

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

9-2012

A Silent Textile Trade War: Batik Revival as Economic and Political Weapon in 17th Century Java

Ruurdje Laarhoven

Hawaii Pacific University, rlaarhoven@hpu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

Laarhoven, Ruurdje, "A Silent Textile Trade War: Batik Revival as Economic and Political Weapon in 17th Century Java" (2012). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 705.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/705>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**A Silent Textile Trade War: Batik Revival as
Economic and Political Weapon in 17th Century Java**

Ruurdje Laarhoven

rlaarhoven@hpu.edu

This short paper is based on primary records of the Dutch East India Company or VOC and on published works related to them. The main argument I wish to make is that the Dutch monopoly control of the Indonesian economy, particularly of the textile trade, did not cause total impoverishment of the Indonesian people; it caused instead the revival and spread of the art of batik-making as a successful counter-measure. I plan to show what the sources reveal about the increase of weaving on Java as epitomized by the revival of batik. Basically four sets of actors were involved: the Javanese, the Dutch as well as the Chinese and Indians. I present these groups in the context of Java's history of the 17th century.

The Javanese

Centrally located in the Indonesian archipelago, the north coast of Java functioned as major entrepôt for spices and victuals. In western Java, at Sunda Kalapa, the Sultan of Banten was an enterprising and wealthy trader. The city counted a large foreign population consisting of international traders from east and west. The Javanese living in independent towns along the north coast seasonally traded to the Moluccas. They bartered mainly local and imported Indian textiles in exchange for spices such as cloves, nutmeg and mace. On their return to Java they sold or delivered these products to foreign merchants from Europe, India, Arabia, Armenia, Malaysia, China and other nations who had shipped out their trade goods with the Javanese traders.¹ The cities along the north coast often were located a little inland along the navigable rivers that flowed into the Java Sea. The history of these independent city states showed them to be constantly in "flux", as one historian puts it, as they competed for power and wealth, causing conflict and violence, burning cities and rice fields.² When one city fell, another rose to benefit from its demise.

During the 1600s leadership of the coastal city-states lay with the *bupati* or regents who ruled on behalf of the *Susuhunan*, the King of the agrarian inland state of Mataram at Kartasura. Among the major centers under Mataram's control were Ceribon, Semarang, Japara, Demak, Tuban, Gresik, western Madura island, and Surabaya. The following table gives a quick overview of the size of some of the cities in 17th century Java.³

¹ Lodewycksz 1598: 120-21

² Nagtegaal 1988: 60

³ Reid 1993, v2: 72 averages

Population Estimates for Java and Makassar in the 17th Century

City	Years	Estimated average
Banten	1672-1696	400,000
Jakarta	1596-1618	21,000
Mataram	1624	800,000
Semarang	1654	100,000
Japara	1654	100,000
Tuban	1600	130,000
Surabaya	1625	50,000
Makassar	1614-1660	206,000

Figure 1. Population Estimates Java.

Note Mataram's access to manpower. Java of the 17th century was a very stratified society with many levels of lower ranked officials and dignitaries identified by their attire

Arrival of Islam

The Javanese did not fully absorb Islam as a new religion. As in their previous encounter with Buddhism and Hinduism, they adjusted the new belief system to their existing Javanese worldview. For the people of Mataram, Islam served more as a cultural identifier than a religion in which faith was a guide to a person's life.⁴ As such Islam influenced the way the Javanese came to dress themselves differently. Previously men and women used to keep the upper half of their bodies uncovered, now men began to cover their heads with a cloth while women and men wore a loose upper body covering: a *baju* for men and a *kebaya* or over-shirt for women. The non-Muslim Javanese and people of other nationalities each dressed in a fashion reflecting their ethnicity.

The Chinese

Of the non-Javanese quarters the Chinese were the largest and most important group. Chinese junks added thousands more Chinese to the populations every year especially in the latter part of the 1600s.⁵ The junks annually also brought in a large quantity and variety of textile-related materials, such as rolled and flat cotton and silk textiles, countless bundles of raw silk, needles and thousands of packages of embroidery and gold thread. These products were dispersed in all directions through the interisland trading network; the Chinese itinerant peddlers were known to give credit to their customers, making them popular among the island inhabitants. In each commercial center a Chinese captain was in charge of the citizenry. He was a leader, arbitrator, often the *syahbandar* or harbor master and a wealthy person.

⁴ Ricklefs 1993: 11

⁵ Nagtegaal 1988: 111

The Chinese immigrants married local women. Many Chinese were associated with and contracted by rulers and elites because they were industrious, peaceful, and reliable.

The Dutch

When the Dutch first fleet of four ships arrived, they explored settling in the Moluccas close to the spices. They fought and successfully dislodged all other Europeans in order to establish a monopoly on the trade in spices. At the same time they discovered that large profits of 100 to 200 percent and more could be made from selling Indian imported textiles to the spice producers, hence they began in 1617 to monopolize the import and sales of Indian cloths as well. Only those Indian textiles imported through the East India Company could be sold in areas in Indonesia ruled by the Dutch. Those who broke the restrictions were severely punished. It should be noted that the Dutch completely ignored the existing trade in locally woven textiles because profits from them were too small. Two-term Governor-General Jan Pietersz. Coen (1619-12 & 1627-29) was an energetic albeit cruel and ruthless implementer of the Company's monopoly policies. He secured Batavia (Jakarta) as base and hub for the Dutch inter-Asiatic trade.

The Word *Batik* in Source Materials

The Indonesian scholar Hardjonagoro is said to have examined the classical literature of the Majapahit period I (1100-1300) about which he concluded that batik dress had not been used at the court during the early Hindu-Buddhist era. He pointed out that even nowadays in several traditional ancient ceremonies associated with the court, such as aristocratic weddings, no batik is used, but textiles other than batik.⁶

During Coen's time the word batik was regularly used to designate *sarassa* "painted" Javanese cloth.⁷ This caused the Dutch also to sometimes refer to Indian *sarassa* as batik when ordering a quantity of them from India.⁸ In 1605 a buyer for the English Company in Banten observed that the women preferred to buy the imported cloths, even though they could dye and weave themselves. He wrote: "Also there commeth from thence [i.e. Coromandel] *many sorts of white callicoes, which they themselves doe both die, paint, and guild, according to the fashions of that countrey*. Likewise they can weave a kind of striped stuffe, both of cotton and rinds of trees, but by meanes of their laysinesse there is very little of that worne."⁹[my emphasis] Thus there is no doubt that batik, perhaps in an elementary form, was practiced on plain white cotton. The Dutch felt threatened in 1648 by the chintz imitations and issued an edict that prohibited the production, sales and trade of imitation cloths from the Coromandel Coast (*kustkleederen*). With regards to color, dye, and other technical details, these imitation cloths were very difficult to differentiate from the real ones. They noted, however, that the least bit of moisture or water on them blemished the painting. Nevertheless, these "false" products spoiled the Company's commerce in the real Coromandel goods. For breaking Company rules, those caught had their cloths confiscated, including the vessel in which the imitation cloths were found. A fine of 10 reals-of-eight for each piece of cloth confiscated, was to be divided between the informer and the officer.¹⁰

⁶ Hardjonagoro 1979: 227

⁷ Laarhoven 1994, Appendix A: 57

⁸ Dagh-register, Batavia 1641, v.5: 234

⁹ Foster ed1943: 172 fn.1

¹⁰ Plakaatboek 1648: 121

A Batavia manuscript dating from 1518 had mentioned some well-known batik designs such as *kekembangan* ("meander of strings of flower designs"), *kembang-tarate* ("lotus flower"), *alas-alassan* ("drawings of animals between the flower designs"), *uran-urangan* ("crab and shrimp motifs"). While the existence of these designs does not prove the making of batik, it shows that the designs were known from olden times; some scholars even pointed out that batik designs were found in carvings on the Borobudur and Prambanan temples. Through my readings concerning the debates on the origin of batik, there are basically two schools of opinion: (1) those siding with J.A. Loeber Jr., who believe in an Indonesian indigenous development of batik, and (2) those who are inclined to side with G.P. Rouffaer who suppose that its origin can be attributed to Indian influences on Java from the Silandra and Sanjaja periods in the 8th to 9th centuries.

The Silent Textile Trade War

Understandably the Javanese reacted to the oppressive commercial policies of the Company as the 17th century moved on. The Dutch succeeded in occupying by force several flourishing commercial centers where they competed with the local and foreign traders. They captured Jakarta in 1619, and subsequently conquered Banda (1624), Malaka (1641), Ambon (1655), Makassar (1669), Java north coast (1678), Ternate (1680), and Banten (1682). Policies were imposed that greatly diminished the existing trade of the local population and the foreign traders which previously had contributed to the "boom years" in the Indonesian economy before 1600.¹¹ Professor Anthony Reid has described in some detail the wealth the Indonesians had been enjoying in those years, especially the rulers, courtesans and officialdom before the Dutch imposed their monopolistic policies on them. It was these restrictions, according to him, which impoverished the population. No doubt this is true, but I would argue that one cannot speak of an impoverishment in terms of the development of local textile production. Actually, the opposite took place; the restrictions were the cause for the elaboration and increase of indigenous textile production by Indonesian women. As the Indian textiles became unaffordable and the Indonesian men, who were the boat builders, navigators, and traders, were prevented from acquiring imported cloths for their women, the women reverted back to the skills they had always possessed. The women did not travel to trade, but were expected to take care of home and children. Their weaving, dying and painting skills had value in the community because they could control the level of supply by their industriousness. The elite and well-to-do women with the help of their female slaves, provided a guarantee that cloth would always be available when needed for ceremonial occasions. This residual female power provided continuity with the traditional view of women's value in Indonesian society. As they became more acquainted with foreign cloths, they naturally attempted to absorb and incorporate selected designs, patterns, motifs, colors and other details that appealed to them, adding these to the traditional repertoire. Buhler illustrates with examples the influence of the *patola* designs as decoration on the cloths made by the island women.¹²

¹¹ Reid 1993, v.2: 1, 10, 53, 63..

¹² Bühler and Fischer, v.2, Plate XXXII



Figure 2. Sale of Chintz compared to Non-chintz.

We see a remarkable trend in terms of the VOC importation of textiles from India. The chart above shows the total number of pieces of cloths the Dutch imported to Batavia over a period of 130 years. I set apart the quantity of cloths that were chintz from those that were plain, striped, checkered, muslin, or luxury cloths. It is noticeable that chintzes were a large part of the import. The overall trend of the Company's textile trade was clearly downward. This graph is a result of an examination of the bookkeeping books of the Company in Batavia for the years indicated below the line.

The most popular textiles sold on Java were the chintzes, *painted on both sides*. The Javanese would not have them any other way. Two types stand out: the *tapi-cindai* and *tapi-sarassa*. They were sold in multiples of thousands every year. For example, 45,653 *tapi cindai* and 13,880 *tapi sarassa* besides other articles of chintz, were reported sold in bookkeeping year 1652-53, as shown in the graph above. Many times in the orders to the Coromandel factories, it is written that the *tapis* needed to be "of bright colors and good painting on both sides." Some 28 varieties of chintz articles were sold through the Company shop in Batavia.

What Happened Between 1648-1688?

When the Dutch settled in Batavia, Sultan Agung, the *Susuhunan* who ruled Mataram from 1613 until his death in 1646, was known as an aggressive and brave leader, the last and greatest ruler of Mataram.

He was ambitious and wanted to attract the riches that trade brought. Following in his father's footsteps who attempted to bring Surabaya under his control, Sultan Agung had his eyes on Banten, a very flourishing commercial town, to which he wanted to extend his hegemony. He invited in 1626 Governor General J.P. Coen to join him in capturing Banten, but his request was denied and this made Sultan Agung furious. This was the beginning of Mataram's growing hatred and hostility towards the Dutch. Twice he attempted to seize Batavia in 1628 and 1629, but failed. He also failed in preventing the Dutch from capturing Malacca to which the Javanese sailed in hundreds of small crafts every trading season and where many of their relatives resided. Mataram reacted by boycotting the trade of the Dutch which was especially aimed at the sales of Indian textiles.

Sultan Agung ordered his subjects to not bring any rice and provisions to the Dutch in Batavia, because the people who sold rice bought Indian textiles from the Company shop with the money they received. The Sultan's rice monopoly lasted for about 50 years. He was ahead of Gandhi in encouraging his people to grow cotton, and to weave and wear Javanese dress. His strategy was to stop the trade to Batavia altogether and thereby squeeze the Dutch out with an economic weapon since military might had failed.

When Sultan Agung's son, Amangkurat I died in 1677, two parties emerged to vie for supremacy at Mataram. The Dutch were called for assistance, and they supported the son, Amangkurat II, who opposed the coastal rulers that were supporting the other party led by Trunajaya, a strongly Islamic millenarian. In 1680 Amangkurat II stabbed Trunajaya to death. As a reward for the assistance in recovering the ruler's power, the *Susuhunan* in 1678 concluded a contract with the Dutch, which proved to be a turning point in the history of Java. The Company gained tremendous power over Javanese trade, its productive lands in the extensive Priangan district beyond Batavia, as well as manpower through the regents in the coastal towns.

The highest titled wife at the Mataram court was considered equal in status to the ruler; she wore the same batik design as the ruler himself. A Dutch visitor to Mataram in 1656 saw the *Susuhunan* served and surrounded by 10,000 women, 4,000 of whom were seen spinning, weaving, embroidering, painting and sewing.¹³ Women controlled, as pointed out earlier, the production of cloths necessary for the market, ordinary consumption, and ceremonial use. Women also controlled the quality of cloth, the indigo and dying of it, and thus the entire batik making process. Court batik, like the kris, is equated with Javanism and nationalism. It may be presumed that the women of the court were moved by a spirit of retribution towards the Company's monopoly of the importation and pricing of Coromandel chintzes; they wanted revenge for the defeat of their men by the Dutch. Combined with the *Susuhunan*'s counter-monopoly on the sale of rice and cotton, the women made every attempt to imitate the imported chintzes, and improve their skills in the process. This began to make an impact on the sales of Indian cloths for the Company. Letters written to the Netherlands from 1676 onwards repeatedly mention the increase of weaving among the Indonesian women everywhere.

Indian and Chinese Influence on the Batik Revival

It is likely that some Indian input in the revival of batik occurred during Amangkurat I's reign when the Dutch issued an edict in 1662 that expelled the Indians living in Batavia.¹⁴ They were involved as tailors in the textile trade and as soon as they had saved a good amount of money, they returned with it back to

¹³ de Graaf ed1956: 256-57.

¹⁴ Chijs 1886, v.6:360

India, money that was withdrawn from Batavia, according to Company officials. Many Indians subsequently moved to Java's cities along the north coast. Some Indian merchants held offices, such as the appointment of a Gujarati as Governor at Japara. More to the point, Indians also had knowledge of how to prepare the cloth to make the dyes color fast. This knowledge was probably tapped early on by those to whom it mattered, the women making batik.

There was in Batavia a Chinese quarter, just like in other trading towns in Southeast Asia. In Batavia about 25% of the residents were Chinese.¹⁵ The wealthy ones married royal princesses from the Mataram court. The princesses physically left the court compounds with their entourage and presumably brought with them the art and technique of making batik; they may have been the channels through which the skills of batik making became widespread. The *Susuhunan* also gave titles to deserving locally born wealthy Muslim Chinese. There is no doubt that commercial ties existed between the court and the Chinese leaders in their respective communities, and that the Chinese entrepreneurs and traders were active in organizing the production and distribution of batik. The documents mention that they travelled to remote villages with the imported smooth and fine white *muri*, *parcalle*, and *salempuris* cloths.

Wax was plentiful and available in Java, although much wax also was imported to Java at the end of the 1600s, indicating a demand for them in batik making.¹⁶ Mary Hunt Kahlenberg has pointed out how a French publication of 1608 was the basis for the globalization of motifs that included the Chinese flower art, recognizable as designs on batik from Pekalongan.¹⁷

A Dutch letter from 1686 finally brought the matter in the open. The letter refers to the arrival of 50 European and 24 native Dutch ships from Coromandel with thousands of bales of cloths. The Director General thought the prices paid for them were too high and he is said to have complained: "If the painters on the Coast [of Coromandel] do not lower their prices and spruce up their business, *the Javanese will bypass them. They are so ingenious and as the proverb goes, will take the bread out of their mouths*" (my emphasis).¹⁸

For the next 30 years or so, the Dutch were on their toes with keeping the quality standards up and not be overshadowed by the Javanese. The Company desperately tried to sell their large stock of chintzes before they went out of fashion. Sales had decreased in all the places along the Passisir (north coast communities). The basic complaint was that the Company sold less and less cloth and profits were diminishing because of the weaving by the Javanese. When Coromandel experienced famine, pestilence and death from the war of 1687-88, it stimulated more local weaving and painting of cloths in the islands, according to the Dutch reports. Again in 1688, the documents stated the Dutch had difficulty stopping the importation of wax, needed for "the painting of cloths." The last complaint for the year was that the Company could not sell its textiles because the people bought it in Mataram. They were cheaper there than those from Coromandel although "het van schilderij zoo moy niet en is aen te zien", meaning the painting does not look quite as beautiful.

The last graph is the ultimate sign that the Company no longer sold the chintz on Java's north coast because batik had replaced it. The chart shows that a large number of chintzes were sold in the 1650s,

¹⁵ Ricklefs 1993, 2nd edition: 90

¹⁶ Laarhoven 1994: 403

¹⁷ Hunt Kahlenberg 1979: 245

¹⁸ Generale Missiven (1686) v.5: 56

but none after that. The chintz sold in 1757-59 was old stock that Governor-General Mossel ordered to dispose off.



Figure 3. Textile Sales of Java, north coast.

The silent textile trade war, staged by the Javanese women, had been won. I think that the evidence is clear that the batik art had re-sprouted and spread beyond the court in the second half of the 17th century due to a confluence of causes: resentment against the Dutch, the improvements in dyeing methods, the entrepreneurial spirit of the Chinese and Javanese traders, and last but not least the productive power of the Javanese women.

Bibliography

Bühler, Alfred and Eberhard Fischer (1979) *The Patola of Gujarat* 2 volumes, Krebs AG, Basel

Chijs, J. van der ed. (1885) *Nederlandsch-Indisch plakaatboek, 1602-1811*, 17 volumes. Batavia : Landsdrukkerij

<http://www.dbng.nl/nl/details?searchkey1=rel&searchterm1=071862455&searchtype1=and&searchterm2=&searchterm3=&item=5>

Dagh-Register gehouden int Casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaetse als over geheel Nederlandts India (1887-1931) Volumes 1-31 covering most years between 1624-1681 Batavia, Landsdrukkerij and The Hague, Martinus Nijhof.

Foster, William (Sir, Ed.) (1943) *The Voyage of Sir Henry Middleton to the Moluccas 1604-1606 : A new and enlarged edition with an introduction and notes by Sir William Foster...* [The Last East-Indian voyage : The Narrative of Thomas Clayborne His nautical observations Fragment of a Journal kept in the Ascension "An Exact discourse of the subtitles..of the East-Indians. London, Hakluyt Society (Glasgow, printed by R. Mac Lehos).

Generale missiven van gouverneurs-generaal en raden aan heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, Deel 5, 1698-1713.

<http://www.historici.nl/retroboeken/generalemissiven/#page=0&accessor=toc&source=5>

Graaf, H. J. de. (1956) *De vijf gezantschapsreizen van Rijklof van Goens naar het hof van Mataram, 1648-1654*. Werken van de Linschoten Vereeniging vol. LIX, The Hague, Martinus Nijhof.

Hardjonagoro, K. R. T. (1979) "The Place of Batik in the History and Philosophy of Javanese Textiles: A Personal View" in Mattiebel Gittinger ed. *Indonesian Textiles*. Proceedings, Washington D.C. The Textile Museum.

Hunt Kahlenberg, Mary (1979) "The Influence of the European Herbal on Indonesian Batik" in Mattiebel Gittinger ed. *Indonesian Textiles*. Proceedings, Washington D.C. The Textile Museum.

Laarhoven, Ruurdje (1994) "The Power of Cloth." Unpublished PhD thesis for the Australian National University, Canberra.

Nagtegaal, L. W. (1988) "Rijden op een Hollandse Tijger, De Noordkust van Java en de V.O.C 1680-1743." Unpublished PhD thesis for the Rijksuniversiteit, Utrecht

Reid, Anthony (1988) *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680*, Volume Two: Expansion and Crisis. New Haven, Yale University Press.

Ricklefs, M. C. (1993) *A History of Modern Indonesia since c1300, Second Edition*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Ricklefs, M. C. (1993) *War, Culture and Economy in Java 1677-1726, Asian and European Imperialism in the early Kartasura period*. Asian Studies Association of Australia, Southeast Asia Publications Series, No 24 Sydney, Allen & Unwin.

Rouffaer, G. P. and J. W. Ijzerman eds. (1925) *De eerste schipvaart der Nederlanders naar Oost-Indië onder Cornelis de Houtman, 1595-1597*. Werken van de Linschoten Vereeniging vol. VII, 1, D'Eerste Boeck, van Willem Lodewijckz. The Hague, Martinus Nijhof.