Creating Batik Lasem through a comparative study of Batik Lasem and Champa in the 15th to 19th century

V J Basiroen

Binus Northumbria School of Design, Bina Nusantara University Jakarta, Indonesia 11480

Email: nonjane@binus.edu

Abstract. Batik Lasem of Indonesia is a part of the national cultural heritage. Playing an important role in the production of traditional Indonesian textiles, batik Lasem has a specific motif mixing elements of Chinese and Javanese culture, which produces meaningful, unique motifs and colors. It is believed that Admiral Cheng Ho, who first arrived at the Binangun port in 1413, had brought this culture with his people from Champa. The purpose of this research was to create a new batik motif by combining Batik Lasem and the Champa motif. The research method used was the literature studies by analyzing the acculturation of Champa ceramic ornaments in Batik Lasem and interviewing with some batik observers as well as batik entrepreneurs. Through Design Thinking Process, the author develops four motifs of the acculturation motif from the surrounding natural environment and the daily stories of the local people. In the future, the author hopes that this sustainable new motif will inspire young people to preserve this extinct Batik Lasem as our precious cultural heritage.

Keyword: cultural heritage, acculturation motif, Batik Lasem, Champa ceramics, sustainable motif

1. Introduction

Lasem in Central Java is a melting pot of Javanese and Chinese cultures. Lasem is known as the ‘Little Tiongkok’ or La Petite Chine (French) since it was the first place of arrival of the Chinese who landed on the north coast of Java [1]. Batik Lasem hosts traders and merchants from various places and their wares are traded and bought by local people in the port city. These activities have resulted in the creation of multicultural cultural values and products. The manuscript ‘Carita Sejarah Lasem’ (The Historical Story of Lasem) by R. Panji Kamzah in 1858, adapted by R. Panji Karsono in 1920, described that Lasem was the first place where Chinese traders landed in Indonesia. It had been the center of batik production in Central Java since 1401 Saka (1479 AD) [1]. During the Ming dynasty, there were two of Dhang Puhawang named Cheng Ho, with his captain Bi Nang Un, decided to stay in Bonang after seeing the beauty of North Java. Lasem’s Adipati, Wijaya Badra, gave land and a place to stay to Bi Nang Un in the Kemandhung area. Bi Nang Un has a wife named Na Li Ni, who taught batik and Chinese letters to young local people in Taman Banjar Mlati Kemadhung, Lasem [2]. Figure 1 shows Cheng Ho’s sea voyage to Indonesia, with his fleet landing at the port of Lasem in 1413 [3].

According to Carita Sejarah Lasem, Putri Na Li Ni of Champa is considered a batik pioneer in Lasem, challenging to trace until now. This statement raises two questions: Is there a similarity between Champa ceramics and the Batik Lasem motif? What are the Champa motifs like, and how do they compare to the Batik Lasem motifs? There is not much information about batik Lasem’s history and its...
development, because due to the lack of written documents resources about the history of Batik Lasem. Furthermore, the difficulty of obtaining Batik Lasem artifacts, especially Batik Lasem cloth collections that are more than 200 years old. As a result, it was difficult to assure when Batik Lasem began in the past. Considering the need to obtain data on the history and the source of the Batik Lasem motif, the author conducted an exploratory study through a literature study by analyzing motifs and ornaments on cultural artifacts and interviewed batik observers and batik entrepreneurs. Through Design Thinking Process, four motifs of the acculturation motif from the surrounding environment and daily stories of the local people are created and implemented.

Figure 1. Cheng Ho Sea Voyage
(Santosa, 2018)

2. Literature study
Many batik center regions face difficulties tracing their batik history because there is no factual data in the form of written records about the history of batik. Meanwhile, the history of Batik Lasem is more or less supported by the availability of data written in the book ‘Serat Badra Santi’, composed written by Mpu Santibadra in 1497 AD and rewritten by his descendant Raden Panji Kamzah (1858) and Raden Panji Karsono (1920) by adding the chapter Carita Lasem (The Story of Lasem). The book ‘Serat Badra Santi’ contains 28 episodes of the poetry of Badra Santi, Carita Lasem, and an ancient Lasem Map. The connection of the book ‘Serat Badra Santi’ with the historical development of Batik Lasem is located in chapter 558 first page as follows:

Padha ngudhi nggambar nyungging sing setiti (They line up to draw the perfect note)
Ngati-atu natal ngukir barang impi (Beware of Christmas carving dreams)
Ditlaten nmyongket, mbathik widyarini (Ask for help, to learn batik widyarini)

There is much relevant information about the historical development of Batik Lasem culture from Sigit Witjaksono (Njoo Tjoen Hian), 88 years old, and the owner of Batik Lasem Sekar Kencana. He is the eighth generation of descendants of a batik entrepreneur's family that started around 1850 and kept producing batik with the loyal artisan to this day. The contribution of Chinese people in the pioneering period of Batik Lasem was in the form of the use of various Chinese cultural motifs and silk fabric on Batik Lasem. Chinese motifs used were Phoenix (Hong), Kilin, Dragon (Liong), Lion (Sai), Butterfly, Vines, Banji, and so on. The acculturation motif of Batik Lasem with Chinese culture is the Kilin, Hong Bird, Dragon, Lok Can, The Red-Blood Getih Pithik, and Chinese letter motifs [4]. The local Lasem develops batik motifs reminiscent of Lasem's natural environment and conditions, historical stories, and flora and fauna in Lasem. It produces its characteristics known as Batik Lasem, seen in the Latohan, Watu Pecah, Gunung Ringgit, and Buah Kawis.

In 1413 AD, Admiral Cheng Ho and Bi Nang Un, the ship's captains, who came from Champa, landed on Regol beach (now called Binangun beach), in Lasem Regency. Bi Nang Un came to Lasem with his wife, Na Li Ni, a son named Bi Nang Na (5 years old), a daughter named Bi Nang Ti (3 years old), and their relatives. They lived in the Kemandhung area (now Jatirogo, Lasem), which had been awarded by the Adipati Wijayabodra [5]. The Champa reign was a kingdom that once ruled in a region
that is now central and southern Vietnam, from 192 AD to 1832 AD. For several centuries, the Vietnamese people finally occupied the Champa kingdom. William Kwan Hwie Liong, an observer of batik pesisir (coastal batik) and a leader of Institute Plural Indonesia (IPI), mentioned the possibility of various types of Champa ceramics motifs that affect the motifs of Batik Lasem. It is regarding the similarity of Batik Lasem motifs with ornaments on Champa ceramics that were brought by Putri Na Li Ni from the Champa Kingdom in the seventeenth to eighteenth Centuries [6].

An archeological data was found at the location of the accident in the South China Sea. The cargo of Thai ceramics gives them insights into the routes they followed and the markets they supplied [7]. Many ceramics found in many ruins of the South China Sea tradition clearly show the role of Ayutthaya as a stage where ceramics from the Sawankhalok, Sukhothai, and Singburi refineries and various other kilns throughout the kingdom, were accumulated before being loaded onto ships for export. Several Chinese and Vietnamese pieces were also found in several wrecks with a dominant Thai ceramic load. Figures 2 and 3 show the Binh Thuan wreck at the South China Sea in the fifteenth century [7].

Guy commented that many Chinese and Vietnamese ceramics were brought by merchant ships from Japan to Thailand via Fujian, Guangdong, and Vietnam [8]. Several pieces of ceramics have been found at the location of the Thai kiln. They explain the influence in the shape and decoration of Thai ceramics, especially the impact of Chinese Longquan Selelong on Sawankhalok dishes [8]. Figure 4 below shows the ceramics from Sawankhalok at the South China Sea wrecks in the fourteenth to fifteenth Century.

Observations were made on the ancient ceramic images of Hoi Anh lifted from a sunken ship in the fifteenth century off the coast of Hoi Anh (Vietnam), which contained a large cargo of Vietnamese ceramics. The Hoi Anh shipwreck was found when a catastrophic typhoon hit a Chinese merchant ship
loaded with 750,000 pieces of Vietnamese Ming-inspired ceramics off the coast of Hoi Anh. Destroyed by fire and eroded by seawater, the ship's cargo sunk to the bottom of the South China Sea [8].

Forgotten about for centuries, in the early 1990s, Vietnamese fishers began to find ceramics in their shipping nets. The diving excavation of the Cham Island shipwreck is one of the most in-depth salvage expeditions ever undertaken. Two hundred and fifty thousand pieces of ceramics were recovered. A large number of ceramics were auctioned off to museums such as the Metropolitan Museum in New York. However, a few of the small products, for cosmetics, medicines, and spices, can still be found in Hanoi's Old Quarter [8]. Figure 5 shows the fifteenth to sixteenth-century Vietnamese ceramics from the Hoi Anh hoard [9].

![Figure 5. The 15th-16th Century Vietnamese Ceramics from the Hoi Anh Hoard](source: Hoi An Shipwreck Ceramic Boxes: Zaitun Series, n.d.)

3. Design thinking process

IDEO and Riverdale Country School in New York have developed a toolkit called Design Thinking for Educators. There are five phases in the Design Thinking Process, which are consist of research and discovery, analysis and interpretation, idea and experimentation, and implementation as a result [10]. Based on the Design Thinking Process, four ideas from the similarity of acculturation motifs between Champa ceramic motifs and Batik Lasem motifs were developed and implemented.

3.1. Research and discovery

The author made several field observations to the city of Lasem by observing the daily life of batik artisans. In this phase, the characteristic and the uniqueness of Lasem motif was discovered. The author also observed and collected data from literature studies and found many pictures of Champa ceramic motifs in the fifteenth to nineteenth Centuries that similar to the existing Lasem motifs. At least there is seven acculturation motif which has the similarities.

3.2. Analysis and interpretation

The research was conducted by studying the meaning of the Lasem motif, which came from the historical stories and the socio-cultural aspects of the local community. This motif study was conducted by interviewing elders and batik owners, as well as the local culture of the Lasem community. During this phase, the author analyzed the four motifs commonly found in Batik Lasem and found the meaning from each of these motifs. The four motifs analyzed are Latohan, Watu Pecah, Gunung Ringgit, and Lok Can. The author analyzed the findings of these images by comparing the existing Batik Lasem motifs to Champa ceramic motifs. At least seven Lasem motifs that are looked similar to those of Champa ceramic motifs. Below are four acculturation motifs from the seven motif findings.
3.2.1 Lok Can
The main ornament of the Lok Can motif on Lasem batik is the Hong (Phoenix) bird, which was modified with the Swallow (Sriti) motif found in Lasem. Lok Can Batik was originally made with silk material (Chinese: Can is silk). The color of the Lok Can batik motif is dominated by blue, exceptionally light blue (Chinese: Lok is blue), and background color white or beige. However, now, there are many Lok Can batik made from superfine primis cotton, which is combined with flora and fauna motifs in the background [11]. Figures 6 and 7 show Lok Can as a decorative flower as a Lasem cloth background, similar to Sawankhalok decorative stoneware bowl and pot motifs of the 15th Century on the right [12].

![Figure 6. 19th Century Lok Can Batik Lasem](image)

![Figure 7. 15th Century Sawankhalok stoneware cloth. (Batik Tulis Lasem Sekar Kentjana) Brown Glazed Decoration Ceramic, and the Vase (“Sawankhalok eMuseum,” n.d.)](image)

3.2.2 Nyuk Pitu
The Nyuk Pitu or Seven-Point motif used as the Batik Lasem cloth is very similar to the Nyuk Pitu or Seven-Point motif on the statue fragments from Sawankhalok from the excavation in the South China Sea from the fifteenth century. Figures 8 and 9 show both of the Seven Point motifs.

![Figure 8. 19th Century Batik Lasem Motif Nyuk Pitu (Batik Tulis Lasem Pusaka Beruang)](image)

![Figure 9. 15th Century Sawankhalok Seven Point on bowl (“Sawankhalok eMuseum,” n.d.)](image)

3.2.3. Watu Pecah
Watu means stone, and Pecah means broken so that Watu Pecah can be interpreted as ‘broken stone’. This motif is remembering the sad conditions of the people who became stone-breaking workers. Sigit Witjaksono, one of Lasem’s elders, mentioned that the Watu Pecah motif had a historical background in Lasem during the Daendels era. In 1808 Governor Daendels made the highway from Anyer to Panarukan (1808-1810). The colonial government ordered the regent to prepare 200 strong workers to work for free. The workers had to break the mountain rocks to harden the road. The emergence of various diseases, such as malaria and typhus during the road construction project, caused many mass casualties. This event is a memory for Lasem’s people who have enshrined it in batik cloth motifs [4]. Figure 10 shows the Watu Pecah motif as a Batik Lasem background compared with the ‘scales’ motif on Vietnamese ceramics. Figure 11 is in the form of twin crested birds with moulded heads, which serve as spouts [7].
3.2.4. Latohan

Latohan or seaweed is one of the sea plants commonly used by the Lasem people for food as urap. Latohan is inspired by the history of the Lasem community, the majority of which work as fishers. The life of the Lasem people in the coastal area requires fishers to utilize and process food products originating from the beach, such as seaweed plants [13]. Merry Purnomo, one of Lasem’s batik artisan, said that Lasem people’s passion for eating seaweed plants as a side dish ultimately makes this latoh plant a favorite food and has deep meaning for the Lasem community [14]. This Latohan is what directs the making of the motif into the art of batik. The description of the Latohan motif is similar to grapes because it has several spheres that virtually meet in each style [15].

![Figure 12. Latoh or Seaweed in the Lasem Area](image)
(Basiroen, 2018)

Latohan motif as Batik Batik Lasem cloth background (Figure 13), compared with Sawankhalok Schenkenkane glazed ceramic decoration, fifteenth century (Figure 14). The Latohan Lasem motif looks exactly the same as the floral and vegetal decoration of Sawankhalok ceramic motif.

![Figure 13. 19th Century Latohan motif as Batik Lasem background](image)
(Batik Tulis Lasem Pusaka Beruang)

![Figure 14. 15th Century Sawankhalok brown glazed decoration ceramic motif](image)
(“Sawankhalok eMuseum,” n.d.)
3.2.5. Gunung Ringgit

Gunung Ringgit is a classic ancient motif in Lasem because it was discovered at the beginning of the development of Batik Lasem. The motif contains a symbolic meaning, reminiscent of a pile of coins. This motif is commonly found on Batik Lasem cloth from the past to the present. Figure 15 below shows the Gunung Ringgit motif, and figure 16 is the fifteenth-century porcelain. In the mid-fourteenth century, a hugely damaging typhoon off the coast of Hoi Anh smashed into a Chinese merchant ship loaded with 750,000 pieces of Vietnamese Ming-inspired ceramics. Gunung Ringgit is a classic ancient motif in Lasem because it was discovered at the beginning of the development of Batik Lasem. This motif is commonly found on Batik Lasem cloth from the past to the present [13].

![Figure 15. 19th Century Gunung Ringgit motif Anh as a background (Batik Tulis Lasem Pusaka Beruang)](image1)

![Figure 16. 15th Century porcelain of Hoi (“Sawankhalok eMuseum,” n.d.)](image2)

3.3. Ideation and experimentation

During ideation and experimentation, author explore and sketch the main motifs on the design of motifs. The three main motif designs are:

3.3.1 Salt storage, wooden windmills and salt farmers

Located on the border between East Java and Central Java, a road trip across the North Coast from Semarang to Lasem takes 3.5 hours. When entering the Rembang district, the views on the left and right are quite large salt fields. The hot sun there gives farmers a livelihood to produce salt. In the salt fields, there are many windmills here, and small houses with salt storage shed. These everyday activities of Lasem people give the author ideas to become motifs of Batik Lasem. The new motif can be seen in Figure 17.

![Figure 17. The Color Palette and the Main Motifs: Salt Storage, Wooden Windmills, and Salt Farmers](image3)

3.3.2. Kawis fruit

Kawis fruit motifs are related to the habitat of plants or Kawis trees that thrive only in the Lasem and Rembang areas. Kawis fruit is useful and made as a drink and food. Kawis-scented beverages such as
Kawista drinks as Java Cola syrup and taste refreshing. Kawis fruit can be seen in the figure below that was photographed in 2009 [16].

![Kawis Fruit](image)

**Figure 18.** Kawis Fruit (Juwita, 2009)

This tasty *Kawis* fruit that only grows in Lasem and Rembang areas gives an idea to create a new motif on Batik Lasem; the new motif can be seen in Figures 23 and 24. *Kawis* fruit repetition scattered in various sizes and angles, combined with the *Kricak* or *Watu Pecah* motif (Figure 10). As a comparison, there are two alternative designs of *Kawis* fruit motifs made, using two different color backgrounds. In figure 19 left, the orange *Kawis* is in the blue background, combined with the white *Kricak* motif. Whereas on the right design, the colored *Kawis* are close to the original, beige, scattered among the leaves and the *Kricak* motif, on a pale blue background.

![Color palette](image)

**Figure 19.** The color palette of two design *Kawis* fruit with leaves

3.3.3. **Gunung Ringgit, Latohan, and Gawangan, with the batik artisan**

*Gawangan* is a batik tool that is used as a buffer cloth when the batik process takes place. Gawangan can be made of bamboo or wood and can be moved according to the needs of batik. This tool gives the author an idea to make a new Batik Lasem motif because it is used in everyday life besides using a pan, stove, and of course, white *mori* cloth. The new motif can be seen below in Figure 20. *Gawangan* motifs, batik cloth, batik artisan, pans and stoves, all together is combined with *Latohan* (see figure 12) and *Gunung Ringgit* (see figure 15) motifs. *Gunung Ringgit* is one of the classic motifs and has long been used by all Batik Lasem artisans. It means wealth, money, or abundant wealth pile up, reflecting the desire to get rich or have great wealth. *Gunung Ringgit* and *Latohan as Isen-Isen* (background filler) forms geometric shapes such as pathways, whose space is filled with the artisan batik and *Gawangan* as the main motif.
3.4. Implementation and results

Based on the four ornament types from the analyzed and comparative study of Champa ceramic and Lasem motifs, the author created four new acculturation motifs, not only from the similarities of Champa ceramic but also from the Lasem motif of the daily stories and life of Lasem people surrounding with the natural Lasem environment. These motifs are expected to become unique and suitable motifs to the community in both the Lasem community in particular and Indonesian in general.

3.4.1. Salt farmers, wooden windmills, salt field, and salt storage, all combined with Latohan (see figure 13) and Nyuk Pitu (see figure 8).

3.4.2. Kawis fruit combine with Watu Pecah or Kricak
3.4.3. Gawangan combined with Gunung Ringgit and Latohan

![Figure 25. Gawangan Combined with Gunung Ringgit and Latohan Motif](image)

4. Conclusions

Through the literature study, interviews with some experts, and comparative studies of Champa ceramics excavations in the South China Sea, there are at least seven types of Champa motifs found on Batik Lasem motifs produced in the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries. However, further archaeological historical studies are needed in the future to see more evidence of similarity.

Four acculturation motifs between Champa ceramics and the characteristic of Lasem motifs are created through the Design Thinking Process. These acculturation motifs are expected will inspire young people as new modern motifs and become a sustainable motif for Batik Lasem artisans, entrepreneurs, and batik lovers, as well as preserve this extinct Batik Lasem as our precious cultural heritage.

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