



ICHDC2019



1st International Conference on Humanities Design & Creativity 2019 Best Western i-City Shah Alam, Malaysia, 18 Dec 2019

Cultural Consciousness: A case study of dying art on Batik Block in Malaysia

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Abstract

Malaysia's traditional batik block is a national treasure. However, it is slowly dying out, especially on the east coast. With globalisation and rapid technological change, batik block production is becoming limited as younger generations lose interest in block making. Few master block makers remain in Malaysia. Cultural awareness of block makers towards the Batik community and society is required. This research paper aims to make the traditional batik block more interesting and stimulating through innovation that does not change the original block state. The art of block making will continue to flourish to preserve Malaysia's traditional culture.

Keywords: Cultural Consciousness, Dying Art, Batik Block

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1.0 Introduction

This paper discusses the innovation of batik block, whereby it is crucial to identify the significance of the term cultural consciousness. Cultural consciousness can be defined as developing awareness of culture in the self, resulting in expanding understandings of culture and developing more profound cultural knowledge about other individuals and contexts (Mariela Páez & Lillie R. Albert, 2012). Globally, cultural consciousness is part of Sustainable Development (SD) and was first cited from the World Economic Development Council concerning one of the environmental, social or economic dimensions of Sustainability Development (Berglund et al. 2014; Olsson et al. 2016). The art of batik block is highly related to society's culture since, in batik block, a complete and perfect garment was characterised not only by its look but also by the mix of design, patterns, motifs, and colours that symbolised specific identities. In Malaysia, batik has existed around 1921, contributing to Malaysian economic and business opportunities in a rural areas, especially in Kelantan and Terengganu. A study by Hanipah et al. (2011) stated that the earliest technique introduced in Malaysia was batik block. The initial process in making batik block is by applying black dye onto wood carving mould called *sarang*, and this early technique is known as '*Terap Hitam*' (black stamp). According to Abdullah, M. (1990), the decline of our culture and tradition occurs at an alarming rate. One notable example is Malaysian traditional brassware craft, which was formerly popular and well-known owing to its unique and exquisite work of art (Bernama, 2010). However, the traditional brassware craft, which was created in Kampung Ladang, located in the capital city of Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia, has extinct due to lack of succession, skills and interests of younger generations (Alan, T.L.S, 2018).

For this reason, the researcher has come out with new approaches and concepts in order to preserve the cultural values of the batik block in Malaysia. Hence, this research attempts to discover about; [1] analysing various types of local batik block design [2] the most appropriate forms that should be designed to develop innovative shapes of batik block by using the design thinking approach. The

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researcher hopes that this research would benefit the government, batik practitioners, block makers and society in generating sources of income, thus enriching the country's economic and cultural values. This is no exception to Malaysia's batik, where its appeal has been continuously rejuvenated to match the current trend with new fresh designs. Hopefully, from this innovation and exploration in batik block, our batik industry will cast a brighter future in the nation's art heritage.

1.1 Malaysian Batik Block

Traditionally, the first evidence of Batik existence in Malaysia can be seen through Batik block or in the Malay language as Batik Terap or Batik Pukul. It is considered one of the most famous traditional handicrafts in Malaysia, especially in Kelantan and Terengganu, and Batik artisan was devoted almost exclusively to producing batik sarongs (Norlelawaty, H. et al. 2014). To flourish the batik production, brass has been transformed by combining other cheaper metals such as zinc and copper (Mohd, Yusop, 2015). Through the study by Haziyah (2006) have mentioned that the block batik mould, which is made from wood, copper, or iron, is being applied (stamped) on fabric by using wax. Alternatively, materials in making Batik blocks are also made from recycled tin cans, zinc sheets and other disposable metals. However, the most popular material in making Batik block is brass sheets due to its property as a heat conductor. Abdullah (1990) Significantly described that this Malay traditional Batik block is called Sarang or Sarang Bunga. In Malaysian Standard (2007), batik Terap defines as a technique where a block /Sarang lilin (fig.1) is used to stamp the physical resist substance on plain fabric. Some evolution occurs predominantly in the development of Batik production in the Malay Peninsula. This can be seen in the emergence of several block batik techniques that have been introduced. According to Pauziah (1983), Haziyah (2006), Hanipah et al. (2016), in the 1940s, few techniques have been introduced, such as the batik discharge technique (batik skrin), stencil or screen printing, as well as hand-drawn Batik (Batik Tulis). The evolution and innovation of block Batik production in this country can be observed based on the chronology of technological development, based on research done by Elphick (2014), which stated that the process of making stamped batik or 'batik therapy begins with the application of wax using batik block, also known as 'sarang bunga' moulds made from wood, copper or iron. In addition, the batik block is usually made of copper or brass. It is heat conductive properties and is used to 'print' hot wax onto cotton.



Figure 1: Batik Block (Homogenous Block)

1.2 Issues Of Block Makers

About the batik stamp, recent research has proved that there are less than seven-block makers in the state of Terengganu and Kelantan (Nur Azlin, 2017). In comparison, there are more than 300 block makers in the year 1990. The deteriorating numbers of block makers are because the commercialisation of batik is centred on hand-drawn batik as it commands higher profit margins. Relatively, it is learnt that the equipment used to make stamped batik is expensive. To make a stamped batik sarong, six batik stamps or blocks are used. These six batik stamps are considered a set. The sets would cost more than RM 1.000.00. However, an empirical study is required in underpinning the factors of modularity and tessellation. Relatively, a gap can be seen whereby, among past literature, empirical study on the concept of modular and tessellation associated with batik was lacking. Therefore, this research was undertaken to identify the potential outcomes of Batik design utilising the modular concept.

2.0 The Influence Of Conventional Batik Block In Design And Culture

The World-Asia Pacific Craft Council (WCC-APR) recognises Malaysian batik as one of the world's most famous local craft products, and batik is popular among local craft entrepreneurs. Several previous studies of batik have identified, and it is known that batik has different production techniques and involving several stages of processes. There are three types of batik produced by local Batik entrepreneurs: block Batik, screen Batik, and Batik Tulis or hand-drawn Batik (Noor Haslina and Normaz, 2015). From the previous research, several pieces of evidence suggest that batik has begun in the Malay Peninsula, specifically in Kelantan and Terengganu.

Block Batik is one of the oldest traditional techniques of making Batik in Malaysia. Batik artisan used wooden blocks carved with patterns as a mould to print batik in the early days. The first conventional batik block or stamp that has been used in the production of block Batik Malaysia can be traced back to the late 1960s (Ismail, 1997). The primary tool in producing stamped batik is called batik block (Akhir et al., 2016). In producing block Batik design, the intricate skill of block-makers can be seen through the beautiful patterns created on blocks. Initially, the block was made of wood before being substituted by zinc, iron, brass or copper blocks as used today (Norwani, M., 2008). To flourished the batik production, brass has been transformed by the combination of other metals such as zinc and copper (Yusop, 2015). Through the study by Haziyah (2006). She stated that the batik block is made by the mould of wood, copper or iron, and applied on fabric by using wax. Blocks were also made from recycled tin cans, zinc and other disposable metals. Brass plate is the main material to make batik block. Significantly, this traditional method in Malay is called *sarang* or *sarang bunga* (Abdullah, 1990).

About culture, American anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn thoroughly discussed theories and definitions of culture in 1952, made a list of 164 different definitions (Oatey, 2012). Culture, on either definition, is defined by William (1958) as a complex and comprehensive collection of relationships, values, attitudes, and behaviours that bind a specific community consciously and unconsciously. According to Zimmermann (2017), the term "culture" is derived from a French phrase, which is derived from the Latin word "Colere," which means "to cultivate" or "to cultivate the earth." One of the main design content in developing batik motifs is pattern and motif design. In batik block making, the motif is the most crucial element. The concept of repetition and design placement is the basis for design development, and the motif is not only for decoration, but it is symbolic and has a specific name and meanings from nature and unique appearance inspired by floral and geometric designs (Juhari, 2009).

3.0 Through Design Thinking, Re - Improvise Batik Block Innovation

For this research paper, the researcher has implemented a qualitative approach, with the technique is chosen based on design protocol analysis (Anwar et al. 2016). This method aims to re-strategising design investigation in real-time with an artificial environment. This form of qualitative research through the terms of ethnographic methods in which researchers observed, interact with and participates in the daily lives of people and communities. Ethnography, which derives from anthropology and is adopted by sociologists, is a qualitative approach that lends itself to the study of the attitudes, social experiences and activities of small populations, including involvement and observation over time, and to the analysis of the data gathered (Denzin, N.K and Lincoln, Y.S 2011). In this research, there are two phases of design ethnography in which focus groups and surveys are used to generate the insights that design principles need in the discovery of batik block innovation. The interview was conducted with batik block experts, also known as *Adigurus* (master craftsmen), accredited and recognised by the Malaysian Handicraft Corporation. For reliable and appropriate data, the chosen respondents should have experienced more than forty years in batik block making, and they are the only specialist master block makers in Malaysia who are still active in producing original blocks for batik productions.

3.1 Innovation Batik Block Through Design Thinking Process

Roterberg (2018). Design thinking is a comprehensive customer-oriented innovation approach that aims to generate and develop creative ideas. Moreover, Ordonez et al. (2017) describe that design thinking promotes creativity and problem solving while building cognitive and social skills. The procedure model is characterised by five phases, which are shown in (Figure 2). In this research, the data has been re-improvised through three phases, which are as follows: [1] Empathise; [2] Define and; [3] Ideate. The innovation outcome of the batik block was based on the design development of the ideation process, where a series of shapes, traditional Malay motifs, and block designs were created and constructed for future preferences. Data were collected through three design stages: empathise, define, and ideate; they are described below.



3.2 Participatory Of Block Makers

In this phase, the researchers aim to find out the need to enliven the dying art of block making and sustain the culture of batik block making. The discussions concerning the cultural consciousness of batik block were done by observing, engaging and empathising with the batik community to understand their experiences and motivations and involving researchers in the physical environment to gain a deeper personal understanding of the related issues. In this research, the Design Thinking process has started with an empathised mode involving the two-block makers and batik artisans, which the researcher has identified. Both of the respondents (*Adigurus*) are from the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, which is from the state of Kelantan (Abdul Ghani Mat, 60 years old) and the other one from the state of Terengganu (Zakaria Ismail, 60 years old).

3.3 Batik Block With Modular Design Concept

In understanding the design characteristic of batik block, the most vital consideration has been placed to the planned pattern arrangement produced in batik block. Pattern arrangement is crucial and could give design impact in the context of manufacturing batik

block. The combination of patterns during production becomes the essential aspect in differentiating the design output of a textile surface pattern. The selection of modularity in this experiment because of its capabilities in the design has evolved as a measuring tool and the use of standardised units that combine physically to form a larger structure with each other (E.S. Hur, & Thomas, B.G., 2011). Modular design is a design method that produces conventional interfaces from autonomous components—customising, upgrading, repairing designs and reusing components. LEGO's plastic building toys are a well-known instance of module design (Spacey, J. 2016) (Figure 3). By using these concepts, the block design can be changed according to the customer's needs. Using this concept, the pattern or design arrangement through the interchanging blocks before LEGO's provides more alternatives than the conventional method.



Figure 3: The Concepts of Modularity Approach in LEGO

3.4 Batik Block Design Ideation

Batik block design ideation begins with design sketches that apply to ideate the local themes. For hundreds of years, the Malay community has had various approaches to becoming a part of cultural heritage. In this example, the design sketches (Figure 4 and 5) were developed using local Malay traditional motifs.



Figure 4: Pucuk Rebung



Figure 5: Motif Daun Sirih Emas

In describing motifs, Legino (2012) describe that the motif can create a unit that helps to form a pattern, though the element of repetition helps to form the design, as well as the prototype, is an early sample, model, or release of a product used to test an idea or method or to serve as a template for replication or improvement. Prototyping, or the act of creating prototypes, is an essential component of iterative user-centred design because it allows designers to test their ideas with users and receive feedback (Houde and Hill 1997). In this research, the researchers have produced a prototype related to batik stamps that would cater to modular design factors. These factors will become the subject matter in producing batik stamps, as described in the research background. Before the prototyping process, design ideation related to the batik block had been implemented. Design ideation related to batik block begins with design sketches that are pertinent to modular concepts. The basic idea about modularity is highly related to the arrangement of shapes, patterns and motifs. About this, a series of basic sketches had been designed to show the arrangements based on shapes. Hexagon shape had been chosen due to its dynamicity and for ease of arrangement. (Figure 6). Before the prototyping process, design ideation related to the batik block had been implemented. To visualised the idea, the innovation block was designed (Figure 7) and (Figure 8) using 3D software (Solid works) to assist the block makers in the fabrication process (Figure 9) and (figure 10).



Hand Hand Hand

Figure 7: 3D Pattern Block Design



Figure 8: 3D Pattern Block Design



Figure 9: The Fabrication Process of Block



Figure 10: The Fabrication Process of Block Units

4.0 Experimental Of Modular Batik Block

The experiment of the modular concepts of batik block is aimed at refining prototypes and solutions. The evaluation informs the next iteration of prototypes and determines whether any improvements can be made that need to be considered. There is a sustainability project testing session through design protocol analysis (Anwar,2016) that have been conducted involving a group of the respondent (students and teachers). The evaluation process of the prototype, the protocol of the evaluation process took approximately three-hour sessions with 12 deaf and hard of hearing students and teachers (Respondents) in a Batik block workshop. (Figure 11). The school has invited the researchers to perform a batik block workshop because they have block batik printing art subjects in their syllabus. The students and teachers are from the Vocational Special Education Secondary School situated in Section 17, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. The testing process was focused on the usability of the modular batik block, where it began with a brief demonstration by the researchers. From the testing process, all respondent has executed the pattern application procedures without problems or issues during the stamping process. All respondent agrees on the practicalities especially on handling, choosing and re-arranging pattern on the innovated modular batik block. Respondents were also able to initiate their design and pattern arrangements based on batik design principles. (Figure 12).



Figure 11: Stamping Process



Figure 12: Final Design Arrangement

5.0 Conclusion And Future Works

From the interview sessions made with the block makers, they argue that Batik block making in Malaysia is dying and will probably disappear due to the lack of exposure and the importance of instilling cultural consciousness to the younger generation. Appreciation of our art and craft legacy is crucial, and if the situation is left unattended, the Malay's identity in this country will be wasted. Many, especially young people, have no interest in batik clothing, and this circumstance is seen as a result of the development and rapidity of the diversity

of modern clothing and fashion sense. At present most young people do not know the legacy in our country, especially about batik blocks. The introduction of innovative Batik block in the school aim to promote a stimulating process of creating stamped batik, thus would popularise the culture and heritage of Malaysia traditional batik among the younger generation. The innovation through the concept of modularity (interchangeable blocks) made the stamping process more stimulating as it has many potential design outcomes based on desirable arrangements, that initiated by the users (respondent), thus creating a myriad of exciting patterns (Figure 11). Here, the innovated modular Batik block has shown a successful design outcome through a single block, which could not be achieved conventionally. In the production processes, the modular concept of this batik block has reduced the need for more than seven blocks required to come with the same results. A single modular Batik block produces a result of several design patterns, yet remaining the design principle of batik, validated by the *Adigurus* in which all the original philosophies of producing batik are not questionable. The innovation does not also oppose the principle of block making, where it still sustains the conventional materials and techniques needed in creating batik blocks. Overall, this project provides a solution based on the cultural consciousness issues, and the innovation considers desirable solutions. By doing some interesting innovation on Batik block. All these efforts would not be realised except with the awareness of the Malaysian society on the importance of their own culture and heritage, including in the industry of traditional batik making. It needs to be nurtured among all sorts of generations in Malaysia, especially among the millennials.

Acknowledgement

This research has been conducted in UiTM Shah Alam, PKKM Malaysia, Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation and involves several parties in conjunction with the completeness of the studies. We would also like to express full appreciation to block makers, *Adiguru*, En. Zakaria Ismail and En.Ghani bin Mat and respondent from the Vocational Special Education Secondary School situated in Section 17. Shah Alam, Malaysia, in supporting this research.

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