

# Preserving Malaysia's Cultural Identity through Batik: Challenges and Strategies

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## Abstract:

Batik is a national symbol that reflects the cultural and national identity of Malaysia. The uniqueness and artistic value, as well as the heritage of Malaysia, are embodied in the designs of Batik. However, there is a lack of clarity in identifying Malaysia's identity through local Batik. To examine the causes of this lack of clarity and the challenges faced by Malaysian Batik, considering its role in preserving the identity of art and culture, data collection and content analysis methods are used. The results of this content analysis explain how Malaysian Batik confronts these challenges in line with the development of the nation's art and heritage through commercializing the unique identity of Malaysian Batik, aligning with the goals of the 2021 National Cultural Policy (Daken). This research is crucial in formulating strategies to enhance the value of Malaysian art and heritage. The outcomes of these discussions will serve as a guide for future research.

*Keywords* — **Batik, Art and Heritage, Pattern design, Identity, Craft**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The World Crafts Council-Asia Pacific Region (WCC-APR) proudly recognizes Malaysian batik as one of the renowned local art and craft forms on the global stage. This recognition is followed by reference to the National Creative Industry Policy (DIKN), which categorizes textile arts, specifically batik-based products, under the Creative Industry of Cultural Arts. This industry, with pride, stands as one of the key benchmarks in the economic growth and cultural enrichment of advanced nations.

DIKN has, through continuous research, drawn insights from advanced nations such as the United Kingdom, Singapore, South Korea, New Zealand, and Australia. It has defined the creative industry within the context of Malaysia as an effort to gather and nurture individual or group talents, revolving

around elements of creativity, innovation, and technology. This Endeavor aims to achieve excellent economic resources and high revenue for the country, emphasizing the importance of artistic creation and the protection of intellectual property rights, in alignment with the cultural and multicultural diversity principles in Malaysia. Clearly and unequivocally, it can be stated that Malaysia's creative industry is centered around the arts in the context of economic growth, involving talented individuals and corporate entities. This effort has a significant impact on the country, both in terms of income and its national image, as stated in the National Creative Industry Policy.

As mentioned by Noor Haslina (2017), the batik industry not only holds value in the development of Malaysia's cultural heritage but also stands as a

strategic asset for Malaysia's future economic development. It has successfully contributed as a thriving rural industry. The Craft Industry in Malaysia, as a whole, is a vital driver of the country's economic growth. The Malaysian craft industry is divided into five main areas: textiles, forest products, land-based products, metal products, and various crafts, all considered part of the manufacturing category. According to records of craft entrepreneurs, the majority of craft industries and entrepreneurs in Malaysia fall under the categories of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and micro-enterprises, as outlined by the Malaysian Craft Development Corporation in 2020. The role of culture also influences the nation's development process. Malaysia's identity needs to be nurtured as an effort to enhance socio-economic and political development. The integration and engagement of all layers of society need to be unified as an ongoing process (KKMM Portal). According to Mohammad Haris Abd Azis, a Cultural Officer at the Cultural and Arts Center, Universiti Utara Malaysia, the manifestation of art and culture is a crucial element in expressing the civilization and glory of a nation. The role of art and culture is significant in contributing to the development of society in creating a nation with a distinct identity (Bernama, 2021).

The National Culture Policy (DAKEN) 2021 was launched by the Prime Minister of Malaysia as a guide and reference for planning all aspects of national art, culture, and heritage development. The implementation of art, culture, and heritage in the future includes High-Value Culture, Social Harmony, Preservation and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, Cultural Development and Enhancement, Cultural Empowerment, Cultural Economic Generation, and Cultural Excellence. According to YB Dato' Sri Hajah Nancy Shukri, the Minister of Tourism, Arts, and Culture of Malaysia, DAKEN 2021 is implemented to realize the vision of making Malaysia an advanced nation rich in cultural heritage, preserved by its people, and maintaining the preservation and conservation agenda of the nation's art and heritage. According to Ismail Sabri Yaakob, the Prime Minister of

Malaysia, the DAKEN 2021 government's effort is to elevate and dignify the nation's art, culture, and heritage. He calls upon the entire Malaysian family to support this policy so that the aspects of art, culture, and national heritage are preserved (Sinar, 2021). Heritage relates to something inherited by an individual and a group of people from previous generations. Heritage represents the memory of a nation's entire life and, in turn, symbolizes its civilization. Heritage is generally divided into two categories: tangible heritage and intangible heritage. Batik, as a textile artifact, falls under tangible heritage, which means it is something that can be moved. In addition, there is another category of heritage known as cultural heritage, which can also be divided into two main categories: tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage. Movable cultural heritage, involving textiles, including batik, is classified under tangible cultural heritage (KKMM Ministry of Communication and Multimedia Malaysia Portal).

The term "batik" originates from the Javanese words "ambatik" or "tritik," which refer to the actions of drawing, writing, coloring, or dripping wax. The suffix 'tik' in each word means producing small dots (Shaharuddin, Abd Aziz Noor, Trihanondo 2021). According to Amirah Syazwani (2023), the word "batik" is also believed to have originated from the Javanese language with a simpler explanation, consisting of 'ba' and 'tik,' which means a drop of wax. In Malaysia, this term refers to the process of decorating fabric using the technique of stamping or drawing with a canting, or a combination of both (Silah, 2021).

The process of creating batik is a decorative form of textile production that involves the intersection of design and knowledge of heritage, culture, and aesthetic values. According to Zamrudin Abdullah (2019), the element of beauty or aesthetics is a crucial component in producing high-quality batik works. The efforts of batik designers to creatively shape ideas in line with the aspirations of contemporary batik enthusiasts should be emphasized in the creation of modern and contemporary batik designs. The role of batik

designers is significant in preserving the economic development of the batik industry and elevating the heritage of Malaysian batik art. According to Noor Haslina Mohamad Akhir (2015), good craftsmanship requires high skills, hard work, and patience in producing high-quality craft that generates income for the craftsman. According to Nazlina Shaari (2017), batik represents the identity of a product that requires more intellectual and multicultural cultural input. In the production of exceptional batik designs, there should be a strong connection between the batik designer, the environment, production, and consumption. Therefore, in this context, batik can meet quality standards and fulfill global market demand. Cultural values and creative knowledge become highly important in the production of high-value batik (Zamrudin Abdullah, 2019).

Referring to the appreciation of art, the formalistic and iconographic aspects play two significant roles in the creation of an artwork. An artwork typically consists of two main elements: motif and its interpretation. The motif or batik design is an image seen through the presentation of formalistic elements in the artwork. Formalistic features include elements of art and design principles, such as lines, shapes, tones, forms, spaces, compositions, perspectives, and colors. The combination of art elements and design principles in formalistic form generates a design idea that produces the motif or batik pattern. The ability to analyze or recognize formalistic features will lead the artist to explore iconography or the meaning of a particular design pattern. The interpretation of a design represents a personal understanding based on what is perceived by the artist (Zamrudin Abdullah, 2019).

## **II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The research uses a systematic literature review method with the aim of identifying and discussing the challenges of the batik Malaysia. The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. Analyze the lack of clarity in recognizing Malaysia's identity through local Batik

2. Propose strategies to rectify and clarify the representation of Malaysian identity in Batik

## **III. RESEARCH METHOD**

This research employs a qualitative approach, specifically the literature review method and document content analysis. Data collection involves library research, including referencing books, theses, journal articles, conference papers, internet searches, and other relevant sources in both Malay and English languages. This approach is suitable for obtaining comprehensive information, and the literature search strategy is guided by the research objectives. The research focuses on identifying the causes of ambiguity and challenges faced by Malaysian Batik and considering the role of Malaysian Batik in preserving the identity of art and culture. Therefore, the keywords used are based on the research title. Literature searches utilize databases such as Google, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Academia, aiming to facilitate a more organized and systematic literature search. This research has established specific criteria as instruments to streamline literature search. These criteria include the time frame (research years) within the range of 2015 to 2022. Additionally, the selection of literature must consist of articles, proceedings, books, or theses. According to Xiao and Watson (2019), a similar critical or comparative literature review study necessitates the establishment of a robust set of criteria.

## **IV. DISCUSSION ANALYSIS OF THE LACK OF CLARITY IN RECOGNIZING MALAYSIA'S IDENTITY THROUGH LOCAL BATIK**

The Chief Executive Officer of the Yayasan Budi Penyayang Malaysia, Datuk Leela Mohd Ali, has made various efforts to promote the art of batik in Malaysia. However, the local batik industry still faces challenges in penetrating international markets and has not reached the desired level of development. The lack of creativity in creating innovative designs and the failure to provide a globally competitive edge are challenges that need to be addressed (Halina Mohd Noor, 2018).

According to the 2018 Annual Report on Craftsmanship, there was a 1.2% increase in craft sales, from RM500.5 million in 2017 to RM506.5 million in 2018. This reflects positive developments in the craft industry driven by Kraftangan Malaysia. Furthermore, when looking at market performance and sales from the series of Craftsmanship Reports from 2009 to 2018, the Malaysian Craft Market has experienced annual growth. In this context, among textile crafts, batik has emerged as the largest contributor to craft sales. However, efforts to promote the art of batik face increasing challenges, with the threat of copying batik designs from other countries that endanger the uniqueness and image of Malaysian batik. The Chief Executive Officer of Karyaneka Sdn.Bhd, Norizmah Mustafa (2019), emphasizes that the uniqueness of Malaysian batik is now in danger and has been threatened by the trend of copying batik designs from abroad. The issue of counterfeit or imitation batik designs has become a significant challenge. Fatihah A Latiff, an entrepreneur and batik designer from the Tinta Batik House brand, explained the considerable challenges they face in their efforts to promote the country's batik. They not only have to contend with counterfeit products from China but also have to compete with printed batik, not only from China but also from Indonesia, where the original batik is imitated and turned into fabric. What is more distressing is that some individuals in Malaysia show support for these counterfeit products (MyMetro, 2019). Popularizing Indonesian batik among the youth presents a significant challenge to the local batik industry. Wan Mohd Hafiz Wan Mohd Arifin, the General Manager of Noor Arfa Holdings Sdn Bhd, expressed his frustration when the younger generation shows more interest in promoting Indonesian batik, indirectly leading to a decline in the local batik industry. Social media has become the primary and most favored platform for the youth (MyMetro, 2019). However, we cannot solely blame them. Trends like selfies, group photos, and things going viral are global phenomena that are immensely popular worldwide. The younger generation is enthusiastic

about showcasing what's new and modern, aligning with the latest fashion trends. Normaz Wana Ismail (2019) formulated that most batik entrepreneurs exhibit interest in marketing and innovation. However, concerning marketing innovation, they still rely on government-established marketing models. The use of broader marketing and promotional channels, such as online sales and electronic media advertising, remains underutilized. The majority of them continue to focus on conventional practices like direct sales to customers, wholesalers, or retailers. In terms of innovation in processes and products, the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation and local batik entrepreneurs have made efforts to create new or more advanced batik techniques in painting, coloring, and up to the final stages. To enhance the role of batik entrepreneurs and designers in product and organizational innovation, greater efforts are needed to diversify batik products to compete with more modern and sophisticated products. They should also be willing to make changes in operational management by focusing on job specialization and more efficient work procedures. It is important to improve performance and preserve Malaysian batik in the long run. However, the extent of involvement of local batik entrepreneurs and designers in these innovation efforts, as well as the achievements made through these efforts, needs to be examined. Looking ahead, the Malaysian batik industry should be able to compete and strengthen its position in the international market. This can be formulated that, in the context of Malaysia, batik does not display a distinct Malaysian identity that can be clearly appreciated. The value of authenticity in the design of its motifs seems to be trapped in the waves of modernization. According to Ahmad Hakim Abdullah (2020), findings from the conducted research indicate that Malaysian batik does not possess a unique identity when compared to Indonesian batik. The latest designs in local hand-drawn batik, such as organic (flora), fauna, and geometric motifs, do not represent a clear Malaysian identity. The same issue also applies to local block batik. While its designs may lack a

strong Malaysian identity, they still exhibit distinctive characteristics related to their usage in areas like medicine, ceremonies, gifts, symbolism, and decoration (Rabiatuadawiyah Mohd Kari, 2019). The problems reported by the local media regarding the challenges faced in the local batik industry, such as the influx of textile products based on batik from foreign countries, are seen as challenges and competition for local batik entrepreneurs. According to Fatihaf A Latif (2019), batik entrepreneurs and designers in Kelantan are facing challenges in advancing their batik businesses when confronted with the emergence of imitation batik, especially from China and Indonesia. Therefore, local batik designers and producers need to be more responsive to this situation by showcasing unique and fresh batik patterns while preserving the Malaysian identity to compete with foreign products. However, the opposite situation occurs when some batik designers copy patterns from foreign batik and incorporate these design elements into their batik. Norizmah Mustafa (2019), the Managing Director of Karyaneka Sdn.Bhd, expressed disappointment when witnessing the threat to Malaysian batik. Moreover, the trend of copying batik from abroad has damaged the true uniqueness of Malaysian batik. The most significant impact on society is the confusion in identifying the authenticity of Malaysian batik. Hafiz Ithnin (2020) also stated that it is quite challenging to purchase batik-patterned clothing on media platforms that reflect the Malaysian identity. Even those who wish to wear batik for international conference events often confuse authentic Malaysian batik with Indonesian batik. Therefore, these misunderstandings have hindered efforts to promote local culture to foreign countries (Mymetro, August 2020). A lack of knowledge about the appreciation of artistic elements and principles in the design process has led to artworks that do not achieve high-quality standards. The artistic and cultural elements in contemporary Malaysian batik designs have been identified as a comprehensive body of knowledge through the appreciation of art in terms of

formalistic and iconographic aspects. The method of analyzing or identifying formalistic characteristics will bring each designer closer to iconographic issues or the meaning behind a batik design. The interpretation of a design is based on what an individual designer sees. This interpretation relates to the understanding of significant issues through customs, culture, beliefs, history, myths, legends, and so on. In other words, this interpretation will create a specific identity in the design. Both design elements and the interpretation of their creation are closely related when conveying the message of a batik design. Artistic output results from an individual designer's expression or creative skills and imagination, typically in a visual format (Zamrudin Abdullah, 2019). This situation arises due to a lack of understanding in translating the traditional elements of local art and culture into batik designs. Malaysian identity is not prioritized in the design process; instead, only sharpened ideas are used. As a result, there is a lack of awareness that this affects the government's efforts to strengthen Malaysia's identity in local craft products and also impacts the income of the batik industry in Malaysia. The latest data on craft entrepreneurs published by the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (2020) indicates that the batik industry across Malaysia, especially falls under the micro B40 category, with annual sales not exceeding RM300,000 and household income less than RM4,360 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). The role of micro B40 industries, along with batik designers and producers, is crucial in ensuring the development and competitiveness of the Malaysian batik industry by emphasizing quality in designs that reflect Malaysian identity. Therefore, this research should continue as it has the potential to bring new light to the Malaysian batik industry and promote Malaysian art and culture through batik designs. Furthermore, this research indirectly serves as an effort to increase the income of micro B40 entrepreneurs in facing the Industrial Revolution 4.0. This research is also seen as a step towards realizing the government's vision for the craft industry in Malaysia.

According to Mohamaddin bin Ketapi, the former Minister of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (2021), during Visit Malaysia 2020 (VM2020), the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation consistently ensured the production of high-quality craft products that follow current trends and attract tourists visiting the country. The creation of new products using icons and motifs that reflect the identities of Malaysian states is ideal for attracting more consumers to use local craft products. The craft products produced serve as clear symbols of local identity that can be showcased to both domestic and international tourists. This demonstrates that the uniqueness and excellence of local craft products are on par with similar products from other countries in the market (Craft Report, 2021). Furthermore, the significance of this research is closely related to the support of the National Culture Policy 2021 (DAKEN) and is in line with the proposal by the Prime Minister of Malaysia to elevate and dignify the country's arts, culture, and heritage while ensuring their sustainability (Sinar, 2021).

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The challenges faced by Malaysian batik require due attention. It is a crucial factor in the efforts to promote art and heritage by emphasizing a unique identity in the designs and products. Issues related to counterfeiting and imitation products from foreign countries should be promptly addressed, and this problem should not be allowed to persist. If left unchecked, the identity of Malaysian batik in the face of foreign competition will be at risk, and the uniqueness behind the competition from foreign batik products will be lost. To address these challenges, innovation and transformation in the modernization process need to be implemented without compromising the original characteristics of Malaysian batik. The Malaysian identity in design patterns and the creation of new products must be preserved. Batik entrepreneurs and designers need to understand intellectual property and ISO patents to prevent unauthorized copying and imitation of batik designs. The quality standards set by the Malaysian Handicraft Development

Corporation also play a significant role in ensuring the authenticity of Malaysian batik is maintained. The government, relevant organizations, and key bodies in Malaysia and abroad should provide full support for the development of Malaysian batik. The role of batik in strengthening the National Cultural Policy 2021 (DAKEN) should also be considered. Further research is needed to better understand the actual role of the batik industry in Malaysia and how it can compete and overcome future challenges.

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