

# BATIK

Makers and Wearers

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition  
*Batik Kita: Dressing in Port Cities* presented  
at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore,  
from 17 June to 2 October 2022.

Exhibition curator and editor  
Lee Chor Lin

© Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore  
[www.acm.org.sg](http://www.acm.org.sg)  
All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-981-18-9207-3

Printed by Oxford Graphic Printers Pte Ltd

Production management  
Benjamin Chiesa

Image rights, proofreading  
Faisal Husni, Sharon Yap

Cataloguing-in-Publication data is available from  
the National Library Board, Singapore

All objects and images are from the collection of  
the National Heritage Board, Singapore, unless  
otherwise noted.

Cover:  
**Kain panjang *wadasan***  
Probably Madura, early 20th century  
Batik tulis. Cotton, synthetic dyes, 237.5 x 105.2 cm  
1991-00013

Organised by



An Institution of



Supported by



Principal Supporters

NG TENG FONG  
CHARITABLE FOUNDATION  
黃廷方慈善基金

THE FULLERTON  
HOTELS AND RESORTS  
富麗敦酒店集團

746.662



# BATIK

## Makers and Wearers

Lee Chor Lin

with contributions by Amalinda Savirani,  
Anne Goh, Azhar Ibrahim, Faisal Husni,  
and Margaret Sullivan



PUSTAKA PERDANA



1013758

ACM



# Contents

<b>FOREWORD</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>WRITING BATIK: REFLECTIONS ON THE BRILLIANT CAREER OF BATIK IN INDONESIA</b>	<b>14</b>
Lee Chor Lin	
<b>BATIK NYONYA OF PEKALONGAN: ITS LIFE AND FUTURE</b>	<b>190</b>
Amalinda Savirani	
<b>MAKERS OF THE NEW ERA</b>	
Lee Chor Lin	
<b>THE BATIK OF IWAN TIRTA</b>	<b>258</b>
<b>BINHOUSE: THE JOURNEY OF REFORMING BATIK</b>	<b>262</b>
<b>SPEAKING TO BINHOUSE: A CONVERSATION WITH JOSEPHINE KOMARA</b>	<b>266</b>
<b>NESTLING IN SOLO: A CONVERSATION WITH YUSMAN SISWANDI</b>	<b>272</b>
<b>BATIK AND UNESCO</b>	<b>336</b>
Anne Goh	
<b>BATIK IN SINGAPORE</b>	<b>350</b>
Lee Chor Lin	

<b>POETICS OF BATIK AND PANTUN</b>	<b>365</b>
Azhar Ibrahim	
<b>THREE GRANDMOTHERS AND KAIN BATIK</b>	<b>398</b>
Faisal Husni	
<b>HIGH FLYING FASHION: CABIN COUTURE</b>	<b>410</b>
Anne Goh	
<b>I. B. BATEK AND BATIK STAMPS</b>	<b>420</b>
Anne Goh	
<b>YUSUF SURIB AND CO-WORKERS</b>	<b>428</b>
Margaret Sullivan	
<b>SHIRTS: WONG KEE MENG AND LOH YAW MAN</b>	<b>437</b>
Margaret Sullivan	
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>450</b>
<b>GLOSSARY</b>	<b>455</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>458</b>



*Batik Kita: Dressing in Port Cities*, which ran from 17 June to 2 October 2022, was the Asian Civilisation Museum's first major exhibition on batik, featuring more than 230 pieces from our collection and lenders in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. As is typical of ACM, we approached the subject in a very different way, exploring batik as both historical textile and contemporary fashion.

Batik Kita means "Our Batik" in Malay and celebrates batik as a style and aspect of cultural heritage shared between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. We used this term for the exhibition also because batik belongs to all ages, and we hope to encourage young audiences to not only appreciate the craft and tradition behind these works, but also to discover how fashionable their parents and grandparents were when wearing their own *baju batik* ("batik fashion"). Hopefully, the exhibition and this volume stimulate interest and encourage more people to dress themselves in batik.

"Dressing in Port Cities" also suggests a cross-cultural, port city perspective, in keeping with the museum's vision. From this approach we explored its courtly origins, then shifted perspective to the coasts and shorelines of the region, where a coming together of cultures from across Asia and the world has resulted in distinctive and exhilarating styles of batik.

*Batik Kita* was ACM's first major special exhibition after several were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Along the way, we changed how we present exhibitions, choosing to work more closely with communities that matter to us, and to celebrate the passion, creativity, and excellence of artisans and designers in Singapore and the region – who are just as important to the museum as the objects on display.

It thus gives me great joy that so many people were involved in bringing the exhibition to life, first and foremost Lee Chor Lin, guest curator of the exhibition and editor of this catalogue. Chor Lin curated the first major batik exhibition in Singapore in 1991. As the former director of the National Museum of Singapore, she has been an inspiration to me personally during my time as director of ACM. Working with and learning from her on this project has been both a joy and a privilege.

I would also like to thank the many donors and lenders to the show, as well as those who have contributed essays to this catalogue. The project was a success thanks to the efforts of ACM's curatorial, exhibitions, and project management teams — in particular; Anne Goh, research assistant; Faisal Husni, assistant curator; and Harris Sim, project manager. My thanks also go to our editorial, marketing, audience, education, and development teams and to everyone else who made this exhibition possible.

Kennie Ting

Director, Asian Civilisations Museum

*Batik Kita: Dressing in Port Cities*, which ran from 17 June to 2 October 2022, was the Asian Civilisation Museum's first major exhibition on batik, featuring more than 230 pieces from our collection and lenders in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. As is typical of ACM, we approached the subject in a very different way, exploring batik as both historical textile and contemporary fashion.

Batik Kita means "Our Batik" in Malay and celebrates batik as a style and aspect of cultural heritage shared between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. We used this term for the exhibition also because batik belongs to all ages, and we hope to encourage young audiences to not only appreciate the craft and tradition behind these works, but also to discover how fashionable their parents and grandparents were when wearing their own *baju batik* ("batik fashion"). Hopefully, the exhibition and this volume stimulate interest and encourage more people to dress themselves in batik.

"Dressing in Port Cities" also suggests a cross-cultural, port city perspective, in keeping with the museum's vision. From this approach we explored its courtly origins, then shifted perspective to the coasts and shorelines of the region, where a coming together of cultures from across Asia and the world has resulted in distinctive and exhilarating styles of batik.

*Batik Kita* was ACM's first major special exhibition after several were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Along the way, we changed how we present exhibitions, choosing to work more closely with communities that matter to us, and to celebrate the passion, creativity, and excellence of artisans and designers in Singapore and the region – who are just as important to the museum as the objects on display.

It thus gives me great joy that so many people were involved in bringing the exhibition to life, first and foremost Lee Chor Lin, guest curator of the exhibition and editor of this catalogue. Chor Lin curated the first major batik exhibition in Singapore in 1991. As the former director of the National Museum of Singapore, she has been an inspiration to me personally during my time as director of ACM. Working with and learning from her on this project has been both a joy and a privilege.

I would also like to thank the many donors and lenders to the show, as well as those who have contributed essays to this catalogue. The project was a success thanks to the efforts of ACM's curatorial, exhibitions, and project management teams — in particular; Anne Goh, research assistant; Faisal Husni, assistant curator; and Harris Sim, project manager. My thanks also go to our editorial, marketing, audience, education, and development teams and to everyone else who made this exhibition possible.

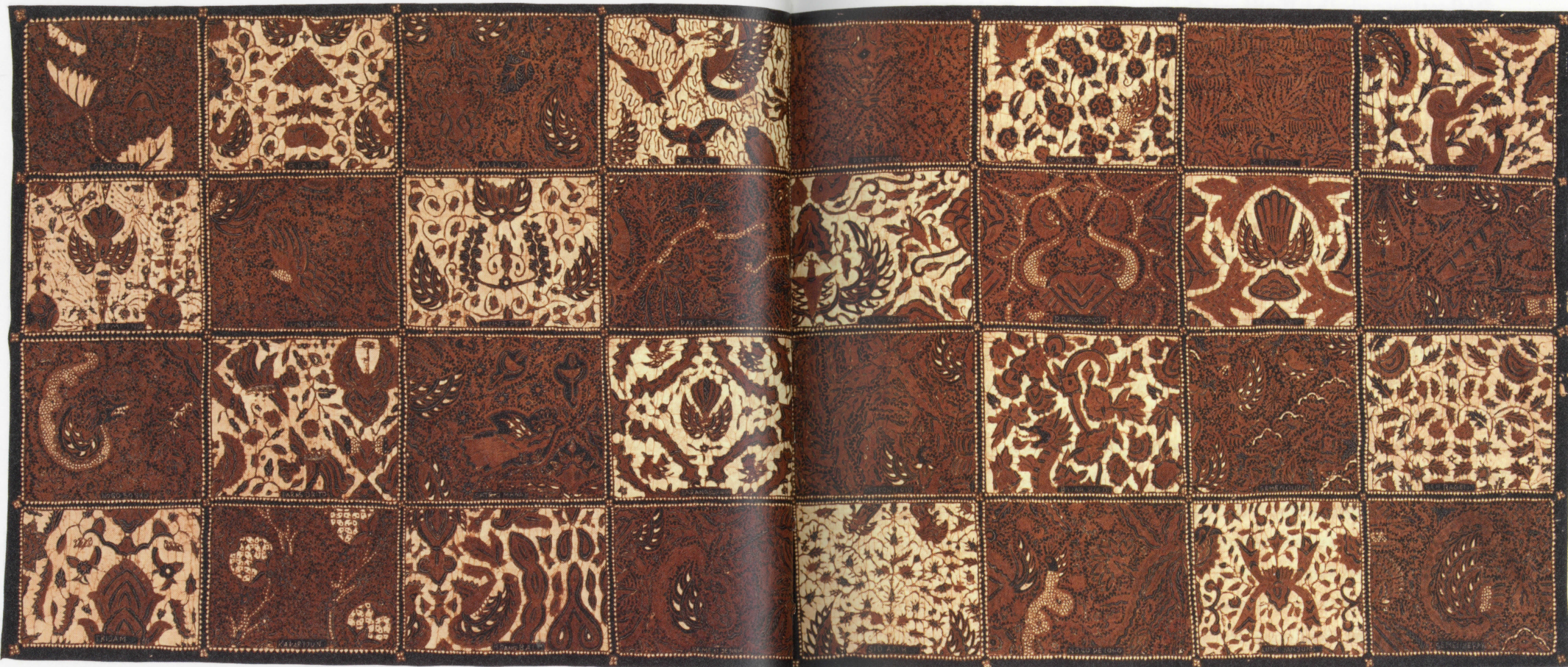
Kennie Ting

Director, Asian Civilisations Museum



*Siindah - Siindah*

*Tindak-tindak.* Princes and princesses of the court of Yogyakarta on an outing to Parangtritis on the southern coast of Java for the birthday of the Sultan of Yogyakarta, around 1936. Album 15, Pagi-sore Collection.



*Previous pages*

**Kain panjang nitik ksatrian**

Central Java, Yogyakarta,  
first half of the 20th century  
Batik tulis. Cotton, synthetic dyes,  
254.2 x 109.3 cm  
T-0855

Worn by courtiers of Yogyakarta,  
this kain panjang has a combination  
of sacred motifs – *parang rusak*,  
*nitik*, *kawung* and *grinsing*.

*Above*

**Kain panjang with semen motifs**

Central Java, 20th century  
Batik tulis. Cotton, synthetic dyes,  
250 x 103.8 cm  
T-0541-A

## Reflections on the Brilliant Career of Batik in Indonesia

Lee Chor Lin

Batik is a technique to decorate finished fabric, and the name, which means “to dot”, is rooted in the Javanese language. Batikers use a paste-like substance to draw patterns or motifs on cloth. When dipped in dye, the substance becomes a colour-resist; only the uncovered portions of the cloth absorb the colour. Textile makers in many areas at various times in history have used this technique to create imagery and patterns on their fabrics, using rice paste, earth, and beeswax as the resist substance. It was around the seventeenth century that the Javanese succeeded in producing batik of fine luxury quality. The world soon adopted the Javanese term *batik* for this resist-dye technique, as well as for the resulting fabric. Until the twentieth century, no other makers outside Java were incentivised to produce batik of this quality and variety, in the labour-intensive method in which the Javanese excel.

The question of when the Javanese first made batik still cannot be definitively answered, despite much scholarly study and research using historical sources, trade records, oral histories, and sculptural imagery. The oldest batiks to which we can assign dates based on historical records are some traded by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the eighteenth century or ones entering Japanese collections around the same time. Still, we know from these sources of information that a large variety of textiles and jewellery were available to the adornment-conscious people of Java. We also know that the Javanese were familiar with the variety of spectacular textiles from India – brocades; ikats of different orientations; as well as block printed, mordant-resist, painted, and tie-dyed silks and cottons. Cotton cloths produced in Gujarat and the southern Indian coasts, generally known as *ajrakh* and *chintz*, were the mainstay of textiles traded to Southeast Asia from the sixteenth century onwards. While it is important to understand how this prevalence of Indian trade textiles shaped or mentored Javanese textile

aesthetics, it is not advisable to attribute too hastily the Indian sources as the originator of Javanese batik.

The Javanese most probably made their first batiks with rice paste, and production may have been a lot more widespread than we know. Glutinous-rice paste resist batik blankets (*simbut*) of handwoven cotton were still being made in West Java a century ago. Generally decorated white (resist), with “naive”-styled stickman motifs, the red of the cloth was not achieved by dip-dyeing. Rather, as observed by twentieth-century ethnographer-curator Cornelis M Pleyte, a paste-like substance made up of crushed *mengkudu* bark was smeared on the cloth repeatedly to achieve the earth-toned red.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, this method was re-enacted with a mixture of *mengkudu*, sappanwood, and other “secret” ingredients when a batik maker in Lasem used natural-dyeing on her batik, attempting to revive an antiquated method. The result of her initial dyeing yielded a dirty pink hue, proof that the sort of brilliance in red requires multiple repeats of dyeing and drying, or possibly other secret ingredients to interact with the natural dyestuff.<sup>2</sup>

About 83 kilometres east of Lasem, in the coastal town of Tuban, batik making begins with the growing, harvesting, and processing of the raw materials – cotton and indigo. Cotton is handspun and woven on back-strap looms, while the indigo sits, rots, and ferments in dye vats, titrated with alkaline for the desired blue. Homespun cotton yarns are thicker, and the woven result, even in plain weave, is textured and unsmooth. Tuban batikers create their patterns with an economy of lines and dots, avoiding excessive curvilinear and complicated motifs, as well as complex dyeing processes. Called *gedhog*, this rustic batik may have been what European observers encountered in villages during the seventeenth through early nineteenth century. Where refinement is absent, Tuban *gedhog* makes up for it with the charm of simplicity. In the 1980s interior designers found in *gedhog* a new furnishing material for household items, generating an aesthetic which has become part of mainstream contemporary batik.

In the courts of Central Java, although the women were proficient in spinning, loom-threading, weaving, and batik, the use of imported cotton cloth, first from India and later from other countries – Holland, England, and America – where weaving was done on automated industrial looms,

changed batik qualitatively from the seventeenth century onwards. Beeswax is still, to this day, considered the best ingredient to use as a resist, as its molten consistency is well-suited for batik making. It does not solidify too quickly, hence clogging up the canting; or crumble too soon, breaking up carefully rendered strokes and lines. We don't know when beeswax started to be used for batik, but trading records show that it was first exported from Southeast Asian forests (in the southern Philippines and Timor, for example) in unprecedented quantities in the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Much was exported to Portuguese and Spanish influenced markets to be used for candles in churches, but one should not overlook the possibility of the new availability of beeswax on the market as providing a breakthrough ingredient in batik making, enabling finer batiking and the invention of intricate motifs.

Since the seventeenth century, the courts of Solo (Surakarta) and Yogya (Yogyakarta) have made batik standard attire. In 1755 these courts named batik patterns which became exclusively reserved for use by members of the courts. The mid-eighteenth century saw the Dutch consolidating control over these traditional polities in Java. The psyche of the rulers turned inwards to other expressions of leadership, spiritual cultivation and the arts. The Dutch also controlled the import of textiles, partly because the trade was dominated by British interests as they consolidated their control in India. Indian textiles, which once dressed in voluminous abundance the pageant of Javanese aristocracy, were priced beyond reach. Worked on fine southern Indian cotton with top-grade beeswax from the eastern islands, Javanese batik was being transformed into a higher level of artistic achievement. Batik eventually replaced weaving and became the new women's art. This was the new beginning of batik, a court art made within the confines of the palaces and in villages where the courts commanded loyalty and had special social arrangements. Batik was a solution to deal with the ascendancy of the Dutch.

### THE MEANING OF BATIK

The Javanese created and developed their own encyclopaedic vocabulary of batik motifs, pattern making, and a system of general compositional decisions for piece cloths. Although everything is rendered by hand, the early batikers

did not set out to make imagery that was meant to be seen as a picture, like a painting. They were clear that they were making fabrics that would be wrapped around the body and folded in various directions. When the fabric was finally worn as a garment, large portions of it would not be visible. In fact, batik pattern making is based on the repetition of a nucleus motif on a tightly delineated structure – cross-grid or diagonal (*garis miring*). In drawing the motifs, even those with names of flora, fauna, objects, or symbols, effort is directed to capturing the spirit of what these motifs mean, how they may affect or influence the general scheme of things, and the feeling the motifs might conjure up under various scenarios. By and large, these batik motifs are meant to generate a realm of positive forces for their wearers, carefully calibrated to remain “just right”. Javanese often murmur *cocok* (matching) or *cukup* (enough) as a soft compliment and sign of approval.<sup>4</sup>

In Solo, all batiks for court use must be finished with sogan brown dye. In both principalities, the *parang rusak* (“broken knife”) motif is the mark of court batiks worn by kings and their offspring. *Kawung*, a schema of overlapping circles, with ancient roots, is also a motif forbidden (*larangan*) to those outside the palaces. Two albums from a member of the Solo court, dated between 1936 and 1957, show that various sizes of *parang rusak* were the main batik worn by princes and princesses on many different occasions – holidaying in Kaliurang, mountain climbing, making pilgrimage at the seaside of Parangtritis, or for a game at the carrom board and badminton.<sup>5</sup>

Female descendants of kings were trained by their mother or elder women in batik from a young age. Those with skill would make pieces for the pleasure of the king. Beautiful batik enhanced the status of the king and his court; with the appropriate meaning accorded to the batik worn by the king, its spiritual power was enhanced. Batiks were also given away as tokens of appreciation and recognition. Everyone appearing in the presence of the king must wear the appropriate batik.

Although the best batik making is associated with the courts, the symbiosis between the courts and their subject villages must not be overlooked. These villages are the sources supplying and maintaining the continuity of good batikers for the courts. Many of these are pilgrimage sites, given special protection by the rulers so that the sites are maintained and

offerings made. As the Javanese regard art making as a form of offering, these are also villages of arts and crafts, producing *keris* and batik, dancers and painters. In the region between Yogyakarta and Solo are constellations of batik villages – including Imogiri, Wedi, Bayat, Bantul, Wonogiri, Wonosari – each nurturing batiks in their own aesthetic styles, while supplying the palaces with batikers and female courtiers.<sup>6</sup>

The doyen of batik, KRT Hardjonagoro Gotikswan (1931–2008), often cautioned against recognising only the courts as the source of batik:

In actual fact, the court was merely a stopover on culture's long journey. The seed sprouted in the agrarian community, and only later spread in to the courts where it underwent extreme refinement and enrichment. Finally, it diffused back into the agrarian community from which it had come.<sup>7</sup>

### TIGA NEGERI

A niche variation based on the brownish Solonese batik was made popular in the 1930s by Chinese workshops in Solo. Called *tiga negeri* batik, it is made on the Solonese basic brown palette, background covered with finely drawn filling motifs (*isen isen*) to accentuate the main motifs, usually flora or fauna, which are dyed in the red of Lasem and blue of Pekalongan, both prolific and important batik centres on the north coast of Java.

One of the best tiga-negeri producers, the Tjoa Giok Tjiam family, sent their batiks to Lasem for the red dye, but the indigo was done in the traditional Solonese process. The batik is finished with a sogan brown dye. Although the name acknowledges the presence of three distinctive colours, it is doubtful that their process involved blue-dyeing in three places (Solo, Lasem, and Pekalongan), as is still the explanation for the term “tiga negeri”. As long-term settlers in Solo and Yogya, Chinese in Central Java have been making batik since the eighteenth century. The general Solonese colour scheme of the batik indicates the depth of Javanisation of the Chinese of this region. The batik may instead have been named after the Chinese literary work *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which enjoyed wide popularity after the Peranakan-Malay and Indonesian translations were published in late

1890s. Recently, Indonesian batik experts have conjectured that tiga negeri batiks were popular in West Java, rather than their native Central Java. This discovery adds a new layer of meaning to this batik that links three elements unique to the history and culture of Java.<sup>8</sup>

## COASTAL BATIKS

If batik making was a solution to the crisis caused by the Dutch colonial regime's monopoly on textiles, it was also a new business opportunity for the trading communities dwelling in port towns lining the north coast of Java. Before this consolidation of textile import and trading came about in the mid-eighteenth century, the trading of luxury textiles, fabric material for local dyeing (such as tie-dye and batik), silk yarns for weaving, and other raw materials for textile making was conducted by active trading communities there. In these trading ports on the north coast Java, the main merchant groups were Arabs from Hadramaut in Yemen, Chinese from Fujian, and Gujaratis from India. Successful traders of textiles gained market knowledge, built up a good sense of the likes and dislikes of their customers, learned technical differentiations among those who wove or made their own textiles, and identified gaps in the market.

The Dutch monopoly over imported Indian textiles created a crisis, too, for most other Asian merchants, the Javanese included. Nevertheless, leveraging on their network and accumulated capital, the north coast merchants coped by re-orienting their businesses to trading in domestically produced textiles, such as batik. Some started to organise production lines, as they already controlled the raw material supply chain – beeswax, cloth, and dyestuffs. This shift of emphasis was part of the movement of Java from an agrarian based economy to one of small-scale manufacturing and cash crop cultivation. Batik was encouraged widely as an activity to fill agricultural lull periods. The products filled the highly varied market rapidly, and the wearing of batiked garments, including the sarong, became a norm in previously non-sarong wearing communities.

By the second half of the nineteenth century wearing batik sarongs had become a common dress style among women of coastal urban centres across



ACM



9 789811 892073