

Sustainability of Traditional Motifs in Malaysian Batik Block

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Abstract —The history of batik block in Malaysia began in 1911 at Kota Bharu, Kelantan. Batik block is produced by using hot (melted) wax on a copper block. The motifs of batik block, which portray local identities, have already been around since the 20th century. Later, these motifs have undergone a transformation, whereby the block producers no longer used designs which reflected traditional styles and identities. As such, modern batik block in Malaysia does not have a strong identity. With respect to this problem, one of the objectives of this study was to analyse the various types of the local batik block designs in terms of their local characteristics. Therefore, interviews have been conducted via typological analysis. To achieve the same, guidelines for the designing of batik block need to be introduced. This research is expected to create awareness regarding the importance of the identities of batik block, and the outcomes of the standard will act as references for batik block producers and universities in the future.

Keywords - Batik Block; Floral Motif; Identity; Malaysia; Sustainability

1. Introduction

Traditionally, the blocks (*sarang*) which utilized to produce Malay batik block (fabric) were made of brass plates. Until now, the motifs and designs on the blocks are flora- and fauna-related (Mohd Yusop, 2015). The advent of block batik began when Haji Che Su of Kelantan and Haji Ali of Terengganu initiated the local production of batik sarong in the 1920s. This in fact was the first attempt in Malaysia to produce stamped cloth (batik pukul) – fabrics whose patterns were printed using wooden blocks. Come the 1930s, batik makers at the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula were already making block batik (batik cap) using wax and metal blocks. Initially, brass and tin were imported from Java to create the aforementioned blocks; later, the said metals were obtained locally (in the case of tin, its recycled form was used) (Jamal, 2007). The characteristics and identities of block batik have influenced the ways by which the Malays dressed up. A complete and perfect outfit was not merely defined by its appearance, but also the combination of design, patterns, motifs, and colours. Batik in its entirety could denote the identity, art, standard, and culture of the Malays (Ahmad Jamal, 2007; Ismail, 1997; Samin, 2014). The most commonly-produced batik block was the traditional sarong, its design of which was defined by the layout, motif, pattern, and color. These features were important for determining the functional and symbolic meanings of the designs. Malaysian batik block possesses artistic characteristics like balance and repetition of lines, textures, shapes, and colours (Ismail, 2014). The uniqueness of batik block is the difficulty in repeating the motifs as continuity is needed (Haron, Ramli, & Nik Abdul Rahman, 2015). Hence, it can be used as both apparel and accessory (Ismail, 2014). Batik block has become a multi-functional item in daily lives of the Malays as its functions ranged from wrapping babies as well as formal and casual attire to covering the deceased (Mohd Noor, 2014). So, this study has focused on the traditional floral motifs to determine the sustainability of batik block designs in Malaysia.

1.1. The Problems of Block Batik Products in Malaysia

Currently, Malaysian batik does not have a strong identity like its Indonesian counterpart (Syed Mahdzar, Chuah, & Safari, 2013). For batik to be viewed as a modern product, the manufacturers must create a Malaysian identity in batik block (Hussin et al., 2016). As per the interviews with a group of batik entrepreneurs during the 2017 National Craft Day, the respondents claimed that batik block did not have a strong identity (refer Table 1) and that there were no guidelines for designing batik block with a Malaysian identity.

Table 1. Differences between traditional and modern batik block in Malaysia



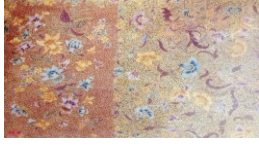



No	Traditional batik block	Current batik block
1	 <p>Malaysian batik block produced from 1920 to 1930s (Van Roojen, 1993)</p>	 <p>Malaysian batik block produced in 2016 (in Kari, Rabiatudawiyah. March 3, 2017)</p>
2	 <p>Malaysian batik block in 1950s (Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation, 2007)</p>	 <p>Malaysian batik block Produced within 2016 (in Kari, Rabiatudawiyah. March 3, 2017)</p>
3	 <p>Malaysian batik block (Cop Bukit) in 1970s (Noor, 2014)</p>	 <p>Malaysian batik block Produced in 2016 (in Kari, Rabiatudawiyah. March 3, 2017)</p>

Table 1 above has displayed the differences between traditional and modern batik block in Malaysia. The former has sported traditional motifs while this was less so for the latter. This could probably be attributed to a lack of understanding of the identities of traditional motifs by the contemporary producers of batik block. In this case, the designs have been created based on imagination without taking into account the local batik block designs. Therefore, the latest products do not flaunt typical Malaysian designs. Overall, as per the literature, the current problems concerning Malaysian batik block are in line with those associated with the current local block batik. In light of that, they have recommended the implementation of specific guidelines in the designing of batik block products to strengthen the local identity and hence, the sustainability of the said products in the Malaysian and international societies. Hence, the research questions were (1) “how to analyse the various types of local batik block designs?” and (2) “what are the guidelines for designing batik according to a Malaysian identity?”

2. Literature Review

A few prior studies have described the importance of certain motifs. Some researchers have mentioned that those which contained flowers and leaves were well-known to be prominent motifs in traditional Malay block batik (Ismail, 1986). Meanwhile, others have highlighted that abstract and geometric designs were also prevalent in traditional Malay batik, in addition to the two aforementioned motifs (Akhir, Ismail, Said, & Kaliappan, 2016). This showed the floral motifs were strongly associated with traditional block batik. Since the identity of traditional motifs has not been deeply rooted in the society, Malaysians nowadays favor design that do not contain any embedded meaning (Haron, Yusof, Taha, & Mutalib, 2014; Ramli, Said, & Sedon @ M. Dom,

2014). Regrettably, the current society does not care about the importance of the motifs because the aesthetic properties of the designs are of higher value (Haron et al., 2015). Therefore, certain communities in the local society are unable to appreciate the traditional motifs. Evidently, modernisation poses a significant challenge towards the maintenance of historical form of art to the subsequent generations (Mazlan Che Soh & Omar, 2012). This issue has been frequently highlighted in previous researches on local block batik motifs and designs. Unfortunately, current designs were more inclined towards abstract ones which have been adapted from other countries. Following this occurrence, the identity has become unclear and resulted the poor sustainability of the local block batik. The general meaning of “identity” is “to recognise something or discover what exactly it is, apart from its origin and nature” (Summers, 2008). It also refers to the strength of self based on the symbols, icons, and identification in a society (Wan Yusoff, 2006). Elements of traditional motif like Awan Larat have been converted into images from beliefs (Nik Abd Rahman, Ramli, Yatim, Zakaria, & Wan Ibrahim, 2012). As another example, grape tendrils have no longer been used in the motifs for ages (Ismail, 1986); instead, pea tendrils have been adopted to display a Malay identity (Hussin, 2006). These 2 motif were commonly used in the past for Malay batik block. In this era of modernisation, Malaysia is still struggling to come up with a local design identity as no specific word can describe the designs which originate from Malaysia (Ahmad, Hassan, & Romli, 2014). The factor which made important the creation of a Malaysian block batik identity was the Indonesians’ claims that batik-producing techniques were theirs in light of UNESCO’s recognition. On the other hand, others have argued that the existence of Indonesian batik did not signify that Malaysia could not develop its own identity (Collins, 2009).

Indonesians place more importance on batik designs which reflect their identity. Examples of these include the sacred lotus flower, parang rusak, and garuda bird. Collectively, these are known as Batik Kraton (Anjana & Nagar, 2010). Meanwhile, batik has been produced in West Africa since the 17th century. They also have their own identity in their products, whereby the patterns are inclined towards local figures which possess symbolic meanings (Choudhary, 2015). Other than that, paisley (from plants) is one of the prominent identities of the Indian textile industry, apart from batik. Until today, the patterns on paisley contain traditional impressions of India (Sylvanus, 2007). Overall, it is important to know and understand the traditional identity of motif so this will indicate the sustainability of the current motif and design of Malaysia batik block.

The meaning of sustainability can be defined as the action to make something continuously to exist, happen, or maintain for a period of time (Summers, 2008). In addition, sustainability is a process where sustainability (environmental, social, and financial) is combined into a system from idea generation obtained from research and development (R & D) and commercialization. This applies to products, services, technologies, new business, and organization models (Charter & Clark, 2007; Shuhaib & Enoch, 2013). Sustainability does not only happen in technology, but also in culture, as the culture needs to be sustained for the survival of a civilization (Zain, 2016). Usually, common perception on sustainable is about new technological ideas, but aesthetic elements are also some ideas that require sustainability because they are critical reflection on art, culture, and nature (Michael, 1998; Shuhaib & Enoch, 2013). When relating to sustainability and textile, the most important quality of traditional textile good is the sustainability of the as a visual identity (Rusu, 2011). Therefore, adding traditional local design elements into contemporary design is seen as an approach towards sustaining the nation’s heritage values (Shuhaib & Enoch, 2013). Thus, based on these past studies, clearly, local block batik identity needs to be sustained for the strength of Malaysia. The sustainability is related closely with the identity in traditional block batik.

Overall, it is true that most of the current motif and designs were portray the abstract looks. This shows the Malaysia still struggling to come up with local motif and design’s identity and it is quite a challenge towards maintains the traditional motif and design of floral identity of batik block in Malaysia. It is important for Malaysia to refer to other country like Indonesia, Africa, and India that have their own identities in their batik, which are based on their respective distinctive motifs like floral motif. These traditional motifs are still being used in their modern batik. As such, there is also a need for Malaysia to incorporate traditional floral motifs in their modern batik block to create a local identity so that Malaysia’s batik block designs will be easily recognised by societies from all over the world and to ensure the sustainability of this valuable Malay heritage.






3. Methodology

This qualitative study has employed a methodology that consisted of the interviews, field work, and library researches. For the data analysis, the researchers have used the typography process in order to organise the data systematically. The field work comprised observation activities, whereby the researchers have visited few block batik production sites in Terengganu and Kelantan (as these are the dominant states in which batik is manufactured). Other than that was, the Terengganu State Handicraft Centre, Kelantan State Handicraft Centre,

Malaysian Handicraft Centre, Terengganu State Museum, Kelantan State Museum, National Museum in Kuala Lumpur. The outcomes of this research were based on primary data, i.e. the responses to the interviews with directors, royalty, academicians, and gallery managers. The secondary data is the book, journal, conference paper with the various research works on the block. A total of 31 block batik practitioners from different states in Malaysia have been interviewed. In all, 18 questions have been asked to each person, of which 3 concerned the socio demographic background of the respondents, 11 about the motifs, and 4 regarding the Malaysian identity batik block. Overall, the outcomes have provided answers to the research questions of this study.

4. Analysis and Finding

Table 2. Traditional Batik Block Motifs in Malaysia

	Year	Image	Information
1	1920	<p>Grass flower/ <i>Imperata cylindrical</i> (<i>Bunga lalang</i>)</p>  <p>(Ahmad Dawa, 2009)</p>	<p>Function: Medicine.</p>
2	1930	<p>Ylang Ylang flower (<i>Bunga Kenanga</i>)</p>  <p>(Awang Isa, 2009, as cited in Ahmad Dawa, 2009)</p>	<p>Function: Ceremonial gift. (Ahmad Dawa, 1995)</p>
3	1940	<p>Chrysanthemum flower/ <i>Chrysanthemum morifolium</i> (<i>Bunga Kekwa</i>)</p>  <p>(Hussin, 2006)</p>	<p>Function: Drink/ medicine/ decoration.</p>
4	1950	<p>Jasmine flower (<i>Bunga Tanjung Tua /Caperdik</i>)</p>  <p>(Ahmad Dawa, 2009)</p>	<p>Function: Decoration and medicine. Symbolise: virginity and purity. (Ahmad Dawa, 1995)</p>
5	1960	<p>Jasmine flower/ <i>Jasminum sambac</i> Aiton (<i>Bunga Melur</i>)</p>  <p>(Hussin, 2006)</p>	<p>Characteristics: white, has soothing smell. Symbolises: Sign of purity and chastity.</p>
<p>Water lily flower/ <i>Nelumbo nucifera</i> Gaertn. (<i>Bunga Teratai</i>)</p>			








6	1970		Function: Food/ decoration.
		(Hussin, 2006)	
7	1980	Hibiscus flower (<i>Bunga Raya</i>) 	Characteristics: Has five petals. Symbolism: National flower (Wan Abdullah, 1995, as cited in Ahmad Dawa, 1995)
		(M. Derahman, personal communication, November 15, 2017)	
8	1990	Pumpkin flower/ <i>Cucurbita moschata</i> (<i>Bunga Labu</i>) 	Characteristics: 3 petals, has a tendril motif. Symbolism: growth and youthfulness.
		(Ahmad Dawa, 1995)	

Table 2 above has discussed the traditional motifs of Malaysian block batik with respect to the year of production which contains the info like the function and symbolize. There motifs were of grass flower, ylang ylang, chrysanthemum, caperdik, jasmine, water lily, hibiscus, and pumpkin flower. These flowers were typically used as medicines, ceremonial gifts, symbols, and decorations.

Table 3. Motifs of Malaysian batik block, by State (Kraftangan Malaysia, 2017)

	States	Malaysia Motif/ Characteristics	Images
1	Melaka (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2017)	Kesidang flower/ Decoration	 (Designer: Syed Erwan Fahimy Syed Omar Nasiry)
2	Kedah (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2017)	Bongor flower	
3	Perak (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2017)	Bougainvillea flower	
4	Negeri Sembilan (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2017)	Chilli flower	







5	Pahang (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2017)	Pecan flower		(Designer: Hariri Abdullah)
6	Sarawak (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2017)	Normah or Lundu Orchid flower/ Symbol		(Designer: Fuad Ariffin)
7	Sabah (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2017)	Rafflesia flower		(Designer: Anjalia Raimin)
8	Johor (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2017)	Gambir flower/ Medicine		
9	Selangor (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2017)	Tanjung flower/Ceremonial Gift		
10	Perlis (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia, 2017)	Mango flower		
11	Terengganu (S. Mamat, personal communication, August 17, 2017)	Alamanda flower		

Table 3 above shows the collection of batik block motifs based on the states in Malaysia. Examples of the motifs and their respective states include Kesidang flower (Malacca), Bongor flower (Kedah), Bougainvillea flower (Perak), chilli flower (Negeri Sembilan), pecan flower (Pahang), Lundu orchid (Sarawak), Rafflesia flower (Sabah), Gambir flower (Johor), Tanjung flower (Selangor), mango flower (Perlis), and alamanda flower (Terengganu). The aim of the compilations in Tables 2 and 3 was to determine the changes in the identities of the floral motifs of block batik in the Malay society from 1920 until today.

Table 4. Characteristic features of local batik block

Traditional motifs	Modern motifs
Medicine	/
Ceremonial Gift	/
Symbol	/
Decoration	/

Table 4 above enumerates the characteristics features of traditional and modern motifs of floral in batik block. The characteristics that were shared between the two were medicine, ceremonial gift symbol, and decoration. So, these 4 items are the basic features that can be used to propose guidelines in the designing of motifs for the Malaysian batik block. The producers can use these characteristics when making their batik block. During the

field work, it was discovered that many of the latest batik block products did not contain traditional floral motifs. As mentioned, these designs have failed to portray a clear Malaysian identity because they were not created with reference to the traditional floral motifs, but based on imagination without support from research. Thus, it is vital for the current batik block producers to implement the traditional motif's identity for sustainability of the industry. There are several reasons for the selection of traditional floral motifs in batik block in Malay world. One of them is the religion as the fauna (animal) motifs are less favoured as compared to floral ones as they create doubts for the wearer to perform solah (Ahmad Dawa, 1995). However, fauna motifs can still be used, on the condition that it is stylised (Ismail and Hassan, 2012). bunga semangat and lotus to symbolise religion (Hinduism) (Haron et al., 2014). Apart from that, floral have been associated with variety of functions. For example, roses can be used to decorate gardens, jasmine to scent gardens, hibiscus as medicine to cure headaches, cloves to season food, as well as coconut leaves to relieve pain and to provide advice (philosophy) (Haron et al., 2014). In addition, floral motifs are related to trade activities. When fabrics were brought to Malacca in the 15th century (in an era of animism prior to the advent of Islam), skillful block-makers were able to design floral motifs based on nature sources (Nik Abdul Rahman et al., 2012). To sum up, the traditional identities of block batik are defined by religions, decorations, scents, medicines, seasonings, philosophies (symbol), and trading activities. The motifs are mostly floral because the extrinsic beauty of the flowers can be converted into specific characteristics and symbols. All of these aspects are vital in the process of creating guidelines for local batik-designing. Overall, in this context of research, there are 2 types of identities of traditional batik block which is the internal identities and external identities. The internal identity refers to the characteristic, symbolise, function and philosophies. In terms of the external identities of batik block, concerns the motif and materials. The motif usually at the front and back surfaces of the fabric where the traditional motifs of batik block were inclined towards bamboo shoots, while the modern ones were more abstract. Whereas, the material used which were made of brass. Furthermore, the dominants state that were well known with traditional batik block were the Terengganu and Kelantan. In the context of this research, the traditional identity of batik block of this states can be identify by the color and motif. The Terengganu versions of batik block have striking and bright colours in addition to small, detailed flower motifs. In comparison, Kelantanese block batik has dull colors and big flowers. Overall, the traditional identity of Malay batik block is important to sustain and preserve for future generation.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this paper has documented and classified the traditional floral motifs of block batik via typological analysis to determine their sustainability in the Malaysian industry. Based on the findings, it can be postulated that the local block batik does not have a strong Malaysian identity. The most significant finding in this study was that Malaysian block batik motifs had distinctive characteristic features (uses) like medicines, ceremonial gifts, symbols, and decorations; these are likely to be able to significantly strengthen the local identity and hence, sustainability of block batik. Certain members of the society still prefer floral motifs in the generation of new ideas and styles. For example, Ruzz Gahara, which used Ketang Guri – a traditional flower motif – in their products, has managed to preserve the heritage and is well-known overseas. This proves that traditional motifs are still relevant in the modern world. Notably, this research has evaluated the possible guidelines for batik-designing, apart from the sustainability of traditional floral motifs in the modern block batik in Malaysia. The contributions of this study will serve as an important design bank for the producers of block batik to come up with new designs with reference to the traditional motifs. This study had an association with the goals in the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (RMK -11) on 2016 - 2020. It is recommended that future researchers study the identities of block batik in each district in Malaysia.

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