

Cultural Semiotic Analysis of the Transformation of the “Hayu” Batik Motif from Royal Tomb Ornaments

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:
Hayu Batik,
Transformation,
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Royal Tomb,

The Hayu batik motif is a contemporary batik design developed since 2022 by researchers from the University Centre of Excellence Javanologi for Javanese Traditions, Universitas Sebelas Maret, in collaboration with traditional batik artisans on the slopes of Mount Lawu, Karanganyar, Central Java. A distinctive feature of this motif lies in its adaptation of aesthetic elements from the ancient royal tombs of Pura Mangkunegaran, Surakarta. This study aims to examine the progress achieved to date and to explore the “behind-the-layers” transformation process through which the aesthetic elements of royal tombs are reinterpreted into batik design elements. Specifically, the objectives are: (1) to explain the transformation of forms from the aesthetic elements of ancient tombs into the elegant design patterns of the Hayu batik, and (2) to analyze the aesthetic transformation process that adapts traditional aesthetic values to the needs and tastes of modern society, resulting in a synthesized Hayu batik pattern. Both are expected to illuminate the shift from the sacred imagery of heritage to a more profane, accessible, and contemporary form aligned with current trends. Employing a cultural semiotic approach, this qualitative exploratory research interprets systems of symbols, signs, and codes, particularly regarding the transformation of symbolic meaning and cultural expression. The findings reveal that form transformation is achieved through translation, rotation, reflection, and dilation. Where translation involves subtractive, additive, dimensional, and geometric transformations while aesthetic transformation encompasses changes in medium (stone to fabric), atmosphere of appreciation, design orientation, and lifestyle. This study also presents the creation process and philosophical values of the four Hayu motif designs, positioning Hayu as an innovative breakthrough in batik art that integrates historical narratives, events, and connections into new symbols and imaginative-practical aesthetic expressions.

INTRODUCTION

Batik has evolved as the “distinguished cultural image” of Surakarta, originally serving to meet the community’s basic need for clothing. Over time, it developed into a medium for expressing art and beauty, imbued with diverse values. During the era of the traditional monarchy in Surakarta (1745–1945 CE), batik reached its peak as a royal hallmark alongside other courtly cultural products such as culinary arts, gamelan, weaponry, royal titles, and ceremonial traditions held both routinely and incidentally (Doellah, 2002). The reign of Paku Buwana X is often regarded as the golden age of *wastra batik*, which has endured as a defining product and cultural marker of Surakarta (Suharmaji, 2020).

Following Indonesia’s independence, particularly between the 1980s and 1990s, the batik industry experienced rapid growth. Investors from outside the palace walls opened new *batik tulis* (hand-drawn batik) enterprises in Sragen, Karanganyar, Wonogiri, and Klaten Regencies. Within Surakarta, batik production was concentrated in Kauman and Laweyan Villages, later expanding to Kratonan, Pasar Kliwon, and Banjarsari Villages (Anisah, 2016). This growth led the Surakarta City Government to declare Surakarta the “City of Batik,” with the Kasunanan Palace and Pura Mangkunegaran as key symbols (Pemkot Solo, 2022). Notably, the advancement of Solo batik has been supported by contributions from surrounding regencies. Its distinctiveness lies in the elegance of historically significant motifs such as Parang,

Truntum, Kawung, Sidomukti, and Sidoluhur (Purwaningsih, 2012; Widodo, 2024), which are believed to carry profound local wisdom. Nevertheless, newer motif such as dome patterns, moons, animals, triangles, and centipedes continues to emerge and gain acceptance (Asti & Arini, 2011).

Today, batik production in Surakarta is still sustained by both large community groups, such as those in Laweyan and Kauman, and smaller producers operating from their own shops. However, current trends show a relative decline. Several large-scale batik companies, including Semar, Keris, Danarhadi, and Gunawan, have had to cut production due to global economic pressures. Moreover, Indonesia's largest textile manufacturer, PT Sri Rejeki Isman Tbk (PT Sritex), officially closed on 1 March 2025 after being declared bankrupt, resulting in mass layoffs (Tempo, 28 February 2025). These global conditions have shifted consumer preference toward printed textiles, as the high production cost and lengthy process of *batik tulis* have made it increasingly expensive. In response, batik creators, academics, and entrepreneurs have sought strategic solutions such as developing natural *sogan* dyes from herbal plants, sap, and other organic sources, and reimagining "forbidden motifs" (*batik larangan*) into contemporary designs for a broader market, particularly younger audiences. Such motifs include Parang, Bangun Tulak, Lar, Cemukiran, and Lenga Teleng (Pujiani, 2015).

The emergence of the *Hayu* motif (2024) marks a new phenomenon in Surakarta's batik landscape. Its unique character, derived from aesthetic elements of ancient royal tombs, offers an unexpected appeal while posing challenges for creators to introduce new motifs amid a conservative society with entrenched perceptions of batik's meaning (Wulandari, 2022). *Hayu*, meaning "life," is designed by stylising and recombining basic elements to align with cultural tastes, creating a new life symbol rich in aesthetic and philosophical value (Widodo, 2023). The decision to source these elements from royal tombs stems from their authenticity as part of historical heritage, containing the finest artistic qualities of their time (Banindro et al, 2024). Yet, this subject has rarely attracted public attention beyond archaeological, historical, or folkloric studies. The *Hayu* motif builds upon traditional patterns such as Kawung, Sekar Jagad, and Mega Mendhung.

This paper critically opens a new discourse on the development of the *Hayu* Batik Motif from Royal Tomb Ornaments, a creative transformation of design character through a cultural semiotic approach. It moves beyond examining form, aesthetics, ethics, and conceptual philosophy (Sachari, 2002), instead positioning the motif as a solution to the decline of *batik tulis* in the face of mass-produced stamped and printed alternatives. Two types of character transformation are examined: (1) form transformation, describing various stylisation modifications (geometric shapes, scale, proportion, combination, separation, etc.), and (2) functional transformation, examining changes in object function, functional efficiency, and the productivity of meaning to create new aesthetic-philosophical impressions. These transformations are argued to shift the "sacred" imagery into a more contemporary, relatable, and trend-aligned expression (Wu & Guo, 2021; Mandal, 2013).

Theoretical Background

Concept of Batik Hayu Design

Preliminary studies indicate a “taste migration” among consumers toward modern textiles bearing batik-like patterns, often marketed simply as “batik” due to their variety, lower prices, and availability in numerous outlets in Surakarta. This reality prompted researchers to seek new sources of ideas, materials, and values for revitalising traditional batik (Ashari, 2014). The central question was whether there were vital cultural objects that could serve as the basis for a new batik design. Several potential sources were explored, leading to the decision to draw aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual inspiration from the ancient royal tombs of Pura Mangkunegaran, Surakarta.

The systematic use of ornamental elements from these tombs resulted in a design considered “unique, visually appealing, rich in philosophical meaning, and modern.” The name *Hayu*, meaning “life” or “well-being”, was chosen deliberately to avoid associations with death or misfortune (Herusatoto, 2008). Etymologically, *Hayu* derives from the Old Javanese *ayu*, which has cognates such as *arja*, *harju*, *arjaya*, *asapta*, *rayu*, *ramya*, and *rahayu* (Poewadarminta, 2014). From an onomastic and toponymic perspective, naming is an interdisciplinary field that integrates linguistics, social sciences, history, culture, and philosophy (Daljuni, 1997).

The *Hayu* batik design considers functionality, aesthetics, and user context from the motif planning stage to the final pattern. Geometric and abstract forms combine the tombs’ ornamental elements with Javanese traditional art, nature, and the artisans’ personal imagination, producing strong symbolic and philosophical meanings (Pandanwangi et al, 2023). Symbolic representations of death are transformed into visual metaphors of life, hope, and blessings.

Concept of Cultural Semiotics

The term semiotics (or semiology), first introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), has since been developed by modern theorists such as Charles Morris (1901–1979), Umberto Eco (1932), Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), Roland Barthes (1915–1980), A.J. Greimas (1917–1992), and Thomas A. Sebeok (1920–2001). Cultural semiotics systematically analyses how symbols, signs, and cultural interpretations shape and express values, beliefs, and behaviours (Christomy & Yuwono, 2004).

Ancient tombs can be understood as “signs” open to interpretation. Barthes (1985) divides signs into three components: *sign* (material concept), *signifier* (the physical form), and *signified* (the mental, behavioural, and cognitive aspects) (Tinarbuko, 2008). In this framework, cultural semiotics offers a lens to understand how meaning is constructed and experienced in culture (Hoed, 2011). Four key principles apply in this study: (1) the royal tombs of Pura Mangkunegaran are cultural products containing complex networks of symbols, signs, and meanings (Herususanto, 2008); (2) these signs are historically and contextually tied to Javanese culture; (3) they are open to reinterpretation in new cultural contexts (Eliade, 2002); and (4) a multidisciplinary approach enables contemporary symbolic representation, creating new forms as dialogic expressions of past and present ideas (Dillistone, 2002).

Concept of Developing the Hayu Batik Motif

In this context, motif development refers to transforming the aesthetic components of the royal tombs into new batik patterns (Table 1). This transformation applies translation, reflection, rotation, and dilation techniques (Widodo, 2023) to create new motifs and designs. The elements involved include: (1) the main ornament as the focal point of the batik; (2) supporting ornaments that enhance the overall composition; and (3) *isen-isen*, or filler ornaments, such as *cecek* (dots), *sawutan* (lines), and *ukel* (curves) (Bonindro et al., 2023; Permatasari, 2023).

The development process integrates aesthetics, functionality, and consumer preferences, combining knowledge from fine arts, graphic design, literature, and product design. The result is a motif that visually harmonises traditional symbolism with modern appeal, sustaining cultural heritage while engaging contemporary markets (Tomasovic, 2023).

Table 1. Development of *Hayu* Batik motifs and designs

Criteria	Motif	Design
Purpose	Compiling various basic elements of the source of the tombs of the kings of Pura Mangkunegaran as initial work	Changing the image of the tomb, the king, and creating new designs and narratives
Focus	Forming aesthetic elements and structured patterns	Adapting to function, aesthetics, artistic context, and users (consumers)
Characteristic	Repeating, combining, and rearranging with eclectic creations	Maintaining the regularity of motifs, sequence, consistency, and forming designs
Example	Geometric patterns in batik: floral, fauna, human, and fictional creature motifs.	Can be used in interior design, product design, and graphic design
Role	Building patterns and making a new inspiration	Solving problems, creating final works

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Strategy

This study employed a qualitative exploratory approach, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the development of Solo-Indonesia batik motifs inspired by the aesthetic and ethnic ornaments found in the royal tombs of Pura Mangkunegaran, Surakarta. The research critically examines the potential and strengths of stylized design, grounded in intellectual capacity, imagination, and craftsmanship (Yin, 2014). This approach was chosen for its flexibility and openness, enabling the discovery of new insights for similar future studies (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). The research strategy adopted was a focused single-case study (Miles & Huberman, 2018), allowing for a detailed and comprehensive reconstruction of the transformation of traditional values into distinctive design characteristics and visual beauty (Sharapov, 2022).

Data Sources and Research Data

The primary data sources were three royal tomb complexes of Pura Mangkunegaran in the Surakarta region: Astana Mangadeg, Astana Girilayu, and Astana Nayu (Oetoro).

The research steps included:

- a. Conducting preliminary focus group discussions to refine research objectives, describe key observations, and prepare field notes prior to visiting the sites (Strauss & Corbin, 2007).
- b. Fieldwork activities at the tomb complexes, including:
 1. Interviews with key informants at each location: Sudarmo (72, Mangadeg), Sukirman (68, Mangadeg), Sudarno (69, Girilayu), Pasiran (66, Nayu/Oetoro), and Hartadi (52, Nayu/Oetoro).
 2. Documenting the site through photography and video, focusing on primary ethnic ornaments, supporting decorative elements, and other architectural details.
 3. Collecting secondary sources, such as archival documents, photographs, and historical artifacts.

Data Collection Techniques

Three main techniques were applied:

1. In-depth interviews to gather information on history, traditional practices, notable figures, site renovations, and other relevant details about the royal tombs (Miles & Huberman, 2018).
2. Site surveys of selected tomb complexes (Bryman, 2001), including photographic and video documentation of aesthetic elements.
3. Document analysis of Old Javanese manuscripts, tomb restoration reports, and records of repaired sections to ensure the authenticity of the recorded ornaments.

Data Analysis Techniques

The study employed an interactive analysis model, moving between three stages:

1. Data condensation – refining, directing, and organizing the data;
2. Data display – presenting the data systematically;
3. Conclusion drawing – interpreting the findings (Yin, 2014).

Objectivity and rationality were maintained through triangulation and the strict selection of informants to ensure data validity (Strauss & Corbin, 2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Transformation of Form and Style

The transformation of form in the Hayu batik design is a series of processes in which the original base forms are modified into “new” motifs with a more complex and aesthetically refined style. These base forms are reinterpreted into dots, lines, and flat planes through techniques such as translation (shifting), rotation, reflection, and dilation, resulting in distinctive patterns.

Such transformations require precision in altering geometric shapes, sizes, proportions, combinations, and separations—while consistently adhering to the main objective: *to create a new image and style derived from the aesthetic foundations of the ancient royal tombs of*

Pura Mangkunegaran, with the confidence that these designs will be well-received by consumers.

A. Translation (Shifting) of Forms (Figure 1)

Translation can be achieved through:

1. Subtractive Transformation – reducing the volume or mass of the original form, such as removing frames, minimizing ornamentation, and simplifying decorative details.
2. Additive Transformation – adding new elements to the base form to enrich the design.
3. Dimensional Transformation – altering the dimensions (lengthening, shortening, or increasing the height) of a section without changing its fundamental shape.
4. Geometric Transformation – modifying the base form into an entirely different geometric configuration.

The practice of translation is illustrated in the figure below:

Original Tomb Ornaments

Motif Design

Embodiment in Cloth

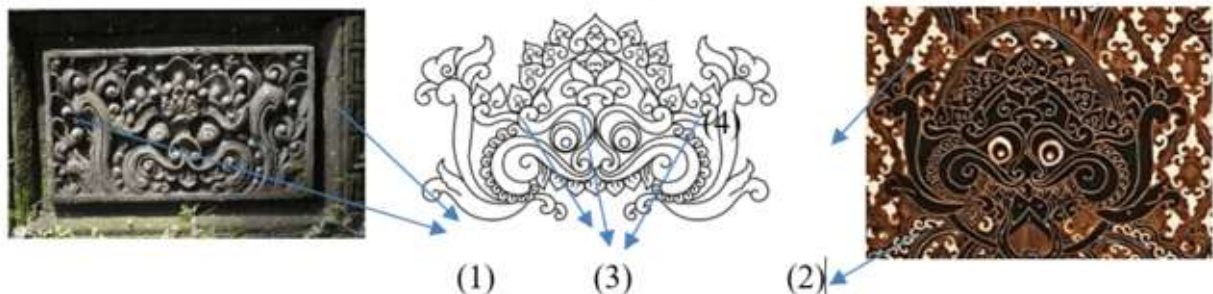


Figure 1. Design Translation of *Hayu* Batik

B. Rotation

Rotation involves turning a basic form around a specific reference point. In the *Hayu* batik design, the rotation technique is employed to evoke a dynamic impression, diversify visual variations, and enhance the overall aesthetic appeal of the motif (Fijayanti & Fakhriati, 2023). Through precise execution, ornamental imagery derived from royal tombs is reinterpreted into new patterns by rotating the base form either clockwise or counterclockwise at carefully determined angles (Figure 2). This process results in motifs that are both symmetrical and dynamic, further enriching the visual elegance of the batik textile.

Original Tomb Ornaments	Motif Design	Embodiment in Cloth
		
Vertical Form	Horizontal Form	Repetition Variations

Figure 2. Form Rotation in *Hayu* Batik Motif

C. Dilation

Dilation (Figure 3) refers to the creation of batik motifs by altering the scale of the base form, either by enlarging or reducing its size, and combining this with rotation at specific angles. This technique allows the designer to achieve proportional variations while maintaining the essence of the original form. Similar applications of combined rotation and dilation can be found in other Indonesian batik traditions, such as the *Tembakau* Jember batik and the Batik *Besurek* of Bengkulu. The Parang motif of Surakarta also exhibits a comparable tendency, reflecting a shared design approach across different regional batik styles.

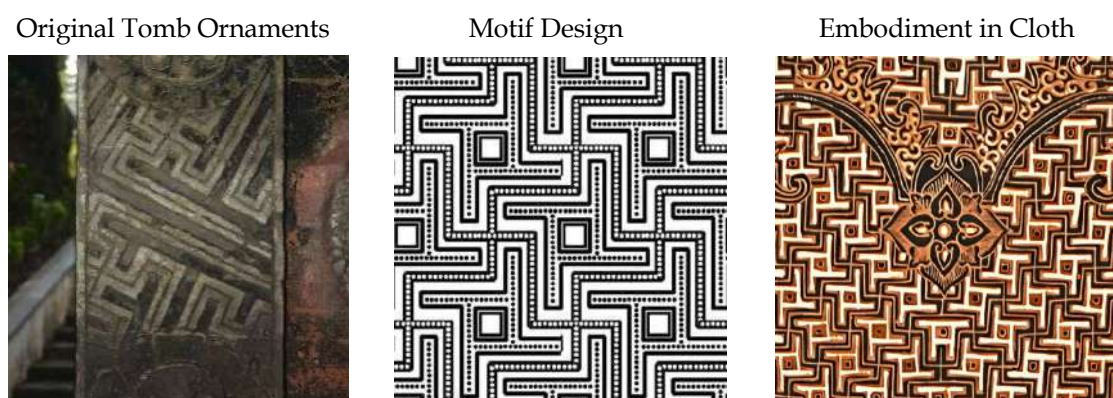


Figure 3. Form Dilation in *Hayu* Batik Motif

D. Reflection

Reflection is the process of mirroring a basic form across a line or plane. In *Hayu* batik, this method is skillfully combined with translation, rotation, and dilation to produce patterns that are symmetrical, varied, and richly detailed. Through the application of geometric principles, the design achieves a sense of “new” visual

beauty, one that retains a connection to its traditional roots while presenting a fresh and contemporary aesthetic (Figure 4).

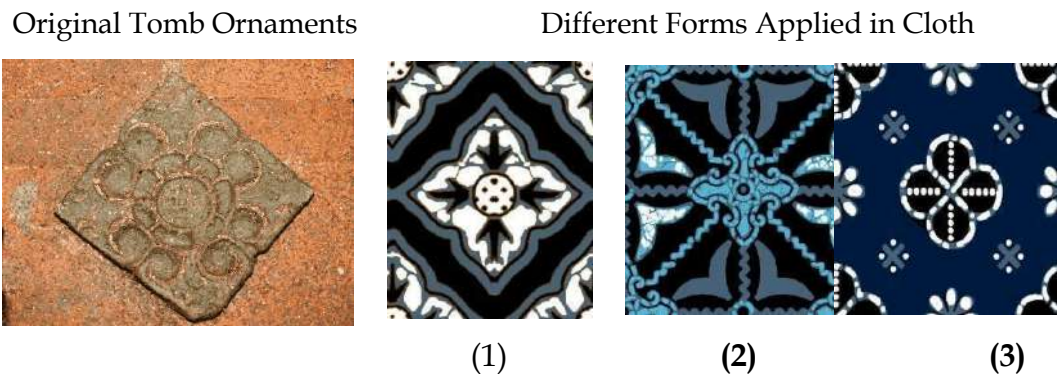


Figure 4. Form Reflection in *Hayu* Batik Motif

Aesthetic Transformation

In general, aesthetic transformation in *Hayu* batik can be understood as an effort to alter or shift the mindset regarding how beauty, artistic meaning, and embedded values are perceived, appreciated, and experienced within a single piece of fabric. Such transformation may occur in various creative domains—visual arts, design, architecture, and beyond, centering on the redefinition and development of beauty concepts that have no universal standard (Bamfort, 2023). This opens new opportunities for artists and creators to work free from the constraints of fear or error, embodying what may be termed a “myth of new liberation.”

Historically, batik has reached its pinnacle as an indispensable identity marker for the nobility of Surakarta. A single piece of batik cloth, decorated with specific motifs and patterns, not only conveyed artistic value but also signified a particular social status within traditional Javanese society (Asti & Arini, 2011), closely tied to various ceremonial practices. In Javanese wedding customs, for example, popular motifs include *Truntum*, *Sido Asih*, *Sido Mulyo*, *Sido Mukti*, and *Semen Rama*. Different ceremonial contexts called for different motifs, such as *kitanan* (circumcision), *taraban* (coming of age for girls), *mitoni* (seven-month pregnancy ritual), *tingkeban*, and funerals, where the *Slobok* motif is traditionally used.

Findings from this study reveal that *Hayu* batik is a manifestation of an aesthetic transformation process in several significant ways. First, it successfully reinterprets the aesthetic elements of the royal tombs, originally expressed through natural stone, marble, granite, and ceramic into the medium of batik cloth. This is not a simple material translation, but a conceptual recontextualization across media, visual aesthetics, spiritual messages, moral values, and social connotations. *Hayu* batik consciously shifts away from associations with tombs, death, eeriness, and sacredness, transforming them into new expressions of elegance, beauty, and novelty (Mandal, 2013). Second, its emergence influences the perceived standards of beauty, function, and quality in batik appreciation. *Hayu* batik offers a “new breath” to the Indonesian batik tradition, not replacing existing aesthetic concepts, but complementing them. Third, it reshapes the atmosphere of batik appreciation. The long-standing assumption

that classical batik holds the highest value has been partially challenged by the presence of *Hayu*'s contemporary motifs, which remain rooted in traditional batik techniques yet embrace a more progressive design identity. Fourth, it alters the orientation of design patterns (Figure 5). *Hayu* batik prioritizes functional aspects while giving equal attention to aesthetic quality, reflecting a balance between utility and beauty (Figure 6). Finally, it impacts lifestyle development by introducing a new creative resource, the aesthetic elements of the royal tombs of Pura Mangkunegaran into the broader discourse of batik design innovation.



Figure 5. Hayu Saraswati Form and Style Transformation



Figure 6. Hayu Murti Form and Style Transformation

Batik Hayu Making Process

Hayu batik uses distinctive colors and goes through 3 stages of coloring.

1. Creating a Hayu (*molani*) Batik design. The finished pattern is transferred onto a prepared piece of unbleached cotton cloth. The motif is created by following the pattern created on the paper (Step 1 on Figure 7).



Figure 7. Drawing Batik Pattern Process

2. Painting with wax (*lilin*) using a *canting* (hand-held tool) follows the basic pattern. Covering with wax the parts that retain the original color of the fabric (white). This process requires great care and precision. (Steps 2 and 3 on Figure 7)
3. The first dyeing process is carried out using the immersion technique, followed by the first stage of fabric drying.
4. Once dry, the next batik process continues by applying wax with a *canting* on the areas designated to receive the first color layer.
5. The process continues with the second dyeing stage. Afterward, the wax is removed by immersing the fabric in hot water over a stove until completely clean, then the fabric is dried. (Step 5 on Figure 8)
6. The next waxing stage is carried out by applying wax to preserve the first and second color layers.
7. The process of waxing and dewaxing is repeated multiple times, depending on the number of colors used and the complexity of the motif.
8. The *nglorot* process, or final wax removal, is done by boiling the fabric in hot water. This is followed by the final washing stage after wax removal. The batik cloth is then dried by air-drying it in the shade, avoiding direct sunlight to ensure color consistency and durability (Step 6 and 7 on Figure 8)



Figure 8. Dyeing and Wax Removal Process

Four *Hayu* Batik Design Motifs

Presented below are four *Hayu* batik motifs resulting from two years of research: (1) *Batik Hayu Dirda*, (2) *Hayu Murti*, (3) *Hayu Loka*, and (4) *Hayu Saraswati*, each accompanied by a brief description of the design.

1. *Hayu Dirda* Batik Motif



Figure 9. *Hayu Dirda* Batik Motif

Hayu Dirda Batik Motif conveys a sense of elegance and beauty. This motif depicts a garden of life filled with various kinds of plants and beautiful flowers, growing on fertile earth beneath a sky full of stars and a captivating horizon. The entire composition symbolizes prosperity, beauty, material strength, and high social status. Carefully and deliberately arranged, the design captivates and draws the viewer's attention. This motif represents a hope for nobility and glory achieved through hard work, perseverance, and noble character. In Javanese values, attaining a dignified life status is essential for fulfilling one's *dharma*, the next stage of life's purpose.

2. Hayu Murti Batik Motif



Figure 10. Hayu Murti Batik Motif

Hayu Murti Batik Motif carries a philosophical meaning of nobility, intelligence, and well-being in the life of its wearer. The word *Murti* means “embodiment” or “form,” signifying that the highest manifestation of life is the attainment of knowledge that can be used to *memayu hayuning jagad*, “enhance the beauty of the universe.” This motif is well-suited for formal occasions such as celebrations, traditional ceremonies, and professional gatherings, as it embodies symbols of intellect, luxury, and high status. The impression of prosperity is strongly emphasized, reflecting a universal aspiration shared by many.

3. Motif Batik Hayu Loka



Figure 11. Hayu Loka Batik Motif

Hayu Loka Batik Motif, meaning “*a beautiful world, admired by all*,” serves as a symbol of high spiritual value. This motif reflects the spirit of *memayu jagat*, “nurturing and beautifying the world” and symbolizes spiritual strength, loyalty, and resilience in achieving balance between human duties and fundamental rights. The design evokes an image of serenity, harmony, and inner strength, offering protection against various forms of malevolent threats. It projects a noble and dignified aura upon its wearer. This batik motif represents the continuity of virtuous values, meant to inspire all who see it.

4. Motif Batik Hayu Saraswati



Figure 12. Hayu Saraswati Batik Motif

The word “*Hayu*” accompanies *Saraswati*, and together they form a symbol of the highest level of spirituality, attainable only through knowledge, wisdom, art, and refined emotional sensitivity. *Saraswati* represents the embodiment of *olah rasa*, the deep cultivation of emotion in mastering the mind, heart, and feelings. This batik motif radiates a sense of grace, joy, and serenity. It carries a silent prayer for lasting spiritual peace, attainable only by those with a composed and centered self. This explains why the motif consistently draws admiration from all who see it, evoking a deep sense of feeling and pride for its wearer.

CONCLUSION

The *Hayu* batik motif is a recent addition to the rich landscape of traditional art in Surakarta. It is one of the historically embedded motifs that emerged alongside the legacy of the kings and nobility of Pura Mangkunegaran, Surakarta. Classified as a *Mahardika* “non-conventional” creation, it integrates geometric, floral, faunal, and figurative patterns (see Dharsono, 2007). The *Hayu* motif embodies symbolic expressions of culture and identity, with strong potential to serve as a distinctive hallmark of Solo Batik. Its design character conveys spiritual values transformed into form, style, and aesthetics.

In terms of functional character, *Hayu* batik can be categorized into three types:

1. Batik as *Busana* – reflecting aesthetic appeal, luxury, and elegance, with a “showcase” of prosperity for the wearer.
2. Batik as *Ageman* – imparting an ethical impression and propriety.
3. Batik as *Rasakan* – evoking spiritual depth and tranquility, harmonizing attire, meaning, and the wearer.

The findings of this study indicate that *Hayu* batik carries distinctive influences on its wearer through the transformation of functional character:

1. *Perbawa* (sociological influence) – signifying high social status, position, property, and wealth.
2. *Kawibawan* (psychological influence) – projecting intellectual capacity, charisma, and honorable authority.

3. *Pangaribawa (spiritual influence)* – transcending mere power or position, reflecting a certain level of spiritual refinement, and shaping both self-perception and how others respond to the wearer.

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