

# STUDY OF BATIK AS A MEDIA OF COMMUNICATIONS TO REPRESENT CULTURAL IDENTITY OF NUSANTARA

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## ABSTRACT

In the past, especially the Javanese, people worn batik as a traditional cloth which was emphasizing on some aspects such as: objects, ceremonial, ritual, historical and cultural. It generally explains that batik has two definitions, that are 1) batik as a cultural object / explicit cues which more focus on the physical appearance such as motifs, textile materials and colors of batik itself, and 2) batik as a non cultural object / implicit cues which focus on the values contained in batik. But now batik has been able to become a media of communication which unites different cultures, because its existence does not just represent the diversity of the traditional art in one area only, but it has been transformed as a tool that is able to communicate authentically about the identity of the country that has been recognized, even virtually, by the entire of the world. It can be described in the Product Assimilation theory which states that the position of art can serve as an effective communication media. Thereby we can use batik as one strategy to improve the quality of authentic identity of the Nusantara.

**Keywords: batik, identity, culture, tradition, communication**

## 1. Introduction

Batik nowadays tends to be considered as part of creative and craft industry that has economic values. Furthermore, batik now is one of a fashion trend which has prestige value to enable someone who wears batik be in a certain social strata. However, in addition to those conditions, if batik is placed in communal culture, local culture, and national culture, batik is considered as having a high artistic value and priceless traditions value because in batik it is shown the identity of *nusantara* (the archipelago), a face of the Indonesian nation. Recently, even batik has become a cultural icon, which not merely represents small community, but also the country. Batik has been able to represent local culture to the national realm so that it is internationally known as the nation's character and identity.

It is in accordance with Charles Shander Feire (1981) who said batik as community's communal indexical culture. In historical art, batik of Indonesia reputedly originated from ancestors who made writings on lontar leaves, which it was then developed hereditarily by certain communities as a symbol or identity. Batik art has become a wellknown identity and symbol of both local and national communities. Batik as the community's local symbol can

be identified implicitly from its patterns and motifs (for instance, we can identify which one is batik from Pekalongan, Solo, Jogja, Garut and Madura from its typical characteristic)

Functions of batik, in terms of tradition, can be reviewed from several aspects as follows:

1. *Ceremonial*: Batik is worn as the supplementary requirement in sacred traditional ceremonies among *keraton* communities and common people. This batik wears' reception inside *keraton* in the said traditional ceremony aims to give the highest honor to the king as the supreme ruler.
2. *Ritual*: In ritual ceremony, instead of wear it, batik is placed as offerings to the Lords of the nature in order to get salvation and protection from catastrophe.
3. *Cultural Historical*: People use batik to see the history of people's lifestyle in certain age(s) as well as how batik was worn as ritual and ceremonial tools. In addition, to know the philosophy behind the creation of the motifs.

These batik's conventional functions indirectly give pictures that role of batik in people's daily life is very important. Starts from daily wears until a religious-important ceremony. It shows that in addition to practical function as clothes nor supplementary clothes, batik is also an art which has a role as a media contains of cultural values through its motifs symbolism that represents the surrounding nature. However, as the time goes by, those values now has been degraded by modernization where it starts to appear individual perception which then impacts big communities in Indonesia that batik has supposedly no longer be treated as "sacred" because there is an economic opportunity in batik nowadays.

## 2. Discussion

Looking at batik as a media in social cultural introductory process, in general batik is divided into three processes that are production, distribution and consumption.

Production stage is an important basic stage, because before it arrives to the consumers' hands, batik will go through a production process. In this stage, batik is made with a working system that in accordance with the rules of making batik, which generally it has to go through a *perintangan* ("drawing" process using *canting* as the tool and *malam/wax* as the "ink") to be thereafter go on to coloring and *pelorodan* process (release *malam/wax* from the fabric after coloring process) until the fabric has the expected special characteristic to be said as batik. This is an important process where it contains traditions value as the attempt of culture introduction, where the stages in making batik are something that shows local identity and that it has been done hereditarily where the local people as the doers.

Next stage is distribution, where this stage aims to distribute batik that has been produced to the prospective buyers. An important strategy to distribute batik is to know how these batik can have visual attraction to answer towards the actual fashion trend challenges. However, even though batik is placed as a fashion commodity, it is still expected that batik can become a "messenger" of the archipelago's cultural identity by exposing the characteristic and visual images of batik itself. Batik distribution has no longer been done by merely a

conventional way (in person contact) between seller and buyer in the market, but it is also can be done by utilizing technology such as internet and television as a smart access to invent a “market”. For instance, television’s role in batik distribution that is also to do a culture promotion starts to have batik in its program such as a program with an actor wears batik in it so that it can be directly become a role model for public who watch it, as well as the advertisements which frequently use batik to convey its message or even in a news program which can also influence public to wear batik.

This is in accordance with a quote as follows: (Bungin: 2001) *“Controlling information through monopoly of communication technology, includes television networks, has become a power that can rule human ideology through national traffic that accommodate capital, human and commodity, human’s information and culture.”*

Pertaining to batik distribution itself, it has different explanation with the above explanation that the presence of global market in batik industry obviously has demanded visual image of batik itself in order to adjust with the world’s community’s taste nowadays. Nevertheless, until now it seems visual imaging in Indonesia does not answer the said challenge. Most of Indonesian batik still relies on references of local motifs and patterns. Even if someone says it is a contemporary batik, it still cannot significantly be seen compares to traditional motifs. Biranul Anas Zaman (2011, h78-89)

The last stage is consumption as social activity which is understood as individual needs. Consumption also reflects identity, because it is a chain of social, cultural and economic relationship. Even it is closely related that batik has become part of recent fashion as part of lifestyle. Based on this, batik eventually has entered its explanation as part of the culture that has no longer directed to traditions, but as popular culture. In popular culture of batik fashion it cannot be separated from industrialization, capitalism and consumerism. It is shown by how batik has become an important commodity in the economy of Indonesia. The philosophy, ritual and magic receptions of previous classical batik has become something that cling to batik itself, now it seems to fade away and become unimportant. The focus now is how to create batik in this popular culture era by industrializing it in form of a mass production; capitalism to get economically huge profit as well as to answer modern people’s lifestyle which is very consumptive. Aesthetically, the resulting products is also tend to become bias, because the beauty is only seen on the visual surface without a deep receptions as previous classical batik that is not popular culture oriented. In addition, batik fashion in popular culture pushes public to become adorer, follower and imitator. It shows from the ease of an idea that can be easily popular, then it soon spreads and followed by other people or community which use the same concept. It can be seen from how many batik designs has grown and applied on casual wears which uses popular type of batik where the technique and resulting motifs are also tend to be more simple. For instance, one of those batik designs is Garutan batik. The motifs is more simple, does not have meaning, have a bright color and lower price. The effect to this situation is that none of the business doers has batik designs that is different to others and original. That is why now it appears many “instant” batik that is also does not go through a thoroughly concept making which results to a short existence. The root is weak, does not reach to the essential, so that it is easy for this kind of batik to dissappear from the market. From this explanation, based on its reception, batik has two basic receptions as follows:

1. Batik fashion definition as implicit cues emphasizes on batik images, philosophy values as well as its receptions which are applied through its motifs. It explains how batik was born as a media for a sacred worship with a strong religious message, many faiths and beliefs about rule to be obeyed within its invention, until the presence of batik which can be used/worn merely by the kingdom family.



Figure 1: Sida Mukti motif, means "happiness". These motifs is used by the bridal couple in the hope they will gain happiness in his life.

2. Batik fashion definition as explicit cues emphasizes on its physical appearance, such as: it is reviewed based on its motifs' aesthetic, color combination, fabric texture as well as its application towards fashion design. In this definition, batik will show an indicator as follows:
  - Connotative Indicator: This connotative indicator is an indicator which can produce cultural values, politic, social, economy and style. For instance, batik with the same motifs with different textile materials, one uses regular cotton and other uses premium silk, when it uses it will create social values there, where batik with cotton for middle class and silk for high class people. Or other example, when it is mandatory for workers to wear batik every Friday, it creates a culture where wears batik has now become a habit. In economy it is clearly seen that batik now has become a commodity when it is produced in a large scale. While in politic, wear batik is a form of effective identity imaging of Indonesian towards the international world.



Figure 2: Premium Batik - batik scarf with silk material

– Denotive Indicator: Physical appearance of batik will explain time and space.

- 1) Time indicator for certain time limit, it can be said that batik is time bound when it is used. For example: Batik that is worn as office wears, it considers as batik office wears. This batik is time bound so it is imposed predicate according to the time. If it is out of time situation where it is not in office working hours, then the predicate will be taken out from this batik's definition.

Clothes and time for longer period are divided into two, that are:

- a. Linearity: Batik develops according to the civilization development. It shows from how batik conventionally was used for many sacred and ritual activities, but as the time goes by slowly it becomes a commodity product, then moves as a tool to show social strata by using prestige value from the batik itself.
- b. Cyclical: Batik fashion develops in trend that influence it. Obviously seen, batik now is created as the attempt to stay exist in the fashion trend. One of its movements relates with environmental issue. Batik fashion has entered a realm of an environmental friendly material such as natural fibers and colors. And batik will keep developing ahead.

Batik fashion development is really temporal, moves fast so that it demands innovation and designing process to the better directions following the trend cyclus. Like a primitive civilization, batik has fastly replaced by popular batik trend and will keep moving forward creating new culture.

- 2) Space indicator can be explained in a narrow definition that batik is space bound of where it is used. For example, party wears. When batik is worn to a party then it creates a predicate of batik as party wears. To explain more about batik as a space indicator is that it contains culture relates with habits and daily life of a certain community, world's point of view towards fashion, and also collective beliefs. Such as: characteristic or cultural identity of the place where people originated come from.



Figure 3: Casual Batik

Like batik usage as a media to do ceremonial activity in some parts of Indonesia might not applicable in other area as they have different traditions background. As well as batik application towards fashion product for certain motifs, for instance kraton prohibition motifs which actually prevails for merely to those who have faith in it. Nevertheless, even though parts of the area do not have faith in it and have different traditions, they still put their efforts not to disobey the prohibition as a form of tolerance and respect toward other people's faith and traditions. However, this sort of tradition has slowly become more flexible where there is no longer prohibition motifs bound.



Figure 4: Party Dress Batik

### 3. Conclusion

Speaking about batik as a culture's product cannot be separated from its role as a media contains of cultural ceremony, ritual and history receptions. However in reality, along the developing times, batik has been able to become a media which shows cultural character and identity of the archipelago, detached from the threat of cultural extinction as the effect of globalization which as if demands batik to be in a popular trend. However, it cannot be denied that batik has to be in that popular trend to maintain its existence. Looking at to batik's fashion role in the time indicator, batik has put itself in linearity (*linearitas*): development according to its age and civilization, as well as cyclical (*siklusitas*): development according to the rolling trend. To maintain character and identity of batik which has the archipelago's characteristic, it can be reviewed from time indicator especially in terms of culture, where cultural role in batik's visual appearance itself: motifs, color and tekstile material, should include those own batik's characteristic, even though its creation has started to touch modernization. Regardless of those conditions, batik's fashion has become the representative media of the archipelago's culture.

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