar to them but not to her. She is also active in lobbying for more halal business, more prayer rooms, and more mosques in Seoul. Celebrating her first Ramadan outside of Indonesia in 2020, she described the difficulty of finding halal food and remaining healthy, which followers repeatedly describe as “inspiring.” These examples elicit a pleasurable reversal by making Indonesians authorities in pious practice, a delight, given their frequent dismissal by Arab religious authorities as lax. Further, displaying the inconvenience of living a pious life in a non-Islamic environment doubly mediates her foreignness, downplaying her Korean-ness in favor of her Muslim-ness. This, in turn, can motivate even more religious commitment. As Dinny explained, if Ayana can fast under such difficult conditions, certainly “I should be able to do it, too. We should try to support her from afar.”

These examples prompt us to revisit how the worlds of beauty and fashion generate particular affordances in the broader persuasion of dakwah. Rather than ask whether or not commodification and dakwah can coexist, Ayana’s conversion highlights how they work together. Her story is equal

parts discovery of a new life philosophy through Islam and attraction to the beauty and elegance of modest fashion displayed on the glamorous social media celebrities whose company she now keeps. Conversion and cosmopolitanism emerge as partners in the fantasy of a world of followers. Fashion's own foundation in the production and circulation of fantasies of self-expression makes it especially amenable to the promise of a radically remade self. Similarly, her points of inspiration reinforce a narrative prominent among Indonesian modest fashion designers that creative and divine inspiration are not contradictory processes, and that self-cultivation through creativity is a form of worship (*dzikir*) itself.



Figure 10: Big sister Ayana welcoming her younger brother into Indonesian Islam, signaling a new coronation (Moon 2020a).

Ayana's story, therefore, illustrates to Indonesian fans of pious celebrities that appearances are a fundamental and legitimate component of their religious practice. They may feel this is a fact, but in the dense and vibrant context of Indonesian media life, they also face skepticism about their sincerity in being visibly pious (Jones 2010). Visible piety remains semiotically ambiguous, appealing to some yet threatening or even sinful to others because of its potential for ostentatious display (*riya'*; Husein 2017). Ayana's enthusiasm for Islam and Indonesia, via her enjoyment of modest

fashion, is therefore in dialogue with a nostalgic strain of Indonesian public culture which claims that earlier generations of reformist youth who courageously “converted” to a religion in which they had been raised in the face of parental disapproval (Brenner 1996) were more sincere practitioners of *dakwah* than the current generation whose fashionable motivations are presumed to be superficial. Further, her apparent lack of self-consciousness about her beauty reinforces a preference among fans of modest fashion that modesty is both technical, as in covered, and characterological, as in humility. Her convert’s enthusiasm for perfecting her comportment informs her celebrity charm, reminding her followers that the parallel promotional logics undergirding advertising and proselytization can be harmonious.

Perhaps no detail persuades Ayana’s fans of her commitment to *dakwah* more than the fact that her high-school-aged brother Aydin converted to Islam in March 2019. He fasted with her during Ramadan 2020 and appears in many of her Instagram photos. Like her, he has begun to adopt small aesthetic changes that suggest his version of Islam will be Indonesian in flavor, including a *peci* hat, *baju koko* and the occasional sarong (Figure 10). These appear as tools akin to her own modest dress in assisting in the much more complex aspect of conversion that requires new subject formation. In displaying that process publicly, literally *sharing* the experience of discovery, proselytization and the pleasure of creating new aesthetic and affective arenas coalesce in the figure of the transnational convert. Digital mediation may have facilitated the debates about piety and sincerity in Indonesia, but it is also unsurprisingly harnessed as an antidote to those same debates. This context has produced the conditions in which a figure like Ayana becomes uniquely compelling, linking pity for her short-term suffering to admiration for her new wealth, beauty, and fame.

Celebrity access to the foreign thus complicates who and what now counts as centers and peripheries, in part by focusing our analytical gaze on femininity. While foreignness in this arena can be mined, the act of creating new resemblances may also require new domestications. As Ayana herself blushing admits in interviews, she receives frequent marriage proposals on social media inviting her to settle down with

an Indonesian husband for an Indonesian future, an option she has so far declined. Considered in the history of regional genres of power, figures like Ayana suggest a new kind of “stranger-queen,” an outsider whose potency relies on her ability to refuse full domestication. This form demands she preserve her foreignness while smilingly facing her Indonesian fans. As much as Ayana savors Indonesian Islam, and as much as Indonesian Muslims enjoy her love of them, she may ultimately hold a mirror up to Indonesia itself more than to the world (Figure 10).

Considering the role of the foreign in these aesthetic projects prompts other questions. If piety requires access to the cosmopolitan, what aesthetic logics become untranslatable? Whose expressions do not make sense in a landscape of visual dakwah? Whose fantasies no longer fit in an affective universe that demands display? Whose versions of modesty refuse to be made visible?

They may not be on social media and they may not be spectacular, but they may be just as pleasurable.



Figure 11: Ayana’s green room, behind the scenes shooting Wardah video content and professing her love of Indonesia (Moon 2020b).

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Notes

¹ Notably, being marked as foreign does not always confer attractive allure in Indonesia. For example, critics of Habib Rizieq Shihab, leader of the hardline Islamic Defenders Front, argue that he is out of touch with authentic Indonesian religious tastes, in spite of his large following. Ethnicity also figures in the dismissal of other others in Indonesia, most evident in the complex erasure and stigmatization of Chinese Indonesians who have been required to assimilate through taking on Indonesian family names and generally de-emphasizing their difference, even if they have converted to Islam. Relatedly and tellingly, converts from regions of Indonesia that are considered essentially other, such as Papua, do not experience the same degree of adoring celebrity, suggesting that their otherness is less available for a kind of domestication that rests on admiration.

² As Kenneth George (2009) and Webb Keane (2018) each argue, facility with Qur’anic Arabic in Indonesia is both an appealing medium for worship and an anxious site for potentially mishandling sacred language.

³ Pham describes designers in the US and Europe as co-opting distinct minority aesthetics that are the result of precise histories of oppression, such as dreadlocks or blackface, for collections that feature white models and gain cachet for appearing to be diverse.

⁴ While whiteness resonates at least partly here with racial difference, and hence foreignness, as Ayu Saraswati argues (2013), whiteness in Indonesian conceptions of beauty should not be confused with a longing for Euro-American racial identity. Rather, the fact that Indonesian categories of beauty have shifted over time from a classically romantic preference for yellow skin to lighter skin tones should be read as signifiers for cosmopolitanity in general.