

# Uncoverings

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## Tradition and Innovation in Kentucky Quilts and Yogyakarta Batik

*"I know how much work goes into making a quilt  
because I've been making them myself for ten years.  
I do it for enjoyment, but that's different."*

—Visitor to the David Appalachian  
Crafts Center, August 1981

Rebecca M. Joseph

The socioeconomics of textile production is an extremely important issue which has received relatively little attention from researchers despite the enormous growth of interest in textile studies in the last fifteen years. Yet the reality is that vast numbers of men, women, and children throughout the world support themselves through the making of handcrafted textiles for sale in local, extra-local domestic, foreign, and tourist markets. Textiles produced in rural areas of the industrialized nations and in the Third World are frequently described as traditional but may or may not be genuinely so in terms of either design or method of manufacture.

In this paper, recent changes in two types of textiles considered to be traditional within their genres will be compared.<sup>1</sup> Kentucky quilts are said to be traditional largely because they are associated with rural makers while Yogyakarta batik from Indonesia draws its recognition from past patronage of the royal court. The American and Indonesian textiles are comparable because they are historically made by women and girls who gained their highly valued skills informally. Further, the factors which have contributed to the process of change are the same. Technology, consumer tastes, mass communications, and the condition of the local economy influence Yogyakarta batikmakers as much as they do Kentucky quilters.

*The Kentucky Setting*

Appalachian crafts, like the region itself, have been subject to periodic rediscovery by secular and religious missionaries since the late 19th century. The most recent revival, centered in Kentucky in the early '80s, was largely attributable to the patronage of the state's then first lady, Phyllis George Brown. Like earlier revivals, a regional image was offered to other areas of the country, while local people were re-educated about their culture and heritage. The recent revival of Kentucky crafts was publicly supported unlike the Appalachian crafts movement which was funded primarily through private philanthropic and religious organizations during the first decades of this century.<sup>2</sup>

Quilting, roughly defined, is the technique of fastening layers of cloth together to form a new whole. The top layer is frequently assembled from small pieces of fabric or appliqued. The center may be a cotton or wool batting, a blanket, or more recently, polyester fiberfill. The backing or bottom layer is most often a single piece of cloth or sheeting.

In eastern Kentucky, quilt tops are both pieced and appliqued using polyester doubleknits or cotton blends. Some quilts are made explicitly for personal use or for sale. Still others change destinations; a quilt intended for personal use is sold or one made for sale is given as a gift. Quilts made for personal use are judged first on their functional or utility value and secondly in terms of overall design. For commercial quilts, aesthetic considerations are generally given higher priority.

David Appalachian Crafts is a 100-member cooperative based in Floyd County, Kentucky. It began as a church-sponsored income generation project in 1970 and returned to outside direction after a brief period of independence in 1982-83.<sup>3</sup> The group sells a variety of crafts through the Crafts Center and its mail order catalogue including quilts, hickory furniture, baskets, dolls, musical instruments, and quilted gift items. Approximately 80% of the members are women, more of whom use some form of quilting, piecing or applique in their work than any other technique.

*The Javanese Setting*

The island of Java lies seven degrees south of the equator in the

southwestern section of the Indonesian archipelago. Although it accounts for only 7% of Indonesia's total land mass, the island is inhabited by almost 60% of the Indonesian population or nearly 100 million people. The eastern and central areas are occupied by Javanese speakers while Sundanese live in the west. The Special Region of Yogyakarta is bordered on three sides by Central Java province and by the Indian Ocean to the south. It is at the center of a much more extensive culture area known as Ngarigung which is distinguished from other Javanese areas by the predominance of the syncretistic court culture which flourished in the cities of Yogyakarta and Solo prior to Indonesian independence.<sup>4</sup>

Batik is a dye-resist technique which enhances the decorative and symbolic value of cloth without affecting its utility. As practiced on the island of Java, batik is done using a combination of waxes applied with a pen-like, copper nib mounted on a bamboo handle (*canting*) or with a hand-held copper stamp (*cap*). The former is known as *batik tulis*, the latter *batik cap*. The cotton, silk or rayon cloth is waxed on both sides up to three times before it is dyed. After dyeing, part or all of the wax is removed, depending on the pattern, and the process is repeated until the desired number of colors have been applied. In Yogyakarta, blue, brown (*soga*), and white is the preferred combination for traditional and quasi-traditional designs.

The origin of Javanese batik is uncertain. While some historians believe that the basic process diffused from India or China, others maintain that batik had indigenous roots in the Indonesian archipelago.<sup>5</sup> The invention of the *canting*, probably in the 14th century, allowed a refinement of batik design previously unknown. When manufactured cloth from Holland replaced most of the coarse, handwoven textiles used in batikmaking up until the late 19th century, Javanese batik experienced a second "design revolution." Compared to the *canting*, the design possibilities of the *cap* are limited. Developed about 1850 in order to make batik competitive with cheap, foreign imports, the *cap* is best suited to geometric and repeat designs.

Early European and Chinese sources refer to hundreds of women engaged in batikmaking in the Sultan's palace.<sup>6</sup> In the past, aristocratic women did the detailed work on *batik tulis* for personal use while the coarser work and dyeing were done by lower class artisans. Today all but a small percentage of the batik made is com-

mercially produced through an extensive network of subcontractors. The vast majority of batikmakers are village women and girls working at home or in factories in the city. It is rarely made for personal use except by elderly women of the royal court or for a young woman's wedding. In rural areas, the making and use of batik is closely related to agricultural and ritual cycles.

Batik in square and oblong lengths is traditionally used as clothing and for ritual purposes. *Tritik*, also a resist technique, is sometimes used in combination with batik. Although it is no longer worn on a regular basis by most people, batik continues to be a source of cultural pride and a component of the national costume.

In recent years, the Indonesian government has become involved in batikmaking in rural areas. Projects intended to improve the welfare of village women by increasing their income through crafts often involve training and technical assistance in batik production. It is hoped that these women will become independent producers, reducing their dependence on their husbands' or parents' incomes. There are several of these projects in Yogyakarta.

#### *Typology of the Quilting and Batik Tulis Industries*

Fernando proposes that crafts industries be placed upon a developmental continuum according to the predominant system of production organization, destination of products, and degree of government and organized private sector intervention. The traditional type is characterized by production units which are largely family based, making goods for personal use and the local market and little or no outside intervention. At the other extreme, the modern type features semi-mechanized workshop production of nontraditional crafts on a mass scale primarily for export. Government and the organized private sector play a large role.<sup>7</sup> Most crafts industries observable today represent neither extreme, but fall somewhere in the intermediate range.

Until the early 1970s, quilting in eastern Kentucky was of the traditional type. Quilts were made for domestic use, as gifts, and occasionally for sale. Young girls learned quilting from older relatives or neighbors. Groups of women would gather to quilt another's top, but no cash payment was expected.

The establishment of David Appalachian Crafts and similar co-operatives changed both the organization of production and the destinations of the finished work. Semi-workshop production was introduced entailing an elaboration of the division of labor so that a quilt previously made by one woman would be made by two or more; one doing the piecing or applique, another the quilting, a third the binding, etc. The "putting out" system has also become established for the production of quilted gift items such as pot holders and picture frames.

Markets for Kentucky quilts and gifts have expanded rapidly since the late '70s. The state-sponsored revival is most notable for introducing Kentucky crafts to the corporate and export markets. Other important consumers are tourists who buy at the Crafts Center or from the many gift shops in Kentucky and nearby states that sell Appalachian crafts. The longest established group of buyers are church groups and other nonprofit organizations who view their purchasing quilts as a form of social service. Market differentiation has produced an acceleration of the trend toward workshop organization and payment on a piece-rate basis. The government's role as intermediary between artisans and extra-local consumers has grown substantially although the future of its involvement is uncertain.

It appears that the development of batikmaking as an industry was rather different in the agriculture-based sultanates of central and east Java than in the commercially-oriented north where the batik trade with Holland began in 1750.<sup>8</sup> Batik was most likely a widely practiced cottage industry in some rural areas prior to the establishment of an urban trade in Yogyakarta, but to what extent this occurred is unknown. In central Java, including the Yogyakarta region, the native aristocracy held the role of patron of the arts. The control that the court may have exerted over batikmaking and use in nearby areas is suggested by reports that in traditional batik-making villages until the 1950s, women wore the striped cloth known as *lurik* for personal use and local trade.

Organization along workshop lines and a concomitant shift to wage labor is widely believed to have taken place in the late 19th century following the introduction of the *cap* and factory-made cotton from Holland. There is convincing evidence, however, that

batikmaking was already organized in semi-workshop and workshop production modes in the Yogyakarta area during the 18th century.<sup>9</sup> Within the batik industry today the traditional type continues to exist in only a few isolated areas. Large and small-scale subcontracting is increasingly widespread and use of the "putting out" system extensive, especially in the making of *batik tulis*.

In recent years, the domestic demand for *batik tulis* which grew rapidly in the 1950s has decreased dramatically in spite of market differentiation. A preference for Western style clothing, the availability of inexpensive substitutes, and a marked increase in the cost of manufactured goods relative to the price of agricultural products all contribute to the shrinking demand for batik. Few batikmakers can afford the textiles they produce. Other markets for *batik tulis* are either small (urban elites, collectors) or unstable (tourists, export).

In the United States, the demand for quilts and related items is still growing. A trend towards modernization of the quilting industry is observable in response in eastern Kentucky. On Java, however, the primary *batik tulis* market is already saturated. The division of labor is becoming more and more extenuated, suggesting that the industry has reached a point of stagnation.

### *The Textiles*

Eastern Kentucky quilts and Yogyakarta batik are generally considered to be traditional within their respective genres because they are thought to conform to certain stylistic and technical conventions which have been transferred informally from one generation of artisans to the next. Individual pieces are evaluated in accordance with those conventions and variations in quality ascribed to the skills of the makers. Ideas with regard to what constitutes a traditional Kentucky quilt or a traditional Yogyakarta batik have expanded in recent years as the cultural values once attached to them have diminished and, through entry into new markets, been augmented by conceptions held by the new principle consumers of "traditional" textiles, i.e., urban elites, collectors, and tourists. These groups have introduced their own criteria for evaluating the authenticity of quilts and batik, demands to which their makers frequently respond.

Quilts and *batik tulis* are similar with respect to design in that there are recognized pattern types, but within each group is room for originality and innovation. Patterns vary from one area and maker to the next. Just as there are several quilt patterns with the name *Trip Around the World*, there are numerous variations of the *Pisang Bali* (Bali Banana) batik motif. The expansion of mass media and transportation has increased contact with urban centers, resulting in hybrid designs which incorporate the latest fashion trends. At the same time, mass communications and guidance from outside "experts" inform quiltmakers' and batikmakers' perceptions of what is traditional. Although they are frequently aware of which patterns were recently introduced, both quiltmakers and batikmakers will often describe these designs as local to the area and traditional.

The individual signing of batik, like the signing of quilts, is uncommon. Few of the Kentucky quiltmakers and even fewer of the batikmakers sign their names to their work. Some affix the name of their cooperative or group because they have been told that this will make their work more marketable. From the makers' point of view signing one's name is a redundancy because within the producer community the identity of the maker is already known. Even without being told, "Polly made this quilt," her friends and neighbors know she did by the choice of fabrics and design and by the degree of skill executed in making it. If her work is especially fine, it is likely to be known in neighboring communities as well. Similarly, a batikmaker of some experience is able to look at two pieces using the same motif and differentiate between the one made in her village and the one made in a village down the road. She will also know who made the piece from her village by recognizing the maker's idiosyncrasies.

### *Women's Work*

Quilting and batikmaking in the past were thought to be women's work. This is not to suggest that men never made quilts in Kentucky or *batik tulis* in Yogyakarta, but the occurrence was rare. Among quiltmakers and batikmakers who do not explicitly view themselves as artists, this generalization is also true today.<sup>10</sup> Most people, including the artisans, believe that women are naturally



better suited to tasks which require patience and attention to detail, qualities deemed necessary to create a fine quilt or batik. Character rather than skill determines ability according to the Javanese.

A number of women enjoy quilting or making batik with others. It provides an opportunity for socializing, sharing information and evaluating each other's work. Javanese women tend to form batik-making groups around a woman who acts as a middleperson between traders in the city and her neighbors. Since dyeing was introduced in the village of Giriloyo, several closely related women have merged their groups for the purpose of buying dyestuffs and processing the cloth, but they remain independent in all other respects. In Kentucky, the women who frequently worked together were mother-daughter teams and a group of old friends in their seventies who met at the Crafts Center once a week.

In eastern Kentucky, it is common for a group of women to work together on a quilt to mark a special occasion such as a wedding or housewarming. Women also make quilts to celebrate important events in their own lives. Certain patterns are popular among the quiltmakers for gift quilts. The Dresden Plate, for example, is often used for friendship quilts.

While a single piece of batik may be worked on by many women before it is completed, a group of women rarely works together on batik that will be given as a gift. Batik is made for events which mark life cycle transitions and are important in the rituals connected with them. Custom previously restricted the use of some patterns to members of the royal family, but it is unclear to what extent village women followed these dictates outside of the areas under the direct control of the court. Today, village women rarely make batik for personal use because of the high cost of raw materials. When they do, they choose the most difficult and detailed pattern that they are capable of reproducing. Both batik and quilts made for special occasions involve greater investments in time and materials than the majority of those made for sale.

Quilting and batikmaking serve several purposes for the women who make them in addition to the social functions described above. Although they are no longer made extensively for domestic use, most artisans derive a great deal of personal satisfaction from the self-expression and display of skills involved in their work. The

approval of other skilled artisans is highly valued as is the outside recognition implied by sale of their work at a high price.

Batikmaking and, to a lesser extent, quiltmaking also suggest continuity with a more familiar past at times of rapid social and economic change. This link to the past, even if it is romanticized, helps many women to cope with a variety of new and difficult situations. While women in Giriloyo say that batikmaking is in their blood, only a handful of women in the village actually made batik prior to the mid-1950s. In Kentucky, quiltmaking has been associated with the past less often by the quiltmakers than by crafts promoters appealing to the romantic notions of city dwellers.

In spite of significant contextual differences, quiltmakers and batikmakers share some common economic problems. Both quilts and batik in large part derive their monetary value from the fact that they are produced through labor intensive processes. It is this same factor, given market constraints on price elasticity, that causes extremely low returns to labor. The quiltmakers reported earnings average \$1-2/hour, the batikmakers \$0.25/day.<sup>11</sup> Some artisans have tried to increase their share of the sale price by using lower quality raw materials or by simplifying designs. Both strategies often have negative long-term results even if they are initially successful due to loss of reputation and pressure to reduce prices on lower quality goods.

Low earnings also result from the assumption, made by the quiltmakers and batikmakers as well as their employers and agents, that women's contributions to household income are secondary to that of their husbands'. While very few of the quiltmakers studied openly acknowledged contributing to the basic support of their families, it appeared that in 1982 very few were not. The coal industry was in a recession for some months and few men were working regularly. Almost all of the older women were living on fixed incomes due to a husband's disability. Close inspection of income and expenditures in batikmaking families shows that earnings from batik work are often the only regular source of income, especially in female-headed households. Recent research on the southern Tagalog embroidery industry in the Philippines adds further support to the hypothesis that households become increasingly dependent upon women's textile production under conditions of chronic male under- and unemployment.<sup>12</sup>

*Technology and the Transfer of Skills*

Quilting and batikmaking are textile arts characterized by their labor intensity and the high degree of skill necessary to do fine work. Technological change has greatly affected both the processes and values attached to making and owning quilts and batik. Machine piecing and applique have become common in the last thirty years. More recently, machine quilting and fabric with quilt designs gained popularity. Cotton cloth is no longer pounded before being waxed for batik. Chemical dyestuffs have replaced the natural dyes used in the past. These innovations have made quilting and batikmaking, respectively, less time consuming. Their effects on the quality of the textiles produced depends on who is making the evaluation.

The widespread availability of substitute goods has had a greater impact on traditional textiles than any technological innovation in production. Over the past forty years quilting, which had been a valuable domestic skill for rich and poor women alike, has acquired a negative value in the minds of many residents of eastern Kentucky. Using handmade quilts became associated with poverty as wealthier people switched to the use of mass-produced blankets. Consequently, the importance previously attached to having and transferring quilting skills was abandoned. The greater part of the crafts cooperative's training program has been concerned with teaching quilting to younger women and retraining older ones, many of whom had not quilted in thirty years or more. It is only in the last few years, since quilting was rediscovered by the urban elite, that interest in quilting has again taken root in the area.

Batikmaking has been similarly affected by competition from substitute goods. Providing adequate clothing for a large population with low buying power has been one of the Indonesian government's ongoing priorities. In order to do this, national policy has favored the rapid development of a modern textile sector. With the availability of attractive, inexpensive cloth and ready-made garments, the values attached to owning and being able to make batik have declined as have knowledge of the symbolic significance of traditional patterns and the ability to distinguish real batik (*batik asli*) from mass-produced, pseudo-batik (*batik printing*).

*Batik printing* is sold as yardage which is much more adaptable to the current taste for Western-style clothing than the traditional batik lengths of 2.5 meters or less. Like using quilts instead of blankets, wearing traditional batik daily has become associated with poverty, evidenced by the fact that with few exceptions only the elderly and village women over 45 now wear it regularly. Batik-making skills have almost disappeared among women of the upper classes. Many poor women continue to make batik, but it appears that the number of master craftswomen is steadily decreasing.

Continuity is apparent despite major changes in the motifs and technology used in recent decades. Most noticeable is that there appear to be some basic criteria for evaluating the quality of the textiles which have changed very little. Both quilts and *batik tulis* continue to be judged according to the technical skills of the maker although there is a tendency for priority to be placed on the use of pattern and color in the evaluation of commercial work. To a certain extent, handwork without the use of labor-saving tools, like the sewing machine or *cap*, is still the most highly valued by producers and consumers alike. There continues to be a limited but remunerative market for the finest quilts and batik among the urban elite and textile collectors, which cooperatives and income generation projects strive to take advantage of.

### *The Role of Assistance Projects*

Both government and nongovernment organizations have become involved with production and marketing of traditional textiles. The intervention most often occurs out of a genuine desire to assist poor women by helping them to become financially independent through the sale of their handwork. Training and technical assistance is provided as is some marketing assistance, the latter usually accomplished through the administrators' personal connections.

Few of these projects succeed. First, planners do not take social and economic stratification in the target areas into account. In both Kentucky and Yogyakarta, the projects have been inadvertently designed to benefit women who are already relatively well-off. Recruitment methods result in the project participants being limited

further to women who are consanguineal or affinal relations. The very poorest women are effectively made ineligible before the project begins. In Yogyakarta, increased opportunities for wealthier batik-makers have actually led to increased exploitation of their poorer neighbors through the manipulation of social obligations.

The selection of project personnel may also reduce the chances for success. Both government and privately sponsored projects often assign whomever is available within the department or agency regardless of the appointee's background. Technicians are commonly chosen without regard to the marketing experience crucial to connecting producers with potential consumers. Many nongovernment projects face the additional difficulty of being dependent upon volunteer workers with varying degrees of commitment to the project.

The project's organizational structure is usually imposed from the outside and controlled by outsiders. The participants have no motivation to develop managerial skills or even to make the organization work. When the outside personnel withdraw, as happened at David Crafts, the cooperative or business quickly fails unless outside direction is resumed.

The most productive forms of assistance are those which meet quilters' or batikmakers' stated needs. In eastern Kentucky, for example, quiltmakers had trouble finding high quality raw materials in sufficient variety and at affordable prices. David Appalachian Crafts buys cloth and batting in bulk and savings are passed on to the members. In order to further reduce the quilter's burden, members who are working on Crafts Center orders receive the required materials free of charge.

Organized groups can offer social and economic benefits to their members beyond the purchase of raw materials, skills upgrading, and marketing. The following are only a few examples. Artisans who are otherwise isolated by physical distance or community mores may be brought together. Small-scale savings and loan schemes assist quiltmakers and batikmakers who would not qualify for institutional credit either due to the amount of their request or lack of acceptable collateral. Finally, preventive health care, family planning, and other information beneficial to women and their families can be disseminated through member networks.

*Conclusions*

The socioeconomics of quilting and batikmaking are extremely complex. An adequate treatment of either requires an understanding not only of the organization of production and marketing within the historical context of the local and regional economies, but also of the social, cultural, and environmental factors which affect the artisans' productivity. This paper has drawn attention to this complexity by comparing the development of quilting in eastern Kentucky and the making of *batik tulis* in the Yogyakarta region of central Java. My major conclusions are as follows:

1) Makers of traditional textiles are neither anonymous nor resistant to change. It is the outside consumer who erroneously makes these judgments based on preconceived notions of what traditional textiles and their makers *should* be.

2) In the transition from textile production for domestic use and occasional sale to primarily commercial production there are observed tendencies toward elaboration of the division of labor and the monetization of labor relationships.

3) Traditional textiles such as quilts and *batik tulis* derive their value largely from the labor intensive processes utilized in their making. This feature, combined with assumptions about the nature and value of women's work, acts to limit the acceptance of technological innovation while keeping returns to the laborer minimal.

4) While the economic importance of quilting and batikmaking to producer households is clearly substantial, benefits such as personal satisfaction and social interaction should not be underestimated.

5) Competition from high quality substitute goods threatens the existence of traditional textiles which became associated with poverty. Those textiles, like handmade quilts and high quality *batik tulis*, which appeal to elite groups become luxury goods beyond the means of most of their makers.

6) Despite differences in cultural context in eastern Kentucky and Yogyakarta, class rather than gender or region is the greatest determinant of the types and styles of textiles produced in any given place and time.

7) Outside intervention can be greatly beneficial to textile artisans. The artisans should be actively involved in the planning

stage and training in managerial skills an integral component of the project. Projects should be designed with sensitivity to social and economic impacts of the chosen methods of implementation.

*Notes and References:*

1. Fieldwork was conducted in Kentucky in 1982 with the sponsorship of the Center for the History of American Needlework. The research in Yogyakarta was supported by the International Development Research Center in 1984–85 and by a Fulbright dissertation research grant from September 1985 to August 1986.
2. For a detailed description of the Appalachian crafts movement, see Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870–1920* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1978).
3. David Appalachian Crafts is a semi-autonomous affiliate of St. Vincent's Mission.
4. Koetjaraningrat, *Kebudayaan Jawa* (PN Balai Pustaka, Jakarta, 1984), p. 25.
5. See, for example, Mattiebelle Gittenger, *Splendid Symbols: Textiles and Tradition in Indonesia* (The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., 1979) p. 115; Beverly Labin, "Batik Traditions in the Life of the Javanese," *Threads of Tradition* (University of California, Berkeley, 1979), p. 42.
6. See, for example, T.S. Raffles, *The History of Java* Vol. 1 (John Murray, London, 1830) and De Kat Angelino, *Batikrapport* Vol. 1 (Kantoor van Arbeid, Weltevreden, 1930), Introduction.
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8. Pieter Mijer, *Batiks and How to Make Them* (Dodd, Mead, and Company, New York, 1919), p. 24.
9. Mitsuo Nakamura, *The Crescent Arises Over the Banyan Tree* (Gajdah Mada University Press, Yogyakarta, 1983).
10. For a discussion of men in the Yogyakarta batik industry, see Ann D. Sutoro, *Women's Work in Village Industries on Java* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, in press), pp. 65–89.
11. At June 1985 prices, the rupiah equivalent of \$.25 bought slightly more than 1 kilogram of rice or one prepared meal of rice and vegetables.
12. Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr. and Virginia A. Miralao, *Southern Tagalog Embroideries: A Case Study of a Philippine Handicraft* (Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, Manila, 1985).