

The Influence of Noblewomen on the Batik Knowledge Construction and Role of Women in Rural Batik Sector

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze the historical background of artistic batik skill that had strong influence on the construction of batik knowledge and role of women in rural batik sector. A case study of qualitative strategy involving 40 rural batik entrepreneurs and batik workers indicated that the collective action of community outside the palace to meet the batik needs of noblewomen became the first settler of batik entrepreneurs, batik firms and batik workers. Most of the noblewomen took part in delivering personal capability building of village women to have better understanding of the aesthetic subtleties of hand drawn batik than men.. The majority of rural women play important roles in rural batik sector, such as seeking regular jobs to keep village women to do batik work, active in creating new batik motif and quality controlling that were key to determining batik price in a competitive market.

Keywords: a court art, aesthetic subtleties of batik, awareness, participation, role

1. Introduction

The art of batik, a wax-resist technique for dyeing cloth is one of the ten cleverness namely local genius that has been mastered by Javanese people before the influence of Indian Hindu culture. Most of the Javanese people have certain capacity and cleverness to develop the culture influence according to the circle of local condition or surroundings (Brandes, 1889 in Maziyah, 2007). Formerly, batik making activity was known as a court art, a leisurely, refined spiritual activity of noblewomen, but it was also practiced by court artisans (Rouffaer, 1904). Batik making techniques that were developed by the palace so close with traditional existence, a situation of environment that still sustained Hindu-Java culture to give opportunity to the noblewomen to obtain a deep understanding of basic education of batik art - starting from arrange batik motifs until the steps of batik making that involved their refined taste, deep spiritual training and diligence (Samsi, 2011). At the same time lots of the women palace retainers, the wife of palace retainers and village women who worked for *priyayi* (member of elite aristocratic) family also had opportunity to learn batik art, then bring their knowledge outside the palace surroundings. Since then, the women cannot be apart from batik art that closely relate to female traits - concentration, patience and carefulness that are not owned by male batik workers who need their muscle strength to complete batik works (Puspita, 2004).

At times, in association of batik making with palace culture often made it possible for the noblewomen or *priyayi* women to do *ngengreng* work only - making outlines of the batik design and filling batik ornaments in the design with wax on white cambric. While the women palace retainers finished up the rest of batik works - batikting the outlines and the filling on the other side (*nerusi*) and covering those parts which are not to be colored with a layer of wax (*nembok*). The finishing works of dyeing, scraping and soaking the cloth in boiling water were brought to other batik workers outside the palace. This routine works making people accustomed with highly batik designs developed by the royal families, it was the time when the spread and development of the batik designs happened. It was likely that lots of local artisans outside the palace took the initiative in establishing a working group relation with the needs of the noblewomen for finishing their batik works, and eventually known as the settler of batik entrepreneurs, batik workers and large scale of batik industry in Solo.

Since then, batik making skills were well developed to be economic potential activities outside the palace, through which, at the same time, the transformation from a craft to an industrial business happened (Brenner, 1960). Solo, then, was a major center of batik industry in Java and able to bring about 30.000 workers. The batik workers came from Solo and other villages, including women and girls who came to the city to do batik works. There were some village women work as *maklar* or *pelantar* (batik work mediator) who came to pick up batik works from *juragan* batik (owner of enterprise), then distributed them to their family and neighbours to work at home (Kat Angelino, 1920 in Soedarmono, 2006).

In the context of community development, the tradition of batik making is a local history and cultural elements peculiar to local people for centuries that was still sustained as a strong base to develop local batik sector. The above cultural history recognised women as multi talent workers. In the discussion of the skill aspect of batik art, one should not neglect to point out the significance of great women being batik designs and ornaments maker, batik worker and *pelantar* in the development of local batik sector.

2. Objective

A main concern of this study was to know how the village women respond to external influences that fundamentally shapes the forms that development of Pilang Village batik sector takes, particularly in the following issues.

- 1) The construction of batik art knowledge for village women.
- 2) The awareness, participation and competence of women in the development of batik sector.
- 3) The significant role of women in batik sector.

3. Methodology

3.1. Subject and Scope

This qualitative study took place in Pilang Village. The location was set up in a purposive manner with consideration of being a batik village center which employ a large number of female batik workers paid on a piecework basis (*borongan*). The purpose of this study is to have understanding of phenomena of the subject's nature, such as behaviour, perception, motivation, action taken as a whole by means of describing in words and language in the special natural context. This study applying a postpositivisme paradigm, that a social reality/phenomena/indication are regarded as a whole, complex, dynamic and full of meaning (Moleong, 2007).

3.2. Research Method

A descriptive qualitative format that was used in this study is to describe briefly concerning any condition and phenomena of social reality in the location of study. A case study strategy was applied to find out the pattern of interactive relation that depicts of deeply reality in the case of influence of the development of batik industry in Solo on the role of women in establishing local batik sector.

The collection of primary data was obtained from some key informants which defined by purposively through the data collection procedures were field observation and interview. The data collection was implemented through four phases : 1) preliminary study, structured indepth interview, 3) the selection of data and analyze the defined focus in detail, 4) analyzing all gathered data and information in detail.

4. Results and Analysis

Table 1: Distribution of Respondent by Age, Education, Occupation and Experience

Background Information	Category	Total	Percentage (%)
Age Group (Years)			
a. 20 - 30	Beginner batik worker	15	37.5
b. 31 - 39	Middle level batik worker	20	50.0
c. 40 - 60	Senior batik worker	5	12.5
Total		40	100
Education			
a. Elementary School		27	67.5
b. Secondary School		10	25.0
c. Senior High School		3	7.5
Total		40	100
Occupation			
a. Batik worker		34	85.0
b. Entrepreneur		4	10.0
c. <i>Pelantar</i>		2	5.0
Total		40	100
Experience (Years)			
a. < 5		5	12.5
b. 5 - 10		20	50.0
c. 10 - 15		15	37.5
Total		40	100

4.1. Knowledge Construction in Batik Art Making

The introduction of batik art until the transformation to batik industry was important and disregarded parts of the awareness, participation and role of the noblewomen or *priyayi* women (member of elite aristocratic) in the context of ideal social-cultural-psychological construction for women in carrying out their *dwiperan* (domestic and public) roles. The awareness and participation of the noblewomen in introduction of batik as a court art were firstly presented to the women palace retainers who took care of the batik needs of their employers. In the personal and cultural development viewpoint, this kind of daily serving activities corresponded with nonformal education or a simple way of transferring knowledge carried by the noblewomen to introduce the art of batik to mostly uneducated women. The introduction and education of batik art in this case are being instances in illustration of an outsider intervention that required by the women palace retainers to make their initiative and creativity grow in fulfilling their function in accordance with the employers need. In the context of community development, the noblewomen act in transferring their knowledge was regarded as part of enabling process to develop personal capability (Combs and Ahmed, 1980).

The action taken by the noblewomen to develop personal capability covering : (1) knowledge (cognitive) - introducing the function of batik tools, raw materials (cloth, wax), basic technique of batik making, batik motifs and ornaments; (2) productive skill (psychomotoric) - introducing the steps of batik making and giving a chance to practice by continuing the employer's works; (3) mental (affective) - preparing the way for personal capacity building so that the women palace retainers or village women were ready to enter the world of batik making works. In this regard, the noblewomen had played their role as change agent who made the outsider intervention possible to happen. The recognised change from outsider intervention was the women motive in determining a general direction of the women palace retainers or village women to develop their work quality and making self-choice for their future life. Knowledge, productive skills and mental building were regarded as a form of intangible culture heritage, that were three major components to influencing the characteristics of the women and their way of thinking, self-help capacity building and awareness to spread batik culture to their surroundings.

In subsequent development, the certain simple way of knowledge transfer introduced by the noblewomen was still adopted as local tradition namely “*pembelajaran turun-temurun*” (passed on education from one generation to the other). This tradition was very important in the development of local batik sector and still sustained to date to continue batik making and keep this field work as a permanent part-time job for local women. As stated by a senior female batik worker in her interview :

“According to the story from my mother that formerly lots of village women took walk to Nagari (Solo) to do batik works during slow periods of agricultural activity. Some of these women can be trusted to bring batik works for their families or neighbours would work at home. I believe from my own experience that to see my mother to do daily routine batik works making the children accustomed with batik tradition. So, batik making skills was passed on from one generation to the other by our mothers.”

4.2. Women Awareness, Participation and Competence

Fulfillment of the financial household at Pilang Village is generally become a husband-and-wife responsibility. From this fact emerges as the women awareness of looking for a part-time job during slack periods of agricultural activity. In certain community which having common interest to improve the family welfare, the awareness of carrying out productive activities will become the major motive for village women to assist their husbands earning money for supplement family's income. Awareness, in this case, is regarded as main motive which urge individual or collective action happened to explore and develop other self-potential capability besides farming. Awareness of exploring self-potential capability is such willingness to learn batik making delivered by the *pelantar*. Batik making skill is then become a permanent side-job that can be carried out at home in women's spare time after caring for their children, cooking, or looking after their household's other needs.

The influence from outside towards the development of local batik sector demand from the female batik workers to keep adapted well to any influence by means of improving their product quality. This outsider influence emerges the women awareness of improving their batik skill and some of them develop their capability to become batik entrepreneurs and *pelantar*. The women at the age between 20 - 35 years old belong to the productive age group, who were recognized having reasonable high awareness to improve their capability. This kind of awareness can be seen from their desire for obtaining opportunity to learn designing batik motif, coloring technique *colet* (applying color with brush) or other suitable working area for women.

Those two kind of women awareness show that the need of carrying out productive activities is in accordance with the need of improving product quality. Generally, the village women rely on the trial and error learning process obtained from the *pelantar*, employers, friends or senior batik workers rather than the outsiders. In reality, this kind of learning process has been patterned into a social institution system that is conducive to good achievement of women's desire in exploring their capability according to their talent or interest. There were three important factors identified from the women awareness of improving their product quality : a) the social institution system gives priority to local human resources potential and strength of traditional culture, b) the creation of conducive working environment for women to do collective learning activities, c) willingness to keep improving forward and not just being batik worker forever.

In the community development perspective, the awareness of *pelantar* or employers to train local women is regarded as their participation in responding the needs of productive batik workers, who are able to contribute profit to local batik sector. The direct participation of women in local batik sector was initiated by some *pelantar*, who dared to take the initiatives becoming *pelantar*, manager, motivator, trainer as well as supervisor. The form of participation to bring their decision come true by means of taking initiatives to build a relationship with the owner of batik enterprises in Solo in order to get batik works (*pelantar*), managing the distribution and collection of batik works (manager), motivating local women for not leaving the village to work to the city (motivator), mobilizing the local women resources to attend batik making course (trainer), conducting on-the-job-training and supervise the learning process (supervisor). The way of *pelantar* to prepare human resources and make the training results operational are part of the women's competence in the area of batik production that never touched by male batik workers. Learning proses as part of the direct participation of women in batik sector help the individual or collective capability to adjust to any changes in order to improve the family welfare.

The women have different competency from men. The women competency in the field of batik production usually relates to the understanding of raw materials, supplement batik materials, preparing the cloth, coloring, main batik motif elements, and their skills in hand-drawn batik such as making the wax outlines and doing the filling in batik motifs, batiking the outline and filling the other side, covering the parts which are not to be colored with a layer of wax, choosing and arranging batik ornament rightly. In this case, most of women have better understanding of the aesthetic subtleties of batik than men.

The awareness, participation and competence of women mentioned above are regarded as the community competence which have four important components : 1) capable to identify problems and needs of local community, 2) capable to reach an agreement in determining targets according to priority, 3) capable to find out the right ways to achieve the targets, 4) capable to work together in a rational way (Ndraha, 1987 in Soetomo, 2008).

4.3. The Role of Women in Rural Batik Sector

Exploring the roles of women in local batik sector and trade requires an understanding of the ways in which historically and culturally specific notions of gender work through the family as well as through local social institutions. Actualization of local women as human resource might be to happen in the community because of the family's awareness to let the women having opportunity to develop self-potential skill according to their aspiration. The situation-condition of family and community environment are relatively conducive for women to work. The fact that, culturally the local women play important role to keep controll over the family's psychological freshness. Eventhough, they spend their spare time to do batik works, they always have priority over the family's needs.

The discussion concerning women's awareness, participation and competence above show that they have took part in the development of economic community. Historically, lots of women who worked as *pelantar* have played a prominent role in enabling process to develop skilled and productive local human resource through on-the-job training of batik arts. The other prominent roles of women are distinguished between female batik entrepreneur and *pelantar*.

Being batik entrepreneurs, the central role of women in Pilang firms are to be managers of business on their own. Most of the crucial business decisions on the purchasing of batik materials, the needs of female batik part-time workers, wage matters, determining quantity and batik motifs to be produced. The role of women in making decision is more dominant than men (husbands), particularly in regard with aesthetic subtleties of batik that were key to determining quality and price in a competitive market.

To be different from the role of batik entrepreneurs, *pelantar's* main responsibility is looking for batik contract work from many *juragan* (owner of enterprise) batik in Solo. In the batik contract work, the prominent role of *pelantar* is to develop a basic batik motif ordered by *juragan* batik and drawing the outlines of batik design on white cambric, to give direction to their female batik workers about the right way to arrange batik ornaments for filling batik design, supervising and to give a few finishing touches in order to make batik design more attractive. In making decision of quality matters, *pelantar* mostly conduct same role as the entrepreneurs.

There is other traditional role of women that still sustained to date so called *pengepul* (traditional batik trader). Their significant role is buying and selling other people's batik product. This significant role is very helpfull to the local small scale entrepreneurs which just started their business.

5. Conclusion

All datas of this study were analyzed by using some community development theories. The results of this study show that historically the development of batik industry in Solo had strong influence to personal character and skill building as well as preparing the readiness of women to enter the world of batik making works. These are summarized as follow :

- a. The nonformal education method to transfer knowledge of batik as a court art introduced by the noblewomen became the settler of common people knowledge system. This simple method is easily adapted and passed on by village women from one generation to the other and intitutionalized locally. The tradition of learning to improve personal product quality show that local batiking knowledge is not a static factor and stagnant, rather it was growing rich and to be developed from time to time.

- b. The positive perception of female batik workers on the importance of role improvement from *buruh batik* (low class batik workers) to become *pelantar* or batik entrepreneur was strongly influenced by individual inovative attitude, motive and capability to develop their long working experiences. Working experience with *juragan* batik in Solo had strong influence to the role of women in making decision and establishing the production system of their own firms.
- c. The participation and role of women in batik industry sector constitute opportunity and at the same time as an obligation to develop themselves being a personal or a member of community in fulfilling their responsibility according to the family's expectation or their social environment.
- d. Women being local human resource are very important, their potential efforts being motivator and trainer that were key for young generation to perpetuate local traditional batik.

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