

Against the Grain

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Back Talk – On Being A Fashionable Librarian!

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Back Talk — On Being A Fashionable Librarian!

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“Librarian fashion”? Did I read that right? I was looking at the program for the five-day **World Library and Information Congress of IFLA**, held in August in Kuala Lumpur. I’ve been attending for some years, always finding the event eye-opening and refreshing in many ways — and I currently serve on the **IFLA** governing board. We’ve seen many interesting programs, but a whole session on “Librarian fashion?”

Well, friends, it may have been the high point of the conference. Let me tell you a little about it.

Five hundred people crowded the room, first of all. And yes, the usual librarian jokes were all mentioned: hair in a bun, shushing the patrons, sensible shoes, etc. But the session was downright inspiring.

The importance of the session was highlighted when we saw that it was being introduced by governing board member **Antonia Arahova** from Greece, one of the moving spirits behind next year’s **IFLA** congress in Athens, and that the keynote speaker was **ALA’s** President **Loida Garcia-Febo**. The session had been organized jointly by the **IFLA** committees for New Professionals (always zany and smart), Management of Library Associations, and Public Libraries. There were seven papers, each one strictly kept to seven minutes, which were delivered by speakers from Australia, U.S., Mexico, Indonesia, India, Egypt, and two from Malaysia.

The papers were crisp, effective, and interesting. The two that absorbed the most interest came

from librarians in Malaysia and Indonesia: first, “Wear the past in the present for the future,” prepared by **Puspa Diana Jawi, Japri Bujang Masli, and Muhammad Annwar Adenan**, of the **Sarawak State Library**, Malaysia; and then “Traditional Costumes as librarians’ uniforms for work at Public Libraries of Yogyakarta, Indonesia,” prepared by **Atin Istiarni and Ida Fajar Priyanto**, of the **University of Muhammadiyah and Gadjah Mada University**, Indonesia. Malaysia and Indonesia are predominantly Muslim countries, where modesty in dress is expected and women face particular expectations. For the most part in this region, they do not wear the heavy black robes familiar from strict Middle Eastern countries, but instead colorful long robes and equally colorful headscarves are common. (Pro tip, as we say nowadays: if you want to wear colorful clothing on a regular basis, it’s a good idea to move to Malaysia, where inexpensive batiks and silks in dazzling colors and styles are widely available!) So, the theme of these talks was to explore the ways traditional dress can work for library professionals.

I have my American habits and styles, but I must say these speakers made a good case for using traditional dress consciously as a strategy, not merely for personal presentation but also for library mission. Should we not think, they asked, that wearing tradi-

tional dress in a library is a form of cultural heritage preservation? And of expressing commitment to the side of librarianship that is devoted to preserving and honoring traditional culture? They made a much better case than I thought one could possibly make, and they showed power-point slides with pictures of their library colleagues in various settings both casual and formal.



First, we listened our way through the papers thoughtfully, and then the fun began. It was time for the fashion show! One of the Malaysian speakers on the panel, **Nurfarahwahidah Badruesham** (<https://my.linkedin.com/in/nurfarahwahidah-badruesham-5587a7112>), is a professional librarian who doubles as a certified professional image consultant (she wears the long gown and the headscarf). She was amazing: one of the brains and energizers of the session!

The invitation was simple: “Y’all come!” (Doesn’t this sound **Katina**-like?) Everyone in the room was invited to walk the “catwalk” — or, well, the stage, actually. Come up on stage on one side, pose, and pause for photos at the front, then come down into the cheering crowd — those were the instructions. There must have been 150 people, male and female, who took up the invitation. They wore everything from gorgeous African native dress to jeans-and-shirt-with-airplane-wrinkles combinations, and wore everything with a swagger and a smile. What was beautiful was that the session had become such an open, affirming, respectful occasion, that people from all over the world, in every kind of clothing, of every age, size, and shape, were delighted to have the opportunity and spontaneously jumped on it. The 15 minutes or so of the fashion show may have been among the happiest and most energetic **IFLA** sessions ever seen.

You can see a couple of photographs here, but they hardly do justice to the session. Everyone, strutting onto the stage or crowding forward to take pictures or simply applauding at a distance, got caught up in the fun of the session. But it was fun with an important message. Rules and expectations and standards come second; self-expression and respect (even admiration!) for everyone we work with and for has to come first. What matters is not what one wears or how one looks, the message went on, but how one chooses to present oneself with confidence and ambition and respect for all one’s colleagues. Nobody left that room without a smile and an insight or three.

Six of the seven papers are available in the **IFLA** online library at: <http://library.ifla.org/view/conferences/2018/2018-08-27/927.html>.



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