

The Artistry and Beauty of Coastal Batik: The Unique Identity and Significance of Lasem Batik

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore and highlight the cultural significance of Batik in the Indonesian archipelago, highlighting the unique characteristics of Batik Lasem as a renowned coastal batik variety. The study involves extensive research and documentation of the cultural heritage of Batik, focusing on Batik Lasem. Various historical records, literature, and cultural resources were reviewed and analyzed to gather comprehensive information. The research findings underscore the intrinsic value of Batik as an enduring cultural tradition in Indonesia. Batik Lasem, with its distinct features such as the use of the rare "red blood" color derived from noni tree roots and the Tumpal Pusung motif, stands out as a testament to the rich cultural heritage of the region. The research sheds light on the importance of preserving and promoting the unique cultural elements of Batik Lasem. This coastal batik not only reflects the cultural diversity of Indonesia but also serves as a symbol of cultural identity and pride, contributing to the ongoing appreciation and safeguarding of Batik as a priceless cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS

Coastal batik, Lasem, Characteristic, Blood red, *Tumpal Pusung*

Introduction

Batik is an invaluable treasure. Batik fabric reveals many fascinating aspects beyond its beauty and patterns. Because batik records a portion of our history, it seems to possess the power to tell us stories. For so long, the general populace appears to have been unaware of the beauty and various intriguing facets of our ancestors' creations. In fact, batik has become the national traditional attire, and on almost every significant occasion, even on certain days, people are expected to don batik. Many motifs, patterns, and colors of batik in Indonesia hold philosophical and everyday life meanings [1].

According to Helen Ishwara's book, "Benang Raja: Menyimpul Keelokan Batik Pesisir," the batik-making method has been known for thousands of years, with different techniques evolving over time. Batik-making essentially involves creating variations on fabric using a resist-dyeing technique. The process entails using a non-penetrating dyeing agent to draw on the fabric. Once the dyeing is complete, the color-resist substance is removed, revealing the protected motif underneath [2].

This method has been used for centuries in various regions of the Indonesian archipelago. According to Robyn Maxwell in her book "Textiles of Southern Asia: Tradition, Trade, and Transformation," batik may have emerged in the inland regions of Central Java in the early 17th century due to the use of a wax-resist substance called "*malam*" applied with a tool called "canting." The color-resist substance was previously applied using other tools, such as bamboo stalks, before the use of canting. Sticky rice paste was one of the many color-resist substances used [3].

Many people are uncertain about the origins of batik, even though the word "batik" comes from the Javanese language. According to G.P. Rouffaer, the batik technique was possibly first discovered in Lasem by traders who landed on the Indonesian coast around the 6th or 7th century, possibly from India or Sri Lanka (S.K. Sewan Susanto, 2018).

Batik can be divided into two main categories: inland batik and coastal batik. Batik originating from regions far from the sea, such as Surakarta, Yogyakarta, Indramayu, and Semarang, is referred to as inland batik. Coastal batik comes from areas near the coast, such as Pekalongan, Cirebon, Lasem, Tuban, and Madura, and typically features brighter and richer colors, such as green, yellow, bright red, bright blue, and even orange. Inland batik usually features earthy colors like brown, dark blue, brownish-white, or bluish-white.

The Historical Journey of Indonesian Coastal Batik: Art That Narrates Culture and History

Indonesia is renowned for its extraordinary cultural heritage. Batik is one of the most captivating and beautiful cultural treasures. Batik, which means "painting with wax" in Javanese, is one of Indonesia's most famous and remarkable traditional art forms. Batik is a source of national pride and a significant cultural heritage recognized worldwide. However, coastal batik holds a special place in the history of Indonesian art and culture.

The history of coastal batik, a distinctive form of traditional art in Indonesia, encompasses the development and evolution of motifs and techniques used in batik-making in coastal regions such as Java, Sumatra, and Bali.

The development and evolution of batik in Indonesia's coastal regions, including Java, Sumatra, Bali, and Sulawesi, play a crucial role in the history of coastal batik. The unique characteristics of coastal communities set them apart, reflecting the rich cultural and historical diversity of Indonesia's coastal people [4].

The influence of other cultures that interacted with Indonesia through maritime trade shaped the history of coastal batik. Early developments in coastal batik were heavily influenced by Chinese and Indian cultures, evident in the use of geometric patterns, dragons, and phoenixes.

Coastal batik underwent numerous transformations during the Dutch colonial period in Indonesia. For instance, batik artisans in coastal Java began incorporating European elements like tulip flowers, horse-drawn carriages, and Dutch royal symbols to create a style of batik known as "Batik Belanda."

Coastal batik is a symbol of cultural identity and art. Many traditional ceremonies, including weddings and religious rituals, utilize this attire. The motifs and designs of coastal batik often depict the lives of fishermen, the beauty of the sea, and local wisdom.

The resurgence of coastal batik art occurred in the 20th century. Artists and fashion designers collaborated to revive traditional motifs in contemporary fashion designs. This not only helped preserve coastal batik art but also restored its beauty both domestically and internationally [5].

The history of coastal batik showcases Indonesia's deep cultural richness, continuously evolving over time. Coastal batik serves as a beautiful visual art medium that reflects the economic and cultural journey in Indonesia's coastal regions. By preserving and gaining a deeper understanding of the history of coastal batik, we can appreciate this extraordinary cultural heritage and carry forward this beautiful tradition to future generations [4].

Method

The History of Batik Lasem: Beauty from the Roots of the Morinda Tree

Lasem is the second-largest city in Rembang Regency, Central Java, after Rembang itself. With numerous Chinese settlements scattered throughout the city, Lasem is known as "Little China." Lasem is also home to a gold-coated reclining Buddha statue. It is often referred to as the "city of Islamic scholars" and the "city of students." This region is known for producing guava and mango fruits, as well as seafood products like salt and shrimp paste. Batik Lasem is renowned for its bold coloring and beautiful coastal hues.

Lasem holds significant historical importance in Indonesia's maritime trade history. It served as a prominent trading center and port during the colonial era and the 19th century. Due to its trading activities, the city became a cultural hub influenced by various countries, including China and India. Interestingly, the development of batik art in this city was greatly influenced by these external influences.

Batik Lasem is mentioned as one of the classic variants, known as "*pakem*," with its distinctive patterns and motifs, characterized by bold and striking color combinations, as well as diverse and unique designs, yet maintaining elegance and beauty, as stated in the book "Lasem Negeri Dampoawang Sejarah yang Terlupakan" by M. Akrom [7]. This unique batik can be found in the National Batik Museum. Lasem's batik is known as "batik tulis kendoro sendiri" or "Pesisiran Laseman." It differs from Jogja or Solo batik, which is meticulously made following palace guidelines and features motifs reserved for the wealthy. The resilient nature of Batik Lasem makes it egalitarian, allowing it to be worn anywhere and by anyone.

It appears that the traditions and arts of China and Campa (Cambodia) influenced the development of Batik Lasem. Positive and rich cultural acculturation resulted from the significant Chinese and Campa populations who settled in Lasem and gradually integrated with the local inhabitants, including the art of batik. The production and marketing of Batik Lasem have seen notable success over time [5].

A Brief Overview of the History of Batik Lasem

Before the arrival of the Japanese army in Lasem in 1912, Lasem had been a center for producing high-quality and skilled batik.

Since the late 18th century, Chinese and Arab traders had been trading homemade batik produced in villages along the northern coast of Java Island. Subsequently, batik workshops employed artisans to create customized batik according to the workshop owners' preferences and the market's demands.

The name "Batik Lasem" derives from the town of Lasem in the northern coastal region of Central Java, Indonesia. The trading history of this town with many countries, including China and India, significantly influenced the development of Batik Lasem.

According to Helen Ishwara in the book "Benang Raja: Menyimpul Keelokan Batik Pesisir" [2], Laseman, or Batik Lasem, was heavily influenced by Chinese culture. This is because, since the 14th century, Lasem, an ancient port city, had engaged in trade and relations with Chinese merchants.

As Nyong Raden mentions in the book "Sejarah Lasem" the arrival of Admiral Cheng Ho in 1413 had a close connection to the history of Batik Lasem [8]. According to the book "Sabda Bradasanti," which can be found in the National Museum of Jakarta, Admiral Cheng Ho's fleet came to the Lasem area to repair their ships and allow sick crew members to seek medical treatment. Pages 45 and 46 of the book mention that in the year Saka 1335 (1413 AD), Captain Bi Nang Un joined Admiral Cheng Ho's entourage to Lasem, marking his third visit to the Nusantara region. Bi Nang Un saw Lasem as a fertile and prosperous place, with a friendly and family-

oriented community. Many people from Campa (Cambodia) had settled there. Eventually, he requested permission from Admiral Cheng Ho to discontinue the voyage as he wished to settle in Lasem.

Bi Nang Un was permitted to stay in Lasem by the Duke of Lasem, Prince Wijayabadra. He was also asked to bring items that were not present on Java at that time. Bi Nang Un returned with his wife Na Li Ni, their five-year-old son Bi Nang Na, and their three-year-old daughter Bi Nang Ti. Other skilled Campa people in batik-making, gold jewelry crafting, and gamelan production also brought black glutinous rice seeds, blungko mangoes, sugar cane, pomegranates, Cempo chickens, blue-feathered peacocks, and klewer rice. Initially, Bi Nang Un resided in Kemandung (South Lasem). Later, he moved to Binangun, which is now the Bonang coastal area. Na Li Ni taught the children of Kemandung and her own children how to make batik, dance, and create tobacco pouches from peacock feathers. Bi Nang Ti excelled in batik, embroidery, weaving, and herbal medicine-making in her adulthood. Lasem is recognized as the birthplace of the first batik. After marrying Prabu Badranala, the descendant of Dewi Indu, who later became the Duke of Lasem, Bi Nang Ti was given the name Winarti Kumudawarni. Following Bi Nang Ti's passing, her remains were buried in Bukit Regol (now known as the Bonang Beach area), in what is now known as the Petilasan Sunan Bonang, where you can find the legacy of this Campa Princess [6].

The "Babad Lasem," rewritten by R. Panji Kamzah in 1858, tells the story of Bi Nang Un, a crew member of Dhang Puhawang Tzeng Ho from the Country of Tiong Hwa, and his wife Na Li Ni, who chose to settle in Bonang after being captivated by the beauty of Java's nature. Na Li Ni began learning the art of batik and eventually became skilled in creating batik using a unique blood-red color obtained from chicken blood. The motifs they often created included bird motifs, liong (dragon) motifs, marigold flowers, and banji motifs. These motifs eventually became the hallmark of Batik Lasem.

Batik Lasem is one of the most respected types of batik in Indonesia, renowned for its unique blood-red color. Lasem, a historic small town on the northern coast of Central Java, is intertwined with the history of Batik Lasem. However, what sets Batik Lasem apart is the distinctive red color produced by the Morinda tree roots that only grow in that region. Batik Lasem holds a special place in global trade, both domestically and internationally. It was even exported to Thailand and Suriname in the early 19th century, marking a golden period for Batik Lasem.

Discussion

1. Distinctive Characteristics of Batik Lasem

Several characteristics make Batik Lasem distinctive, including the following:

a. Color

- 1) *Kelengan*: features blue motifs on a milky white background.
- 2) *Bang-bangan*: showcases red motifs on a milky white background.
- 3) *Bang biron*: displays red and blue motifs on a milky white background.
- 4) *Bang ijo*: presents red, green, and blue motifs on a milky white background.
- 5) *Bang ungon*: exhibits dark purple or purple and red motifs on a milky white background.
- 6) *Irengan*: highlights black motifs on a white milky background.
- 7) *Tiga Negeri*: combines red, blue, brown, and purple motifs. Batik Tiga Negeri is the result of the acculturation of three cultures. This batik which originates from three different cultures is called Batik Tiga Negeri. Its red color comes from China, blue from

the Netherlands, and brown from Mataraman. Therefore, Batik Tiga Negeri is a living tradition in Lasem, not just a pattern or motif. In the process of making Batik Tiga Negeri, a single color cannot be produced in one place during the process. Due to differences in mineral content in water, artisans believe that each region has unique color specifications. In Chinese culture, Lasem is famous for the red color known as "chicken blood" or "*getih pitik*." Batik makers must go to Pekalongan to obtain the blue color. For the brown color, the batik must then be sent to Solo to get the "*sogan*" color, which is a distinctive feature of Mataraman culture. From there, various colors developed and became part of the history of Batik Tiga Negeri. The batik motifs in Tiga Negeri, each representing their local culture, were influenced by this migration process. It's not surprising that this type of batik is categorized as relatively expensive. However, don't be mistaken; the culture of Batik Tiga Negeri holds strong philosophical and historical value [10].



Figure 1. Lasem Batik with the characteristic colors of the Tiga Negeri
[Source: Setyorinihestingintyas.wordpress.com downloaded 25 September 2023]

According to Sanyoto in his book, *Batik Lasem: Motif dan Maknanya* (2013: 22), the distinctive red color of the Lasem batik distinguishes it from other batik colors. In Lasem, red chicken blood (white blood) is the name of red batik. Some people believe that Lasem's water contains certain minerals that give it its distinctive red color.

For Batik Lasem, coloring is crucial, which is why its naming can be associated with its color type or composition. The coloring process utilizes natural colors like Morinda and indigo, giving Batik Lasem an advantage over older variants, apart from its beautiful motifs that are unmatched by other batiks. "Merah Lasem," also known as "chicken blood red," is the famous red color of Lasem from the past. To this day, this unique red color is still specially produced using dye extracted from the roots of the *Morinda citrifolia* L. tree [7]. Furthermore, these colors hold specific meanings originating from China, such as:

- 1) White (*pai*): Symbolizes purity and old age.
- 2) Black (*hei*): Represents death and darkness.
- 3) Red (*hong*): Signifies wealth and joy.
- 4) Green (*lu*): Always combined with red as it symbolizes negative aspects of life.
- 5) Blue (*lan*): A symbol indicating higher elevation.

- 6) Yellow (*hua*): Symbolizes fame and progress.
- 7) Purple (*zi*): Represents patience and loyalty.



Figure 2. Lasem Batik with the characteristic Bang Biron color
[Source: Ageng Batik Surabaya, 25 September 2023]

Color Differentiation Habit: the use of special techniques to create patterns with different colors, resulting in captivating contrasts and beautifully adorning motifs in a harmonious manner [8].

b. Motifs

The Batik Lasem motifs, when viewed from various perspectives, are indeed highly diverse and intriguing. Batik Lasem motifs include lokcan, banji, seruni, lung-lungan (plants and vines), hong birds, nutmeg plants, kilin (a lion-like creature in Chinese mythology), and butterflies. They are incredibly diverse and fascinating to observe, and study, and even serve as attractions for art enthusiasts in general and batik lovers.

Apart from motifs influenced by China, Batik Lasem has three (three) original characteristics, according to Batik entrepreneur Sigit Witjaksono. According to Rika Irawati from Tribun Jateng, Rembang, Batik Lasem, coastal batik, has distinctive motifs. A Batik Lasem entrepreneur, Sigit Witjaksono, mentioned that there are three distinctive Lasem motifs, namely Latohan, Sekar Jagad, and Watu Pecah or Kricak. As explained by Sigit, “Watu Pecah or Kricak is a motif inspired by the Daendels road project,” while “Latohan is the fruit of a plant that grows along the seashore.” For the construction of the Anyer-Panarukan road, the people of Lasem had to cut rocks into small pieces [9].



Figure 3. Lasem "Kricak" batik motif

[Source: Ispurnomo, Pinterest.com downloaded 25 September 2023]



Figure 4. Fish and shrimp motifs on Lasem batik illustrate the geographical influence of Lasem which is located on the North Sea coast.

[Source: Pinterest.com downloaded 25 September 2023]

b.1. Tumpal

The tumpal pusung, or *pucuk rebung* motif on the edge of the fabric is another prominent characteristic of Batik Lasem. Between the 1800s and the early 1900s, the long headscarves and sarongs of coastal regions were typically adorned with tumpal, which is a motif of two rows of equilateral triangles facing each other. Lasem still utilizes these tumpal motifs, although, in Pekalongan and some other coastal batik centers, long headscarves and sarongs are often decorated with *dlorong* motifs, flowers, or bouquets. Lasem has even developed beautiful and diverse tumpal motifs, with one of the most famous being the tumpal *cepel sorot maenan* [14].



Figure 5. Tumpal Pusung motif on Lasem batik
[Source: Instagram Batik Lasem Sekar Mulyo, downloaded 25 September 2023]

b. 2. The edges are in the shape of a straight plane.

The top and bottom of Lasem fabric always have a straight plane approximately 3-4 cm wide and adorned with motifs of animals, plants, or flowers. Sometimes, this straight edge shape can also be found in Cirebon and Madura batik. The lower edges of other coastal batik are often dominated by lace-like edges.



Figure 6. BledakTumpal Motif of Sekar Jagad Batik Lasem
(Source: <https://rajabatiksekolah.com/product/batik-tulis-lasem-motif-bledak-tumpal-sekar-jagad/> downloaded 25 September 2023)

b. 3. Kobot

Kobot is a narrow edge portion on the edge of the fabric, usually connected to the body of the fabric. The Lasem batik's *kobot* measures 1-2 cm and is plain. In other coastal

batiks, such as Pekalongan, Batang, Juana, and even inland batik-like Solo, the *kobot* is wider, approximately 10 cm, and bears the same motif as the fabric.



Figure7. Kobot of the batik Lasem with dragon motif

(Source: <https://www.infobatik.com/peradaban-batik-lasem-di-indonesia/> downloaded 25 September 2023)

For centuries, Lasem batik has been influenced by Chinese and European cultures, reflected in batik designs that incorporate elements from both cultures. Animal motifs, flowers, and European decorative elements are sometimes used in Lasem batik designs, creating a unique style that combines different cultural elements.

Symmetrical Geometric Patterns: The symmetrical and structured geometric patterns in Lasem batik create a strong aesthetic impression in the design [10].

Conclusion

The journey of Lasem batik has been long and intricate, crafted with diligence and precision in the past. Each batik carries different meanings and motivations, depending on the individuals who create and wear them.

Lasem batik, like Madura, Pekalongan, and Cirebon batik, is renowned throughout Indonesia and even beyond its borders. Both its motifs and names are well-known. Prices vary widely, ranging from very affordable (IDR 25,000 per piece) to very expensive (over one million per piece).

In recent years, Lasem batik has gained popularity, but it remains relatively costly. The nominal value of batik is influenced by its quality. To this day, hand-drawn batik remains the only type with the highest quality compared to mass-produced batik cap and screen printing.

One of the distinctive features of Lasem batik is its unique red color derived from the roots of the morinda tree; this color cannot be replicated in batik produced outside Lasem. The *pusung* or *tumpal* motifs, as well as the straight-edged borders, are always present on Lasem's long fabrics and sarongs.

Furthermore, batik has evolved over time, with each era bringing a unique story to its development. Conversely, Lasem Batik has become one of the nation's treasures that has maintained its distinctiveness for a long time.

Several factors influence the relationship between Lasem Batik and the coastal regions, including its history, production methods, and unique motifs and characteristics:

Geographical Location: The city of Lasem, located on the northern coast of Central Java, Indonesia, is the home of Lasem Batik. It enjoys easy access to maritime trade due to its proximity to the coast. The history of Lasem Batik's development has been greatly influenced by its coastal connections, as the culture and batik motifs spread through trade.

Use of Blood Red Color: The strong blood-red color is one of the distinctive features of Lasem Batik. This color comes from the roots of the morinda tree, which grows specifically in the Lasem region. Coastal areas often have soil and climates conducive to the growth of natural dye plants like morinda, making this blood-red color highly characteristic of batik originating from coastal areas.

Motifs Inspired by Coastal Life: Some Lasem Batik motifs originate from coastal life. These batik motifs often depict the lives of fishermen, boats, or elements of the sea. These motifs reflect the close relationship between coastal communities and their environment.

Maritime Cultural Influence: Lasem has a history of maritime trade with many countries due to its coastal location. The designs and motifs of Lasem Batik show the cultural influence of the countries involved in this trade, such as China and India. These influences have resulted in a unique artistic wealth in batik.

Therefore, Lasem Batik and the coastal regions have a strong and mutually influential relationship. The use of natural colors in batik, motifs inspired by coastal life, and maritime cultural influences all contribute to the distinctive characteristics of Lasem Batik art.

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