

PEKALONGAN'S BATIK INDONESIA MUSEUM: How it came to be

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It all began at a seminar on batik organized by the Berkah Foundation headed by Bapak Sucipto Umar in March 2005. I had been invited to present a paper, replacing Ibu Nian Djoemena who had had to withdraw due to poor health.

The title of my paper was "A study of Pekalongan". In it I said, among other things, that the kind of batik that was being produced in Pekalongan in recent years was of a style dictated by 'fashion', characterized by dark and dull colors. The style did not lack in attraction, but we were no longer seeing Pekalongan's trademark, brilliantly colored batiks with bright bouquets and flowers against a background of finely etched *ukel*-curls or *banji* patterning in showrooms or shop windows along Hayam Wuruk street.

Moreover, Pekalongan's citizens were no longer wearing batik in their daily lives, mainly because of the dominating trend of 'Muslim dress' with long skirts and tuniques or loose dresses made from plain material trimmed with machine-embroidery and accompanied with a matching head-covering, not to mention diverse institutional uniforms being worn by women workers, who in their free time usually wore jeans and T-shirts. It was a rare occasion to see a woman wearing a classic Pekalongan batik buketan sarong with floral designs or *jelamprang* patterning with a matching kebaya, something that we still could see about two decades ago. On the other hand, many of Pekalongan's men were wearing batik shirts almost every day. The irony is that for some 150 years, it has been the women who have kept the batik-wearing tradition alive, the men having taken to Western pants and shirts a long time ago.

Pekalongan's batik industry has long consisted of small localized centers and little family businesses producing also to the demand of batik merchants from other islands such as Sumatra, Kalimantan and Sulawesi and who was even sending it further to Penang, Malaka, Singapore and the Malay Peninsula. As we all know the ladies of the Peranakan societies were also wearing sarongs and embroidered kebayas like how it is worn in Java. Some of the merchants even decided to settle down there to be near to their sources because their business was growing all the time. Some bought houses and shops and until now a few of their descendants still live in Pekalongan. Later on came the fashion designers and gallery owners, both domestic--in Jakarta, Jogja or Bali-- and also foreign countries, such as France, Italy, England and America.

Styles of dressing outside the big cities, too, were changing under the influence of Jakarta's trends. Batik sarongs, the tubular hip cloths and kain panjang or batik hip cloths were only being worn at weddings, graduations or as dance costumes. In addition, there were no places where batik handicrafters or designers could view collections and gain inspiration for their own work. So, it was essential that a museum dedicated to batik be established.

Then, in September 2005, I attended the Pekalongan Batik Festival with friends from the Himpunan Wastraprema (an association of traditional textile lovers) and met with Pak Cip, as we affectionately call Bapak Sucipto Umar, who spontaneously invited me to accompany him on an audience with the city's new mayor, Dr. Basyir Achmad. At the meeting, I was asked to deliver a brief presentation on the importance of having a batik museum in Pekalongan.

In a meeting late in December the same year, at the Century Hotel in Jakarta attended by members of OPEK or Orang Pekalongan, an association of Pekalongan-ese in Jakarta, I was again asked to give my thoughts on how to set up a museum.

It was my opinion that first of all, there had to be a building and that this should be provided by Pekalongan city and be not only of historical relevance but also located in a strategic area that was easily accessible to visitors, a building like the former Resident's and Regent's residences facing the old city square or *alun-alun*, that has been empty for a number of years. There also had to be a collection of batiks donated by Pekalongan's citizens and producers. For my part, as a developer of Indonesian batik and handicrafts, I suggested that I pull together a collection from colleagues, friends, fellow members of various associations and collectors living in Jakarta, for which we had to set a target of, say, 500 pieces of batik from 50 donors. If needed, I would be willing to serve as curator of the museum for the first years.

I advised the municipal government that it would have to consider, as well, tourism in the area. Shopping tourism: for example visitors would certainly be looking for batiks and local weavings in addition to snack-foods as souvenirs. Spiritual tourism could also be developed, given the considerable number of pilgrimage and holy sites in and around Pekalongan. Not forgetting the Dutch cemetery where a number of world-famous batik entrepreneurs such as, Mrs. Simonet and Mrs van Zuylen are buried. Architectural tourism would be the choice of some tourists, with Pekalongan's many interesting vintage buildings, some of which could be preserved as restaurants and showrooms for batik and weavings, or even as simple, clean, and inexpensive lodging for tourists, in the style of Europe's Bed-and-Breakfasts. I knew of the existence of many family homes in Pekalongan that were empty, since the owners had moved to Jakarta or another big city for business reasons. All of these could be turned into opportunities for families left behind to earn extra income and help fill potential gaps in hotel accommodation.

Several weeks after the December meeting, Pak Cip telephoned to advise that the mayor would be providing the ex-City Hall, a large and lovely Art Deco-style building right in the middle of the city and opposite the central post office. Knowing the building well, I answered that this would be ideal for our purposes. Pak Cip then departed for Pekalongan to examine the site for himself and returned with visible excitement. Although it was still occupied by some city offices, it was about to be vacated and could be freshened up by the day already earmarked for the opening: July 12, 2006, to coincide with Cooperatives Day celebrations that were to be held in and beside the square fronting the building.

This decision had come only a few weeks before the scheduled opening. Starting immediately, I visited Pekalongan every two weeks for 3-to-4-day stays, to check on the cleaning up, and in the intervals in Jakarta, I drew up a long list of potential donors, worked out a letter of request with the mayor and his staff, and sent the letters out via special messenger or delivered them myself. I also carried blank letters of request so that I could give them out whenever I met a person interested in adding to the collection being amassed.

Reactions were intriguing. On June 3rd, I was received by a cousin, Ibu Titik Soebono, who told me to go through her cupboard and make my selections—12 pieces of batik and a stunning batik coat she had had made when going abroad in the early 1960s. This was often the response of older donors—please open my cupboard or suitcases and take your pick!—while others sent their donations to my house in Jakarta. The Indonesian Batik Foundation—Yayasan Batik Indonesia—after they received the letter, invited me to a general meeting. Ibu Jultien Kartasmita and Ibu Widodo asked what we needed and I told them everything that still was lacking in the preparations. So they provided not only a large collection of batiks from their collection and member's donations, but also funded the purchase of exhibition furniture. Later on they also generously gave a check for other purposes.

The donors were many and the collection piled up in a very short time. These I collated and had carefully cleaned by me and my staff, while documentation including photography was taken care of by my mentor, Judi Achjadi, who was helping me as an assistant curator. The collection consisted of all possible qualities of batik from many districts: wax-drawn by hand, wax-stamped, combination of the two and even a few milled fabrics machine-printed with batik-like patterns. This was, after all, a museum and needed to have all things related to the batik tradition, including fakes and foreign copies and inspirations. Collectors in Yogyakarta and Pekalongan contributed about 200 pieces, Jakarta some 400 pieces; thus, in two months' time we had exceeded our initial target of 500 pieces from 50 donors. This I reported to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, as I guided him and the first lady around the museum at the opening on July 12, 2006, followed by his ministers.

For the opening, we filled the main exhibition room with a selection of the oldest pieces we had received, dating back a century and more. Batik from the 1950s to the 1970s was displayed in another of the larger rooms, while the third large room housed outfits—sarongs and kain panjangs matched up with kebayas, long open-fronted tunics, shoulder-cloths, and veils. Off one side of the inner garden, craftsmen and women exhibited their skill at waxing batik.

Since then, the displays have been changed many times, based on themes chosen in coordination with the Pekalongan municipality, as represented by Ibu Erry Getarawan and Ibu Sumarni, and reported back to Pak Cip as chairman of the KADIN (Indonesian Chamber of Trade and Industry) Foundation which provided strong financial backing for the project and a large collection of freshly made batik from all over Indonesia.

Some of the themes of our exhibitions have been Contemporary Javanese Batik, which was complemented with examples of Bateek Malaysia made with the technique we refer to as 'Batik Lukis' or 'painted batik', because the dyes are applied with a brush. Our mission was to show that we did not have to be stuck in the past and should learn more about batik made in other parts of Java, and to allow Indonesians and the people of Pekalongan see for themselves what Bateek Malaysia was. At the same time, two of the three largest rooms were dedicated to Pekalongan's own batik styles.

To celebrate the museum's first anniversary, we presented a style of batik specific to Pekalongan. This was the Batik Jelamprang, which we teamed up with a similar type of batik from Yogyakarta called Batik Nitik. Although the first was created in Pekalongan, it used a particular technique for which Yogyakarta is well-known: patterns are composed of square dots. The next show presented batik designed for household uses rather than dress, with the assistance of the head of the regional branch of the National Handicrafts Council, while the Pekalongan batik display was refreshed with new donations.

Ideally, exhibits should be changed every four months, unless circumstances require otherwise. Exhibits need not always be from the museum's own collection, but borrowed from sources outside the museum. This was the case with the Contemporary Javanese Batik show which combined pieces donated by the KADIN Foundation and loans from my own collection, while the Jelamprang and Nitik show was complemented with loans from the collection of Mrs. Nian Djoemena, who was also a donor.

We still have a great deal of work ahead of us. Our collection now totals over 900 pieces for which adequate storage space is needed with the proper facilities. We have a library, but we need more books. We need proper labeling and we need to get certificates of appreciation to all donors. We have a shop, but thought needs to be given to the way in which it is set up and pricing. We need to document the craftspeople making batik and batik tools, and especially name-personalities producing batik, in Pekalongan. All of this requires skilled staff and funding. This is our challenge today.

Thank you.

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Prepared for the 2nd ASEAN Tradisional Textiles Symposium.

Translated into English with the help of Judi K Achjadi.

Manila 2 February 2009.

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