

Girilayu Batik Motifs and their Forms of Symbolic Contemplation

Agus SACHARI

Bandung Institute of Technology
Jl. Ganesha 10, Bandung, Indonesia
aasachari@gmail.com

Arianti Ayu PUSPITA

Bandung Institute of Technology
Jl. Ganesha 10, Bandung, Indonesia
ariantiayu@fsrd.itb.ac.id

Desy NURCAHYANTI

Bandung Institute of Technology
Jl. Ganesha 10, Bandung, Indonesia
desynurcahyanti@students.itb.ac.id

Abstract: This article discusses the factors that confer a contemplative atmosphere to the village of Girilayu (Central Java Province, Indonesia) and stimulate local artisans to create batik motifs that contain symbolic philosophical meanings that confer ethical values to batik making while adapting to contemporary design and technological processes. Since 2016, *Mbok Semok* batik has struggled to preserve local traditions and patterns that stimulate contemplation in its designs. The paper is based an ethnographic approach involving data collection from Girilayu batik artisans; later analyzed using a phenomenological approach in order to describe the correlation between design and contemplative philosophical meaning in *Mbok Semok*. Thus, the paper functions as an example of the need to articulate local ethical practices with technological change in a way that grounds harmony in human relationships with the environment and the supernatural beyond.

Keywords: atmosphere, batik motif, artisans, contemplative, philosophical meaning.

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that cultural artifacts contain a substantive accumulation of ideas and concepts as well as philosophical values in their material forms (Shapiro, 2018). Factors such as traditions, norms and live perspectives make up the content of values in a given community. Deeper philosophical meanings can be extracted from the analysis of physical or non-physical objects, sensed directly or indirectly from aesthetic experience.

(Puspita, 2018: 23-48). Individual and communal aesthetic experiences are partly formed by educating taste, sometimes through formal and academic education. Thus, some components are part collective agreements that change in time but that always contain the seeds of some sort of prior universal sublimity with strong philosophical ties (Saka, 2007; Capra, 2009).

In the 21st Century, technology has succeeded in making life easier, but at the same time, it has distorted social abilities, preventing people from being comfortable and happy. (Borru, 2018: 223-226) Our argument is that human thinking processes contain a high degree of contemplation, and a balance needs to be reached. It is important to clarify that contemplation is not only about meditation. It also it is about doing activities that create harmony and make humans reach a high point of communion and gratitude towards the divinity and the supernatural realm (Harrell, 2018: 9-40). Traditional artisan products used to involve activities aimed at getting closer to this metaphysical comfort, away from daily routines of saturation aimed at fulfilling economic needs. Batik artisans in Girilayu aimed at conferring into their designs characteristics that enhanced philosophical meaning and contemplation. Gradually, technology has been carefully introduced so that their *Mbok Semok* creations involve philosophical values as well as decorative details.

In Indonesian cultures it is perceived that philosophical meanings contained in batik designs are formed from a dialogue between microcosm and macrocosm components as a natural process of interaction between the human world and the rest of the universe (Sumardjo, 2000). This balance is created by means of implicit and explicit actions and circumstances that support this contemplative atmosphere and universal connection. In Girilayu, the cozy geographical environment, with its cool and mild mountains, enhances contemplation. Girilayu is a village at the foot of the Lawu mountains. Here people have devoted themselves to preserve handwritten batik for centuries. (Communication & Information Bureau of Karanganyar Regency, 2017). The village was part of Mangkunegaran Palace territory until the reign of KGPAA Mangkunegara VII in 1944. It later became part of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia when it proclaimed its independence in 1945 (Wasino, 2014).

In contrast to the majority of today's contemporary designs, batik prioritizes visual appearance. But the belief that batik contains patterns which enhance contemplation is a factor that has been influencing crafters

for centuries to create batik motifs with deep symbolic meanings. These aspects have not received sufficient attention. Previous studies have discussed batik from the perspective of exploring shifts in design processes, industrial and technological change, or the impact of tourism. (Basiroen, 2016: 119-136; Yudana, et. al, 2017: 21-32; Shaari, 2017: 81-88; Yunus, 2018: 19-28). The symbolic patterns present in batik, however, preserve characteristics that speak, in the apparent abstraction, of local traditions, of philosophical values in particular communities and, in the case of Girilayu batik, of contemplation, especially in *Mbok Semok* batik, a type of design pattern which has not been investigated (Wardoyo, 2018: 117-126). Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore contemplative ambiances in Girilayu batik.

This research was conducted in the batik center of Girilayu Village, Karanganyar Regency, Central Java province, Indonesia. The area is located on the slopes of Mount Lawu. Girilayu batik center was chosen as the research location because it still maintains the traditional way of making batik. One of the batik motifs created by Girilayu batik artisans is *Mbok Semok*. This type of batik displays iconic symbols and activities of Girilayu's community. It was first created in 2016 using contemporary design processes and technologies alongside Girilayu local traditions. Iconic symbols, such as the batik woman artisan, the *Tri Dharma* monument, the *Tri Dharma* gate, or the *canting* styles as well as the figure of the shield, embody symbolic aspects explained below.

An ethnographic approach was used to obtain primary data from Girilayu community; in particular from batik artisans involved in the process of creation of *Mbok Semok* motifs. Data collecting included surveys, interviews with batik artisans, and documents related to the development of Girilayu batik designs (Spradley, 2007). The analysis used a phenomenological approach, trying to find the philosophical correlations of *Mbok Semok*'s symbols and motifs in relation to the local conditions of Girilayu. The geographical location of the village has had a particular role to play in enhancing a contemplative atmosphere in the local batik designs (Kersten, 1989; Carr, 2004). The research was supplemented with notes on batik activities in the village Girilayu obtained from the official library of Mangkunegaran Palace in Surakarta, Rekso Pustoko collection.

As a result, the research has concluded that, in spite of technological changes, Javanese cultures struggle to preserve strong philosophical

components in their local crafts and artifacts. Javanese artistic creations are influenced by internal and external factors. Internal factors are believed to originate not only in physical but also in metaphysical forms (Endraswara, 2018; Purwadi, 2005). External factors come from the layered interpretation of each receiver. Batik is believed to embody the philosophical meaning present in Javanese society, including values, norms, life perspectives (Saddhono, *et. al*, 2014: 52-61; Kusumawati, 2017: 91-99). Communal unity is of great importance in batik design, which considered a form of 'intangible heritage' where the meaning 'intangible' refers to the hidden aspects of contemplation (Kerlogue, 2004; Yudhoyono, 2010). It is believed that each *isen-isen*, the small motifs within the main batik filler, have deep philosophical meaning (Rizali, 2014; Mudra, 2019: 75-90).

GIRILAYU BATIK

Most new designs or contemporary batik motifs do not pay attention to the deep philosophical meaning in their motifs. Girilayu batik style is a blend of dominantly dark Surakarta palace batik style with Mangkunegaran batik which is predominantly light brown. These two styles combine to create a new character of Girilayu batik which is yellowish brown. In Javanese culture, Girilayu batik is believed to have specific symbolic meanings hidden in each of its motifs. The symbolic meaning functions as a cultural narrative. *Mbok Semok* batik motif is an exception that includes elements of Girilayu distinctive symbols, values and the local wisdom.

For thousands of years, the natural environment influenced the way people's ways of life. Community groups living in the coastal areas of Indonesian territories were different from those in rural or remote areas far from the sea (Alexander, *et. al.*, 2011; Hadi, 2000). These differences are present in the characteristics and features of batik. Coastal batik has a dynamic character with bright colors and motif elements styled close to its original form. Coastal batik reflects the open character of these communities. On the other hand, inland or lowland groups, especially those living close to the center of power, e.g. Yogyakarta and Surakarta palace regions, have batik motifs tending to be dark toned, earth colored, or monochrome (Djoemena, 1990; Doellah, 2002; Ishwara, *et. al.*, 2011; Permanasari, 2019). Girilayu people, who live in mountainous regions,

are influenced by cool and calm environment creating a contemplative atmosphere.

Contemporary Girilayu *Mbok Semok* batik integrates technology, modern design process and contemplation activities in its patterns. The quality of handmade Girilayu batik is recognized world-wide; an expertise transmitted from generation to generation among batik artisans, first originating in *Tumenggung*, a governmental position equal to today's Major, leader of Girilayu village during the reign of KGPAA Mangkunegara I (the first king who occupied Mangkunegaran Palace). The making ceremony is usually performed by using *canting* (a special tool to make hand written batik). Batik motifs were inspired by shapes from everyday life perceived to have a deep spiritual connection with the divine.

Three large tomb areas in Girilayu, i.e. Astana Mangadeg, Astana Girilayu, and Astana Giribangun. The first two are the tombs of the kings and descendants of Mangkunegaran Palace. Astana Giribangun is the tomb of the current President of the Republic of Indonesia, Mr. H. M. Soeharto along with his family and his wife, Mrs. Soeratinah Soeharto (Mrs. Tien). The family of Mr. H. M. Soeharto obtained the honor to build a tomb in the Girilayu region because Mrs. Tien was the granddaughter of KGPAA Mangkunegara III, the 3rd king of Mangkunegaran Palace. Based on the oral history of the community, Girilayu was selected as the final resting place of the Mangkunegaran dynasty. According to the tradition, Prince Sember Nyawa received these instructions when he was meditating on Girilayu hill. The place eventually became the location for his retreat meditation during guerrilla warfare (Siswokratono, 2002), and the geographical conditions of the village alongside its cultural traditions have continued to embody the contemplative atmosphere captured in Girilayu batik.

Girilayu is located 660 meters above sea level, a peaceful environment that significantly affects the daily activities and routines of its residents (Parker, 2002). Thus, Girilayu batik tradition is more than material craftsmanship. It is believed to require spiritual aspects including taste, mind and soul. Fasting and praying are part the creation process, and the Girilayu community believes that good batik motifs come to life due to the harmonic combination of knowledge, proper emotional intentions and attitudes, as well as rational steps, even including contemporary technologies. Failing to include one of these basic components can result

in failure or poor results. Intentions are conveyed in prayers as well as the attitudes of artisans reflected in the motifs. For example,

Truntum is a batik motif designed for the bride and groom. *Slobog* is motif used in burial, to cover the dead body. (Sardjono, 1992; Santosa, 2014). Girilayu batik artisans interpret their local knowledge for particular purposes, designing the motifs and patterns in a way that carries particular symbolic and philosophical meanings.

MBOK SEMOK MOTIFS

As mentioned above, some of the most characteristic motifs in *Mbok Semok* are the batik woman artisan, the *Tri Dharma* monument, the *Tri Dharma* gate, the *canting* styles, and the figure of the shield.

The female batik artisan is a typical motif in Girilayu batik because most of batik making activities, especially those in handwritten batik, involve the expertise and role of women. The symbolic and philosophic meaning of this pattern refers to the representation of the female principle as a source of life, pleasure and happiness that can enliven the soul.

The *Tri Dharma* monument is a representation of KGPAA Mangkunegara I teachings on mindfulness. The king stressed the importance of maintaining self-introspection as a form of self-awareness during the Karanganyar Regency and later in the Girilayu community in general. *Tri Dharma* teaching is the official source used for life guidance in accordance to *Pancasila* (The Five Philosophical Basis of Indonesia). It emphasizes self-awareness so that every human being can behave responsibly and help preserve the balance between people and with the environment as well as the supernatural beyond. *Tri Dharma* teachings contain values and norms that are basic for the survival of humanity and its ecosystems.

Canting stylation is a motif shaped as a slope pattern which represents the main tool used in batik designs on cotton cloth. *Canting* symbolizes the beginning of great work as process, using the symbolism of the journey. This Girilayu motif represents the communal identity of the village as a long and difficult learning process, akin to batik making.

The shield motif or defense guard represents an attitude of endurance and resistance. This pattern also represents the spirit of the Girilayu community in relation to its geographical location amid the mountains.

These natural elements are among the longer lasting entities in the world. Resistance does not mean rigidness but full awareness in facing the dynamics of change. In relation to batik, it also symbolizes its inner contemplative meaning as a way to counter-balance human productive routines based on every changing technology.

As mentioned, the batik making process is considered a means to confer equilibrium and harmony to technological productive activities. Batik crafts seek to connect each design to the universal spiritual and supernatural energy and instill contemplation into each pattern. Unlike contemporary forms of marketing and branding products, batik relies on a cultural system preserved through symbols and carrying ethical values. The motifs of contemporary *Mbok Semok* batik struggle to maintain this contemplative mindfulness and self-awareness while adapting to current technological trends.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored forms of Girilayu batik, in particular *Mbok Semok*, and their symbolic spiritual significance. Batik is an activity that requires inner peace as well as a sense of taste, and concentration. The environmental conditions of Girilayu village confer a contemplative atmosphere in its batik designs. From the cultural point of view, these contemplative attitudes are enhanced by the history of Mangkunegaran family Palace as well as by the spiritual values and traditions of the Girilayu community, Central Java Province, Indonesia.

Acknowledgements: The authors thank Bandung Institute of Technology for funding and supporting this research which has been conducted in Karanganyar Regency, Central Java Province, Indonesia, through P3MI scheme in *Kelompok Keilmuan Ilmu-ilmu Desain dan Budaya Visual* (Scientific Group of Visual Design and Visual Sciences), Faculty of Visual Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology.

References

- Alexander, Jeffrey. C., *et.al. Interpreting Clifford Geertz: Cultural investigation in the Social Sciences*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Basiroen, V. J. and M. E. Lopian. "Implementation of Design Thinking Process in Creating New Batik Lasem". *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. 24(S). 2016: 119-136.

- Borrupt, Tom. "Creative Disruption in the Arts-Special Issue Introduction". *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, Vol. 48. Issue 4 (2018): 223-226.
- Capra, Fritjof. *The Hidden Connections: A Science for Sustainable Living*. Yogyakarta: Jalasutra. 2009.
- Carr, David. *Space, Time, and Culture*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2004.
- Communication and Information Bureau Karanganyar Regency. "Kecamatan Matesih". 2019; <http://www.karanganyarkab.go.id/20110104/kecamatan-matesih/> (accessed on 1 Desember 2019).
- Doellah, Santoso. *Batik: Pengaruh Zaman dan Lingkungan*. Surakarta: PT Danar Hadi, 2002.
- Djoemena, Nian. S. *Batik dan Mitra*. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1990.
- Endraswara, Suwardi. *Falsafah Hidup Jawa: Menggali Mutiara Kebijakan dari Intisari Filsafat Kejawan*. Yogyakarta: Cakrawala, 2018.
- Hadi, Sudharto. P. *Manusia dan Lingkungan*. Semarang: Badan Penerbit Universitas Diponegoro, 2000.
- Harrell, Shelly P. "Soulfulness as an Orientation to Contemplative Practice: Culture, Liberation, and Mindful Awareness". *The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, Vol. 5. Issue 1 (2018): 9-40.
- Ishwara, Helen, et. al. *Batik Pesisir Pusaka Indonesia: Koleksi Hartono Sumarsono*. Jakarta, Indonesia: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2011.
- Kerlogue, Fiona. *Batik: Design, Style and History*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004.
- Kersten, Frederick. *Phenomenological Method: Theory and Practice*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989.
- Kusumawati, Medina Dyah and Endang Ruswanti Hartowiyono. "Philosophy, Design Batik Yogyakarta, and Batik Surakarta Made in Indonesia". *International Journal of Latest Trends in Engineering and Technology*, Vol. 8. No. 3 (2017): 91-99.
- Mudra, I Wayan. "Image Brayut on The Creation of Ceramic Sculpture". *Cultura International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, Vol XVI. No. 1 (2019): 75-90.
- Parker, Gavin. *Citizenships, Contingency and The Countryside Rights, Culture, Land and The Environment*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Permanasari, Indira and Patricius Canahar. *Kisah Goresan Malam: Selisik Batik Harian Kompas*. Jakarta: PT Kompas Media Nusantara, 2019.
- Purwadi. *Upacara Tradisional Jawa: Menggali Untaian Kearifan Lokal*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2005.
- Puspita, Arianti Ayu, et. al. "Knowledge from Javanese Cultural Heritage: How They Manage and Sustain Teak Wood". *Cultura International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, Vol XV. No. 1 (2018): 23-48.
- Rizali, Nanang. *Nafas Islami dalam Batik Nusantara*. Surakarta: UNS Press, 2014.
- Saddhono, Kundharu., et. al. "The Study of Philosophical Meaning of Batik and Kimono Motifs to Foster Collaborative Creative Industry". *Asian Social Science*, Vol.10.No. 9 (2014): 52-61.
- Saka, Paul. *How to Think about Meaning*. University of Houston: Springer, 2007.

- Salmon, John. And Graham Shipley. *Human Landscapes in Classical Antiquity: Environment and Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Shaari, Nazlina & Khairul Aidil Abd Rahman. "Sustaining Batik Craft in Malaysia using Indigenous Creative Knowledge". *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol.25(S).2017: 81-88.
- Shapiro, Bill and Naomi Wax. *What We Keep: 150 People Share The One Object that Brings them Joy, Magic, and Meaning*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 2018.
- Siswokratono, W. E. Soetomo. *Sri Mangkunegara IV sebagai Penguasa Pujangga (1853-1881)*. Semarang: Aneka Ilmu, 2002.
- Spradley, James P. *Metode Etnografi*. Yogyakarta: Tiara Wacana, 2007.
- Sumardjo, Jakob. *Filsafat Seni*. Bandung: ITB Press, 2000.
- Van Peursen, Cornelis Anthonie. *Strategi kebudayaan*. Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2000.
- Wardoyo, Sugeng. "Kajian Estetika Batik Girilayu Kabupaten Karanganyar". *Corak Jurnal Seni Kriya*, Vol.7. No. 2 (2018): 117-126.
- Wasino. *Modernisasi di Jantung Budaya Jawa: Mangkunegaran 1869-1944*. Jakarta: PT Kompas Media Nusantara, 2014.
- Yudana, Galing, et. al. "Culture-based Tourism through Optimization of Lurik and Batik Industries in Klaten District". *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. 25(S). 2017: 21-32.
- Yudhoyono, Ani Bambang. *Batikku Pengabdian Cinta Tak Berkata*. Jakarta: PT Gramedia, 2010.
- Yunus, Ulani and Dominiq Tulasi. "Batik Semiotics as a Media of Communication in Java". *Cultura International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, Vol. IX. No. 2 (2012): 143-150.
- Yunus, Ulani. "The Symbolic Meaning of Wonderful Indonesia TVC (A Visual Journey through Banyuwangi Version)". *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. 26(T). 2018: 19-28.

Bioprofile

Agus Sachari is known as a figure who is diligent, unpretentious and upholds cultural and traditional values. He has various experiences in industrial product development projects both on a micro to a national scale. Currently, he is a lecturer at the Faculty of Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology and the head of the Visual Culture and Design Science Research Group. The results of his research have been published in various scientific articles and books.

Arianti Ayu Puspita pursued her doctoral degree with a historical topic regarding Javanese furniture in Faculty of Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology from 2014 to 2018. Currently she is conducting research on the preservation of traditional and modern artifacts through digitization methods. Since 2017, Arianti has been a lecturer and researcher at the Ethnographic Design Laboratory in ITB Product Design Study Program.

Desy Nurcahyanti is a doctoral candidate at Faculty of Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology. The research conducted focuses on the sustainability of traditional textiles, particularly batik. The aspects of her concern are the influence of social and society conditions on cultural regeneration. Desy actively collaborates with researchers in Indonesia to discuss issues in art, design, and cultural studies.