

# The transcultural identity of Batik in the relationship among craft, art and design

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## ABSTRACT

The paper aims at illustrating a research carried out within the Design Department, Politecnico di Milano in the Design for Cultural Heritage field. The research studies the multicultural and transcultural elements of the Batik technique in the textile field and proposes a methodological tool in order to foster an intercultural communication and use. The paper will be divided into two parts. The first one about the role of the design discipline as a facilitator of innovation in transcultural processes. The second one about the methodology of the research. The method is focused on four steps: 1) the state of art of the transcultural routes of Batik (Netherland, Africa....) and cross-fertilization paths (from craftsmanship to industry, from art to design); 2) the collection of case studies where artists and designers re-interpret Batik; 3) the creation of a thematic tool: a critical, dynamic and digital archive with which curators, designers and artists can find data about Batik (in terms of patterns, techniques and so on) and can use it in order to trigger new concepts and transcultural contaminations; and 4) the creative workshop (with artists and designers) where verifying this tool that was used in order to develop experimental interpretations of Batik in different kinds of products.

*Keywords:* Design for Cultural Heritage, Textile Heritage, Intangible heritage, Traditional Crafts, Transculturality, Art.

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## IN BETWEEN CRAFT AND DESIGN

While the artisanal production model was considered until recently to be an expression of resistance to progress and to the innovation of expressive idioms, we are now witnessing renewed interest in the knowledge and practices that distinguish "authentic" production (Castells, 2004; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Pine and Gilmore, 2007). This takes form in the rediscovery of traditional production processes and the showcasing and promotion of the culture-intensive artisanry of a specific social community, leading to a profoundly different viewpoint on the global v. local dichotomy. Geographical identities lose their uniqueness and specificity, acquiring instead a pluralistic, hybrid character built on paradigms of convergence and intermixing of streams of relations that reconstitute the interactions among places, cultures, communities, people, habits, rituals and iconographies (Castells, 2004;

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Fiorani, 2006; Manzini, 2015). While the "local" transforms into cosmopolitan specialty (Fiorani, 2006) to increase its market appeal by leveraging the allure of the different and exotic, the "global" undergoes a process of indigenization (Appadurai, 2001) of new cultural forms, thus acquiring new formal values. This is a process of cultural transition (Appadurai, 2001; Gnisci, 2001), which, via culture (Bourdieu, 1986), connects social signifiers and meanings through an innovative reinterpretation of processes that combine the richness of the time-honored, distinctive techniques proper to a given culture with the new expressive idioms of the contemporary world to develop products and services that leverage differentiation and personalization as a means of reinvigorating a culture of design. The reservoirs of material culture and artisanal techniques typical of a specific community and its territory become more than just a heritage but also cultural capital (Throsby, 1999). They are an aggregate of tangible and intangible assets which are recognized as having cultural value that is continually re-invested in the development of new artefacts, goods, and services, and also a carrier of new values and meanings (Vacca, 2013). Furthermore, in a complex, globalized and deterritorialized age as the one we are living in, it is important to keep in mind the flows of cross-cultural migration which, being in constant evolution, strongly clash with the erroneously-established idea that identity is one and immutable and that belonging is local or localizable (Appadurai, 2001). The different panoramas of interaction between cultures and their fruition processes are no longer recognizable or definable in a "spatial" sense but must be explored in a "temporal" way, in their evolution and in their complicated and continuous interactions. In this context, design plays an important role of mediation, contributing to the processes of enhancement and actualization of the cultural capital, as a resource from which design draws within projectual processes.

This territorial capital has been fuelled by an equally rich culture-intensive dimension which has been able to preserve and value knowledge, techniques, processes, in a continuous process of hybridisation between Design and Artisanry, tradition and innovation, triggering a "migration" and "cultural" translation process of meanings and techniques from one geographic-cultural context to another and experimenting increasingly advanced and innovative processes and methodologies.

As we wish to demonstrate with the present paper, the particular legacy with the culture of a territory leads to a vision that sees contemporary techniques become effective narratives with explicit, functional and descriptive content, but also with implicit, emotional content that evokes other meanings, i.e. they assume symbolic values of a social and cultural nature. Function and emotion trigger a complex series of evocations that fuse different polarities,

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constituting artifacts that both function and signify at the same time, finding their function in meaning, and vice versa, signifying their function and narrating their territory. As Halbwachs (1992, pp.120-121) argues “Each individual memory is only a point of view on collective memory”.

## 1. BATIK AS “CULTURAL TERRITORY”: OBJECTIVES AND METHOD OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Nowadays the design discipline embraces several meanings; herein, we would like to underline the one related to the enhancement of the cultural heritage (*design for cultural heritage*).

This approach recognizes, as a privileged field of theoretical-critical reflection and applied research, the design of knowledge, cataloguing and enhancement of tangible and intangible cultural assets.

This design branch deals with studying new scenarios and paradigms of cultural experiences in the field of museums, archives, events, cultural enterprises and local areas.

Herein, we would like to deal with the intangible heritage as a territory for design applications and – symmetrically – the physical territory as a geography of relationships and multicultural influences. The subject of this essay falls within the Design of Cultural Heritage field starting from the inclusion of Batik in the Unesco World Heritage list.

This research project studies multicultural and transcultural elements of the Batik practice and suggests a methodological tool able to foster, on the one hand, the knowledge of this technique in a wide audience and, on the other hand, the triggering of interdisciplinary synergies in scholars, designers and artists. Batik is a good example of a fabric as “evidence” of plural “souls,” a “place” of experimentation and hybridization: it was born in a specific context but then it moved to other ones and absorbed different influences and changes.

The questions which stimulated the research expose the topic to an interdisciplinary approach which requires relationships between design and anthropology.

Some critical questions emerge:

- What does the Batik cultural identity consist of, taking into account that it has been influenced by a plurality of geographical and cultural contexts?
- What was the effect of migrant flows on this specific practice?

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- In this context, how art and design can become mediators of transcultural dynamics?
- How can the design discipline imagine and shape new products starting from the tangible and intangible value of Batik?
- How can we understand the appropriation and the use of Batik in the occidental art, design and fashion field?

The research tries to deal with these issues and look at this topic from other angles as well. Furthermore, it sets the following general objectives:

- Enhancing the cultural value of Batik;
- Gathering communities around this topic;
- Creating a “common ground” where artists, designers, curators, craftsmen and companies can share knowledge and opportunities.

In terms of methodology, the project analyzes and intervenes in four research dimensions: processual, ritual, iconographical and institutional.

The *processual dimension* is about the technique evolution. It is developed in a chronological way and follows the several seasons of Batik. To the origin in Indonesia (16th century) the technique was practiced by craftsmen using manual tools as an extension of the body. In the 18th century there is the Dutch Wax printing: the industry replaces artisans. In this age this technique becomes an applied science, the machine improves human potentialities. Finally, in the 21st century the digital Wax printing emerges, it takes advantage to digital technologies and it is based on smart devices (see: Fancy Fabric in China and Digital Wax Printing Project France+Italy).

The *ritual dimension* is recognizable in artistic productions based on celebrative topics. One of the most frequent iconographical theme is the portrait aimed at celebrating an important event for personalities or communities (see: Nelson Mandela’s effigy and the International Women day).

The *iconographical dimension* includes a translation process: in several cases we can find traditional Indonesian patterns which are reinterpreted by Dutch culture. An example: the traditional representation of Garuda’s wings (symbol of Indonesia and Hindu divinities) is retaken by Vlisco company in 1960 in the pattern named “Bunch of Banana” or “conch” in Africa.

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Finally, the *institutional dimension* is focused on the relationship with institutions and actors in order to anchor the research in solid entities and real contexts. On the one hand, there is Unesco Cultural Organization and, on the other hand, there is Vlisco Foundation which owns a digital archive of its collection (books, fabrics, tools and so on). Both of them represent an important framework and assume a crucial role in networking and activating new forms of collaborations. Further institutional interlocutors of the research are: museums, universities, artists/designers associations.

The research is articulated in four steps:

- defining the state of the art of Batik transcultural paths as well as “cross-fertilization” processes (from handcraft to industry, from art to design);
- collecting case studies where artists and designers interpret Batik through different languages and applications;
- creating a meta-design thematic tool: a sort of digital archive through which scholars, curators, designers and artists can find data in terms of colors, patterns, techniques and applications as well as using it in order to trigger new concepts and transcultural contaminations;
- organizing a workshop (involving artists and designers) where verifying the potentialities of this tool in order to develop new experimental interpretations of Batik in different typologies and products.

## 2. TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITY: MIGRATORY FLOWS AND BORDERS AS CULTURAL RESOURCES

The textile technique known as Batik (or later as wax printing) has become through time a representative element and symbol of African culture. This textile is the result of a complex and not always visible transcultural process that has sometimes become perceptible through interpretations of different historical points of view.

The study focuses on the interconnections between different territories and cultural fields and specifically those relative to the constitution of a certain textile (techniques, iconography, material) identified as transcultural object. The principal aims are, on the one hand, to analyze those artistic and design’s interpretations (historical and contemporaneous) which are able to make the “plural” and hybrid aspects of connected cultural identities and territories perceptible; and, on the other hand, to stimulate

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multidisciplinary and multicultural paradigms in the field of art and design. In this way, the transcultural phenomena are analyzed, individuating textile that derives, first, from the history of migration, colonization and industrialization; then that are interpreted by contemporaneous artists and designers. In this way, the attention is given to those textiles, subjected to various circulations, transactions, and translations: constituted of interlaced cultures present in different territories and represented by multiple variants and interpretations.

This particular type of textile is a dyeing technique that first appeared in Indonesia and was industrialized by Dutch people in the 19th century. The Indonesian market, however, rejected the degraded, western version of what they regarded as a noble tradition, therefore the Dutch were forced to bring the new merchandise to their African colonies. There, Batik became so enormously popular, that the typical multicolor pattern has come to be the very symbol of African culture, a visual sign that immediately associated with the identity of Africa. Starting from this material, many artists and designers from various territories and points of view have explored the signification system, in particular the notion of reference: the way in which the work refers to external meanings. In this way they have explored the dynamic space that opens between the socio-political sphere of the material (Batik) and the autonomy aesthetic of the work/creation. A sample of those artistic and design's interpretations of Batik is analyzed in the second part of the paper.

The interest for relational properties leads to consider various theories and practices, for example the relational art, centered on the relationship between the artist, his public and their context. In his essay "L'esthétique relationnelle" the theoretician Nicolas Bourriaud (2010) resumed the relational art, saying that "Art is a state of encounter" – in fact, this movement shows how the sphere of social and cultural relationship reconfigures cultural principles and practices producing "original" and hybrid forms. The relational art form includes collaboration, meeting, and manifestation.

This research is thus considering not only the respective cultural specificities of this disciplinary field, but above all their "porous borders" (Sennett, 2009). The attention is focused on this ambiguous space of contact between different disciplines (art, design, and craftsmanship) and territories (Europe, Indonesia, Africa) in order to reveal reciprocal exchange and dialogue related to Batik.

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### 3. DIGITAL ARCHIVE OF BATIK: TOWARDS A META-DESIGN TOOL

Considering these theoretical premises and the multiplicity of data collected and collectible, the idea to design a tool in the form of hypertext and interconnected platforms is naturally triggered. The tool is interesting on the one hand to investigate, share and disclose the historical data (related to the stories of migration, colonization, circulation trading, industrialization, globalization of Batik). On the other hand, it is useful for sharing a connected system among the different actors/groups (historian, designer, artist, neo-craftsman, museum, company, etc.) in order to arouse multidisciplinary and multicultural paradigms in the field of craft, art and design. Furthermore this tool is interesting to linkage visually this cultural relationships, exchanges and evolution based on the communication/visualization of historical and geographical interpretations (trading route, territories, cities, actors) juxtaposed with different artistic and designs practices and points of view. The tool will be conceived as a “mutualized space” of interpretative data (including the case studies collection) in order to arouse new interpretations and also to stimulate future relationship and exchange among actors.

About the infrastructure of the contents, the tool is divided into three parts: *history* (information about historical and geographical aspects of Batik); *patterns* (categories of iconographical motives and geometrical variants); *works* (collection of artistic interpretations of Batik by artists and fashion designers).

About the uses and applications the tool presents:

- *Analytical features* (research): it studies historical data, patterns and iconographies, art and design interpretations. This aspect aims at implementing knowledge.
- *Conceptual features* (source of inspiration): it deals with themes, iconographies, techniques, colors, shapes. This aspect aims at stimulating interpretations.
- *Relational features* (dialogues and co-creation): it is addressed to scholars, artists, designers, curators, craftsmen. This aspect aims at gathering communities around the topic and triggering new projects.

About the field of application the tool is addressed to:

- The *educational field*: the tool as a source of inspiration and information at the theoretical and practical level, also useful for workshops and courses.

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- The *business field*: the tool as source of inspiration at the theoretical, aesthetic and formal level, in order to increase collections and as a source of artistic or design skills to start co-creative processes.
- The *museum field*: the tool as a source for curators useful for communities networking, as a platform for artists in order to share ideas and projects, create relationships between collections and new works.

#### 4. VERIFICATION OF THE TOOL THROUGH A WORKSHOP ACTIVITY: SOME PARADIGMATIC PROJECTS

In order to verify the potentials of the tool a design workshop has been organized. Some artists and designers have been involved under the supervision of the author of this research project (Decker, 2016, 2018) in order to explore the use of the tool and shape new interpretations of Batik.

The first project is titled “A seal for processing another image” (by C. Luraghi, F. Ballarin and J. Belloni) and embraces the *processual dimension* (technique). The project consists in creating a big cylindric seal usable by two or more people. Its texturized surface is made of several patterns of Batik (traditional and new) in order to overlap and stratify them in a mixed print.

The second project is titled “Study for a Commemorative Batik: Assimilating Arnold, Evicting Emmett, Merging into Neu Expressionismus” (by P. Paradiso and A. Ferri) and embraces the *ritual dimension* (commemorative). This idea stemmed from a reflection about the activation of “memory behaviors” according to the celebrative vocation of Batik. In this case the commemorative ritual is intended as a symbolic element. For this reason Batik becomes a commemorative tool able to lay claim to a group identity. Starting from that, the project interprets two opposite symbols of Afro-American teen-agers: Emmett Till and Arnold. The first one is a victim of violence on the part of American racism in the ‘50s and becomes famous thanks to the Schutz’s portrait. She paints his scarred face. The second one – the main character of a tv series in the ‘80s – is a symbol of social redemption of the American dream. The graphic interpretation of these two portraits is the subject of a 500x60 cm. piece of fabric.

The third project is titled “WebJL Batik” (by M. Torcolacci and G. Lela) and embraces the *iconographic dimension* (translation). The idea stems from the Batik translation properties due to colonialism. The project translates Batik in 2.0 decorations using the digital fingerprint technique in order to make users able to customize their personal pattern.

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## 5. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, we can do some final considerations about two orders of issues: the role of the design discipline and the further developments of the research project.

About the role of the discipline, design intervenes in terms of networking, embraces an interdisciplinary approach and finally collects, systematizes, interprets and creates new forms of applications of Batik.

The further developments of the research project could be divided into three orders of time frames. Short term: collaborating with Digital Wax Printing Project mentioned before; middle term: collaborating with Mudec (Museum of Cultures in Milan), collaborating with ULITA-Archive of International Textiles (University of Leeds); long term: creating a Batik Observatory able to collect data (incoming) and – starting from them – to create new forms on intercultural products (outgoing).

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