

SYMBOLISM AND FUNCTIONS OF CLASSICAL BATIK IN SURAKARTA WITHIN THE CULTURAL AND ROYAL COURT TRADITION PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study examines the symbolism and functions of classical batik in Surakarta within the context of Javanese culture and royal court traditions. Classical batik is not merely a decorative textile but also represents cultural values, philosophical meanings, and social identities inherited through generations. The research focuses on the interpretation of symbolic motifs and the functional use of batik in traditional ceremonies, social practices, and cultural activities associated with the Surakarta palace tradition. A qualitative descriptive method was employed through observation, documentation, and in depth interviews with batik artisans, cultural practitioners, palace representatives, and local communities. The collected data were analyzed using a cultural interpretation approach to understand the meanings embedded in classical batik motifs and their relevance in contemporary society. The findings reveal that classical batik in Surakarta contains symbolic representations related to harmony, social ethics, spirituality, and cultural identity. In addition, batik functions as a medium of cultural preservation, social communication, and ceremonial representation within Javanese royal traditions. The study concludes that classical batik remains an important cultural heritage that reflects the continuity of traditional values and the cultural identity of Surakarta society.

Keywords – classical batik, symbolism, cultural function, Surakarta, royal court tradition, Javanese culture

Introduction

Classical batik in Surakarta represents one of the most significant forms of Indonesian textile heritage that embodies philosophical values, symbolic meanings, and cultural identity within Javanese society (Doellah, 2011). Batik is not merely a decorative textile product, but also a cultural expression closely related to spirituality, social structure, and cosmological beliefs (Djoemena, 1986). Richter explains that traditional textiles in Indonesia communicate ethnic identity, social status, and the relationship between humans and supernatural forces, indicating that textiles possess sacred and symbolic meanings beyond their practical functions (Widodo et al., 2021). This perspective demonstrates that batik should be understood as a cultural artifact that reflects the worldview and

ideological system of the society that produces and uses it.

Within the Surakarta palace tradition, batik developed as part of royal culture and became an important marker of social hierarchy and ceremonial identity (Ferdiyanah, 2017). The tradition of wearing batik originally emerged from the royal court environment, where kings, noble families, and palace servants wore specific batik motifs according to their social status and rank. Certain motifs, such as Parang, Udan Liris, and Sawat, were categorized as prohibited patterns reserved only for royal families, reflecting the symbolic and political functions of batik within Javanese court traditions (Anggraini & Affanti, 2021). The symbolic meanings embedded in classical batik motifs indicate that batik functions not only as clothing but

also as a medium of philosophical communication, social legitimacy, and cultural preservation.

The philosophical dimension of batik is further emphasized in studies discussing the metaphysical and cosmological meanings of classical Javanese batik. Hastangka (Hastangka, 2009) explains that batik contains aesthetic, philosophical, and mystical values closely related to social structures and cultural identity in Javanese society. Batik motifs are often associated with ceremonies, traditional rituals, and symbolic representations of authority and harmony. In Javanese cosmological understanding, batik is believed to possess spiritual meanings connected to cosmic balance and supernatural power. Therefore, classical batik can be interpreted as a visual text that communicates ethical values, spirituality, and collective memory across generations.

The development of batik in contemporary society also demonstrates the dynamic relationship between tradition and modernization. Recent studies show that Indonesian batik continues to evolve through innovation and digital technology while maintaining its cultural integrity. Wesnina, Prabawati, and Noerharyono (Wesnina et al., 2025) explain that the integration of traditional batik motifs with contemporary digital techniques enables the preservation of cultural heritage while adapting to modern fashion industries and global market demands. This transformation indicates that batik remains relevant in contemporary culture as both a traditional heritage and a modern creative industry. In addition, batik has also contributed to the development of cultural tourism and local economies through creative industry activities and heritage-based tourism programs.

Although many previous studies have examined batik from perspectives of aesthetics, tourism, fashion, and creative industries, research specifically discussing the symbolic meanings and functional use

of classical batik within Surakarta royal traditions remains limited. Most studies tend to focus on batik as a commercial product or visual design, while its philosophical and socio-cultural dimensions receive less attention. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the symbolism and functions of classical batik in Surakarta within the perspective of culture and royal court traditions. The research focuses on understanding the symbolic meanings embedded in classical batik motifs and examining their functions in ceremonial practices, social identity, and cultural preservation within Javanese society. This study is expected to contribute to the development of cultural and visual studies while strengthening efforts to preserve classical batik as an important Indonesian cultural heritage.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the symbolism and functions of classical batik in Surakarta within the context of Javanese culture and royal court traditions. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research focused on understanding cultural meanings, symbolic representations, and social practices related to the use of classical batik in society. The study emphasized interpretative analysis to explore how batik motifs embody philosophical values, social identity, and cultural traditions that have been preserved through generations.

The research was conducted in Surakarta, Central Java, particularly in areas closely associated with classical batik traditions such as the Kasunanan Surakarta Palace, Pura Mangkunegaran, Laweyan Batik Village, and Kauman Batik Village. The subjects of the research included batik artisans, cultural practitioners, palace representatives, historians, batik entrepreneurs, and local community members who actively participate in the

preservation and use of classical batik. These informants were selected purposively based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in batik culture and traditional ceremonies.

Data collection procedures consisted of observation, in depth interviews, documentation, and literature studies. Observations were conducted to examine the use of batik in cultural activities, traditional ceremonies, and everyday social practices in Surakarta. In depth interviews were carried out in a semi structured manner to obtain detailed information regarding the meanings of batik motifs, the functions of batik in royal traditions, and the transformation of batik practices in contemporary society. Documentation techniques included collecting photographs, archival records, traditional batik patterns, and cultural documents related to Surakarta batik traditions. Literature studies were conducted through books, academic journals, and previous research discussing Indonesian textiles, classical batik, symbolism, and Javanese cultural traditions.

The primary research instrument in this study was the researcher, who directly interacted with participants and interpreted cultural phenomena in the field. Supporting instruments included interview guidelines, observation sheets, field notes, voice recordings, and visual documentation. The interview guidelines were designed to explore topics related to symbolic meanings, social functions, ritual use, and cultural values associated with classical batik motifs.

The collected data were analyzed using an interactive qualitative analysis model consisting of data reduction, data presentation, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. The researcher categorized the data based on themes related to symbolism, cultural functions, philosophical meanings, and the role of batik in royal traditions. Data validity was strengthened through triangulation techniques by comparing

findings from observations, interviews, documentation, and literature sources. This approach enabled the researcher to obtain comprehensive and credible interpretations regarding the cultural significance of classical batik in Surakarta.

The research procedure began with preliminary observations and literature reviews to identify the research focus and relevant cultural contexts. The next stage involved field data collection through interviews, observations, and documentation in selected research locations. After data collection, the researcher conducted data classification, interpretation, and thematic analysis to identify symbolic meanings and cultural functions embedded in classical batik traditions. Finally, the results were interpreted within the framework of cultural and visual studies to formulate conclusions regarding the role of classical batik as a representation of cultural identity and royal tradition in Surakarta.

Findings and Discussion

Historical Development of Classical Batik in Surakarta

The history of classical batik in Surakarta is closely intertwined with the development of Javanese royal culture and the political history of the Mataram Kingdom (Henriatmo, 2006). Historical records indicate that batik traditions flourished during the Islamic Mataram period and became increasingly formalized under the royal courts of Surakarta and Yogyakarta after the division of the Mataram Kingdom through the 1755 Treaty of Giyanti. During this period, batik evolved from a domestic textile practice into a refined cultural expression associated with royal authority, social hierarchy, and court etiquette. According to Hardjonagoro (Iskandar, 2002), the classical form of Javanese batik became more structured during the reign of Sultan Agung in the seventeenth century, when specific motifs, colors, and dress

codes were incorporated into court traditions.

In Surakarta, batik developed as an important element of court culture within both the Kasunanan Surakarta and the Pura Mangkunegaran. The royal courts played a central role in determining aesthetic standards, regulating motif usage, and preserving symbolic meanings embedded in batik designs. Several motifs, such as Parang, Sawat, and Udan Liris, were classified as *batik larangan* (restricted motifs) and could only be worn by members of the royal family or individuals holding particular social positions. The regulation of motif usage demonstrates that classical batik functioned not merely as clothing but also as a visual marker of power, legitimacy, and social order within Javanese society.

The growth of classical batik in Surakarta was also supported by the emergence of batik producing communities outside the palace environment, particularly in Laweyan and later Kauman. Laweyan is recognized as the oldest batik production center in Surakarta and has been associated with batik trade and manufacturing since at least the fifteenth century. Initially, many artisans produced batik for the needs of the royal courts before expanding their activities into commercial production. Over time, Laweyan developed into an important economic center where batik production, trade networks, and entrepreneurship flourished. Its significance is further reflected in the emergence of prominent batik merchants such as Haji Samanhudi, whose batik business activities contributed to the establishment of Sarekat Dagang Islam in the early twentieth century.

During the colonial period, classical Surakarta batik experienced significant expansion as batik products entered broader domestic and international markets. Although commercialization encouraged innovation in motif design and production techniques, the royal courts continued to preserve classical motifs characterized by

the distinctive *sogan* color palette of brown, black, and cream. These colors became an identifying feature of inland Javanese batik and distinguished Surakarta batik from coastal batik traditions, which tended to employ brighter colors and more diverse ornamental influences.

Following Indonesian independence, classical batik in Surakarta underwent a process of transformation while maintaining its cultural foundations. Cultural figures such as K.R.T. Hardjonagoro (Go Tik Swan) played an important role in revitalizing batik traditions by reinterpreting classical motifs and introducing the concept of *Batik Indonesia*, which combined royal aesthetics with broader national cultural identities (Iskandar, 2002). Since the recognition of Indonesian batik by UNESCO in 2009 (Leni Putri Lusianti, 2012), Surakarta has further strengthened its position as one of the principal centers of batik preservation, education, and cultural tourism. Today, classical batik continues to serve as both a cultural heritage and a living tradition that connects contemporary society with the historical, philosophical, and cosmological values of Javanese court culture.

Symbolic Meanings of Classical Batik Motifs

Among the numerous classical batik motifs of Surakarta, the Parang motif occupies a particularly significant position due to its close association with royal authority, leadership, and Javanese cosmological philosophy. Historically, Parang was classified as a *batik larangan* (restricted motif), meaning that its use was limited to members of the royal family and individuals of noble rank within the palace environment. The exclusivity of the motif reflected its symbolic function as a visual representation of power, legitimacy, and social hierarchy in Javanese court culture (Grafita & Rudianto, 2023)(Djoemena, 1986).

The word *parang* is commonly believed to derive from the Javanese term *pereng*,

meaning a sloping cliff or hillside. Visually, the motif consists of a continuous diagonal arrangement resembling ocean waves or an unbroken chain. This repetitive pattern symbolizes persistence, strength, and continuity in human life. In Javanese philosophy, the uninterrupted flow of the Parang motif represents the ideal character of a leader who remains steadfast, resilient, and consistent in facing challenges. Consequently, the motif became closely associated with kings and rulers, who were expected to embody courage, wisdom, and moral integrity in governing society (Doellah, 2011).

Beyond its political symbolism, the Parang motif also reflects the cosmological worldview of Javanese culture. Javanese cosmology emphasizes harmony between the microcosm (*jagad cilik*), represented by human beings, and the macrocosm (*jagad gedhe*), represented by the universe. The flowing diagonal lines of the Parang motif symbolize dynamic movement and the eternal cycle of life, illustrating the interconnected relationship between humans, nature, and divine power. The motif therefore conveys not only worldly authority but also spiritual responsibility, reminding rulers that power must be exercised in accordance with ethical values and cosmic balance (Koentjaraningrat, 1994)

One of the most prominent variants is Parang Rusak, a motif traditionally worn by kings during important state ceremonies and royal rituals. The term *rusak* does not imply destruction in a negative sense; rather, it symbolizes the ability to overcome evil desires, internal conflicts, and obstacles that threaten social harmony. Within palace traditions, Parang Rusak represented the king's duty to maintain order and protect the welfare of the kingdom. Thus, the motif functioned as a symbolic reminder that leadership requires self-control, discipline, and moral responsibility (Hardjonagoro, 2010).

The symbolic meanings embedded in the Parang motif demonstrate that classical batik is more than a decorative textile. It serves as a visual narrative that communicates philosophical teachings, ethical principles, and cultural values inherited across generations. Through its form, symbolism, and restricted usage within royal traditions, the Parang motif illustrates how batik operates as a medium of cultural transmission, preserving Javanese concepts of leadership, spirituality, and social order. Consequently, the motif remains one of the most powerful representations of the philosophical and cosmological foundations of classical Surakarta batik.

Functions of Classical Batik in Cultural and Royal Traditions

In Javanese culture, classical batik serves functions that extend far beyond its role as clothing. Within the royal traditions of Surakarta, batik functions as a cultural symbol, a marker of social identity, a medium of spiritual expression, and an instrument for preserving collective memory. The selection of specific motifs for particular ceremonies reflects the Javanese understanding that textiles possess symbolic meanings capable of communicating values, authority, and cosmological beliefs. Consequently, batik occupies an important position in royal rituals, where it operates as a visual language connecting individuals with cultural traditions and sacred heritage (Doellah, 2002; Surya et al., n.d.)

One of the most significant functions of classical batik can be observed in royal ceremonial events such as the Kirab Pusaka Satu Suro and the Jumenengan Dalem celebrations held annually by the Surakarta royal courts and Pura Mangkunegaran. These ceremonies commemorate important moments in the Javanese calendar and symbolize the continuity of royal authority, cultural values, and spiritual traditions. During these events, members of the royal family, palace servants (*abdi dalem*), and

participants wear classical batik motifs that correspond to their ceremonial roles and social positions. The use of batik in such rituals reinforces the symbolic hierarchy embedded within court culture while simultaneously preserving traditional dress practices inherited across generations.

In the Kirab Pusaka Satu Suro, sacred heirlooms (*pusaka*) are paraded through designated routes as part of a ritual intended to commemorate the Javanese New Year and to seek harmony between human life, nature, and divine power. Participants often wear classical batik characterized by traditional *sogan* colors and motifs associated with dignity, protection, and spiritual balance. Within this ritual context, batik functions not merely as ceremonial attire but as a cultural symbol representing continuity between past and present. The visual presence of classical batik strengthens the sacred atmosphere of the procession and communicates the enduring relationship between royal institutions and Javanese cultural identity.

Similarly, during the Jumenengan Dalem, which commemorates the coronation anniversary of a king or ruler, classical batik serves as a representation of legitimacy, authority, and royal continuity. The ceremonial use of specific motifs reflects the philosophical values associated with leadership, wisdom, and responsibility. In this context, batik acts as a symbolic medium through which royal authority is visually expressed and culturally legitimized. The continued use of classical motifs in Jumenengan ceremonies demonstrates how batik contributes to the reproduction of cultural traditions and reinforces the symbolic power of the palace within contemporary society.

Beyond its ritual functions, classical batik also serves as a medium for cultural education and heritage transmission. Through ceremonial practices, younger generations are introduced to the meanings, histories, and philosophical values embodied in batik motifs. Royal rituals

therefore function not only as commemorative events but also as cultural learning spaces where traditional knowledge is preserved and transmitted. The participation of local communities, cultural organizations, and visitors in events such as Kirab Satu Suro and Jumenengan further strengthens public awareness of batik as an important element of Javanese heritage.

From a broader cultural perspective, the continued use of classical batik in royal traditions demonstrates its role in maintaining cultural identity amidst social change and modernization. While batik has become a global fashion product and a component of Indonesia's creative economy, its ceremonial functions within palace rituals preserve its deeper philosophical and spiritual meanings. Through events such as Kirab Pusaka Satu Suro and Jumenengan Dalem, classical batik remains a living cultural tradition that connects contemporary society with the historical, cosmological, and symbolic foundations of Javanese civilization. Thus, batik functions simultaneously as ceremonial attire, cultural heritage, symbolic communication, and a medium for sustaining collective memory within the royal traditions of Surakarta.

Preservation and Transformation of Classical Batik in Contemporary Society

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Conclusions

Classical batik in Surakarta represents more than a traditional textile tradition; it serves

as a cultural system that embodies philosophical values, symbolic meanings, and the historical identity of Javanese society. The historical development of Surakarta batik demonstrates its close relationship with royal institutions, particularly the Kasunanan Surakarta and Pura Mangkunegaran, where batik functioned as an important medium for expressing social hierarchy, political authority, and cultural legitimacy. Through the preservation of classical motifs and traditional aesthetic principles, royal traditions have played a significant role in maintaining the continuity of batik as a cultural heritage.

The analysis of the Parang motif reveals that classical batik contains complex symbolic narratives rooted in Javanese philosophy and cosmology. As one of the most prestigious royal motifs, Parang symbolizes strength, perseverance, leadership, and moral responsibility. Its visual structure and historical usage illustrate how batik functions as a cultural text that communicates ethical teachings, spiritual values, and cosmological understandings across generations. These symbolic meanings demonstrate that batik is not merely an artistic product but also a medium through which cultural knowledge and collective memory are transmitted.

The study further shows that classical batik continues to play an important role in cultural and royal traditions. Ceremonial events such as Kirab Pusaka Satu Suro and Jumenengan Dalem demonstrate how batik functions as a symbol of authority, ritual identity, and cultural continuity. Within these traditions, batik serves not only as ceremonial attire but also as a visual representation of the relationship between royal institutions, cultural heritage, and Javanese cosmological beliefs. Through ritual practices, classical batik contributes to the preservation of cultural values while reinforcing collective identity within contemporary society.

Finally, the preservation of classical batik in contemporary Surakarta reflects a dynamic interaction between tradition and transformation. While efforts by artisans, cultural institutions, museums, and educational organizations continue to safeguard traditional knowledge and symbolic meanings, contemporary innovations in fashion, tourism, and digital media have enabled batik to adapt to changing social and economic conditions. This balance between preservation and transformation demonstrates the resilience of classical batik as a living heritage. Therefore, the sustainability of classical Surakarta batik depends not only on conserving its physical forms and traditional motifs but also on maintaining the philosophical, symbolic, and cultural values that give meaning to its existence within Javanese society.

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