

Symbolic Resistance: Tradition in Batik Transitions Sustain Beauty, Cultural Heritage and Status in the Era of Modernity

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Abstract

The use of batik as design culture heritage of Kampong Laweyan, a village in the Surakarta (Solo) province of Java island, Indonesia, is the case study of this paper. The purpose of research is to understand how batik, from its ancestral place of origin, facilitated the rise of a small community from cycles of economic slumps, while facing the external impacts of globalisation. Even as batik preservation gained UNESCO recognition in 2009, some critics argue that economic development is contrarian to the concept of preservation and sustainability. This paper brings together the numerous cultural, historical and socioeconomic perspectives of Indonesia's batik status as an intangible heritage. Using phenomenological method of critical inquiry, it traces the development of batik as a traditional cloth of both royalty and rural Indonesian society, a dual symbolic expression of folk wisdom which simultaneously facilitating architectural and social preservation of local communities. Interpretative analysis of batik artform as a cultural phenomenon presents the inherent 'equipment and expertise' as ways in which Laweyan leverages the economic potential of local cultural heritage in its tourism marketing. Findings show that supportive mechanisms and initiatives at local and national levels create awareness and interest in traditional batik heritage. Nevertheless, a concern for the productive capacities of rural villages must be harmonised with sustainable cultural tourism programmes for social and environmental benefits. From these principal findings, this paper contributes to design research by urging for the modernisation of batik as an iconic representation of Indonesian identity to be sustainably explored. Through designing, production, marketing and promotion via heritage tourism initiatives and through injecting contemporary ideas into batik production, it enables the preservation of generational wisdom through the intangible values of this distinctively beautiful and intricate fabric.

Keywords: Indonesian batik, batik art, cultural heritage, preservation, tourism

1. Introduction

The Central Javanese province of Surakarta (Solo) is one of the eight Indonesian sites designated by UNESCO for outstanding universal value due to its archaeological discoveries of early man settlements and ancient fossils at Sangiran (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). Kampong Laweyan, one of the settlements in Surakarta, has built its community fortunes since the 1920's through their much-touted batik craftsmanship (Steelyana, 2012; Widayati, 2004), making its name through tireless promotion of economic and social legacies, chief among these being the production, distribution and sale of *batik*. Indonesian *batik* was recognised by UNESCO (2009) by being inscribed on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since 2009. Among Laweyan's half million village population, are weavers and artisans endowed with masterful batik craftwork skills, rooted in historical associations with the production of "lawe" (spun cotton) and "lurik" or weaved fabric (Retnaningtyas, in UNESCO Asia Pacific Cultural Centre, 2009: 86-98). These traditional wares, known locally as *mbok mase*, brought tangible effects of economic prosperity through ornamental houses with kraton (court-)inspired building structures (Budiningtyas et al, 2013; Danar Hadi, 2011; Hastuti, 2009; Hastuti et al, 2013; Priyatmono, 2004; Soedarmono, 2006).

Globalisation has resulted in cheaper China and India print textiles overtaking markets once dominated by labour-driven, time-consuming handmade batik crafts, Kampong Laweyan woke up to huge commercial challenges

Budiningtyas et al (2013) with local merchants experiencing the effects of market downturns (Gatut & Ariyanto, 2010), further eroding the existence of related social heritage elements such as local architecture (Widayati, 2004). As awareness mounted over external economic threats on village lifestyles, locals were provoked to revitalise Laweyan through economic initiatives to preserve their traditions. Laweyan gradually developed into a tourist destination based on villagers' collective capacity (Budiningtyas et al, 2013; Ibnu Majah, 2015), particularly in batik and tourism. In consideration of heritage as a valuable cultural knowledge and regional economic development strategy, this research questions: *How do batik arts and batik preservation exemplify local community wisdom? What methods enhance social awareness of priceless generational learning and cultural knowledge? Does tourism add heritage preservation value?*

2. Literature Review

The exact genealogical origins of traditional batik are undetermined but presumed to be over 2,000 years old. Originating from the Majapahit kingdom, the artform evolved through subsequent sovereigns in power. Some records show that traditional batik art flourished extensively during the Mataram kingdom, followed by the kingdoms of Solo, Pekalongan and Yogyakarta, spreading from the end of the 18th-century into early 19th-century (Kuhr, 2012). Large-scale production, manufacture and marketing of batik only started in the later 20th-century (Smend, 2015). As an artistic heritage, batik reflects the image of Indonesia's highly developed tangible culture and arts heritage (Chutia and Sarma, 2016: 111); hence, the pride of batik deeply permeates Indonesian society (Setiawati, 2011).

Batik derives from the combination of Javanese words, 'amba' ("to write") and 'tik', from the word 'titik', referring to small dots or making dots. Tracing its origins to the Hindu kingdom of Galuh in the regency of Cirebon, on the western Java peninsula from 1520 AD, this form of wax writing as cloth decoration is also described as 'seratan' [Javanese for "writing"] (TREDA, 2008). Throughout Indonesia, batik art is an integral part of religious and secular observances as rooted in myriad cultural and remnants of traditional practices of Indonesian's unique geopolitical diversity and social milieu.



Figure 1. Crown Prince of Yogyakarta Hamengkuganara Wore the *Parang Barong* over Silk Trousers of Double Ikat Patterned *Patola*, with Embroidered Slippers Made for Royalty ca. 1885

Specific patterns like the 'parang' design were reserved for royalty (Elliott, 2010). During those times, the women of the Sultan's kraton (court) occupied themselves painting delicate batik designs (Figure 1). For the Javanese, batik is more than the art of decorating textiles; its swirls and motifs bear deeper cultural philosophy of life's milestones as represented by the cycle of birth, marriage and death. Batik cloth is wraps for newborns and doubles up usefully as infant cradles. It is the customary wedding attire for all classes, with motifs symbolising the relationship between

newlyweds and their families.



Figure 2. Courtesans Carry the Sultan's Ceremonial Paraphernalia, such as Lances, Gold Shield, Royal Umbrella, Gold *Sirih* Set and Spittoon, Wearing Batik in Accordance with Their Status, ca. 1935

Anthropology researcher Fiona Kerlogue (2004) explores batik's symbolisms for a host of other ritualistic performances: as funereal cloth; for spiritual protection from harm; to heal the sick, or to mark a sacred space. It reflects royal bloodlines through distinctive designs representing nobility classes, while functioning as formal attire for royal ceremonial events (Figure 2). Some batik designs are associated with traditional festivals and meant for religious or ceremonial purposes related to belief orientations namely Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam (Elliott, 2010: 22-24). As a sign of cultivation and refinement, batik is a treasure of the Indonesian peoples for centuries. Called the "fabled cloth of Java" by textile designer Inger McCabe Elliott (2010, cited in Smend and Harper, 2015: 148), the art has journeyed from ornamental folk motifs inscribed on the walls of ancient temples to contemporary designs that compete in the international fashion world.

2.1 Batik Production for Heritage Preservation

To understand the role of design culture in the exploration of batik artform for heritage preservation, the process of batik-making should firstly be understood. Batik-making is a resist technique for producing design on fabric with the use of dyes. The process involves blocking out selected areas of fabric through application of melted wax (paraffin or pure beeswax) on both sides, after which colour is brushed or applied in a dye bath. The waxed areas, repelling the dye, maintain the original fabric colour. This step is repeated until it achieves intricate design combinations and overlay of colours (Krevitsky, 1964).

The subtlety in batik artistry, Murray (2013) notes, is akin to darkroom photography: its inversion of the outcome begins as negative form, making it unlike regular painting or other art methods. This also implies the batik-maker's deeper understanding of interrelations between multiple phases of waxing, dyeing and colour setting, as well as fluctuating quality outcomes of manual production (Optimasi et al., 2018).

Historically, batik was produced by households (Brenner, 1998: 39-51). It was essentially a craft in the female skills domain, the ability to handle the *canting* and a small copper container with a long slender spout, which involves gentle blowing of its tip to secure the wax flow. Javanese hand-drawn batik's characteristic motifs and pattern richness adapts to reveal diverse expressions of cultural influences from Hinduism and Islam, as well as Arab, Dutch, Portuguese and Chinese (Danar Hadi, 2011; Elliott, 2010). Nature is another source of design inspiration: leaves, buds, flowers, trees and twining shrubs, butterflies, birds, mountains, water, clouds, fish, insects, etc. These motifs take more geometric design forms today.

3. Research Methods

Design culture research is useful to examine the interrelationship between design artefacts, the works of local designers and producers and how these affect social trends related to consumption (Highmore, 2009). Historians, designers, social scientists and economists seek to understand society through examining aspects of culture such as lifestyles, architecture, technological, environmental and material use to improve understanding about human development, population growth, the spread of beliefs, language, power and influence (Highmore, 2009; Widayati, 2004).

Design is ubiquitous; perceived and observed around us in the natural and human world. Modernisation of design is essential for cultural progress and development. New designs provide a platform that distinguishes artists' and designers' creativity from one another. Hence, design culture is a productive arena for social research, supplying literature and discourses as catalysts to explore and explain the deep cultural interweaving and entanglements of our material world, from mercantile activities to social interactions. This enables researchers to gain critical insights into the role of arts in the modernisation of culture, studied and documented from varied perspectives of anthropological, archaeological and ethnography disciplines. James Spradley (1997) for instance, applied ethnographic interviews in participant-observation of subjects as the essential complement of grounded theory-formation, through researching the narrative descriptions of village practices such as lifestyles, linguistic habits and social behaviours.

In this paper, qualitative case study technique for evaluating the preservation strategies of Indonesian batik as intangible heritage will be utilised. Firstly, the research analyses economic valuation of batik industry potential through tourism marketing and architectural preservation. Secondly, the cultural interpretative context of large-scale commercial production of batik in Laweyan is reviewed. Overall, the research aims to obtain some notable differentiations in the approaches. This enables critical insights from the findings, as the scope of discussion for this paper was intended to demonstrate similarities between broader economic prospects and local perceptions, in order to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of each. An examination of both perspectives increases the ability of ancient communities such as Laweyan to face modern challenges to heritage preservation. Design research on batik's value as a form of cultural heritage derives from understanding its function *as a tradition in transition*. Research process was limited by several factors, namely a lack of cohesive field data on the characteristics of market competition and local government responses through policy mechanisms. Another hindrance is inadequacies indicated in several areas of policy coordination at national and state levels to effectively predict the direction of future initiatives. Suggestions for policy change will be elaborated in the concluding sections.

4. Discussion

Batik preservation go beyond heritage promotion for visitors to Indonesia (Santyaningtyas and Mahmood Zuhdi, 2017) with the implementation of a government-endorsed United Nations-funded programme, P2WIK, since 1981 (Sharpley and Tefler, 2002: 224). Rural village womenfolk, as well as small-time entrepreneurs form the key producers and distributors under P2WIK, having their collective incomes redistributed in the community through direct selling to wholesalers and tourists. As local labour yield to increasing market demands for low-cost products, commodification also erodes the transfer of cultural wisdom and collective identity (Robinson and Picard, 2006). Overall, batik industry growth posits on production in line with increasing market demand, skill differentiations among craftspeople, and growth in distribution and retailing.

4.1 Traditional Batik in the 21st-Century Global Economy

Modern batik makes its presence all over Indonesia, particularly on Friday, the formally designated Batik Day that sees civil servants attired in cultural office wear (Steelyana, 2012), besides the national batik day celebration on October 2 (Fact of Indonesia, 2017). Batik appreciation has also been rising significantly the last two decades, being worn at state and local events, during graduations, as standard working uniform designs for hotel staff or tour guides, ironically resulting in its objectification as a token emblem of Indonesia's cultural unification (Kuhr, 2012: 124-128). The local cultural agencies have moved to ensure the "multiplier effect" of batik visibility continues, with 77% of respondents survey nationally claimed attiring themselves voluntarily in batik at least once a month (cited in Steelyana, 2012).

Contemporary batik artisans also play an important role. Edi Setyawati of University of Indonesia described the learned batik heritage phenomenon thus:

"Within an ethnic group's a traditional culture, the sharing of creations is a common practice. To copy a work of art ... is generally not considered as a transgression of rights, but [instead, is] considered as sharing [of culture], which

is ... *beneficial*" (cited in Jaszi, 2009).

The late batik designer Iwan Tirta (1960-2000) believed that with the commodification of printing and mass production since 1970s, came a gradual and inevitable diminishing of batik's essence and inherent social value, as cheap, copied products awash domestic and regional markets, directly challenging hand-made batik's authentic cultural position and dual importance to Javanese royal and rural society (Kuhr 2012: 132). Thousands of designs have been produced for the domestic and international markets, with regional production centres located in Yogyakarta, Pekalongan and Surakarta (TREDA, 2008). The Indonesia Batik Foundation claim exports of products reach U.S, Sweden, Germany, UAE and France. From over 3,400 designs, the Solo Regional Government patented about 900 motifs (TREDA, 2008: 31). By strengthening the intellectual property protection, the Foundation seeks to actively integrate batik handicraft promotion and development as an economic industry while protecting the intangible cultural heritage Laweyan. Table 1 shows an approximate figure of batik users (Ministry of Trade Indonesia).

Table 1. Domestic Use of Batik in Indonesia (TREDA, 2008)

Batik Users	Total
Government Employee	3,995,000
Private Employee	12,658,000
Kindergarten Student	56,400
Elementary Student	226,700
Junior High School Student	180,200
Senior High School Student	114,700
Community	55,000,000
Total	72,231,000

4.2 Laweyan Architectural Heritage Preservation

Scholars attempt to address preservation issues by studying the links between "pro-poverty growth" approaches in developing cultural economies (such as Indonesia), and how stakeholder direct benefit from policy changes (Antara and Sri Sumarniasih, 2017). Michel Picard (1993, cited in Picard and Wood, 1997: 110) states that community identity is the result of "discursive constitutions" of local cultural transformations and external relations in postcolonial eras, justifying the importance of preserving ethnic customs and practices.

Long before its heritage site status in 2004, Laweyan had established its fame as producers and merchants of quality batik in the past century (Ibnu Majah, 2015). The village proved its spirit of independence and resilience by forming a closed-off patrician enclave, where lavish private homes complete with five-meter high walls (known as "beteng") separated it from neighbouring communities, affecting external perceptions and stoked its elitist image (Brenner, 1998; Mirsa et al., 2016; Widayati, 2004: 7-12).

Laweyan's "labyrinthine ancient dwellings" (Agmasari, 2017) are constructed around narrow walking paths, embellished with court-inspired ornate décor and hand-carved motifs as door ornamentations, and this image contributed to its alienation. As the village economy grew, Laweyan became a natural site for traditional, familial weaving practices to rise. The growth of mercantile knowledge resulted in its becoming a symbol of resistance over centuries, competing with societies that deferred to nobility classes, and the village experienced heights of prosperity over centuries of immersion in trading while proudly preserving its local character (Brenner, 1998; UNESCO Asia Pacific Cultural Centre: 88-90).

Law No. 11/2010 on Cultural Heritage Protection mandates the safeguarding of cultural legacies through preservation of settlement buildings and objects by documenting them as "traditional culture expressions" (Santyaningtyas and Mahmood Zuhdi, 2016). In a longitudinal study of Laweyan's evolution as a feudal settlement to an artisanal enclave, Mirsa et al (2016) found changes brought about by transformational processes of urban geography. The authors reflect on batik's importance for communal survival, for example, the way local rivers, where fabric washing and drying, once formed the bonds of social interrelations, have turned into modern highways. Other literature indicate heritage protection measures such as spatial utilisation as a necessary initiative to preserve

architectural legacy (Adishakti, 2005: 25), yet rural land or homeowners may be reluctant to convert their dwellings into commercial hubs, despite a desperate want of restoration, a problem attributed to repeated cycles of economic fluctuations that are felt acutely by villagers when the costs of preservation get prohibitive (Widayati, 2000; Sharpley, 2015).

4.3 Local Wisdom in Regional Tourism Development

Local wisdom is defined as the knowledge of the community in the past as accumulated into a body of cultural knowledge for the present (Antara and Sri Sumarniasih, 2017; Holthaus, 2008). Living cultural values, passed down by local wisdom keepers, are enablers in the transfer of generational knowledge, to be protected by the descendants and successors of a culture (Widayati, 2004). Ahimsa-Putra (2007) states that local wisdom survives when stronger elements are inherited; impracticable ones left behind or discarded. The value of local wisdom as learning solutions for community-specific problems have also been widely debated (Ahimsa-Putra, 2004; Holthaus, 2008) and the usefulness of local wisdom preservation studied by Sartini (2004) and Holthaus (2008).

Scholars, tourism marketers, economists and politicians interpret the value of local wisdom differently. From a political science perspective, measures to boost productivity through skills and technical development for textile manufacturing help ensure sustainable supply chains for the supply of human capital and raw materials (Indonesia Cabinet Secretariat, 2017).

From a sociological perspective, local wisdom is undoubtedly a prime asset enabling communities to promote batik's inherent symbolisms while adapting to broader social problems related to heritage preservation. As Southgate and Sharpley (cited in Sharpley and Tefler, 2002: 252) found, community management of resources enable social capital of mutual trust and assurance to develop, forming the core incentive for regulatory behaviours needed to maintain cooperation. Local wisdom, not cultural hegemony, is the basis for the growth of modern culture, where technology thoughtfully integrates into cultural heritage initiatives. Where socioeconomic development conflict with environmental preservation, community dialogues are preferred to legal resolutions (Dahlani, Soemarno and Setijanti, 2015). As Hofman, Rodrick-Jones and Thee (2004: 44) found, poverty-stricken communities often suffer the inevitable consequences of socioeconomic changes, involving into disputes ranging from land title claims to business competition coming under bureaucratic interference. In many cases, the collective, *informal* wisdom of families, friends, local leaders and religious authorities are sought to achieve resolutions. For rural communities, the reality of their situations should be monitored and supported by non-profit organisations and NGOs, in their roles as institutional interface of the producer-consumer-authority dialogues, through offering unprejudiced counsel (Chutia and Sarma, 2016; Mason, 2008: 178; Sharpley, 2015; Vitasurya, 2015).

4.4 Future Direction in the Modernisation of Batik

In overcoming problems, this section will discuss viable solutions. Tourism is a primer for socioeconomic growth, characterised by employment boost. The development of regional tourism can effectively reduce poverty margins by addressing larger communal poverty issues, providing local enterprise opportunities (Cukier, 2002; Mason, 2008: 36-37). Structured processes, robust employment creation programmes and well-developed commodity export policies enables village producers to launch new products and market innovations for domestic and tourist markets, through upgrading existing equipment, amenities and facilities (Cukier, 2002, in Sharpley and Telfer, 2002: 165-201; Antara and Sri Sumarniasih, 2017; Yoeti, 1990: 34).

The modern adaptation of designs, styles and material modification would enable Indonesia to catalyse its place in culture marketing among countries of Southeast Asia by commodifying batik for contemporary consumers and tourists, without abandoning traditions (Chutia and Sarma, 2016; Gray, 2011). This contributes to community preservation by encouraging mutual cultural exchanges among Indonesia's business communities in trade activities such as export and negotiation. Additionally, the fashion and design world's adoption of traditional batik ensures its vital heritage styles, motifs and distinctive personas to be proudly presented to global markets.

Globalisation aside, where market demands necessitate increased commercialisation, batik's image needs to be complementary component of tourism marketing. Production of batik-inspired clothing, accessories, household items and decor must be periodically introduced, innovated and promoted (Budiningtyas et al, 2013). Advocacy groups need to influence younger generations' perceptions in order to build talent momentum and pride awareness. Their role is to remind youth of batik's beauty by encouraging interest in its history, heritage and functionality.

Another issue hampering preservation efforts is intellectual property rights protection (Hitchcock and Nuryanti, 2000). Although the global export market for batik developed with astonishing rapidity in the last decades, the lack of acknowledgement of design trademark protection persists as marketing agencies and supply chains disregard

ownership of rights of design manufacture and pattern exclusivity. At the same time, state agencies are without proper vested authority to ensure income distribution systems are fairly implemented to benefit craft producers (Chutia and Sarma, 2016; Gatut and Ariyanto, 2010).

National and state promotional programmes, private collectors' boutiques, public galleries, and non-commercial institutions such as foundations can do their part as cultural sponsors, by enabling upcoming entrepreneurs to take on competition from the region's other major producer, Malaysia (Gelling, 2009). Campaigns on batik-making processes utilising media channels both traditional and digital help further publicise and change perceptions. These reflect the essence of cultural modernity and diversity in craftwork as demonstrated by the entrepreneurial spirit of women artisans (for instance, social enterprise *Lawe Indonesia*, <https://www.laweindonesia.com>).

Certainly, the challenge ahead is on building strong tactical methods to head off competition from international market distributors and suppliers, even as batik strives to shed its limited cultural image of "uncool" folk attire. Some possible ways include designer fashion lines, blending traditional patterns, colours and themes to produce contemporary designs. Marketing and branding through local arts initiatives and festivals are crucial to engage audiences. Batik producers should find new ways to respond to environmentalists' calls for cleaner practices. For manufacturers, traditional hot wax stoves could be replaced with energy-reducing electric stoves. Natural dyes as alternative to synthetic dyes should be encouraged through campaigns for producers eyeing larger markets (Booth, 2011). SME innovation in production from cost-effective and environmentally friendly practices could be explored such as the recycle and recovery of wet wax runoffs (known as "pelorodan"), and reuse of wastewater from dyeing and flushing processes (Susanty et al., 2013). Future modernisation of Indonesia's batik industry requires new paradigms. Solutions applying local wisdom should be considered if national tourism policies and measures are inequitable, unsustainable or ineffective in resolving localised environmental problems (Hofman et al, 2004; Telfer, in Sharpley and Telfer, 2002: 338-348).

A clearer strategic framework must identify and adheres to sustainable tourism principles to manage and promote sustainable development through preserving rural community identities, e.g. heritage architecture (Hitchcock and Kerlogue, 2000; Sharpley, 2000). Well-planned tourism marketing programmes must showcase various crucial aspects of heritage preservation, encouraging sustainable tourist attractions such as visitor galleries to house batik artefacts, displays and products in uniquely local settings. Tourism revenues must be channelled back to help villagers conserve their ancestral dwellings (Budiningtyas et al., 2017). Consequential to tourism development, local communities must be encouraged to maintain the intangible values of their material culture for posterity (Hitchcock et al., 2010; Ibnu Majah, 2015; Ahimsa-Putra, 2004; Widayati, 2004).

5. Conclusions

From principal findings presented in this paper, it was clear that batik is acknowledged to be significant contributor to Indonesia's national artistic and cultural heritage. It sustains the inherent value of Indonesia's tourism economy, yet batik's potential should be appreciated from the standpoint of craftsmanship and as a signifier of local wisdom.

Besides state-mandated attire policies, perception change programmes also contribute in sustaining batik's popularity and intangible heritage. Debates must be fostered, even as commercialisation enhances social perceptions of batik around the world (Smend and Harper, 2015). This paper contributes to design research by urging for the modernisation of batik as an iconic representation of Indonesian identity to be sustainably explored. Through injecting contemporary ideas into batik design, production, marketing and promotion via well-thought out initiatives, it enables the preservation of the intangible values of this distinctive fabric.

Stakeholder involvement is another solution for the revitalisation and preservation of batik manufacturing communities. Local artisans and industries must root for the cloth as a genuine soul symbol for Indonesia by marketing its origins and utilising it to express Indonesia's national identity. Design researchers should comprehensively map future directions of traditional batik by studying how its adaptation to the world economy signifies the impacts of mass production, competition and globalisation on local cultural economies. In reaching out to domestic markets, this author argues for properly strategised localised initiatives where state funding and media attention for traditional batik is highlighted through cultural exchange programmes. International exhibitions, seminars, workshops and textile or fashion design showcases are other methods to ensure batik arts is seen to be worth preserving (Chutia and Sarma, 2016; Steelyana, 2012).

Enhancing competitiveness in fashion and textile industries through intellectual ownership rights protection of the craft, while establishing gallery and design museum collections for tourism marketing programmes, would help

boost adoption rates among global culture connoisseurs. State tourism agencies and other economic development authorities must work collaboratively with educational and cultural institutions to ensure batik heritage preservation becomes an authentic response from modern society, not an act of nationalistic compulsion.

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