

Cultural Sustainability: A Case Study of the Dying Art on Batik Block in Malaysia

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Abstract: Traditional batik block in Malaysia is the country's heritage and treasure. However, it has slowly faded nearing extinction, particularly in the east coast region of Malaysia. The uniqueness of a batik block is very much relies on its pattern that is championed by a master craftsman called the master block maker. Currently, not many master block makers are left in Malaysia with only few remaining in the east coast. This finding raised the question of batik block being considered as a dying art which needs cultural awareness and recognition. A qualitative study was conducted to identify the dying art of block making in Malaysia. In - depth interviews was conducted with two block making experts in the state of Kelantan and Terengganu. The transcribed data of the interview sessions were then analysed using thematic analysis, and it was found that there are four major themes involved in the issue of the craft's dying art which are: consistent, human factors, batik community and initiatives. These factors plays major role in the conservation of the art of batik block in Malaysia. From the findings, it is hope that the art of block making will continue to flourish thus enhancing the appreciation and sustaining the valuable traditional culture of Malaysia.

1 INTRODUCTION

In interpreting the meaning of cultural sustainability, it is crucial to define the meaning of the word culture and sustainability. As for the sustainability, there are many different definitions, but the most frequently cited comes from the World Council on Economic Development, which advocates operating in ways that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Bertels, S., Papania, L., and Papania, D., 2010). Systematically, Becky. J., Brown. M.E., & Hanson. D.M., et al., (1987) describes that the meaning of sustainability is strongly dependent on the context in which it is applied and on whether its use is based on a social, economic, or ecological perspective. Becky. J., Brown. M.E., & Hanson. D.M., et al., further explains that sustainability may be defined broadly or narrowly, but a useful definition must specify explicitly the context as well as the temporal and spatial scales being considered. Setting the priorities for sustaining or being sustained, and at what costs, is a value-laden process that can only be accomplished within the context of a clearly stated definition of sustainability. Deciding what actions and policies should be taken to achieve sustainability

can only be accomplished with appropriate measures and indicators of sustainability.

In describing batik as a Malaysian cultural icon, Stephen T.F. (2015) in his research about the interrelation of history and character of societies, found out that ancient cultures reflect the diversity of experiences of their communities through arts and crafts. He described that while traditional arts and crafts disclose a composite of historical events and their surroundings, some of it bears spiritual significance which can be found in the craft of batik. He further explained that in anthropology and sociology, batik's role as an art form is often discussed and viewed through its variable patterns, shapes and design elements.

At present, the Malaysian batik, although considered as a traditional Malay craft, is less than a century old. Its aesthetics defines and characterizes the heritage of the Malays, seen through motifs which blend the Malay sultanate culture, community values, imagination and creativity in interpreting their surrounding environment meaningfully. In a modern context, Malaysia's batik design heritage is premised on its dynamic sociocultural capacities to serve markets and demands. Definitely, cultural sustainability as it relates to sustainable development

(to sustainability), has to do with the maintaining of cultural beliefs, cultural practices, heritage conservation, culture as its own entity, and attempts to answer the question of whether or not any given cultures will exist in the context of the future (Soini, K. & Birkland, I. 2014). In addition, Kamarudin (2013) describes that cultural sustainability is one of the major pillars in creating a sustainable community as well as with three most known pillars which are economy, social and environment.

The stamped batik is considerably used by most people for its low cost compared with the hand drawn batik. The quality of the stamped batik or block batik primarily depends on the quality of the batik stamp. Batik stamp is a handy craft work fully done by hands of the batik expert. Traditionally batik stamp is made of copper plate form with the measuring 0.25mm in thickness and 20mm in width to form patterns. The craftsmen are now limited and most of them are old men, but they have high capability to draw the patterns by hand before making it as batik stamp (Suryanto et al. 2016). Technically, block batik or batik cap is a batik method in which designs are applied in wax with stamps or 'chaps' as they are pronounced. Elphick, M. (2014) a researcher of batik products described that the batik stamps are usually made of copper or brass for its heat conductive properties and used to 'print' hot wax on to cotton. She further stated that producing batik stamp is still a labour intensive process requiring patience and skill.

According to Mohamed Awang (2008, December 10), batik craft should be ceaselessly sustained in order to safeguard the Malay identity from being caught in the rapid current of globalization and from the dangers of the virtual world. In addressing the significance of innovation in the Batik industry, Mohamed Awang emphasizes that the Batik artisans need to evolve from conventional and traditional design into a more contemporary design that could be commercialized overseas.

Mohamed Awang further describes that the Malaysian identity needs to be conserved even though the design has been stylized and changed. In the 1930s, the use of wax in printing batik was introduced by batik makers in the east coast. Regularly blocks were made from steel or metal to produce more refined and neater batik. Surprisingly the block technique was slowly set aside in favour of the hand-drawn batik and batik stencil technique, which is an easier and faster method of creating batik. The result from this situation is that there are only few block makers or craftsmen left in Kelantan and Terengganu, and at the same time, the interest among youth to inherit the skill of block making is deteriorating.

Therefore, crucial efforts need to be done to sustain the cultural heritage of block making as well as to enliven the Malaysian batik industry. For these reasons, the researchers strongly believe that culture is the key element in developing people's relationships and attitudes for all tangible and intangible to enhance our cultural identity in ways to improve our lives and live in a viable inheritance. From this paper, we tackle the cultural sustainability in the dying art of batik stamp by interviewing the two batik block maker experts.

2 METHODOLOGY

This research employed the qualitative approach with the selected method like library research, fieldwork and interviews. Preliminary interviews of face-to-face were completed. To meet the objective of this research, two sets of interviews were conducted with the batik block experts; Abdul Ghani Mat 62, who is recognized by the Malaysian Handicraft Corporation as an Adiguru (Master craftsmen) from the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia (Kelantan) and the other one from Kuala Terengganu, Zakaria Ismail, age 60. This is also proof that geographical location has the driving force that shapes culture and ability to produce batik stamp until now as all the block makers are from the east coast region (Kelantan and Terengganu). Both of them have more than forty years of expert experience in block making and they are the last block makers who are still active. The way of life in the east coast area is full of cultural heritage and this environment should be sustained.

The information focuses on the cultural sustainability on batik stamp, young generations, and perceptions toward batik blocks. The interviews conducted were to answer the following main questions: a. What is your opinion in the decrease of Malaysian block makers? b. What is the factor for the absence of understudies to inherit the art of batik stamp? c. Should there be any reforms to upgrade Malaysia's batik stamp? d. Why do we need to preserve the art of batik stamp?

The answers of the interviews were analysed and summarized as follows: Transcription process, Translation, Thematic Analysis, Findings and Reportin.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The responses from the interviews can be divided into several parts based on the interview questions. The answers of the interviews were analyzed and summarized as follows:

Attitude: ‘Extinct, not extinct but as good as dead. Without new understudies, there will be none.’ ‘For a batik block maker, it is necessary to use skills and creativity for block designs’. From the interview sessions made with the block makers, they argue that the batik stamps in Malaysia are becoming increasingly coming to an end and likely to disappear like other heritage treasures, due to the lack of exposure to the younger generation on batik. Attitude on the importance of art legacy is seen to be a major factor for the lack of appreciation and if the situation is left unattended, the heritage of the people's identity in the country will be wasted. Many, especially young people have no interest in batik clothing and this circumstance is seen as a result of the development and rapidity of the diversity of modern clothing and fashion sense. At present most young people do not know the legacy in our country, especially about batik blocks.

Government: ‘The government did not put emphasis in promoting for successors. The government is indifferent. They have started to take on but contradictory’. According to this statement the Ministry of Public and Private Industries should play a role to continue to develop and intensify efforts in terms of promotion, so that batik blocks are not only used by batik entrepreneurs but also as a reference material. The block makers are of the opinion that by emulating the neighbouring countries in defending their culture, the batik heritage and the block makers will always be well preserved. “Batik Indonesia is superior to us because they are skilful at promoting their art and product. We, in this scenario are lagging behind. For instance, in Malaysia, we do not have batik school uniform, unlike Indonesia. My stepson is an Indonesian. They are to wear their batik inform on every Monday and Wednesday. The whole of Indonesia has to wear batik. In Malaysia, batik uniforms are worn by boarding school students; even so only on Thursday prior to weekend.” The government should take on this method if we are to preserve our batik. If there is no effort, then the batik maker will disappear and no one will know of their existence.

Innovation: ‘Batik now needs to be renewed. There should be new style. There should be change. Block makers and batik making cannot be separated. Someone who wants to make batik has to make a

block first. The block maker should be referred to in order to create a design.’ Modernization should be made on batik stamps so as to nurture interest in new groups, to place it in line with current modern trends. Most block operators especially the block owners do not want to change, they prefer to adopt old techniques and techniques in the manufacture of blocks. It is obvious and evident on how our neighbouring country is very much aware in ensuring the preserved of their batik heritage compared to Malaysia's batik.

Awareness: ‘Art, in any form is fine and delicate. Anything artful and fine has to be preserved. Stamping blocks has existed since the 50s. Therefore, we need to have successors to ensure the art and craftsmanship lives on. I hope we will be able to produce successors and in batik, there has to be new development’. The production of batik in Malaysia should be significant. The support and appreciation of the various parties should necessarily exist within the community, especially among local batik producers. As a country with Malay culture and strong understanding of batik, the batik art and culture should be enhanced in the local community through education at primary, secondary and tertiary level to give awareness on the batik handicraft. To attract interest towards block making, it is suggested that exposure is made through art education available in schools. The involvement of young people in traditional art activities such as the making of batik stamping blocks will magnetize the younger generation in appreciating the art form of batik blocks.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, it is concluded that the four aspects of response by the block makers during the interview session is consider a vital information to cater the issue of dying art batik block making. Attitude, government, innovation and awareness need to be considered seriously as these are the key elements in sustaining the culture. To cater the issue of attitude, the Malaysian need appreciate and values their own heritage and consider those culture as their pride and identity. Government have to play their role in preserving the culture by promoting and creating awareness to the younger generations as well as to the tourist that flocked to the beautiful east coast region. Innovation is one of the major contribution in sustaining the culture and heritage. By doing some interesting innovation on batik stamp, the industry will be booming as innovation could create

stimulating experiences in stamped batik making using innovative batik stamp. All these efforts would not be realized except with the awareness of the Malaysian society on the importance of their own culture and heritage including in the industry of traditional batik making. It need to be nurtured among all sort of generations in Malaysia especially among the millennials. Problems in the batik industry need to be addressed immediately in an effort to uphold the country's batik industry. If the number of batik block makers continue to decrease, soon, Malaysia will lose its most treasured asset in the name of development and modernization. This legacy is an important product to attract foreign tourists especially those interested in culture and the arts to visit our country, Malaysia. The critical downside to losing the batik will result in the future younger generation not knowing the legacy of our homeland.

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