

MEDIA RELEASE*For immediate release***MULTINATIONAL NOMINATION FOR THE INSCRIPTION OF KEBAYA ONTO THE
UNESCO REPRESENTATIVE LIST OF THE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF
HUMANITY**

Singapore, 23 November 2022 – Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand will be jointly nominating *kebaya* for inscription onto the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity. *Kebaya* is a traditional form of women’s dress in the region, which became highly fashionable at the turn of the 20th century, and continues to be worn today. It is, in essence, a long-sleeved open-fronted upper garment traditionally made from a variety of fabrics and often known for being adorned with intricate embroidery. This would mark Singapore’s first multinational nomination¹, and the first multinational nomination involving the four countries.

2. The idea of the multinational nomination of *kebaya* was proposed and coordinated by Malaysia, and discussed as part of a series of working meetings amongst a number of countries in 2022. Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand agreed to work together on this multinational nomination as *kebaya* represents and celebrates the region’s rich shared history, promotes cross-cultural understanding, and continues to be present and actively produced and worn by many communities across Southeast Asia. The multinational nomination also presents an opportunity for countries to promote and celebrate this shared cultural heritage found in the region and promote mutual understanding and international collaboration between countries. The four participating countries welcome other countries to join this multinational nomination.

3. Ms Chang Hwee Nee, Chief Executive Officer of the National Heritage Board (NHB), Singapore, said, “*Kebaya* has been, and continues to be, a central aspect in the representation and display of cultural heritage and identity for Malay, Peranakan and other communities in Singapore, and is an integral part of our heritage as a multicultural port city, with links across Southeast Asia and the world. The multinational nomination underscores this multiculturalism and our common roots with the region, and acknowledges the knowledge, artisanal skills and socio-cultural values associated with *kebaya*. We hope that the nomination will also generate

¹ The inscription of Singapore’s Hawker Culture on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2020 was a single-country nomination.

greater interest and pride in the making and wearing of *kebaya* across different communities and generations in Singapore.”

4. The four countries aim to submit the nomination file to UNESCO in March 2023, and the result is expected to be announced in end 2024.

Shared History and Significance of *Kebaya*

5. *Kebaya* represents a significant part of Singapore’s Malay and port city heritage, and reflects the unique blend of cultures in Southeast Asia. *Kebaya*-wearing communities take pride in their own sewing and embroidering styles, passed down through the generations. *Kebaya* designs demonstrate a blending of cultures, for example, traditional Javanese motifs and *batik* patterns such as the *kawung* (palm fruit), or motifs from Malay, Chinese, Indian and European traditions, be they flowers and animals, mythical creatures, or figurative elements. *Kebaya* is also worn in a variety of ways. It could be long or short, and paired with lower garments such as a *kain* (a long piece of rectangular cloth wrapped and tucked around the waist) or *sarong* (a stitched, tubular skirt), and is usually secured with either *kerongsang* (brooch), pins or buttons. In short, *kebaya* is a microcosm of the melting pot of cultures and craft traditions in the region and in Singapore.

6. In Singapore, *kebaya* is worn as casual wear and on both festive or formal occasions, such as Hari Raya Puasa, Lunar New Year, Deepavali, and at important rites of passage such as weddings, at parties and events. It featured strongly in popular culture in the mid-20th century, for example, in Malay-language films and popular music from the era, where fashionable leading actresses and performers frequently wore *kebaya*. Today, it still features in traditional performing art forms such as *Dikir Barat*², *Dondang Sayang*³ and *Wayang Peranakan*⁴; and has also been presented in contemporary theatre productions such as *Emily of Emerald Hill*.

7. There is an active community of makers and wearers of *kebaya* in Singapore and they continue to share and pass on the knowledge, skills and cultural meaning related to the making and wearing of *kebaya* – a form of intangible cultural heritage – from one generation to another,

² A performing art form - traditionally a choral ensemble - practised by the Malay community in Singapore.

³ A musical and poetic art form, involving the singing of *pantun*, or four-line verses.

⁴ A theatre form that was derived from *bangsawan*, a form of Malay theatre, in the early 20th century.

ensuring that the significance and practice of *kebaya* remain relevant. These include the embroidery styles and stitching techniques cherished by the different communities, as well as the practices associated with the wearing of *kebaya*.

8. Mdm Ratianah Tahir, local craftsperson of *kebaya* and *sulam* (embroidery), and a designer-tailor at the boutique store *Kebaya By Ratianah*, said, “I am delighted. The nomination would create greater awareness of *kebaya* on a global stage and encourage me in my efforts in cultivating appreciation and preservation of our shared heritage. It gives me the greatest form of satisfaction, seeing all ages, especially the young, donning the *kebaya*. It is an honour for me to contribute, albeit small part on my end, as I believe that the *kebaya* is a symbol of our multinational identity regardless of who we are and where we are from.”

Support of Singaporeans required for Successful Nomination

9. UNESCO will evaluate the nomination file collectively submitted by all four participating countries, and focus on aspects such as:

- How the nominated element is aligned with UNESCO’s definition of intangible cultural heritage;
- How the existing and future safeguarding measures in each of the participating countries ensure the promotion and transmission of the practice; and
- How the nomination effort has involved the participation of the community (or communities) in each of the participating countries.

10. Specific to Singapore, NHB has held six focus group discussions in August and October 2022 to seek views and information relating to the social and cultural significance of *kebaya* to relevant communities, as well as on the multinational nomination. The focus group discussions were attended by 48 participants comprising cultural practitioners, representatives from cultural associations and researchers involved in the making and wearing of *kebaya*, and all participants had expressed their support for the multinational nomination.

11. Mr Heath Yeo, local craftsperson of *kebaya* and *sulam*, said, “*Kebaya* means a lot to me as a maker and embroiderer, and making a *kebaya* requires a lot of hard work – from preparation to design, sewing to embroidery, all the way up to completion. Every *kebaya* is created layer by layer from start to completion, a labour of love involving meticulous and hard work. To me, *kebaya* can be likened to a lady of grace with her unique identity, uniting cultures

and races. She embodies strength and yet is delicate at the same time. Born out of a beautiful blend of East and West, she attracts attention whenever she is seen, and I hope that a successful inscription will present an international stage for her and allow her to shine for the world to see and admire.”

12. NHB has also begun discussions with stakeholders on possible future safeguarding measures. As part of the preparation efforts for the nomination, NHB and several community representatives from Singapore attended a workshop organised by Malaysia in Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan from 1 to 3 November 2022, joining community and government representatives from other countries. Participants of the workshop discussed the cultural significance of *kebaya* and the information that will be included in the multinational nomination file.

13. Beyond the preparation of the nomination file, NHB will also organise public outreach initiatives featuring *kebaya* in January to March 2023, leading up to the submission of the nomination file in end March 2023. Through these efforts, we hope to promote a greater appreciation of *kebaya* and generate awareness of the nomination effort. More details on the public outreach initiatives will be shared on NHB’s website (<https://go.gov.sg/kebaya-nomination>) and social media channels (Facebook: NationalHeritageBoardSG, Instagram: @nhbsg) at a later date.

14. For more information, please refer to:

- Article on *kebaya* in NHB’s national inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage <https://www.roots.gov.sg/ich-landing/ich/Kebaya>;
- **Annex A:** About the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity; and
- **Annex B:** UNESCO’s assessment criteria for nominations for the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

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About the National Heritage Board, Singapore

The National Heritage Board (NHB) was formed on 1 August 1993. As the custodian of Singapore's heritage, NHB is responsible for telling the Singapore story, sharing the Singaporean experience and imparting our Singapore spirit.

NHB's mission is to preserve and celebrate the shared heritage of our diverse communities, for the purpose of education, nation-building and cultural understanding. It manages the national museums and heritage institutions, and sets policies relating to heritage sites, monuments and the National Collection. Through the National Collection, NHB curates heritage programmes and presents exhibitions to connect the past, present and future generations of Singaporeans. NHB is a statutory board under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. Please visit www.nhb.gov.sg for more information.

About the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

The UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity comprises the diverse cultural practices and expressions of humanity, and seeks to raise awareness of the importance of such practices and expressions, encourage dialogue that respects cultural diversity, as well as give due recognition to the practices and expressions of communities worldwide.

The successful listing of an element on UNESCO's Representative List by a country does not imply that this element belongs to, originates from, or exists only in the submitting country. Since the Representative List was developed in 2008, a total of 530 intangible cultural heritage elements have been inscribed as of November 2022.

Some of the intangible cultural heritage elements on UNESCO's Representative List include Hawker culture in Singapore, community dining and culinary practices in a multicultural urban context (2020), *Yeongdeunghoe*, lantern lighting festival in the Republic of Korea (2020), Craftsmanship of mechanical watchmaking and art mechanics (a multinational nomination by Switzerland and France; 2020), and Nordic clinker boat traditions (a multinational nomination by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden; 2021).

UNESCO's Assessment Criteria for Nominations onto the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

Based on UNESCO's requirements for nomination, the submitting State(s) Party(ies) is (are) requested to demonstrate in its(their) nomination file, that an element proposed for inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity satisfies all of the following criteria:

- **Criterion 1:** The element constitutes intangible cultural heritage as defined in the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.
- **Criterion 2:** Inscription of the element will contribute to ensuring visibility and awareness of the significance of the intangible cultural heritage and to encouraging dialogue, thus reflecting cultural diversity worldwide and testifying to human creativity.
- **Criterion 3:** Safeguarding measures are elaborated that may protect and promote the element.
- **Criterion 4:** The element has been nominated following the widest possible participation of the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned and with their free, prior and informed consent.
- **Criterion 5:** The element is included in an inventory of the intangible cultural heritage present in the territory(ies) of the submitting State(s) Party(ies), as defined in the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.