
A BRIEF REVIEW OF MALAYSIAN BATIK DEVELOPMENTS FROM 1950S TO 1980S

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ABSTRAK

Batik Malaysia adalah proses pemberian dekorasi dan pewarnaan kain dengan menggunakan teknik lilin sebagai perintang. Industri batik di Malaysia berumur kurang dari satu abad tetapi memiliki peran sebagai identitas nasional dan terus berkembang. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk melakukan ulasan singkat tentang perkembangan batik Malaysia dari tahun 1950 hingga 1980-an. Tahun 1970-an adalah titik balik dalam produksi batik dan sebuah awal baru dalam semua hal. Dengan mengadopsi stylus atau canting, batik dianggap memiliki nilai seni tinggi daripada sekedar kriya di Malaysia dan terkenal dengan torehan lilin dari canting dengan isen garis-garis dan titik-titik yang terampil namun rumit di atas bentuk sarung. Kain batik tidak lagi hanya dibuat menjadi sarung di Malaysia. Terlepas dari kenyataan bahwa batik tulis populer untuk pakaian dalam dua dekade terakhir pada abad kedua puluh ini, secara keseluruhan ada penurunan keunikan dan inovasi dalam industri batik. Tampaknya ada tidak banyak minat dalam pengembangan produk baru, teknik atau strategi pemasaran baru. Desain batik juga diciptakan tanpa mengamati tren pasar. Batik Malaysia terlokalisir dan tidak terekspos pada pasar global.

Kata Kunci: Batik Malaysia, Perkembangan, Gambar Tangan, Teknik *Wax Resist*

ABSTRACT

Malaysian batik as a process of decorating and dyeing fabric by using wax-resist technique is no exception. The batik industry in Malaysia is less than century old but it has a role in national identity and it keeps improving. This article aims to do a brief review on the developments of Malaysian batik from 1950s to 1980s. The 1970s were a turning point in batik production and a fresh start in all ranges. With the enthusiastic adoption of the stylus or canting, batik has become more art and less a craft in Malaysia and it is famous for its masterful but laborious canting-drawn wax lines and dots on the sarong format. Lengths of batik are no longer simply made into sarongs in Malaysia. Despite the fact that hand drawn batik was popular for tailored clothing in last two decades of twentieth century but there was an overall decrease of uniqueness and innovation in the batik industry. There seemed to be not much interest in new product development, new techniques or marketing strategies. Batik designs were also being created without looking up the market trends. Malaysian Batik was localized and it was not exposed to the global markets.

Keywords: *Malaysian Batik, Developments, Hand Drawn, Wax Resist Technique.*

INTRODUCTION

Textiles are one of the most exciting and solid art forms Throughout Asia. Southeast Asian textiles are prominent works of art, formed by a rich diversity of techniques such as weaving, dyeing and embroidery with a variety of materials (Maxwell, 1990). Textiles which are from the handicraft category are invented by humans to enrich our lives. Based on historical researches textiles have been developed along other aspects of human culture. Textiles are inseparable part of Malay culture and which indicates the sophistication of Malay people (Siti Zainon Ismail, 1997). Fiona Kerlogue (2004), mentions that batik is particularly significant in the world of textiles because of its composition, design, colors and the philosophy behind it. The way it is produced and its functions express the spirit of a nation.

Sarong and batik are two Malay words which entered the English Language and it is apprehensible by most non-Malay globally. This colorful fabric is the national textile of Malaysia. Kelantan and Terengganu are the two east coast state of Malaysia that are the pioneers of batik industry and the most famous states for batik production. The Standard and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM) stated that batik is a handcrafted process using a wax resistant technique. The motifs are designed on the fabric using hot wax and it is followed by color application. The wax application and subsequent dyeing or hand painting are often carried out repeatedly (Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation, 2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. A Touch of Batik History

Art and craft can reveal little of the history and identity of a nation. The craft and, more recently, artistic perspective of Malaysian batik which is a process of decorating and dyeing fabric with a wax-resist method is no exception. Local batik designers and producers artworks are very genuine and adventurous,

meanwhile it is rooted in ancient traditions established distance away from West Africa to East Turkestan and as nearby as the island of Java in Indonesia. Centuries of maritime trade along the East-West 'water silk route' and the two sided exchange of ideas and products from within and outside of Southeast Asia have influenced the techniques, motifs and the composition of the surface-decorated textiles and cloths of this region (Yunus, 2011).

According to Shireen Naziree (2004), the origin of batik, like many traditional folk arts, is not known. A similar dye-resistance technique was practiced in Asia and Africa. Batik in its refined form is associated with Malay Archipelago. This idea of decorating fabric with designs using a resistance material like wax, resin or rice paste is very old and remains of fabric found in archaeological excavations from fifth and sixth centuries A.D. in Egypt and Middle East. Malaysia batik has been mainly rooted in traditional sarongs. The designs and production of sarongs has been firstly identified with Kelantan and Terengganu, East Coast States of Malaysia. Documentation of batik production in Kelantan date back to the 1920's when the overtones were largely Javanese.

Noor Azlina Yunus (2011), remarks that the earliest history of the Malay Peninsula, indeed the whole of the area that eventually came to be known as Southeast Asia, was shaped to a large extent by the crosscurrents of maritime trade. Siti Zainon Ismail (1997), noted that cultural diffusion has also introduced completely different kinds of cloth and textiles from India, China, Persian and Arab regions. These innovations spread through coastal areas. Sara Arney (1987), believes that the origin of batik remains a mystery. While some scholars claim the technique began in India, others believe it may have originated on the royal courts of Persia. Yunus (2011), also agrees that it is not exactly known when and where people first applied beeswax, paraffin, rice and other vegetable paste, even mud, to cloth that

would then resist a dye. The roots of batik are ancient, difficult to trace and much debated, with many countries claiming to be the original cradle of the art.

The history of batik industry in Malaysia is formed by the immigration of a group of Javanese people settled on the Malay Peninsula who start small home production centers in the early years of the twentieth century. They reside on the East Coast neighboring Kota Bharu and Kuala Terengganu (Leigh, 2002).

B. Batik Developments in 1950s and 1960s

Wan Hashim (1996), stated that the batik production had a sudden stop during Second World War as the Japanese prohibited importing raw materials like white cloth, dye and wax. After Japanese surrender, batik production restarted but rather slowly as this infant industry had to compete with textiles from Britain, India and Japan.

According to Arney (1987), in 1951 local batik was recognized in a "*Definitive Exhibition of Malay Arts and Crafts*", sponsored by the Singapore Art Society (also in Kuala Lumpur in 1952). The Exhibition catalogue description and a single photograph illustrate the Pekalongan style of batik created by Malays at that time. According the catalogue, in the 1950s locally made batik were primarily consumed by the local population although some were exported to Siam (Thailand), Burma, Sarawak and Brunei. As Siti Zainon Ismail (1997), mentions by the 1950s when the industry evolved to bear its own distinct Malaysian identity, batik was commonly embraced by Malaysians of all cultural background.

Batik industries were increasing during 1950. The Singapore catalogue states that there were sixty factories operating around Kota Bharu at that time, with a few starting in Kuala Terengganu. In the mid-1950s the Rural and Industrial Development Authority (RIDA) was established to provide assistance

to small-scale rural industries. A number of studies were carried out on weaving and other cottage industries on the east coast but batik was overlooked by these studies; however by the early 1960s producers had organized batik associations to facilitate communication with RIDA. Independence changed the lives of artists and artisans. The National Art Gallery (*Balai Seni Lukis Negara*) encouraged batik as a medium for expressing the Malaysian experience. National competitions were held to develop the technique (Arney, 1987).

Batik was largely associated with practical applications and it was being fashioned into the latest fashion trends of the period (Naziree, 2004). Local craftsmen and artists also beautified imported cloth by using different dyeing techniques and a diversity of colors. Batik became the major textile worn in the courts of Java and Jambi. Batik was worn as a part of everyday clothing in Kelantan and Terengganu.

The *Majlis Amanah Rakyat* (MARA) was established in the early 1960s in order to continue and expand RIDA's efforts to provide assistance to the rural population, primarily Malays. The MARA Handicraft Development Center (*Pusat Kemajuan Pertukangan Tangan MARA*) was established in Petaling Jaya to encourage the search for new techniques and patterns. In 1965 a United Nations consultant, Don Jourdan, provided technical advice based on his experience with Java's batik industry to improve production techniques and encourage the production of batik yardage. In 1968 a Peace Corps volunteer contributed in the area of design. In the same year of enterprising the MARA, Bumiputra Batik Marketing Corporation was established to assist the east coast batik producers in marketing their products. Malaysia Batek and Handicraft Berhad (MBHB) was also to serve the east coast producers (Arney, 1987).

Barbara Leigh (2002), stated that batik in Malaysia is produced by some of the small and medium enterprises which

had close connection with government. The Handicraft Development Centre was founded in order to promote Malaysian handicraft in 1967. Establishing Batik Malaysia Sdn. Bhd. was a main promoter in 1968. There were collaborations between Batik Malaysia Sdn. Bhd and MARA (*Majlis Amanah Rakyat Act - Council of Trust for Indigenous People Act*); ITM (Institute Teknologi MARA) have been set up around the country to carry out training schemes.

By the 1960s, batik makers have taken a leap forward by diversifying from 'sarong' production to producing batik cloth in yardage. This new product proved to be readily accepted by the local consumers since the new batik cloth could be made more readily in to fashionable clothing for everyday use. Batik makers introduced batik made on fabrics other than cotton such as Swiss voile and rayon. By the 1970s, introducing higher quality of cotton and silk made batik acceptable clothing for official functions (Fuziah Raja Uda & Ong, 2003).

Yunus (2011), explains that the organizations and institutions that had been created by the new federal government in the 1960s to serve people in development, including small scale batik producers in east coast states of Kelantan and Terengganu, were reaping returns from their efforts. More efficient infrastructure and better facilities were reflected in the improvement in the consistency of colors and overall quality of batik produced.

C. Developments of Batik form 1970s to 1980s

According to Wan Hashim (1996), The rapid expansion of batik production took place in the 1970s when batik came to be recognized as national dress for the Malaysian multi-racial society. In 1973, The Malaysian Handicraft Board (*Lembaga Kraftangan Malaysia*) was founded. The establishment

and funding of these bodies was assisted by the Malaysian government's affirmative action policies to specifically assist Malays, commencing in 1971. As Arney (1987), stated in 1972, representatives from the East Coast Malay Batik Producers Association (*Persatuan Pembatek-Pembatek Melayu Pantai Timur*) and individual batik makers from Kelantan and Terengganu made petitions to the federal government protesting the imposition of sales tax and identifying other problems in the batik industry. In July 1972 Khir Johari, the Minister of Trade and Industry visited Kelantan and Terengganu discussing the problems of the industry. As a result of the meeting, the Minister directed that a Task Force be established to examine the short and long term problems of the batik industry in Malaysia.

The Malaysian Handicraft Board became the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (MHDC), in 1979. Since then, it is generally noted as *Kraftangan*, which its aim is at indigenous enterprises called *bumi putera* in different places in Malaysia. MHDC's plan is focused on the manufacture, promotion, and marketing of crafts. Their goal is to spread craft production all over the country. For producing batik, a number of places on the East Coast of Malaysia have been selected (Leigh, 2002).

In the line with the government's New Economic Policy to upgrade the rural economy, cottage industry was given priority within the framework of the National Development Plan and Programs in the 1970s. Great efforts were made to revitalize cottage industry involving policy changes, introduction of new strategies and improvement of the facilities and amenities particularly for the batik industry. Thus a period that encouraged innovation, new techniques, designs and incentives was introduced and extended to batik makers. This period saw the emergence of new creative talents spear-headed by entrepreneurs who had vision of the potential growth of the batik industry (Fuziah Raja Uda & Ong, 2003).

D. New Batik

Since the 1970s, batik making in Malaysia has become less a craft and more an art with the keen acceptance of the canting. The definition of batik in Malaysia has also obtained a much larger meaning than the Javanese one, which is renowned for its masterful but laborious canting-drawn wax lines and dots on the sarong format. Lengths of batik are no longer simply made into sarongs in Malaysia. More often batik creations show the artistic characteristics such as originality of composition and design, impressive use of color, a high level of technical expertise and, especially, a talent for working in the medium of batik. Similarly, the old system of anonymous artisans is giving way before a new style and organization of the batik industry that encourages individual talent and promotes recognized batik designers and artists (Yunus, 2011).

The international interest in multiculturalism, ethnic arts and handcrafts coincided with the search for economic development and a national identity in the early years of Malaysia's independence. Malaysian batik producers had a new market and at the same time, young Malaysians were being trained by MARA Handicraft Centers on the east coast and by the MARA Institute of Technology (ITM). The first intake of students graduated with diplomas in art and design in 1970. In that same year the National Culture Congress addressed the issue of Malaysian culture. Ramli Malek, artist and teacher at ITM, presented a paper discussing the state of the batik industry at that time. The concluding message from the Congress was that Malaysians should look toward their cultural heritage in their artistic expression. The Congress marks a significant turning point in Malaysian arts; whether it actually contributed to a change or merely reflected the general fever in Malaysia at that time, Malaysian batik rolled into the 1970s with a burst of vitality (Arney, 1987).

Sheppard (2011), stated that Malay women of 1970s prefer batik sarongs to any other kind for everyday use. Batik has become popular because a Malay batik industry has come into existence and inexpensive sarongs of good quality are available all over the country. In 1970 there were more than 3500 workers in Kelantan and Terengganu employed in batik industry. The process of batik in Malaysia was not quite the same as the process followed in Java. The design and color used are different. In particular, the colors in Java are mostly ochre, dark blue and deep brown in contrast to the light green, light blue, yellow and light red in Kelantan. Foliated patterns of Java are abandoned and Kelantan designers have replaced them with large flowers and leaves often with a striped background. In Terengganu the designers use nearer pattern and colors to the Javanese style but the compositions are original.

According to Arney (1987), questions posed at the Culture Congress was an inspiration for artists from all generations to pay attention to their regional heritage as a source for creative inspirations. A number of young people, some returning from studies overseas others having studied at ITM, turned to batik as a livelihood. Ramli Malek, who studied overseas, recreated European paintings using batik as a medium and also produced yardage with innovative designs. TunkuZubeidah, with a degree in art from Great Britain and a short apprenticeship at the MARA Handicraft Research Center, started production in her backyard.

Yunus (2011), believes without a doubt, pushing the boundaries of Malaysian batik in the early 1970s was mostly done by TunkuZubeidah Abu Bakar an entrepreneur who added a new dimension to batik. After returning from art studies in England, She took a course in batik making and instantly realized the massive potential of the medium. In her workshop, Kutang Kraf, she turned away from conventional batik *cap* to experience new

techniques, fabrics, designs, color combinations and uses for batik as well as, significantly, ways of marketing her exclusive, unique batik to the public via fashion shows and presentations. She was also a pioneer of one size fits all woman's caftan, which proved an ideal 'canvas' for her designs. Above all she explored the possibilities of stylus batik, using a canting and liquid wax to create a new type of Malaysian batik, one that combined craft, art and fashion.

Kutang Kraft was expanded in Sungai Penchala, just outside of Kuala Lumpur. Azman Sutan Aman and associates set up Aran Nova-batika. Those people trained at ITM applied their newly acquired knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts: Fatimah Chik met Tunku Zubeidah while working at the MARA Handicraft Research Center, then joined her at Kutang Kraft (Arney, 1987).

Many graduates in art and design, especially those from MARA Institute of Technology, turned to batik making to fill the demand for 'ethnic materials' for both dress and furnishings. Others worked in MARA Handicraft Centers in the east coast states of Terengganu and Kelantan as teachers, providing skills training and marketing advice, and in technical and product development. The time was ripe in the 1970s to create a unique Malaysian batik that was not exclusively wedded to the cap tradition (Yunus, 2011).

According to Arney (1987), until year 1970 batik was synonymous with sarongs. The MARA Handicraft Development Center made great strides toward product development. But in the last analysis it was the vision of the people like Tunku Zubeidah that changed the image of Malaysia's batik industry. Bold geometric designs on then popular styles of clothing, such as the kaftan and dirndl skirt, made quite an impact on the fashion world in Kuala Lumpur at that time.

A significant technical innovation that took place during this time was the creation of the "*batik canting*", hand painted batik. This was

the hand drawn technique where the outline of the design is traced with molten wax and colors are applied to the pattern using airbrush. This method allowed for the skillful shading of colors and hues. The new style Malaysian hand painted batik has been developed further to produce creative expressions that are works of art. These artworks are often produced by designers and artists working on particular concepts and themes. These fine works of combining the canting technique with brush painting are the produced as art-to-wear batik (Fuziah Raja Uda & Ong, 2003).

International fashion designers became interested as the contemporary batik developed. Pito Moreno of the Philippines and Paco Rabanne of Italy are two designers who created lines based on the new Malaysians batik. Through the 1970s innovative batik designers and established producers influenced one another. Established producers adopted the new techniques; young designers explored traditional methods and motifs. Kutang Kraft commissioned blocks from Kelantan with miniature foliage, to stamp on to Swiss voile. Ramli Malek requested block makers to build blocks of his designs inspired by Japanese motifs, such as the crane found in many Japanese art forms. Printers from East coast were brought to Kuala Lumpur to do the surface decorating on cloth in urban factories while ITM graduates were sent to east coast to teach and be a designer there (Arney, 1987).

Long-sleeved batik shirts were introduced as formal wear for men in Malaysia in the 1970s. Batik designers were quick to prepare three-meter silk length, in which the pattern pieces of the shirt-back, front panels, sleeves and collar-were drawn separately on the cloth, aligned along the warp, for a tailor to cut out and join. The floral motifs of women's wear were replaced by abstract, geometric and linear motifs that ranged harmoniously over the separate components. Hand drawn batik on silk is also crafted in yardage with patterns that cover the entire length of the cloth. The overall

designs make the cloth suitable for tailoring Western-style dresses, skirts and blouses as well as men's shirts. It is also suitable for the modernized *baju Melayu*, usually a V or round-necked version of the *bajukurung*, or other innovative designs (Yunus, 2011).

According to Ngo (2007), by founding the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (MHDC) on October 1, 1979, many workshops and exhibitions which aimed to promote the traditional Malaysian textiles especially in areas of batik and songket have been organized. The MHDC has established National Craft Institute [Institut Kraf Negara (IKN)] at Rawang, Selangor. IKN aims to attract the younger generation to the art of making traditional Malaysian handicrafts and it offers educational certificates and diploma courses related to traditional Malaysian handicrafts. According to Wan Hashim (1996), the Batik Malaysia Berhad (BMB), a subsidiary company of a government's statutory body came to promote the batik industry further.

As batik flourished in the 1970s, it was increasingly recognized as a part of local heritage. The national carrier, MAS (Malaysian Airline System), commissioned Kutang Kraft to produce batik murals featuring the traditional kite, the *waubulan*, for its offices around the world. Members of the airline's female cabin crew have always worn uniforms with batik motifs, albeit silk-screen printed and mass produced in view of the huge requirements. At the annual National Day celebrations, some of the parading groups comprising government and non-government participants sport batik uniforms. Many associations have their own specially designed batik uniform, usually in symbolic colors, to reflect their identity and purpose and to set them apart from other groups (Yunus, 2011).

In response to the call for "National Culture" fashion designers revel in synthesizing traditional forms and cloths in to completely avant-garde fashions. The National Day issue

of the Malay Mail (August 31, 1986) presented the potential of modern fashion designers by illustrating the ideas of designers who combine the *kebaya*, *saree*, *shulwar*, *kameez*, and *cheongsam* as well as other local costumes stitched out of any number of types of cloth. While few Malaysians would be seen wearing such creations, they illustrate the attempt to assimilate Malaysia's variety of cultures in to the idea of "Images of a Nation" (Arney, 1987)

Yunus (2011), stated that by the early 1980s, the range of silk fabrics in hand drawn batik had grown enormously. Batik had become the material of choice for formal functions and glamorous evening wear, especially among urban Malays. Young men and women were also wearing cheaper versions for office wear and outside functions. A proliferation of batik fashion shows, reported enthusiastically by the media, disseminated the new fashion ideas, inspiring established batik producers and innovative young batik designers to adopt new techniques and fabrics, modify traditional methods and motifs and to generally think afresh. What emerged were a variety of new styles and products and a diminishing of regional differences; batik was no longer the province of a few well-known households in the northeast of the peninsula but a large-scale countrywide industry. Above all, the widespread adoption of the stylus or *canting* clearly showed that hand-drawn batik, Malaysian style, was here to stay.

In the 1980s the introduction of high quality and expensive materials such as pure silk, *voile*, terylene, silk satin, brocade, crepe silk, lawn, *fuji* and others has further improved the quality of Malaysian batik. This was accompanied by the use of *canting* rather than *cap* to produce modern and up-to-date designs, some of which are based on abstract art. This Improvement has made possible the export of batik to overseas. Marketing and sale promotion has helped the expansion of the batik market further (Wan Hashim, 1996).

CONCLUSIONS

Although batik maintained its popularity for tailored clothing during the last two decades of the twentieth century, there was a general decrease of originality and creativity in the batik industry. There was also an inability of entrepreneurship. There appeared to be little interest in new product development, in retraining in new techniques or in developing marketing strategies. Producers and designers seemed content to turn out the same old designs while others resorted to copying those of established fashion and batik designers. Batik designs were also being created in isolation, without a thought to market trends or popular culture and without exposure to the world beyond localized markets (Yunus, 2011). The efforts of the Malaysian government, working through the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (Kraf Tangan), and other organizations to develop Malaysian crafts, including batik, is necessary for the batik industry.

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