

Creative Craft: The Uniqueness and Potential of The Malaysian Batik Industry

N.H.M. Akhir, N.W. Ismail, R. Said, and S. R. Kaliappan

Abstract— Batik refers to a process of dyeing fabric by making use of a resist technique. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has classified batik as part of the “intangible cultural heritage of humanity”, one of the traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors to be passed on to our descendants. In Malaysia today, batik has been recognized as a high-value heritage and is also classified as a creative industry. The links that exist between batik, creative industry and cultural heritage are believed to have positive potential for the future development of Malaysian culture and the Malaysian economy. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the uniqueness of Malaysian batik and to discuss the potential of the batik industry in terms of culture and its contribution to the national economy. Based on some preliminary research, it is found that the uniqueness of batik can be observed in the diversity of batik techniques, its designs and products and its capacity to contribute to the tourism and fashion industries and also to create job opportunities in local communities.

Index Terms— Batik technique, batik uniqueness, batik potential, Malaysian batik.

1 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has a variety of crafts and batik is one that is better known throughout the world. The Malaysian craft industry can be divided into four main categories, namely earth-based, metal based, forest-based and textile-based crafts. Batik is a handicraft product that belongs in the textile-based category. Historically, the development of batik in Malaysia is believed to have started in the 15th century of the Common Era [1], but the 1970s were a turning point in the production of batik in Malaysia [2].

In the Malaysian case, batik has been classified as a creative industry within the cultural arts [3]. Batik-making as a creative industry is a blessing in disguise for Malaysia since the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has recognized the ability of creative industries to open up new opportunities for developing countries to leapfrog into world high-growth sectors. Basically, creative sectors consist of a variety of activities which are rooted in traditional knowledge and cultural heritage and they include art, crafts and cultural festivals and also more technology and services-oriented subgroups such as audiovisual products and the new media [4].

Malaysia has vast cultural and creative resources in

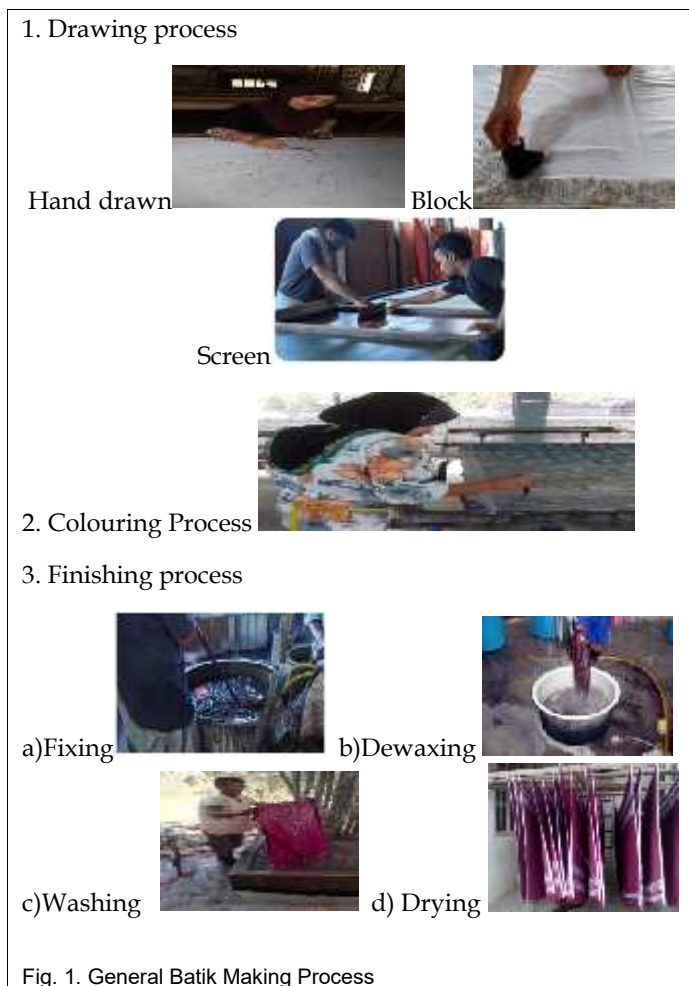
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the fields of the performing, visual and fine arts, Islamic calligraphy, film, arts education, literary works and crafts, which can all be developed and exploited in the future [5]. In the case of Malaysia, the craft industry is one of the contributors to the nation’s economic development [6]. Based on the *Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation: Annual Report 2011-2012*, total craft sales increased to RM341.9 million in 2012, a rise of RM198.3 million compared to 2011 (RM143.5 million). An interesting fact, based on statistical data on the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) in the craft industry, Malaysian Handicraft acknowledges that batik is a principal contributor to Malaysian total craft sales and that it can become a benchmark for reaching the craft sales target of RM1 billion in 2016 [7].

Moreover, UNESCO has classified batik as part of the “intangible cultural heritage of humanity”, one of the traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors to be passed on to our descendants. Batik has been recognized as a high-value heritage of Malaysia [8],[9]. Accordingly, the links that exist between batik, creative industry and cultural heritage are believed to have the positive potential for the development of Malaysian culture and its economy in the future. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the uniqueness of Malaysian batik and to discuss the potential of the batik industry in terms of its cultural and economic contributions to the nation.

This study is based on preliminary research to some selected batik enterprises, batik associations, the National Craft Institute and the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation in Kuala Lumpur and Terengganu, to make live observations of the development of the batik industry in Malaysia. The information and materials derived from these visits have been used to gain a deeper understanding of the uniqueness of batik and its contribution to Malaysian

culture and the Malaysian economy.



2 THE UNIQUENESS OF MALAYSIAN BATIK

2.1 What Is Batik?

In previous studies the word 'batik' was shown to derive from two words, namely, 'amba' 'to draw' and 'titik', 'dot' or 'point' [2],[10],[11]. Accordingly, batik is a process of dyeing fabric by making use of a resist technique (using melted wax) to cover areas of cloth with a dye-resistant substance to prevent those areas absorbing colours [2],[12]. However, some studies mention that the resist technique may use not only wax, but may involve using rice, beans, mud or thickened starch that can act as resist materials in the process of decorating fabrics [13],[14]. Hence, the word 'batik' itself indicates the method or techniques used in producing batik fabrics.

2.2 Batik Techniques

Batik is a craft that has existed for a long time and it is therefore still unclear where people first applied batik techniques; but it is presumed to be 2000 years old [10],[15]. Even though batik is an old industry its techniques require in batik-makers high skills and competencies along with creativity. Creativity can be defined as the ability to create, bring into existence, to

invent in a new form, to produce through imaginative powers, or to bring into existence something new [16]. Batik techniques have their own uniqueness compared to other textile techniques. One prominent technical advantage of batik techniques is to generate motifs on both sides of a fabric that are not blurred and this is called the reversibility effect. This uniqueness allows the dye to permeate the fabric and is an original feature of batik techniques. However, the direct method (involving the use of pigment dyes) is not able to show this visibility effect on both sides [13]. Besides that, the advantage of batik techniques is that they allow an unlimited range of design possibilities through the artistic freedom derived from the skills and creativity of hand painting.

The history of batik development shows that batik techniques are not 'frozen'. The evolution of the batik industry is bringing innovation in its techniques in terms of design and batik-making processes. This uniqueness will become a trigger for increasing the quality and the range of batik products. The earliest form of Malay batik was known as batik *pelangi* (rainbow) and was created by using a tie-dye technique [17]. This was a way of creating patterns of color by folding and tying a fabric in order to inhibit the flow of the dye into the folds of the fabric. This technique was implemented without using wax as a resist material. However, through the creativity of batik-makers, today materials such as rubber bands, string, wires and roots are used to bind the fabric. In fact, sometimes beans, sand, stone and wood are also placed on a cloth to produce a unique pattern of colors after the dyeing process [1].

Technically, there is a variety of types of batik in Malaysia. Among the popular techniques are hand-drawn batik, block batik and screen batik. In hand-drawn batik, canting will be used to make creative patterns on a fabric while a funnel pen is used to form a design, in the form of a stencil screen on a banner screen. Finally, a 'squeegee' is used to press the ink through the fine meshes of the screen onto the fabric to produce screen batik. Meanwhile, if producing a block batik design, block-makers can demonstrate their expertise in creating beautiful patterns on blocks. Initially, the block was made of wood before being substituted by zinc, iron or copper blocks as used today. Even though all these types differ in terms of production techniques and the tools used, generally all batik techniques have three similar processes, namely a drawing, coloring, and finishing process (fixing, de-waxing, washing, drying) as in Fig. 1.

In order to enhance the competitiveness of Malaysian batik compared to other textiles, batik-makers, Malaysia Handicraft and the National Craft Institute have developed several new creative batik techniques, for instance, the overlapping technique, crack technique, silica technique, discharge techniques and also the scratch technique. These techniques are able to add value to batik products in terms of producing more beautiful colors and designs. For example, in the silica technique, sodium silicate is used on the fabric's surface to produce a glowing effect like crystal in the background color of the

fabric. Also, as a result of the creativity and certain innovations in batik production, batik has gone beyond its traditional use as material for clothing to become a more creative fabric for such things as soft furnishings and decorative items for homes and the hospitality trade [2]. In addition, some batik-makers have also made significant improvements in batik designs, such as introducing abstract, geometric and stripe designs and a new style of batik products for items of modern dress such as ties, shawls and scarfs.

3 CULTURAL HERITAGE AND ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF BATIK

The word "heritage" refers to something that is inherited from one's ancestors. In this context, batik as a cultural heritage artifact engages inherited knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts that are transmitted by one generation to the next. Meanwhile, the word 'culture' generally refers to patterns of human activity and to the symbolic structures that give such activity significance and importance [18].

The customs, beliefs and values of a culture are believed to contribute to the development of heritage in society. Therefore, as a heritage product, the unique thing about Malaysian batik is that it is able to demonstrate the national identity or the unique culture of the Malaysian people. In earlier times a pair of Malay girls would wear batik to cover their heads while playing traditional games like 'congak'; but nowadays batik clothing has been accepted as a popular choice for official government activities and for those of the private sector and local communities. In fact, men also wear batik when attending a dinner function and ladies wear modern dresses made with batik fabric. Previously, Malaysian batik was the common attire for the Malay community, but currently, it is also favoured by the Chinese, Indians and the indigenous peoples [12]. In addition, since 2008 the Malaysian government has required that Malaysian batik be worn by public servants on every Thursday of every week. Thus Malaysian batik is not only known for the beauty of its patterns and colour combinations, but it is also a means of promoting Malaysian culture and, ultimately, of unifying this multi-ethnic country [2].

Although batik can serve as the national dress of the Malaysian people, the unique thing about batik is that it is strongly influenced by Islamic art. The majority of batik-makers are to be found on the East coast of Malaysia, such as in Kelantan and Terengganu. The majority of them are Malay and Muslims. Therefore, the batik designs must conform with the Islamic restriction for artists not to imitate God, the creator of all life, by making images of living things such as people or animals. The drawing or carving of any living thing would show that an artist lacks proper regard and respect for Allah. In Islam, only Allah has the power to create what He wants. Accordingly, among popular motifs in Malaysian batik, there are leaves, flowers and geometric and abstract designs [1],[2].

Currently, cultural and heritage items are creative products that can be sold to foreign tourists [18] and that can also contribute to Malaysia's appeal as a tourist destination. Accordingly, batik can be promoted to both local and external tourists. Because of the uniqueness of the process of batik-making and the wide range of products such as clothing, decorative items, gifts and souvenirs, batik has the ability to play an important role in attracting tourists from all over the world. Thus, it is not surprising that several countries in Asia are aggressively marketing their heritage products on international stages such as China, Thailand, the Philippines and India [18].

In the meantime, as producers of textiles, the batik industry will advance in the fashion industry through creative handmade designs. There are some fashion designers who use batik fabric to produce a modern dress that is more trendy and will appeal to the tastes of the younger generation. In this regard, batik performed impressively throughout 2012 with the successful display of batik fabrics in 17 fashion shows with a total collection of 1059 items [19]. Among the fashion shows that helped enhance the prestige of batik fabrics as both a traditional product and also as a contemporary and stylish product were the fashion show in conjunction with the Miss Tourism International Final 2012, the fashion show in conjunction with the visit to Malaysia by Prince William & Kate Middleton and also the fashion show associated with Malaysian London Nite & Malaysian London Weeks 2012.

As we know, producing a piece of batik requires going through the six stages of the production process. Thus, the batik industry really must have sufficient manpower to produce good batik fabrics of excellent quality. Therefore, as a labor-intensive industry, batik-making can create new job opportunities for local communities. The batik industry is capable of promoting the well-being of local communities through the generation of household income.

4 CONCLUSION

Batik is an old craft, but it plays a pivotal role in terms of the development of Malaysian heritage products, the fashion industry, the tourism sector and the economic well-being of local society. The skills and creativity of batik makers are indeed propelling Malaysian batik towards becoming a high-quality hand-made product that is also a traditional product. Growth in the batik industry will provide some positive spillover effects for all the parties involved in the development of the batik industry. In addition, Malaysia has several agencies such as the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation, Karyaneka Sdn. Bhd. as well as some non-government organizations (NGO) to assist in the development of this kind of local handicraft industry. Thus, batik is one of the country's heritage products that should be preserved to ensure that the next generation will be aware of, and feel proud of this heritage.

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