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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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Batik of Java: Global Inspiration

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Batik, the resist-dyeing technique of patterning cloth through the application of wax, has been known since antiquity in several parts of the world, but it reached its highest level of complexity on the island of Java. While deeply embedded in local traditions and associated with the beliefs, philosophy, and social order of Java, during the last two centuries batik has become a powerful cultural intermediary connecting Indonesia with other parts of the world. The aim of this paper is to outline the history of this process and determine the impact of the Javanese batik technique and aesthetics on textile traditions in Japan, West Africa, Europe, India, and Australia.

The underlying principle of wax-resist dyeing is that those parts of the cloth to remain undyed are covered with molten wax. In Javanese batik, wax is applied by hand with a small instrument called the *canting*, resulting in the creation of individual designs and providing each fabric with unique qualities. In mass-produced fabrics, the wax resist is applied with a copper stamp or *cap*. A distinctive feature of all Javanese batiks is that they are double-sided cloths, with identical patterns drawn on both sides.

The iconography of batik is quite complex, resulting from a harmonious merging of local, ancient motifs with ornamental borrowings from the traditions of India, China, the Middle East, and Europe.¹ Frequently, batik motifs have been invested with deep symbolic meanings and have been linked to the Javanese system of beliefs known as *kejawen*. Over centuries, batik has evolved into several regional and ethnic forms. For example, the blue-and-brown fabrics known as *kain sogan* associated with the traditions of local courts are typical for Central Java, while in the port cities on the northern coast of the island a cosmopolitan and multicolored style has evolved, with frequent references to Chinese and Indian heritage.

Japan

The Japanese encounter with Javanese batik textiles, known in Japan as *Jawa sarasa*, is a long-lasting process that began in the seventeenth century and continues today. Although it was a relatively small-scale engagement, never as intensive as the European or African encounters with Javanese textiles, nonetheless it proved very persistent over four centuries.

Javanese batik aesthetics entered the Japanese cultural paradigms of the Tokugawa era in an indirect way, through Indian trade textiles. In the seventeen and eighteen centuries the main supplier of these goods was the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Indian textiles destined for the Japanese market were dispatched from two ports on Java, controlled by the Dutch: Banten and Batavia (Jakarta). This trade, initiated in 1609, continued for more than two centuries, and during the years 1641 to 1854 the Dutch were the sole European traders operating in that market. There is no doubt that, in addition to generic Indian chintz and chintz produced specifically for the Japanese market, the consignments of textiles shipped

¹ Alit Djajasoebrata, *Flowers from Universe: Textiles of Java* (Volendam, The Netherlands: LM Publishers, 2018), 71–77, 107–23.

from Java to Nagasaki contained Indian textiles originally produced for Indonesian markets, known in the western part of the archipelago as *kain sembagi*.² They were decorated with motifs favored by the Malay and Javanese peoples, such as *tumpal* (rows of elongated triangles) and geometric medallions set in a grid of intersecting bands. *Kain sembagi* also became highly treasured in Japan, with large pieces incorporated into dress items and smaller ones used in the tea ceremony and as containers for precious objects.

Obi sash (far left) with the Javanese *tumpal* motif, probably made of *sembagi* cloth (right).

Left, *Beauties of the Eastern Quarter: Onaka and Oshima of Nakamachi*, approx. 1775–1777, by Kitao Shigemasa (Japanese, 1739–1820). Ink and colors on paper. *Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Gift of the Grabhorn Ukiyo-e Collection*, 2005.100.62. Photograph © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Right, Waist wrap cloth with *tumpal* motif in the style of Indian *sembagi* trade textiles, northern coast of Java, late 19th–early 20th century. Hand-drawn wax resist (*batik tulis*) on cotton. Krzysztof Musial collection.

In addition to the export of *kain sembagi*, there is evidence that from the seventeenth century onward small quantities of original Javanese batiks also entered the market. Although the VOC did not trade in Javanese textiles, batik might have been present in the cargo of private traders or sent to Japan as gifts.³ In the first half of the seventeenth century, in Batavia, there was a distinct Japanese community numbering approximately 300 to 400 persons.⁴ One of the residents was Cornelia Cnoll, a young woman of Dutch-Japanese descent whose mother lived in Hirado. In a letter sent from Batavia in April 1671, Cornelia lists the gifts sent to her

² John Guy noted that many of the *sarasa* used in Japan were the same as cloths made in India and found in western Indonesia, especially Sumatra and Malaysia. See John Guy, *Woven Cargoes. Indian Textiles in the East* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 170, 174.

³ Javanese textiles do not feature in the list of goods exported by the VOC from Batavia to Japan. See Ruurdje Laarhoven, *The Power of Cloth: The Textile trade of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) 1600–1780*, PhD thesis (Canberra: Australian National University, 1994), 215–18, 359–74.

⁴ Iwao Seiichi, “Japanese Emigrants in Batavia During the 17th Century,” *Acta Asiatica*, no. 18 (1970), 1–25.

mother and relatives. Apart from a range of diverse chintz fabrics, she presented her mother with two pieces of batik fabric.⁵

The overwhelming interest in *sarasa* led in the eighteenth century to local Japanese production of textiles resembling imported Indian chintz. Known as *wasarasa* (Japanese *sarasa*), they replicated designs of Indian trade textiles through a simplified dyeing technology. Production of *wasarasa* resulted in a wide dissemination of Indian chintz designs among those groups in Japanese society that could not afford to purchase original *sarasa*. *Kain sembagi* designs were included in the production of *wasarasa*. At the end of the eighteenth century motifs of “exotic textiles” started to circulate even more widely, following the publication of *sarasa* manuals known as *sarasa benran*.⁶

It is obvious that already during the Tokugawa era (1603–1867) Javanese batik (*Jawa sarasa*) was recognised in Japan as a distinctive group of textiles, and its characteristic features were known to at least some consumers. In 1829 the Netherlands Trading Society (Nederlandsche Handelmaatschappij) sent to the trading post in Nagasaki industrial imitations of Javanese batik textiles printed in Belgium, called *batiksche sitzen* (batik chintz) or *dubbelde batiks* (copy batiks). In response to this shipment, the officials in Nagasaki advised that only high-quality copies of Javanese batiks, printed on both sides, would be accepted by Japanese consumers. Clearly double-sided decoration was recognised in Japan, as on Java, as a distinctive feature of batik textiles.⁷

The beginning of the Meiji Restoration (1868) meant the opening of Japan to the outside world and the establishment of direct contacts with foreign countries. Indirectly, it led to the introduction of the wax-resist dyeing technique to Japanese textile arts, as Japanese artists and artisans traveling overseas at the beginning of the twentieth century became aware of European experiments with the batik technique. Equally significant was the opening of the ancient Shōsōin Imperial Repository in Nara. It revealed thousands of treasures, including a group of eighth-century textiles, some of them decorated with the distinctive wax-resist dyeing technique *rōkechi* that was abandoned in the following centuries. The modern Japanese technique of wax dyeing became known as *rōketsuzome*, and its pioneers were Tsuruichi Tsurumaki, Tomonosuke Ogō, Takeo Sano, and Matsugorō Hirokawa.⁸ The revival of wax-resist dyeing led many Japanese artists to conduct close studies of Javanese batik, resulting in the use of the Javanese *canting* or wax-pen and, at times, the introduction of Indonesian motifs. In the following decades Japanese artists greatly modified the process of wax-resist dyeing by introducing technical innovations and new means of expression.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Japanese artists, scholars, and traders started to visit Indonesia, and direct commercial and cultural links were established between the two countries. One of the most well-known Japanese entrepreneurs was Sawabe Masao, who, in

⁵ Leonard Blussé, *Strange Company. Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women and the Dutch in VOC Batavia, Verhandelungen van Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land en Volkenkunde*, no. 122 (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1986), 191.

⁶ Guy, *Woven Cargoes*, 175–77; Yoshimoto Kamon, *Wa sarasa monyō zukan* (Tokyo: Guraffikusha, 1976), 97.

⁷ Algemeen Rijksarchief, Den Haag. Nederlandse Factorij in Japan 703, no. 42, 1829.

Hundreds of samples of Dutch textiles exported during the first half of 19th century to Japan and collected by the Nagasaki Customs are in the collection of the National Museum in Tokyo (no. TI-504). Book no. 49, dated the Bunsei era 12 (equivalent to 1829) features samples of double-sided, high-quality printed cloth imitating the style of Javanese batik. With high probability, these are the batik imitations that were mentioned in the Dutch report in the Algemeen Rijksarchief in Den Haag.

⁸ Betsy Sterling Benjamin, *The World of Rozome. Wax-resist Textiles of Japan* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1996), 100–10.

the 1920s and 1930s in Yogyakarta, Central Java, set up the batik workshop “Fuji” that specialized in the production of textiles and dress accessories for export to Japan. In 1927 the workshop employed 90 people, providing them with reasonable wages and good working conditions.⁹

During the Japanese occupation of Indonesia (1942–1945) Japanese interest in batik found its expression in the creation of a new type of cloth called *batik hokokai*. It featured high technical standards and very detailed, dense decoration that was an amalgamation of Chinese, Javanese, and Japanese motifs. These fabrics, usually produced in Chinese workshops on the northern coast of Java, were used by Japanese authorities as gifts to their supporters.

The Japanese fascination with Javanese batik continues today, with several workshops in Pekalongan and other central Javanese cities producing textiles for the Japanese market. Of particular significance is the Ardiyanto batik workshop in Yogyakarta, which specializes in the production of kimonos and *obi* decorated with Javanese motifs. It also makes lengths of silk for Western-style garments with motifs adjusted to the Japanese market, such as cherry blossoms. The company also has outlets in Tokyo.¹⁰

Japanese engagement with batik evolved from an indirect one, facilitated through Indian and Dutch agency, to a direct one in which Indonesian producers receive feedback from their representatives in Japan and even worked to specific orders sent by Japanese clients. Over four centuries of contact, the volume of Indonesian textiles entering Japan was never great; nevertheless, they left a definite imprint on Japanese textile decoration, fashion, and applied arts.

Africa

In the twentieth century machine-printed textiles with Javanese motifs became a staple cloth for more than 500 million people in West and Central Africa. Similar to Japan, the transfer of Javanese textile heritage to Africa occurred as a result of European agency, without the involvement of the Indonesian people.

African cottons with Javanese motifs have their roots in industrial imitations of Javanese batiks, printed throughout most of the nineteenth century in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, and the UK, for the lower strata of Indonesian society.¹¹ Following the peak of production in 1867, the market experienced a sharp decline. Subsequently, the initiative of Scottish merchant Ebenezer Brown Fleming, around 1890, to divert the flow of these textiles to the African Gold Coast was a welcome move.¹² Although Europe had been exporting various types of textiles to West Africa since at least the sixteenth century, textiles with Javanese motifs were a new product on this market. They were embraced by local consumers

⁹ P. de Kat Angelino, *Batikrapport 2: Midden-Java* (Weltevreden: Kantoor van Arbeid, 1930–31), 175, 189. Peter Post, “Indonesianisasi and Japonization,” in *Indonesian Economic Decolonization in Regional and International Perspective*, eds. J. Thomas Lindblad and Peter Post (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2009), 61–86. Samples of Fuji batiks that illustrate the Central Javanese process *kain sogan* are in the collection of the National Museum in Tokyo, no. TI-349-17.

¹⁰ Research conducted by the author on Java, August 2018.

¹¹ Maria Wronska-Friend, “The early production of Javanese batik imitations in Europe (1813–1840),” in *Kunst und Geschichte des Glarner und europäischen Zeugdrucks*, ed. Reto D. Jenny, *Glarner Tuch Gespräche* 10/11 (Ennenda, Switzerland: Comptoir von Daniel Jenny & Cie., 2017), 49–57.

¹² Helen Elands, “Dutch Wax Classics. The designs introduced by Ebenezer Brown Fleming circa 1890–1912 and their legacy,” in *African-Print fashion Now!* ed. Suzanne Gott et al. (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2017), 53–61.

Gold Coast was the colonial name given to the coastal territory of today’s Ghana.

with great enthusiasm and demand grew very quickly.¹³ At the beginning of the twentieth century all European factories that previously specialized in batik imitations destined for Southeast Asia, shifted the core of their production to African markets.

Following the African independence era of the 1960s, and given the need to develop local industry, the bulk of production moved to African countries, with textile factories set up in Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Togo, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Another shift in the global history of African prints took place in the last decade of the twentieth century, as China became a new producer and soon dominated the market, undercutting local production and, in a number of cases, leading to the closure of African factories.¹⁴

European agency in bringing the Javanese textile heritage to Africa proved very successful and long-lasting. Archival records indicate that initially, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, textiles exported to African markets closely resembled copies of Javanese batiks produced for Indonesia. Gradually the Javanese design vocabulary and the technology of printing were adjusted to the needs of African consumers, with European designers assuming the role of cultural translators between these two distant parts of the world.

Javanese batik inspired contemporary African prints in several ways: by the use of the resist-dyeing technique, the introduction of the principles of spatial composition, and a range of new motifs and color combinations favored on Java. Industrial copies of Javanese batiks stimulated the development of two major groups of African fabrics: “wax prints” manufactured through industrial resist-printing, and much cheaper “Java prints” or “fancy prints,” the result of direct printing. Due to the complex, highly specialized method of manufacturing, wax prints became luxury goods, while direct-printed textiles form the bulk of production.

In Javanese batik the effect of colorful veining (*remek*) that results from the intentional cracking of the layer of wax is used very sparingly, as technical perfection and total control of the medium are the most highly prized attributes of these textiles. In Africa, however, a strongly pronounced veining effect has become a distinctive, highly appreciated feature of these textiles. To achieve this effect in the production of wax prints, following the resist application but prior to the first dyeing, a special machine crumples the cloth and breaks the layer of resist in an irregular way. The ensuing process of immersion dyeing yields the desired veining effect, while additional colors are surface-printed. In “fancy prints” and “Java prints” the networks of colorful veins that imitate wax-cracking are printed directly on the cloth.

The motifs and designs of Javanese batiks have also undergone a process of deep adaptation. In many respects African design aesthetics are the opposite of the highly refined and subdued style of Javanese textiles, as local consumers prefer larger designs, brighter colors, and open, clearly expressed patterns. Therefore, when transferred to Africa, the Javanese motifs were enlarged, simplified, and presented in a bolder, contrasting range of colors. All major Javanese motifs appear on African prints, although they have frequently been extracted from

¹³ In the 1870–80s the Dutch factory P.F. van Vlissingen & Co. (now Vlisco) attempted to sell copies of Javanese batiks in East Africa. They also introduced some Javanese motifs to *kanga* textiles. See MacKenzie Moon Ryan, “A Decade of Design: The Global Invention of the Kanga, 1876–1886,” *Textile History* 48, no. 1 (2017), 101–32.

¹⁴ Salihu Maiwada and Elisha Renne, “The Kaduna textile industry and the decline of textile manufacturing in Northern Nigeria, 1955–2010,” *Textile History* 44, no. 2 (2013), 171–96.

their original context and combined with new motifs derived from African or European traditions. Some Javanese motifs, such as the patchwork *tambal* or cone-like *lar* (a wing of the mythical bird Garuda) have become “classic” African designs, printed repeatedly over several decades with only minor adjustments to their layout and color.

An important characteristic of African prints is the distinctive *horror vacui*, a feature that makes these fabrics so vibrant and expressive. This aversion to free, undecorated space in surface arrangements has its roots in Javanese batik aesthetics. In African prints, as in Javanese batik, the confines of large motifs or the background of the cloth are covered with small, densely placed abstract ornaments. Almost all of them—scrolls, dots, small spirals, zig-zag motifs, or hatchings—have been borrowed directly from the vocabulary of Javanese batik, where they are known as *isen*. In some cases, even a particular color combination favored on Java has crossed over to Africa: for example, a large group of African prints replicate the blue-and-brown colors of the *sogan* batiks of Central Java.

Javanese head scarf (left) with *pagi-sore* composition (“morning and afternoon”) and wax print for West African market (right), with the same arrangement called “day and night.” The upper section of the African cloth features the popular Javanese *lar* motif (wing of Garuda).

Left: Hand-drawn wax resist (*batik tulis*) on cotton. Java, late 19th—early 20th century. Rudolf Smend collection.
Right: Cotton wax print produced by Vlisco, the Netherlands, for the West African market, approx. 2012.

As on Java, cloth in African societies functions as a facilitator of the spoken word. The type of fabric and its patterns act as an important medium of visual communication, conveying messages about the wearer’s social position, personal status, and even emotions. In the cultural milieu of Africa, Javanese motifs received new names and new identities. As the connection between Indonesia and West Africa was not a direct one but facilitated through European intermediaries, Indonesian names and meanings were not carried over; in most cases, African consumers are not even aware of the Javanese roots of their textiles. For example, the rows of elongated triangles, known on Java as the *tumpal* motif, in Ghana received the name “Pencils of President Kwame Nkrumah.”¹⁵ The only case of an Indonesian name transferred to West African textiles is the diagonal composition of opposing darker and lighter sections, known in Javanese batik as *pagi-sore* (“morning and afternoon”) and in African prints as “day and night.”

¹⁵ Interviews conducted by the author in Ghana, February 2018.

Nelson Mandela's fascination with Javanese batik represents a separate chapter in the history of textile connections between Indonesia and Africa. In the 1990s, during one of his visits to Indonesia, Mandela received six batik shirts from President Suharto. Designed by Iwan Tirta, Indonesia's most famous couturier, the shirts were made of high-quality, hand-decorated silk batiks, and Mandela wore them on a number of formal occasions. In the ensuing years Mandela ordered at least a dozen similar shirts from Tirta. There is no doubt that for Mandela the act of wearing an Indonesian batik shirt was not a political statement but a personal, aesthetic choice.¹⁶

Just over a century since their introduction to Africa, cottons with Javanese designs have undergone extensive technical development and aesthetic adaptation. Invested with new meanings, the textile heritage of Java has been deeply assimilated into West African cultural traditions, becoming an integral part of local culture and frequently used as a highly evocative expression of African identity.

In the 1970s Western craft advisors introduced the wax-resist dyeing technique to African cottage industry. It is termed "batik" and, as it employs hand-drawn or hand-printed wax resist, it has some affinity with the technique of Javanese batik; nevertheless, these fabrics evolved without any reference to the textile traditions of Java and constitute a new, fully autonomous group of African textiles.

Europe

The introduction of the batik technique to the Netherlands around 1890 was another outcome of colonial encounters. In a short time batik gained significant popularity, and a decade later the Javanese method of textile decoration was practiced all over Europe, becoming a distinctive feature of Art Nouveau and Art Deco.

The Javanese technique attracted the attention of European artists and artisans for two reasons. First, towards the end of the nineteenth century Europe experienced renewed interest in handwork as a result of growing opposition to industrial, mass-produced objects. The ideas of John Ruskin and William Morris found many followers on the European continent and resulted in an appreciation of high-quality handmade objects. The second reason was the fascination with Far Eastern arts. While artists in London and Paris were captivated by the art of Japan, the Dutch searched for inspiration in the cultural traditions of their colonies, especially Indonesia. In the process, they discovered the Javanese technique of batik, which was useful for creating high-quality decorative objects of unique character.

Around 1892 a group of young artists in Amsterdam (Carel Lion Cachet, Gerrit Dijsselhof, and Theo Nieuwenhuis) started to conduct experiments with batik. Initially the wax-dyeing technique was employed in interior decoration to achieve a harmonious, integrated style in which all decorative elements would be executed in the same range of colors with the same or similar designs.¹⁷ Given the growing demand for textiles decorated with the Javanese technique, in 1897 Agatha Wegerif-Gravestein set up, in Apeldoorn, the first atelier in Europe specializing in the mass production of batiks. Besides producing a large range of decorative textiles, she introduced the technique to the decoration of garments.

¹⁶ Maria Wronska-Friend, *Batik Jawa bagi Dunia. Javanese Batik to the World* (Jakarta: Indonesian Cross-Cultural Community, 2016), 134–35.

¹⁷ Joop Joosten, "De batik en de vernieuwing van de nijverheidskunst in Nederland 1892–1903," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 23 (1972), 407–21.

Following the 1900 World Exposition in Paris, where a range of Dutch batiks was exhibited, the technique found new practitioners all over Europe. The peak of the popularity of batik falls during the years 1905 to 1930, when it was practiced by thousands of artists, artisans, and amateurs. Apart from the Netherlands, batik became especially popular in Germany, France, Poland, Austria, Great Britain, and the United States. The range of textiles and their applications was very diverse. Batik fabrics were frequently used in interior decoration as cushions, curtains, furniture lining, and to create a range of special garments, but also in *haute couture* where batik became the embodiment of Oriental fantasy. In 1911, in Paris, Paul Poiret designed a series of evening coats decorated with the batik technique and Oriental motifs. In the 1920s Marguerita Pangon continued the trend of creating opulent batik garments in an Art Deco style, destined for an exclusive clientele that included some of the crowned heads of Europe.¹⁸

In its early stage the rapidly growing interest in batik was hampered by technical problems, especially the lack of suitable synthetic dyes to produce durable colors at low temperatures. Consequently, in 1900 the laboratory of the Koloniaal Museum in Haarlem set up a research project with the aim of adapting the Javanese technique to the needs of European practitioners. In the process, the laboratory staff conducted several hundred experiments with natural dyes, mordants, and various types of wax compounds. A practical recommendation was to use a blue-and-brown range of colors (indigo and catechu).¹⁹ The dyes were easily available in Europe, produced permanent colors, and, importantly, were used in the production of the *sogan* batiks of Central Java, which were widely recognized as “the most beautiful and aristocratic type of Javanese batik.”²⁰ The Haarlem Laboratory exhibited Dutch batik at several exhibitions in Europe (Italy, Germany, Denmark, and Belgium), and the brochure promoting Haarlem-style batik was translated into at least five languages. Subsequently, a large number of European batiks created at the beginning of the twentieth century replicated the Central Javanese range of blue and brown *kain sogan* textiles.

Left: Chris Lebeau, The Netherlands, 1905. Detail of a three-part screen produced in the Javanese *nitik* (dot) style with the *sogan lorodan* technique. Silk, hand-drawn wax resist, natural dyes. Collection S.S.K., Provinciaal Museum van Drenthe, Assen, no. E1994-0260.

¹⁸ Wronska-Friend, *Batik Jawa bagi Dunia*, 43–87.

¹⁹ Maria Wronska-Friend, “Javanese batik for European artists: experiments at the Koloniaal Laboratorium in Haarlem,” in *Batik Drawn in Wax*, ed. Itie van Hout (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 2001), 106–23.

²⁰ Gerret Pieter Rouffaer, “Batikken,” in *Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsch-Indië* 1 (s’Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1917), 193.

Right: Detail of a waist wrap cloth (*kain panjang*) with motifs in the *nitik* (dot) style in the blue-and-brown range of colors (*kain sogan*). Cotton with hand-drawn resist (*batik tulis*), Winotosastro batik workshop, Yogyakarta, Java, 2011.

The laboratory at the Koloniaal Museum closely collaborated with a group of artists associated with the School of Applied Arts in Haarlem. From 1901 to 1908 they created an exceptional range of batik textiles that testify to a deep internalization not only of the technique but also of the aesthetics of Javanese *kain sogan* textiles. Most outstanding are the works of Chris Lebeau, representing a very high level of technical accomplishment in wax drawing and dyeing. Similar to the best works of Javanese masters, his batiks were produced in a highly controlled and detailed manner, avoiding the cracking of wax or other accidental effects. In addition, Lebeau executed most of his batiks in a style similar to the Javanese *nitik*, in which the outlines of ornaments are composed not of continuous lines but of thousands of tiny dots of wax.²¹

The deep assimilation of Javanese principles of textile decoration is further illustrated by batiks produced in Poland at the Warsztaty Krakowskie, or Krakow Workshops, during the years 1913 to 1926. In Poland the perception of the Javanese technique differed significantly from the rest of Europe, where batik was usually perceived as an exotic Oriental technique. Specifically, in Poland a similar technique of wax-resist dyeing has been used for centuries in the decoration of Easter eggs, known as *pisanki*. Thus, here, batik was recognized as a local, indigenous tradition that was transferred from an egg-shell to a cloth surface. At the same time, members of the Krakow Workshops closely studied the Javanese principles of surface decoration. In the process, numerous Javanese motifs were combined with elements of Polish folk art, resulting in an unusual fusion known as “Javanese-Krakow style.”²²

Yet the majority of European artisans who practiced batik adapted the principles of the Javanese technique in a rather superficial way. The attempts to conduct deep, systematic studies of the Javanese textiles, as they were done at Haarlem or Krakow, were quite rare. Similarly, attempts to recreate handmade copies of Javanese textiles in Europe were sporadic.²³ As a highly flexible technique, batik allowed a great degree of personal expression, and European artists and artisans used this medium in their own individual ways; a uniform, pan-European style of batik never developed.

Growing market demand for European batik meant that in most cases the Javanese technique had to be simplified and adjusted to the expectations of consumers. The most important feature of batik, its capacity for high-quality designs of artistic merit, was frequently compromised. A common feature of European batiks was a strongly pronounced veining effect resulting from the purposeful cracking of the layer of wax, pioneered in the Wegerif atelier. This crackled effect was regarded as evidence that a wax resist was used and that a particular cloth was made by hand rather than an industrial method.

The European fascination with the batik technique led, at the beginning of the twentieth century, to the introduction of Javanese motifs and aesthetics into the works of several European artists and designers. Most notable were Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Henri Matisse, and Henry van de Velde.

²¹ Wronska-Friend, *Batik Jawa bagi Dunia*, 69–74.

²² Maria Wronska-Friend, *Sztuka Woskiem Pisana. Batik w Indonezji i w Polsce* (Warszawa: Gondwana 2008), 133–89.

²³ German painter Max Fleischer and his Javano-Dutch wife Maria Wiemans set up a batik workshop in Berlin, in 1902, in which they used batik patterns and natural dyes brought from Java. See Robert Breuer, “Batiks,” *Kunst und Handwerk* 54 (1903–4): 333–39.

Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Henri Matisse both had collections of Javanese batiks. Although they never practiced the batik technique, they closely studied Javanese batik ornamentation. Mackintosh, during his stay in London from 1916 to 1923, created a series of textile designs that echo Javanese motifs such as *parang curigo* and *sekar jagad*. Henri Matisse's drawings from 1937 also reflect several Javanese motifs, especially *parang rusak* and *tumpal*.²⁴

The fascination with batik demonstrated by Henry van de Velde, a Belgian designer and architect based in Weimar, Germany, from 1901 to 1916, was quite different. Well aware of his clients' interest in batik, for reasons of efficiency he decided to use industrial imitations printed in the Netherlands for his interior-design projects, rather than handmade batiks. He also promoted them as a cloth for fashionable garments worn by his family and friends. In this way Dutch batik imitations, destined for the lower strata of Indonesian society, became a fashionable fabric for garments worn by the German artistic and financial elite.²⁵

In the 1930s, as new tendencies dominated Western design, the popularity of the batik technique in European decorative arts started to diminish. However, batik did not disappear completely from Western art and design. In the ensuing decades it gained popularity in the fine arts as a medium for resist-dyed paintings. In crafts, wax-resist dyeing has become a global phenomenon, practiced in most parts of the world. More than a century since its introduction to Europe, the batik technique, practiced by several generations of artists and artisans who continuously test its technical limits and artistic potential, has undergone a deep transformation and shows little affinity to the Javanese method of textile decoration.

India

Although the technique of wax-resist dyeing has been practiced in India for several centuries, its current version, inspired by Javanese batik, is the outcome of Rabindranath Tagore's visit to Java and Bali in 1927.

Tagore, the prominent Indian writer, philosopher, and composer who received the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature, was keen to restore ancient cultural links that had connected India and Indonesia for almost a millennium. Therefore, the main objective of his visit to Indonesia was "to study Hindu influence in Javanese religion, art and music."²⁶

Aware of those interests, his hosts prepared a special program that included a number of cultural events. Among them were batik presentations witnessed on several occasions by Tagore and accompanying Bengali scholars and artists, while high-quality batik textiles featured prominently among the gifts presented to them.²⁷ However, Tagore's interest in Indonesian textiles went further: his group purchased additional batik fabrics and tools in the shops and markets of Surakarta and Yogyakarta. One of his companions, Surendranath Kar, took practical lessons in the batik technique.

²⁴ Wronska-Friend, *Batik Jawa bagi Dunia*, 83–87.

²⁵ Maria Wronska-Friend, "Fernöstliche Faszination: Henry van de Velde und die javanische Batik. Oriental fascination: Henry van de Velde and Javanese batik," in Thomas Föhl and Antje Neumann, eds., *Henry van de Velde. Raumkunst und Kunsthandwerk. Interior Design and Decorative Arts 2: Textilien. Textiles* (Leipzig: Seemann Verlag, 2014), 369–97.

²⁶ Telegram sent by Tagore to the British Consul in Batavia, 29.05.1927. Leiden University Library, Arnold A. Bake Collection, DH 1214.

²⁷ Supriya Roy, ed., *Letters from Java. Rabindranath Tagore's Tour of South-East Asia 1927* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 2010), 104–7.

Tagore's awareness of the creative potential of batik preceded his visit to Java, likely resulting from the Western fascination with batik at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1923 Pratima Devi, Tagore's daughter-in-law, learned the principles of batik during a visit to Paris. On returning to Santiniketan, Tagore's place of residence in Bengal, she set up a small batik workshop.²⁸ Presumably, Tagore was keen to introduce the batik technique to the curriculum of the Kala Bhavana art college in Santiniketan, and his trip to Java provided the opportunity to further his knowledge of Javanese textiles and the methods of their production.

The collection of the Kala Bhavana Nandan Museum at Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan contains more than 30 Javanese batiks registered around 1930–31; almost all of them were brought from Indonesia by Tagore and his companions.²⁹ Most of them are medium-quality, blue-and-brown *kain sogan* textiles from Yogyakarta and Surakarta. Their condition indicates intensive use: in the 1930s these fabrics were frequently borrowed from the museum's collection and used as costumes and stage decorations in Tagore's dance dramas (*nrityanatya*) that toured India, as well as in Javanese-style dances.

The same fabrics were used as instructional materials in batik classes taught at Kala Bhavana under the guidance of Surendranath Kar. The new technique was taken up with great enthusiasm and soon found many followers. Among the most gifted students were the sisters Gouri Bhanja and Jamuna Sen, who later worked as art teachers at Kala Bhavana and contributed greatly to the development of the characteristic style of Santiniketan batiks.

Although Tagore's companions brought Javanese batik tools to Santiniketan, local practitioners decided to simplify the technique by applying the wax resist with a brush: a small one to draw the design outlines, and a large, flat one to apply the wax-and-paraffin mixture to large sections of fabric such as the central field of the sari. The use of the brush led to a more spontaneous style of surface decoration than the closely controlled drawing of Javanese batik with the wax-pen.

Students at Kala Bhavana carefully analyzed the principles of Javanese batik decoration, and one assignment required them to make a batik cloth in the Javanese style.³⁰ However, Indonesian motifs and principles of decoration were rarely transferred to Santiniketan batiks. The majority of these fabrics follow the aesthetic style of Kala Bhavana, focused largely on the spiritual relationship between humans and nature. Floral motifs are frequent, as well as small animals, birds, and fish presented in harmonious, well-balanced compositions.³¹

²⁸ Haimanti Chakravarty, *Batik. Decoration on Fabric as Practised in Java and South India* (Santiniketan: The Santiniketan Press, n.d.), 1.

²⁹ Author's research at the Nandan Kala Bhavana Museum in October 2016. Archival photographs indicate that Rabindranath Tagore also had a private collection of batiks that did not enter Kala Bhavana Nandan Museum.

³⁰ Interviews with Kala Bhavana graduates conducted at Santiniketan in 2016.

³¹ Wronska-Friend, *Jawa Batik bagi Dunia*, 157–66.

Achal, the decorated end panel of a silk batik sari. Made by Sulekha Bhattacharya, Santiniketan, 2012.

Almost a century since its introduction to Santiniketan, the Javanese technique has received a new identity and become a distinctive feature of Bengali arts and crafts. In addition to the production of exclusive textiles such as silk saris by a group of Kala Bhavana graduates, a significant cottage industry has developed to provide employment to local women, especially from rural areas and disadvantaged families. Graduates of Kala Bhavana have also been instrumental in promoting the batik technique in other parts of India and abroad, for example in Burma.

Today Bengali batik remains the most significant legacy of Tagore's visit to Java, a tangible outcome of his efforts to revive cultural dialogue between India and Indonesia.

Australia

In a rather unusual cross-cultural encounter, in the early 1970s batik was embraced by the Aboriginal communities of the central desert in Australia. In a short time the new textile technique gained significant popularity, widely accepted as a new medium to reinterpret ancient spiritual traditions and make them available to a wider audience.

The first Aboriginal community to embrace batik was Ernabella, a small settlement of the Anangu people in the Musgrave Ranges of Central Australia. In 1971 the coordinator of the local Art Centre, Winifred Hilliard, decided to introduce batik to widen the scope of techniques used by Anangu women. The first batik instructors were American artist Leo Brereton and Danish artist Vivianne Bertelsen. Both had acquired their batik skills on Java, so the Anangu women learned the technique as it was practiced in Indonesia, using original tools imported from that country. In 1975 direct contact with Indonesia was established when three Ernabella women went to Yogyakarta to enhance their skills at the Batik Research Institute.³² Although the Indonesian way of learning the batik technique by copying Javanese designs was contrary to the intuitive approach to batik developed at Ernabella, the visit left a lasting impression on the style of the locally produced batiks, especially on surface design: whereas previously large, flowing motifs were placed against an empty background, following the visit to Indonesia almost all Ernabella batiks featured a background densely covered with small "fill-in" motifs of points and dots similar to the Javanese *isen*.³³

However, at Utopia, another Aboriginal community of the central desert, batik was embraced in a different way. At its peak, around 1988, batik was practiced there by around 90 women

³² David Kaus, *Ernabella Batiks in the Hilliard Collection of the National Museum of Australia* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2004), 20–31.

³³ Wronska-Friend, *Jawa Batik bagi Dunia*, 186–90.

under Emily Kame Ngwarreye, an elderly woman of great charisma who assumed the role of “batik boss.”³⁴ While batik motifs at Ernabella were purely decorative, without any narrative qualities or encoded meanings, at Utopia they were often associated with traditional cosmology or rituals, with the wax drawings depicting the ancestral landscape of the Dreamings. This concept paralleled the portrayal of the sacred landscape in the *semen* design of Javanese batik, represented through a range of cosmic symbols originating in the Hindu-Javanese tradition. Violet Apetyarr, one of the Utopia women who in 1994 spent several weeks improving her batik skills at the Brahma Tirta Sari studio in Yogyakarta, commented on the spiritual commonalities of Javanese and Aboriginal batiks in the following way: “Our things have Law and theirs are the same; they have Law as well. Theirs comes from the land, and ours comes from the land as well. Everybody comes and gathers together for ceremony. People come from all over the place. In the same way, we are getting to make batik.”³⁵

Tarian Terakhir/Last Dance (detail), a collaborative work by artists of the Brahma Tirta Sari batik studio and Aboriginal women of Utopia Urapuntja. Hand-drawn and stamped resist (*batik tulis* and *batik cap*) on silk, Yogyakarta/Utopia, 2005. Collection of Brahma Tirta Sari.

The direct contacts between Aboriginal and Javanese artists were due largely to the initiative of Nia Fliam and Agus Ismoyo of the Brahma Tirta Sari studio in Yogyakarta, renowned for a range of innovative batik textiles created in the spiritual traditions of the Javanese philosophy of *kejawen*. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed several workshops and collaborative projects: groups of Aboriginal women from Ernabella and Utopia came to Yogyakarta, and Indonesian artists visited communities of the Central Desert. The most successful outcome of the collaboration was the joint presentation of a series of monumental batik fabrics at the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane in 1999, created by the artists from Utopia and Brahma Tirta Sari. The fabrics illustrated conjoined mythological narratives of the Javanese and Aboriginal peoples by referring to

³⁴ Anne Marie Brody, *Utopia. A Picture Story. 88 Silk Batiks from the Robert Holmes à Court Collection* (Perth: Heytesbury Holdings Ltd., 1990).

³⁵ Mary-Lou Nugent, *Putting in the Colour. Contemporary Aboriginal Textiles*, (Alice Springs: Jukurrpa Books, 2001), 69.

their ancient spiritual traditions and ancestral stories. The largest of this series was a ten-meter-long batik cloth with the joint name *Sekar Pucung/Songs of the Ancestors*.³⁶

In the 1990s Australian Aboriginal batik reached the peak of its popularity, becoming a well recognised, modern expression of Aboriginal culture. Apart from Ernabella and Utopia, batik was made at Fregon, Kintore, and Yuendumu.³⁷ The technique was practiced mainly by women, and it helped to present their cultural traditions in the context of modern Australian society. Aboriginal batiks featured at a number of exhibitions in Australia and overseas, including the 1994 display of Ernabella batiks at the National Museum of Indonesia.

However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century Aboriginal batik started to lose its artistic significance, ceding its place to the market demand for acrylic paintings. In most cases the production of batik requires a higher degree of skill and is more time-consuming than direct painting on canvas; nevertheless, fabrics fetch a much lower price and are more difficult to sell. The difficulties in appreciating textiles as a fine art meant that a number of excellent Aboriginal batik practitioners moved to painting on canvas, which is commercially more viable. Although the three-month Utopia Batik Revival Workshop of 2007 briefly renewed interest in this technique, the chapter of Australian Aboriginal batik might have come to a close.

Conclusions

Since the end of the nineteenth century batik of Java—a deeply-rooted, local textile tradition—has evolved into a pan-global technique of textile decoration providing creative stimulus for artists, artisans, and textile designers across the world. Apart from the technique and technology of dyeing, Javanese textiles have left their imprint on the iconography and surface decoration of diverse groups of textiles, in fashion and decorative arts. In each case, the mechanism of cross-cultural adaptation of the Javanese technique and its aesthetics was different. At times, for example in the case of Africa or the initial period in Japan, it was an outcome of colonial mediation and trade, while in the cases of India and Australia direct contacts between artists and craftspeople from both countries were of major significance.

The diversity of responses to the Javanese medium of batik illustrates the extent to which technology is culturally determined. New interpretations of the Javanese technique have been shaped by a range of factors such as the technological knowledge and technical constraints of the societies that adopted this method of textile decoration, their aesthetic preferences and cultural stereotypes, as well as market demand and commercial profitability. The global success of batik was largely due to the flexibility and expressive potential of this technique. While encouraging experimentation and creativity, batik allows a great degree of personal expression and easily accommodates diverse aesthetic traditions and approaches to art.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Javanese batik has left a significant legacy in textile arts in almost all parts of the world. This is a dynamic, ever-evolving process; and in the future further chapters documenting encounters of Javanese batik with new traditions will undoubtedly be written.

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³⁶ Jenny Green, "Singing the Silk: Utopia Batik," in Judith Ryan and Robyn Healy, eds., *Raiki Wara. Long Cloth from Aboriginal Australia and the Torres Straits* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1998), 32–37.

³⁷ Judith Ryan, ed., *Across the Desert. Aboriginal Batik from Central Australia* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2008).

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