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## NARRATIVE APPRAISAL OF MALAYSIAN NEO-TRADITIONAL BATIK DESIGN PRODUCED BY YOUNG DESIGNERS

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### ABSTRACT

Batik is one of the traditional craftsmanship that the Malays in Malaysia continue to safeguard for their cultural sustainability. Batik is an art of decorating cloth with colourful patterns, and the Malay normally designs batik with the themes of flora and fauna; organic shapes; and geometrical patterns. This article has the aim to narratively appraise the neo-traditional batik design, produced by a group of young designers. The appraisal is conducted based on the inclination of design motifs and the source of design inspirations. The appraisal is qualitatively conducted using visual analysis and narrative appraisal methods. The group of young batik designers participated in the project is consisted of 61 individuals, who had undertaken a short research project on traditional batik design, and then carried out their venture to produce neo-traditional batik design. The results of batik designs were visually analysed and categorised based on the observed design motifs and the designers' described sources of inspiration. Nevertheless, only few selected batik designs would be appraised narratively in this article, to provide samples of stimuluses for batik designer-to-be. This narrative appraisal is hoped to motivate young designers to venture into batik design exploration with high level of cultural understanding and expressive attachment.

**Keyword:** *Batik, Neo-traditional Batik, Design Motive, Design Inspiration, Narrative Appraisal, Batik Design*

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### INTRODUCTION

Malay traditional craft is a rich and diverse heritage that encompasses various artistic and practical skills passed down through generations in the Malay culture. These crafts often reflect the cultural, historical, and natural influences on the Malay people. However, many types of the traditional crafts are on the verge of extinction. Therefore, attempt to safeguard the tangible cultural heritages must be carried out thoughtfully for cultural sustainability.

Batik is one of the traditional craftsmanship that the Malays in Malaysia continue to safeguard for their cultural sustainability. Batik is a technique of wax-resist dyeing that is used to create intricate and colourful patterns on fabric. Malay batik has its own unique style and motifs that reflect the cultural and artistic heritage of the Malay community. Traditionally, the Malay normally designs batik with the motifs of flora, fauna; organic shapes, and geometrical patterns.

After centuries of batik production and usage, the modern society in Malaysia has attempted to produce Batik patterns using contemporary design. Even though such attempt might be considered as a good initiative, but some batik designers have lost control of their enthusiasm into producing batik design with motifs which are non-permissible in Islam: such as explicit animal figure and images of nudity. The development of new design should be observed as not to jeopardise the traditional patterns and to ensure the contemporary batik design is shariah-compliance. Hence, this article has the aim to narratively appraise the neo-traditional batik design, produced by a group of young designers. The appraisal is conducted based on the inclination of design motifs and the source of design inspirations. The appraisal is qualitatively conducted using visual analysis and narrative appraisal methods.

### METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

"Allah is beautiful and he loves beauty."  
A hadith narrated by Jabir (Faith in Allah, 2023)

This project was inspired by the above hadith and considered as one of the effort to sustain cultural heritage of the Malay in Malaysia. The project is conducted at Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design, in International Islamic University Malaysia. The project is described in this article in the form of narrative appraisal, based on young batik designers' inclination of design motives and the source of design inspirations.

This project uses qualitative research approach, with the utilisation of visual analysis and narrative appraisal methods. The group of young batik designers participated in the project is consisted of 61 architecture students, who had undertaken a short research project on traditional batik design, and then carried out their venture to produce neo-traditional batik design. However, only 59 out of 61 designers uploaded their works in "Behance", an online document storage, for visual analysis and appraisals. The young designers uploaded their works in the forms of videos, pictures of the batik designs, and write-up of their works.

The produced batik designs are categorised based on the observed design motifs and the designers' described sources of inspiration. For design motifs, the categories are Flora, Fauna, Geometrical shapes, random design, and others. Whilst, for sources of inspiration, the categories are nature, built-environment, Emotion, Life-style and others. All the produced batik design had been analysed visually and only few selected batik designs were appraised narratively in this article, to provide samples of stimuluses for batik designer-to-be.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### TRADITIONAL BATIK DESIGN

Malay traditional batik design is characterised by intricate patterns, symbolic motifs, and vibrant colours. According to Rosman (2019), traditional batik is a tradition in Malaysia that contains a great deal of symbolism and has a wide range of interpretations. Traditional batik design often draw inspiration from nature, mythology, and cultural symbolism. Malay batik designs are not only aesthetically pleasing but also carry cultural and symbolic significance, making them an essential part of Malay heritage and identity.

Based on review of literature, the author categories traditional Malay batik motifs into 5 categories, that consist of 16 elements. Table 1 shows the categorizations of the elements used in Malay traditional batik motifs.

Table 1: Categorizations of the Elements

CATEGORY	FLORA	FAUNA	GEOMETRICAL PATTERN	RANDOM/ORGANIC DESIGN	OTHERS
ELEMENTS	Flowers (Jamine and hibiscus)	Birds	triangles, diamonds, and square shapes	Keris Motif	Lambang (Symbols)
	Pucuk Rebung (Bamboo Shoots)	Other Animals	Ikat Patterns (Tie Patterns)	Wayang Kulit Motif (shadow puppetry)	
	Pucuk Paku (Fern Shoots)		Wau Bulan (Kite)	Bersurai Motif scattering of flowers	
	Irisan (Serrated Leaves)		Tumpal Motif (Framings)	Gelombang (Waves)	
			Bentuk Segi (Geometric shapes)		

The motifs listed in Table 1 are used in various traditional garments and textiles, such as baju kurung, sarongs, and kebayas, and are often worn during special occasions and cultural celebrations. Besides the design, colours play a crucial role in Malay batik design, with vibrant and contrasting hues being popular choices. Traditional colours include indigo, brown, and white, but modern interpretations may incorporate a broader range of colours. Figures 1 and 2 show examples of traditional Malay batik, with Flora and Fauna motifs.

The modernisation of batik has expanded and been recognised in textiles industry. This development has been termed as “recontextualisation” (Rahman, 2019). With modern batik motifs and broader range of colour, re-contextualised tradition forms the basis of cultural invention by appropriating elements of tradition and history relevant to the needs of modern society. In recontextualisation, the application of modern knowledge to the utilisation of tradition generates an informed, “conscious process of acceptance and rejection of specific elements of the past” (Rahman, 2019). Hence, in the effort to keep pace with current developments and to uphold the local craft’s heritage value, the Malaysian batik is therefore set to be redefined (Basir, 2020). Basir viewed that batik design could not be too static to the extent of impeding its evolvement. She stated that if the industry keep sticking to the old techniques, it may not conform with contemporary tastes and needs (Basir, 2020). This modernisation of batik design could also be termed as Neo-traditional batik. Figure 3 and Figure 4 show examples of Neo-traditional batik design.



Figure 1: Flora motif in Batik (Source: <https://www.vecteezy.com/photo/3151756-pattern-for-traditional-clothes-malaysia-include-batik>)

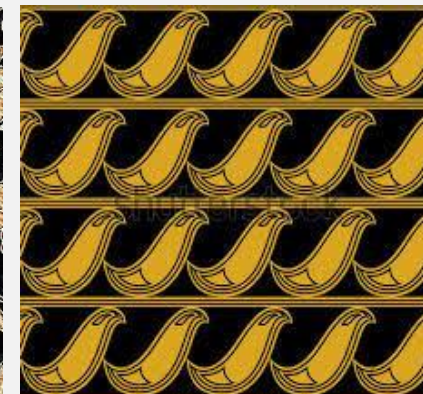


Figure 2: Fauna motif in Batik (Source: <https://www.shutterstock.com/search/itik-pulang-petang>)



Figure 3: Neo-traditional Flora Motif in Batik design (Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/illustrations/batik-Malaysia>)



Figure 4: Neo-traditional Flora Motif in Batik design (Source: <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/fish-batik.html?sortBy=relevant>)

### NEO-TRADITIONAL BATIK DESIGN

“neo” means new or recent, or in a modern form (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Neo is a prefix word, a combining form meaning “new,” “recent,” “revived,” “modified,” used in the formation of compound words (Dictionary.com, 2023). In the context of batik industry in Malaysia, neo-traditional batik is a contemporary approach to the traditional art of batik, which is a technique for creating intricate patterns on fabric, not necessarily using wax and dyes. In fact, “technologically driven innovations can be seen in various phases of batik production such as tooling, processing, design, product, and marketing” (Syed Shaharuddin, et. al., 2021). The adoption of computer-based technology has certainly put what used to be a traditional batik industry in the track of the Forth Industrial Revolution (IR4.0).

Neo-traditional batik allows designers to reinterpret and adapt traditional batik methods to contemporary contexts, creating a bridge between the past and the present. It represents a dynamic and evolving form of artistic expression that celebrates the rich cultural heritage of batik while embracing innovation and creativity. Key characteristics and features of neo-traditional batik may include Modern Designs, Diverse Materials, New Dyeing Techniques, Cultural Fusion, Contemporary Application, Artistic Innovation, and Preservation of Tradition.

## PROJECT FINDINGS

Based on visual analysis, it is observed that most young batik designers are inclined to use Flora as the motifs for their batik design, 67.8% . The second preferred subject is Fauna where 11.9% of the designer chose the fauna motifs , whilst the third is geometrical pattern at 10.2% . Random design and other patterns score 6.8% and 3.4% respectively in the findings. The result shows that similar to the traditional batik design, young designers tend to adapt flora, fauna and geometrical patterns for the design motifs in creating neo-traditional batik design. Figure 5 shows the frequency of the chosen Batik Patterns.

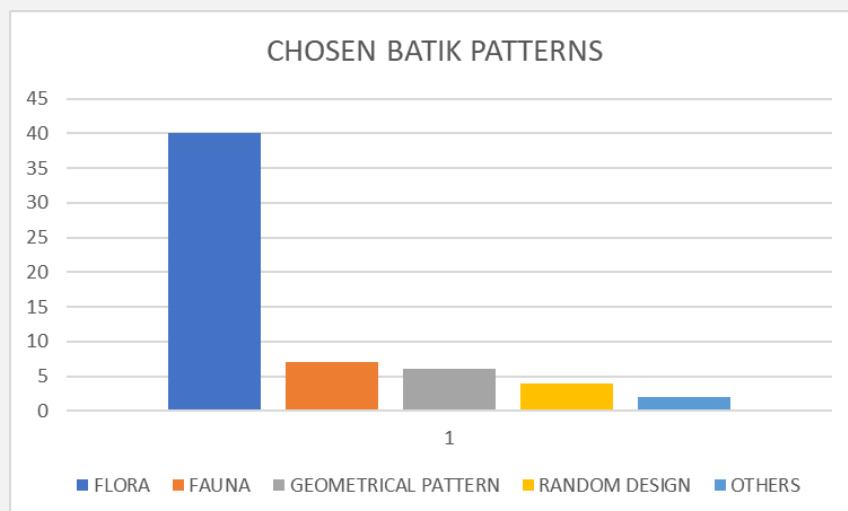


Figure 5: Frequency of the Chosen Batik Patterns

For sources of inspirations, the majority of young batik designers chose nature (66.1%), and life-style (16.9%) as their inspirations in designing the batik clothes. 10.2 % young batik designers chose emotion as their source of inspiration. Other sources of inspirations scored 5.1%, whilst only 1 designer chose built-environment (1.7%). Figure 6 shows the frequency of the sources of Inspiration for Batik Design.

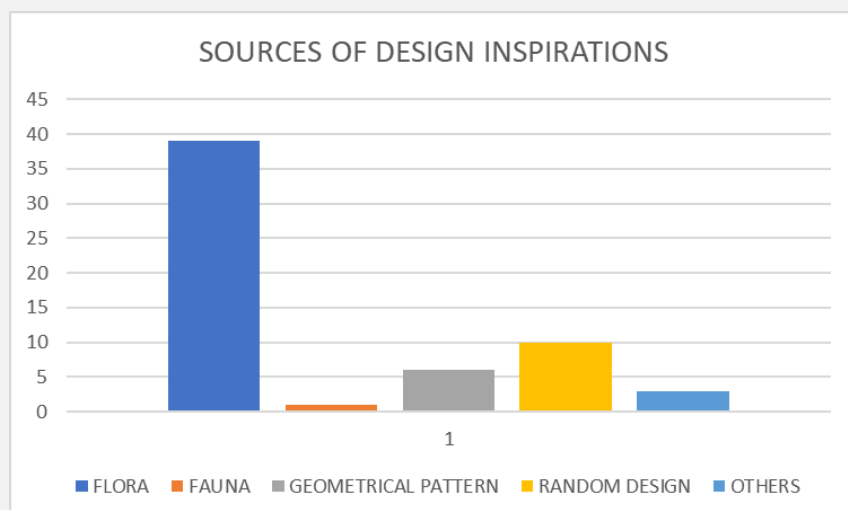


Figure 6: Frequency of the Sources of Inspiration for Batik Design

The following sections narrate on some selections of Batik Design that could be promoted for exemplary Neo-traditional Batik Design. Neo-traditional batik is a contemporary approach to the traditional art of batik, which is a technique for creating intricate patterns and often incorporates contemporary design elements, such as abstract patterns, geometric shapes, and innovative colour combinations. These designs may be influenced by current fashion trends, personal artistic expression, or cultural fusion.

### EXAMPLE 1: FLORA PATTERN WITH NATURE INSPIRATION

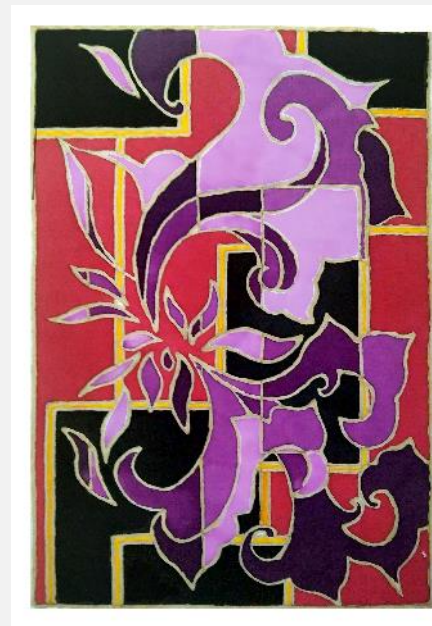


Figure 7: The "Smile," designed by Mohamad Izhar Shaharudin

This first example of Neo-traditional batik design is titled, "*Smile*". Designed by Mohamad Izhar Shaharudin. It depicts a plant, named Fiddlehead or "pucuk paku" in Malay language. The design has strong inclination to portray flora motif, with nature inspiration, which is very common in the design of traditional Malay Batik. However, the intertwined juxtaposition of curvilinear and geometrical shapes portrays a touch of modernised abstract form, that gives the "Smile" a unique character that could be upheld as a new idea for Neo-traditional Batik design.

With contrasting but harmonious colour palette, *Smile* also renders calmness in modern fabric design. In fact, the batik design represents the emotional being of the designer. Its' symbolic meaning goes very deep, relating to the designer's emotional reminiscence of father and son relationship. As written by the designer, the purple colour represents spirituality, that reminds him to always pray for his father and become a good son. The background colour of the batik design is maroon, representing the positive trait of kind and inviting confidence with strong character. The orange line in the batik design symbolises joyful memory of being together, whilst the black rectangles epitomises the missing piece of loneliness. The batik design portrays the designer's affectionate feeling towards his late father and expresses his wish to thank his father for his success.

## EXAMPLE 2: FAUNA PATTERN WITH RELIGIOUS (OTHERS) INSPIRATION



Figure 8: The “Hoopoe” designed by Wissal Hanouf

This second example of Neo-traditional batik design is titled, “Hoopoe”. Designed by Wissal Hanouf, *Hoopoe* is inspired by the following Quranic verses.

“And [Solomon] reviewed the birds, and he said, ‘Why do I not see the hoopoe, or is he of those absent? I shall surely punish him severely or slay him, or he must come to me with a clear excuse.’ But [the hoopoe] was not long in coming, and it said, ‘I have found out what you have not apprehended, and I come to you from Sheba with tidings!’”

Quran 27:20-22

Hoopoe is called “*Hudhud*” in Arabic, and the bird is mentioned to convey the story of Magnificent King Solomon who communicated with a hoopoe. During the king’s reign, he had an army of various creatures, and birds were his most movable arm which worked as talented scouts. In the Quran, Hoopoe is portrayed as an intelligent bird, smart, knows and worships his Creator. Beside in Islam, many religions uphold the Hoopoe as a sacred or holy bird. The Hoopoe is often connected with wisdom, majesty, kingship, and the divine (Brophy, 2022).

In accordance with the Quranic description, Wissal’s batik design shows the importance of being intelligent and smart in knowledge management. The batik shows the movement of a hoopoe, soaring up-right and getting reading to fly high. This feat also illustrates confidence to face challenges. Although the form of hoopoe appears to be a bit abstract and blended well with the surrounding nature, yet Wissal’s batik illustrations clearly shows that fauna could be promoted as a decent impression for neo-batik design. Hoopoe has the choices of colours that are commonly used in both traditional and modern interpretation of the Malay batik. As inscribed by the designer, the deep brown colour is called “sogan” in Malay language. This is the reason why the traditional batik is sometimes called “batik sogan”. Brown is natural colour that evokes a sign of strength and reliability. Brown represents solidity and the colour often associated with resilience, independence, security and safety. The batik design also has splash of green colour, in the rendering of orchids. Green is considered the colour of nature that illustrates the blessing from Allah. Green also epitomises good health and longevity.

## EXAMPLE 3: COMBINATION OF FLORA AND FAUNA PATTERNS



Figure 9: The “Hadaful Hayah” designed by Mohamad Izz Israq Izudinshah

This third example of Neo-traditional batik design is titled, “Hadaful Hayah”, which means “Have a good day”. Designed by Mohamad Izz Israq Izudinshah, the batik design depicts a pattern of combination of flora and fauna, as symbiosis of natural elements. Clear form of birds’ wings appeared on both sides of the batik cloth, yet with contrasting colour pallets. Elements of flora appears at the background, amalgamated harmoniously with the main fauna subject of the design. Both fauna and flora in the batik design reveals the vibrance of Allah’s creation in this world.

Izz Israq inscribed that the batik design is inspired by a Quranic verse, of surah Al -Isra’;

“ See how we have favored some over others in this life,  
but the hereafter is certainly far greater in rank and in favour”  
Quran 17:21

“*Hadaful Hayah*” has the intention to illustrate the idea of two opposing worlds, the heaven and the hell, representing the good and the bad. Birds’ wings in the middle of the batik painting bear a resemblance to a hoopoe, a bird which is mentioned many times in the holy Quran. The bird symbolises a living being in this world (*dunya*), moving upwards in life and gathering good deeds for the life in the hereafter. The batik design emphasises that the deeds one does in the worldly life would determine his place in the hereafter, either in heaven or in hell.

The designer uses range of blue and orange colours for his batik design to emphasis the contrast between good and bad. Blue represent calmness, relaxation, responsibility, stability and reliability (Kerry, 2022). Blue could also offer the feeling of refreshing and responsive. Meanwhile, orange stands for danger, and it is normally used for safety equipment and to indicate areas where we need to exercise caution (Smith, 2023). In the batik design of “Hadaful Hayah”, the orange colour has literally rendered the terrifying nature of the hellfire. Symbolically, “Hadaful Hayah” converses with viewers, proclaiming that the choice is yours.

#### EXAMPLE 4: FLORA PATTERN WITH EMOTION AS INSPIRATION



Figure 10: The "Pain", designed by Alifah Ilyana Alyas



Figure 11: A video link for the "Pain" (source: Alifah, 2023)

This fourth example is chosen for its uniqueness in presenting flora batik motif, with emotional attachment. The batik is designed by a female designer, named Alifah Ilyana Alyas and she names her creative invention, the "Pain". The batik design shows simple composition of floral motives, combined with blue background and splashes of water marks.

This design has the simplicity of modern touch, as it turns away from intricacy of traditional batik design. "Pain" also has modest colour palette that shows the idea of humbleness and sadness. Although blue is always associated with positive connotations, but generally in rhymes, blue is associated with feeling sad. As the term goes, "Caught the blues."

Alifah describes "pain" as the condition which everyone would feel in life, but no human can feel other people pain like their own. People can only try to understand and the effort of trying to be by someone's side and share the suffering may help to lessen one's pain. The courage to embrace the suffering would also increase as someone has a shoulder to cry on.

Alifah has a video to show the progress of producing her batik design, as if telling the audience that looking at the batik cloth that represents "pain" alone could not make someone fully understand one's pain. In fact, understanding "pain" requires viewing the video that she composes while producing her batik design. Embedded with a sad song, the video induces despairing sentiment. The video could be watched by scanning QR code of Figure 11 (Alifah, 2023).

#### EXAMPLE 5: COMBINATION OF FLORA AND FAUNA PATTERNS



Figure 12: The "Culture Bridging," designed by Suhib Mohammad Abdasalam Abumahfouze.



Figure 13: A video link for the "Culture Bridging" (source: Suhib, 2023)

The fifth example of Neo-traditional batik design is titled, "Culture Bridging", which has the attempt to bridge the Asian's batik and Arab's needlework arts. This integrated batik pattern is designed by Suhib Mohammad Abdasalam Abumahfouze. His batik design depicts geometrical pattern that is seldomly used in traditional batik design, but very popular for the middle-eastern folks' needlework. In the effort to produce neo-traditional batik design, Suhib has embraced geometrical pattern with well-ordered floral motifs. Still attached with the flora's influence, Suhib does not elude from the traditional batik entirely.

For "Culture Bridging," Suhib inscribes that needlework is a form of craft that was commonly used by the middle eastern female folks. Back in the old days, the female middle-eastern folks usually wore blank black dresses. Hence, to beautify their dresses, they did needlework of well put together geometrical pattern and sewed it to the clothes. Later, the needlework became one of the most common form of arts of the Arab. In fact, the needlework was applied not only for dresses, but also for other fabrics, such as table-cloth and head-scarf.

Suhib dominantly use black and red for his batik design. He perceives that the symbiosis between the colours black and red gives the harmonious affluence for the batik design. He identifies black as the colour of strength, whereas red represents love and happiness. The combination of black and red portrays the strong character of Arab female folks and should be adapted to the Asian batik crafts. Figure 13 shows a QR code attached to a video, that recounts the production of Suhib's batik design (Suhib, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

This project has successfully yielded 59 batik design that could be promoted for neo-traditional batik designs. Although this articles only showcase five chosen batik designs, the others are similarly important in term of presenting the creativity of young batik designers. The aim to narratively appraise the neo-traditional batik design could only be done with appropriate understanding on the traditional batik motif and the symbolic meaning of designers' intention and creativity. Hence, this project indicates that narrative appraisal requires deep interpretation of meaning, rather than just artistic creativity.

The five batik designs represent the inclination of using flora and fauna motives among the young generations of batik designer. Although the western contemporary arts have gone beyond the horizon of nature, this project shows that the influence of nature is implanted deep to the heart of the Malay designers. It is hoped that this narrative appraisal could motivate young batik designers to venture into batik design exploration with high level of cultural understanding and expressive artistic affection.

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