

Mbok Semok as Visual Communication Media And Environmental Conservation in Indonesia

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Abstract

Local wisdom – based social approach is one of conservative ways to prevent environmental damage caused by community's lack of understanding in environmental management. Batik as a cultural artifact is flexible and dynamic as media to express and as a local wisdom symbolization that Indonesian people are able to communicate visually and effectively. Girilayu as a batik center in the mountainous area of Karanganyar regency, Central Java, Indonesia is chosen as this research location since batik artists in this area are capable in visualizing community's local wisdom in contemporary batik motif, i.e. *mbok semok*. This study aims at (i) outlining the concept of communication and environmental conservation media through *Mbok Semok* batik motif, (ii) elaborating philosophical role of *Mbok Semok* batik motif functions as communication and environmental conservation media by batik artists in Girilayu, and (iii) analyzing the role of *Mbok Semok* batik motif as effective communication and environmental conservation media in Girilayu. In addition, the method used in this research is visual cultural study with ethnographic approach. Moreover, research analysis is enriched with referential documentation resulting in the finding that visual language in *Mbok Semok* batik motif can communicate Girilayu community's moral value in preserving the environment through the philosophical meanings of its motifs to their younger generation and visitors of this batik center. Visual communication on batik is an effective medium for community local wisdom – based environmental conservation in Indonesia.

Keywords: batik; Girilayu; *Mbok Semok*; environmental conservation; visual communication

1. Introduction

1.1 Environmental Conservation And Visual Communication Issue

Issues on nature and environmental damage seem now to sink down the ocean of social media which mostly prioritizes social, economic, political, security, health and humanitarian problems. The speed of technology and the flow of information are currently not completed with human awareness to maintain and care for their surrounding environment. Human negligence has occurred beyond tolerance threshold. This human destructive behavior affects on the environment where they live to be damaged, slowly destroyed and neglected. Meanwhile, conservation becomes a paradoxical and polar discourse which oppose to exploitation. In addition, the focus of most people is currently still on viral, trendy, popular, fun and momentarily beneficial stuffs (Keraf, 2010: 47-50). On the other hand, minority groups have a high awareness to maintain the environment viable and the life cycle takes place naturally, on a small scale with the utmost effort; since maintaining natural virginity extensively is now impossible. There are only 3% of the total world populations who join and form environmental groups in the world until March 2019 according to data of United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the United Nations agency specializing in dealing with environmental issues. At least it needs 30% or ten times of the current amount to achieve ideal total population of the world that may give a real contribution to nature preservation; and all people born on earth and consume oxygen for breath for free should care the earth and environment. Environmental ethics need to be consistently applied and echoed in various discourses and forums (Ulum, 2017: 11-19). Moreover, conservative movement of philanthropists and activist groups in the world has been carried out especially by people who have natural forest areas with large areas, such as South Africa, Brazil and Madagascar (Hewson, 2019: 25-33; Sellers, 2019: 43-51).

Many still narrowly understand the term 'environment' as a place to live around their house. Here, in this topic, it is interpreted globally the mother earth where human being and other living creatures stand every day with the open air sky shelter, mountains, forests, and the vast ocean. The role and awareness of environmental conservation should begin from such smallest scope as family and limited small groups as early as possible, especially started in children. Changes and times keeps continuing to urge to immediately begin a grand and permanent movement for the environment (Weber, 2009: 215-221). Time bombs due to environmental damage exploded one by one in several parts of Indonesia in the form of disasters, such as floods, landslides and forest fires. This disasters series keeps occurring with the same problems, i.e. human indifference to the environment and it seems that there is no reflection and evaluation. In fact, the government and authorities have issued various regulations and policies to protect the environment. However, there are still some factors related to the Indonesian people's conservative and low attitude to protect the surrounding environment and nature. In addition, Indonesia is such a comfortable place to live that it causes the people in Indonesia to be careless and ignorant to preserve the environment. There are many things causing this ignorant attitude. One of them is there is still an obstacle in the way people communicate each other or between communities. Unidirectional communication still occurs which cause people's sensitivity to signals, signs, and metaphors decreases. Community initiatives to share the aesthetics of life with nature become numb. Invitation and request to preserve the environment are often considered to be the blowing wind. It is just the formalities from the leader to the people or like parents to their children. Massive and pure awareness of the community to prioritize the beauty and the harmony of the environment usually wait until there is a ceremonial command of any viral event for imaging (rating purpose). Commodification for economic and entertainment purposes has diverted the feeling to non-human things. The concept of green must be repackaged to be easily understood and applied by the community in every aspect of everyday life (Blewitt, 2013).

Communication is an activity of interaction and connection between living things on earth. There are a variety of forms and ways of interaction between living things or living creatures. Humans have mind that makes them able to make various ways to exchange information. In addition, two directional interaction is one must condition which allow a message to be delivered and received by the addressee. The message must have carrying capacity for the sender and attractiveness for the recipient (Caropeboka, 2017: 1-19). The era of industrial revolution 4.0 and post modernism today have ushered human civilization to communicate visually with abundant media. Visualization makes it easier to receive and convey information, messages, signals, symbols and signs; Thus, it's not only in the form of electromagnetic wave vibrations. The power of images is universal and provocative which can influence the humans' perceptions and emotions to act (Liliwari, 2011: 630-636; Sukendar, 2017: 1-11). Social media brings the heyday of visual communication by summarizing a good composition between writing, sound, and images. However, the majority of media visualization is not balance in publishing news. Besides, various interests of capitalism especially cultural and economic politics are mostly hidden behind the narrative. Community access to find out about environmental damage as a subject material for evaluating attitudes and education has greatly reduced. The aesthetic panorama of natural beauty in hyperreality conditions is deliberately processed to lead people's curiosity imagination to travel and explore and more precisely to conduct physical exploitation (Barker, 2000). At last, it is time to mobilize all the potential power of visual communication as a hyperaggressive conservation media and green concept propaganda in Indonesia and international world to preserve the earth.

1.2 Tradition Artifacts as Visual Communication Media

Common people understand visual communication media in the form of films, advertisements, videos and posters. This definition is formed by the academic realm which educates students with learning categorization and curriculum. In reality, visual communication media are diverse and are not always concerning modern innovation but can also adopt local wisdom elements containing noble values and norms (Ulum, 2017: 19-20). Regeneration occurs in the process of inheriting the noble values of the society, and it requires the right communication media. In addition, speech or oral teaching is actually not enough to support this learning function. Then, it needs to be equipped with literal and visual documentation. Literature requires a gradual and layered understanding as well as a series of basic insights before entering the realm of interpretations and assumptions. In contrast, the visual is easier to digest because most human primitive brains tend to be the same in translating basic forms. Ceramic or earthenware models which bulge in its lower body is such a case showing similarity in form in the whole world, whereas there was no communication tool in the past that preached the products of other peoples' cultures. This similarity in visuality of perception is (probably) caused and influenced by the subconscious memory of human psychology when they are still young (baby) during suckling positions as they see the shape and silhouette of their mother's cheeks (Damajanti, 2006). Accordingly, visual communication in the same sense can be called visual language. It is unnecessary to doubt

the effectiveness of visual language function in translating messages since it is able to complete the blank spaces of spoken and written languages which are limited (Tabrani, 2012: 119-125).

The form of the tradition visual language can be seen in the artifacts produced by the imagination process of the genius local people in their era, i.e. *batik*, *wayang beber* (wayang art developed in Majapahit Kingdom and Pre-Islam era), ornaments on ancient manuscripts, tradition ornaments applied to buildings, clothing, living equipment, and ceremonial equipment. Batik becomes a work of *wastra nusantara* (Indonesian traditional cloth) which is rich in symbols (codes) and philosophical meanings. The process of *batik* visualization is contemplative accompanied by prayer and apprehensive (fasting) practices done by women armed with *canting* (special tool to apply wax on cloth to create *batik*) causing invisible energy to emanate in the form of the plenary beauty of a richly meaningful motif. In addition, energy from batik cloth is suggestive. There is a role of trust and knowledge affecting the impact which arises as batik is functioned to be a medium rather than just a clothing or a piece of cloth. In the past, *batik* was manifested as a medium to deliver prayer. Each cloth acted as a positive energy conductor. Javanese, when they were sick, especially children, will be enveloped in *batik* cloth or *jarik* (long batik cloth especially used as women clothing) which was used when the mother gave birth to them, since they believed that there was still the former amniotic water (*kawah* in Javanese) left and placenta's blood (*ari-ari* in Javanese) which seeped in the cloth fabric pores.

Kakang kawah adi ari-ari which means older brother amniotic (water) and younger brother placenta in Javanese's belief are siblings when they were born in the world, as a message that humans do not live alone in the world, instead they have relatives or friends accompanying them. Usually the mother will cover the child or grandmother will blanket her grandson, even when they themselves are sick, the Javanese will pray with an opening sentence more or less saying "*kakang kawah adi ari-ari kancanono (mentioning the name of the sick) tekan seger warase*" which means older brother amniotic water younger sister the placenta please accompany ... (name of the sick person) until the sick person is healthy; then the cloth is covered. Scientifically, it can be explained however. When a person is sick, he will emit body heat (fever) which requires media to balance body temperature or absorb heat such as compressing fever through the forehead. The fiber of old (*lawas - Javanese*) batik cloth which is repeatedly washed will change to become supple and cold. Moreover, the majority of traditional batik cloth uses cotton fabric with 100% cotton fiber composition. Thus, it naturally creates a comfortable and cool effect when it's in contact with (human) skin (Elliot, 2004).

Besides as the "healing" power for those who believe it, *batik* begins to be used as a medium of visual communication to symbolically and philosophically convey messages. The convention is through the form of patterns and special motifs on *batik* as various forms of pieces, colors, and types of materials used in clothing or fashion. Signs, symbols and signals are seen in all shapes. Like fashion, *batik* can show social class, identity and statement for others about the wearer in a fast-paced temporary space (Pahlevi, 2018: 71-76; Barnard, 2007: 39-46). The process of visualization and the way *batik* conveys the message are interesting to describe. *Wastra (traditional art cloth)* as a result of initiative, taste, and creativity process aesthetically fuse and combined with hot wax and *canting* dances is a competent artifacts for conservative communication media about the environment and nature. It is the right time to apply particularly as people forget and ignore the value of local wisdom and are less sensitive to read the signs of tradition. *Batik* maker in Girilayu Village in Karanganyar Central Java has seemed to be able to represent the conservative concept through *Mbok Semok batik* motif. The philosophical meaning and the long journey behind the making process show a form of visual communication by adapting the local wisdom of the community.

2. Method

This is a qualitative research using a visual ethnographic approach. In addition, the data were obtained by conducting direct observations of people's daily lives and the results of interviews with the community's objective point of view without any intervention (Pink, 2004: 84-99). Supporting documentation regarding *batik* maker's activity in Girilayu is used as a complement to the analysis. Girilayu location was selected based on the consideration that it is as a place with characters and criteria which could be used to represent the research topic without leading to a case study. The focus of the research emphasizes the realization process of a communication carried out by *batik* makers in Girilayu in visualizing *Mbok Semok batik* motif. The term 'Indonesia' in the title is as a location pointer of Girilayu region, considering the results of this study can be used as an ethnographic representation of local wisdom value and as a source of visual communication manifested in traditional artifact products in international discussions. The analysis derived from the context of visual culture with a communication perspective questions between components which form a correlation by utilizing symbols and signs with philosophical depth. The results of the study present different views about a

formation of communication. *Batik* motif is able to represent the community's view of life and as representation media for conservation purposes (Elkins, 2010: 57-66).

3. Result and discussion



Figure 1. *Mbok Semok Batik Motif* created by *batik* makers in Girilayu

Cultural change has influenced various aspects including the way people convey messages, existence, and resistance to local wisdom values. The community's mindset and attitudes tend to change and many conflicts occur in several obligatory things in the social norms, particularly because there are still leaders who are appointed or communally agreed to indirectly supervise and take control (normatively). Supervision is conducted by patronizing or example patterns to create comfortable feeling in the community and to avoid intimidation nuance. Open arenas and freedom to speak (give opinion) are supported by a series of information facilities which give opportunities and strength to the community to communicate each other without limits. Thus, supervision is still necessary to evaluate rather than to give sanction.

The geographical location and conditions have actually affected the speed and the way people treat the change in Girilayu. The village is located in the chilly and cool mountainous region, in the slope of Mount Lawu, 31 km east of Surakarta (Solo) city. This condition significantly leads to a slow and smooth work rhythm. A contemplative atmosphere is obviously created. History proves that the area is comfortable for *tafakur* (reflective meditation). Prince Samber Nyawa or KGPAA Mangkunegara I got *wangsit* (divine inspiration) when he isolated himself for meditation during their guerrilla journey (pre Treaty of Salatiga) from Nglaroh (now Wonogiri). The supernatural voice ordered him to make the place for retreat (meditation) and for final rest (graveyard) for himself and all of his descendants, which were then named Astana Mangadeg (KGPAA Mangkunegara I, II, and III), and Astana Girilayu located on the hill across the west (tombs of KGPAA Mangkunegara IV, V, VII, and VIII). Sometime after receiving *wangsit*, the war was won by Prince Samber Nyawa's forces, and one of the agreement contents made was Matesih region (now the administrative sub-district of Girilayu Village) became Mangkunegaran municipality. The place where the tomb was built is named Girilayu which is derived from the Javanese term '*giri*' which means mountain or can be interpreted as a high (grand) place, while '*layu*' means finish, in another sense it is interpreted as '*layon*' which means screen closure or death; so Girilayu means the last resting place. The etymological meaning of the word '*giri*' and '*layu*' indirectly refers to a calm and contemplative atmosphere. The population living in Girilayu region is mostly the descendants of the caretakers of Astana Mangadeg and Girilayu, as well as Astana Giribangun cemetery (inaugurated in 1976).

Girilayu region which is fertile becomes a prime location for natural tourism and has excellent potential in agricultural sector mainly for vegetable and fruit. These commodities support and shape the dynamic economy of Girilayu community. They fill their leisure time by making *batik* which is still run as a tradition until now. *Batik* besides being a medium of contemplation and education for Girilayu community, it is also an effective verbal and symbolical communication tool. The form of interactive conversation is built between family members, especially between mothers (women *batik* makers) and children during making *batik*. The child sitting next to the mother pays attention to the *canting* which wriggle and forms a richly meaningful motif. The mother will start the conversation, talk about many things which contain advice, stories, and teachings that are delivered in a naturally flowing way while still keeping her eyes fixed on the sheets of *mori* (cotton cloth to make *batik*) cloth. Dialogue and monologue are built through *batik* activities and opportunities to inherit meaning and concepts through interactions are done informally and effectively. Accordingly, there are a few things achieved through this communication model, such as the way the batik makers responds to the rapid changes in this era. They use *batik* to convey symbols and messages to remain wise and to maintain environmental harmony. One of the efforts is through *Mbok Semok* motif made by *batik* women in Girilayu.

Meanwhile, environmental and nature conditions around Girilayu gradually changes. Green open land, lush trees, and cool air have turned into sturdy buildings at several points. Consequently, landslide threat becomes a concern when rainy season comes since Girilayu is located on a steep mountain slope. Based on the results of geographical identification in Girilayu region, it reveals that the number of species and types of plants which grow as a biodiversity wealth in Girilayu starts to decline. Commodification of the area as a tourist location certainly sometimes does not take pay high consideration to biodiversity sustainability. *Batik* women's restlessness and worry seeing this phenomenon have accumulated through *Mbok Semok*. Some of the symbols displayed in the *batik* motifs include the stylation of female *batik* woman with tendrils as a double message conveying that *batik* is like a natural ecosystem which must be preserved and human life which coexists with nature should preserve and carefully treat the nature as a legacy for the future generation. The white motif of Tri Dharma monument is a symbol of the nobility of Tri Dharma teachings as an inheritance from KGPAA Mangkunegara I which contains advice and life principles to become human beings who are able to behave or take the right and appropriate actions for mutual welfare (*mulat sarira hangrasa wani*), to feel that they also possess it so that they have awareness to maintain and conserve (*rumors through handarbeni*), and finally to have a high awareness to protect and preserve (*wajib melu hangrungkepi*). The last sentence from the teachings of Tri Dharma is in accordance with the concept of sustainability and conservation related to the tradition of making *batik* in Girilayu as well as to the nature wealth as a source of life for the local community.

4. Conclusion

Tradition communities respond cultural changes and technological advances by the production of symbols through activities and artifacts. Most tradition communities still live and interact directly with nature and the environment. Damage and change towards the degradation of the environment and the nature are more quickly felt by people living in rural and mountainous areas. In fact, the majority of exploitation activities is not resulted by the actions of people living in the area. Nevertheless, they must bear the impact of the damage. Girilayu as a region possessing a combination of traditions and good nature conditions begins to be affected by the effects of cultural change and ways of communication. *Batik* becomes media of communication of Girilayu community through symbolic and signal abstractions on *batik* motives. The character of eastern society especially Indonesia cannot be frontal in conveying messages and criticism. Accordingly, traditional methods through community's local wisdom are effective enough as a support system for solutions to various problems, especially problems related to nature conservation which has a synergy and strong correlation with the continuity of tradition in the community. At last, it can be stated that tradition is an abstraction of human reactions to communicate with the nature and the environment.

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