

Zakaria Ali's Principle as a Method of Analysis in Uncovering the Elements of Malaysian Culture, Based on Chuah Thean Teng Batik Painting

Shazani Shamsuddeen¹ & Wan Samiati Andriana WMD²

Abstract

Art appreciation is a process of observation to perceive, understand, enjoy, and interpret the values (meanings) contained in an object of art or work of art related to physical qualities (forms) that cultivate the urge to observe, appreciate, evaluate, as well as to delight. Art criticism and visual analysis were taught in school for students to understand the concept of art appreciation. The purpose of this paper is to assess Malay cultural elements in the context of Malaysian visual art as manifested by Chuah Thean Teng in a dissemination of his cultural ideas based on a theory posited by Zakaria Ali. The Theory of Malay Aesthetics is the concept of beauty in art based on Malay ideology in the context of visual arts. Zakaria Ali is one of the scholars that came out with the novel concept of Malay Aesthetic. Aesthetics is a part of philosophy that deals with the analysis of concepts and the resolution of issues that occur while interpreting an aesthetic object. Aesthetics also refers to the knowledge gained from analysing a work of art. The Malays' artistic objects often emphasise beauty that focuses on materials and techniques. Hence, to decipher the content analysis in identifying the Malays' cultural elements on the chosen artwork samples, an observational method was carried out for this paper. The artwork entitled "Breast Feeding" was made to immortalise the 10th anniversary of the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) in helping to protect, promote, and support breastfeeding.

Keywords: Analysis, Batik Painting, Malaysian Culture, Zakaria Ali's Principle.

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a very multicultural country, with people of various ethnicities, languages, and religions, all of whom sustain their predecessors' cultural traditions. Thus, Malaysian society consists of a wide range of lifestyles, beliefs, values, and art.

Batik is a highly valued art form and has become a cultural symbol, highlighting the national identity of the country. It is this artistic value that acts as the backbone of the Malay culture. Malaysia's identity in batik indeed shows its development, which has been able to represent the society's diversity. According to Najib Ahmad Dawa (2002), batik will continue to be an intermediary that serves as a meeting point to unite cultural diversity, or nation-states that are countries that share batik as a heritage for the purpose of artistic activities. Batik as a medium has high potential and can be exploited mainly by ASEAN countries.

Each country has its own distinct arts and crafts, which exemplify the country's true nature and thus reflect the country's national identity. According to Ben Davis (2021), art plays a critical role in society by exchanging points of view, cultivating values, and narrating experiences in relation to space and time. In this context, art is envisioned as a mode of communication in which people from diverse cultures and eras interact through visuals, sounds, and narratives. Concisely, art has always served as a catalyst for social change.

The pith of an artist's work will inevitably be linked to cultural issues. According to by Liza Marziana, Hamdzun Haron, Abdul Latif Samian, and Ahmadrashidi Hasan (2015), artists express their ideas and feelings that arise from the soul as biocultural creatures, and thereafter channel them through their lifelong ideas and practises by means of artistic works. Since the issue of cultural context is close to and revolves around artists' lives, they are constantly attempting to ameliorate society's receptivity and insight into cultural context (Hasan, 2006).

¹ Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Email: shazanishamsuddeen96@gmail.com

² Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Email: samiati@sarawak.uitm.edu.my

2. Literature Review

Batik in Visual Art

Batik in a visual art context, as highlighted by Zakaria Ali (2010), involves the transformation of batik from a textile masterpiece to batik as visual artwork. This was triggered by Chuah Thean Teng in the 1950s. Teng's brother ran a batik factory after World War II, but it did not bloom. Teng then started experimenting with batik dyes from the remaining materials and he finally managed to learn to express his skills of painting on cotton cloth.

Batik in visual art is divided into two art forms, namely batik painting and painting batik. 'Batik Painting' and 'Painting Batik' appear similar in terms, but they actually have significant differences. Batik painting is a painting made using the techniques that are used in the production of traditional batik cloth. This statement is supported by Frank Sullivan (1968). According to him, some artists used wax to cover the entire surface of the cloth and creased it so that the wax cracked. Colours are then applied to the cracks. The wax is then removed, and artists use a maker pen to draw a line on the fabric, which will then be painted with Indian ink. This type of painting's outcome does not have a specific name, but it is defined as a batik painting.

Meanwhile, painting batik is a painting made by using different materials and processes from traditional batik but painted with specific motifs and patterns. Frank Sullivan (1968) stated that painting batik is a type of artwork that illustrates certain or envisioned themes, relying on the artist, but focusing on batik motifs. The artists' use of media is also highly reliant on the artists themselves.

The Father of Batik Painting

Datuk Chuah Thean Teng is a modern and contemporary Asian artist who is regarded as the father of batik painting. He was born in 1912 in China and died in 2008. He received his education at the Amoy School of Art. Chuah Thean Teng was known throughout the art world in Southeast Asia only by his trademarked signature "Teng." According to Frank Sullivan (1963), Chuah Thean Teng migrated to Malaya when he was 17 years old.

Professor Ungku A. Aziz (2012) once described the three talents of Chuah Thean Teng until he was recognised as Malaysia's Leading Artist. The first talent actually involves Chuah Thean Teng's obviously creative personality. His experience is so broad and deep. He also has knowledge and skills in handling tools and media-related artisanship.

Second, despite not being from Malaysia, he was very appreciative of the entire statement that forms the Malaysian setting. As an economist, his primary concerns were poverty and rural progression, so he paid great attention to this rural landscape. His romantic paintings revolved around the beautiful life in the village, and his innovative interpretations of traditional art were closely linked to efforts to celebrate and honour the country and its people, in line with the hopes and aspirations of the newly independent Malaysia.

Third, Teng had a well-honed ability to adapt to global waves in the contemporary art world. These characteristics caused Chuah Thean Teng to be greatly admired and he received various awards until his name became famous even abroad.

As a pioneer of batik painting, his works have succeeded in elevating the prestige of the batik medium to fine art. As stated by Chuah Thean Teng (2006), Chinese brush painting is associated with China, while watercolour and oil paintings are associated with the west. We can say that batik is the art medium that best represents Malaysia. The coming of Islam to the Malay world around the ninth century A.D. has not only resulted in a tremendous change over the life of the people, it has transformed the body and soul of the Malays. From the fourteenth century onwards, Islam became the foundation of the Malay culture and was the dominant force that shaped the Malay worldview.

3. Research Methodology

To facilitate understanding, this paper describes the analysis of the visual characteristics of Chuah Thean Teng's artwork titled Breast Feeding by applying the concept of Malay aesthetics by Zakaria Ali. An investigation into the elements of the Malaysian culture that were applied by the artist was recognised through observation.

According to Zakaria Ali (2006), the concept of Malay aesthetics has been suggested to be based on five formulations. The theory of beauty designed by Zakaria Ali seems perfect in analysing batik in the context of visual art as it coincides with the Malay ideology. Thus, it gives a deeper appreciation and understanding of the selected artworks.

The first principle is finesses, which expresses the delicacy of the art of objects and the chosen media. The inspirations originate from the nature that embraces the formation of the material of the work of art. The result of this implementation characterised artistry's refinement.

The second principle is usefulness, which pertains to the object's usability in art designed to serve utilitarian purposes with aesthetic characteristics. This principle also shows the quality of the sharing practises in the Malay community.

The third principle is unity, which refers to the assimilation and unification of form and content. The implementation of this fundamental allows the composition to be conveyed and constructed distinctly. In Malay heritage, the principle of unity signifies the complexity and sophistication of motif and pattern designs in traditional Malay arts.

The fourth principle is contrast, which refers to the harmonious feature of contrast. Two differences that complement each other, resulting in flexibility, harmony, and balance in design. The use of media, contrasting colours, forms, and textual implications, exemplifies and enlivens the aesthetic standards of art.

The fifth principle is the symbolism that is used to find the integration and unification between form and content. This principle reveals the symbolic meaning that is associated with Malays' history, traditions, beliefs, roots, and so on.

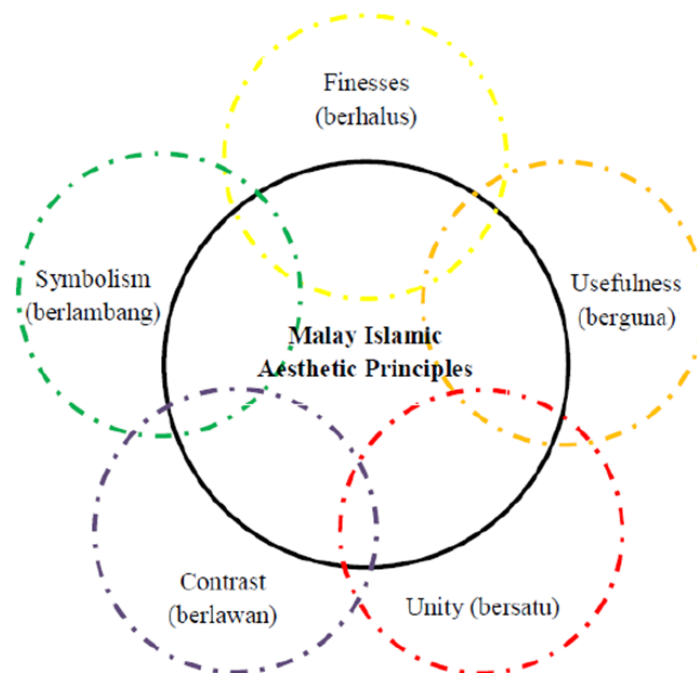


Figure 1 Malay Islamic Aesthetic Principles By Zakaria Ali.

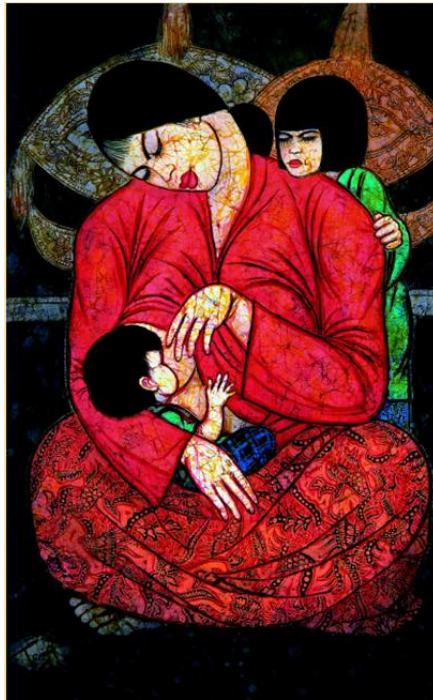


Figure 2 “Breast Feeding” (2011) by Chuah Thean Teng

4. Finding

Artwork Analysis

This 2011 batik painting was titled Breast Feeding and has a physical dimension of 91.5 cm x 61 cm. The focus point of this masterpiece is a mother’s unconditional love and nurturing for her child. This artwork is one of the collections of Yahong Gallery.

Finesses

The artist used fine lines and shapes to form the floral motif on the mother’s kain batik. The lines and shapes applied are the floral motifs commonly used in the production of traditional batik fabrics.

This finesse principle can also be seen in the body of the traditional Malay game that is used as the background of this painting, namely the wau (kite). The artist used wau bulan as an additional subject in this work. Wau bulan tail resembles a crescent moon or horns and contains the full moon in the part between the crescent moon and its wings. This element also shows how the artist applied the concept of Malayness to his work, as wau bulan is one of the types of kites played by the Malay community, especially in the state of Kelantan Darul Naim. The design of wau produced contains Malay cultural elements and motifs inspired by the same source as the batik motifs, which are flora, fauna, geometric, and abstract.

Usefulness

The artist illustrated in his artwork that the batik cloth is not only used by adults but also by children. This phenomenon occurs in real life, where batik clothing is worn by all levels of Malaysian society, regardless of age, race, and religion. However, batik is more commonly used and is a synonym for it by the majority of the Malays. It thus exemplifies that culture and society in Malaysia are inextricably linked to one another.

The usefulness principle is also applied to the wau games, as they are often intended to fill free time, celebrate certain festivals, as well as show joy. Overall, this explains its use as a leisure activity. On top of its beautiful design factor and attractive pattern decoration, it also looks elegant as an ornament.

Unity

The artist creates a sense of unity within the composition of the subjects, as the art fills the whole canvas and is centrally positioned, focusing on a mother who is breastfeeding her son and nurturing her daughter at the same time.

Contrast

The dominantly contrasting warm colours of red and black and a little bit of the cool colour of green and blue invoke a feeling of tranquillity in this artwork and create a depth of shallow space. The use of dark-coloured backgrounds also provides emphasis on the subject being depicted.

Symbolism

Batik fabric as worn by the subjects in this artwork is one of the most famous Malaysian traditional textiles and is still used to this day. As illustrated in this painting, batik fabrics are used by the people, especially among the Malays, regardless of age. To promote and boost Malaysian batik, the then Public Services Department director-general, Tan Sri Ismail Adam, issued a directive in 2008 requesting civil servants to wear colourful batik attire every Thursday instead of having to wear it only twice a month.

The second point of the symbolism principle is the depiction of the wau bulan. Malays around the 15th century CE believed that the wau game was related to the spirit of the wind and the sky. According to the Malay community in the past as well, humans and the environment had a strong affinity. Wau bulan is one of the Malaysian heritage symbols and has received recognition from the Majlis Pelayang Malaysia as one of Malaysia's traditional wau. As all Malaysians know, the wau bulan has also been used as a symbol of Malay culture, in which it is printed on the back of the Malaysian ringgit banknotes and engraved on the back of the old fifty cents coin. In addition, it is also printed on the coins commemorating the 9th SEA Games in 1977 (Ramli, 2015).

The third point of the symbolism principle is the connotation of a mother's role. In Islam, a mother's sacrifice is acknowledged and applauded. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) once said something about a mother's position in Islam, It was narrated from Mu'awiyah bin Jahimah As-Sulami that Jahimah came to the Prophet (PBUH) and said: "O Messenger of Allah! I want to go out and fight (in Jihad) and I have come to ask your advice." He said: "Do you have a mother?" He said: "Yes." He said: "Then stay with her, for Paradise is beneath her feet." (Sunan an-Nasa'i 3104 In-book reference: Book 25, Hadith 20 English translation: Vol. 1, Book 25, Hadith 3106)

5. Conclusion

To sum up, this painting has been found to utilise the batik painting technique as applied in the production of traditional batik cloth since the cracks due to wax are clearly visible. Chuah Thean Teng also incorporated the beautiful motif and pattern similar to traditional batik on the mother's batik sarong and on the body of the wau. Moreover, the additional image of wau bulan strengthens the element of the Malay native culture presented in this painting, as it was once prevalent among Malaysians, including those who are in metropolitan areas. The use of vibrantly bright colours by the artist is indeed associated with batik designs from Kelantan and Terengganu. Overall, this artwork is a reflection of the Malaysian culture, both in terms of production techniques and the content presented.

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