

# Exploratory Research on the Myth of Batik Gentongan in Tanjung Bumi

Indah Purnama Sari<sup>1\*</sup>, Zaeni Miftah<sup>2</sup>

*Department of Economic Education, Universitas Indraprasta PGRI Jakarta, Indonesia*

*Department of Informatics Engineering STIKOM Cipta Karya Informatika Jakarta, Indonesia*

*\*Corresponding author. Email: yliu@nufe.edu.cn*

## ABSTRACT

*Batik Gentongan* was an ancient and endangered cultural heritage, only existed in Tanjung Bumi, Madura. This research analyzed the myth behind the making process of *batik Gentongan*, and how the myth colored people's life. The data was explored through an exploratory approach and collected by observations, interviews, and literature studies. The key informants from Tanjung Bumi community were selected by snowball method. The results showed that the manufacturing process of *batik Gentongan* was unique. It began with preparing the cloth and asking for the prayer of the cleric, followed by doing *batik* on the two sides of the cloth, and ended with the coloring process by repeatedly soaking it in a *gentong* (barrel) for six months. If there was a neighbor die, the coloring process must be stopped for seven days. If it was violated, coloring process was deemed to fail. This myth contributed in making the *batik* as the main source of income for the community. However, the number of *batik Gentongan* makers was shrinking so the government's intervention was needed to preserve it.

**Keywords:** *Folklore, Myth, Batik Gentongan*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia was rich with tradition, including local language, spirituality, art, and folklore as the first collective creative work (oral language, music, drama, choreography) [1]. In the explanation of the 2002 Copyright Act, folklore was defined as all traditional creations created by the community, both individuals and groups, that showed a social and cultural identity that was undervalued that had been inherited from generation to generation. Examples of folklore include folk songs, folk poetry, traditional dance, traditional games, and art crafts. In fact, batik can be categorized as one of them.

Batik has been used, produced and found all over Indonesia and mostly associated with Indonesian society as its origin [2]. Batik was believed to have existed since the Majapahit era and flourished at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Like other islands in Indonesia, Madura was also a batik producer. The Madurese batik was said to have been first introduced by the Duke of Sumenep, Arya Wiraraja, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Arya Wiraraja was a close companion of Raden Wijaya, the founder of Majapahit Kingdom. Madurese batik also has a historical closeness with

Yogyakarta batik due to close relationship between the kings of Mataram with royal nobility of Madura. For example, the kingdom of Bangkalan in the days of King Cakraningrat I was the inheritance of the Mataram Sultanate led by Sultan Agung.

Madura has a role in the development of Indonesian cultural history, including the development and preservation of written batik (*batik tulis*). Madurese batik was classified as coastal batik which was characterized by marine motifs such as scales of fish, shells, tendrils of seaweed, waves, ships, birds, and others. In contrast to Yogyakarta batik, Madurese batik dares to explore strong colors like red, orange, green, yellow, and blue. The strokes expressively describe the Madureses' temperament: firm, straightforward, hard-working, open, and brave. However, motifs from the Javanese mainland also appear in Madurese batik, considering that in the past the island was fell within the jurisdiction of ancient Javanese kingdoms; for example, the motif of "*Reng-perreng*" (bamboo tree), "*Geje se Kerreng*" (the elephant strong), "*Sekar Jagat*" (universe flower), and others. The other infamous motifs include "*koceng renduh*" (cats curled up), "*gejhe se-kerreng*" (fierce elephants), "*get toget*" (larva), "*Carcena*" (Chinese girlfriend plants), "*tase malaya*" (Malacca sea), and so on.

The alluring motifs and colors of batik were apparently made by women who inherited the expertise from generation to generation. Madurese batik was very charming, describing a straightforward and free personality, since it was made in unit quantities with traditional equipment.

In every district on Madura Island, batik was produced. The infamous center of its traditional written batik was Tanjung Bumi Subdistrict, Bangkalan Regency. The majority of the men of Tanjung Bumi worked as fishermen who sail between islands and even abroad, while the women generally worked as batik artisans.

In ancient times, it took months or even a year for processing a piece of batik. It was due to the motifs that were sophisticated and detailed, yet smooth at the same time. In the past women made batik to spend their time waiting for their husbands who sailed to other islands such as Kalimantan and Sulawesi. For these women, waiting for the return of their husband was the longest and most tense moment. They were always anxious about whether the husband can return home safely and can bring money to support their household. The anxiety was normal for them, considering that seafarer husbands always have to be ready for ferocious waves that can come any time whenever the weather was unfriendly. The seafarers' days were in waves, covered in wind. To reduce anxiety, the wives were learning and making batik. However, there was no literature that informed us when exactly they began making batik.

The Tanjung Bumi batik was well-known in Indonesia and abroad, although the echo was not as loud as Pekalongan batik and Trusmi Cirebon batik. One of the masterpieces of Tanjung Bumi batik was batik Gentongan. Batik Gentongan was not ordinary batik. The economic value of batik Gentongan was very high due to the complexity of the process, beauty, and quality. The price for a piece of batik can reach ten million rupiahs.

The process of making batik Gentongan took a long time (6–12 months), and there were myths that must not be violated. The myths surrounding the making has been persisting to this day and coloring the socio-economic life of Tanjung Bumi community. At the same time, batik Gentongan was also threatened with extinction. Apart from only being in Tanjung Bumi Subdistrict, there were very few numbers of batik Gentongan artisans. Not all batik artisans can afford and pursue batik Gentongan. Generally, they tended to produce ordinary batik. This study attempts to analyze the myths behind the process of making batik Gentongan, and how they influenced the socio-economic life of the community.

## 2. METHOD

This research used exploratory research approach. Exploratory research was used to investigate a problem which was not clearly defined. It used primary qualitative data. The primary data was collected directly from the research subjects, both as a group and an individual. The study was specifically carried out to explore a certain problem which requires an in-depth investigation. The data was collected through observations, interviews, and literature studies.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Batik Gentongan

Batik Gentongan was unique, for it was found only in Madura. The batik was called “gentongan” (Javanese “*gentong*” means barrel) because it was manufactured using a barrel for soaking the cloth. The barrel was planted in the ground and was used repeatedly for countless times in a long period.

The process of making batik Gentongan was began with the immersion of cloth (*mori*) using oil (*camplong*) and charcoal. Subsequently, a motif was drawn on the both sides of the cloth (*arengreng*). The next process was filling in the motives (*esse ngesse'en*). It was followed by coloring process. The coloring process was carried out by covering certain part of the motif with melted wax (*malam*). The covered parts were those the artisan intended not to be colored. The cloth was then being colored with a brush (*nyolet*).

The next stage was coloring. It was done by immersing the cloth into a barrel containing dye for a long time. Barrels containing water and coloring agent were stored in a closed light-tight room. One barrel can hold several pieces of cloths at once. Batik artisan will dip the cloth in the soaking water for 24 hours. A cloth that has been soaked was rinsed and hung to allow the water to drip until it dry, then soaked again. The process was repeated every day for six months. Some even have carried out the process for a year. By doing so, the batik will has a durable color, lasting even for decades.

Batik Gentongan has a longer and brighter color than ordinary batik, even though the fabric was fragile and smelled like spices due to soaking process. How long the cloth was soaked in the barrel will determine the quality of the desired color. Batik Gentongan has a distinctive color such as indigo blue (the Madurese call it “*biru dongker*”) and red. The red coloring agent can be taken from *noni* skin, green from *mundu* skin mixed with alum, while blue from *tarom* leaves. The coloring with natural ingredients was similar to the coloring method of batik in Cirebon [3].

Color density was achieved from the length of time spent in soaking stage. After obtaining the desired color, a stripping process was carried out by shedding and scraping the layer of wax with boiling water until the cloth was clean. It was then aerated until it dry.



**Figure 1.** Barrel (*Gentong*) for Soaking the Cloth

In this time consuming process of making batik in Tanjung Bumi, the coloring process using barrel is the most important and difficult one. Perseverance,

thoroughness, and expertise in concocting natural dyes were needed.

### **3.2. Myth Behind Batik Gentongan**

Myths are practices and procedures defined by pre-shipping rational concepts to legitimate their actions and resources, but which are not supported by evidence [4]. Myths have various functions in social life, including for developing meaningful symbols and providing an explanation about environmental phenomena. They can also serve as the most effective educational means to strengthen and instill cultural values, social norms and beliefs, as a guide for the community to foster social solidarity, as a part of social identity that differentiates one community from another, as well as a means to instill and reinforce certain cultural values, thoughts, and knowledge, and to stimulate the development of creativity. In the Madurese folklore, it was said that batik Gentongan was actually not worn as clothing but as a wrap around a sling to store precious or sacred objects. Moreover, batik Gentongan was also considered an inherited heirloom. The function was inseparable from the old and sophisticated process of its production.

As a valuable object itself, batik was treated like a gold jewelry. It will be handed over or passed on from a mother to her children as a sign of mother's love. Especially for those who have daughters, the batik will be given when their daughters are about to settle down. Batik Gentongan was a source of their wealth and pride; no wonder they made it wholeheartedly. However, along the course of time, the value of the batik has shifted too.

Batik Gentongan was surrounded by myths. First, the people of Tanjung Bumi believed that the process of production must be preceded by certain ritual as a way to pray to God for the success of the production process. The ritual involved local religious leaders. The same ritual was also carried out by farmers before starting the planting process.

Second, if a neighbor died, the coloring process must be stopped for seven days. They believed that if a neighbor dies, the coloring process must not be continued; otherwise, it would fail and not be able to produce the expected result. But the myth was not applicable only on the coloring process; all other stages of making batik were affected to. This myth was then spread among artisans of other types of batik too, including written batik (*batik tulis*). It must be halt for seven days, since in the Muslim Madurese custom, if someone dies, their neighbors will flock to the house of the deceased neighbor to help preparing *tahlilan* (prayer of death) which needs to be carried out for seven days consecutively.

Third, Madurese batik was infamous for its variety of patterns accompanied by white dots look like salt. It was not coincidence that the Island's epithet was "salt island". Madurese batik was also unique in terms of its use of colors. Each color has its own meaning and philosophy that largely related to Madurese myths and beliefs.

Green, connoted as leaf color, symbolizes fertility. The meaning dated back to the reign of Majapahit in Madura. Green was also taken from the development of Islam in Madura. Blue symbolizes vast ocean. It was usually

interpreted as the natural color of the archipelago. It was perceived by the Madurese as a wide stretch of sea surrounding Madura Island.

Red symbolizes courage. It also represents the character of Madureses who are firm and strong when facing problems in life. Yellow symbolizes fertile agricultural land. For the Madureses, yellow means that their land is fertile enough for agricultural uses.

In addition to colors, motifs and patterns found in Madurese batik have different meanings depending on the characteristics of their respective regions. Usually, the style of Madurese batik follows the character of its community tales.

Fourth, batik coloring, especially for batik gentongan, was only available in four villages of Tanjung Bumi. It was even believed that if a coloring process was carried out in another area, it would not work. The four villages were Telaga Biru, Tanjung Bumi, Paseseh, and Macajah Village. The Tanjung Bumi Subdistrict Head, in an interview, recalled that other sub-districts had tried to do the coloring but the results were unsatisfactory, not as good as the coloring in the four villages.

It is necessary to do more in-depth research on whether the success of batik coloring is influenced by the levels of lime contained in groundwater. The Tanjung Bumi community believed that the groundwater in there had a high level of lime. It helped the coloring process so that the results were so distinct and cannot be copied elsewhere.

### **3.3. Effect of the Myth on Community Social Life**

Making batik was the daily routine of Tanjung Bumi community, especially among its women. Most of them doing batik without the help of patterns apparatus. This ability was passed down through generations, so the design resided in the mind of these women. There was also a growing myth that every woman who moved to Tanjung Bumi will eventually be able to make batik. More than a myth, most women from other region who were married to a Tanjung Bumi man and settled there would eventually making batik, like their native counterparts.

The Tanjung Bumi women tended to invest their time in making batik; it helped them to maintain positive mind. Making batik activities was usually carried out together on the terrace of one's house. Some also made their batik on the porch of their own house while interacting with neighbors who were also making batik. It was common to their houses to have no fence. If making batik was carried out at night, they often did it together in one house while watching television. It can be said that the social life of these women was good. Although making batik requires concentration and precision, it can be done by these women in a busy and interactive atmosphere.

Tolerance and mutual cooperation were also evidently observed in the social life of Tanjung Bumi people. If someone died, their neighbors will help the family to get through the misfortune. Their presence will make the house of the deceased look like preparing for a celebration. The help will last for a week. Everyone will leave their batik making in order to giving hand, ignoring any order,

even ones that must be finished immediately. The death of a neighbor was arguably the most acceptable and understandable reason for collectors, traders, and buyers even though they have been harmed by the delay. It showed that empathy, tolerance, and mutual cooperation were highly upheld by the people of Tanjung Bumi, exceeding the principle of “professionalism” demanding the completion of batik orders on time.

From the discussion above, it was apparent that the myth connecting the batik making and the death of a neighbor has strengthened empathy and tolerance in the community’s social relations. Thus, this myth has a positive impact on social life, as happened in the Baduy tribe, where the myth about the creation of the universe made them tolerant [5]. But, it also has a negative economic impact, because the production was getting longer and the economic cycle of batik being disturbed. In addition, delaying the completion of batik order unilaterally shows that the production process has not been professional.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The myth surrounding Madurese batik, especially batik Gentongan, has colored the social and economic life of the community. However, the batik tradition was shrinking due to the decreasing number of batik artisans. The government needs to help the community to strive for preserving batik Gentongan. The conclusion of this research was in line with Sulaiman et al. [6] that the batik tradition lacked of regeneration of batik artisans; therefore, a development management was needed to empower the younger generation of batik artisans so that they can preserve their cultural heritage.

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