Indonesian Batik: Identity, Symbolism and Textile Communication

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Abstract

This paper will guide the reader through the world of Indonesian batiks. As an introduction, the paper will present classic Javanese batik motifs, its history and use in society, and will make an attempt to discuss batik symbolism and textile communication. The paper will further discuss the many batik types found in each region, their names, and their function in society. The paper will close with a section on contemporary batik and the future of batik in Indonesia.

Batik is closely related to the Indonesian people, in particular the Javanese who make, wear and promote them. In Indonesia the word ‘batik’ emerged between the 10th to 14th century, from the ancient word “(a)mba-tik” which means making or writing a dot or a range of dots on cloth. Batik in Indonesia is made by decorating woven cloth with designs using a wax-pen or canting with a wax compound to cover those parts of the cloth which are to resist a particular color during the dyeing process.

The roots of batik are ancient, found everywhere, and difficult to trace. No one knows exactly where and when people first began to make batik. Batik is known to have existed in China, Japan, India, Thailand, East Turkestan, Europe, and Africa, and it may have developed simultaneously in several of these areas. Some scholars believe that the batik process originated from India and was later brought to Egypt and the rest of the world. Wherever batik originated, batik was most highly developed on the island of Java.
History and Identity

Routiër in his book "De Batikkunst in Nederlandsch Indie", suggested that batik started in the 6th or 7th century on Java. Other scientists claim that the 6th century the Aryan culture originating from India and Pakistan influenced Southeast Asia, introducing the products of art which became the medium of enlightenment according to the Hindu-Buddhist philosophy. The decorative arts became an accessory on the arts that depicted figures of gods carved or painted depicting scenes from the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics on temples, performed in puppet theatre, carved on metal works, and woven in the material arts. Religious decorative arts became part of religious Indonesian life and are infused into various elements.

In the beginning, painted cloth “batik” was used as ceremonial and religious cloth, batik ornaments were linked to spiritual and symbolical purposes. The art of Indonesian batik was first explored by the court particularly by noblewomen, who had time to spend six or eight weeks designing and waxing one piece of cloth. Within the creative art process on Java, there were also creators of art called ‘empu’, a term given to someone who has achieved a mastering of arts, aesthetics and meditation. An empu has the ability to create art that served as a medium between the seen and the unseen dimensions. The batik motifs are rooted in such a creative process, while the craftspeople produce these designs in order to decorate and embellish the object, and to give the object a function in society (Nia Fliam Ismoyo, 2007).

In a personal communication with textile expert Judi Knight Achjadi several years back, I learned that as a non-Javanese person, naming batik in the traditional way is easy, but understanding the meaning of a pattern is complicated. First, it should be understood that the language used in naming the classical patterns is Ancient Javanese, and not the Indonesian language that we learn in school today. Secondly, to understand the Javanese philosophy, we need to have some knowledge of the Hindu-Javanese way of thinking. Thirdly, we should have an insight into what an object means to a traditional minded Javanese. A lotus blossom to a Javanese is not necessarily a flower. And lastly, Bedrich Forman (1988) suggested that batik actually is apart from reality, and it reflects the inward state by looking not at, but into and through aniconic symbols or symbols that are represented by something else. According to Judi, trying to interpret the meanings of a batik pattern is like peeling an onion layer-by-layer.
Symbolism and Textile Communication

Most batiks of the Central Java Sultanates have a symbolic meaning and therefore have communicative abilities through which it “speaks” (Gienger, 1989). Cultural meaning is expressed in textiles through motifs, colors, and the actual meaning of the name given to the cloth. Symbolism, which is developed by culture over time indicates that the cloth has visual textile communication skills. Symbolic meanings are important to many Javanese, however not all Javanese people do understand and adhere to the meanings and symbolism of batik designs, while some batik terms are slowly disappearing.

There are many thousands of batik designs in existence. Classic Javanese batik designs are many, however only the most important ones will be mentioned here. In the past, to distinguish the differences in rank between various members of the sultans' families and high officials, ordinances were passed periodically at the courts of Yogyakarta and Surakarta sultanates listing batik patterns which could be worn only by members of certain status and relationship to the sultan. Commoners were not allowed to wear these designs.

By decrees issued in the 18th century, the Sultan of Surakarta reserved for himself and his close relatives designs that were forbidden for commoners. These designs exclusively reserved for the ruler and his family were called “larangan” (which is forbidden), these include the following motifs: *parang* (broken blade), *sawat gurdo* (Garuda wings), *udan liris* (drizzling rain) and *cemukiran* (border motif originating from a lotus design).
Parang

Parang is a motif arranged following a diagonal line in the shape of letter ‘S’ as a symbol for continuity interpreted in various ways. It is believed that the word parang comes from the word pereng/lereng or steep slope as found on the south coast of the island Java. Sultan Agung the third king of the Mataram kingdom interprets the sharp rock formations on the coast as a symbol for a sharp mind. Another meaning of parang is machete or knife. Wearing this batik motif at a wedding is not allowed, as it is believed that it might destroy the newly-weds’ life. The philosophical meaning of parang is the continuous struggle for the truth and be a good example to other people. ‘Parang rusak’ (broken knife or blade), was reserved for the king and his consorts.

Gurdo (Garuda)

In Hindu mythology, the eagle Garuda is considered the ally of the gods and the mount of Lord Vishnu. On batik, Garuda may be depicted as a complete set of two wings and an open tail called sawat, as two wings (mirong) or just one wing (lar).

‘mirong’ (garuda wings), with a parang kli’k (small parang) background was reserved for the princes and their families. For lower ranks and distant family-members the semen style was allowed without garuda wings.
Udan Liris (drizzling rain)

*Udan liris* is a diagonal *lereng* pattern symbolizing fertility. Some say that *udan liris* symbolizes determination and gratitude after having faced many obstacles in life. The slanted rows may feature 5, 7, 9 or 11 rows each with a different pattern, which will be repeated filling the whole surface of the cloth. There are two types of this design, *rujak sente’* featuring a dark background, while *udan liris* has a white background.

Cemukiran

*Cemukiran* is a pattern bordering a plain center field of a head or breast cloth. It is said that *cemukiran* originated from a lotus pattern.

*Cemukiran* is a symbol of power, and in the past only worn by royalty.

With the development of time, these motifs are considered no “*larangan*” anymore and are now worn by commoners. The *parang* and *udan liris* designs are depicted in the 45 degree-style of *lereng* or “slanted or diagonal style”.
Types of Batik

There are various types of batik, *batik tulis* or hand-drawn and hand-waxed batik on one or both sides of the cloth, *batik cap* or batik made using a copper or wooden stamp (around the mid 11th century) so that batik designs could be reproduced much more quickly. The third type of batik is *printed batik*, or batik motifs made by machines (early 20th century) or through the medium of computers (21st century). There is a wide array of materials used, the most common are cotton and silk, however other materials such as pineapple fibers, *goni* fibers, *pela* or rattan-leaves fibers, palm fibers, orchid fibers, and banana fibers are popular and have a huge market. Lately batik is also printed on synthetic material, such as satin, rayon and polyester.

Initiated by the Javanese court, gradually, the batik technique spread, while workers and commoners became more involved in the work-process, especially when the trade markets for batiks began to develop in the seventeenth century. Until the late nineteenth century, natural dyes were made by tradition and local knowledge. Tree-bark, fruit, roots, and leaves were used for natural dyes.

Depending on the number of colors used, a Javanese batik is immersed in one or more dye-vats. Each color has its own meaning, often indicating its regional or family origin. The first color used was indigo blue, followed by red and yellow, and these three colors, dyed in combination, became the traditional colors in Javanese batik for centuries.

In the late nineteenth century, chemical dyes were introduced, so that by the twentieth century Indonesian batik artisans were able to produce batik fabrics in great quantities, using many hues.
Geometric and Non-Geometric

Based on their shape, batik designs are divided into geometric and non-geometric designs. Geometric designs for example are, parang and lereng, ceplok, and banji.

Ceplok is a general name for a series of repeating geometric designs based on squares, rectangles, ovals, rhomboids, stars, diamonds, crosses and circles. The geometric design Banji "ten-thousand-fold" (ban= 10; zhi = thousand) shows Chinese influence, while the philosophical meaning is to wish the wearer luck ten-thousand-fold.

According to batik expert Judi Achjadi, kawung is an ancient pattern and is believed to be a design of four oval lobes touching each other, while pointing to the center. The oval lobes are believed to be jaggery palm fruit, cut length-wise. For the Javanese the kawung motif is considered sacred, as it symbolizes not only fertility depicted by two crosses or seeds on each lobe, but it is also considered a pattern of strength and power.
Some of the most imaginative and splendidly ornamented batik designs are the 'semen' designs. 'Semen' comes from the word ‘semi’, which means 'small buds and young leaves' featuring curling tendrils providing an interlocking background for stylized flora, fauna, and symbolic scenes.

*Semen Rama* pattern comprising of motifs featuring *hastabrata* or 8 virtues of a good leader plus one: 1. Tongues of fire; 2. Mountain; 3. Tree of Life; 4. Deer; 5. Bird; 6. Garuda wing; (Sewan Susanto in Oetari Siswomihardjo, 2011). It is believed that 7. is *pusaka* or heirloom; 8. *temple* or structure that gives protection and ti. Throne, symbol of royal power.

The philosophy behind Hastabrata is explained as follows: A good leader should have the following eight characteristics: a leader should be able 1) to be the source of light that shines upon the world and be the source of information; 2) able to solve problems. 3) to be respectful to one another; 4) have high aspirations; 5) be considerate to people; 6) be kind and gentle towards others; 7) be a motivator for other people; 8) be open minded.

Batik worn by the servants of the Yogyakarta palace (2014)  Batik worn by children from the royal household of Yogyakarta.
Batik as royal costume at Keraton Surakarta Hadiningrat: A: costume for females of the royal household; B: costume for ceremonial occasions; C: for females older than 15 years (M. Soedibyo, 2000)

Batik for males at Keraton Surakarta Hadiningrat. Left: daily wear of a prince; right: royal costume for ceremonies (M. Soedibyo, 2000)

Batik used as costume for soldiers of Keraton Surakarta Hadiningrat: (left) for lower rank; (right) for high ranking soldiers (M. Soedibyo, 2000)
These classic batik motifs show a wide range of Hindu, Buddhist, and Javanese inspired designs.

Batik has traditionally been associated with traditional festivals and specific religious ceremonies. It was believed that some batiks motifs had mystical powers to ward off sickness, and ill fortune, such as batik slobog, which is also used for the deceased, while other pieces are believed to bring good luck to a seller (pisan bale), meaning that the buyer will return to buy more. Certain batik designs are reserved for seven month rituals of an unborn baby, and traditional weddings, others are for dead rituals, or are merely used as a sling to carry a baby. In the past, a person’s status can be determined from the batik he or she was wearing. The bigger the design the more important the individual is.

Nowadays this is no longer true.

*Slobog* motif

*Pisan Bale*, generally called *pisang Bali* (Bali banana)
PEKALONGAN

Batiks of the North Coast are distinct from the batik keraton or batik from the Central Javanese sultanates. In Pekalongan for example, the batiks were introduced by merchants from India, and China, hence the Chinese and Indian influence, dominated by vibrant colors of *pesisir* (coastal) batiks of Pekalongan, while the designs show free and dynamic patterns. Colors of batik Cirebon however, appear more muted and fine. *Pesisir* batiks are heavily influenced by the Chinese, Arab and western merchants that introduced their culture to the north coast of Java, as demonstrated by the following batik samples.
North-coastal batiks may include elements from both European sources. Many of these reflect indigenous motifs rooted in neolithic culture; however, over the years, designs from Indian cottons, Chinese textiles, ceramics, carvings, and European floral patterns and tales have been added to the Indonesian batik repertoire.

*Buketan* or Bouquet of flowers and “Little Red Riding Hood” motif (Pekalongan) show western influence (van Zuylen 19120)

North-coast shoulder cloths depicting phoenixes, and Cirebon Batik showing rock formations found at the Cirebon palace (Katura Batik) show Chinese influence
Batik Sudagaran (Merchant’s Batik)

After keraton batik became more public, a different type of batik emerged called batik Sudagaran (merchant’s batik), a combination of batik keraton and dynamic patterns according to the tastes of local merchants. Batik Sudagaran is bold and daring in terms of design and color combination of soga and dark blue. In addition, batik Sudagaran shows a background of isen-isen or fillers, the most simple batik design, consisting of dots, hooks, curls and the like.

Merchant’s Batik/ bati Sudagaran kupu-kupu latar Dan liris, butterflies on drizzling rain background, Solo 2011) (Danar Hadi)

Batik Madura depicting bold free hand-drawn and stylized motifs (Judy Sumarsono, 2011)

Head cover. Batik Sudagaran Tiga negeri (Merchant’s Batik, Three Regions Batik). The color brown is dyed in Solo, the red in Lasem and the blue in Pekalongan. (Doellah 2002)
Sumatera

Batik made in Sumatera has a totally different appearance, the designs are bold, simple, each standing on its own, and some of them may include calligraphic motifs, or show elements unique to the region.

Batik besurek or batik calligraphy from Jambi (2014)  Batiak Tanah Liek (Clay Batik), Minangkabau (West Sumatra), colors are dyed using clay.

Until now, some batiks are made on Java for the Sumatran market, however, today many regions have their own batik industry.

BALI

The indigo silk batik by artisan Cokorde Agung of Pejeng (image left) is made using a hand-carved cap, depicting motifs of carps (good luck), and the Balinese poleng motif (dualism in life). (MW Collection 2003.)
SULAWESI

This batik shawl from Toraja in Sulawesi depicts buffaloes and farmers (MW collection, early 1960’s)

PAPUA

Inspired by batik motifs from Java, Papuan artisans show elements taken from their own island such as the Bird of Paradise, exotic orchids and their traditional axe (Timika Collection 2014).

Contemporary Batik

Contemporary batik owes much to the past, it is different from the more traditional and formal batik styles. For example, the batik artisan Dudung from Pekalongan holds on to the pakem (rules and regulations) of the existence of the mlinjon, the small diamond between rows of batik parang, however he explored the design by deconstructing the pattern, and reconstructing again, creating an utmost expressive and totally new design. The ever widening range of techniques and methods available offer the artist the opportunity to explore a unique process in a flexible and existing way.
Other contemporary artists are Nia Fliam and Agus Ismoyo from Brahmasari Studio in Yogyakarta. Their collaborative works feature layers of detailed landscapes of light, color and perspective, to discover visual symbolism built on traditional Javanese motifs such as parang, semen and kawung.

Contemporary batiks are also inspired by designers, such as the batik made by Sekar Jaya, Surakarta inspired by the Italian designer Milo.
The Future of Batik

On October 2009, UNESCO designated Indonesian batik as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. This prestigious award made the general public in Indonesia more aware of the great value of batik they inherited from their ancestors. As a result, after 2009 the batik market potential increased ten-fold. The back-bone behind the success are the local small and medium batik enterprises that are competitive at the national and international level.

A qualitative research executed by the Satya Wacana Christian University reveals that there is a great potential for doing batik business because while batik has been rooted for generations, batik is a prime cultural product. The younger generations, and particularly young Indonesian designers have taken the initiative to wear, use and work with batik in their designs, creating an even larger market. In addition, the research showed that future anticipation for doing a successful batik business reveals the importance of the role of batik associations and the support of the government, the significance of patterns of anticipation and future strategy and the correct way to develop human resources in the batik industry.

Recently, new developments have shown that students of Bandung Institute of Technology, since 2006 experimented with 3D modeling software to help create batik patterns, which they called batik fractal. In doing so, ancient Indonesian batik motifs have been revived through new mathematical formulas and digital technologies. For many batik aficionados, ‘batiks’ created through this technique are seen as different, as it is created not in the traditional way, although executed through the implementation and applying of bees-wax.

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About the Author

Wastra, meaning “traditional textile”, is a passion of Mariah Wawuruntu’s, a hobby she started 15 years ago. She loves to visit weavers and textile artisans not only in Bali, but time permitting, all over the archipelago. Presently she is the editor of a bi-lingual traditional textile journal published two times a year.

Mariah is retired from the University of Indonesia and is currently the owner of Villa Wastra Bed and Breakfast, in Bali, Indonesia, a boutique B&B she built with her husband, Bob, in 2006.

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