THE SOCIO-CULTURAL LIFE OF BATIK
IN INDONESIA AND THE LIMIT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Inditian Latifa
Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia
inditian@gmail.com

Dana Hasibuan
Faculty of Social Science and Politics, Universitas Gadjah Mada
danazaka@gmail.com

Abstract

This study sets out to interrogate the historical transformation of culture utilizing batik in Indonesia as an illustration of the relationship between cultural practices, power relations and the logic of neoliberalism. By identifying the critical junctures in Indonesia that effect the formation of meanings attached to batik in the larger reconfiguration of capitalism during the Dutch colonial era and in the present circumstances of late capitalism, this study argues that the hybridity of batik production in the Dutch East Indies, as signified by the emergence of batik Belanda, exemplifies a period when the notion of batik as a mutually empowering form of trans-cultural practices was possible. Analyzing the disposition of batik today, this study further argues that, unlike in the past, trans-cultural practices during the current state-sanctioned deployment of batik as Indonesia’s national cultural heritage becomes only possible through practices of trade and consumption. This cultural formation offers a critique ideology toward the current national and global discourse of batik that reifies unbounded cultural practices as “cultural heritage.”

Keywords: batik, batik Belanda, cultural heritage

Introduction

Within globalization studies, the production and exchange of textiles and clothing serve as constructive links in unearthing not only economic and political relations, but also social and cultural entanglements between different geographies. As Appadurai (1986, p. 3) asserts, “commodities, like persons, have social lives,” thus exploring the cultural biography of textiles, which has been an important commodity since the 18th century, can provide insights into the life of different societies in a given time. In countries with colonial histories, close reading into the textiles created and worn during certain time periods may lead to alternative chapters within the histories of these countries and deconstruct Eurocentric relations between center and periphery. Ruschak’s (2009) study on The Real Dutch Wax, which are wax-printed textiles produced in the Netherlands in the 19th
century, and distributed in West Africa, particularly in Ghana, is a brilliant example of postcolonial studies on textiles. Ruschak argues that Ghanaian women were in fact powerful agents behind the production and consumption of the waxed-printed textiles, thus deconstructing the notion of powerless colonized consumers.

Despite their value in reframing colonial relations, the study of textiles remains largely under-researched within postcolonial studies (Hemmings, 2013). The salient themes of the postcolonial, such as subject formation and power relations, remain rooted in the study of literary corpus for the humanities and the ethnographic study of marginalized communities for the social sciences. In attempt to expand the applicability of postcolonial studies to a wider socio-cultural terrain, this study explores the life of batik Belanda which is a luxurious variant of batik developed from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century by the women of the European and Indo-European communities residing in the Java island of Indonesia, or then known as the Dutch East Indies. Taking a postcolonial lens and calling on critical concepts introduced by Homi Bhabha in his book “The Location of Culture” (1994), this study locates batik Belanda in the larger politics of clothing in the Dutch East Indies and argues that the process of identification for colonizer and colonized in the hierarchical culture promoted by the Dutch colonial government is not as intransigent and disparaging for the latter as it is thought to be.

In addition, this study argues that batik Belanda represents a period in time when batik can function as a site of trans-cultural interaction and an open space for inter-dialogue because the conditions of early capitalism in the Dutch East Indies did not yet revolve around private property and ownership systems. Thus, drawing extensively from postmodern approaches, particularly the cultural logics of neoliberalism and the commodification of culture (Jameson, 1984; Harvey, 1990; Ong, 2007), the second part of this study problematizes the state-sanctioned “Indonesianization” of batik today and the deployment of batik as Indonesia’s Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). The argument is that the Indonesian government has increasingly adopted a global “neoliberal” sensibility and as a result has reoriented the cultural meaning of batik that previously allowed batik to be a shared form of trans-cultural practice, as signified by the emergence of batik Belanda, to a closed cultural commodity today. In this regard, this study addresses the discontents behind the over-celebrated notion of “cultural heritage” which more often than not intensifies ethno-national and intra-regional tensions.

Postcolonialism and postmodernism are two different critical strands that share similar theoretical and practical roots and emerged as a new site of academic reference relatively within the same period. It remains highly contested however within the academic sphere on the relationship between these two different strands and whether they can be positioned in adjacent to each other for academic and advocacy practices. Scholars such as Bill Ashcroft (1989), Robert Young (1990),
and Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (1991), all share skeptical views, on the legacy of postmodern approaches for critical and emancipatory purposes of postcolonial theory. While not intending to enter such debate, this study finds that interweaving these two different critical strands under a single analytical framework in tracing the trajectory of meanings of batik from early capitalism to late capitalism stimulates an exciting and coherent reading of material culture and renders novel understandings of their dispositions.

**Batik and the Question of Origins**

Batik can be categorized as a strand of the wax-printed textiles that Ruschak (2009) observes is part of the global connection between Europe, Southeast Asia, and West Africa in the 19th century. In Indonesia, the term batik itself does not only refer to the wax-printed textiles, but also also the technique used to create it. The technique of batik is a resist-dye technique where motifs are applied on both sides of a cloth using hot wax. The wax can be applied by hand using a tool called canting or since the industrial revolution using stamping tools. Once the wax has cooled, the wax sticks to the cloth and the cloth is soaked in a dye bath. After dyeing, the wax is removed and the motifs that had been drawn in wax will now have the natural color of the cloth, whereas the rest will have been dyed. This process can be repeated several times depending on the number of colors that are desired.

On the question of how and when batik developed in Indonesia, there are two main schools of opinions that have mostly been made referred to. First, there are scholars like J.A. Loeber Jr. who believe in an Indonesian indigenous development of batik and then there are scholars like G.P. Rouffaer who believe that its origin can be attributed to Indian influences from the Silandra and Sanjaja periods in Java (Laarhoven, 2012). Nevertheless, both schools concur that the activity of creating batik, or membatik, was initially part of the leisure activities of the local native women while waiting for the harvesting period. That being so, batik was also not intentionally created for trade but for domestic use. It was not until the 16th century that batik making turned into household industry to meet the increasing demand of batik from the royal families (Nugroho, 2013).

Conventionally, batik is used as a piece in a person’s attire, for example, for women to cover the breasts (kemben) or as a garment tucked at the waist or armpits (sarong). However, it has many other functions, particularly for the locals, for instance as a shoulder strap to carry infants (selendang), or as part of a ceremony. Looking at the motifs of batik, one cannot immediately understand the meanings behind the iconographic designs. This was because by the end of the 16th century the Islamic faith had been widely adopted in Java, which originally was the only island that shared the batik tradition (Nugroho, 2013). As a result, batik motifs were forbidden to refer to realist depictions of living creatures, such as humans, animals and plants. However, this did not bring a halt to the creative process behind batik
motifs. On the contrary, it brought about a variety of unique stylized and modified ornaments that pertained to local wisdom and philosophy.

There are many variants of iconographic designs in batik. The ceplok design, for example, consists of a range of geometric icons. The main characteristic of the design is having identical geometric designs put side-by-side of each other. The geometric icons behind ceplok are non-realist representation of petals that when united become flowers. This idea of unity or togetherness in Indonesian term is called “grompol” and serves as the underlying philosophy behind the ceplok design. This philosophy is an important characteristic of social life in the local communities in contrast to values of individualism and liberalism. Thus, this is why this type of batik is usually worn for wedding ceremonies, or any other form of family gatherings, as it symbolizes coming together in harmony.

Another variant of the iconographic designs of batik is the parang motifs. At first glance, the parang motifs appear to be keris or sword icons. However, they are in fact representation of flames or “tongue of fire” which in Javanese local wisdom refers to the power and strength of the people. Strength can also be read also from the strong parallel diagonal lines that structure the flame icons. The sizes of the flame are varied. Some can be as small as 2 cm, and this kind is known as parang klithik, while some can reach up to 8 cm. The parang motif are worn by the men, as it represents their role as a father, a husband, and for those who were not married yet, as a protector of the society. Thus, this idea of men being the protector of the family and the society is prevalent within the local communities. However, it is important to note that in the late 19th century, as one of the consequences of heightened maritime trading, there developed a strand of batik known as batik pesisir, or coastal batik, that began to depict realist images of living things (Nugroho, 2013).

The Politics of Clothing in the Dutch East Indies

During the first decades of early settlement in the Dutch East Indies, many of the Europeans who resided in the colony were mostly middle-class and upper-class men who worked either for the Dutch government or the Dutch East India Company (V.O.C), which is the Dutch national trade company (Van Dartel, 2005). It was not until the late 19th century that many European women started to travel to the colony to join their husbands or independently, due to the Dutch government’s approval of private business ventures in the colony. Since then waves of immigration took place not only from the Netherlands but also from other European countries, such as England, France, and Germany, and many European quarters were established in the larger cities of Java island.

Steadily, along with the development of infrastructure in Java island, the European and Indo-European communities began to have quite regular contact
among themselves (Van Dartel, 2005). The different environmental settings between Europe and the Dutch East Indies mainly made the topic of clothing one of the most discussed topics among the network of European communities. At the outset, the European men and women would continue to wear what they were used to wearing in Europe with the men wearing long-sleeved shirts paired with sleek pants and women wearing buttoned-up blouses with petticoats underneath their skirts. However, the tropical climate and humid weather made sartorial options limited for the communities, thus it has been argued that due to practicability the Europeans started to model the style of dress of the locals, particularly kebaya encim, batik sarong and batik pants (Van Dartel, 2005).

Nevertheless, the choice of the Europeans to model the style of dress of the locals was not only due to practical reasons, but also because by wearing batik pieces in their attire the Europeans could “show” how they were at east in the new country and with the locals and their customs (Lukman, Yasraf Amir Piliang, and Priyanto Sunarto, 2013). Even more, as batik fabric became to be part of home decorations, such as table cloths and bed sheets. Clothing and style of dress in general have never only been about practicability and innocent personal taste, as they are expressions of identity that differentiates a person or a group of people from others, be it in terms of race, ethnicity, class, or position in a field of power (Bordieau, 1984). It is with this understanding of the politics of clothing that the Dutch colonial government did not appreciate the Europeans to be wearing batik pieces, particularly outside the house, as there was a concern that this idea of going native or verindischt would blur the power relations between colonizer and colonized (Lukman, Piliang and Sunarto, 2013).

The Dutch colonial government were not the only one who was aware of the symbolic hierarchy that clothing represents in enforcing distinction from one group to another. In the early 19th century, the Dutch East Indies was controlled by the British Empire for a short period of time. The British colonial government reinforced strict policies prohibiting Europeans from using local attires, such as kebaya and batik pieces, because they were considered indecent and also compared to underwear, such as chemise and petticoat (Lukman, Piliang, and Sunarto, 2013). The European women in particular were strongly suggested to wear European gowns again in the Dutch East Indies in order to restore the dignity of Europe. Nevertheless, with the end of the British reign at the end of the 19th century, the Europeans returned to wearing local attires, although this freedom was only for a brief period of time as the Dutch colonial government afterwards immediately reinstated the rule regarding clothing and this time emphasizing that every person, both Europeans and locals, were required to use their own “native” clothing in public spaces (Onghokham, 2005).

To gain deeper understanding of the disposition of batik within the larger politics of clothing in the Dutch East Indies, it is useful to call on certain critical
concepts within postcolonial studies for two main reasons. To begin with, postcolonial theory may enable a process of redemption where historical moments are comprehended as a bundle of various social relationships and actors converging in a specific time and space rather than as a fixed and clear cut depiction (Benyamin, 1949 in Williams and Chrisman, 1993). In other words, postcolonial has the potentiality to offer a different way of understanding the past through highlighting the discursive elements that shape a particular moment in history. Second, the process of re-reading the past from a different lens may shed light on the contingency of culture which Bhabha (1994) suggests has the potential in enabling the interplay of voices of both the colonizer/colonized, Self/other, Elite/subaltern through the play of difference.

An important concept within postcolonial theory is the concept hybridity which, as Bhabha (1994) argues, recognizes that the power relationship between colonizer/colonized or self/other is never stable, never static, nor unchanging. There is constant negotiation or play of difference where social and cultural hierarchies can never be assumed to exist prior to the process of encounter between the colonizer and colonized. For Bhabha (1994), the contingency of the power relationship between colonial relations does not fall back on practices of subjugation and exploitation but instead proposes the idea that even within any power structure there is the the possibility for the subaltern or marginal groups to emerge and articulate their agencies.

Further elaborating the concept of hybridity, Bhabha (1994) proposes the concept of mimicry in which members of the colonized society imitates the behaviors of the colonizers to have access to the same power. Behaviors include the colonizers’ politics or cultural attitude to their language and outfits. In this context, Bhabha reconfigures Fanon’s (1952) conception about the desire of black man in a colonial society. If for Fanon the act of mimicry produces disorientation and to an extreme degree even madness as the colonized is split between being uprooted from one’s traditional values and excluded from the dominant society, for Bhabha (1994, p. 86), mimicry signifies agency of the colonized activating the desire to be recognized as the “other” that is “almost the same but not quite …[which] poses an immanent threat to both normalized knowledges and disciplinary power.”

Another concept that is the antithesis of mimicry and will have more applications in this study is “reverse mimicry,” or more referred to in popular culture as “going native.” Within Indian postcolonial literature, there have been various examples of British officials dressing up as Indians not only in private spaces but also public spaces. The reasons behind reversed mimicry are as varied as the ones behind mimicry. Nevertheless, within postcolonial theory actions of mimicry and reversed mimicry are not as innocent and harmless as they might
appear to be, as Bhabha (1994, p. 90) quotes Lacan in one of the chapters within his book on this:

“Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage… It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.”

As stated above, mimicry is not merely the act of adjusting, blending or harmonizing one’s self into a normal neutral setting, but a setting that is already “mottled” or in other words broken by irregularities and many subsets. While mimicry refers to the effect of hybridity from the position of the colonized, reverse mimicry can be argued as the manifestation of ‘hybridity’ of the colonizer’s identities and social practices. From this point of view, reverse mimicry problematizes the representation of the colonizer as an already given powerful subject as the practice of incorporating traditional customs to gain or enforcing power by itself already suggests the lack, vulnerability and uncertainty of holding power within the dominant group.

Along this line of argument, the Dutch colonial government’s decision to reinstate the clothing policy that prohibited Europeans to wear local native clothes and at the same time prohibited the locals to wear European attire could be seen as an act to impede instances of both mimicry and reversed mimicry. The colonial government’s decision reflected their apprehension about the strong relation between clothing and identity and the consequences of blurred boundaries between group identities towards the hierarchical structure promoted in the colony since the 1800s. The official discourse passed down by the colonial government was that wearing local native attire indicated the less approved status of being indigenized into the local culture of the Dutch East Indies. At the crux of this colonial policy on clothing is the process of “orientalizing” where the native group is associated with derogatory terms, such as undignified and obscene. In return, this work of “othering” allows the Europeans to obtain an advanced and superior social position within the colonial society.

Nevertheless, while the colonial rule prohibited Europeans to wear local attires in public space, many Europeans took the chance and continued wearing kebaya and batik sarong and batik pants, although mostly in their homes. These instances where the Europeans in particular did not fully internalize the colonial policy on clothing have been traced to a number of different reasons from the romanticized and sentimental feeling towards the local people and their culture to an act of functionality (Van Dartel, 2005). This study attempts to provide further explanation on this act of indiscipline from the European’s side that refuses to fully obey the colonial government, departing from the idea that ambivalence and instability continues to problematize the process of identification between the
Europeans and the locals as shaped by colonial policy. To support this argument, the emergence of batik Belanda production and use among the European communities will be examined.

Batik Belanda and the Paradox of Colonial Identities

Batik Belanda is a variant of batik that is produced and used by the European women, mostly those located in the northern part of the Java Island in areas like Pekalongan from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Unlike the local batik, the designs of batik Belanda were slightly modified with inspirations derived from European style that had more soft pastel colors and icons from European folktales, like Red Riding Hood. Nevertheless, despite differences in the type of colors as well as the motifs, batik Belanda was created using the same method of the local batik that is using canting.

For the European women living in the Dutch East Indies in the late 19th century, there was not much entertainment or leisure activities to be done. Van Dartel (2005, p. 3) describes the cultural life in the European communities of the Dutch East Indies to be rather monotonous, as “Life evolved around the house, where people visited each other during the day and early evening... In the meantime, she [the European women] had many anxieties, felt lonely because her husband was always working and longed for the letters ‘from home’. It is from this lack of enthusiasm towards cultural life in the colony that is said to motivate the women to engage in the process of designing and producing batik Belanda.

Nevertheless, this study argues that despite the lack of variety in cultural life in the colony, the need and the desire to wear batik was already present among the Europeans, and this shall be examined to a greater extent. One may argue that the emergence of batik Belanda reaffirms the superior and inferior colonial relations of culture as what appears is the repetition of similar stories where Europeans appear as the modern and enlightened subjects who manage to “discover” the cultural practice of batik and at the same time taking it to a grander level by integrating European icons and style. European women sought a way to be able to wear local attires, but at the same time still adhere to the hierarchical social structure that the colonial government enforced. This line of reasoning inevitably reifies Europe as a universal and global force that has the sophistication and capabilities to subsume batik as the representation of the local culture.

However, when one frames the emergence of batik Belanda as a form of reversed mimicry, the production and emergence of batik Belanda reveals a more deep-seated complexity than European superiority. The argument is that batik Belanda reflects the Europeans’ uncertainty and anxiety which is part of the paradox of colonial identities in which the identities of both colonized and colonizer are always undermined by what Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes as the third space...
and as a result never fully complete and realized. The third space is the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference which ensures that “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). From this vantage point, the assertion of the colonizer as the powerful subject becomes unstable as identities are incomplete and fluid rather than whole and static. This fluidity of identities however is often overlooked as it operates at the interstitial space, inundated by the dominance of binary colonizer/colonized relationship.

The political implications of this framing is profound, as it destabilizes the binary opposition of colonizer/colonized by emphasizing the idea that identities are always discursive. In other words, while the European subject continues to retain privilege and powerful positions within the colonial society, the question what it means to be European continues to haunt and challenge the subjects. Facing this question, the Europeans subsequently deploy domination and stereotyping as strategies to occupy the powerful position while at the same time recognizing implicitly that they have not yet been completely successful in attaining superior positions. It is in this regard that the materialization of batik Belanda signifies “moment of slippages” which relates to the lack of identities failing to fulfill its expectation. Thus, the hybridity of colonial power continues to face the dilemma between appearing authoritative and hiding anxiety. engulfed

This postcolonial approach towards batik Belanda in producing hybrid colonial identities indicates that batik during the colonial period operates on a particular kind of cultural logic and more than just a cultural expression where Europeans bring a piece of their home into the colony. Situating batik within this framework also radically designates batik as an “empty signifier” that is open to be claimed and contested by different actors and interests. The enunciation of the third space through the case of batik Belanda enables batik to be articulated as an intangible space which enable both indigenous and European women to encounter each other and redefining the form and designs of batik. Hence, batik in general may operate as an arena that accommodates multiple discourses to encounter one another.

It is important to highlight that the production of batik Belanda was possible largely due to the political conditions of the colonial period that was in the early stage of capitalism. Although there had already been a strong emphasis on capital accumulation and resource exploitation, the system had not yet revolved around private property and ownership. In the case of batik Belanda, for example, the hard labor of producing the batik was done by the locals, while the Europeans designed the icons and provided guidance and supervision of the production process (Van Dartel, 2005). However, at this period in time, the commodification of cultural customs and practices had not yet been introduced, thus the space to maneuver and challenge authority in the cultural field through batik was possible and the logic of
third space could be employed to deconstruct the idea of clear hierarchical relations between the culture of the colonizer and the colonized. It is only after the state developmentalist period of Indonesia that batik became strongly controlled by a different type of logic that is central to late capitalism and closes the possibility of batik ever becoming a site of hybrid cultural identities.

Critique of Batik as Cultural Heritage

The term “cultural heritage” was introduced after World War II when the global community witnessed the deterioration and destruction of monuments, art centers, and historical buildings due to armed conflicts (Hooder, 2010). The damage brought upon these sites was perplexing, as not only would it destabilize the history and culture of a society, but also the society’s building blocks of knowledge. Therefore, in 1954 the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed conflict henceforth the “Hague Convention” was introduced as one of the earliest modern international charter which recognizes the centrality of preserving cultural heritage not only for the nation-state but as an approach to encourage international cooperation as well (Blake, 2000).

While the introduction of cultural heritage to protect major sites and artefacts from the possibility of obliteration has gained support from the international community, until today the theoretical debate surrounding the notion of cultural heritage has been contentious as it significantly influences political tension and policy implementation, “There exists a difficulty of interpretation of the core concepts of “cultural heritage” (or “cultural property”) and “cultural heritage of mankind” and as yet no generally agreed definition of the content of these terms appears to exist” (Blake, 2000, p. 62). From the legal perspective, the lack of a clear set of international regulation of cultural heritage has been criticized for creating uncertainty and even insecurity. Nevertheless, the ongoing contestation is related with the common agreements regarding cultural heritage and its critiques (Eriksen, 2001).

The first critique is associated with the work of Alain Finkielfraut (1987) who stipulates that the original spirit of UNESCO which were based on universal rights value have degenerated into, “a tool for parochialism and relativism” (Eriksen, 2001). From this liberal stance, the notion of cultural heritage is entrapped within the logic of a celebratory of difference emphasizing culture over rights. The second critique is the disavowal of politics from culture which will be the core discussion of this study (Bhabha, 1994). This point of view attempts to go beyond the binary division between universal/relativism by re-engaging culture with the political. It argues that through the culture-politic nexus, the nexus may reformulate the current universalism/relativism framework impasse. This perspective has been very critical, particularly toward the notion of difference that underpins the cultural heritage framework. It suggests that while on the surface cultural heritage may
appear inclusive and neutral, the logic that operates beneath is discriminatory as culture is essentialized as a static, fix, and unchanging object.

This study identifies that the discourse of batik as Indonesia’s cultural heritage is a recent invention that began to spread primarily after the authoritarian regime stepped down. Before that it was relatively unpopular to claim batik as Indonesia’s cultural heritage. This appropriation of batik as cultural heritage cannot be separated from the decision of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2009 recognizing batik as Indonesia’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Items. This marks a new phase of development as batik is then codified as subject to rule of law and privately belongs to Indonesia as a nation state. The securitization and privatization of batik led the Indonesian government to create the Batikmark logo that is registered under the Patent Number 034100 at the Directorate of Intellectual Property at the Indonesian Ministry of Law and Human Rights (Badriyah, 2014).

The purpose of the Batikmark logo is to ensure that in the international arena, particularly, as well as the domestic one, batik is indeed acknowledged to originate from Indonesia. This is in response to the many production of what the Indonesian government and people call as “counterfeited batik” that have manufactured by China as well as other competing countries. Indeed, as Jameson argued that the process of reification is pivotal particularly for the market because it produces clear demarcation that will allow for private based ownership to claim the originality of a cultural customs or products (1984). The certification process of batik in order to obtain the batikmark logo is conducted by the Centre of Handicrafts and Batik (Balai Besar Kerajinan dan Batik), which is a unit at the Indonesian Ministry Trade and Industrial Affairs. By 2013, the Centre has already issued 106 certificates. Regarding certification, the center examines batik based on the technique used for the creation of batik. It classifies batik into three categories, i.e. batik tulis (handwritten batik), batik cap (stamping batik), and batik kombinasi (handwritten and stamping batik). However, what this study finds problematic is that in addition to these three official categories, the center also classifies batik Indonesia based on their appearances, which also intersects with classification based on their area of origin, such as batik Yogyakarta, batik Solo and batik Pekalongan.

As batik is commoditized as a global brand representing the face of Indonesia in front of international audience, the cultural heritage attains a second function which carries cultural rather than economic importance. Similar to other Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia is an incredibly large and diverse country. Consisting of over 17,000 islands and being the fourth most populated country in the world, Indonesia is a multi-ethnic state with more than 700 languages spoken actively. Despite such diversity, the Indonesian government does not give any official acknowledgement on ethnicity, which can be seen by the absence of ethnic
affiliation on Indonesian identity cards. This is not without intention as the government seeks to enhance national unity by not emphasizing on ethnic and cultural differences, but instead promoting one unitary national culture as a common frame of reference (Budhisantoso, 1996). By officially advocating batik as a national cultural heritage, through petitions made to UNESCO to acknowledge batik as Indonesia’s national cultural heritage and by having official batik day where Indonesians are suggested to wear batik to work, there is a danger of eroding other groups that do not share the same textile tradition. In the eastern islands of Indonesia, for example, the style of dress of the locals compose of textile made not from wax print but from ikat, which uses a technique of binding the textile threads so that all the threads are parallel to one another.

In addition, to potential ethno-national conflict, the institutionalization of batik as Indonesia’s national cultural heritage can also lead to intra-regional tensions, for instance the feud between Indonesia and Malaysia in 2009 (Suditomo et al. 2011). There were heated anti-Malaysia demonstrations in Indonesia after Malaysia displayed batik in videos that promoted Malaysian tourism, thus indirectly promoting batik as a part of their national culture. In the article titled “‘Mine, Yours or Ours?’: The Indonesia - Malaysia Disputes over Shared Cultural Heritage,” Jinn Winn Chong (2009, P. 83) explores The Malaysian Minister for Information, Communication and Culture and Dato’ Rais Yatim confusion how the dispute got serious in which flags were burnt and rocks were thrown. Chong argues that in cases where culture has indeed been regarded as the core of a certain collective identity, in this case the Indonesian collective identity, “aggressive postures in defense of what is considered their cultural heritage should be seen as a natural manifestation of a broader and deeper enterprise to defend their ontological identity and security.”

Conclusion

The reconfiguration of capitalism from colonial to late capitalism has left consequences for the production of culture. This study identifies that during the early period of colonialism, while culture is often articulated as a form of subjugation and domination, there are socio-historical moments which disrupt the logic of colonizer/colonized; batik Belanda in this context reflects such notion of hybridity. While the notion of hybridity does not create an equal relationship, it allows for a Third Space to emerge hence enabling encounter where power can be contested and struggled. Nevertheless, under the logic of neoliberalism, the transformation of culture has been profound as it shifted from a common good into a commodity. To make it into a property, culture has to be essentialized. At the present, cultural practices appear as celebrating diversity but on a deeper level it actually obstructs people to find common point of reference or voice injustice through culture. Hence, it can be argued that the ramification of cultural commodification extends beyond the logic of market privatization, it also
diminishes the political dimension of culture which has enabled, in the past, the process of contesting inequality.

This process of orientalizing batik into national boundaries obstructs the possibility for batik to articulate as a transnational space. While on the surface the notion of cultural heritage appears to promote diversity, in practice it essentializes culture, accentuating primordial and exclusive claim. As it has been elaborated above, the only moment batik performs as a transnational space is through trading and consumption practice. Meanwhile, when batik is articulated outside the economic sphere, it mobilizes ethno-nationalism and prone to conflict. This indicates the diminishing of the political of batik which is very substantial to recognize and enable multiple narratives to bridge difference likened to the colonial period.

Overall, this study denotes that the discourse of cultural heritage shaped by the logic of market neoliberalism plays double roles in Indonesia. The first role is related with batik as a global brand that represents the image of Indonesia in the international arena. Although this is claimed to benefit Indonesia, this study argues that such logic serves more the interests of the global market and capital interests as it sustains the practice of consumption. The second role is related with the project of nation-building. Again, while batik is continuously hailed as the nation’s cultural heritage, the disappearance of various cultural customs and knowledge throughout the archipelago as a result of economic growth policies contradicts the notion of nation-building project. This study argues that these two roles are intertwined and reinforce each other in reifying batik as a static and fixed cultural material “owned” by Indonesia.

References

Kebaya Encim as the Phenomenon of Mimicry in East Indies Dutch Colonial’s Culture. In Arts and Design Studies Vol. 13.