

BY JOHN TAN

KELVIN Tan Khai Wen, publicly known as Kel Wen, has always been one who does not shy away from risks. As the man behind Behati, the 30-year-old Muar designer has made a name for himself with his fashion-forward interpretations of traditional wear.

From his 2019's Raya collection of oversized *baju melayu* to Datuk Seri Vida's telekung dress at 2023's Astro Most Gempak Awards, Wen has breathed new life into Malaysia's cultural styles. This Raya, he explores tradition further with his interpretations of *kebaya* in his Qaba collection. Inspired by the etymology of *kebaya*, the collection makes a bold move to introduce it as menswear, presenting a masculine influence to the traditionally female piece.

What prompted your interest in *kebaya*?

This collection's name is Qaba and it is a tribute to *kebaya*. I wanted to pay homage because *kebaya* is a Nusantara fashion icon, originating from Indonesia and Arab (states).

It started off as *Qaba* from the Arabs and then it evolved into *kebaya*, as we know it today. So, this collection details the transformation from *Qaba* to *kebaya*. That said, I wanted it to also have a Malaysian aspect to it. Since multiculturalism is one of the biggest points of Malaysian traditional wear, I wanted it to show that this *kebaya* is made in Malaysia – you cannot get (this) anywhere else.

Take, for instance, the *Kebaya Baba* in our collection, which pays tribute to our local Peranakan culture. It is more minimal and it fits a man's body. Normally, it is only made for women. But I have created a shirt-inspired, corporate and modern *kebaya*. To me, this is what Malaysian tradition is about. It is always about trying to innovate things.

Do you think your exploration of *kebaya* will invite criticism?

My purpose for having *Qaba* as the title is to celebrate *kebaya*. I really want people to learn about the history of the word and piece.

For those wondering why I am making *kebaya* for men, I am hoping to prove *kebaya* is not only for women. My purpose is to only expand the market. This is just the first step. Hopefully, we can all have more variations of traditional wear in the future to showcase our Malaysian identity.



Kebaya korset batik.



The *baju melayu* comes with a reversible *sampin*.

Redefining traditional wear

► Behati founder Kel Wen presents *kebaya* as menswear this Raya

Why did you decide to play with darker colours this time around?

There is a lot happening in the world right now. Hence, the world's mood has been quite dark. So, I wanted this campaign to convey hope through the darkness. You can say this is a metaphor for me trying to remind people to be fearless and not allow our inner demons to control us in this holy month.

This is the first time I have touched horror in my art because I am not a fan of horror films. I am actually scared of horror films. But, I enjoyed this as a new experience. To me, it is about fighting my personal fears. And, to be able to create something out of it is a positive message. So, that is what I hope to convey.

Could you elaborate on some of the materials you utilised?

Songket is the main material I used because I do not see enough *songket* items. So in this collection, I wanted to present more design variations on

how to wear one. For instance, I made a reversible *sampin* and a *baju melayu* with it. Normally, people would only use a *songket* for *sampin* but it is such a nice fabric. I would want to wear it as a top.

Also, we would only wear *sampin* with *baju melayu*. But these days, we want something easy. When I am attending a Raya event, sometimes I prefer not to dress too full with a *sampin* covering but I love *songket*.

How do I solve this issue then? I just make it into a top and I can wear my jeans. The idea is to appreciate the culture, but also make it easy to style with. That is my goal – to create new styles using traditional methods and fabric.

How would you say the *songket* contributes to the overall feel and aesthetic?

Although it is dark, it is very rich at the same time, which is what *songket* is to me. For me, *songket* has never been happy or joyful. Instead, I have always seen it as dark and sophisticated.

This is especially true with the *songket* I picked this time around. It has a black base with hints of metallic gold and silver, just to represent the golden and silver age that we are having at this point.

It is to showcase time in a way. This is because I feel it is the most classic and I want to achieve a new classic. For this collection, I hope to build this image of a traditional

songket. When people think of *songket*, I hope they think of gold, silver and bronze, which are the best colours in my opinion.

Any specific piece you are particularly fond of?

Other than the *songket*, we do also have *kain pelikat* this season. I love *kain pelikat* because it is very casual. You can style it with jeans. You can dress it down or up. It all depends on how you style it. It also has that cultural element, which I love. This is because *kain pelikat* is originally from India. So, there is that cultural exchange.

What was the hardest aspect about bringing this collection to life?

The biggest challenge was the timeline for this year. The time frame between Chinese New Year and Raya was short. I am still trying to get used to it.

This whole collection actually came out in a month. Although I only showcased 20 designs, I actually had 80 designs. So, that was the biggest challenge – to make it in time and to conceptualise everything.

Will we be seeing you at KL Fashion Week this year?

Yes, you will. You can expect similar vibes as with this collection.

It is still going to be dark but it is going to be a fun one. I have been planning it.



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The collection also features Kel Wen's signature oversize *baju melayu*.



The *Kebaya Baba* pays homage to local Peranakan culture.