

Cultural Dimensions in the Development of Decorative Carving Crafts in Jepara Regency

Sri Indrahti^{1*}, *Yuta Tri Waskita*,¹ *Khairana Zata Nugroho*¹

¹History Study Program, Faculty of Humanities. Diponegoro University, Indonesia

Abstract. This article describes the various culture that have given color to the development of decorative carving in Jepara Regency. Starting from the period of Islamic culture, to be precise as a decoration for the Mantingan mosque, Kartini's initiative to make carvings as souvenirs, colonial influence, the period of independence until the presence of foreign investors (1980-2010). Writing this article using primary data and secondary data. Primary data, including archives stored at the Jepara and Semarang National Narcotics Offices, the Jepara Trade and Industry Office regarding PMA and PMDN, as well as carving craft business units. Secondary data includes the monthly Gema Bumi Kartini magazine published by the Jepara Regency Government, journals, research results relevant to the Jepara carving industry during the writing period. The data will also be complemented by interviews with informants, policy makers and communities active in the carving craft sector.

¹ Corresponding author: indrahti@gmail.com

1 Introduction

Jebara is famously known for its wood carving, both in Indonesia and in other countries. Besides that, Jebara is also known as a city with historical value as an old maritime city and the city where one of the leaders of the Indonesian women's movement was born, namely R. A. Kartini [1]. With a strategic position in the field of shipping and trade, Jebara's has often been mentioned in historical sources by local historical accounts in the form of *babad* and travel notes compiled by foreign traders and travelers [2].

The art of carving, which is characteristic of the Jebara area, has been known by its people since the XVI century [2]. The decorative variety of Jebara carvings can be traced from the beginning of the existence of the Mantingan mosque, which was laden with carved motifs on its wall. The development of the art of carving itself can be traced back to the colonial period, with the role of R. A. Kartini as the proponent of the artisans and the establishment of carpentry school by the Dutch colonial government [3]. The development of the carving industry can be said to have entered a new phase around the 1980s, with the starting point from abroad orders, including Singapore. Since then, the variety of carving motifs has adapted to suited orders from abroad, so that there have been developments of new variety of designs according to buyers' orders with more minimalist style.

This resulted in a shift in the Jebara carving industry. At first, the artisans did not follow the market tastes, but in its development the artisans began to conform to market tastes, especially the international market. This conformity raised concerns about the fate of cultural values that are embodied in Jebara carving in the future. The main issues are then elaborated through these following questions. First, how is the development of the variety motifs of Jebara carving throughout time. Second, how do the carver artisans preserve the variety of traditional carving motifs at the present time. Through the historical method, sources such as books published by the Regional Government of Jebara, various journal articles, and research reports are used and arranged in such a way as to produce a comprehensive historical narrative.

2 Results and Discussion

2.1 Variety of Carving in the Mantingan Mosque Period

The people of Jebara have known the art of carving for a long time. Since

the establishment of the Mantingan Mosque in 1559, a variety of ornate carvings have been found there. On the walls of the mosque there are carvings on white stone with ancient art patterns. The establishment of the Mantingan Mosque was initiated by Queen Kalinyamat, related to her desire to worship. Her *patih*, Chi Hui Gwan, who was skilled at carving was given another name, Sungging Badar Duwung. At first, stones were used as carving media, but slowly it was replaced with wood. This change may be caused by the changes in the function of carving, which is not only used for decoration in places of worship [1].

From this folklore, it can be concluded that the carving skills possessed by the people of Jepara were passed down by a figure who has several names, such as Chi Wie Gwan, Patih Badar Duwung, and Prabangkara. It is possible that all three names refer to one person. It can be concluded that the carving skills possessed by the Jepara people have developed for generations [2]. Starting from the function of decoration in places of worship such as those found in the Mantingan Mosque, carving skills began to be widely recognized by the people of Jepara. At first the existing decorative patterns were leaves, lotus flowers, rock hills, landscapes, lines, and compositions of birds.

In Islamic teachings at that time, it was forbidden to make statues or make carvings in the form of living things. To avoid it, the artisans tried to disguise it by creating images of living things with intertwined lines and leaves motifs. Through these ornaments, the art of carving is still perceived as living (things) decoration. This can be seen in the wall decorations at the Mantingan mosque which consist of plant motifs, and there are also elephant motifs and scenes from the Ramayana behind them [4]. Attempts to disguise the ornaments of living things into lines and leaves made by the artisans in its development have become a feature that is unique to the art of Jepara carving.

2.2 Variety of Carving in the Colonial Era

Jepara carving craft continued to develop in the colonial era, which was mainly continued by R. A. Kartini, a daughter of the Jepara Regent. Kartini, who knew that the wages and work of the artisans was inadequate then tried to find a way out in the form of coordinating the artisans and helping with marketing by allowing the artisans to work around the district yard so that Kartini would be more easily involved in it [5]. Kartini also ordered some of the produced carvings to be used as souvenirs for her guests from outside Jepara, including overseas [1]. There is a tendency among artisans to try to maintain the image motifs that developed during the time of Kartini and her family because these motifs are considered to be the hallmark of Jepara handicrafts.

The endeavors to develop the carving art were also done by the Dutch colonial government, which held courses focused on making furniture (*meubelmaken*) and woodcarving (*houtsnijwerk*) in Jepara in early July 1929 [6]. During its development, the course underwent name changes, as follows: *Openbare Ambachtsschool* (1929-1931), *Ambachtsschool Voor Inlanders* (1931-1932), and *Ambachtsleergang* (1932-1942) [3]. Initially, the carving motifs that became the focus of the research in the courses were based on various motifs found in temple buildings, and aside from carved decorations, there were also relief motifs. Over time, Jepara carving also displays various kinds of living things such as humans and animals, which are combined with floral motifs. These carving motifs generally depict serial wayang stories, temple reliefs, stories of life in the palace, and etceteras [8].

The establishment of the course initiated by the Dutch colonial government was then followed by the establishment of a Regional Company in 1932 which involved the regents of Jepara and Rembang. The regional company named Jepara's *Houtsnijwerk en Meubelmaker* (JMH) was then used to accommodate *Ambachtsschool* graduates [3]. The establishment of this carpentry school showed that the Dutch colonial government paid attention to the carving craft industry in Jepara. Through formal education established at that time, the artisans were expected to be able to explore existing motives and develop them. The Regional Company was established as a forum for realizing the ideas of skilled workers and developing the carving craft industry [8].

2.3 Variety of Carving through Formal Education

During the independence period, there was an Indonesianization of the names of various agencies and institutions, including the name of schools. The carpentry school which had existed since the colonial period was then renamed as *Sekolah Pertukangan* (1945-1950), then became *Sekolah Teknik Pertama* (1950-1955), and *Sekolah Teknik Negeri 3* (1955) which is the name that is still used today. At this school there is a carving decoration department, with the curriculum being taught covering furniture construction as well as carving motifs from Indonesian ornaments. In fact, some artisans imitate the carving motifs that are taught at school, but some other craftsmen develop carving motifs according to consumer orders [3].

Even in its development to further empower the carving craft, in 1963 and 1964, the Head of the Level I Regional Cooperative Office of Central Java established *Koperasi Industri Pertukangan Kayu* in Panggang Jepara, *Koperasi Pertukangan Kayu "Sido Dadi"*, based in Sukodono Village, Jepara, [9] and *Koperasi Perindustrian Pertukangan Kayu Suka Damai* based in Mantingan, Jepara [10]. Another cooperative whose members are carved furniture entrepreneurs and artisans is *Koperasi Mebel Ukir Tahunan Jaya*, which was established in 1969. This cooperative is a legal entity and has 174 members, who generally reside in Tahunan [2]. At the Annual Members' Meeting (*Rapat Anggota Tahunan*; RAT) held in 1994, it was reported that the cooperative had business assets in the field of sawmills with two units of saws belonging to themselves, then there was an addition of 1 unit of saws which was in collaboration with *Pusat Koperasi Unit Desa Semarang* [11].

2.4 Variety of Carving in International Market

In connection with the export tax, efforts also have been made to support its elimination through the visit of the Minister of Industry and Trade (Perindag) in Jepara in August 1999 [12]. The request was granted and the Regional Government of Jepara then sent an official letter requesting confirmation from the Minister of Industry and Trade and submitting an application for providing credit assistance for simple machines for small craftsmen as promised so that all existing orders in the carving industry could be completed on time and produce good quality according to the customer's wishes, considering that time and quality standards were a serious obstacle for artisans and exporters. The next proposal concerns the availability of complementary raw materials which are difficult to

fulfill and are in accordance with market mechanisms [1].

This happened because the Jepara craftsmen were not fully able to fulfill the expected number of orders due to the rather strict requirements due to the standards and quality set, indicating that local artisans were not ready to enter the international market with various accompanying rules, especially regarding production quality [13]. Around 1996, sales of Jepara furniture products were discovered in the United States, and the marketing said that the furniture was a dream that became a beautiful reality. Crafted by local artisans, each hardwood has unique knot characteristics, and the wood varies in texture and no two cuts are the same. The sales promotion is strictly for the holidays which means interest free and payment is made within 90 days of ordering before November 11, 1996. The promo is found in sales stores in the United States. Items offered include: Jepara King Bed, dresser or dresser, mirror, cabinet for underwear, chest of drawers, and bench storage [14].

Throughout the 1980-2000 period, the marketing of the carving industry has entered the international market through orders and foreign investors who are active in Jepara. This can be seen not only in the orders that come in, but also in some foreigners who carry out business activities in Jepara. This condition raises concerns among local Jepara entrepreneurs, especially since the presence of these foreign entrepreneurs does not yet have a permit. Usually those who come from England, Taiwan, France and New Zealand run their business by coming to the villages of the center of carving craftsmen, then buying semi-finished materials and then processing them into finished goods and selling them domestically and abroad through courier services [15].

2.5 Efforts to Preserve Carving Variety in Other Media

The manufacture of furniture adapted to the tastes of the international market has forced Jepara carving to conform the styles to the tastes of the international market. In order to maintain its sustainability, many of Jepara's traditional carving motifs have begun to switch media. Commonly used media include batik and architecture, especially in mosques. Batik motifs inspired by Jepara's carved motifs are expected to increase the productivity of artisans by using a variety of Jepara's carved motifs which are already well-known for their popularity [16]. This can be seen in the carved niche motifs which are accompanied by several leaves that expand like fans used in official clothing in Jepara [17]. In the field of architecture,

one form of implementation of Jepara's decorative carving motifs can also be found in the Baitul Makmur Great Mosque. Various carved decorative motifs also decorate the entrance gate of the mosque and the foyer of the mosque. Not only mosques, the existing motifs and decorations also often adorned *gebyok*, *joglo* houses, and roof tiles using Jepara carving motifs [18]. The transfer of the media is expected to preserve the decorative motifs of Jepara carving.

3 Conclusion

The carving industry, which grew and developed in harmony with the local cultural values of the Jepara people, and became the identity of the city of Jepara, experienced rapid development in response to international market demand in the 1980s. The development of the existing decoration began with the decoration of the Mantingan mosque, then progressed as a souvenir during Kartini's time, and became popular in the international market; which created demand for motifs according to the needs of the customer. During these various development processes, Jepara's local values remain the most important part which is always strived to be preserved in this carving craft with wood media and even penetrates into cloth media with Jepara batik and decorating public facilities buildings.

This article is funded by 2023 Dipa fund Faculty of Humanities Diponegoro University.

References

1. Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah Pemerintah Kabupaten Jepara dan Lembaga Penelitian Universitas Diponegoro, *Penggalian Nilai-nilai Budaya Lokal untuk Meningkatkan Daya Saing Industri Kerajinan Ukir dalam Era Globalisasi* (Jepara, Pemerintah Kabupaten Jepara, 2005).
2. Panitia Penyusun Hari Jadi Jepara, *Sejarah dan Hari Jadi Jepara* (Jepara, Pemerintah Kabupaten Daerah Tingkat II Jepara, 1988).
3. Pemerintah Kabupaten Daerah Tingkat II, *Risalah dan Kumpulan Data Tentang Perkembangan Seni Ukir Jepara* (Jepara, Pemerintah Kabupaten Daerah Tingkat II, 1979).
4. Tim Jurusan Sejarah Undip, *Inventarisasi dan Deskripsi Peninggalan Sejarah di Kabupaten Dati II Jepara* (Semarang, Fakultas Sastra Undip, 1992).
5. Kartini, *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang* (Jakarta, Balai Pustaka, 2021).

6. De Ambachtsschool. Mededeelingen uit het jaarverslag. – De nieuwe cursus. – Rondegang door de inrichting (De Locomotief, 14 Juni 1929).
7. Meubelmaken en houstijden te Japara (Soerabaiasch-Handelsblad, 11 Juni 1929).
8. A. D. Karmadi, M. S. Kartadarmadja, *Sejarah Perkembangan Seni Ukir di Jepara* (Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1985).
9. Akta Pendirian Koperasi Pertukangan Kayu Sido Dadi, 12 Juli 1964 (Dinas Arsip dan Perpustakaan Jawa Tengah).
10. Akta Pendirian Koperasi Perindustrian Pertukangan Kayu Suka Damai, 10 Juli 1964 (Dinas Arsip dan Perpustakaan Jawa Tengah).
11. Rapat Anggota Tahunan Koperasi Kerajinan Mebel Ukir Jepara (1994).
12. H. P., “Profesionalitas Management Nyawa Perusahaan Mebel”, *Gelora Bumi Kartini*, Agustus 1999.
13. Pesan 500 Daun-pintu Berukir eks-Jepara Setiap Bulan. 12 (*Kompas*, 27 Agustus 1980).
14. Of course you'll sleep well. This is the furniture of your dreams. 218 (*Chicago Tribune Sun*, Nov. 3, 1996).
15. Munculnya Pengusaha Asing Resahkan Perajin Ukir Jepara. 9 (*Kompas*, 17 Januari 1989).
16. U. N. Ismia, M. F. Na'am, A. P. Nazwan, Penciptaan Motif Batik Sumber Ide dari Ornamen Masjid dan Makan Mantingan, *Fashion and Fashion Education Journal*, 10, 1 (2021).
17. A. Setiawan, A. M. Sulaiman, Pengembangan Desain Motif Ukir untuk Aktualisasi Identitas Jepara sebagai Kota Ukir, *Andharupa*, 3, 1 (2017).
18. Muhajirin, Estetic Expressions of Jepara Carving in Efforts to Deal with the Market Demands, *CORAK Jurnal Seni Kriya*, 8, 1 (2018).