

Visual Aesthetics of Batik Cloth in the Mitoni Ritual of Surakarta

R.A. Heryani Wahyuningrum; Elda Franzia Jasjfi
ra.heryani@trisakti.ac.id¹, elda@trisakti.ac.id²
Visual Communication Design, Faculty of Art and Design
Trisakti University

ABSTRACT

This research examines the visual aesthetics and symbolic meaning of batik cloth used in the Javanese Mitoni ritual in Surakarta, a traditional ceremony held during the seventh month of pregnancy to pray for the safety of the mother and child. The study employs a qualitative iconographic approach to analyze the form, motif, and symbolism of batik cloth selected for the ritual. Data were collected through direct observation and interviews with ritual practitioners and families who conducted the ceremony. The analysis reveals that each batik motif carries philosophical meanings representing prayers for protection, fertility, and harmony. The cloth used within the Surakarta Palace tradition demonstrates strong ties between visual art and spiritual belief, functioning as both aesthetic expression and cultural identity. The findings highlight the importance of preserving batik as part of Indonesia's intangible heritage and its role as a visual language of hope and continuity in Javanese culture.

Keywords: visual aesthetics, mitoni, batik, cultural identity, Surakarta

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has 1,340 ethnic groups, and Javanese make up 41% of the largest population in Indonesia. Javanese society has a diversity of ethnicity, language, customs, rituals/traditions and clothing/fabrics. Many Javanese traditions are derived or modeled from the rituals of the Royal family life, which is a role model for the Javanese community. Customs that have values and norms of life in Javanese society develop to maintain balance in the philosophy of life. Changes in the inherited noble values are manifestations in their implementation adapted to regional conditions and their respective abilities. Changes/improvements are

adjusted to the demands of the times, so that Javanese rituals look very adaptive to develop a blend of Javanese and Islamic culture into Syncretic Java (Javanese culture wrapped in Islamic culture) (Rifa'i, 2017). Development in the context of preserving Javanese ritual culture can stem the flow of foreign cultures that do not necessarily have the meaning of the prayers in Javanese rituals (Bratawidjaja, 2000). The uniqueness of Javanese culture is its ability to maintain authenticity, as well as the ability to develop in digesting incoming outside culture, not by cultural isolation. Javanese culture increasingly found its identity with the entry of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. But the entry of modernization, the identity of 'Javanese' which is increasingly sinking, becomes a problem of integrating Javanese culture (Suseno, 2001).

One of the changes in Javanese culture that has developed is batik, both in its use and as a strong Indonesian cultural heritage. Batik in society has been introduced since it entered the palace, so that there is a grouping of classic batik which is an identification for the nobility and is known as 'Aristocratic Batik', which is believed by the public to be worn only by the upper class. (Clifford Geertz in Dharsono 2007:11). Batik has always been worn as daily clothing by the community, but there are motifs/patterns that are prohibited on certain occasions or can only be worn by the Susuhunan and his sons/daughters within the palace. Since 2009, UNESCO has designated batik as the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, which includes three heritage domains: oral traditions and expressions, social habits and customs, rituals and celebrations, and traditional craft skills (Nurlaili & Hikmawati, 2018).

In line with culture through batik, Javanese culture maintains diversity in its daily life cycle through Javanese traditional rituals/ceremonies that have meaning and symbolism. In Javanese society there are 2 types of ritual ceremonies, open ceremonies and closed ceremonies. The Tingkeban or Mitoni ceremony is one of the closed ceremonies, and is often also called a life cycle ceremony. Mitoni, which comes from the Javanese word "pitu", meaning seven, serves as a means to get rid of disasters and is part of the initiation of appreciation of elements of old beliefs, in the hope of getting salvation (Boanergis et al., 2019) .

In the mitoni ritual, the symbolism of pregnancy towards birth is one of the important life cycles, as a life process with deep spiritual values in Javanese culture. The symbols in the pregnancy procession starting from the first month to the ninth month are carried out with the aim that the pregnancy runs smoothly, safely, get many offspring, and avoid havoc and disturbance of spirits. The Mitoni/Tingkeban ritual is one of the closed ceremonies which is often also called the life cycle ceremony. The symbols in the procession of pregnancy starting from the first month to the ninth month are carried out with the aim that the pregnancy runs smoothly, safely, get many offspring, and avoid havoc and disturbance of spirits (Purwadi, 2005).

The study centers on the *Mitoni* ritual within the Surakarta community, presenting it as a significant cultural narrative of the descendants of Surakarta. This focus arises from concerns regarding the diminishing engagement of the younger generation—particularly descendants of Javanese families in Surakarta—with the traditional *Mitoni* ritual procession. Previous research by (Nurcahyanti, 2010) indicates that *Mitoni* traditions are increasingly simplified or even omitted by younger generations, influenced by urban lifestyles, modernization, and the adoption of Western-style celebrations. These shifts raise questions about whether the symbolic prayers for safety embedded in the selection of ritual batik cloth are beginning to erode, leading to a life cycle that no longer requires a complete series of rituals, and instead adapts to cultural diversity or modern practices entering the current generation. In light of this, the study emphasizes the importance of fostering understanding of the symbolic prayer elements in *Mitoni*, so they can remain a *fairuhung*—a deeply rooted cultural heritage—within Javanese society.

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modernity (western customs) that are starting to enter the current generation? The selection of rituals carried out, makes the author feel the need to build an understanding of the prayer symbols of these rituals, so that they can become fairuhung Javanese society.

Batik as a part of Javanese tradition has an equally important role in reflecting symbols of power, identity, and wealth. Batik was used by rulers to show their social status and as a tool of diplomacy. As times change, batik has transformed into an art commodity that is valued by the wider community (Hastangka, 2013). Similarly, in Javanese customs, the existing values need to be passed down so as not to be eroded by the changing times, especially with the influx of many outside cultures that are often considered more contemporary by some people. Thus, this research seeks to examine not only the symbolism of batik but also its visual aesthetics, including the analysis of motifs, color schemes, composition, and ornamental symbols used in the Mitoni ritual, and the challenges faced in preserving the cultural identity of Javanese heritage in the midst of global cultural dynamics.

The scope of this research is Javanese descent and society, especially Surakarta with a focus on the visual aesthetics of batik used in the mitoni ritual. The discussion of the symbolism contained in the selected batik has an important symbolic meaning in the context of meaning, especially life cycle rituals. However, since the post-independence of the Republic of Indonesia, there have been changes in the Palace environment, especially from the order of dress for reasons of practicality. Many changes including the culture of life cycle ceremonies such as: birth ceremonies, circumcisions, marriages, mitoni, birthdays, graduations and so on, are now open to the public and can be carried out by people outside the Surakarta Palace (Soedibyo, 2003).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research on the aesthetics of batik cloth in the Mitoni ritual employs a qualitative method with an iconographic approach to examine the form, symbols, and visual narratives embedded in the batik used. The main objective is to explain how the visual aesthetics of batik cloth function as a symbolic medium within Javanese–Surakarta society, revealing the spiritual and cultural meanings contained in each piece through systematic iconographic analysis.

1. Data Type

The study uses three main types of data:

- Visual data: Photographs and direct observation of batik cloth motifs used in the Mitoni ritual, including close-up documentation of patterns, colors, and compositional structures.
- Narrative data: Oral accounts obtained through interviews with batik artisans, cultural experts, palace figures, and community elders who have knowledge of Surakarta’s ritual traditions.
- Written documents: Archival records, literature, and historical references related to classic Surakarta batik motifs and their use in royal and community rituals.

2. Research Subjects

Participants include:

- Cultural practitioners and palace-affiliated individuals familiar with Mitoni traditions (3 people).
- Elders with lived experience in ceremony Mitoni rituals (2 people). Selection of subjects uses purposive sampling, focusing on individuals with direct involvement or deep knowledge of Mitoni and batik symbolism.

3. Data Collection Techniques

- Interviews: Semi-structured interviews conducted in Javanese and/or Indonesian, recorded and transcribed for analysis.
- Observation: Field visits to Mitoni ceremonies in Jakarta.
- Visual analysis: Photographic and direct examination of batik cloth to capture detailed motif structures, color palettes, and compositional arrangements.

- Literature study: Review of books, journals, and palace archives relevant to Surakarta batik and Javanese rituals.

4. Data Analysis (Panofsky's Iconography Application)

Data interpretation follows Erwin Panofsky's three levels of iconographic analysis:

1. Pre-iconographical description: Objective of the batik's visual elements: line, color, motif shapes, composition, and fabric texture.
2. Iconographical analysis: Identification of motifs and patterns in the context of Javanese visual tradition, linking them with known symbolic meanings from historical and cultural references.
3. Iconological interpretation: Deep contextual analysis that reveals the philosophical, spiritual, and socio-cultural significance of the batik within the Mitoni ritual, considering Javanese cosmology and palace traditions.

4. Data Validation

Triangulation is employed by comparing visual findings, interview narratives, and literature sources to ensure accuracy and credibility in interpreting the symbolic and aesthetic meanings of the batik cloth.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

(Suseno, 2001), in his theory of multiculturalism, emphasizes that Indonesia is a nation rich in ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. The *mitoni* ritual, performed in different regions, often undergoes adaptation and simplification; however, multiculturalism in major cities in Java creates a space for diversity in carrying out *mitoni* while maintaining the essence of the ritual. *Mitoni* is regarded as an integral part of the cultural identity of Javanese–Surakarta descendants, where traditional elements—such as the use of seven different water sources, batik cloth, flowers, and offerings prepared for ancestral spirits—are still highly preserved.

(Geertz, 1993) through his interpretive approach to cultural symbols, offers a profound understanding of the meanings embedded in batik and other elements within the mitoni ritual. He asserts that culture is a web of significance constructed by humans through the symbols they employ in daily life. The symbols found on batik cloth, flowers, and offerings carry meanings that far transcend their material

forms. For example, the batik cloth is not merely a physical garment protecting the mother but also serves as a spiritual safeguard, linking the human realm to divine power and the cosmos.

In the context of this research's findings, Geertz's approach can be employed to interpret how the visual and symbolic elements within the mitoni ritual are not merely aesthetic decorations but function as cultural communication tools conveying implicit messages about values, social status, and spiritual relationships. For instance, the specific batik motifs chosen and the colors used during the ritual embody prayers and hopes for the mother's and child's safety, as well as the continuity of the Surakarta palace lineage. A semiotic analysis of these elements reveals that the mitoni ritual operates as a visual communication medium that transmits complex, layered cultural meanings.

Theoretically, (Geertz, 2017) interpretive framework is supported by prior research on cultural symbolism and semiotics in traditional ritual contexts. (Barthes, 2012) emphasizes the significance of signs and symbols in culture. In the field of visual communication design, these concepts are particularly relevant to understanding how traditional symbols are visually communicated and received by communities, as well as how this communicative process may be maintained or transformed in the face of modernization.

The *mitoni* ritual—celebrating the seventh month of a woman's first pregnancy—was first introduced by the Surakarta Palace to the Javanese community. The bathing of the pregnant woman with water from seven different sources is not merely a physical act of cleansing but also holds profound symbolic meaning concerning spiritual purification. In Geertz's interpretive framework, the number seven signifies perfection or completeness, reflecting the hope that the unborn child will be physically and spiritually whole (Abdullah et al., 2021).

This study employs an iconographic approach to describe the symbolic meanings embedded in batik motifs used in rituals, based on the three-tiered framework developed by Erwin Panofsky (Probosiwi, 2018). The analysis unfolds as follows:

1. Pre-iconographic Description (Visual Description): Each motif on the batik cloth adheres to the classical Surakarta batik style, characterized by symmetrical composition and the presence of *isen* (dot motifs, sawut, lines). The color palette prominently features traditional Surakarta hues such as sogan brown, black, and brick red, which are historically significant and imbued with cultural meaning.
2. Iconographic Analysis: The visual elements collectively form a thematic nexus relating to the interconnection between humans, nature, and divine power. For example, the Lar (Gurda) motif symbolizes authority and protection over the microcosm of the womb, conveying strength, courage, and spiritual guardianship for the mother and fetus (Koentjaraningrat, 2004; Suleman, 2017). The Tree of Life motif signifies fertility and hope for a smooth birth and the child's flourishing future (William & Geertz, 1961). Butterflies represent the mother's inner spiritual journey throughout pregnancy until the birth process (Soedibyo, 2003).
3. Iconological Interpretation: Batik motifs function as a medium of spiritual communication that connects humans with the divine. The cloth acts as a visualization of prayers and hopes for the safety of mother and child. The ritual practice of changing seven batik cloths symbolizes a sequence of transformative transitions welcoming new life, embodying values such as love, self-control, and surrender to God ((Koentjaraningrat, 2004; Panofsky, 1939).

The seven types of batik used are not chosen arbitrarily; each cloth represents ancestral values and is believed to reflect Javanese cultural beliefs about life, birth, and the human connection to the spiritual realm. The number seven (*pitu*) is sacred, as it relates to *pitungan*, meaning “help” in Javanese (Setyaningsih & Zahrulianingdyah, 2015).



Over time, the aesthetic elements of *mitoni* have evolved, particularly in modern society, where ritual components—including the choice of batik—are simplified. Differences can be observed between the Surakarta Palace family and the broader community. However, the symbolic meanings of the batik remain preserved as part




of cultural identity. Classical batik adheres to strict standards (*pakem*), consisting of main motifs, filler motifs (*interludes*), and *isen* (detail) motifs (Sony kartika, 2007).



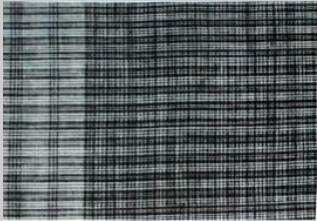
The traditional batik color system also has philosophical meaning based on the cardinal directions:

- Black (*lawwamah*) represents earth.
- Red (*anger*) symbolizes fire.
- Yellow (*supiyah*) signifies wind.
- White (*mutmainah*) represents water.
- Green (*kama*) is associated with the center of the earth.

These symbolic associations derive from Javanese Sufi teachings.

BATIK MOTIF	VISUAL SYMBOLS	PHILOSOPHICAL MEANING
Sidomulyo 	Lar (Gurda), Butterflies, Building, Tree of Life	Sido means "to be", Mulyo means "glory". Symbolizes receiving grace bestowed by the Divine. Reflects human ability to control four passions (anger, lawwamah, supiyah, mutmainah). The ideal life is achieved through self-control. (Sony kartika, 2007)
Source: personal documentation		
Sidoasih 	Lar (Gurda), Butterflies, Tree of Life	Symbolizes love, compassion, and peaceful relationships among people. (Kusrianto, 2021)
Source: (Kusrianto, 2021)		

<p>Sidomukti</p> <p>Source:(Kusrianto, 2021)</p> 	<p>Lar (Gurda), Tree of Life, Butterflies, Dampar</p>	<p>Symbolizes lofty dreams and balance between mind (microcosm) and God, as well as horizontal harmony with the environment (macrocosm). (Sony kartika, 2007)</p>
<p>Sidoluhur</p> <p>Source: Personal</p>  <p>Documentation</p>	<p>Building/Throne, Butterfly, Lar (Gurda)</p>	<p>Represents high status, noble leadership, honor without arrogance, and inherited noble values.</p>
<p>Wahyutumurun</p> <p>Source: Personal</p>  <p>Documentation</p>	<p>Lar (Gurda), Plants, Crown/Makutha, Butterflies, Phoenix Bird, Peacock</p>	<p>Symbolizes wealth, beauty, cultural diversity, and hope for divine guidance.</p>
<p>Parang Canthel</p>  <p>Source: https://id.theasianparent.com/batik-parang</p>	<p>Repeated Letter N motif</p>	<p>Represents dependence on Almighty God, spiritual strength, and discipline.</p>

<p>Madu Bronto</p>  <p>Source: Personal Documentation</p>	<p>Beetles, Isen motifs</p>	<p>Represents a life filled with kindness, compassion, and sincere love like sweet honey.</p>
<p>Sidadrajad</p> <p>Source: Personal Documentation</p> 	<p>Lar (Gurda), Butterflies, Flower, Plants</p>	<p>Symbolizes noble status achieved with humility, avoiding arrogance (adigang, adigung, adiguna).</p>
<p>Lurik Tumbar Pecah</p> <p>Source: Nian S.</p> 	<p>Stripe motif</p>	<p>Symbolizes hope for a smooth birth and timely rupture of amniotic fluid, with prayers for safety and health.</p>


<p>Yuyu Sekandang</p>  <p>Source: https://fitinline.com/article/read/keunikan-makna-filosofi-batik-klasik-motif-yuyu-sekandang/</p>	<p>crab, Lar (Gurda)</p>	<p>Symbolizes fortune, numerous beneficial relationships, and many virtuous descendants contributing to family and society.</p>
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Table 1 Examples of batik motifs in the *mitoni* ritual of the Surakarta Community

source: author documentation

At the peak of the ritual, the expectant mother changes into seven pairs of clothing with different motifs, along with three additional batik cloths, and various colors of *kebaya* and *kemben*. The choice of batik motifs varies across Java but retains the shared intention of ensuring the safety of both mother and child.

Regional variations include:

- **Surakarta community:** Sidomukti, Sidoluhur, Truntum, Parang Kusuma, Semen Rama, Udan Iris, Cakar Ayam, Lurik Lasem, Kemben Dringin (Abdullah et al., 2021).
- **Kebumen community:** Wahyu Tumurun, Sidomukti, Ratu Ratih, Satria Wibawa, Palang Grompol, Sidoluhur, Lurik (Estiningtyas, 2019).

Although the type of batik differs, the symbolic intentions remain similar. Even the name for the seventh-month pregnancy celebration varies—*Mitoni* (Solo/Central Java), *Tingkeban* (Central/East Java), *Palet Kandhungan* (Madura), and *Nujuh Bulanan* (West Java) (Rachma et al., 2023).

In contrast, the Puro Mangkunegaran Surakarta family uses only *Sembagi* cloth and Sidomukti batik. *Sembagi* is a floral fabric featuring seven colors—red, white, blue, yellow, green, black, and purple (Nurcahyanti, 2010) .

Ultimately, whether performed inside or outside the palace walls, the use of batik cloth in *mitoni* remains a spiritual medium connecting the Javanese community with God. The selection of batik is often determined by the availability of cloth owned by the *juru paningkeb* (ritual elder) or the family, reflecting the Javanese adaptability to circumstances (Bratawidjaja, 2000).

Previous studies highlight *mitoni* as a ritual with deep spiritual values, fostering social cohesion within the Javanese community (Boanergis et al., 2019). According to Edward B. Taylor (1871), asserts, culture encompasses the habits formed within society—its knowledge, arts, beliefs, morals, laws, and customs (Vitry & Syamsir, 2024). The aesthetic dimension of batik in *mitoni* has both philosophical meaning and social function, serving as a cultural expression of harmony between God, humans, and the universe. Within the functional-structural context, the ritual also reinforces human relationships within family and society. The batik motifs—especially Sidomukti, Sidomulyo, and Sidoluhur—symbolize shared hopes for honor, happiness, and safety.

In essence, the *mitoni* ritual becomes a cultural bridge linking ancestral traditions with modern generations. Though adapted to contemporary life, it preserves the symbolic power of batik and strengthens Javanese cultural identity. The ritual embodies philosophical and spiritual values, acting as a representation of the microcosm's harmony with the macrocosm, aiming for both vertical (divine) and horizontal (social) balance. The number seven remains central, signifying perfection and completeness.

CONCLUSION

The cultural process is created from an idea, concept, and centered on human thought, so that it becomes a cultural system that is believed, embraced, carried out consistently based on the principle of relationship. The mitoni ritual is a representation of the identity of the Javanese community and its descendants, so that Javanese families maintain it as a family heritage. meaning of the batik cloth motif used in the mitoni ritual is a symbolic representation and a cultural identity of the Surakarta Palace, part of the human life cycle, especially in the prenatal phase. The purpose of the batik cloth is a spiritual medium for the family's prayers and wishes for the pregnant mother and the baby, a safe birth and a good future for the baby. This ritual can be thought of as a "small universe" that represents the larger cosmos. Each element in the ritual, from the sequence to the symbols used, has an interrelated meaning, creating a harmonious whole. These symbols serve as a way of communication between humans and God, humans and the universe, and between fellow humans. Educating the community, especially the younger generation, to preserve existing traditions and cultural values is very important. This needs to be socialized so that it remains relevant to modern lifestyles without losing the main essence of the ritual.

The *mitoni* or *tingkeban* ritual is a traditional Javanese ceremony that marks the seventh month of pregnancy, serving as a medium for prayers, blessings, and moral guidance for the mother and unborn child. Rooted in the Javanese philosophical framework, the ritual embodies a worldview where human life is harmonized with divine will, the natural order, and social cohesion. This depth of meaning sharply contrasts with the contemporary *baby shower* tradition introduced from Western culture, which generally emphasizes gift-giving, entertainment, and casual socializing. While such modern celebrations may appeal to younger generations due to their informality and convenience, they often lack the layered symbolic depth and visual-cultural heritage embodied in *mitoni*.

The iconographic analysis of batik used in *mitoni* reveals a sophisticated integration of visual aesthetics and cultural symbolism. Motifs such as *Sido Asih*, *Truntum*, and *Sido Mulyo* serve as visual prayers: *Sido Asih* expresses enduring

marital love and familial harmony; *Truntum* symbolizes guiding affection from elders to the next generation; and *Sido Mulyo* represents the hope for a noble and prosperous life. The compositional balance of these motifs, often symmetrical and rhythmically ordered, reflects the Javanese principle of *keselarasan* (harmony), while color choices—dominated by soft browns, deep indigos, and natural soga tones—symbolize purity, protection, and continuity of life.

Through Panofsky's three-tier method, the analysis uncovered that these aesthetic choices are not arbitrary but deliberate cultural constructs:

1. Pre-iconographical level: photos the physical forms, lines, colors, and compositional structures of the batik.
2. Iconographical level: identifying their symbolic associations with fertility, protection, and harmonious social order.
3. Iconological level: interpreting these as manifestations of *tri hita karana*, the Javanese ethical ideal of harmony between humans and God, humans and nature, and humans with one another.

In the current era of modernization and cultural globalization, the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of *mitoni* batik risk being overshadowed by simplified, entertainment-focused adaptations. While incorporating elements of modern celebration may help engage younger participants, such integration must not dilute the symbolic integrity of the ritual. Educational initiatives—through formal curricula, museum programs, and community workshops—are essential to preserve and transmit this layered visual language to future generations. By safeguarding both the aesthetic beauty and the spiritual-philosophical meanings of *mitoni* batik, the Javanese community can ensure that its cultural identity remains resilient, relevant, and deeply rooted in the *fairuhung* philosophy that affirms human dignity through moral and spiritual richness.

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