Carla Jones

Exposing Modesty: Fashionable Piety and Scandal in Indonesian Urban Life

We seem to be living in scandalous times. How can anthropological analysis make sense of the intimate binary between exposure and vulnerability? In this presentation, I argue that contemporary Indonesian debates about modest Muslim fashion are a potent site through which to analyze how scandal, the tantalizing but shocking revelation of secrets, is always gendered. Indonesia is the world’s largest majority-Muslim country. During the same decade in which post-authoritarian political culture there has focused on curing corruption through exposure, its semiotic opposite—cover—has become associated with the figure of the stylishly pious woman. By asking how women’s claims to modesty, often through social media, are reframed as vulgarity, I suggest that debates about women’s appearance can complicate the allure of transparency as a uniformly desired remedy for corrupt conditions.

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Carla Jones is Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Her research analyzes the cultural politics of appearance in urban Indonesia, with particular focus on femininity, domesticity, aesthetics and Islam. She has written extensively on self-improvement programs, manners and middle-class respectability during the Suharto and post-Suharto periods in Yogyakarta and Jakarta, and is the co-editor, with Ann Marie Leshkowich and Sandra Niessen, of Re-Orienting Fashion: The Globalization of Asian Dress (Berg, 2003). Her current work situates anxieties about Islamic style in the context of broader debates about corruption and exposure. She is especially interested in the suspicions that settle on covered women in contemporary Indonesia, in which accusations of hypocrisy intersect with gendered assertions about revelation and propriety. Jones was President of the Association for Feminist Anthropology from 2017-19.