

THE VISUAL ORNAMENTS OF THE RIFA'İYAH PELO ATI BATIK AS A MODE OF ISLAMIC PROSELYTISM

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Abstract

Batik is a traditional cloth decoration technique. In 2009, UNESCO recognized Batik as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity from Indonesia. In recent times, batik has started declining towards being a lost art, much of which the collective responsibility of the Indonesian nation.

Batik features a variety of visual ornaments containing life sayings and messages embedded by its designers for their audiences. However, many of such cyphers are yet to be decoded. Decrypting the embedded messages left by elders in the visual ornaments of classic batik motifs is a worthwhile endeavour and manifestation of the Indonesian nation's effort to preserve batik. Among batik visual ornaments laden with philosophical meanings is the Pelo Ati batik of the Rifa'iyahs. The visual ornament incorporates the teachings of Sheikh Ahmad Rifa'i's brand of tasawwuf, wherein man may be considered as virtuous or unvirtuous by his heart.

This study is limited to the Pelo Ati visual ornament of the Rifa'iyah batik. Future studies shall focus on the visual ornaments of other batik cloths. The limit is imposed in order to preserve and socialise the meanings of the visual ornaments of batiks found in the Indonesian Archipelago. In addition, a number of Indonesians are still ill-informed of the implicit messages on batik cloths. This study employs ethnographic methods accompanied by a literature review on the history of the Rifa'iyah community in Kalipucang-Batang, its batik, and its culture. This study also uses in-depth interviews with batik experts, Rifa'iyah Batik experts, and Rifa'iyah religious figures. For a period of time, residence is taken within the Rifa'iyah community in Kalipucang-Batang.

Keywords: batik, meaning, philosophy, Rifa'iyah, Islam

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional Indonesian handicrafts are dominated by motifs and visual ornaments of implicit philosophical meanings conveyed by their designers. Batik is a well-known Indonesian traditional handicraft.

Batik is a traditional cloth decoration technique. In 2009, UNESCO recognized Batik as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Indonesia should be right to feel proud of the recognition.

The batik cloth is an Indonesian cultural heritage with expresses ties between its designers and users. Depending on its motif and visual ornaments, designers of batik cloths convey unique messages to their audiences. Indeed, there are still batik visual ornaments whose implied meanings are still under dispute. As such, it is appealing to study the implied messages in the motifs and visual ornaments of classic batik designs.

Among batik visual ornaments laden with philosophical meanings is the Pelo Ati batik of the Rifa'iyahs. The Rifa'iyah is an Islamic order who follows the teachings of Sheikh Ahmad Rifa'i, founder of the Kalisalak Pesantren (Islamic boarding school), in Limpung Batang. In 2004, he was inducted as National Hero of Indonesia by former president Susilo Bambang Yudoyono by virtue of the Presidential Decree No. 089/TK/2004. The Pelo Ati visual ornament incorporates the teachings of Sheikh Ahmad Rifa'i's brand of tasawwuf, wherein man may be considered as virtuous or unvirtuous by his heart.

Batik-making among the Rifa'iyahs has been in decline in recent years. The reason for such decline can be attributed to the Rifa'iyahs' ignorance on the importance of cultural preservation as well as lack of internal and external support. It is imperative to preserve cultural heritage from being forgotten by time. It is also an imperative to socialise alternative modes to express life lessons. Cultural heritage often uses pictures to convey its messages to its audience.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH

The followers of Sheikh Ahmad Rifa'i inherit a batik design called Batik Rifa'iyah. The Rifa'iyah Batik, the patterns and motifs of which are influenced by a belief system, is a coastal batik from Pekalongan – named after its designers, the Rifa'iyahs. The peoples of Kalipucang Wetan believe that the visual ornaments of the batik are an heirloom since time immemorial (Soekma Yeni Astuti, 2006, 106).

"Sacred symbols then connect certain ontologies and cosmologies with a set of aesthetics and morality". (Clifford Geertz, 1992, 51)

"In essence, symbolic shapes create meanings. It is thus important to understand the relationship between the form's elements. In a visual artwork, for instance, the forms and colours are the symbols whereas the object being studied is a reference towards such symbols." (Nanang Rizali, 2014, 41)

According to Rifa'iyah Batik expert, Miftakhutin (2012), or intimately known as Mbak Utin, the batik consists of 24 visual ornaments, six of which are no longer produced due to design complexities or lost. The rest of the motifs, however, are still produced. The original producers of the batik itself are unknown as the current producers only produce those which were taught by their elders. Thus, current designs copy inherited motifs. It goes without saying that the philosophical meanings are lost as well. However, the meanings of the Pelo Ati visual ornament are still traceable.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study is limited to the Pelo Ati visual ornament of the Rifa'iyah batik. Future studies shall focus on the visual ornaments of other batik cloths. The limit is imposed in order to preserve and socialise the meanings of the visual ornaments of batiks found in the Indonesian Archipelago. In addition, a number of Indonesians are still ill-informed of the implicit messages on batik cloths. This study employs ethnographic methods accompanied by a literature review on the history of the Rifa'iyah community in Kalipucang-Batang, its batik, and its culture. This study also uses in-depth interviews with batik experts, Rifa'iyah Batik experts, and Rifa'iyah religious figures. For a period of time, residence is taken within the Rifa'iyah community in Kalipucang-Batang.

4. VISUAL ORNAMENTS OF THE PELO ATI BATIK

According to Miftakhutin, the meanings of the visual ornaments of the Pelo Ati batik are partially understood.

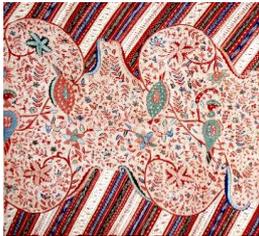
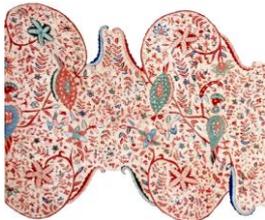
The visual ornament of the Pelo Ati batik consists of the following elements (Soekma Yeni Astuti, 2006, 165-166):

- The primary element of the Pelo Ati motif is bird-like shapes.
- The bird-like shapes resemble chickens based on the shapes of their bodies and comb. Birds are only depicted to their heads only since the Rifa'iyah people of Kalipucang Wetan believes that Islam

prohibits whole depictions of living beings.

- The name Pelo Ati is derived from the bird's liver located in its centre.
- The whole body is filled by dots of lighter-colour than that of the outline of the body. The colour of the bird is red, or colloquially called bang-bangan. The tail spans three-quarter length of the body.
- The overall colour of the Pelo Ati motif is white with tanahhan (filler motifs) at the sides of the liris (lines). The middle of the white background is sometimes filled with materos (small wavy fillers).
- The Pelo Ati motif is populated by flowers and leaves.
- The Pelo Ati motif is placed above the Liris motif to form a quasi-background of the Pelo Ati motif.

Table 1. Matrix of the Visual Ornaments of the Rifa'iyah Pelo Ati Batik

VISUAL ORNAMENTS OF THE RIFA'YAH PELO ATI BATIK	
	
Body of Cloth	
Body: 	Primary motif, body: 

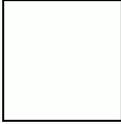
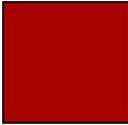
<p>Primary motif, body: Ayam Ati (Chicken Heart) Motif</p> 		<p>Primary motif, body: Ayam Pelo (Chicken Liver) Motif</p> 			
<p>Primary motif, body: Plants</p> 	<p>Sunflower Motif</p> 	<p>Cloverleaf Motif</p> 	<p>Leaf Tendril Motif</p> 		
<p>Floral motif filling the body, following primary motifs:</p>					
<p>Flower Motif 1:</p> 	<p>Flower Motif 2:</p> 	<p>Flower Motif 3:</p> 	<p>Leaf Motif 1:</p> 	<p>Leaf Motif 2:</p> 	<p>Leaf Motif 3:</p> 
<p>Tanahan of the Body</p>					
<p>Primary Tanah motif, body: Materos Satrio Motif</p> 					
<p>Tanahan of the Body</p> 					
<p>Head of Cloth</p>					

<p>Head:</p> 		
<p>Tumpal (triangles):</p> 		
<p>Body of tumpal (triangles)</p> 	<p>Margin of tumpal (triangles):</p> 	
<p>Tanahan of the head:</p> 	<p>Bunga Mekar (Blooming Flower) Motif:</p> 	<p>Tutul Pitu (Seven Dots) Motif:</p> 
<p>Papan:</p> 		
<p>Margin of Cloth:</p>		
<p>Motif of body and papan margins</p> 	<p>Motif of tanahan head margin:</p> 	

(Source: Bulan Prizilla, 2013)

Table 2. Colours of Visual Ornaments of the Pelo Ati Batik

<p>COLOURS OF VISUAL ORNAMENTS OF THE PELO ATI BATIK</p>
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<p>Basic cloth colour (White/beige)</p> 	<p>Bang-bangan Ati</p> 	<p>Bang-bangan Lombok</p> 
<p>Gadung</p> 	<p>Wedelan</p> 	<p>Biru Bebe</p> 

(Source: Bulan Prizilla, 2016)

Geertz, 1992, stated that symbols then connect certain ontologies and cosmologies with a set of aesthetics and morality, of which are reflected in the Pelo Ati, a classic Rifa'iyah batik visual ornament. In addition, Rizali, 2014, stated that essentially, symbolic shapes create meanings. It is thus important to understand the relationship between the form's elements. In a visual artwork, for instance, the forms and colours are the symbols whereas the object being studied is a reference towards such symbols. It is applied to the Pelo Ati visual ornament, in that meaningful symbols are inherent in its shapes and colours.

The Pelo Ati visual ornament incorporates the teachings of Sheikh Ahmad Rifa'i's brand of tasawwuf, as follows:

- a. According to Haji Ali Nahri (2012), a Rifa'iyah leader, the visual ornaments of Pelo Ati are coloured according to the Tiga Negeri (Three Nations) colour palette. The Rifa'iyah is guided by three principles: Usul-ad-Din (principles of religion), Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), and Tasawwuf (Sufism) (Ali Nahri, January 13th, 2012).

The Usul-ad-Din and Aqedah (creed) adhered by Ahmad Rifa'i are based on the principles of Sunni Islam. The issue is described in detail in his writings, Ri'ayatul Himmat and Abyanal Hawajj (Saad, Mukhlisin, 2004: 11, Trans.; H. Ahmad Syadzirin Amin).

The opinions espoused by Ahmad Rifa'i are consistent with the fiqh of Imam Syafi'i (Saad, Mukhlisin, 2004: 14, Trans.; H. Ahmad Syadzirin Amin).

Ahmad Rifa'i saw tasawwuf as a discipline which discusses the ethical and unethical behaviours of man to earn Allah's blessings (Saad, Mukhlisin, 2004: 18, Trans.; H. Ahmad Syadzirin Amin).

- b. The Pelo Ati visual ornament depicts a decapitated bird with the heart still intact.

In Haji Ali Nahri's interpretation, the depiction alludes that man is similar to animals. However, the heart distinguishes the former and the latter, in that the former has eight characters as stated in Tarajumah: zuhd (asceticism), qana'at (contentment), sabr (patience), tawakkul (trust in God), mujahada (spiritual struggle), rida (perfect contentment with God's will), syukur (gratitude), and ikhlas (earnestness).

In Asnal Maqashid, Ahmad Rifa'i R.A stated that:

"There are at least eight virtuous traits according to sharia, namely zuhd, qana'at, sabr, tawakkul, mujahada, rida, syukur, and ikhlas. These traits embody the definition of kahauf (fear), mahabba (love), and makrifat (attainment of spiritual knowledge)" (Asnal Miqashad II/407) (Saad, Mukhlisin, 2004: 19, Trans.; H. Ahmad Syadzirin Amin).

- c. The Pelo Ati visual ornament depicts the bird's liver outside of its body. According to Haji Ali Nahri, the depiction means that the liver is where waste is collected to be discarded. In this sense, these refer to the unvirtuous traits stated in Tarajumah, namely hubbu al-dunya (overwhelming love of dunya), thama' (greed), itba' al-hawa (submission to nafs), 'ujub (arrogance), takabbur (pride), hasad (envy), and sum'ah (craving for undue attention).

In Tatajumah, Asnal Miqashad II/408: "There are eight traits which according to sharia corrupts the hearts of man, namely hubbu al-dunya, thama', itba' al-hawa, 'ujub, riya', takabbur, hasad and sum'ah. The heart shall realise it in the future, God willing with His help and the blessings of the Prophet Muhammad" (Saad, Mukhlisin, 2004: 19-20, Trans.; H. Ahmad Syadzirin Amin).

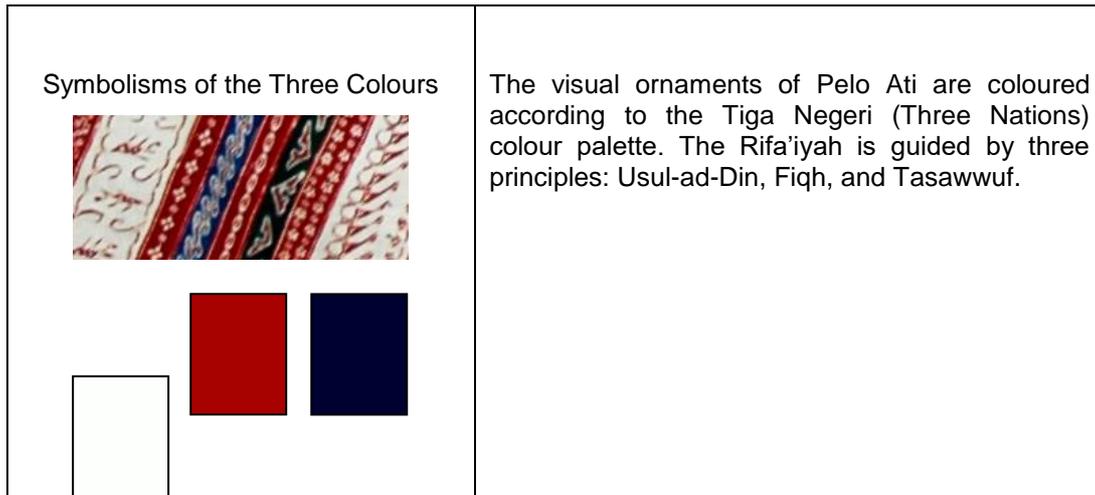
The head of the bird is depicted severed from its body.

In Haji Ali Nahri's interpretation, it reflects Sheikh Ahmad Rifa'i's prohibition of depicting a living being (with the exception of plants) for clothing. However, it is permissible to depict dead beings or beings which may not survive due to dismemberment. The wearer of a clothing article depicting living beings yet to be dismembered is not considered to sin if it is worn beneath the knees. Its creators, however, have sinned for their depiction.

In our view, there is no *Ayam Pelo* motif where the pelo is drawn outside of the bird's body. There is a reason as to why the bird is depicted upside down with its head to one side. As such, by associating the placement of the bird and its currently understood philosophical interpretation, in conjunction with the singular colour of its heart, a plausible interpretation is that the pelo bird signifies the absence of one part of the heart – its virtue. This interpretation is corroborated by the upside down position of the bird, further emphasising that if the virtue of man is absent, then man is no longer virtuous or "cold hearted." However, the philosophical meaning(s) of the *Ayam Pelo* motif has/have to be studied further so as to arrive at a meaning closest to the original intent of its designer.

Table 3. Philosophy of Visual Ornaments of the Pelo Ati Batik

PHILOSOPHY OF VISUAL ORNAMENTS OF THE PELO ATI BATIK	
ELEMENTS OF VISUAL ORNAMENTS OF THE PELO ATI BATIK	PHILOSOPHICAL MEANING
<p><i>Ayam Ati</i> (Chicken Heart) Motif</p> 	<p>The motif depicts a decapitated bird with the heart intact.</p> <p>Alludes that man is similar to animals. However, the heart distinguishes the former and the latter, in that it contains eight characters of man as stated in Tarajumah: zuhd, qana'at, sabr, tawakkul, mujahada, rida, syukur, and ikhlas.</p>
<p><i>Ayam Pelo</i> (Chicken Liver) Motif</p> 	<p>In Tarajumah: "There are eight traits which according to sharia corrupts the hearts of man, namely hubbu al-dunya, thama', itba' al-hawa, 'ujub, riya', takabbur, hasad and sum'ah.</p>



(Source: Bulan Prizilla, 2016)

5. CONCLUSIONS

It is concluded that the depiction of the motifs of the Pelo Ati batik visual ornaments is based on the teachings of Islam as taught by Sheikh Ahmad Rifa'i. Based on his teachings, his followers depicted a motif of a living being – the decapitated Pelo Ati bird – on the Pelo Ati visual ornament. The Pelo Ati visual ornament implicitly contains the teachings of Sheikh Ahmad Rifa'i, i.e. man has both virtuous and unvirtuous qualities stemming from his heart. Sheikh Ahmad Rifa'i's teachings are outlined in the Tarajumah. At the macro level, motifs or visual ornaments of a batik cloth may contain messages embedded by its designers to their audience.

The education and outreach of the Rifa'iyah Batik is expected to raise awareness of Indonesians on the importance of preserving its cultural heritage and an effort towards that direction.

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