

# Fashion and Sustainability

## Fazlun Khalid

One of the effects of what we have now come to know as modernity is that if you are not up there with the rest of the crowd following “fashion” then you must be backward. Fashion has many guises and its most obvious manifestation is the clothes (the words clothes and fashion are now inter-changeable) industry where models manage to look progressively glamorous whilst they progressively wear less and less. This is a trick and in this trick lies a moral.

Progress and modernity behind the politics, the jargon, the hype and the advertising industry is as naked as the fashion models and like them, exude glamour at the same time. It is fleeting, it is built in obsolescence and its nakedness attracts and devours. The places this happen best are the garish cities to which people are attracted like suicidal moths to a powerful street lamp. It is estimated that over half the world’s population will be living in cities early into the new millennium. So, if you are not in and up there – you are out – presumably so.

Seasoned travellers sometimes face the unexpected and this happened to me in Indonesia during a visit to this mosaic of a country last March. My colleagues in the Institute of Ecology in Bandung were taking me to a madrassa (Qur’an school) in one of the neighbouring villages. It was described blandly in advance for me as an alternative school system where “traditional methods” were used. But I was in for a surprise. The person I was first introduced to was “the marketing manager”. This puzzled me - a marketing manager in a madrassa? He said, “the economic crisis in the country never touched us”. More puzzlement - “Why?” I asked. “Our fresh produce is in great demand, especially in the cities”, he replied, patiently. My puzzlement grew into curiosity: Madrassa equals economic independence – how could that be?

What I was led into was a village community, which practised organic farming, described to me as the traditional way, for economic self-sufficiency. Here is another example of how modernity plays tricks with words. It is fashionable to go into “organic farming” yet the methods used by this movement is as old as the hills and the people of this village have got it right – it is the “traditional way”. This was one of a network of Pasantan Madrassa villages that had survived the ravages of colonialism, which in other parts of Indonesia are known as Zawiya schools and Pondok in Malaysia. Apparently there are hundreds of them and the particular village I was taken to supported about 300 students whose ages ranged from twelve to eighteen and a third of them were female. Most of the learning activities were centred in an around the Mosque and the male students when they were not studying worked in the fields. The female students worked in the packing sheds grading and weighing the produce for market. The Village also boasted a herd of dairy cows and a fish farm. There was a clinic and sports facilities.

The remarkable thing about this community was that the whole ethos of it was non-institutional. One did not get the impression that one was in a regimented over organised place. The feel was that of a village - a community of people of which the students were a part. The income derived from agricultural produce supported the students. The students paid no fees and they were housed and fed by the village. And yet the village made a profit. I then saw the point of the marketing manager.

My discussions with the Imam, who was also the head of the community ranged amongst other things to self-sufficiency and the way the Muslims used to trade internationally without the help of the banks. I told him about certain Muslim groups in the West who are advocating a return to traditional trading through the use of gold and silver coins. His response to this was to tell me that he does not trust paper money and that his community traditionally kept their surplus wealth in gold. This is how they saved themselves when the crisis hit the country and the banks collapsed. So we are back to tradition again. The fashion today is banks and paper money, which is at the root of the environmental crisis and any critiquing of this, is considered to be a bit unfashionable if not loony. Such is the power of fashion and the path to “progress” - another fashionable buzzword, but what does it mean? The term’s application relates almost exclusively to economic progress, but the fact that this is causing massive pollution and species extinction at an alarming rate are issues people are not willing to look at squarely.

And then there is “sustainability”. It is now the buzzword in Eco-economics. Very fashionable in fact, but nobody can agree to what it means. But, here we have people living sustainably after the very traditional fashion of their forefathers and learning to cope with the dominant model at the same time. No definitions needed here – just getting on with it. So, tradition is best. It is not a monopoly of any one faith or nation or tribe or group. It has evolved out of centuries of responses to the rhythms of nature and importantly it is in context. It is not subject to the vagaries of one economic theory or another and neither is it dependent on the impulses of global financial markets. This is real progress. It is not polluting and it does not line the pockets of corrupt politicians, racketeers, petty officials and trans-national corporations. It is by the people for the people.

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