

## **Habitus of Culture: Retaining Batik's Identity amidst the Modernization**

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### **Abstract**

Amidst the rapid modernization, Batik is now considered old-fashioned and less favored; as an icon of traditional textile art, Batik has been inferior in keeping up with current demands of a so-called "modern" society. The quick-spreading fad of *kekinian* (or „trendy“, „hype“) has been more familiar to the younger generation. This phenomenon calls for a critical outlook on the "metaphysics of presence" that lays its foundation on the principle of aesthetics. To this growing lifestyle, perfections in life are achieved by expediency and pragmatism. Contrary to that, batik offers traditionalistic, symbolic approach of representing meaning; therefore, it becomes less popular compared to the recent trends. This study, however, sees the relevance of raising the discourse of batik in the midst of recent trends by approaching it from the lens of cultural pluralism that highlights its emphasis on a nation's "character". However, in lieu of mere attempt of "reviving" the relevance of batik, this study aims further to discuss batik's true nature and the development of its existence throughout the advancement of culture and science.

Keywords : Batik Education, Habitus of Culture, Philosophy of Batik

### **1. Batik's motifs**

There has been much debate over the history of batik: its origins, motifs, and dyeing techniques. People all over the world, from Latin America, up to India and Indonesia's neighbor, Malaysia, has been claiming about their respective cultures to be the birthplace of batik as one of the oldest fabric tie-dyeing techniques. In fact, Malaysia once tried to fight for patent rights over batik as their own intellectual property based on the cultural claims on tie-dye technique. Despite the claims, Indonesia's batik is widely hailed as the country's "local genius", and has been designated as the world heritage of humanity.

Batik, regardless of the aforementioned claims, is universal in its most basic patterns. The early motif of geometric pattern in batik was also discovered in other places such as India, China, Vietnam, or in the Middle Asia from Quzyl to Tun Huang. As an instance,

the spiral *ukel* or *lung-lungan* motif (as in *lung* or *Kalpalata* relief in a *Candi*, an Indonesian stone temple) highly resembles the recalcitrant motifs found during the periods of Hindu kingdom in India. Philosophy wise, the *ukel* motif symbolizes “the lessons of life”. This spiral motif, in several temples, was chiseled into reliefs of *kalpalata*; in batik art, the spiral motif is incorporated into variations, e.g. *semen*, *sawat*, and *gurda*.

## **2. History of batik motifs**

Indonesian batik motif is distinctive in ways that its variations are regarded as visual symbolization of spiritual syncretism. Kawendrasusanta (1976) opines that the motif variations do not solely represent Hinduism symbols; rather, it is a form of acculturation between Hinduism and Islamic features. The influence of Hinduism culture in batik motif is noticeable in visual symbols and color variations of red, black, and white. The tricolor variation represents three Hindu deities, i.e., Brahma (red), Shiva (black), and Vishnu (white).

The early spread of Islam in Java gave birth to a new tricolor variation: brown, blue, and yellow. The color variation of batik motif from Cirebon to Pekalongan, however, differs from the previously mentioned tricolor theme of those in Jogja - Solo; the primary color theme in Cirebonese batik is heavily influenced by Chinese culture.

Psycho-homeostatic theorist Frank SK Shiu (in Kuncaraningrat, 1986) opines that the influence of nature towards human beings is reflected in different preference of those living in the inland area *versus* coastal society; the inland residents prefer darker color theme, while people in coastal area opt for brighter color theme and realistic patterns. For instance, darker color theme of batik found in Jogja and Solo represents the area’s landscape that mainly features mountains and sea; symbolizing values of charisma.

The rise of Demak sultanate and Islamic culture in Java marked the surge of geometric pattern in batik motif. As the historical record suggests, the spread geometric pattern was somewhat unintentional. The Demak sultan, Raden Patah, sent Patih Udara to prepare for his intention to perform Hajj pilgrimage. During his journey to Cirebon port, Patih Udara was raided and forced to fight until he died. His turban was covered with blood stains

forming geometrical patterns. The turban was brought home to Demak and was eventually applied as batik motif variation. The blood stains-inspired motif was widely applied in *blangkon* (Javanese traditional headdress) worn by the sultanate officials; another geometric pattern *poleng* was applied in the sultanate official coat.

As realistic style is forbidden in the newly-practiced Islam (as narrated in Hadith by Bukhari Muslim that depiction of living beings into visual art is considered a sin), the style was abandoned; alternatively, the batik motif adopted decorative and figural styles. Following that, the motifs' previous names were adopted into names of flowers, leaves, or trees (e.g., the *semen* motif is inspired from act of plant insemination).

By virtue of the batik artisans' creativity, the Hinduism-inspired motifs (e.g., *sulur*) had modified to that of *ukel* style. The motif symbolizes value of fertility, as seen in the moral values represented in the style, including: 1) the ornaments painted in continuous pattern illustrates the moral lesson of persistence in life; 2) the style illustrates prayers for abundant harvest; 3) "fertility" also depicts the beauty of nature.



The *ukel* motif in the *isen* of wayang figure of Harjuna.

The motif originated from *wayang* (Indonesian leather puppet) is applied as *isen ukel* in batik. The *isen ukel*, in *wayang* art, is applied to symbolize hair. The bas-relief style of sculpture on *wayang kulit* appears more alive under the spotlight of *blencong* (Javanese traditional oil lamp).

In batik, the *ukel* motif aims to provide depth of decorative pattern. The Javanese mythology about life is translated into the motifs, also functioning as "visual texts" that illustrates the lesson of *kautamaning urip* (or being civilized, being enlightened).<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> In Javanese culture, *piwulang* is translated to "teachings delivered to students or other people", while *paweling* means "message"; *piwulang-paweling* therefore is defined as teachings of moral lesson delivered implicitly or explicitly.

*semen* motif in batik illustrates the discourse <sup>2</sup> that aims to deliver messages on cultural and ethical education.

Batik also displays aspects of social life; one can identify the batik wearer's social status just by looking at the batik pattern. The depiction of social life and ethics in use of batik is what made it distinctive only to Indonesia as the medium of cultural expression. Several motifs are specialized only for the royal members of Solo sultanate and Yogyakarta sultanate; the motifs were originally turned over by the community to the royal palace as a sign of tribute to the king. The motifs were then modified into more complex patterns symbolizing myths and depicting diglossia.

The *semen* motif<sup>3</sup>, for instance, derives from Javanese word *semi-* that means "to grow". The word were officially coined into *semén* to symbolize 1) a wish that grows like a tree, or 2) an illustration of human being that develops his/her physical and mental body. Therefore, the motif name depicts that the batik wearer possess ever-growing mental capabilities, is able to motivate others, is capable as a leader within the community; by wearing batik of *semen* motif, one is expected to possess the aforementioned traits in behaving within society.

The *semen* motif is distinctive to Javanese culture (i.e., Sunda/Pajajaran, Jogja, and Solo/Surakarta) as "visual texts" to deliver lessons on leadership. The motif is mainly popular within the royal palace (in Jogja, Solo, Mangkunegaran, and Pakualaman) and is specialized as the the palaces' royal attire. Soetjanto exclaims that *semen* motif is related to moral lessons in Ramayana story ([http://www.javabatik.org/motif/pola\\_semen.html](http://www.javabatik.org/motif/pola_semen.html))

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<sup>2</sup>In this case, the author does not refer to the discourse as "public space", but as narration of moral lessons that are delivered visually in form of motif or pattern.

<sup>3</sup>The *semen* motif, in several regions, develop into:

- a. Keraton (royal palace) style: In Yogyakarta Keraton (*semen gurdho*, *semen sinom*), in Surakarta Keraton (*semen gendhong*, *semen rama*), in Puro Pakualaman, (*semen sidoasih*), in Puro Mangkunegaran (*semen jolen*), and in Cirebon (*semen rama*, *sawat pengantin*).
- b. Keraton-influenced style: Banyumas (*semen klewer banyumasan*)
- c. Sudagaran style: Yogyakarta (*semen sidoasih*, *semen giri*), Surakarta (*semen rama*, *semen kakrasana*)
- d. Rustic style: Yogyakarta (*semen rante*), Surakarta (*semen rama*).  
([http://www.javabatik.org/motif/pola\\_semen.html](http://www.javabatik.org/motif/pola_semen.html)).

“*Semen* motif originates from the reign of Sunan Pakubuwono IV (1787-1816), during which he designated his crown prince to rule the kingdom. Sunan created the motif to advise his son of ideal characteristics of a leader; a tribute to the same conduct, *Hasta Brata*, performed by Prabu Rama to his son, Raden Gunawan Wibisana<sup>4</sup>. The advice of *Hasta Brata* consisted of eight aspects that were visualized into *semen* patterns, each pattern symbolized certain philosophical lesson. The pattern was named *semen rama*, after Rama (or Prabu Rama). The background history depicts that *semen* pattern in batik is heavily influenced by the Hindu-Buddhism culture.”

The rich history of batik and its motifs in Indonesia is considered as the whole nation’s local genius; therefore, justified and legitimated as the arguments against patent rights claim by Malaysia. The diverse motif variation<sup>5</sup> that originates from the ancient civilization in Indonesia should be adequate as the symbolization of Indonesian culture, rejecting the validity of claims from other cultures<sup>6</sup>. Batik, principle-wise, is not only viewed from its technique, but also its motif variations that have entrenched since the ancient times.

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<sup>4</sup>The eight characteristics, or *brata* taught by Prabu Rama to his son involve:

1. *Enda-Brata*: being *dharma* or benevolent, providing blessings to the world and taking care of all kind of life.
2. *Yama-brata*: being just by punishing only the wrongdoers, symbolized as cloudy pattern in *semen rama* motif.
3. *Surya-brata*: being resilient like the Sun.
4. *Sasi-brata*: being delightful to the world, presenting gifts to those who deserved the merits.
5. *Bayu-brata/Anila-brata*: being noble and humble, observant to problems in the society.
6. *Dhanaba-brata/Kuwera-brata*: being wise or thoughtful in ensuring the people’s welfare.
7. *Pasa-brata/Baruna-brata*: the characteristics of water deity with venomous Nagapasa weapon, being big-hearted deity to those who obey, but dangerous to those who disobey; symbolized as ship in *semen* motif.
8. *Agni-brata*: the traits of fire deity, being capable to exterminate enemies, symbolized as fire-shaped ornaments in the motif.
9. *Astha-brata*: the king is symbolized as *dampar*.

<http://netsains.com/2010/03/makna-filosofis-motif-semen-romo/>

<sup>5</sup>Not to be misunderstood with “style”, motif is the fundamental decorative elements of *jarik* fabric; while style refers to design variations usually associated with certain regional traits.

Motif, in Javanese, translates to *wastra*, or a detailed object full of meaning in its elements; therefore, motif is associated with symbolic meaning within its elements.

<sup>6</sup>Etymologically, batik derives from Javanese *mbat* (*ambat*, or to write) and *tik* (*titik*, or dot); as a whole, batik can be defined as “to draw/paint motif on fabric”. The motif is made of carefully-arranged dots from ink (made of paraffin or beeswax) that are close to each other with *canting* (pen-like instrument) as the painting tool (Susanta, 1976).

### 3. Batik in Cultural System/Institution

Culture, to Indonesian society, is not only associated with art, but also as the nation's behavior. The word "culture" is originated from Latin "*colere*", i.e., an act of improvement on cultivation of plant in order to produce optimal crops. Philosophically, "culture" aims to „improve“ human beings“ conduct through education. That being said, culture is regarded as an act to produce happiness. In Indonesian context, "culture" is associated with the daily behavior and value system of Indonesia as a nation (Kuncaraningrat, 1976)<sup>7</sup>.

Worn since ancestral times, batik does not only function to cover body, but also as a culture identity of Indonesia. As its distinctive identity, the motifs in Indonesian batik resembles the nation's character and principles.

As a visual text, batik possesses three cultural symbolism: a) narration of ethics, moral values, and principles; b) characteristics of Indonesian fine arts, c) messenger of moral lessons. Some motifs are connotative and complex in their symbolism; the motifs represent traits of one's personality.

“Most of *ceplok* patterns in batik are originated from those found as decorative pattern on *arca* (god statue) in Hindu-Buddhism temples during ancient times; most of them displayed checkered pattern, circular pattern, animal shapes, or tilted strokes. The *kawung* pattern is observable in most statues of Hindu deities e.g., Ganesha statue in Banon temple, Borobudur, Hari Hara statue in Blitar, Ganesha statue in Kediri, and Parwati statues found across Java. (<http://netsains.com/2010/03/makna-filosofis-motif-semen-romo>)

The geometric pattern<sup>8</sup> resembles an arrangement of static rhythms, similar to that of notations in music sheets. This research discovers that several studies refer the pattern to the bas-relief style decorative pattern on walls in temples across Indonesia.

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<sup>7</sup> Culture is expressed in: 1) socio-political system, 2) economic and livelihood system, 3) technology and nature utilization system, 4) communication and language system, 5) religious belief system, and 6) aesthetic system (performance and craftsmanship art).

<sup>8</sup> The ancient Yogyakarta *ceplok* pattern is originated from the royal palace of Kotagede (Mataram), while that of Surakartan was created shortly after the division of Mataram. Different patterns in different regions might be named similarly one another, e.g. the *semen* pattern in Surakarta might be recognized as *ceplok kokroso* pattern in Yogyakarta <http://netsains.com/2010/03/makna-filosofis-motif-semen-romo>



The *ceplok* pattern was applied as bas-relief of Buddha Mahadewa statue (in Tumpang temple) and Brkhuti statue (in Jago temple). The pattern composition of *kawung* motif comprises *nitik*, *banji*, and *ganggong* patterns.

The design of *ceplokan*, *kawung*, *nilik*, *ganggong*, *banji*, *parang*, and *lereng* is heavily associated to the community's social life. The notion of diglossia<sup>9</sup> represented in the motif of *jejerit* cloth illustrates the social relations and norms in Jogjakarta and Surakarta. Sunan Pakubuwono the Third (1769) once stipulated an *unda-unda* (norms):

“(in Javanese) *Anadene kang arupa jejarit kang kalebu ing laranganingsun, yaiku: batik sawat lan batik parang rusak, batik cumangkiri kang calacep modang, bangun tulak, lenga-teleng, daragam lan tumpal. Anadene batik cumangkirang ingkang acalacap lung-lungan utawa kekembangan, ingkang ingsun kawenangaken anganggo Papatih ingsun lan Sentananingsung, kawulaningsung Wedana*<sup>10</sup>. (Amri Yahya, 1985: 16).

From textual discourse point of view, the statement is considered a registered note that is symbolically implemented into the mentioned motif. The motif depicts one's position within social structure, or in this case, within the structure of Javanese royal society. The wearer of batik with *parang rusak* motif indicates certain social position during a big event. Moreover, the *unda-unda* also signified that batik is a formal attire, in ways that certain batik motif embeds certain social identity to the wearer. Batik functions as symbol that the wearer is subject to certain social conduct or behavior; higher strata indicates better social behavior.

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<sup>9</sup> The principle of diglossia in Javanese language highlights variations of language use based on social structure within the society; as an instance, *Kromo Hinggil* is spoken specifically by members of royal society. Aside from *Kromo Hinggil*, variations of Javanese language involve *madya* and *ngoko*. Therefore, language variations also indicate one's status within the social hierarchy.

<sup>10</sup> Translation: there are motifs of batik that are mandatory: *sawat* motif, *parangrusak* motif, *cumangkiri* motif combined with *madang* (a blossoming flower petal), *bangun tulak* motif (color variation of black or blackish blue), and *tumpal* motif (triangle shape resembling mountains). Aside from that, the *cumangkirang* motif (combined and modified into either *ukel* pattern or blossoming petal pattern) is specified only for members of royal palace (the Sunan's vicegerent, his family members, and his subordinates)

#### **4. Batik amidst Clash of Cultures**

Popular culture, or pop culture, is a set of culture formed by the advancement of industrialization. It is seen by experts as cultural expression of major people. Pop culture is technologically mass-produced by the industry and marketed to the consumers in professional manner to gain profit. The scope of pop culture is global and goes beyond geographical borders as well as linguistic, primordial, and social differences (<http://www.scribd.com/doc/4069285/PERDEBATAN-AKADEMIS-TENTANG-BUDAYA-POPULER>). Pop culture is considered suitable to younger generations, and therefore, gains more popularity than batik in major cities in Indonesia.

Philosophically, pop culture derives from postmodernism perspective by Jacques Derrida that puts critical emphasis on the “metaphysics of presence”. The principle of esthetics is highly dynamic, therefore one considers that the present world does not have static state; people will always try to find something new and dispose the old. Such a perspective depicts that the world will never be in the same static condition; symbols expressed by our ancestors are considered history or memories of the ancestral times and will no longer repeat. That being mentioned, society that glorifies symbols will find itself in hard position in adapting to rapid modernization.

Surge of pop culture brings negative impact to the efforts in maintaining batik as the cultural heritage of Indonesia and the world. To gain popularity over the younger generations, one need to implement batik not by force, rather, by incorporating it into education and appreciation. The antagonistic process between traditional and modern within the KTSP curriculum only highlights the weakness of batik on the brink of modernization. Therefore, one needs to shift the discourse to highlight batik as Indonesian legacy. The implementation of batik in education or fashion industry is expected to enrich knowledge as well as to reintroduce batik and its motif variations as a relevant commodity.

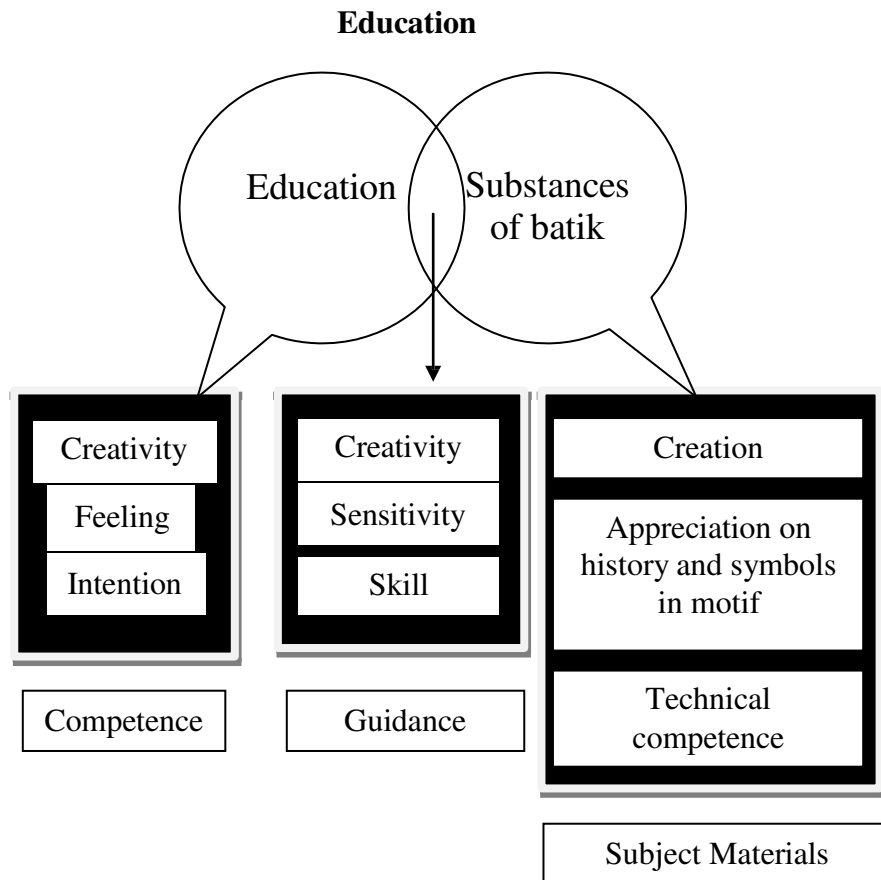


## **5. Philosophy of Batik and Batik Education**

As elaborated previously, batik, as an educational discourse, implies that batik possess educational meaning and is utilized to educate by appreciation of batik motifs and the symbols embedded. Regarding this, the study proposes concept of "Batik Education".

Batik Education is to educate "with, through, in form of" batik. Educating is maturing process children by enhancing the elements of creativity, feeling, and intention. In other words, the material aspect the concept is batik as a form of artwork; while the formal aspect comprises elements of creativity, feeling, and intention through batik. These two aspects aim to develop batik as a learning material embedded with philosophical contents: (1) As fashion, batik underlines the concept of motifs containing life lessons; (2) As process, the traditional process of *membatik* aims to train sensitivity, creativity, and aesthetic expression; (3) batik motifs can be applied as learning material in teaching life lessons as well as economic aspects.

As a local education content in the curriculum, batik represents Indonesian distinctive identity on fashion, economy, and fine arts. The concept of batik education is operationalized in the graph as follows:



Therefore, this study proposes that batik education is "Batik" as a learning medium, learning resource, as well as learning method. As a learning medium, Batik Education is expected to provide insight into character education that instills values of nobility that are still relevant in developing Indonesian's national character. As a source of learning, batik motifs function as visual discourses or narratives that contain texts of life lessons that characterize moral values of the wearer. As a learning method, Batik craftsmanship procedures and dress ethics contain lessons on social conducts of norms; the norms are to be revived and re-popularized in the midst of pop culture.

Pop culture is contemporary and dynamic in adjusting to modernization. Pop culture is indeed demanding for critical thinking and rational thinking, which are essential for human beings. However, younger generations without adequate knowledge and conscience on their cultural roots will lose their true identity in the midst of pop culture. All in all, this study provides the concept of batik education as a medium of delivering lessons on moral and character education so as to actualize the unity of Indonesia and to nurture Indonesian national identity to younger generations.

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