**Batik Semiotics as a Media of Communication in Java**

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**Abstract:** Batik industry, Indonesia's traditional practice of dying cloth through wax resist methods, is considered an important source of intangible cultural heritage and protected under UNESCO. The industry is very diverse and many different colors and motives are used. Research in this article focuses on Batik in Yogyakarta, Surakarta, Lasem, Tuban and Garut regions. This paper studies the connotative implications of Batik’s cultural significations that pass on from older to younger generations revealing the importance of visuality and touch in constructing meaning within certain cultures.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Batik, High Context Culture, Java

**1. Introduction**

Messages in human relations can be expressed by means of semiotic signs in various material formats. Alongside these material and operative conditions, conventions, community and institutional practices are also often related to technological change, so that the materiality of media is already culturally encoded in diverse intermedial cultural practices (López-Varela 2011).

The study Batik is an important source for research on cultural heritage in Indonesia, where it has been used to pass on knowledge across generations and remains one of the less known products of the country’s cultural wealth (Dahles 2001). The study of Batik also reveals important aspects regarding Javanese communicative practices, strongly influenced by social status and power relations (Gittinger 1989; Adams & Dickey 2000) and closely related to the spread of the Islamic Majapahit Empire in those territories. Although Batik art is very ancient, its greater expansion beyond Indonesian territories can be traced back to colonial situation and industrial development in the 18th-century.

Indonesian cultures are collectivist and based on group harmony and consensus, rather than on individual achievement. The rationalism is much less effective in such cultures, governed by emotional and affective persuasion. The speaker’s tone of voice, his or her facial expressions, gestures, postures, as well as the person’s family history and status, are determinant in communicative situations which rely strongly on assessing the value of truth from the speaker’s credibility. Flowery language, politeness and elaborate apologies are also typical in Indonesian cultures(Chaturvedi & Chaturvedi 2004). In such a ceremonial culture, Batik motifs continue to determine class structure in public events. For instance, in Yogyakarta and Solo, the king uses a type of Batik pattern called *Parang Rusak* that invites onlookers to recognize him as the person of highest rank.

The largest and widest archipelago in the world, and a maritime country with tropical climate, Indonesia has various shades of Batik in accordance with the natural and cultural conditions of its production. Styles vary from region to region in accordance with their affiliated culture, and nowadays they all hold registered copyrights. Batik colors and motifs also reflect the places of origin where Batik is produced. Historical traces as well as the local values are inherited and reflected in Batik manufacturing processes (Damas Mulyono, personal communication, March 14, 2012). Initially crafted in royal palaces to dress family, relatives and the court; Batik is more than a piece of artistic clothing. Extending outside the realm of high culture to daily folk life, Batik is both the cloth that wraps Indonesian people from birth to death, and witness to a rich artistic heritage stretching beyond the boundaries of high art to contemporary ethnic fashion.

Batik motifs were, and continue to be, taken from a variety of plants, mountains, animals, rice paddies, rivers, oceans, and ancient symbols of life. Its fabrics continue to be woven within cultural circles close to the family environment and daily life. Their meaning stretches beyond the perceived design, a unique pattern of colors, lines, surfaces, volumes, light and shade, which expresses certain intrinsic and singular qualities. (Tendi Naim, personal communication, March 3, 2012). In 2006, the number of Batik units produced reached a peak of 48.287, with the industry employing 792.300 people and exporting over 110 million U.S. dollars. Batik is mainly produced in 17 provinces in Indonesia. The most important ones are Jambi, Palembang, Bengkulu, Jakarta, Banten, West Java, Central Java, Yogyakarta, East Java, Bali, West Sumatra, Lampung, West Kalimantan, South Kalimantan, East Kalimantan, South Sulawesi, and Papua. A fundamental element in national economy, Batik is also an important element of women’s empowerment, with more and more contracts being negotiated with the help of international NGOs and fashion wear labels interested in ethnic products (on this see Souza 2005).

**2. Batik and Semiosis**

Etymologically derived from the Greek word meaning *semeion* "sign", semiotics can be defined as the science of signs and the study of the systems, rules and conventions that allow these signs to have meaning. Western modern semiotics evolved differently in the work of two pioneers, the North-American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce and European linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Signs, whether icons (images), indexes (metonymical pointers, like gestures) and symbols (abstract consensual signs such as those found in human verbal language) in C. S. Peirce’s terms, consist on a series of interrelated elements that make up a communicative system, interpreted on the basis of its physical manifestations (through the perceptual modes of sight, hearing, touch, taste and scent). Saussure’s semiology came to be concerned primarily with the linguistic sign (symbol in Peirce’s trichotomous view of signs).

It is important to mention that the Peircean categories of signs -icon, index, symbol- are pure solely in their theoretical existence. In practice, their features merge in different proportions. That signs should be, as much as possible, similar to the objects they signify is known as “relative motivation”. But, things can be similar to one another in various ways, and such signs achieve meaning in consensus (“motivated convention”)Motivation represents a 'natural connection' between the signifier and the signified in Saussure’s semiology, and 'similarity' between *representatum* and *representamen* in Peirce’s semiotics. Motivation can be imposed by 'custom' (*habit*, in Peirce’s terms), or approved by 'convention' (Saussure), and 'consensus' is materialized in usages or collective representational customs. For example, in the case of Batik, although it has characteristics of imitative-iconic representation and indexical pointers, it also entails symbolic qualities derived from its embedding in particular cultural codes, thus enabling a process specific to human semiosis: the culturalization of the natural in ‘motivated signs’. This convergence between motivation (in icons and indexes) and arbitrariness (symbols) can be observed in Batik.

Diverse contributions, such as those by Roland Barthes and Ernst Cassirer, came to study sign as distinct orders of meanings and characteristic marks of human activity embodied in diverse cultural fields such as language, art, myth, ritual, history, and even science and technology. These studies brought attention to the way signs are experienced in a given culture. For instance, Barthes distinguishes between two orders of signification, a first level or denotative/literal meaning, and a second level of connotative/culturally associative meaning that he terms 'myth' or ‘metalanguage’ and which serves to reveal and provide justification for the dominant values ​​prevailing in a given period(Barthes, 1990). Connotative meanings refer to particular cultures and traditions and they are often reproduced in a ritualistic way. In ancient cultures, ritualistic sign-reproduction provided the foundation for religious systems. The idol, generally an iconic sign or image, in Peircean terms, became the representation of divinity. Special garments were used by priests, kings and heroes/saints, evoking the archetype (Eliade 1991). Linguistic signs in prayers were the foundation of veneration. In some religions signs were sacred and their reproduction reserved for religious powers, as possession of the sign entailed power over the original (Lévy-Bruhl 1910).

Frequently, signs have a double value: informative or referential and suggestive or emotive, close to their denotative and connotative roles (Eco 1982). Signs with an informative function convey knowledge concerning objects of the real world. Artistic signs are usually connotative, with ambiguity “an intrinsic and inherent property of the poetic message” (Jakobson 1963) that, nevertheless, does not lose its referential function. The coexistence of both functions is evident in Batik designs. Certain non-figural configurations might not have a referent in the real world, but signify by means of a 'mental representation', which does not require the existence of the 'real' object (Reboul & Moeschler 1998). An artist always attempts to change the empirical nature of phenomena and does not offer perceived but represented images (Hoffmann 1977).

The semiotic study of Batik helps demonstrates the complex and nuanced nature of quotidian practices, and the historical changes that have invested the high/low culture divide with new meanings. The plurality of Batik design, both denotative and connotative, points to interesting convergences between previous high and low distinctions (Cobley 2009). The research shows how, in a particular context, any actualized semantic value may overshadow others associated to the same sign without suppressing them. Connotative references remain virtual values within the sign system, and may be activated at any given moment.

**3. Batik Values**

There are at more than 400 Batik motifs in Yogyakarta. Some are classical, and some are modern. Among them: dagger(*parang*), latticework, creeping plants, water plants, flowers, animals, *Sido Asih*, *Sido Mukti*, *Sido Luhur*, Cement *Mentul*, *Sapit Urang*, *Harjuna Manah*, *Semen Kuncoro, Sekar Asem, Lung Kangkung, Sekar Keben, Sekar Polo, Grageh Waluh, Tumurun, Naga Gini, Truntum, Tambal, Grompol, Mdau Broto*, *Semen Gedhang*, *Jalu Mampang* … (Herusatoto 2003). Each motif has its own cultural values ​​and meanings. For instance, *Sido Asih* signifies that the life of the person who wears is full of affection. *Sido Mukti* is frequently used by brides to express adequacy and happiness. *Sido Mulyo* signifies that the life of the person who wears will always be glorious. *Sido Luhur* means that the wearer is a virtuous and noble character. *Mdau Bronto* shows sweet romance in the form of honey comb. *Semen Gedhang* embodies a bride’s desire of fertility (Djoemena 1990).

“Defective Dagger” (*Parang Rusak*) is a motif used Batik from Yogyakarta. It is a lined motif that resembles the letter S, forming a diagonal line with a slope of 45 degrees. Although apparently a simple pattern, the connotative meaning of “Defective Dagger” is “unyielding spirit full of hope”, and emulates the persistent movement of waves. This pattern is created in coastal areas, and the fabric composition points to an unbroken and persistent design that symbolizes the spirit of self-improvement and historical family ties. “Defective Dagger” is frequently used to express hope in child-bearing, and the parents’ capacity to continue the struggle that their ancestors have pioneered (Figure1).



Figure1. Defective Dagger Batik

Classic Batik motif in Java (Surakarta) comes in a variety of shapes that, nevertheless, convey traditional beliefs and symbols common to these cultures. As mentioned above, Batik is more than a piece of clothing or an aesthetic object. It also embodies forms of collective thought in their complex symbolism. Many motifs in Surakarta Batik are related to the natural world. One of such motifs is the *Garuda*, a bird deity who acts as carrier of god Vishnu, and whose story is narrated in the Ramayana, a myth that carries values of greatness, power, virtue, wisdom and loyalty (on this see Pujianto 2003). Used in Batik design, *Garuda* conveys the meanings of virtue and nobility associated to Surakarta culture (Figure 2).



Figure2. Garuda Batik

Batik manufacturers in the Java region of Lasem used to employ Chinese laborers. This cultural influence is evident in unique and lasting motifs such as the Hong Bird, latticework, chrysanthemums, and liongs, created by the first Batik maker in Lasem, Li Na Ni. (Sears 1996) Interestingly, not only Chinese culture is visible upon Lasem Batik; the influence is reciprocal (Liong & Hadi 2010). Lasem Batik’s most prominent characteristic rarely found in other regions is its bright colors, mostly red but also yellow, blue, and green. Red stands for the color of blood, and the dragon, an important Chinese symbol, symbolizes in Lasem Batik the capacity of the region to open up to outside world (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Liong Batik

In addition to Li Na Ni motifs, there are other famous Lasem Batik motifs based on nature, such as *Watu Pecah* (broken stone), *Terang Bulan* (moon shining), and others like *Naga Kricak, Ceplok Piring, Sekar Jagat, Kawung Lerek, Sekar Paksi* …(Elliot &Brake 2004). In early 20th-century, Lasem Batik motifs began to incorporate flowers (*buketan*), bearing the influence of the colonial expansion of the Netherlands in these territories (Djoemena 1990).

Batik patterns in Tuban and Parahyangan (Sundanese settlement) have been studied by Yusuf Affendi (2000). Tuban Batik is located in the northern coastal areas, while the Garut Parahyangan communities live in the mountains. Affendi’s study provides an overview of some of the characteristics of works of Batik art-craft from these two diverse cultural backgrounds. Tuban produces Batik weaving *Gedog* which echoes the sound made by the spinners and weavers, *'Gedog ... Gedog ... Gedog* ...' (Figure 4). Motifs incorporate variations of marine fauna and flora. Supplementary decorations such as *Guntingan*, *Kapasan*, *Campursari*, *Kembang Waluh*, *Ganggeng,* recall names of natural objects in Tuban coasts.



Figure 4. Gedog Batik

Garut Parahyangan Batik uses color tones like pink(*kayas*) which symbolizes youth naïveté and tenderness. *Kayas*, *Kasumba,* and *Gandaria* are also expressed in Sundanese rhymes and songs that offer melancholic sounds accompanied by flutes and encourage gentleness upon the natural world; “save the world” is their message. Flowers and birds embody the sweetness of living things. (Figure 5) The Garut Parahyangan Batik tradition carries this ancestral message of patience and tenderness towards nature and life, its plants, flowers and animals. The message is passed on from generation to generation and encourages joy in its images of chirping birds (Hastings and Selbie 2003)



Figure 5. Garut Batik

**4. Conclusions**

Batik motifs are not just physical realities and objects of clothing; they are also signs that embody ways of thinking and collectivism in Indonesian cultures. There are still many hundreds of splendid Batik motifs, witness to the rich cultural heritage of this geographical area. This paper has only presented a glimpse of the possibilities that semiotic research on Batik motifs can offer to Cultural Studies. The authors hope that their work will inspire other people to explore the noble values ​​Indonesian cultures, and contribute to enrich and preserve its historical heritage.

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