

Lasem's Batik Revival through the Revitalization of Arabic Calligraphy and Chinese Sinography

Dewi Isma Aryani¹
{dewi.ia@art.maranatha.edu¹}

Diploma-III Program of Fine Arts and Design, Jalan Prof. drg. Suria Sumantri, Bandung¹

Abstract. This study aims to map the motifs of Arabic calligraphy and Chinese sinography carried out by the Lasem batik production house. The data were collected from literature studies, interviews with the owner of Lasem batik, namely Sekar Kencana, to be analyzed using ATUMICS qualitative methods. Overall, it was found that the presence of motifs from Arabic calligraphy and Chinese sinography positively affected the value of Lasem batik produced. However, the integration of these two motifs has no significant effect on the increase in production and orders from consumers. In addition, this study found that the acculturation of several cultural elements can affect new target consumers who have multiethnic backgrounds. Most of the studies on Arabic calligraphy and Chinese sinography focus on religiosity, but less on its relationship to certain decorative motifs in batik. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by examining the effect of Arabic calligraphy and Chinese sinography produced on the intangible value in Lasem batik.

Keywords: Arabic Calligraphy; Batik Lasem; Chinese Sinography; Integration; Revitalization

1 Introduction

During the Dutch colonial period, Indonesia recognized two groups of batik ornaments which were divided based on the area of batik in terms of function and motifs, namely inland batik or palace (Vorstenlanden), Yogyakarta-Surakarta and coastal batik [1]. Lasem is a sub-district in Rembang Regency, Central Java which has cultural heritages, one of them is batik. The Lasem community began to explore batik skills through designs that have been developed due to internal and external factors [2]. Internal factors are the main influence of cultural acculturation in Lasem batik which comes from the influence of the palace and local culture of coastal communities. Meanwhile, external factors were caused by the influence of foreign cultures from China and the Netherlands. Due to the influence of these two factors, Lasem batik has a very distinctive decoration and color so that it is unique and different from other coastal batik motives [3]. According to Suliyati and Yuliyati [4], Lasem batik as the batik of the northern coast of Java has a more free and attractive concept with a combination of two or more colors, while the motif is modified with attractive color variations. The existence of cultural differences that exist can be fused flexibly and dynamically, rich in cultural acculturation due to the arrival of traders from outside Indonesia centuries ago by leaving a

strong cultural traces. The ornamental variety in Lasem batik itself can be classified into four variations based on the motif or pattern, namely:

- a) Flora, as an ornamental variety with plant motifs, is usually found in art products such as: batik, woven fabrics, and also carvings.
- b) Fauna, decorated with animal motifs such as: butterflies, birds, fish, elephants, etc.
- c) Figurative, i.e. ornaments in the form of human objects depicted through stylized forms usually found in Eastern cultures such as Papua, Egypt, India, etc.
- d) Geometric, decoration developed from geometric shapes styled according to the maker's imagination [5].

The development of Lasem batik itself had experienced ups and downs. Told back by Thania, the successor to the house of Batik Sekar Kencana, the golden age of Lasem batik in 1900 – 1970 resulted in batik fabrics being exported to several ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka. However, Lasem batik also experienced suspended animation in 1942-1945 due to the Japanese occupation of Indonesia. This resulted in the decline of Lasem batik for almost 30 years starting from 1970 - 2000. The turning point for the rise of Lasem batik was marked by the recognition of batik by UNESCO in 2009 as a Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity and in 2015 there were 30 active batik production houses in Lasem [6]. The conducive climate change in Lasem for batik has resulted in the emergence of innovations in Lasem batik decorations, one of which is by the batik production house Sekar Kencana. Batik Sekar Kencana is a batik house that was founded in 1967 by the legend of Lasem batik, Sigit Witjaksono. The background of the thick acculturation of culture in Sigit Witjaksono's family, Chinese and Javanese, became the beginning of the birth of Lasem batik with Chinese sinographic motifs [7]. The uniqueness of the Lasem batik made by Sekar Kencana is what will be explained further in the discussion.

2 Applied Research Method

This article uses a qualitative method to analyze the findings of the literature study based on the applied theory. Based on the background above, it will be explained the uniqueness of Batik Lasem from the production house of Sekar Kencana. The reason for choosing the object of research in Batik Lasem is because apart from having elements of acculturation from several cultures, namely: Javanese, Chinese, and Dutch, in line with Darmayanti's research (2020) on elements of cultural heritage in the north coast of Java which is rich in acculturation [3], also includes elements of Arabic calligraphy in some of their batik works. The ATUMICS method is used as an analytical approach to Arabic calligraphy and Chinese sinography in Lasem batik because it is full of traditional and modern elements in it. Through the ATUMICS method, it can also be seen the factors that influence the inspiration and the process of creating a product [8].

3 Result and Discussion

Lasem Batik is one of the coastal batik which is known to be rich in the philosophical meaning of cultural acculturation in it, especially Chinese. This makes Lasem formerly known as Lao Sam or Little China [6]. Classification in Lasem batik itself can be divided into three namely classical / folk batik, Laseman batik, and contemporary batik. What is meant by classic/folk batik is Lasem batik which displays motifs or decorations from the flora and fauna

typical of Lasem and the beliefs of the legends of the people. The Laseman batik is Lasem batik which has a strong Chinese cultural influence in it. Meanwhile, contemporary batik itself, like other modern batik, has more free decoration and is not bound by certain rules [6].



Fig. 1. Various nicknames given to the Lasem city

The Lasem batik that will be discussed in this study is more directed to the Laseman batik produced by the Sekar Kencana batik production house in the Babagan batik tourism village, Lasem [6]. Sekar Kencana batik production house is one of the many Lasem batik producers that exist and still survive today. Since UNESCO established batik as a human heritage for oral and non-material things in 2009, it has become a trigger for the sustainability of several batik production houses in Lasem. The multiethnic background, beliefs, and culture in the family of Sigit Witjaksono, the founder of Sekar Kencana batik, also influenced the use of decorative patterns in the batik he produced. The motifs produced by the Sekar Kencana batik production house are very thick with a blend of Javanese and Chinese cultures as shown in Figure 2. Some of the batik fabrics produced by Sekar Kencana were found using Han script or Chinese sinography and Arabic calligraphy. Lasem batik with Chinese sinographic content has been done by many Lasem batik but not massive so it is not popular. Chinese sinography in Lasem batik has only begun to be known and liked since it was developed by Sigit Witjaksono [7].



Fig. 2. Some batik motifs from the production house of Sekar Kencana

The placement of the Han script in Lasem batik is not just a mere motif but has a special meaning because it is a proverb, wise words of Confucius, or prayers that are believed by the Chinese community to be good bearers [7]. The Arabic calligraphy motifs made by Sekar Kencana were originally due to accidental elements, namely from an order from a pesantren owner asking to make batik with Arabic calligraphy to be placed in the mosque [6].



Fig. 3. Lasem Sekar Kencana Batik with Chinese sinography and Arabic calligraphy

Based on the explanation above, then the Lasem batik made by Sekar Kencana with Arabic calligraphy and Chinese sinography will be discussed using the ATUMICS method approach. The reason for using the ATUMICS method as a qualitative approach to analyze the Lasem batik motif made by Sekar Kencana is based on the similarity of philosophical foundations that want to preserve tradition but still pay attention to the elements of modern life in today's society [8].

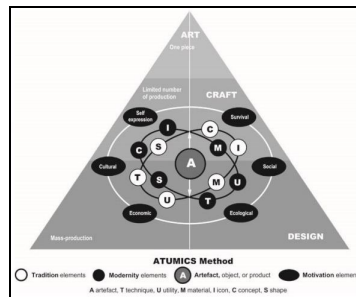


Fig. 4. ATUMICS method diagram

Furthermore, the six fundamental elements in this research will be discussed based on the ATUMICS concept. As shown in figure 4, the letter 'A' in ATUMICS means an artifact/product/object, which is the center of tradition revitalization activities [8]. Artifacts in this study are Sekar Kencana Lasem batik itself and summary of the ATUMICS method can be seen in table 1. Technique (T) is all kinds of knowledge/techniques of making including production, processes, skills, equipment, and other facilities [8]. According to Nugraha (2019), technique as tacit knowledge will only last forever if it is still practiced. This is in accordance with this study, namely the process and technique of batik in Lasem batik. As UNESCO acknowledged in 2009 for batik, it creates various perceptions in it. Some experts argue that what is recognized is batik in the form of cloth, but APPBI (Asosiasi Perajin dan Pengusaha Batik Indonesia) strengthens the opinion that the process of batik in Indonesia is what UNESCO intended as a world heritage.

Table 1. Lasem Sekar Kencana batik summary in the ATUMICS method

Element	Explanation	Sign
Artefact (A)	Lasem batik	

Element	Explanation	Sign
Technique (T)	Batik with hot wax, canting, on a piece of cloth	
Utility (U)	Fabrics or products for human use	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Selendang</p>  </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Taplak</p>  </div> </div>
Material (M)	Cotton fabric (primis, primissima)	
Icon (I)	Peranakan motifs	
Concept (C)	Chinese, Javanese, Arabic	
Shape (S)	Batik motif on a piece of cloth	

Utility (U), according to Nugraha [8], describes the function and usability of a product, the suitability of the user's needs based on its usability/function. The utility of an artifact for humans is a means of primary need or survival. This is in line with the design principle, namely form follows function, that a design will automatically meet the aesthetic rules when its functional aspects can run or are fulfilled. In this study, Lasem batik has utility as a clothing material, one of the primary human needs. As a clothing material, batik cloth can be used for various purposes in human life, for example body covering (long cloth or *jarit* in

Javanese), table cloth (*taplak*), divan or mattress cover (*bed sheets*), and so on. Along with the development of technology, batik cloth is not only limited to covering the body as a mere fulfillment of human clothing needs, but also as a means to express oneself towards the social environment, as studied by Aryani [2] [9] [10]. Materials (M) are all types of raw materials from objects, objects, or a product. In general, traditional products made from natural/natural materials such as wood, bamboo, clay, stone, natural fibers, grasses, roots, rattan, and coconut shells can be a geographical indication of the uniqueness of a particular local area [8]. The material used by the Sekar Batik production house is cotton fabric with either primis/prima or primissima types. Cotton cloth, also known as mori cloth among batik makers, is plain white in color, thick enough, smooth and tight so that it has good quality when used as raw material for handmade and stamped batik.

Icon (I) in the ATUMICS method is all forms of images, ornaments, colors, myths, people, and artifacts. On a smaller scale, the icon is an identity for a particular product [8]. This research on Lasem batik raises an icon or identity in terms of very distinctive motifs and colors. The typical motifs in Lasem batik are strongly influenced by the Chinese-Javanese *peranakan* culture [11]. While the typical color of Lasem batik is a bright red color like the color of chicken blood (*abang getih pitik*). Meanwhile, the Sekar Kencana batik production house, in this case, tries to add the identity of the *Peranakan* motif to Arab culture as a representation of the Muslim community in Lasem. Coupled with the rapid growth of *pesantren*, Lasem is also known as the City of Islamic Students [6]. Concept (C) is an implied element in a product. Concepts can usually be in the form of rules, customs, norms, habits, beliefs, ideologies, and culture in general [8]. The concept has a vital role in the sustainability of its life cycle in the community, usually it can last a long time if it is in accordance with local cultural norms. Batik Sekar Kencana tries to make batik cloth products that are not only filled with *Peranakan* (Chinese-Javanese) motifs but also add elements of Arabic culture in their written batik works. The Han script or sinography, which is better known among the Chinese and Confucian adherents, is able to fuse with Arabic calligraphy and produce a product that has high aesthetic and economic value (can be seen in figure 3).



Fig. 5. Examples of Lasem *Peranakan* batik motifs by Sigit Witjaksono

Shape (S) refers to a physical appearance or attribute of an object, such as dimensions, gestalt, and shape [8]. Traditional forms are often used as a reference for product creation into a more modern version. In the case of Lasem Sekar Kencana batik, what is being referred to is in terms of the decorative forms. The use of Lasem's distinctive decorative elements combined with Chinese elements and Arabic calligraphy is an act of instilling something new and becoming more alive.

4 Conclusion

Lasem Batik, which is rich in cultural acculturation, especially the Chinese-Javanese Peranakans, is one of the most popular coastal batiks in northern Java. Lasem has many nicknames known as the Maritime City, Batik City, Islamic Student City, Little China which also colors the richness of the patterns or decorations on his written batik. Lasem's strong Chinese and Javanese cultural background has become a source of reference for his written batik motifs to this day. Batik Sekar Kencana as one of the oldest Lasem batik production houses innovates by incorporating elements of Chinese sinography and Arabic calligraphy into its batik motifs. Sekar Kencana's Lasem batik revitalization is in line with the ATUMICS method. Thus the revitalization of Lasem batik motifs with Chinese sinography and Arabic calligraphy from Sekar Kencana is able to fuse and glue the multiethnic communities in Lasem, namely the Chinese-Javanese, Chinese-Muslim, and also Javanese-Muslim communities.

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