

THE MANDALA SYSTEM IN CLASSICAL SURAKARTA STYLE JAVANESE BATIK MOTIFS

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ABSTRACT

Classical batik, as a cultural product of Javanese society, has for a long time reflected the sophistication of various skills, concepts, ideologies, and philosophical values which continue to exist today. As an artefact, batik is a cultural object which has a patterned artistic system and a standardized aesthetic symbolization. In order to understand its meaning, especially the family of classical batik motifs known as ceplok, batik can be studied with a Mandala system which can guide numerous visual signs into the structural systematics of its symbols. This system is able to interpret the visual language of batik through a signification that is easily understood in a logical manner by today's society. The classical nature of Javanese batik motifs is not in their metaphysical performance but rather in that their meaning and philosophy are a guide for the life and livelihood of Javanese society.

Keywords: Batik, Classical, Javanese, Mandala

INTRODUCTION

“Batik”, as a cultural product of Javanese society, has long since been a reflection of sophistication of skills, concepts, and ideology. A number of motifs have reached what can be referred to as a classical level and since 2 October 2009, Indonesian batik has been recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage. The revival of cultural studies during the last decade of the 20th century played a large part in the academic or scientific appreciation of local cultural wealth. One indication of this was a sudden increase in the popularity of discourse on Indigenous Knowledge which was developed by World Bank Staff (1998) and states that Indigenous Knowledge is an integral part of a local ecosystem which is the social capital of an area that can be used as an asset to survive and develop. Another term that has been used is “native ways of knowing”, or everyday rationalization as a valuable sign of a group of individuals living in a particular area (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999: 3).

The city of *Sala*, or Surakarta, is a municipality on the island of Java which was at one time an administrative centre or an empire. At the height of its power, Surakarta was not only a centre of territorial power and social control but also a developer, protector (*maecenas*), and legitimator of the art and culture of Javanese society. The basic character of the Javanese people, who traditionally earned their livelihood from farming or cultivating the land, is described by Jakob Sumardjo in his book *Arkeologi Budaya Indonesia*, who refers to them as “People of the Rice-fields” and “People of the Fields”, who adhere to a principle known as “*sêdumuk bathuk sênnyari bumi*”, which means “an inch of land is worth the crown of their head”. The land of their birth and the land they cultivate means everything to them. The basic principle for dividing the space in their life is “the unity of five elements of life”. It is the classification of these five, or even nine, elements of life that subsequently gave rise to the concept of Mandala (magical space) (Sumardjo, 2013: 23-26).

The identifying characteristics of works of art that are created by the Javanese community are that they usually tend to be two dimensional, with an impression of harmony, without perspective, used for decorative purposes, and numerous other functions. These characteristics appear on flat leather puppets, or *wayang kulit*, traditional paintings, or *wayang beber*, and also glass paintings (Fischer, 1994: 2). As a work of intangible culture, batik can be understood from a broad perspective, ranging from its technical side to its process, functional implementation, history, area of origin, cultural influence, development, design or pattern, motif, symbolic meaning, and philosophical value. In its functional implementation, the word batik means an item of clothing that has decorative or ornamental patterns and is usually worn for a special event or ceremony (Veldhuisen, 1993: 18).

The development of different Javanese batik designs and motifs was closely linked to the two ancient kingdoms on the island of Java, namely the Keraton Kasunanan in Surakarta and Keraton Kasultanan in Yogyakarta. A number of batik motifs that developed at that time have been patroned and legalized-formalized as Classical Batik motifs (Doellah, 2002: 56-57). These include the batik motifs *Parang* and *Cêplok* which became the basic patterns for classical Solonese or Surakarta style batik motifs; and *Parang* and *Sêmèn* which became the characteristic motifs of classical Yogyane batik (Siswomihardjo, 2011: 43).

The fundamental nature of Eastern symbolism tends to differ from that in the West. Western symbols tend towards the representation of “the symbol from” or the reflection of something that already exists, whereas Eastern symbols tend towards “the symbol to” or the orientation of something that is desired to exist (See Budi, 2002: 255-256). Based on the names or titles of classical Javanese batik motifs, in particular the motifs *Sidoasih*, *Sidodadi*, *Sidomukti*, *Sidodrajat*, *Sidomulyo*, and *Sidoluhur* from the family of *cêplok’an* motifs, which are unique classical Javanese batik motifs in Surakarta style, there is an indication that they belong to the group of “the symbol to”, relating to the life orientation of the Javanese about the kind of life that is desired.

In the Javanese language, the term batik is an abbreviation of the word “*mbatik*” which means to make or draw a series of dots (*nitik* or *naritik*) on a piece of cloth (Jasper, 1916: 7; and Lu; 1985: 1). The technique used for making batik is similar to that of painting on canvas but is the opposite way round in that certain parts of the cloth are protected during the colouring process. The resistant material used to cover parts of the cloth is a kind of paraffin or wax; hence the technique is referred to a wax-resistant dyeing. For this unique process, old Javanese batik makers created a special tool known as a *canthing* which functions like an ink pen but is filled with hot liquid wax that is used to cover certain parts of the cloth or colours in a small format.

METHOD

The area of study of batik is a cultural phenomenon which is full of symbolic nuances and philosophical values. As such, the type of research used is a Qualitative Explorative and Explanative Research Method, based on Panofsky’s Iconography theory and Gadamer’s theory of Hermeneutics. Panofsky (1982: 28-30) stresses that Iconographical Analysis must take into consideration three kinds of subject matter, namely: (1) Primary or natural subject matter, or the pre-iconographical stage, which involves an analysis of the background to batik production; (2) Secondary or conventional subject matter, or the formal or iconographical stage, which involves an analysis of the visual form of classical batik motifs; and (3) Intrinsic meaning or content, or Iconological Interpretation, which involves an interpretative analysis of the batik, the relationships between symbols, its visual language, visual characteristics, meaning, significance, and ideology.

Gadamer (1989: 3-37) uses four steps in the Hermeneutic dialectic to support signification, namely: (1) *Bildung*, to study classical batik as an actualization of the “image of desire” of ancient Javanese society; (2) *Sensus communis*, to understand classical batik as the representation of the “inner conscience” of the Javanese cultural area; (3) *Urteilkraft* (Judgement), to interpret or understand the meaning of classical batik as the implementation of “limits of wisdom”; (4) *Geschmack* (Taste), to place classical batik as a sublimation of the “traditional taste” or ideological standard of the Javanese community.

The Mandala System to Read Classical Javanese Batik Motifs

The concept of *Mandala* comes from a Buddhist teaching which developed in the 6th century and means a “magical image (space)”. In the 7th century, Buddhist teachings began to enter Indonesia and developed in the form of Tantrism or *Mahayana* Buddhism (Ras, 2014: 132-134). The word “mandala” itself comes from the Sanskrit word meaning “circle” and is a Hindu and Buddhist symbol which represents the universe and energy. The form of most Mandalas tends to be symmetrical and geometric, and this symbol is traditionally used to help the eyes to concentrate by focusing on the centre of the circle in order to achieve a meditative state (Hutchinson, 2007).

When classical batik motifs or patterns are perceived as a concept of Mandala, this will lead to the understanding that: the circle is a symbol of time and the square is a symbol of space. The circle as Time symbolizes essence (or the spiritual principle) and the square as Space symbolizes substance (or the physical principle). The square inside the circle is “captured” or “drawn in”, uniting essence with substance. The circle inside the square is “capturing” or “drawing in”, or presenting the essence into the substance.

In classical Surakarta style batik motifs, the principle of five and nine also appears in the family of *cêplok* motifs. The basic shape of the pattern is a rhombus which is made up of the formation of five (one and four) and nine (one plus four plus four). The numbers five (*panca*) and nine (*nawa*) are implemented frequently by the Javanese in various life concepts. The existence of a single centre point (axis) cannot stand alone, but must be completed or perfected by four corners to support it, in the sense that the meaning of the central motif always requires the presence of the motifs surrounding it.

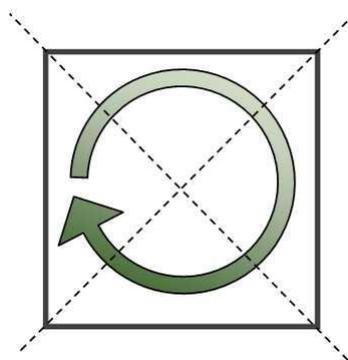


Diagram 1:
Mandala Pattern on Hindu-Buddhist Temple
(Pradakshina Rotation)

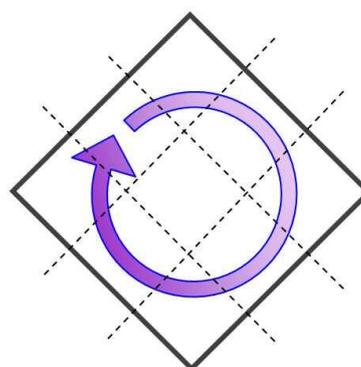


Diagram 2:
Mandala Pattern on Cêplok Batik Motif
(Pradakshina Rotation)

The determination of the central motif as the primary motif or axis in order to understand the subject matter is based on the Mandala system which is concentric in structure with a circumambulatory *Pradakshina*, in which the meaning or value results from the symbolic interaction between the main subject and the several subjects that surround it. The way in

which a *cêplok* batik pattern is read uses a clockwise rotation system similar to the way in which the relief panels are read on Prambanan and Borobudur temples in Java.

There are six classical Surakarta style batik motifs/patterns in the *cêplok* family, all of which have names beginning with “*sido*”: *Sidoasih*, *Sidodadi*, *Sidomukti*, *Sidodrajat*, *Sidomulyo*, and *Sidoluhur*. In the ancient Javanese dictionary, the word “*sido*” comes from the word “*siddha*”, which means: (1) finished, accomplished, or blessed with supernatural characteristics; (2) occurring as a result, according to plan; (3) *Siddha*/Sanskrit/ means a half-god, wise man, or ascetic (Zoetmulder, 2011: 1082-1083). When the word “*sido*” is joined to a particular word, the meaning will become “fulfilment which leads towards the meaning of that particular word”, while not abandoning the other meaning, namely that something that is connected to “*sido*” (*siddha*) will also be associated with metaphysical properties. The six patterns/motifs mentioned above are implemented in their entirety on a traditional wrap-around batik garment, called *jarit*, referred to as “classical batik *jarit*”.

When interpreting a classical batik pattern as the text in a visual sentence, the way in which it is read, based on the Mandala system, is by: (1) choosing a single motif as the “central or primary motif” as a reference for determining the subject matter, based on the characteristics of the name of the motif; (2) determining the “main motifs” or four motifs which are adjacent to the primary or central motif on one side; (3) determining the “descriptive or explanatory motifs” or four motifs which are adjacent to the main motifs on one side; (4) paying attention to the decorative ornaments (*isèn-isèn*) which fill the empty spaces, the colour, and the background; (5) paying detailed attention to the boundaries or contour lines, ornaments, and crossover points where the boundaries or contour lines intersect.

An example of the implementation of the concept of Mandala as a system of signification of classical batik motifs in the *cêplok* family is in the reading of the batik motif *Sidoasih*. In terms of its semantics, the word “*asih*” or “*kasih*” is the Javanese word for love, affections, kindness, sympathy, virtue, and generosity. In Sanskrit, a number of related words include: (1) *açchedya*: inseparable, indivisible; (2) *açintya*: unimaginable, beyond the reach of the mind, associated with *sukma*; and (3) *açyuta*: non-collapsible, firm, unbreakable, permanent, and constant; one of the names of the god Vishnu (Zoetmulder, 2011: 4, 5, and 68). Hence, the name of the pattern/motif “*Sidoasih*” means the desire to fulfil or perfect something so as to become a strong, unwavering love, in the shade of a transcendent nuance.



Diagram 3. Classical Javanese batik motif *Sidoasih*
(Photographer: Wishnu Subroto; Batik Collection: Sri Murniyati Pajang Surakarta)

The classical batik pattern/motif *Sidoasih* is a large rhombus which is made up of nine motifs in the shape of smaller rhombuses. Based on the “reading pattern of batik *cêplok*”, it can be analyzed as follows:

1. One Primary Motif: an ornament of fruits in a basket on an off-white background, filled (*isèn-isèn*) with ornaments in the shape of vines (*lung-lungan*). The meaning of this is the desire or hope for “love” to be fulfilled, like the fruits that has found its basket; a goodness and sincerity filled with fertility, and based on purity.

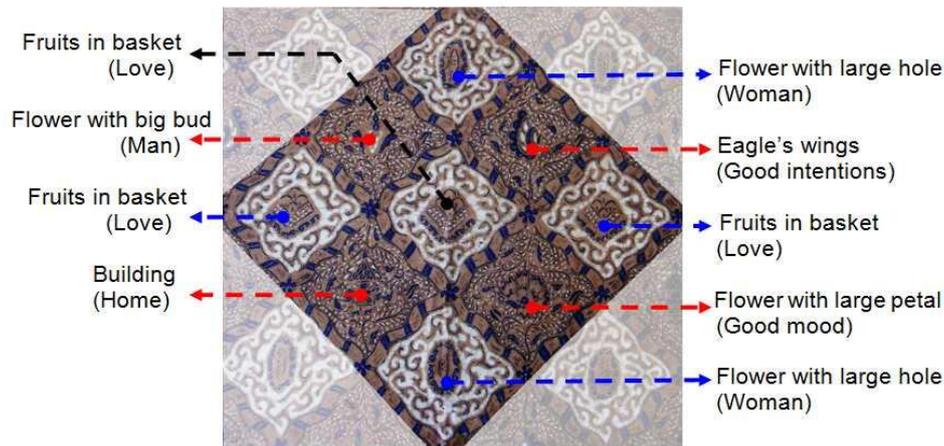


Diagram 4: Identification of the shape, form, and meaning of the *Sidoasih* batik motif

2. Four Main Motifs

- a) Flower with a large bud: on an earth-brown background filled with *ukêl* or *kêmbang pari* ornaments (rice flowers); symbolizes a good, strong man, surrounded by prosperity.
- b) *Lar* or single wing: on an earth-brown background filled with rice flower ornaments; symbolizes desire and a good fighting spirit, surrounded by prosperity.
- c) Flower with a large petal: on an earth-brown background filled with rice flower ornaments; symbolizes a good mood or situation, surrounded by prosperity.
- d) Building (home): on an earth-brown background filled with rice flower ornaments; symbolizes an established home, surrounded by prosperity.

3. Four Descriptive or Explanatory Motifs

- a) Flower with a large hole or aperture: on an off-white background, filled with vine-like ornaments; symbolizes a mature woman who is good, pure, and fertile.
- b) Fruits in a basket: on an off-white background, filled with vine-like ornaments; symbolizes the fruits of a love that is based on purity and filled with fertility.
- c) Flower with a large hole or aperture: on an off-white background, filled with vine-like ornaments; symbolizes a mature woman who is good, pure, and fertile.

- d) Fruits in a basket: on an off-white background, filled with vine-like ornaments; symbolizes the fruits of a love that is based on purity and filled with fertility.

4. Reinforcing Ornaments

The nine areas of motifs mentioned above are each bordered by a thick curved earth-brown line which represents a rope (*dhadhung*), with the following details:

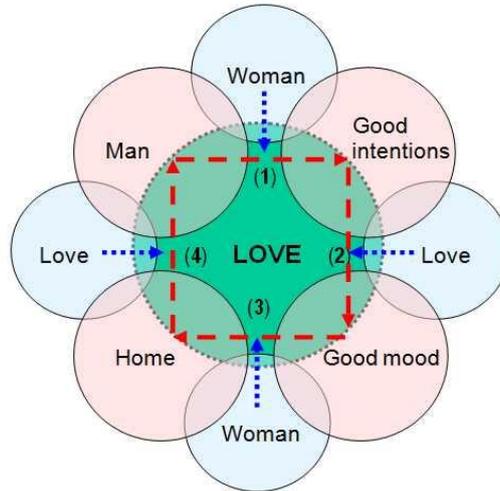


Diagram 5: Plot diagram for reading the *Sidoasih* batik motif with the Mandala system

- a) The areas of all of the motifs are bordered on each side by three curves and three strands of rope fibre; this symbolizes a strong connection that is mutually reinforcing, intertwined, mutually understanding, but flexible.
- b) At each intersection of rope, there is a picture of a jasmine flower; this means that every different space, association of meaning, and understanding of meaning must be bound with purity and sincerity.

Sidoasih is made up of the word *sido*, which means “a desire that is executed” or “what is hoped will happen”, and the word *asih*, which means “love”. Based on an Iconological Interpretation with consideration to the phenomenon of Hermeneutics, and supported by the “pattern for reading batik *cêplok*” with the Mandala system, the visual language discovered is as follows:

“Love: ...become a person who fulfills love... If you are a man who is good and has good and pure intentions (to get married), then choose a good woman and love her in circumstances that are also good. Take her as your bride, marry her, and bring her home. Then love her well (treat her as your wife) so that you both may become complete (loving) human beings. Fulfil all of this with fertility and prosperity, and bind it with purity and sincerity”.

Hence, the classical Surakarta *Sidoasih* batik pattern symbolizes a guideline for love which is good and responsible, and all the things that must be fulfilled as a requirement for building a loving relationship.

The results of the analysis of one of the classical Javanese batik patterns/motifs show that each of the patterns contains a concept or idea about living a well-ordered and well-conceptualized life in society in such a way that is “in order and complete”, almost like the words in verses of a guide book for Javanese people. Javanese creators from the past were

highly unique in the way they stored these life teachings in an art object known as classical batik. At a glance, it appears well-disguised and difficult to understand clearly, but through the multi-interpretation of these symbols, the words of wisdom can become adapted to suit the different character of each era.

CONCLUSIONS

When classical batik patterns/motifs are analyzed by using the Mandala system, it can be seen that one motif acts as an axis of rotation of ‘mechanical meaning’ which moves within a square-shaped area. On every pattern there is a space for a vortex of energy and a channel for the signification of symbols within, which functions as a vortex of power to capture the ‘type of energy’ in accordance with the name of each pattern/motif. If on each piece of cloth with a classical Javanese *cêplok* motif there is a Mandala system, then on each piece of *jarit* batik there are numerous prayers or mantras that are ‘spoken’ over and over again in a visual language; this means that the process of absorbing cosmic energy is ongoing, especially when the cloth is worn for a particular ritual.

In terms of its concept, process of creation, and traditional technique, classical Surakarta style Javanese batik is a reflection of a work of Javanese culture which contains philosophical teachings that are highly specific and fundamental according to the life context of its society. It is difficult to deny that what is contained in the classical Surakarta style batik motifs is a reflection of the indigenous philosophy of the Javanese community. Classical Javanese batik motifs are teachings on how to live in society, visualized in a “visual language”; these batik motifs are honoured not because of their magical aura or because they are considered sacred but rather because the values contained therein provide guidelines for life. Classical Javanese batik, as explained according to the reading of its patterns above, is an original craft with a unique material, technique, form, and concept of life and livelihood, written in the form of a ritual item of clothing, and demonstrates the totality of a work of the nation that is rarely found in other cultural areas.

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