Materializing piety: 
Gendered anxieties about faithful consumption in contemporary urban Indonesia

ABSTRACT
Islamic consumption promises to correct the ills of consumption yet relies on the logic of consumption for its appeal. Fashionably pious women in Indonesia have become figures of concern, suspected of being more invested in the material, and hence superficial, world than their virtuous appearances suggest. Arguing that consumption and religion are interdependent systems of faith, I show that women bear unusual semiotic burdens at the borders of materiality and piety. This approach reveals how pious Indonesian women must frame acts of pious consumption as disavowals of consumption and as expressions of beauty and modesty. [materiality, piety, Indonesia, gender, Islam, consumption, fashion]
dress. Through the consumption of particular goods, pious Indonesian Muslims enact ethical lives, both to themselves and to others. Their pursuit of an Islamic lifestyle through consumption differs from and parallels other forms of religious devotion and materiality, relying on faith and virtue for its value.

In this article, I argue that ethnographic analysis of the rise of Indonesian Islamic public culture calls for a feminist reading of the borders between piety and materiality. As the accounts I share show, public debates and private decisions about religious devotion and the form that piety takes are gendered. Neither sober and ascetic nor sacred and inalienable (Weiner 1992), pious commodities and the people who use them defy discrete conceptions of materiality and piety by constructing virtue through, rather than outside of, consumption. The overproduction and circulation of piously marked goods, especially to women, increasingly frame the path to piety through consumption, yet this route is also devalued as vain and superficial. Mass-produced and circulated pious fashions associated with feminized middle-class consumers thus make claims to virtue through modesty and beauty that are also disavowed on these same grounds. The anxieties I trace about faithful consumption show how rejections of materiality must still take material form and how this restriction differently entangles gendered subjects.

At least two Indonesian critiques of Islamic fashion reveal their gendered foundations and conundrums: first, that Islamic fashion merely caters to consumption as usual, a form of enchantment and frivolous self-decoration that differs little from other forms of commodity fetishism to which women are unusually susceptible; and, second, that women who proclaim a pious identity through stylish dress are not as devout as they might appear. Rather than reducing objects to mute tools in the service of human agency or to animated fetishes that occlude the brutality and banality of capital, I analyze the appeal and anxieties surrounding the rise of busana Muslim (or Muslim dress) in Indonesia as “mere fashion,” and, by extension, ask how scholars might better understand the borders between gender, materiality, and piety. Through ethnographic analysis of women’s personal dress narratives, combined with analysis of public narratives about the social effects of Islamic dress drawn from fashion magazines, fashion designers, and Islamic guidance books for women readers, I argue that debates about the commodification of piety, its transformation into material form for exchange value, and its popular adoption by consumers who use pious goods to enact and declare spiritual states reveal the gendered borders of the relationship between two parallel and interdependent systems of faith: consumption and religion.

Self-presentation is an incitement to believe, an act of faith, on the part of both the self under presentation and, more broadly, a type or figure who circulates in popular representations. Whether explicitly secular or religious, representations traffic in faith in ways that generate the conditions for their own potential critique, raising the specter of illusion, concealment, or deception, what Webb Keane (2007) has called “insincerity.” When the topic is religious, the stakes for perceived insincerity can be high, which makes piety an even more appealing path. In this sense, devotion and consumption not only share qualities but also are dynamically coupled, each hinging on and promising to resolve problems posed by the other. Their overlapping claims to faith, and their specters, are amplified in the classed and gendered context of feminized mass
consumption but are also unique to Islamic and Indonesian conversations about faith.

Understanding the ethical problems pious feminine consumption poses requires attention to feminist histories and theories of consumption that trace how, as Susan Stewart has argued, consumer acts marked as trivial are “cast from the center of authenticity, sincerity, consensus” (1993:173). Although I show that this effect is common in accounts of mass commodification, the appeal of faithful consumption for many of the women I know and the related private and public conversations about its sincerity have a particularly Indonesian valence marked by a fascination with concealment, transparency, and revelation that precedes and exceeds the religious domain. James Siegel has described a sense of falsity as pervasive during the Suharto New Order period (1965–98), an environment in which signs were “as likely to mislead as not” (1998:55). This atmosphere partially enhanced the appeal of Islamic ethics for individual citizens during the regime and fed debates about the regime’s authenticity in its aftermath. Anne Meneley’s (2007:236) description of the role of dress in public spaces in Yemen, where “chic chadors” can generate both protections and inequalities, resonates in the Indonesian case. Clothes that are intentionally fashionable and that also involve cover are squarely situated at the nexus of signs that traffic in twinned promises and anxieties.

In arguing that both religion and consumption share traits that emphasize revelation and faith, I do not mean to suggest that they are somehow equally fraudulent or deceptive. Rather, I intend the opposite, suggesting that social theoretical inquiries into consumption and devotion share a concern about concealment and sincerity that sometimes overlaps with both literalist and liberal religious commentary in Indonesia. Much of the social theoretical critique of commodification shares a modernist skepticism evident in descriptions of both religion and consumption as forms of false consciousness (Marx 1977) or enchantment (Veblen 1922; Weber 2003), conditions that could be overcome through greater revelation of the true nature of material or social relations. In the case of women’s pious and fashionable dress in Indonesia, conversations about the meaning of religiously appropriate yet often highly decorated and increasingly expensive dress also reveal a fascination with combining both systems of faith into signs of attractive, up-to-date modesty. Thus, the same space that grounds the appeal of faith also founds its ambivalence, making revelation an appealing solution in each system and creating the conditions for the need, invention, and success of items like the mukena terkecil.

Such conversations also reveal, as Talal Asad (1986) has argued, that although “Islam” is never a single ontological category, aspirations to coherence and clarity allow the term to be associated with diverse discursive practices and can come from many quarters: scholarly, theological, political, and capitalist. As Asad asserts, “The attempt by Islamic traditions to organize memory and desire in a coherent manner is increasingly remade by the social forces of industrial capitalism, which creates conditions favorable to very different patterns of desire and forgetfulness” (1986:16–17). Taking those projects of desire and coherence seriously includes addressing debates about “practitioners’ conceptions of what is apt performance” (Asad 1986:15). Tellingly, the feminine frequently emerges as a potent symbol in these conceptions. Accounts of how women themselves deal with debates about apt performances reveal a focus on reclaiming modesty and beauty as forms of virtue rather than of vanity.

Religious and political pasts

“You do realize, don’t you, that all these women wearing jilbabs [fitted headscarves] are just doing it for the fashion? It is a trend now. Islam is just a symbol [symbol] to them,” my friend Mita, a 26-year-old woman who does not wear a jilbab, complained one day in 2000 as we drove past a group of young women in colorful Islamic dress. A decade later, women continue to express concerns like Mita’s, as illustrated by comments from Aeshya, a 35-year-old woman who is known for her flamboyant piety and who buys as many as seven headscarves a week. Complaining about what she considered a pretentious version of Islamic dress that appeared to critique the fashionable Islamic styles, she said, “If you see these teenagers with the exaggerated, plain, oversized jilbabs that go to the knees, that are so out of date, we can respect them but in my opinion that is not genuine witnessing [syiar]. They make Islam look rigid, unfashionable, whereas in fact our God likes beauty” (conversation with author, August 8, 2008).

Although expressing individual opinions, Mita and Aeshya were both echoing common interpretations of Islamic dress in Indonesia. Their commentary on contemporary Islamic consumption comes out of a history of Islamic reform in Indonesia that began in the 1980s. Indonesia is the largest majority-Muslim country in the world, but during the heady consumerist period of the Suharto New Order regime and the following decade, Islam came to occupy a new public prominence. Between the regime’s near total grasp on political dissent and its association with material excess and corruption, Islam became a safe and appealing space from which urban, middle-class youth could propose an alternative, universal, and morally superior critique of their parents’ generation while connecting to a global Islamic revival (Brenner 1996; Hefner 2000; Smith-Hefner 2007). Significantly, the early years of this movement were in some ways antimaterialist, philosophically and economically. In addition, official antipathy toward organized Islam during the New Order translated into limited success for explicitly Muslim businesses (Hefner
Young people associated with the movement, especially female college students, were visible for their adoption of foreign-looking Islamic dress that was intentionally undecorated. Islam thus enjoyed a unique moral stance until the last ten years or so, appearing to be outside of consumerism, corruption, and politics.

The fashion landscape in contemporary Indonesia suggests a significant change from the New Order period. A distinctive fashion season now cycles around Ramadhan and Eid, a sumptuous Islamic fashion-magazine market is increasingly crowded and competitive, and designers who once eschewed Islamic dress because of its lower-class stigma now have dedicated lines for their Islami clientele. Indonisia regularly hosts the Islamic Fashion Festival, angling to make the country a center of Islamic fashion for the Muslim world. In the process, those promoting these developments imagine that a unified “Muslim world” exists, that Indonesia could have a respected voice in it, and that fashion and Islam are not antithetical. As one newspaper review of the 2007 fashion festival observed, “The festival is a footstep into the fashion industry which, like it or not, has iron laws that must be followed, such as being capable of constantly producing new fashions, especially if the festival claims to be global” (Pambudty 2007).

Scholars of Southeast Asia have interpreted the blend of Islam and capitalism in urban Indonesia as a locally specific expression of self-improvement (Gade 2004), corporatism (Fealy 2008; Hoestery 2008), or neoliberalism (Rudnyckyj 2009). The literature builds on a regional history in which Islam and commerce have been profoundly interwoven, rather than mutually exclusive. What Anthony Reid (1993) called a “religious revolution” occurred first in Indonesia during the 13th century when Islam arrived with Hadrami traders to the archipelago (cf. Ho 2006). More recently, the popularity and critique of Islamic consumer culture is apparent in a number of arenas, reflected, for instance, in the boom in ustades, or preachers, especially via mass media and related business empires. One figure of popular anxiety in the archipelago indexes the relationship between Islam and commerce. The Pak Haji (Mr. Haji), a man who turns wealth into piety and piety into wealth, often as a moneylender, is a long-standing figure of ambivalence, revered in the community but also considered grasping (cf. Darmadi 2009). Ambivalence about pious wealth is also evident in the opposing figure of the poor woman, which Johan Lindquist (2004) has argued is central to the protections Islamic piety promises politically and economically marginalized and feminized migrant workers on the island of Batam. As Lindquist shows, women who use pious symbols are also widely perceived as deceptive because of the widespread drug and sex industries on the island.

Questions about the legibility of pious symbols hint at a deeper anxiety about concealment and truth, which is particularly Indonesian but is also evident in more global and general concerns about commodification and about Islamic textual interpretation. Islamic hermeneutics have long identified a difference between surface (zahir) and depth (batin), a distinction that correlates with outer and inner devotion. Analyzing recent social panics over blasphemy in Indonesia and in imagined, global Islamic publics, Kenneth George (2009) has argued that attention to artistic and visual production as ethical practice reveals particular concerns about legibility, especially by literalist reformists whose interests become amplified, and can lead to demands for special handling of sacred language. The concerns I trace suggest that related, and specifically gendered, anxieties appear at the other end of the process, consumption.

Thrills and concerns about pious consumption have therefore generated parallel morality tales from opposite ends of the political spectrum in Indonesia. On the one hand, religious conservatives argue that the popularity of pious dress allows women to perform an identity that is not a true reflection of their behavior or inner condition. On the other hand, urban intellectuals and liberal critics argue that pious fashions are evidence of women’s predictable, shallow, and vain attraction to new forms of self-decoration. Although these critiques come from very different social and political quarters in Indonesia, each occupies a moral space, either explicitly religious, suggesting that piously dressed women are not as pious as they appear, or secular, arguing that piously dressed women are victims of commodity fetishism. Further, both critiques assume that individual agency is total, either completely absent or completely present, rather than itself a constructed effect of these debates. Neither of these critiques addresses how women might borrow from the authority of a discourse of consumer choice or of Islam to position themselves as controlling their choices.

In identifying these ambivalences, this article joins a growing literature asking how religiosity and consumption intersect, much of which shares the questions posed by theological and critical discourse in Indonesia itself but which also interrogates the impulse to identify a single “Muslim consumer” (Fischer 2008; Starrett 1995). Johanna Pink has called for analyses of the “Islamization of consumption” (2009:xiv) to extend beyond the view of religious consumption as simply capitalism with a religious façade. The arguments Pink critiques position the effect of exchange on devotion as totalizing, either emptying authenticity or amplifying and concretizing it. Paul Silverstein describes one mode of French anxiety about difference that envisions “a capitalist Islam . . . [that] could purchase its beliefs on the free religious market” (2000:31) by transforming immigrant Muslim athletes into respectable, even heroic, citizens through their integration into public advertising. Political scientist Vali Nasr frames the consumption demands of a
global Islamic middle class (from the Middle East through Indonesia) as an economic counterbalance to China’s consumer power (2009:15) and asserts that business, rather than religion, is the seat for struggles over the “soul” of Islam (2009:8).\(^5\) Patrick Haenni (2005) has argued an opposite effect of consumption’s interface with religion, asserting that the intersection of the “market” and Islam creates, fixes, and distributes conservative interpretations of Islamic authority. In an equally concerned vein, Amrih Widodo, who has critically considered the rise of Indonesian Islamic popular fiction, asks, “Do they (Islamic writers) write for God or for money?” (2008), suggesting that the choice is mutually exclusive. Most of these scholars do not address the significance of gender in the hopeful or dismissive discourse around Islamic consumption, which Banu Gökarkısel (2009), analyzing the popularity of veiling fashion in contemporary Turkey, argues is essential to understanding the broader debate on the boundaries of secularism and piety.\(^6\)

The sheer popularity of Islamic consumer culture in Indonesia suggests that devotion and consumption are not irreconcilable and that, perhaps, instead, the dynamic relationship between these two arenas is what makes Islamic consumption more thrilling than its secular counterparts. As much research on Islamic piety has recently argued, Islamic “counterpublics” (Hirschkind 2006) involve subjective, aesthetic, and sensory practices that contradict a Habermasian delineation of secular public and pious private spheres (Salvatore 2000) or of subjectivity as the voluntary selection from a marketplace of equally positioned identities. Rather, power relations—transnational, national, and especially those classed and gendered—influence which categories of consumption can be framed as virtuous and which cannot.

**The comforts of piety**

Comments from a circle of friends in 2007 suggest how much Indonesians themselves link the reformist movement to the adoption of Islamic dress and to changes in styles. “I remember when I first started wearing a jilbab, I was a senior in high school [in 2000] . . . Remember how during the Suharto period jilbabs were banned?\(^7\) Jilbabs were really out of style [ketinggalan zaman]. I think they were banned because people were afraid they meant fundamentalis. But back then, it was also a statement [pernyataan].” Ratna reminisced with her friends Ning and Desi and me during a casual chat one afternoon. Desi interrupted, “Jilbabs were synonymous [identik dengar] with correct prayer. Today, prayer techniques are spotty and incomplete . . . There was a stigma that people who wore jilbabs must pray regularly and right, must be learned [alim], so people who didn’t know how to pray, who weren’t devout yet, weren’t so brave as to wear jilbabs.” Ratna added, “Now, lots of people wear jilbabs. It’s a trend.” Ning added, “It’s ironic, isn’t it? Jilbabs used to mean being behind the times, but really, it was they who were behind!” Ratna concluded, “I think it was around 2000 when jilbab style started to spread, don’t you? When all the celebrities started wearing them? That is when I took that seminar on ‘Correct and Trendy Jilbabs.’” Ning admired, “Wow, how diligent of you. Did you learn about halal makeup in the seminar?” Ratna responded, “Of course!” (conversation with author, August 10, 2007).

This conversation indexed several themes that mark discourse about fashion and piety in contemporary urban Indonesia. First, Ratna emphasized the before and after quality that is part of the historical narrative of Islamic dress in Indonesia, referencing the period in which it was politically and socially risky to adopt a publicly pious identity and the current moment in which it is much more acceptable if not fashionable. Second, the women described the past as a period that was not only behind the times in terms of awareness of styles (i.e., piety is always current, but women during the Suharto era were ignorant of this) but also as one in which people were more aware of pious discipline. Whereas Islamic dress has become more appealing, its value as a statement about the wearer has diminished. It is no longer safe, they asserted, to assume that a woman in a jilbab knows how to behave in the ways that Islamic dress once meant a wearer did. She may not even know how to pray. Third, ethical behavior entails attention to and study of style, suggesting that, for the women I know, consumption is one of the key ways through which to enact an ethical identity, yet it remains fraught because the path through which pious women are enjoined to enact piety is already framed as superficial. In what follows, I argue that responses to these concerns emphasize two qualities, beauty and modesty, as expressions consistent with piety.

Appreciating why and how style is a component of modesty in Islamic consumption may be difficult for those exposed to strong Western assumptions that one of the ways Islamic dress oppresses women is through its denial of freedom through fashion (Abu-Lughod 2002:785–786). Aesthetics were a consideration in sartorial decisions for the women I describe, often through both frugality and flamboyance as modes of publicly declaring and enacting virtue. The public nature of Islamic piety in contemporary Indonesia is apparent not only in women’s dress but also in accounts of women who reveal that the private experiences of piety are interpolated through public performance. Narratives about harassment or protection focus on the power of the jilbab to do something, to make women feel better, cocooned, comfortable. Saba Mahmood makes a related point in her argument about agency in the mosque movement in Cairo, arguing that women’s modest dress is central to corporeal techniques of pious self-regulation and
asserting that “the body is not a medium of signification but the substance and the necessary tool through which the embodied subject is formed” (2005:29). Part of that aesthetic project includes the material components of the embodied subject, particularly through dressing and addressing the body. Indeed, transforming the body in pleasing yet ethical ways seeks what Susan Osman, comparing the differences and similarities of beautifying the body in varying cultural and political contexts, calls an “in-between-ness” between the alluring lightness of beauty and the heaviness of the body, between “freedom and enclosures” (2002:155).

A component of that sensory delight comes from the pleasure of consumption, and the commodity form itself, which complicates discourse about correct modesty in contemporary Indonesia. To illustrate this tension, I turn to conversations, experiences, and instructions that suggest that commodities such as the mukena terkecil are a response to a particular set of needs that are formed in specific cultural and political conditions.

Hesti, a 28-year-old married mother of a three-year-old son, described her passion for flamboyant Islamic dress as an expression of her general interest in things aesthetic. Hesti was an instructor in graphic design at the state arts university. She and her husband were hoping to open an Islamic advertising agency in 2008, one that would refuse alcohol clients and that would offer an Islamic aesthetic, especially Arab-styled letters and colors. For Hesti, Islamic advertising agency in 2008, one that would refuse university. She and her husband were hoping to open an Islamic advertising agency in 2008, one that would refuse alcohol clients and that would offer an Islamic aesthetic, especially Arab-styled letters and colors. For Hesti, Islamic dress was, first and foremost, especially Arab-styled letters and colors. For Hesti, Islamic dress was, first and foremost, especially Arab-styled letters and colors.

Although the most important part of any narrative of religious awakening in this literature, often dubbed “chic lit Islami,” is the moment in which a young woman realizes her exposure and chooses to cover, much of it emphasizes the importance and challenges of finding the correct style for one’s persona, blending compliance with individual expression. Perhaps the most notable figure in this field is Asma Nadia, author of numerous compilations of young women’s first-person narratives about religious discovery and of men’s quotes describing the beauty of covered women. Two contrasting concerns track through these accounts, differentiating stylishness, which is consistent with conscious, intentional devotion, from trendiness, which drives unconscious and unreflective use of pious dress. First, authors attempt to correct the reputation that wearing Muslim dress, especially a headscarf, will mark a wearer as out of style, provincial, or tasteless, arguing that pious dress should, in fact, increase a wearer’s self-confidence and sense of beauty rather than the opposite. This concern marks much of the seminar industry around correct and attractive Muslim style, reminding jilbab-wearing women that they are not simply as beautiful as women who do not adopt Islamic dress but, in fact, are more beautiful. In these contexts, beauty is reclaimed from the realm of feminine vanity and harnessed to the world of piety, through reference to sermons and hadith that reiterate Allah’s love of beauty. One such seminar I attended, entitled “Self-Confidence with a Jilbab,” focused on interiorization of confidence, encouraging students to imagine themselves as “quality jilbabers” through “integrating principles of simplicity [kesederhanaan], honesty, and hard work” into an “ethic of success.” Strikingly, this process involved “developing a positive personality” via a flowchart of six steps that started with positive thinking and ended with modest dress.

A second concern addresses the possibility that someone might wear Islamic dress incorrectly or for the wrong reasons, even unconsciously. It appears in narratives that trace the secondary awakening that a young, covered woman experiences when she realizes she is still being too “trendy.” The author of one such narrative, F. Hacky Irawani, describes her experience of transitioning from high school to college thus:

I wore a jilbab, but not because I loved my jilbab . . . After a while, I came to enjoy wearing my jilbab. I noticed that jilbabs had become a trend. Everyone was wearing jilbabs, from jilbab gaul [lit. friendly jilbabs but also meaning overly sexy jilbabs] to actual jilbabs . . . So, whenever I went out, I still wore jeans with a trendy T-shirt that was in and tied my jilbab in the back. Not infrequently, because I was wearing a jilbab that was too small, my ponytail would come out or my hair would peak out. But hey, I was still wearing a jilbab! . . . In the end, I realized that wearing a jilbab is
required and not simply a matter of following a trend, so I modified my clothes ... Besides, who says wearing a jilbab isn’t stylish? Stylish doesn’t mean sexy, gals! [Nadia 2006:156–158]

Graphics often accompany these narratives, demonstrating the disappointment that comes from excessive trendiness and the happiness that comes with correct, but still stylish, comportment (see Figure 2). A young man named Rahman, quoted in a similar book, explained that piously dressed women are attractive because “jilbab women ... possess knowledge, because the majority of women who wear jilbabs really know the law on covering the aurat, which is why they wear a jilbab (except those who have some other intention or are only following a fashion trend)” (Nadia 2005:111).

One of the most striking themes that emerges from these narratives is the importance of coming to love the material form of Muslim dress, which reveals its role in reflexive relationships with an inner self. Confessional, diary-style entries that address one’s jilbab in the first person, such as “Salam Jilbab” or “Jilbabku” (My Jilbab), express a closeness with the object itself and longing and emptiness when unable to wear it. A young woman identified as Femmy describes how she felt pressure to take off her jilbab when at home, as is the norm when in the presence of kin, because her father and cousins considered Muslim dress pompous. After much teasing that wearing her casual but covered dress around the house made her look as if she was always about to go out, she stopped wearing her headscarf at home, only to feel that “I did miss my jilbab ... the snug feel of the pin below my chin ... the fold of cloth on my temples ... maybe I will just go buy another one, yah?” (Nadia 2005:15). These accounts resonate with Daniel Miller’s argument that the warmth and longing in human relationships, with the self and with others, take place through aesthetic relationships with things, relationships that are religious in the sense that they perform what Émile Durkheim (2001:159) described as the demanding yet comforting effects of society and tradition.

Aeshya, cited above, is a case in point. Aeshya’s style recalls Lizzy Van Leuwen’s description of her wealthy Jakarta informants’ worship, ibadah, through consumption. By surrounding oneself with beautiful things, one is “praising Allah by ... not wearing the same gold and diamond rings everyday” (Van Leuwen 1997:340). Aeshya, a Yogyakarta civil servant, embraces the superstylish approach to piety and finds extremely plain styles, especially oversized jilbabs that hang almost to the waist, pretentious. She sees no contradiction between her lifelong love of fashion and her sudden decision to adopt pious dress in 2002, much to the surprise and delight of her husband, although one of the reasons she avoided Islamic dress as long as she did was because she had not thought it consistent with her personal style. She and her husband had chosen to send their daughter to private Islamic schools from toddlerhood, another mode of privileged Islamic consumption, and the daughter was required to wear a jilbab to school. Over time, their daughter asked why her mother did not also wear a headscarf, prompting Aeshya to make a change in “style,” adapting her old look to full cover but negotiating with her boss so that she could wear pants, rather than a skirt or dress, to work.

The best adjective to describe Aeshya’s new, pious style is elaborate, as she carefully chooses complementary accents for each outfit, from the sequins on her jilbab to the brooch at her throat and the accents and trims on her tunic. Her friends and colleagues describe the fun of seeing what she shows up wearing each morning, although some privately confided to me that they find her look déclassé. A colleague of Aeshya’s reported once attending a pengajian with her for which Aeshya had gone beyond her usual exuberance in coordinating her ensemble, which included a tunic and skirt of black and white diagonal-striped fabric adorned...
with red polka-dot contrast embroidery, cutout work, and red ric-rac trim on the hems, and a bright red headscarf with sequins and silk flowers at the ears. The final touch was matching red stilettos. Whereas Aeshya was proud of her coordinated outfit, her colleague described the overall effect as dizzying and embarrassing. Moments such as these reveal the class tensions that can emerge in critiques of consumption, especially among women. Aeshya’s colleague’s own embarrassment at Aeshya’s look that evening was partly a projection of the shame Aeshya herself should have experienced. Aeshya’s complex look came off as neither modest nor beautiful.

Moments of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) like this one figure in other contexts in which the meaning of pious dress is up for debate. Taste, framed as modesty in both a technical sense and in the sense of elegance and simplicity, can become the terrain for sorting out the terms of piety, made all the more loaded because, until roughly the last decade, Islamic dress was synonymous with lack of taste, provinciality, or rejection of beauty. Ria, a 50-year-old woman who has consciously resisted wearing Islamic dress on a daily basis but who is widely considered a religious role model, describes being frustrated by comments when she does don it, especially for pengajian. She regularly finds herself the recipient of effusive, overly polite flattery about how much more beautiful she is covered than not, comments she finds coercive and sexist because of what she considers underlying assumptions about an innate feminine desire to be desired. Yet she responds by privately grumbling that women who adopt pious dress are lazy about personal appearance. “No wonder women want to wear busana Muslim. It lets them gain weight and just hide it under a larger, looser tunic. They don’t have to exercise or be disciplined, or take care of their hair. If my hair is graying, here, let’s just throw it behind, but it is difficult to eliminate this focus on appearance while Islamic media are industriously ‘inflating’ the urge [hasrat] to shop.”

**The discomforts of piety**

The growth of public forms of piety has generated interpretations about how consumption creates comfort through knowing that one’s dress and conduct are ethical. For most Indonesian consumers of pious goods, consumption and piety are not contradictory; to the contrary, they resonate with each other in ways that enhance the thrill of consumption and the comforts of piety, suggesting that pleasure and discipline are closely linked. In addition, much of the popular engagement with pious dress in Indonesia has a joyful quality that counters Western assumptions about the dourness and repudiation of material life associated with some strains of Christian-influenced religiosity. Along with the increase in public forms of piety in urban Indonesia in the last two decades, a parallel dismissal of pious consumption as insincere or even deceptive has emerged, largely founded on the argument that because of its fashionable appeal, women now don Islamic dress out of consumer desire or vanity, out of a wish to follow “trends.” In essence, because Islamic dress requires a relatively large amount of fabric, its adoption can be read as a technique by which women strategically identify a style that provides them with a larger canvas for self-decoration than is offered by secular fashions. The accusation of pursuing piety for fashionable reasons is explicitly feminized, making women bearers of heavier semiotic burdens than male subjects during the recent rise in Islamic public culture in Indonesia. Strikingly, the interiority that would prove true piety is just as easily translated into a form of self-awareness that can be construed as vain. In this section, I trace some of the ambivalent critiques of commodified Islamic material culture in Indonesia as an arena that is specifically gendered, and I show that they inform both designers’ and pious consumers’ framing of their actions as grounded in virtuous intention.

Commodification, “selling Islam,” is central to leftist Islamic legal scholar and author Eko Prasetyo’s materialist critique of the Islamic lifestyle movement in Indonesia, which, Prasetyo argues, has packaged greed in the garb of piety. Prasetyo’s primary concern is the lack of attention among reformist Muslims to poverty, even as they perform piety through possessions, a concern he identifies as especially problematic for women.

Wearing a jilbab today is not a fulfillment of a religious requirement but rather is, like the thinking of a model, a component of style, being mod, elegant and appearing fresh. This is what is called *aestheticization,* and it happens wherever there is consumption . . . elements are not only shaped by selling and buying but also import spirituality into the form of the commodity. Muslim identity and gender are already closely enmeshed and then are given an elevated place in the exchange of goods. Through this moment, representations of pious women, dressed in a modern image, give their bodies over to belief through consuming instruments of worship associated with a class who worships. What is crazy about consuming these things is that it is ironic when compared with the social condition that crushes our community [ummat] and leaves it behind, but it is difficult to eliminate this focus on appearance while Islamic media are industriously “inflating” the urge [hasrat] to shop. [Prasetyo 2007: 39–40]
Religious policing and discipline run across the social landscape in Indonesia, from formally religious sermons to blogs and to gossip, which many of my friends consistently remind me is forbidden in Islam and should not cross one’s lips or enter one’s thoughts. Connecting the commodification of dress with the failure to change one’s behavior in line with adopting Islamic dress, trendy piety generates its own ambivalence, proclaiming one’s identity and piety, yet occluding whether the requisite behavioral change has, in fact, occurred. As one young woman, Sita, who has worn a headscarf since high school, describes, the morning sermons broadcast publicly from her neighborhood mosque occasionally seem to her as though they are directed into her family’s Jakarta home, and even at her in particular. She recalled a particular morning when a sermon focused on the social problem of “young women who wear jilbabs but who still return home late at night without shame” and “who still wear fitted shirts or thin fabrics.” Her mother looked at her and said, “That sermon is about you. You are embarrassing all of us.”

Ning, an avid follower of blogs on jilbabs, identified one posting by a Surabaya housewife as especially provocative, eliciting a great deal of commentary. The blog’s author accused women in jilbabs of exchanging religious superiority for basic manners and decency and recounted an experience outside her son’s school in which she, an uncovered woman, was verbally assaulted by a young, wealthy, covered woman whose car could not pass.

Jilbabs don’t just cover the aurat. There are consequences for not following it and failing to achieve integration between one’s dress and one’s behavior. Just as with a tune, there has to be harmony between the music and the lyrics in order to avoid discord . . . I don’t know a lot about religion. I am a Muslim because my parents were Muslim. I pray because He asks me to . . . But this encounter with my child made me skeptical . . . no, disappointed. I was disappointed because this woman wore a jilbab only for fashion. [DenaDena 2007]

As Ning, who found this posting disturbing, emphasized, the problem with the pious woman in the story was her lack of modesty, expressed through manners.

The whole point of busana Muslim is to be modest [Arabic, tawadhu’], and that means polite. When I was a child, my parents wouldn’t let me eat standing up, and they always told me it was because it was forbidden in Islam. When I was older I realized that it was actually only because it is impolite [kurang sopan], and being impolite is what is forbidden. True tawadhu’ is to respect others, to merendahkan diri [lower oneself], not just in the presence of God but in the presence of others. [conversation with author, August 14, 2007]

Commentary about the effect of Islamic fashion’s popularity has reached institutional levels, as well. Azyumardi Azra, a noted sociologist and member of the Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia (Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals) presidium, argues in an editorial column entitled “Again with the Jilbab Issue,” that the majority of Muslim women in Southeast Asia cover not out of political or ideological convictions but simply because of the wish to “cover their hair, neck and chest with colorful fabrics that are fashionable” (2008). More critical yet, feminist philosopher Gadis Arivia has repeatedly expressed concern about the social pressure to cover now that Islamic fashion has become ubiquitous. During the 2009 presidential campaign, candidates Jusuf Kalla and Wiranto publicized the fact that their wives cover—via billboard ads, a televised shopping trip for headscarves, and a book entitled Pious Wives of Future Leaders—and Arivia describes the attention to the wives’ dress as a misplaced focus on the “packaging, rather than the contents of women’s heads” (2009). Intriguingly, the campaign strategy was widely considered a political failure (the candidates did not win the election) and a blatant insertion of religion into politics, arenas that Indonesians increasingly consider separate. Perhaps more interesting still, women I know commented on the obviously hypocritical quality of the strategy, evidenced by the fact that, during the televised shopping trip, Mufidah Kalla, wife of candidate Jusuf Kalla, was not recognized by the vendors as a regular shopper (whereas Rugaya Wiranto was), suggesting that consumption was a key mode of performing and assessing sincerity.

These conflicting but equally dismissive kinds of concerns are apparent in a 2008 conversation I had with my friend Mura. Mura, a 21-year-old college student in Yogyakarta, who had covered from the age of 14, against her parents’ wishes, interpreted her adoption of pious dress as a statement about objectification. “In my opinion, women have been objectified [dijadikan sebagai obyek] forever. I mean, culturally, what’s more in Indonesia, patriarchal culture has been so strong in spite of Islam’s arrival, it has been acculturated to the point that even Islam cannot erase a culture that persistently objectifies women . . . Even women who cover still get harassed” (conversation with author, August 20, 2007). Mura situated her dress choices in a historical perspective about industrialization and style, describing her aesthetic as “simple,” a term she interpreted as part of a broader ethic of modesty in general, both technical and stylistic.

There are now so many kinds of clothing. The function of busana Muslim really isn’t sacred [sakral] anymore, it has become what one must do. And now it has become so industrialized . . . Earlier [in the 1970s] the styles were incredibly conventional, big sizes that didn’t fit the body, but over time we realized that, wow,
that really isn’t attractive. Wow, we can wear a jilbab and still wear makeup. For example, clothes can be made to properly fit the body. [conversation with author, August 20, 2007]

Although Mura was born after the period she identified as predating fashionable Islamic style (the 1970s), she recited a familiar narrative about the past and the present in Islamic fashions in Indonesia. In her personal account, she identified her early high school years as awkward, in part because her secular dress had been “extremely average,” and said that part of the harassment she received had been because of her lower-class style. Yet she was careful to explain that her current pious style is uniquely her own and that she tried to avoid short-lived trends.

I have been wearing a jilbab since long before there were all these market segments. I just go for the standard style because once you start following the jilbab trends, it never stops … Sometimes, I see women walking down the street wearing stylish jilbabs and I think to myself “Good grief, my style of jilbab really is behind the times. I am stupid to think that all that matters with my jilbab is just the principle.” So, I try to mix it up a bit. If the bottom half of my outfit is fitted, I make sure that the top is looser, and if the top is fitted, too, then I make sure the jilbab is big. [conversation with author, August 20, 2007]

Her avoidance of short-lived trends was part of a broader approach to modesty that resonates with other narratives I recount in the following section. In particular, her connection of piety to beauty was mixed with an air of caution captures how fraught the terrain of Islamic style has become, placing women like Mura in between a desire to be modest without trendiness, call for theoretical analysis from two literatures, materiality and religion, that address, and share, some of the same anxieties about concealment, revelation, and truth. I argue that Indonesian concerns about truth and materiality, or the deauthenticating effects of commodification, overlap with some of the modernist foundations of analyses of material culture, exchange, and religion, which suggests that these approaches cannot fully explain the specifically gendered nature of these anxieties.

The stuff of faith and feminine disorder

The concerns that Prasetyo and Arivia express, and those to which Mura was responding in her preference for stylish modesty without trendiness, call for theoretical analysis from two literatures, materiality and religion, that address, and share, some of the same anxieties about concealment, revelation, and truth. I argue that Indonesian concerns about truth and materiality, or the deauthenticating effects of commodification, overlap with some of the modernist foundations of analyses of material culture, exchange, and religion, which suggests that these approaches cannot fully explain the specifically gendered nature of these anxieties.

Anthropology has a rich yet ambivalent history of thinking around things. Early disciplinary research on material culture sometimes treated objects as overly determinined expressions of culture, the real stuff of anthropological theory, or as mystifying objects of unique ritual and cultural practice. Classic social theorists, including Walter Benjamin (1968), Karl Marx (1977), Marcel Mauss (1967), and Georg Simmel (1978), found the relationship between the material and the abstract, particularly in the case of the commodity form, good to think with. More recent work on materiality has pushed the boundaries of the material and the abstract, beginning with Arjun Appadurai’s (1986) and Igor Kopytoff’s (1986) exhortation to anthropologists to consider commodities as circulating or living in moments outside of exchange, and includes a variety of new approaches to the agency of objects (Latour 1993, 2000; Miller 2008).

One of the key questions in materiality studies is the role of capitalism, for which Marx has been an orienting theorist. Marx (1977:163–178) argued that the violence of capitalist production was concealed in the fetishized commodity, a form that hides unequal social relations of production in a material vessel that then animates compelling new social relations on behalf of the consumer. Although religion may seem a curious site in which to analyze the contemporary ambivalences generated in a consumer-driven cultural economy, a context in which things almost seem to own their owners and in which superficiality is celebrated, Marx argued that the commodity fetish achieved its power through its linked religious and economic values. Indeed, his critique rested on the promise of transparency, the allure of revealing the absurdity of capitalist transubstantiation by pulling back the veil, so to speak, on how an object mutates from a concrete, self-evidently useful thing to an animated thing, dominating humans through the alienating commodification of their labor, through their desire for the commodities they then produce, and finally through those objects’ lively mediation of human sociality. Borrowing from the language of empire (Pietz 1985, 1987, 1988), Marx suggested that consumption’s thrills appear to have spiritual rewards but are ultimately empty. Thus, the promises and the critiques of both capitalism and religion resonate, sharing anxieties about matter and spirit, depth and surface, and agency and transparency. From this perspective, capitalism’s genius is not simply its co-optation of religious promises but the ways in which its disappointments then generate the desire for religious solutions.

Although taking different approaches, other social theorists of religion and capitalism shared Marx’s concern about the effects of exchange on the human ability to clearly see social relations and to put objects in their place. Max Weber’s critical explanation of the rise of bureaucratic forms, supplanting the charisma of religious leaders and religious life, rested on its own conception of religion as an enchanting explanation of the world. Modern, rational asceticism would entail the separation of technical means from moral ends, a world itself enchanted yet populated
with “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart” (Weber 2003:182). The Calvinist community Weber studied to make this point struggled with its own concerns about how to properly recognize the divine in the quotidian and what signs could be trusted without overly investing in the material world. Keane (2007) has described this same dilemma as symptomatic of the modernist need to separate spirit and matter, an impulse that was especially problematic in contexts of Christian conversion in which missionaries worried about what sorts of signs (material, linguistic, even dress) could be taken as reliable indications of their converts having rejected fetishism.

Fashion is uniquely positioned at the nexus of these concerns, intersecting with religion, capitalism, and materiality. Simmel argued that fashion was an especially potent site in which to observe the atomization of capitalist exchange and the way dress is used to ameliorate that isolation. “Few phenomena of social life possess such a pointed curve of consciousness as does fashion” (Simmel 1957:547). Yet fashion is, by definition, that which falls outside of serious human conduct. Because it addresses surfaces, it is superficial.

Fashion occasionally will accept objectively determined subjects such as religious faith, scientific interests, even socialism and individualism . . . There is good reason why externals—clothing, social conduct, amusements—constitute the specific field of fashion, for here no dependence is placed on really vital motives of human action. It is the field which we can most easily relinquish to the bent towards imitation, which it would be a sin to follow in important questions. [Simmel 1957:544–545, emphasis added]

Each of these approaches identifies, or even adopts, a moralizing tone, suggesting that the foundations of modernist philosophies on economy and society were often systems of faith themselves, using religious concepts to convey particular anxieties about social change. These anxieties about materiality could be easily inverted into accusations of materialism.

As incisive as the scholarship linking materiality, capitalism, and religion has been, it cannot explain why women, more so than men, are required to consume religious commodities to achieve piety yet are, nonetheless, more susceptible to critique for their use of these objects, perhaps because little of this literature connects to equally complex and long-standing analyses of consumption. Feminist analyses have argued that assumptions about the banality of consumption and the power of commodities to entrance seem to disproportionately affect feminized consumers, even though commodities can turn all people into desiring subjects and objects. Accusations of materialism, superficiality, or even, as my friend Mura specifically stated, objectification consistently affect feminine subjects more than masculine, and religious consumption is not only subject to similar criticism but in some ways is also even more charged, for the very ills of consumption that apparently so tempt women appear to be resolvable through consumption of a corrective commodity, the religious good.

Women figure in both capitalist processes and critical readings of capitalism as objects problematically positioned vis-à-vis desire. Either they generate desire through their objectified form, as detailed in analyses of visual culture (Mulvey 1989), or they are creatures of consumption, subsumed by the commodities they crave.15 Consumption is thus able to circulate in theoretical and popular analyses as self-evidently pleasurable, as leisure, and the flip side of consumer desire that intersects with sexual objectification, labor, and anxiety is ignored. Feminist histories of consumption in Europe and North America, in particular, have shown that the emergence of mass production of consumer goods, department stores, and malls was linked to the feminization of mass culture and consumption. Thus, even as the industrial mode of production required an army of shoppers to desire and find indispensable now identically reproduced commodities, it simultaneously framed those shoppers as deluded. Representational economies rich with unashamed enthusiasm for display, belongings, acquisition, and ownership mixed with anxiety in ways that could simultaneously deny respectability to “consumerism.” Consumption could then be both thrilling (for consumers) and vapid (for those who could see through the process), positioning those charged with consuming as shallow, bourgeois victims of the illusion that things could be fulfilling, as if men were not a part of that cultural economy (Finn 2000, 2003). As Victoria de Grazia (1996) has argued for European history, erasing feminine subjectivity required an easy blurring of the female body as object of desire with consumer desire, associating femininity with both image and object, and stigmatizing consumption as disordering in the process (cf. Miller 1998; Rappaport 2001). The result is a figure required to participate in a consumer-driven economy yet blamed for that participation.

Some of these themes appear in Western and academic debates about Islamic dress. Ironically, Western fashions can be the yardstick in these debates, used to prove that the diverse array of modesty codes glossed as “the veil” deny women freedom yet are still considered shallow within a particular cultural or political context. As several scholars have persuasively argued (Abu-Lughod 1995, 2002; Deeb 2006; El Guindi 1999; MacLeod 1992; Mahmood 2005; Scott 2007), for Western liberal feminists and interested Western public officials, the veil has become so synonymous with women’s domination that it is taken as proof of that “fact” (Ahmed 1982:522).16 This literature shows how reducing Islamic identity to the sign of the veil, while ignoring other forms of religious and political action and neglecting the
social contexts in which veiling may be as liberating as it is limiting, reproduces the blind spots of the commodity fetish, reviving a fear about objects having more agency than humans. Indeed, in her analysis of the moralizing tone of research on mass consumption, de Grazia uses Islam to make her point, arguing that “fashion codes and beauty standards are denounced as akin to purdah, foot binding or the veil” (1996:7). Rather than attempt to pinpoint how Islamic dress helps or hinders women, this literature allows for more specific questions, such as how debates about pious consumption produce femininities and masculinities.\

Both of these feminist rereadings, of capitalist history and of Islamic reformism, can inform a critical analysis of the politics surrounding religious consumption in Indonesia. The most desirable objects are those that inhabit the powerful and risky space of goods that either threaten or promise to transform the subject. The promise, in this case, is simultaneously alluring and fraught. Piety promises morality, transparency, and order in an otherwise disorder social world, in part by naming disorder, excess, and banality as feminine.\

I have traced two theoretical approaches on mass cultural stuff, both of which have implicit morality tales embedded in them: first, the mass-produced and consumed thing as potentially mystifying and distracting, a view especially helpful to critics of capitalist exchange and inequality; and, second, the mass-produced and consumed thing as alluring to women, who are made feminine through their desire for consumer goods. In this sense, then, the feminine is the weak portal through which social decay can occur, for women are tempted into believing the whispering fetish and lose themselves in the process. Yet, the very mode through which they might prove their piety itself demands consumption of material goods like the mukena terkecil, an act that is almost doomed to fail.

The virtue of style

Pious goods have therefore emerged in Indonesia as a solution to a unique problem, the decay posed by the assumed pleasures of mass consumption, and as the antidote to consumer excess as uncontrolled desire. Pious commodities serve as visible, even spectacular, material signs of inner piety, which implies rejecting superficiality, yet they and the people who use them can come in for critique on the grounds that that spectacularity is itself evidence of the absence of true piety. The dilemma I have traced in both the ethnographic and theoretical approaches to piety and consumption is lived and felt by many of the women I know and presents practical problems for entrepreneurs or fashion designers. Reclaiming consumption as piety rather than profligacy involves careful but also explicit emphasis on beauty and modesty as virtues consistent with devotion and Islamic femininity. As a result, simply choosing to cover is no longer, if it ever was, sufficient to declare a pious identity. Wearing jeans or a heavily encrusted brooch or carrying a posh handbag intersects with the other components of cover that put style into conversation with sincerity.

Shopping with friends made these effects especially clear to me. Like Mura’s declaration that she eschews trends, many of the women I know insisted that they understand modesty and beauty in terms of Allah’s preference for simplicity. “Beauty” and “modesty” shift from meaning decoration and cover to disavowing consumption, especially in moments of consumption. In this sense, beauty and modesty can draw one closer to the divine, rather than closer to the self (which accusations of vanity imply). The form these disavowals take still varies. In addition to an ideal of style, the virtues of simplicity and beauty suggested several other qualities that women like Mura cited to describe their aesthetic choices as ethical, especially sopan (polite), anggun (elegant), and sederhana (simple).

For example, many of my friends differentiated themselves from the trendy, Muslim-fashion types, whom they imagined buying a new headscarf every day. Instead, they identified themselves as followers of the simple style of Islamic dress, a recognized genre profiled alongside many other looks in Islamic fashion magazines. Ning almost always wore white or pastel tunics with her jeans, eschewing patterns or prints in declaration of simple style. Yet she was also perpetually on the lookout for attractive brooches to secure her headscarf. For her, a pleasant weekend activity involved the search for, and occasional purchase of, a new brooch, and her taste in brooches favored the sweet (manis) or cute (lucu), such as depictions of fruit. She explicitly rejected brooches that she associated with hypocrisy, especially large or bejeweled styles. Imagining herself as only collecting pins rather than purchasing new clothing, Ning was able to confirm her perception of herself as a woman with simple tastes.

Similarly, Luna, a housewife and mother of an eight-year-old daughter, took pride that almost no item of her wardrobe was purchased ready-made. Rather, she subscribed and also sold her neighbors subscriptions to the popular Islamic women’s magazine Paras. Her entrepreneurial profits funded her purchase of fabrics and patterns that she sewed for herself. Luna acknowledged she could never afford the retail prices for the latest styles of Islamic dress, but by sewing her own clothing, she could be frugal, modest, and sincere as well as fashionable.

Susi, who had recently moved into a gated Islamic neighborhood with her husband and two young children, described herself as uninterested in changes in jilbab styles or in coordinating a close fit between the colors of her dress and headscarves. She often joked about being so busy and distracted that she sometimes walked out the door to her job at an insurance firm without wearing her jilbab and that she relied on the good-natured attentions of her
female neighbors to remind her to put it on. Yet she and I also enjoyed many hours together looking for attractive mukenas. Susi enjoyed the pastel, embroidered lightness of her mukenas, which suggested, to her, cleanliness and purity. For Susi, the safest and most comfortable context in which to play with the fashionable and sensory side of piety was in the context of prayer, an act that frequently occurred when she was alone.

Hesti explained her personal style as directly influencing her shopping decisions and her relationship with her private tailor, and she was conscious of how much she allowed dress to influence her impressions of others. She explicitly avoided stores that struck her as “fundamentalis,” which she identified by their lack of style or their sale of face veils or primarily black garments.

I don’t wear styles that are busy [ramai]. I like those that are simple . . . But in my opinion, people who have taken the initiative to wear busana Muslim, to reconstruct themselves, I perceive as people who are trying to live a Muslim lifestyle. I don’t care if they cover the aurat and then do negative things. I just want to acknowledge the positive part of their decision to reconstruct themselves. [conversation with author, August 13, 2007]

Hesti’s simultaneous refusal to shop at fundamentalis stores and to comment on the relationship between other women’s dress and behavior hints at the ambivalence about interiority and materiality that marks much of the public discourse around pious consumption. This ambivalence recalls Robert Paul’s (1995:45) argument that salvation religions save one from guilt, shifting moral stress from actions to intentions, from exteriority to interiority. Hesti resisted speculating about the motivation of others, preferring to embrace the positive promise of an external action, the adoption of pious dress.

Each of these women enjoyed her interaction with what she explicitly identified as a style unrelated to excessive Islamic consumption. Simplicity could thus give shape to a form of tasteful distinction that could then be opposed to the aesthetic of women like Aeshya, whose style was especially expressive, or that of women who were overly conservative and lacked style. Each of these women not only considered herself in possession of a particular style, “simple,” but also found pleasure in pursuing it. Yet for most of them, a component of this style was economic frugality. Simple styles meant resisting spending on oneself, which could then be construed as its own kind of modesty and, therefore, as devotional virtue.

Reclaiming aesthetics as ethics is also important to those invested in the rise of Islamic fashion in Indonesia, for people like businesswoman Triasari, and for magazine editors and designers. Triasari’s description and marketing of the mukena terkecil relied on comparison with a cell phone, revealing the prosthetic quality of each commodity. One prepared the body for devotion, and the other provided virtual connection for alienated, urban individuals. According to Triasari, women should not have to choose between the two, although she imagined that, if faced with a choice, young women would undoubtedly choose the phone, favoring social connectedness and the prestige of up-to-date technology over the rewards of piety. Positioning the mukena terkecil as a gift designed to improve the religious devotion of the college students of Yogyakarta, she acknowledged that the sales of over 1,000 units per month through 2007 also gave her store national recognition, ranking in a leading business magazine’s Brands to Watch for 2007, and investor interest in franchising her store to other cities (Suryadi and Utomo 2007).19

The Islamic fashion magazine landscape is also increasingly vibrant and crowded, with over ten titles competing and specializing in particular niches. Among the most popular and glossy are Noor, Paras, Alia, and Ummi. Magazines such as these keep pious femininity visible in media representations of Indonesian Islam, an effect that both benefits and constrains editorial decisions. Ambivalences about the relationship between consumption and piety, and about the rise of Islamic fashion in Indonesia, are palpable in editorial content, interspersed in lush photo spreads of seasonal fashions and even more lush advertisements for halal makeup or dress. Two examples reveal these tensions. In one article in the monthly Noor on the question of the “ethics and trendiness of Islamic fashion,” a writer cites a hadith from Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, who quotes the prophet as having said, “Allah Mahaindah lagi menyukai keindahan” [Beautiful and magnificent Allah always likes beauty], and interprets it to mean that “beauty is something good and is one of the blessings from and aura of God” (Fayumi 2008:63).20 Further, “modern society is drawn towards trends, styles, information and global lifestyles . . . developing fesyen Islami is a process of socializing Muslim dress even faster . . . In this context, using fashion to socialize a trend towards the adoption of Muslim dress is something for which to hope” (Fayumi 2008:64).

Opinions such as this seem to encourage the growth of the Islamic fashion business as consistent with religious conduct yet could also appear to encourage consumption. Other articles suggest a more measured approach. In one first-person account, a Noor staff writer considered the issue when describing an encounter with an acquaintance at an Islamic fashion show (Lubis 2008). Knowing that the woman’s husband had been convicted of corruption during the previous year, she was surprised to see her friend decked out in a luxurious ensemble and sporting the latest imported handbag. The article proceeded to quote from verse 26 of Qur’an Sura 17 against excess of all kinds, both consumptive and abstemious, suggesting that true piety involves modest expectations, modest outlay, and concern for
others. The author concluded by reminding readers that even if one can afford branded fashions, it is not appropriate to choose to spend one’s money on them.

This tension between materiality and spirituality is present in comments from designers themselves, many of whom avoided designing for the Islamic dress market until the past decade because it was considered unfashionable and not lucrative. Designers explain their decision to add an Islamic line to their collections as motivated by something other than profits, usually a religious calling or a personal turn toward piety. Designer Itang Yunasz exemplifies how Islamic fashion designers in Indonesia negotiate the line between apparently cultivating a clientele’s vanity through consumption and cultivating modesty and virtue. Describing his collections as embodying “spiritual beauty” (in English), Yunasz argues that “true beauty is not just a physical matter, but is found inside in inner beauty. However, when enveloped by something of beauty, that inner beauty will shine even more. Insya Allah” (2005:11). “Spiritual beauty” thus involves connection between outer and inner states and is implicitly the opposite of a secular beauty that would ostensibly be more superficial. Yunasz describes his designs as combining the rules of Muslim dress with the beauty of the female form in ways that he hopes will “develop Indonesian fashion, especially Muslim fashion” (2005:11). Yunasz lists a number of influences, allowing the design of diverse collections that can suit any woman’s taste. Some designs are directly influenced by imagined, admiring visions of Middle Eastern style that Yunasz identifies as a “spiritual beauty which shines through a collaboration between soft floating fabrics, layering satin silk chiffons, and a pristine color as a symbol of purity” (2005:86; see Figure 3). By contrast, less embellished designs (see Figure 4) can be “minimalist … yet stay within the syariah [religious law] for dress” (Yunasz 2005:109).

Yunasz’s concern with rules, as well as style, parallels a broader Indonesian concern with legibility and transparency that enhances the appeal of religiosity. Indeed, this concern partially explains the appeal of Islam and Islamic consumption. The possibility that something appears to be authentic could be inauthentic relies not only, or even entirely, on the capitalist and modernist concerns I have outlined but also on an Indonesian political anxiety about the pervasiveness of the asli tapi palsu, or the “authentic but false” good (often referred to by the slang term aspal). Siegel (1998:55) has described the aspal as an effect of the linked proliferation of visible officialdom and invisible violence during the Suharto period, when nothing could be believed but much was to be feared. The “air of falsity” benefited the state, not as an agent of demystification but, rather, as a rival competing with the citizenry for control over this force (Siegel 1998:60). The aspal was not so much a faked good but a good that might be authentic yet would fail to deliver on its promises.

The aspal explains in part why designers emphasize the consistency of their designs with syariah rules for dress, but it especially explains two other qualities associated with Islamic consumption in Indonesia. First, items like the mukena terkecil make claims that must be certified. Triasari emphasized the testing she commissioned by the Museum Rekor Indonesia (Indonesian Museum of Records), proving that hers was, indeed, the smallest mukena on the market. This certification was prominently featured in her store’s advertising campaign. Perhaps the most powerful certifying body in Indonesian Islamic consumption is the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars, or MUI). The council reviews everything from movies to vaccines to exercise, certifying whether something is halal or haram (prohibited). MUI halal certification has become a brand in its own right and can mean the difference between a commodity succeeding in the marketplace or not, although certification itself can be deceptive because the logo or certificate can be faked.
As a result, a second theme emerges in the mitigation of the aspal: transparency, which promises eyewitness confirmation of purified, pious consumption. This confirmation is especially prominent in the case of goods that inhabit border zones between subjects and objects, such as food. Many of the women I know in Yogyakarta not only buy their baked goods from certified halal stores but also specifically choose stores that allow the baking process to be seen by customers in glass-enclosed, visible production zones. My friends do not spend time observing the process but, rather, trust the exposure of the baking process to public viewing to ensure that bakers do not attempt to smuggle in forbidden ingredients.

Despite these concerns, the MUI has not weighed in on the issue of the fashionability or trendiness of Islamic dress in contemporary Indonesia. Rather, its proclamations on women’s dress and appearance have focused on issues of false consumer claims, such as a 2009 case of jilbabs marketed with magnets claiming to reduce headaches and increase blood flow in the body. They were forbidden by the MUI, not because they did not follow syariah rules but because they made fraudulent promises. In instances such as these, the MUI functions as both a religious and consumer regulatory agency, positioning consumption as a form of virtue and moral rectitude on a par with formal religious piety.

Conclusion: The enchantments of modesty

A commodity can, and often does, both fail to deliver on and exceed its promises. Although I have argued that the political and economic environment of the past few decades in Indonesia has made piety appealing yet problematic for many middle-class, urban young women, political-economic conditions do not determine their individual experiences. To the contrary, these conditions generate personal experiences of sincerity and pleasure. The enchantment of consuming and using pious goods comes from the very conditions that such goods claim to salve—the seductive promises of commodities, the appeal of a global religious community, the participation in rapidly changing styles—which can make the meanings and rewards of consumption exceed dismissal of commodification as secularizing, empty, or mystifying. Much as Benjamin (1999) optimistically posited about the bourgeois charms of the Paris arcades, the very openness of the commodity form, its animated possibilities, and the fact that it never fully satisfies or fully fails allow for working through the redemptive promises offered by religions and, perhaps, by extension, capitalisms.

Consumption is never naturally pleasurable but, rather, relies on individual labor to fill in the gaps between form and content. The enchantment and excess of meaning in commodities is precisely what makes piety potentially, and often actually, satisfying for many of the women I know. Indeed, pious Indonesian women have had little trouble being fashionably modest, and, moreover, one of the modes through which they have demanded greater public recognition has been the voice of consumer rights. Before the establishment of Indonesian Islamic fashion magazines, pious readers of national women’s magazines wrote letters to editors asking why pious dress was never featured in fashion spreads, asserting that they too deserved to see themselves reflected in the public sphere.

Yet rejection of materiality, in favor of modesty or simplicity, must still take a material form, a dilemma that demands negotiation. This irresolvable conundrum, an attempt to represent a rejection of the material through a material form that may or may not be correctly read is borne more heavily by women than by men in the accounts I have presented, precisely because femininity seems to make one more vulnerable to the charms of consumption. Thus, women who wish to engage in intentional exercises of piety must take a stand on goods that are ubiquitous and appealing yet problematic. Mass cultural but piously marked goods have become lively agents in reflexive exercises of pious conduct and have become essential to piety.
Islamic fashions in contemporary Indonesia also involve concealment, not only physical but also existential. I have argued that this concealment resonates with social theoretical and modernist concerns about truth—claims that the other cannot possibly deliver on its promise. Both fetishize transparency as the solution to the anxieties they generate. Yet simply reading the rise of pious consumption as an outcome of familiar capitalist relations potentially forecloses the fact that capitalism is never simply an economic system but, rather, functions as a faith-based economy with values of its own. In this sense, not only exchange values but also more explicitly transcendent values are created and exchanged, allowing religion to not simply endure despite commercial transaction but to become utterly fundamental to if not harmonious with it. If pious consumption is to be recognized as a sincere expression of religiosity, then its inverse, the religious nature of consumption, must also be recognized. In this context, Indonesia holds a unique position in any transnational analysis of Islamic capitalism because its strength in population never compensates for its weakness in global status in the Islamic world. This conundrum in part motivates the aspirations of a globally oriented religious elite in Indonesia as well as its unease.

Gendered pious consumption, as exemplified in the case of busana Muslim, is thus especially illustrative of the ambivalent relationship capitalism cultures can create around things. Religious consumption increasingly operates in the space of anxiety that marks the contemporary Islamic lifestyle boom in urban Indonesia. Such consumption is a risky game, especially for women. By promising to transform the dissatisfaction of secular consumption into religious achievement, religious commodities claim to occlude individuals against the possible critique that they are engaging in a violation of two otherwise morally distinct spheres, appearance and substance, vanity and virtue. By using consumption to disavow consumption, women claim to be engaged in a better undertaking than secular fashion. Yet by working in this way, in this space, fashionably pious women continue to keep pious femininity at the center of Indonesian anxieties about Islam, even as those anxieties constrain them. Pious women, therefore, have to deal with a social problem that simultaneously benefits and challenges them. And because the challenge is never fully met, the anxieties endure. As objects that represent piety and consumer excess, that promise or threaten to save or damn, all through the form of the objectified feminine, Islamic commodities in contemporary Indonesia are matter par excellence, simultaneously ethereal and material. They absorb the moral critiques of every quarter yet come to feel increasingly necessary to daily life. And in a way, then, their objectness disappears, much as Marx might have predicted, their solidity melting into air.

Notes

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1. Triasari is the niece of the founding matriarch of the Al-Fath and the Annisa Islamic goods stores in Yogya. Advertisements for Al-Fath, whose clientele is middle-aged women, have also linked pious goods to contemporary technology, frequently situating a prayer rug, a mukena, and prayer beads next to a laptop.

2. To be clear, I do not attempt to prove that the women I know really are pious and that their intentions are being misread, although they would argue that this is the case. That might be a compelling issue, but it is not one I am capable of resolving. Rather, I am interested in why this issue arises at all. All commodities, including Islamic commodities, are clearly subject to fashion cycles, in Indonesia as elsewhere. Religious bumper stickers, ringtones, and so on, all come and go in short time frames, so it is telling that primarily those goods and trends associated with women’s consumption are glossed as “fashion.”

3. This did not mean that Islamic organizations were free from political pressure (see Hefner 2000). Historically, much of the research on Islam in Indonesia has focused either on its syncretic
quality or, more recently, on global security and governance issues (Emmerson 2006; Liddle and Mujani 2007). Older research on class in Indonesia also identified an explicitly Islamic middle class as a rural phenomenon. Middle-class urbanites were considered, at least by Indonesians, relatively syncretic, if not outright secular in orientation, and their rural class counterparts considered weak or apostate Muslims (Abdurrahman Wahid 1990; Kuntowidjoyo 1985). A publicly devout middle class in urban parts of Java and other islands is, indeed, new, but it has grown so large in the past two decades that it is almost hard to remember a time when it did not exist.

4. The Islamic fashion industry is hardly the only religious fashion industry in the world. Hasidic Jewish communities in New York and Jerusalem have generated specific brands, some of which guarantee a kosher supply chain for components in their finished clothing (Erlanger 2007). Several companies in Utah sell fashionable, modest clothing to women of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints through online outlets (e.g., http://www.modbme.com and http://www.shadeclothing.com), and the distinctively Victorian styles of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints are also sold online (http://wwwfldscrafts.com). The companies marketing these lines celebrate the fact that women of various religious practices, and even nonreligious women, buy and enjoy their modest clothing.

5. Ogilvy Noor, a new branch of the global advertising corporation Ogilvy & Mather that is dedicated to defining the “New Muslim Consumer,” estimates the halal consumer market at 1.8 billion people in 57 countries and worth $2.1 trillion in annual sales, $560 million of which is spent on cosmetics. Its research was based on four majority-Muslim countries that represent “four key stages in the level of consumer development . . . [of] Islamic branding” but did not include Indonesia (Ogilvy 2010:2). In the United States, Islamic consumption is held up as a familiar trait among otherwise exotic Muslim Americans, with some arguing that they just want to be addressed as consumers like anyone else (Story 2007) or that expressions of Islamic piety are less intimidating when “underneath the chador” one finds the familiar: women who enjoy fashion whatever their nationality (Sciolino 1997).

6. Emma Tarlo (2010) has recently argued that pious dress places British Muslims squarely in the center of public debates about integration and British identity, amplifying their visibility through their decision to remove parts of their bodies from public view.

7. Headscarves were banned for civil servants and students in public schools until 1991 (SK No. 052/C/Kep/D.82), when the Department of Education and Culture changed the policy (SK No. 100/C/Kep/D/1991), allowing a separate uniform for high school students, composed of a long skirt, tunic, and jilbab.

8. Class and status are important components of these articulations of taste, which I have addressed elsewhere (Jones 2007).

9. Western critiques and defenses of veiling are ascetic, and much recent research links the rise of charismatic Protestant conversion around the world to the often-explicit promise of material prosperity (see, e.g., Cannell 2006; Meyer 2004).

10. Clearly, not all forms of Christianity are ascetic, and much recent research links the rise of charismatic Protestant conversion around the world to the often-explicit promise of material prosperity (see, e.g., Cannell 2006; Meyer 2004).

11. The official explanation for the excursion was to show support for domestically produced goods, but country of origin is difficult to determine and much Muslim fashion is, in fact, imported from India and China.

12. In conversation with some of this anthropological scholar, literary scholar Bill Brown (2001) has argued that a paucity of serious attention to things, or a perpetual focus on what work things perform, rather than on things themselves, reproduces Jean Baudrillard’s assertion that “we have always lived off the splendor of the subject and the poverty of the object” (1990:111). Brown’s “thing theory” is a reminder instead that people may take objects for granted “only in order to grant them their potency—to show how they organize our private and public affection” (2001:7).

13. Of course, as Marshall Sahlins (1976:148–65) has argued, use values do not simply inhere in objects and cannot exist outside of social process.

14. Indonesia and even scholarship on Islam figure prominently in historical and contemporary anthropological research on materiality. Joshua Barker (2005), Webb Keane (1997, 2007), Bill Maurer (2005), Rudolf Mrázek (2002), Patricia Spyer (1998, 2000), and Margaret Wiener (2007a) attend in various ways to distinctions between subjects and objects, and the concept of “the fetish” has been central to much research on the region (e.g., Keane 2007; Rutherford 2003; Siegel 1997; Wiener 2007b). This focus may be a result of a regional comfort in insular Southeast Asia with the liveliness of the material world.

15. The intersection of these representations contributes to further objectification of feminine consumers as constituting a market that can be measured and targeted for sales.

16. Discourses of female emancipation through consumption can thus, as Michel Foucault has argued, not only create fields of power around questions of devotion or revelation but can also come to have their own “market value” (1990:7).

17. Suspicion about deceptive religious performances is especially focused on pious women, but it is important to note that public pious men are also targets of related gossip. Visibly pious men are rarer than women in Indonesian cities and are usually marked by facial hair and long white robes styled after Arab male dress. They are seen in traffic asking motorists for money (as in the case of the Laskar Jihad militia movement of 1999–2001 and the more recent Front Pembela Islam) or raiding sites considered sinful, such as bars. In the early years of such visibility, pious men were considered threatening yet sincere; they are now frequently dismissed as intimidating thugs who use a pious identity to bully.

18. For a more thorough analysis of how threats to political and economic order are feminized, see Leshkowich 2005.

19. The garment’s popularity spawned many imitators. In response, Triasari personally designed highly patterned, limited-edition styles sold for one month at a time and available only at her department store.

20. Beauty is also one of the criteria used by (typically male) defenders of polygamy, a practice that is stigmatized among most middle-class Muslim Indonesians. Well-known polygamists argue that plural marriages are beautiful and consistent with a religious ethic that appreciates beauty.

21. Photo shoots that convey exotic, Gulf settings are typically conducted at luxurious homes constructed in that region’s architectural style in the Jakarta area. Magazine and designers’ budgets cannot accommodate shoots outside of the country, and numerous locations have been developed to evoke Middle Eastern styles.

22. The power of rules is especially apparent in moments of display, such as fashion shows, beauty pageants, or seminars like the “Correct and Trendy Jilbabs” class. In one children’s beauty pageant I attended in 2007, intended to inspire mothers of young daughters to be “creative” in constructing attractive busana Muslim, the jury had a strict list of criteria on which to judge the four- to eight-year-old models, including attitude, exposed neck, ears, or hair, and correct pronunciation of basic Arabic phrases. The expectations for
Arabic pronunciation were stricter for the boys’ competition, which also required special dress but no runway performance.

23. A number of Indonesia scholars have identified this phenomenon. See Barker 1999, Bubandt 2008, and Strassler 2009.

24. Many of my friends place great faith in MUII certification, much as many Americans might in the Food and Drug Administration. The parallel is apt, given that each body engages in its own version of what Bruno Latour (1993) has called “purification.”

25. I have frequently been told by friends who travel to Singapore or Australia that the larger the halal sticker on a shop door, the more likely it is to be faked. Cosmopolitan Indonesians take pride in being courted by these declarations yet also consider them commercially motivated and, therefore, unreliable. Concern over false halal claims also emerged in Ogilvy Noor’s market research, prompting the company to report that Muslim consumers around the world share a special concern for “sincerity” (2010:3).

26. Although I cannot fully address this point here, food is a key site for commensality, in general, and religious community and identity, in particular, in Indonesia and elsewhere (cf. Peletz 2002:237). Carolyn Rouse and Janet Hoskins (2004) have argued that food purity, in production and consumption, is a critical mode of Islamic subjectivity among African American Muslims in Los Angeles. One of the most common, recurring themes in the Indonesian mass media is the worry that consumers are vulnerable to unwittingly consuming pork. A bill proposed in the Indonesian House of Representatives in 2009 promises to increase verification and transparency for Muslim citizens, requiring that all beverages, packaged food, medicine, and cosmetics made in the country undergo a halal certification test. Concerns about purity have not extended to the Islamic fashion industry in Indonesia, however, where the halal certification is more focused on the consumption of garments than on the conditions of their production.

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