

DESIGNERS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE: THE SHIFTING FROM TRADITIONAL TO CONTEMPORARY VISUAL CULTURE

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Abstract

Tradition and Modernity are not dichotomies, they exist side by side in our social life albeit marginalized. Modernity is a state of mind and the way we think and appearances may deceive us. Re-invention of Tradition are socially constructed and constantly changing, often in conformity with political interest. It is a conscious effort to construct a new identity based on traditional heritage and functions as builder of social ties and legitimations of status. It is constantly changing in conformity with political interests. Traditional art industry and the current trends are being influenced by the global media and high mobility of people around the world. The questions now are: what is the role of Crafts People, Designers and Patrons of Traditional Arts? How do we render our qualities into 'marketable' commodity, fit for competitions in global markets?

Keywords: *tradition, modernity, re-invention, global, media, market*

Introduction

What is 'Tradition' and what is 'Modernity'? When we look at a certain visual art like a painting or a performing art, sometimes we find out that what was perceived as a 'traditional' one is actually a re-invention of a relatively new one. Like the famous Kecak or Cak dance theatre in Bali that was initially created and promoted by German painting artist Walter Spies living in Bali before World War II, from the sacred traditional Sanghyang ritual into an essentially tourism performance based on the Ramayana epic. Also we now see how the re-invention of Wayang Kulit, a traditional Javanese shadow-puppet play is born out of creating 'new packaging' or slashing of the all night traditional performance into a compact three hours long performance. In traditional textiles, handicrafts like batik and handwoven fabrics nowadays we see a lot of similar socially constructed examples of patterns where 'tradition' and 'modernity' are not dichotomies, as they exist side by side in our social life, albeit marginalized. Modernity is a state of mind and the way we think, hence appearances may deceive us. This study is about a re-invention of tradition in the era of globalization and how designers and craftspeople could gain the greatest benefit in this era of global interaction.

Research Method

This is a qualitative research method in the context of art creation written in a scientific format. To get all personal thoughts and views of how the subjects participants or agents are involved in the creative process within the cultural production arena, namely the place where production and reproduction occur, the researcher became an instrument actively involved in using an ethnography approach while documenting the daily process of the subject's creative endeavor. The researcher is expected to stay within the natural context with the emphasis on the process and meaning of each step. The documented ethnography then should produce variations of the participants in their every nuance.

Discussion

So what is 'tradition'? What is called tradition is something that appears to be or is declared to be 'old' but often has a new origin or even constitutes a new re-invention. Eric Hobsbawm in *The Invention of Tradition* (1987) sees this as a conscious effort to construct a new identity based on tradition that besides functioning as a builder of social ties is also needed politically to legitimize status and authority.

Benedict R O'G Anderson in *"Imagined Communities: Reflections on The Origin and Spread of Nationalism"*(1993) perceived the concept of tradition as constantly changing in conformity with political interests. It is therefore a social construction particularly for the sake of creating a distinct identity that a colonial master or a newly independent state, like Indonesia in the fifties might want to have.

Adrian Vickers in "Bali, a Paradise Created "(1990) described how European writers from the 1930s into 1950s presented Bali as an artistic and spiritual utopia, resulting in Hollywood productions as exotic fantasy films like Road to Bali and South Pacific. Nehru, India's first prime minister, dubbed Bali as the highly cultured 'morning of the world'. It was this 'highly cultured' packaging that was and still is adopted by the Balinese themselves even today, as their 'authentic' identity and something to be proud of.

Yasmin Zaki Shahab in "The Creation of Ethnic Tradition: The Betawi of Jakarta, (1994) noted that when Ali Sadikin, as the Governor of Jakarta in the early '70s needed a new 'Betawi' Identity, some figures attesting to this were needed to accompany the governor on ceremonial occasions. So a contest was organized to find Abang (Mister or Brother) and None (Miss) Jakarta to represent Jakarta as the personification of the Betawi identity that recognized both the considerable Chinese and Islamic input. As a result, None Jakarta wore a modest head scarf and a kebaya (blouse) that was not only in the Sino- Javanese short white lace daily style, but also the long formal version, while the Abang Jakarta wore the formal outfit of a demang or district chief with turban besides the wide batik pants and loose white shirt daily attire. A relatively new identity was born.

So if what maybe considered 'authentic tradition' can also be constructed or reconstructed for the sake of political interest, or a often happens these days for the sake of tourism, how is tradition, especially what is considered as 'Masterpieces of the Archipelago' to be positioned right now with the tourism industry and global market pounding on the door?

At the moment, it is no longer relevant to have a dichotomy between tradition and modernity, because the two move forward together at the same time. Tradition, according to Teruo Sekimoto (2003) does not go against modernity in Indonesia because we could see that small-scale crafts industry such as traditional batik and weavings continue to grow under modern social conditions and are thus a living part of contemporary reality, although often in a marginalized state.

At this moment, it must be acknowledged that the traditional arts industry, like it or not, is created mostly for and absorbed mainly by the tourist industry. All those things that were once offered in rituals and religious performances are now offered to a more real power: tourism. It can even be said that ethnicity is also experiencing commodification (Picard and Wood, 1997).

It is the current trend that only culture, whether ethnic, national, regional or otherwise is capable of translating it's quality into a 'marketable' commodity that is competitive, resilient and globalizes well.

The question now is: what is the role of the craftspeople, the designers, the entrepreneurs and admirers of the traditional arts, particularly in this country that will enable us to render quality in our possession fit for competition in the global market?

People are now busily discussing how to maintain or increase the traditional local or 'fighting spirit' and 'resilience' in the face of the rush of global capitalism. This is a true waste of time, for we already have that resilience. In fact, according to Primadi Tabrani (2003), Indonesia has always been an arena of cross-cultural traffic: whatever forms of art coming from external sources since prehistoric times is always absorbed, refined and ends up with a high local content and a retained local identity. Therefore, globalization is not something to be feared and avoided, because the problem arising from global interaction is a constant adaptation from the global point of view to local conditions.

To succeed in a cultural production arena, namely the place where production and reproduction occur, we should observe closely the place or to be more specific the arena or the location where it all began. Here is where the late philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) came to our minds. To succeed, not just the entrepreneurs, but also the crafts people and designers must all invest their capital in order to gain the greatest benefit from their effort to participate in the arena (Bourdieu, 1993).

Capital economy alone is not enough; there also needs to be an accumulation of symbolic capital, in other words the accumulation of prestige, respect and consecration or recognition from the general public. An effort must be made to attract cultural capital, namely the constant augmentation of cultural knowledge and competence or superiority in one's field. By accumulating various capital and social strengths that will yield success, the exponents or agents, aside from changing in the face of market pressure, will also possess the ability to change, form and condition the cultural production arena.

Through re-invention, namely 'new finding' and re-creating on the foundation of tradition managed through promotion and conditioning taste, the cultural wealth that was once socio-cultural capital for a limited locality can be produced on a wide scale or in ordinary trade language: to be fit for sale.

In addition, as the world's cultural orientations are not only restricted to national and regional, but also encompassing globally with a string of new values and norms. In the meantime new localities are competing to 'redefine' themselves, and give birth to new cultural forms and shapes. To identify what are the new cultural identities and how they

reposition themselves I chose to look to Arjun Appadurai's frame of mind in "Modernity at Large: cultural dimensions of globalization" (2000).

In *Modernity at Large* (Appadurai, 2000), electronic mediation and mass migration of people around the world mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but ones that compels the work of imagination. This mobile and unforeseeable relationship between mass-media events and migratory audiences defines the core of link between globalization and the modern. The work of imagination becomes a space of contestations in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern.

Conclusion

Now as we see the process of 'global-local or 'glocalization' as a negotiation between local and global cultures, the re-invention of tradition in principle is constant dialogues and negotiations that have potential as a source of creativity and simultaneously, of strategies of agents of cultural production for dealing with capitalism and the global market. At the same time, the cultural production arena continues to expand from a local arena to a regional and even a world arena, with constant stress on local identity.

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Illustrations

No	Picture	Description
1		<p>Balinese "Cak" dance theatre was created from the Traditional "Sanghyang" ritual and now under the influence of tourism based on the Ramayana epic.</p>
2		<p>Re-invention of traditional performing art: "New Packaging for the Urban Audience" Choreographed by: Retno Maruti</p>
3		<p>Construction of a new identity functioning as builder of social ties and legitimation, constantly changing in conformity with political interests.</p>

<p>4</p>		<p>Politically correct “new identity”</p> <p>Socially constructed, constantly changing in conformity</p> <p>With political interest (Anderson 1993)</p>
<p>5</p>		<p>Our heritage for centuries has always been cross-cultural.</p>
<p>6</p>		<p>Classical Inland Java Batik patterns, mostly symbolic, can be divided into two: geometric and floral, plant animal motifs.</p>
<p>7</p>		<p>Batik Pasisir Coastal Batiks are more freely designed, less symbolic and colourful, much influenced by Chinese, Muslim-Arabic calligraphy also European colors and designs.</p>

<p>8</p>		<p>The Market Dynamics Demand New Strategies And Technology:</p> <p>Computer aided batik pattern designs</p> <p>Studio Iwan Tirta</p>
<p>9</p>		<p>Designer as Agent of Change:</p> <p>Symbolic Capital (Forbidden Patterns)</p> <p>Into Economic Capital (High Fashion)</p> <p>Batik and fashion design by Iwan Tirta</p>
<p>10</p>		<p>Hand shaped oven baked stoneware ceramic with</p> <p>Local Balinese pattern, shape and proportion,</p> <p>Microwave-proof material for global market</p>