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Indonesian Fashion Designers—Transformation from Traditional Textiles

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Introduction

Indonesian fashion designers started to make design placing traditional textile culture of the country on the background of the own design in the 1970s. The designers are featured in this research how they think the characteristics of their design. Leshkovich and Jones[2003] and Niessen, Leshkovich and Jones[2003] discuss that Asian fashion designers take Asian chic fashions born in Europe and North America into their design and Asian fashion design has been made by the influence of Asian chic fashion from the West. This paper also mentions the view of chic fashion in Indonesia effected by the West.

Interviews with twenty designers¹ were done in Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta and Solo in Java, Lampung in Sumatra, Kuta and Legian in Bali and Waikabubak in Sumba Island in August, 2001 and 2002. In this paper, their thoughts about traditional Indonesian and Western culture are examined by analyzing their commentary on their designs. Clothes-making by Raden Adjeng Kartini (fig. 1) is covered at the beginning of this paper. She is known as The Mother of Republic of Indonesia and as woman who awoke racial consciousness at the end of the 19th century, and she designed and made batik (wax-resist dyeing) and *kebaya Kartini* (blouses designed by Kartini).

At first, in order to understand the designers' historical context, I review the history of clothes-making and then I discuss the characteristics of their profiles. Then I examine how traditional culture and Western European culture are placed on their designs by taking up five designers' cases in this paper.



Fig.1 Kartini (center) wears kebaya and kain. Kartini Museum in Rembang, Java.

¹ The designers are Hardjonagoro in Solo, Java, Iwan Tirta, Syamsidar Isa, Ramli, Biyan, Ghea, Arther Harland, Carmanita, Poppy Dharsono, Edward Hutabarat, Chossy Latu and Oskar Lawalata in Jakarta, Java, Eddy P. Chandra in Bandung, Java, Cariet Bambang, Afif Syakur and Boyonz Ilyas in Yogyakarta, Java, Ika and Elice Seymour in Bali, Dessy Munaf in Lampung, Sumatra and Yohanna Giri Woleka in Waikabubak, Sumba Island.

Historical Background of the Designers

Reviews of the history of clothes-making from the work of Reid[1988:88-89] and Maxwell [1990:354-355, 362-364] indicate that traditional clothes had not changed until the 18th century when Dutch government began direct rule. After that, because of the influence of Western clothes such as body fitted clothes cut and sewn, the clothes in Indonesian area changed greatly. Then batik motives were also changed designed with Western cultural elements by the Dutch and Indo-European people who lived on the North Coast of Java in the 19th century.



Figure 2 Batik motif of carnation drawn by Kartini. Museum Negara in Jakarta.

In Indonesian history, the period from the 19th century end to the beginning of the 20th century was the age of order and calmness as *Tempo dulu* (A good old age) when the culture of the colony was respected and education of Javanese was promoted by the Dutch welfare policy. The Javanese of the intellectual class had eyes which saw the outside world through their education, and then they were awakened to a consciousness of their own ethnicity [Tsuchiya 1991:114-115]. One of such persons is Kartini who is the eldest daughter of the prefectural governor of Jepara, North Coast in Java [Legge 1984:186-187]. Kartini tried to improve the situation of her own race by taking the good part of Western European culture into their traditional culture. As one of the expressions of her thoughts, she created the *kebaya Kartini* with shawl collar design uniting traditional culture and Western culture, and the batik design in which the old Javanese flower motives and Western carnation motives were drawn together.

The thoughts of Kartini led to the idea of racial improvement, then to a form of national consciousness, and later on to nationalism. From the Indonesian formative period to the modern times, traditional versus Western modern culture was the issue for argument among statesmen and intellectuals. The method of uniting traditional and Western culture has been taken in as part of politics, economics and culture until now, and modern fashion designers also use this method.

As designers' career's development, almost all of designers who act internationally with footholds in Jakarta are educated in Europe. And many Chinese Indonesian designers have studied in Hong Kong. They develop eyes which see their own culture through their education, and they make designs with sight from the outside. The designers interpret their hybrid cultural background individually, and they create designs in which traditional culture and Western culture are united. This paper examines their creations.

Fusions of Traditional Culture and Western European Culture

1. The Activity of the Preservation of Traditional Crafts by Edward Hutabarat (1958 -)

Edward Hutabarat who is descended from the royal family of the Bataks in Sumatra started his business in 1982, and organized fashion shows to promote local textiles *ulos (ikat)* in 1984. And he organized shows which had a theme of *songket* (supplementary-weft weaving) and batik cooperated by the government of Jambi in Sumatra in 1992.

He started to investigate clothes which symbolize the country in 1995, and he researched how many kinds of *kebaya* exist in each place in Indonesia. From the data he collected, he published a book titled "*Busana Nasional Indonesia* (Indonesian National Clothes)" in 1999. In this book, he wrote that *busana Nasional Indonesia* is a variety of diverse clothes and that there are no common clothes accepted generally and widely in the whole of Indonesia [Hutabarat 1999:8]. He made a category of *busana modifikasi* (modern clothes) for example which included a *baju bodo* style blouse from Toraja in Sulawesi and skirt made by weft-*ikat* from Ujung Pandang in Sulawesi (fig. 3).



Fig.3 Baju bodo style blouse from Toraja and skirt made by weft-ikat from Ujung Pandang in Sulawesi by Hutabarat [Hutabarat 1999:64].

At present, he visits craftsmen who make gold items in Yogyakarta, sculptures from coconut shells in Bali, and he writes about such techniques. He said the following in an interview.²

I will show you part two.³ I'm doing this with people in Bali, Yogya, Sumatra, Toraja and Ujung Pandang. Nobody helps me, all this is from own money. I'm selling everything for them to help to make my dream come true, to make this book. This is not a business program. This is about world culture. Can you imagine the person who is doing this curving, he is the one and only in the world?

Nobody can make this anywhere in the world. Just he can. We have to keep him. This is not only for Indonesia. This is for the world.

I visit many places twice a month. I support maybe a hundred people from Sumatra, from Padang, Medan, Yogya, Solo, Cirebon, Bali, Lombok, Sulawesi and everywhere.

I have so many textiles and that's why if you have a foundation in Japan, I want to make

² The interview to Edward Hutabarat was done at his workshop in Jakarta on 9 August, 2001.

³ Hutabarat edits the second book about traditional handicraft.

a beautiful exhibition in Japan talking about Indonesia. I want to show all the Meister of Indonesia. Not the cheap ones. I want to make a beautiful exhibition in Japan, very exclusive, because this is not only for Indonesia, for the world, all over the world. Only Indonesian people can make this. Please help them and make money. In five years, you can not learn how to make this. Indonesia is so full of culture like this.

He tries to hand down the industrial arts which are in a crisis of decline and tries to rediscover the technique of crafts in each district, and he supports the craftsmen personally. He said following about the present state of Indonesian crafts.

We have so many cultures, more than ten thousand islands, and more than four hundred folks in Indonesia. If you talk about the jewelry, the fabrics, the textiles, everything up to the food, up to the infinity of everything. And do you know why? I'm the one of the slaves who loves this country. Because I'm very happy doing all of this. I never feel tired, I never feel bored, I never feel, I just feel very excited to do all of this.

And you know in this crisis, in this crisis, it's so hard, so difficult to find the money. It's so hard, so hard in this crisis. The government they don't care. That's why my country is so poor now. So poor now because everybody just thinks about money. Just thinks about money, just thinks about power, they never think about this culture. Can you imagine how beautiful it is in my country? Can you imagine how beautiful our old jewelry are, how beautiful our old textiles are? You can talk to all of your friends in Japan. Somebody needs help. That is me. But at least, but at least, I have no hope, but at least you know what's going on in this country. They have all gone to America, Japan, Europe, everybody takes it abroad. What about old jewelry, old textiles, they have already gone. Because in this country, in this beautiful country, this beautiful art belongs not only to Indonesia, but to the world. There were four thousand patterns of batik in Yogya. Do you know how many motives there are now in Yogya? Just four hundred left. Three thousand six hundred antique patterns have already gone to Japan, America, Holland, London and everywhere. In Indonesia, they sell all their culture abroad. It's so sad. This is going on in this country.

As his words indicate, "I am the one of the slaves who loves this country", he is proud of his country. His trials to preserve the traditional culture are a way of expressing his nationalism.

2. The Birth of "Batik Indonesia" by Hardjonagoro (1931 -)

Kandjeng Pangeran Tumenggung Hardjonagoro's former name is Goh Tik Suwan. He was born in a family of Chinese batik makers. He entered *Universitas Indonesia* in 1952. After that he went back to Solo in 1955 and started to make batik. Hardjonagoro was asked to make new style of "Batik Indonesia (*Batik Nasional*)" by President Sukarno at that time. Due to his success in making Batik Indonesia, the Sultan of Solo gave him the name K.P.T. Hardjonagoro, which means noble of Solo.

The *Batik Nasional* which Sukarno sought was not Java North Coast style which was affected by Europe, China, Arabia and India, and also not the imperial court style in Central Java. Furthermore, it did not express a specific social status either. The *Batik Nasional* which Hardjonagoro made was a hybrid design uniting traditional motives of Central Java which symbolize the country and various cultural elements of the North Coast. He talked about it in an interview.⁴

Why I don't take all the techniques from the North Coast batik, I thought of mixing design with batiks from Yogya, Solo, Ponologo and Banyumas. Traditional colors are only black, white and brown. But on the North Coast, the batiks are multicolored such as Pekalongan. So I mix, I married the North Coast style of multicolored design to the Central Java style by

⁴ The interview to Hardjonagoro was done at his workshop in Solo on 17 August, 2001.

soga dye⁵, brown color, and I created Batik Indonesia. So this is Batik Indonesia. I married the technique of the North Coast style to the design of the Central Java style, we first have only three colors, white, black and brown. But now all the batik in the whole of Java is in fact following, using the technique of Batik Indonesia. If I sold the first piece, I presented the first few pieces to Sukarno, he was very happy.

Hardjonagoro thought that he could get a symbol where greater bigger joint power is shown by uniting the Java North Coast style and the Central Java style. He respected his hybrid ethnic identity as Chinese Javanese and he created a national design which represented the country by unity of Javanese native culture and Indian, Islamic, Chinese and Western cultures.

3. The Batik Thought by Iwan Tirta(1935 -)

Iwan Tirta was born in Java and he started to design batik after he studied in the U.S.A. in 1966. His technique is always faithful to the basis of wax-resist dyeing and he tries to arrange traditional patterns using new materials not only cotton.⁶

I am using polyurethane fabric. Stretch batik. I use this stretch type of batik but classic patterns. Motif is not all traditional and mixed new elements. I use new material always. This is the T-shirt also stretch and also hand draw. Technique is always batiks, but I use all designs.

He uses the words of “frame (wax-resist dyeing) and element (motives and colors)” when he explains his basic concept of creation.

I can develop my working. I can develop the element of batik also. There are the element and the frame in batik. The frame is traditional wax-resist dyeing technique. So the frame is existed from old days. Inside, I can play. Looks like a piano. The music of Mozart has very simple melody and structure, but the detail has variety. That's why until now, people like Mozart. So that is my principle. Then also I experiment with the material, new materials.



Fig.4 Batik prada design by Tirta in 'Bali Four Seasons' Trend Show, 2001.

He tries applications of batik to new materials such as elastic polyurethane fabrics. He also uses these designs to porcelain and then accessories. The characteristic of design by Iwan Tirta is that he

⁵ *Soga* is a brown dye derived from a combination of bark and wood; a major ingredient is the bark of the *soga* tree, *Peltophorum ferrugineum*.

⁶ The interview with Iwan Tirta was done at his workshop in Menteng, Jakarta on 8 August, 2001.

takes new techniques which nobody has introduced by adding his sensible colors by computer. Now he is developing designs and protecting patterns of his designs in his factory in Ciracus, Jakarta. He is unique because he is on the frontier of using computers and revolutionary creations and also sticking with traditional dyeing techniques.

4. Print Expression by Ghea (1955 -)

Ghea Panggabean is a designer who was born in Holland and has an Indonesian father and Dutch mother. She lived in Europe during her childhood and she studied fashion in London. She came back to Indonesia in 1979 and then started work.

She has the theme of Indonesian traditional textiles, but she never sticks to the traditional textile technique by hand work. And she expresses textile design by printing and provides apparel products at a reasonable price through mass production.

The unity of traditional culture and Western culture in Ghea's designs is expressive of traditional textiles as fashion. She is putting emphasis on traditional textiles through unity of traditional textiles and fashion as opposing elements, and she presents dressing trends annually. The design which became the start of her success was *jumputan* in 1985, which was a print design of traditional tie-dye patterns. She used the theme such as *tikar* (knitting basket) in Kalimantan (1998) and *gringsing* (double *ikat*) in Tenganan, Bali (1998). She talked about her fashion creation.⁷

Iwan Tirta criticized me at that time, because I know him. He said, "Why do you always make something with print? You must make things by hand." I said, "I like hand made things, Iwan, but you are already a batik senior." I want to do fashion, I want to change motif every three months, so I contacted the factory, Texmaco and asked them to help me. I told them. I want to try to make the process, and they said it takes a long time. But first I wanted to make Indonesian people wear jumputan because nobody talked about jumputan at that time. Each person had a batik, sarong, but nobody talked of jumputan, so I said, "O.K." The first step, I am young, people don't know me yet, I want to create a fashion for jumputan. Suddenly, great garment company became to take interests. I talked about my idea. I like organza, chiffon, something, "Can you print for me?" They printed it so that it looked exactly like an antique. Because then they had the technique, it became a best seller. So I make fashion for the young, I make organza fabric on many things, so people say, jumputan-jumputan, so I became known immediately as a success, that's why my first step in my career immediately became a big hit. So I was very lucky.

I concentrate every time, I'm launching a new collection. It has to be based on inspiration of something original and traditional things that people don't see every day. But then at the same time, people can talk about the motif of the textile as special culture of all areas. So I started to make Toraja, then after that Kalimantan, then gringsing. Nobody makes gringsing in Bali.

And also I go to Paris to see the trends. So how do I make this Indonesian look fashionable? I just change the color and I made the motives to big, I always mix and match. So you can mix and match it.

Iwan Tirta stuck to the traditional technique and he thought Ghea's print design was violation of the real thing. Ghea's work suggests that she is a hybrid with the Dutch and has compound identity, and she has an outside perspective from her design education in Europe. Her label "*Ghea Etnik* (Ghea Ethnic)" indicates her relative perspective of Indonesian culture as ethnic. This is how she tries to place her designs in the world.

5. The Expression of Universal Design by Biyan (1954 -)

⁷ The interview to Ghea was done at her workshop in Menteng, Jakarta on 7 August, 2001.

Biyan who is Chinese Indonesian born in Surabaya has been expanding work with a foothold in Jakarta. He studied design in Düsseldorf and London, and came back to Surabaya in 1983, and then he started work. He expands his business to ASEAN, the Middle East and the United States. Biyan says that designers need a global perspective on business and he wants to propose Indonesian fashion as universal design at home and abroad. He said in the following interview⁸.

Of course, I realize when I studied abroad, that when I got my education in England and Germany, that gave me more sensitivity to realize why I am, who I am as an Indonesian or being a person from the East. But it doesn't mean that being an Indonesian designer, I have to always do something that comes from Indonesia, but I want to have always a broader meaning. It's not what you see but something is what I think. It's important. After I finished my studies in fashion, I came back here and then started, and until this year I try to find out, and I try to understand because each designer should have the base, a platform doing something, catering to someone. So my concept is that it has to be universal.

But spiritually we have to understand Asian woman. It's about Asian woman but it's not ethnic. Asian woman can also be international? She has its activities, she should be modern, she should be well educated, and then they know their wearing. For example, I like to use my flair because I believe that in the East. But there are always steps. Always I introduce what I'm doing. If it's batiks or it's ikat whatever. I do sometimes but not always. It's depends on my mood.

Because I remember during the 1980s, after I graduated when I came back here, I saw everybody who said to me, "You are an Indonesian, you have to do something Indonesian." When I came from London, I was from a younger generation, I had my own idea. So slowly, I have really found what I wanted to do. Slowly I found what I'm doing. That's how I'm interesting. If you don't see, that's O.K., yet I do. It's something that I can do and how to make modern fashion, because I think fashion has to be able to translate my own time. It's very important.

He says that universal design is a design to express himself and who he actually is. His perspective comes from his educational career of design in Europe, and from his understanding of Indonesian-ness.

Biyan thinks that the design he wants to express is colorless and universal even if it is the design that traditional culture is represented with Western European culture.

The Fusion of Modern Western European Culture and Traditional Culture: Context and Creation

Indonesian designers who emerged in the 1970s have been creating various designs through unity of the tradition and the Western along the cultural policy of the country. The design united the traditional culture with Western culture symbolizes Indonesian hybrid cultural background which consists of various ethnic cultures.

The thoughts and creativities of the designers are divided into three areas as how to think about traditional culture and Western culture. Firstly, there are the designers who insist on traditional culture and they pursue the preservation activities of the traditional culture. Secondly, there are the designers who insist on batik and designs connecting with the regional characteristics of Central Java. They insist on tradition but they think that the fusion of tradition and Western European culture is the foundation of the design and they appeal to the originality of each position. Thirdly, there are the designers who act freely from traditional frames and try to create fashion design by connecting

⁸ The interview with Biyan was done at Hotel Dharma Wansa in South Jakarta on 26 August, 2002.

tradition and the West.

Kartini and the modern designers unite traditional culture and European culture with a perspective from outside such as Europe through the educational experiences of fashion design education. They have been separating from the meaning of the tradition, contextualizing and appealing as national design at home and abroad. This means to set up a boundary by adding designs which symbolize the State to designs which spread worldwide and are standardized. But on the other side, it means that various races are united toward the country, and they have a consciousness of the design of the nation.

Leshkovich and Jones[2003] and Niessen, Leshkovich and Jones[2003] indicate that the effect of Asian chic fashions in the West to the Asian fashion designers. However this paper shows the example that the Indonesian designers as Hardjonagoro and Tirta made their design by the fusion of their traditional culture and Western culture by themselves originally.

In the 1980s, such design from Indonesia has been presented globally with the development of the economy. But since 1997, because of Asian economic crisis and then the collapse of Soeharto's administration, the Indonesian designers began to present their design to the domestic consumers. And adding the effect of Soeharto's policy which has been supporting traditional handicrafts-making, the consciousness of domestic consumers also changed so that they began to recognize their culture and enjoy their local designs. The rich arrangement of creation by the fusion of cultural elements was raised among the Indonesian people.

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