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CULTURAL HERITAGE | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The making of a national icon: Narratives of batik in Indonesia

Rina Febriani^{1,2*}, Luuk Knippenberg¹ and Noelle Aarts¹

Abstract: Batik is closely associated with Indonesia, and it has gradually become both an icon of Indonesia and an expression of Indonesian identity. How this came about is investigated in this article by adopting a descriptive approach and involving the idea of a tipping point, which refers to a crucial juncture at which a small change can lead to a significant and irreversible effect. This study focused on specific narratives about batik and Indonesia, formed and sustained in people's minds, subject to historical change. By identifying important junctures within these narratives, we systematically identified the possible motives, potential effects, feedback loops, enabling circumstances, key actors, and interventions that generated crucial and irreversible changes, i.e. tipping points. Our study revealed that batik's contemporary place in Indonesian society is the outcome of a process that began in the late 19th century, but with roots dating to events much further back in time, which in retrospect turned out to be crucial tipping points. Identifying tipping points and exploring processes both towards and following them proved an effective way to understand the long and complex story of Indonesian batik's journey to becoming a national symbol. Small changes indeed can have a big impact.

Subjects: Culture; Heritage; History

Keywords: batik; narrative; identity; Indonesia; tipping points

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1. Introduction

By the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction, the present is denied, and the past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narrative. **Susan Stewart** – On Longing

On 2 October 2009, UNESCO designated Indonesian batik as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity. This decision was welcomed in Indonesia. Since that day, 2 October is celebrated as batik day. Why did batik, which is essentially a textile-dyeing technique, become so important in and for Indonesia(n) that it evolved into a cultural heritage product and was accepted as such by UNESCO? This study aims to understand the process that made batik an icon of Indonesia, an expression of Indonesian identity. What initiated the process? Who were involved? What junctures or events were decisive?

Following the ideas of Elias and Dunning, we assume that such changes are the result of complex processes, caused by planned (inter)actions and coincidences and also by long-term developments and sudden events (Elias & Dunning, 2000). Together, they culminate in pivotal moments, tipping points, points of no return that create new realities and new un(certainties). Thus, a tipping point can be defined as a moment of irreversible change, in itself sometimes perhaps at first sight not that significant. However, in reality, the effect is more like “the straw that breaks the camel’s back” (Leeuwis & Aarts, 2011, pp. 22–25). The usefulness of the tipping points concept has been demonstrated in numerous prior studies. For example, Otto et al. (2020) suggest that social tipping points offer a promising approach to achieving necessary emissions reductions and climate change mitigation efforts; Bua and Bussu (2021) use the tipping points concept to explain how changes in political regimes can lead to changes in participatory governance; and Chaves et al. (2018) analysed the history of the Guardia Indigena who protects the indigenous Nasa people in Cauca, Northern Colombia, also with the help of tipping points as an analytic concept.

Therefore, in this article, we aim to investigate the process of how batik became an icon of Indonesia by looking for tipping points within narratives about batik in Indonesia. As batik is a national icon of Indonesia, its place, meaning, content, and development is strongly linked to the narrative about, and the development of, the Indonesian nation, a development similar to that of many other nation-states (Grever & Van der Vlies, 2017). Nationhood, like every other cultural practice, is constructed through processes that shape and include the narrative constructions of history and the making of national icons (Kramer, 1997). This is also the case with batik in Indonesia. Furthermore, the narration has not only shaped batik’s history and its place in Indonesian history, but also has made some aspects and events more meaningful and decisive than others—particularly those considered crucial for the development of modern Indonesian nationhood, which, again, is certainly quite normal in new developing nations (Grever & Van der Vlies, 2017).

Because of this cultural and national aspect, and the fact that batik has become an icon, this study is not a historical study in the sense of precisely reconstructing the introduction and trajectory of batik in Indonesia over time, based on primary sources. Our goal is to investigate how batik became an Indonesian icon, what “historical tipping points” were mentioned in the narration of batik, to what extent these tipping points indeed can be seen as crucial, and, if so, for what reason. For that purpose, we have explicitly included secondary sources, such as official documents, annual governmental reports, as well as articles in newspapers and magazines, as these sources are crucial in shaping a national narrative (Anderson, 1983).

To do so, we first looked for stories and narratives about batik in Indonesia that exist and persist in the minds of Indonesians. Using these narratives as a foundation, we proceeded to retrace events or junctures that were important to the establishment of batik as an identity marker. By cross-referencing multiple sources, and analysing the context and circumstances, we discovered

that certain narratives were based on imagined history, whereas others were based on history, supported by proved facts. Then, using these findings, we determined the crucial junctures that led to the tipping points. These junctures include political shifts, technological innovations, social revolutions, and transformations (Centola et al., 2018; Lenton et al., 2022; O’Riordan et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2020) and other phenomena that led to a change in the narrative about batik. It is important to note that we identified tipping points by checking whether these junctures resulted in significant changes and marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. After that, we systematically looked for possible motives, potential effects, feedback loops, enabling circumstances, key actors, and interventions that could have engendered such junctures and triggered a transformative change, a tipping point with regard to Indonesian batik (production, use, meaning, and position in Indonesia). To give a clear example, our study begins at a crucial juncture when UNESCO designated batik as an Indonesian heritage product and asks why the Indonesian government requested UNESCO to designate batik as a distinctive Indonesian product.

We consequently created a timeline of tipping points in the identified trajectory of Indonesian batik, and we reconstructed the narratives that elucidate why these tipping points occurred. The important thing in this process is to seek the interconnectedness of such complex systems (Leeuwis & Aarts, 2011) and to take note of the implications of small changes that may yield momentous outcomes (Granovetter, 1978).

2. The journey of batik in Indonesia

2.1. Batik: the perennial story

The attempt to nationalise batik as an icon of the Indonesian nation began about seven decades ago when Indonesia proclaimed its independence. However, the explanation for why batik could become a national symbol date back to a much earlier period. This comes as no surprise. We know from stories about nation building and nationalism, all over the world, that this is often the case (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983).

In the narrative about batik in Indonesia, the oldest period referred to is that of the Hindu-Buddhist Kingdom of Kalinga in Java, 650–850. Batik’s introduction in ancient Indonesia remains uncertain, as there is no direct evidence to support this claim. We know from Chinese sources, translated and mentioned in a book published in Batavia in 1880 (Groeneveldt, 1880), that there were several kingdoms in Java and Sumatra, the old Indonesian archipelago. The oldest of these sources mentions the Liang dynasty around the year 550. The kings and nobles are described as wearing “thin flowered clothes, covering the upper parts of their body, whereas young girls cover themselves with a cloth of cotton” (Groeneveldt, 1880, p. 10). But we do not know for sure whether Liang was in the old Indonesian archipelago or in Ceylon. Moreover, there is insufficient information to determine whether or not they wore batik; and, if they did, it could have been made elsewhere. The earliest sources suggest that batik was either an Indian (Rouffaer & Juynboll, 1899) or a Chinese invention (Veldhuisen & Heringa, 1996), considered valuable enough to be traded overseas.

The fact that kingdoms in old Indonesia were mentioned in ancient Chinese records implies that these kingdoms were possibly involved in China’s Silk Road. Most probably, there were also other contacts, for instance by Buddhist monks. The kingdoms in Java and Sumatra at the time were either Hindu or Buddhist. Buddhism was still very influential in India, as was also the case in China during the Tang dynasty (618–907). Thus, close contact with India and most likely also with China—possible cradles of batik—is plausible.

That said, it is understandable that the contemporary narrative on the origin of batik refers to these times. What is surprising, and at the same time revealing, is why the narrative starts with the Kingdom of Kalinga in Java and not (also) with the equally important Buddhist Kingdom of Sriwijaya, located on Sumatra, which we know had trade relations with India, the Arab countries,

China, and Persia (Christie, 1998). Is this a sign of bias towards Java in the batik narrative, as is sometimes suggested (Waclawek, 2015)?

Old Javanese documents from the early 10th century mention cotton and white textiles coming from India (Christie, 1993; Hitchcock, 1991), implying the importation, further processing, and even dyeing of textiles in Java. This, however, also remains an assumption. We do not know whether or not this possible dyeing was in a batik form. Further, Christie (1993) mentions, as does Wade (2009), that sometime in the period between the 10th and the 13th century textile makers in Java developed their textile innovation by imitating Indian block-print designs. They base these findings on remarks in Javanese inscriptions in the Eastern Java area, perhaps from the Kediri Kingdom (c. 1042–1222). Some of these texts mention the technique of *tulis* (to draw a line), which is a dyeing technique applied to cloth, but it is unclear whether they already used wax to exclude the dye. The texts only tell us that Java played a role in international trade, most probably as a stopover, an entrepot, for maritime trade with the spice islands, the Moluccas, i.e., contemporary Malaysia (Christie, 1992; Hall, 2011; Sulistiyono & Rochwulaningsih, 2013).

The fact that the term *tulis* does not feature either in documents left by the Hindu Kingdom of Majapahit (c. 1293–1527), which succeeded Kediri, feeds the doubt about the presence of the *tulis* practice at that time, as this period was, according to many scholars, the apex of classical Javanese culture in terms of art, literature, and music (Hall, 2011). If a batik-like decoration technique, such as the *tulis*, had been applied at court, we most probably would have found some reference to it. However, this does not necessarily mean that batik was not worn at court, but rather that it was most likely imported and not produced locally. That is also the finding of Hall (2011), who argues that the Javanese kings of Majapahit would have imported all kinds of luxury products, not just spices, but also expensive fabrics, like silk from China and decorated batik from India. Batik perhaps originated in India, because the batik style found in Java from the 16th century onwards is highly similar to patterns and motifs found in Indian batik (Guy, 1998; Robinson, 1969). So, what does this rather scanty information about the period prior the 16th century tell us concerning the history of batik's introduction into old Indonesia and the narratives encompassed in this history?

First, it tells us that we know almost nothing about the exact origin and date of Indonesian batik's introduction. At best, we can reasonably assume that batik—or some kind of predecessor to it—was imported and used in the ancient Indonesian archipelago (Java, Sumatra, Bali) from at least the 7th century onwards. Given that in those days only luxury goods were traded over long distances, the precursor of batik most probably was in the form of high-quality fabrics and designs, destined and designed for use by kings or the nobility. Another reasonable assumption is that batik, particularly Indian batik, was the main source of inspiration for the later designs and textures of Javanese batik.

It is also likely that the incentive to start producing batik in Java in those days came straight from the top, from the Javanese kings or sultans. Luxury goods were very scarce and expensive; only the very rich could afford them. These items were clear symbols of status and most probably used exclusively for the purpose of distinction. Batik was perfectly suited to fulfilling that task. It offers the possibility to express—even minor—differences in social status by means the quality of the material and, even more, by the possibility to apply complex, meaningful motifs. Moreover, it is likely that the kings of that time would control and even monopolise the trade and the use of batik, and even decided how, when, where, and by whom it could be worn (Kian, 2011; Prapañca & Robson, 1995). If these assumptions are correct, then it becomes highly probable that the kings would control and restrict the local production of batik. They would most likely allow local production only at their own court, and only if they could not import the required quality or quantity of batik. This assumption is supported by an action undertaken in Java in the early 17th century by Sultan Agung, ruler of Mataram (Java), a period that we describe in more detail later.

Before doing so, we consider what the findings thus far have revealed about the Indonesian discourse on batik. Why does the narrative about the origin of Indonesian batik date back to a period about which we have hardly any information? To answer this question, we must look at the process of constructing a national icon.

The narrative of nationalism, as described and analysed by authors like Gellner, Anderson, Hobsbawm, and Smith, is all about supposed or real (perennial) roots. Those roots are to be found, by their nature, in the far past, more often than not before the beginning of recorded history, a more or less nebulous period, when the first signs appeared that a new nation was being, or could be, born (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1992; Smith, 2013). This is precisely what the narrative about the origins of Indonesian batik does. It attempts to demonstrate that the value of batik as a symbol of national identity is guaranteed, not only because its history goes as far back as the origin of national identity, but also because the two were in fact linked from the start, since the creation of the old kingdoms in Java. It is impossible to prove that people in these early kingdoms wore and perhaps even produced batik, but neither is it possible to prove that they did not. It is likely that the kings, the nobility, and their elites wore expensive and decorated clothes if only to identify themselves. Consequently, it is also no coincidence that the Javanese Kingdom of Kalinga is the first kingdom to be referenced in the history of Indonesian batik. It is there, around Mount Merapi, that the first seeds of what later would become Indonesia were sown and germinated. It was also in Java that the discourse in Indonesia as a nation was born.

2.2. Batik: documented history begins

The term batik itself does not appear before the 17th century¹ (Gittinger, 1979), the period of the—no longer Hindu or Buddhist, but Islamic—Sultanate or Kingdom of Mataram (1586–1755), not to be confused with the Hindu-Buddhist Kingdom of Mataram (9th–11th century), located in the same area, around Mount Merapi. That is why most batik histories start in this period (Christie, 1993; Elliott et al., 2004; Fraser-Lu, 1991; Maxwell, 2003). According to Hall, batik was used as a status marker during the reign of Sultan Agung of Mataram (1613–1645): “What one wore or was allowed to wear defined one’s social and political command” (Hall, 1996, p. 89). It is unclear whether batik at that time was imported or produced locally. This was the heyday of maritime trade, and it would not have been difficult for the rich and powerful to acquire Indian or Chinese fabrics (Hall, 2018; Reid, 1984).

The Dutch East India Company, also known as the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie), became established in Java during this time. The VOC was actively involved in the so-called Spice Wars (1602–1645) with Portugal, in an effort to secure its grip over the spice trade and the islands they came from, the Moluccas. To strengthen its position, it conquered Batavia in 1619 and made it its central trading post. This was not welcomed by Sultan Agung, who had successfully invaded Central and East Java. He tried to conquer Batavia in 1628, but his attempt failed (Reid, 1988, 1993). This conflict with the VOC, its blockade of the maritime trade with India, and the import restrictions on Portuguese goods may have forced Agung to seek alternatives for these imports, including batik.

During Agung’s reign, the Mataram Sultanate became a hub of power and a melting pot of Arabic Islamic and long-established Javanese Hindu-Buddhist traditions. Under his rule, batik transformed from a locally produced and worn product for local dignitaries into a luxury export item. It is likely that Agung stimulated the local production of cotton and batik to resist the VOC or to consolidate his power (Laarhoven, 2012; Reid, 1988). A note by a Dutch official (mentioned in Laarhoven (2012) reported that about four thousand women “painted” clothes in the Javanese Kingdom of Mataram in 1656; and, by 1662, as recorded by a Dutch explorer, Joan Nieuhof, numerous Javanese were dressed in what appeared to be batiked clothes (Elliott et al., 2004). These figures may be exaggerated, but Javanese batik by that time was clearly significant enough

to become a serious rival, at least amongst the Javanese elite, of the Indian fabrics imported by the Dutch East India Company.

In addition, Agung introduced and reinforced a variety of ceremonies and rituals to symbolise and support his power and authority. Batik was certainly bound to be part of this, as it was later in Solo and Yogyakarta, as the direct heirs and prolongations of the Mataram Sultanate. Batik lends itself very well to indicating symbolisation and underlining differences in social or economic status (and power). The unrivalled richness of the Indian-Hindu traditions may have been an additional help, as it indicated the most diverse and, if needed, smallest differences in social status, and even conferred religious undertones (Guy, 1998; Reid, 1988).

In the late 17th century, Javanese batik was popular in the Indonesian archipelago (Reid (1993) and seen as a cheap alternative to imported textiles (Kian, 2011). According to a document written in the 1680s, the VOC encountered difficulties selling clothes and textiles (Indian Coromandel) in North-East Java because local buyers may have favoured batik (Kian, 2011; Laarhoven, 2012). During this Mataram period, the quality and status of batik were high, as production was under the control of women of the court (Laarhoven, 2012). Batiking skills were perhaps even a criterion for women to be selected as the king's wife (Boow, 1988). To refine and speed up the drawing of designs on cloth with melted wax, it is likely that the tool known as *tjanting* or *canting* was introduced at this time (Shaw & Shaw, 1974).

Batik cloth was thus one of the main commodities that South Asian traders exchanged for spices in the eastern part of the Indonesian archipelago (Reid, 1993). However, given the high value of spices at that time—worth raging expensive, bloody, and long-lasting wars for (see the history of the Spice Wars)—this could imply that batik was a luxury product as well. Nonetheless, when and where batik was traded, it would surely have inspired awe and spread Mataram's fame.

All in all, Agung's reign and the implementation and existence of the Dutch monopoly were tipping points, because this combination resulted in significant changes for batik. "Batik of Mataram Java" was born, and even produced in large quantities. And that batik became, for the first time, a symbol of "local" power, as it was used to break the Dutch monopoly. Agung's reign created an irreversible transition in Java, politically, culturally, and in many ways also economically. These changes involved batik, of which the production, use, and export to other islands of the archipelago were stimulated. This era also marked the beginning of the use batik as a symbol of 'indigenous' identity. In light of Agung's achievements, it is no wonder that he is often regarded as a hero in Indonesian narratives. While the portrayal of his character may be fictionalized, but at the same time very real.

2.3. The golden age of batik

After Agung's death, Mataram's golden age ended as suddenly as it had started. The rivalry and competition amongst the many rulers were too strong and could only be controlled (temporarily) by strong leaders (Reid, 1984). In Java, that rivalry was strongly kindled by the VOC, which could only win by playing local rulers against one another (Reid, 2015).

The first cracks had already appeared under Agung's successor, but it was in 1755 that the final split was realised. In that year, the Giyanti Agreement, plotted by the VOC, resulted in the creation of the Sultanate of Yogyakarta and the Sunnanate of Surakarta (Solo). This was followed by the establishment of the Princedom of Mangkunegaran in 1757, a dependency of Surakarta. In 1813, during the Raffles period (1811–1816), in which the United Kingdom supplanted Dutch rule in Indonesia, Pakualaman, a princely state like Mangkunegaran, was created within the Sultanate of Yogyakarta. The former Kingdom of Mataram was now split up and divided into four princedoms (in Dutch: *Vorstenlanden*).

The Jatisari Agreement in 1755, a follow-up to the Giyanti Agreement, formalised the distinctions in batik motifs and colours between Yogyakarta and Solo (Carey, 1986). They both developed their own designs and colours to distinguish themselves internally and externally. These princedoms shared a similar use of batik and had a similar cultural and political perspective on the purpose and role of batik. However, with the motifs drawn on batik, batik is perfectly suited to demarcating even the most subtle distinctions. As the similarities between the princedoms were much greater than the differences, this demarcation was very welcome at the time. The appliance of highly sophisticated social markers was required to mark and underline the subtle differences, markers accepted and shared by all. Batik precisely fulfilled that role in Java at that time (Woodward, 2011). Yogyakarta batik used indigo, black, or dark brown patterns on a white background, whereas Surakarta batik used indigo, black, or dark brown patterns on a cream background (Djoemena, 1990; Purwani, 2014). It was not only at court that the cloth etiquette became very strict. According to Honggopuro (2005), specific motifs were forbidden for use by commoners. The king of Surakarta started this with decrees issued in 1769, 1784, and 1790, later followed by the Sultan of Yogyakarta in 1785 (Fraser-Lu, 1991). From now on, it was through batik that people could show where they belonged and who they were.

The dissolution of the Mataram Kingdom was very crucial for batik, and can be considered as a tipping point, because of its far-reaching and long-lasting impacts. This political shift resulted in the establishment of the four *Vorstenlanden*, which all four developed their own batik style and traditions to mark their identity. It could even be considered a major tipping point, as it formalised, by means of an official treaty, the crucial role of batik as a marker of political and cultural identity and status in Java. It is no coincidence, and at least very important to note that most of the motifs that we nowadays associate with Javanese batik were created during this time. This period was indeed a crucial tipping point for the development and use of batik in Java, and consequently in Indonesia.

2.4. The *tjap* (cap) invention: entering the industrial stage

At the beginning of the 19th century, Britain, consequent to its industrial revolution, started to flood South and Southeast Asia with industrially produced textiles. This was also the case in Java. Raffles, a British East Indian administrator, temporarily ruled over Indonesia during the period when the Netherlands was not just occupied by the French but incorporated into France (1810–1813). He was also an early scholar on Southeast Asia who published two books about Java and brought examples of Javanese batik to Britain with the aim of replicating and producing them on an industrial scale (Boow, 1988; Wronska-Friend, 2018).

Although these imported European cloths had difficulty satisfying the sophisticated cultural and aesthetic needs of the Javanese elites (Kraan, 1996; Nederveen, 2017), they began to pose a challenge to local batik production, particularly the lower quality variants. This also worried the Dutch rulers, who tried to restrict the imports but at the same time could offer no viable alternative. The threat was finally somewhat partly averted thanks to the invention of *tjap*, a copper-wax-stamp. This copper-stamp made it possible to produce a rather finely decorated and high-quality batik at a reasonable price, in sufficient quantities (Kian, 2011; Nederveen, 2017). The importation of industrially made imitation batik into Java was also hampered by the fact that the production and use of local batik were still under the jurisdiction of the royal families (Hitchcock, 1991; Laarhoven, 2012).

Coincidentally, this situation occurred at a time when Java's rapid population growth was increasing the demand for batik. This stimulated not only the demand for batik, but also the possibility to produce it locally, thanks to the introduction of the *tjap* (Elliott et al., 2004; Kraan, 1996; Ricklefs, 1986). Overseas Chinese merchants became the main suppliers of raw materials. They also took the finished products and provided financial credit if necessary (Kian, 2011; Mijer, 1919). Locally produced batik became more widely used and cheaper. Commoners started to wear batik,

sometimes with motifs and patterns that were formerly limited to members of the aristocracy only (Boow, 1988).

At the same time, others amongst the new upcoming Javanese elites started to mimic the elites as far as possible. They began purchasing combinations of *batik tjap* and complexly decorated handwritten batik or *batik tulis* (Elliott et al., 2004). Nonetheless, the production of *batik tulis* continued, not least because of the social and cultural role that batik had in society, certainly amongst the elite of the four princedoms. Mijer (1919, p. 8) points out that the native artists considered that *batik tjap* was only for the poor classes and wearing it meant lowering oneself, and van Nederveen (2017, p. 1235) argues that “the love of the Javanese for monstrous and impossible shapes” helped *batik tulis* to survive.

The 19th and early 20th centuries were also the period when the first books and other publications on batik appeared. For example, a history of Java, Raffles’ two-book series in which he claimed to be the first westerner to observe and record the art of Javanese batik (Stephenson, 1993), was published in 1817. In 1899, *De Batik-kunst in Nederlandsch-Indie en haar geschiedenis* by Rouffaer and Juynboll appeared, and in 1916 *De Batikkunst* by Jasper and Pirngadie. During this period, Indonesian batik became fashionable, not only in Java, but also in the Netherlands and even elsewhere in Europe. Hitchcock (1991) states that, in the 1930s, Hollywood stars and other celebrities wore batik and that tourist—who at the time were by definition wealthy—brought batik home when they visited the East Indies.

To conclude, the combination of the Dutch trying to prevent (textile) imports from Britain coming to Java, and the coincident rapid population growth in Java resulted in another crucial tipping point, i.e., the introduction of a technological innovation, called the *tjap*. This period marked the beginning of the mass production of high-quality Javanese batik and made batik the main textile product representing Java. It spread not only in Java, but also elsewhere in the East Indies, in Europe, and even in the United States of America, turning batik into an item of fashion and turning Javanese batik into a well-known and attractive brand.

2.5. The awakening of the nationalist movement and the establishment of batik trade unions

During Napoleon’s occupation of the Netherlands, the British took over the Indonesian archipelago. Nevertheless, the Dutch returned to the archipelago and resumed control after 1815 (Carey & Reinhart, 2021; Keurs, 2011). That juncture marked the beginning of a highly aggressive and expansive phase of Dutch colonialism. Most of the Indonesian archipelago was explored, integrated, and opened for economic exploitation. The Indonesian archipelago was no longer the trading post of a company, the VOC, but had become part of a newly established country, a centrally ruled kingdom of the Netherlands. The archipelago was supposed to fulfil an important role, i.e., stuffing the treasury of the new kingdom of the Netherlands, which until 1830 also contained Belgium, particularly the northern part.

Cultuurstelsel, a highly exploitative system was introduced replacing the *Landrentestelsel* initiated by Raffles, certainly in Java, making the oppression and exploitation in the Indonesian archipelago harsher. The *Cultuurstelsel* itself was abolished in 1870, but the underlying exploitation continued, mostly by private firms, which often used overseas Chinese as their middlemen. It took until 1901 for the Dutch government to change its exploitative attitude when the *Ethische Politiek* (Ethical Policy) was introduced. The policy resulted from the idea that the Netherlands had a moral responsibility towards Indonesia (Ricklefs, 2008).

The Ethical Policy would have far-reaching consequences not only for Indonesia, but also for the ongoing story of batik in Indonesia. Part of the new Ethical Policy was the introduction of a Dutch-style education system in Indonesia, which did more than teach young Indonesians how to read and write. It also introduced them to the ideas of the French Revolution: the ideas of freedom, equality,

political self-determination, citizenship, and nationalism. Sukarno, the father of Indonesian independence, was an outstanding product of the newly implemented Dutch colonial school system.

The Dutch had already started supporting local economic initiatives in the last quarter of the 19th century. Moreover, they granted more economic freedom to local entrepreneurs and traders—often overseas Chinese—to establish local economic cooperatives and trade unions. Batik production profited the most from all these measures, if only because it was already a highly developed sector in Java, as evidenced at the beginning of the 20th century by large batik-producing centres in Surakarta, Yogyakarta, Pekalongan, and Surabaya, and on the North Coast of Java (Boow, 1988; Kian, 2011). All these production centres were strongly controlled by the overseas Chinese. They dominated the market, dictated price, and provided credit. They also controlled the importation of cotton and batik from both Singapore and Ceylon (Dahm, 1969). This—often exploitative—domination of batik production and trade by overseas Chinese regularly sparked protests among local producers.

When the Dutch government's Ethical Policy facilitated the establishment of cooperatives and labour unions, local batik makers organised themselves to counter and demonstrate against the dominance of the overseas Chinese. Thanks to the newly introduced educational system and newspapers, the protests spread quickly and widely because batik was made and sold in numerous locations, particularly in Java.

One of the newly established batik trade unions, the SDI (Sarekat Dagang Islam), would become the hotbed of Indonesian nationalism. In retrospect, this is understandable, as batik was a major industrial sector in Java and this trade union was the only large organisation controlled by locals. However, at the time this was not so obvious; otherwise, the union would perhaps have been prohibited or (better) controlled by the colonial powers.

Haji Samanhudi, a local batik businessman in Surakarta, founded the SDI in 1905. Its aim was to protect local Muslim batik producers and traders against overseas Chinese exploitation (Formichi, 2010; Reid, 2010). The SDI started purchasing batik raw materials directly from European traders, whenever and wherever feasible (Dahm, 1969). The SDI expanded rapidly; thus, in 1909, 1910, and 1913, respectively, SDI opened branches in Batavia (Jakarta), Buitenzorg (Bogor), and Surabaya. While growing, the SDI also broadened its scope and became more political. Its name was changed to reflect this alteration. In 1913, SDI became SI, i.e., *Sarekat Islam*: Islamic Union. After the change, the SI expanded its network to cities all over the Indonesian archipelago. By 1919, the SI claimed to have two million members (Ricklefs, 2008).

The SI became a broad Javanese Islamic trade union with political aspirations, promoting nationalism, anti-colonialism, and independence. It was the perfect organisation to do so, especially because it was Islamic. Neither the Dutch nor the Chinese were Islamic. Consequently, the label Islam or Moslem could easily, and without raising suspicion, be used as a selection and exclusion mechanism for membership and as a marker of emancipation and even identity—particularly as this coincided with Catholic emancipation in the Netherlands (Gorris, 1947). As union members were therefore not labelled as politically dangerous or anti-colonial, being a Muslim could and did become a significant identity marker, fused with being Javanese and even a nationalist (Dahm, 1969; Reid, 2010; Shiraishi, 1990).

All in all, this combination of the Ethical Policy and the establishment of a batik labour union, together with the previous *tjap* innovation, created a crucial tipping point in the narrative of the role and meaning of batik in Indonesia. At this juncture, the discourse about the role, meaning, and history of batik in old Indonesia took off, and batik was framed as an icon of local identity. The S(D)I also profoundly shaped the thinking and actions of the founder of Indonesian independence, Sukarno; and because the S(D)I was the most important batik makers' trade union, batik would become a symbol of Javanese, Islamic, and nascent Indonesian identity. Batik was easily recognisable and could be used

by all Javanese to express their identity and desire to be free from foreign oppression, without the need to shout it out loud. The sprouting of batik as an icon of nationalism had begun.

2.6. Sukarno, Indonesian independence, and the birth of Batik Indonesia

Sukarno attended the Hogere Burger School in Surabaya from 1915 to 1919. His landlord was Tjokroaminoto or Tjokro, the leader of SI at the time, who was so influential that he was called The Javanese King Without a Crown, and even The Messiah: *Ratu Adil*² (Dahm, 1969). It was Tjokro who introduced Sukarno to politics and political action (Adams & Sukarno, 1966).

Batik was—perhaps understandably—very visible in Tjokro’ house; and, unsurprisingly, Sukarno already had a connection with batik, as he was raised in Tulungagung by his grandparents who were involved in the batik industry (Adams & Sukarno, 1966; Palmier, 1957). No wonder that Sukarno developed a special bond with batik that became visible after independence, when the country started to recover from the destruction of World War II and the war of independence with the Dutch. Sukarno decided to use batik to express, illustrate, and symbolise Indonesia’s multi-faceted identity, a role for which, as we have seen, batik is perfectly suited. The face of this project was K.R.T. Hardjonagoro. He was asked by Sukarno to create Batik Indonesia, combining colours and patterns from north-coast and *vorstenlanden* batik (Elliott et al., 2004; Iskandar, 2008). Thus, batik was presented as an icon of the new-born country and nation (Foulcher, 2000; Ricklefs, 2008).

We argue that the period between the *tjap* invention and 1966, the year that Suharto overthrew Sukarno, was a crucial period in and for (the independence of) Indonesia, for the production and spread of batik, and most certainly for the discourse about batik in Indonesia as well as its link with Indonesian identity. It was indeed a period in which long-term development, coincidences, and short-term events came together. The period had several important, yet at the time unforeseeable, intertwined tipping points, including—political shifts, technological innovations, and economic transformations, which also the criteria mentioned by Centola et al. (2018); Lenton et al. (2022); O’Riordan et al. (2013); Smith et al. (2020) – that determined the crucial junctures that led to the tipping points that changed the narrative about batik. The growth and spread of batik production and use thanks to the *tjap* resulted in the rise of many batik producers. The introduction of the Ethical Policy allowed the formation of a batik labour union (SDI) that later became the largest union. The education system introduced after the Ethical Policy triggered, for the first time, the idea of independence. Who could have foreseen that this union would become one of the leading politically forces behind Indonesian independence? Who would have expected that, during the most formative years of his life, Sukarno, the founding father of Indonesian independence, would reside in the house of one of the prominent ideological leaders of that union? Batik could easily serve as the image of a heroic and long heritage. S(D)I’s batik union movement was considered one of the nation’s most potent independence movements. As Legino (2012) argues, the tradition of the largest and most powerful group at the time of independence is most often chosen to form a national identity—especially if that tradition is also acknowledged or even recognised as familiar by other groups, and batik fulfilled all those requirements. Batik was already there, waiting to be used.

2.7. The reign of Suharto: batik as uniform

Sukarno’s reign lasted until 1966. He was succeeded by Suharto, a general who came to power through a coup. Suharto continued to promote batik, and even strengthened batik’s role as the identifier of Indonesian identity. He required some groups to wear clothes with a special batik motif as a kind of uniform. Take KORPRI (Indonesian Public Employee Corps)—a state-regulated organisation of Indonesian civil servants (La_botz, 2001)—as an example.³ Suharto’s preference for batik was perhaps partly influenced by the fact that his wife, Siti Hartinah, was a descendant of Surakarta’s Mangkunegaran court. She had made *batik tulis* since childhood and almost always wore batik in public (Gafur, 1992).

On 14 July 1972, Ali Sadikin, the governor of Jakarta, encouraged the wearing of a batik shirt in Jakarta as formal attire for men and of a kebaya for women (Natanegara & Moersid, 2017). His example was followed throughout Indonesia. Suharto's decree of 17 March 1982 to have school uniforms made of textiles with batik motifs was another action that stimulated the widespread usage and exposure of batik during his presidency. According to the decree, textiles with batik motifs or printed batik was supposed to be worn on special days, such as cultural gatherings or activities representing the school. The patterns and colours of printed batik uniforms had to be designed to represent the distinctive identities of the various schools. Even to this day, students still regularly wear printed batik as part of their school uniform on certain days. The introduction of batik as a (kind of) uniform at different levels of Indonesian society made batik a very visible component in almost everybody's life, all over Indonesia.

Furthermore, Suharto had a significant role in the worldwide promotion of Indonesian batik. For instance, he gave a custom-made batik shirt as a gift to President Nelson Mandela. This shirt, known as a Madiba shirt (Mandela's Xhosa clan name), became a symbol in South Africa in the circle around Mandela (Al Farisi & Haron, 2019). Moreover, batik was the dress code in 1994 when Suharto hosted the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) conference in Bogor. Iwan Tirta, the artist, designed 18 batik motifs for 18 heads of state participating in the APEC conference (Suryaningsum & Tanjung, 2019).

Suharto's reign (1967 to 1998) helped immensely in making batik a highly visible and all-encompassing symbol of Indonesia, deepening the belief that batik was an Indonesian icon and certainly from Indonesia. Here again, the combination of long processes and events is clear. These made Suharto's regime another fundamental tipping point strengthening the link between batik, Indonesia, and Indonesian identity. From here, the step towards its recognition by UNESCO came closer.

2.8. Along the way to UNESCO and to the present

In 1997, Indonesia, like many other Asian countries, was hit by a severe financial crisis that quickly triggered a deep economic recession. The rupiah (the Indonesian currency) depreciated by more than 200% against the US dollar. During this time, many Indonesian companies were forced to cease business, especially those that relied on foreign loans and imports (Tambunan, 2019). The deep economic recession fuelled the already existing turmoil and dissatisfaction with the Suharto regime, triggering new large-scale protests that eventually led to his forced resignation in 1998. This created a vacuum, as he had controlled everything. Indonesia underwent a period of extreme difficulty that almost divided the country. The nation turned inward to find a new direction, and so did batik. The Batik Indonesia label had gained international status under Suharto but, after his fall, it became even difficult to import the necessary materials to make and dye batik. Moreover, the monetary and economic crisis had weakened consumers' purchasing power (Dahles & Susilowati, 2015) and tourism came to a halt. International tourists had contributed greatly to the expansion of Indonesia's batik industry and made it famous all over the world, but because of the crisis they avoided Indonesia (Sugiyarto et al., 2003).

Nevertheless, the Indonesian tradition of wearing batik in everyday life did not change. Suharto and his entourage had widely encouraged and promoted the wearing of batik uniforms amongst all levels of society, in all kinds of organisations, and for all kinds of occasions. Batik had, in fact, become an integrated and visible part of living in Indonesia and being an Indonesian. Batik had evolved into an inseparable and broadly tacitly accepted part of Indonesian identity, inside and often also outside Indonesia, part of the Indonesian habitus and doxa to paraphrase Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977).

And it is precisely because batik had become such an integral, undiscussed, tacit part of Indonesian identity that Malaysia's alleged claim in 2008 that batik was typically and uniquely Malaysian came as a huge shock for many Indonesians. These stories about the Malaysian claim that batik originated in Malaysia began with stories in the Indonesian media that Malaysia was trying to register batik with UNESCO as a Malaysian cultural heritage (Aragon, 2012; Ramlan, 2019).

These stories continued for some time, despite the Malaysian government announcing that the allegations were not true (Clark, 2013). “Fish don’t talk about the water, until the water is gone” is an old saying. In other words, an identity remains invisible and undiscussed until it is challenged. Identity needs a crisis to reveal itself (Erikson, 1970). Malaysia’s alleged claim triggered such a crisis. The shock was perhaps more traumatic as Indonesia had just overcome a severe economic and political crisis that had almost destroyed the unity of the country. Batik, during that period, was one of the few unifying symbols, a tacit but all-present marker of shared identity, past, and belonging. That might explain why so many Indonesians were deeply unsettled and even angered by Malaysia’s alleged batik claim—all the more so, perhaps, as the relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia had already known periods of friction, such as the Ligitan and Sipadan territorial dispute in the 1960s (Butcher, 2013; Chong, 2012; Colson, 2003) and the conflict about the oil-rich territory of Ambalat in 2005.

Indonesians felt deeply injured and wronged. Suddenly, Indonesians became aware of the deep symbolic role and all-present position of batik in their lives. Malaysia’s claim had made them aware of this, the more so as the claim was made by a culturally very similar neighbouring country. This situation is reminiscent of the Narcissism of Minor Differences theory discussed by Blok (1998), referring to the idea that “the fiercest struggles often take place between individuals, groups, and communities that have little differences”. The claim generated pride, pain, and anger, as well as an insatiable thirst to claim batik as uniquely Indonesian. The fight over batik developed into a national obsession (Gelling, 2009).

The conflict ended when UNESCO, on 2 October 2009, designated batik as an Indonesian intangible cultural heritage. In this recognition, UNESCO highlighted three aspects: the techniques, the symbolism, and the culture surrounding Indonesian batik permeating the lives of Indonesians (UNESCO, 2009). Following UNESCO’s recognition, many artisanal batik communities signed a commitment to conserve batik as part of Indonesia’s cultural heritage (Ministry of Culture and Tourism Republic of Indonesia, 2008), and many local governments developed local batik industries as part of their provincial programmes. In 2013, the Indonesian Ministry of Industry reported that about 23 provinces in Indonesia had their own batik motifs (Maria, 2013). The number of provinces producing local batik had increased in 2021 to 27 out of Indonesia’s 34 provinces (Raya et al., 2021).

Today, almost a decade and a half after UNESCO’s designation, batik has become even more popular and widespread in Indonesia and widely accepted as a national cultural icon. The shock therapy caused by Malaysia’s alleged claim constituted the crucial juncture that served as a wake-up call that strengthened the prominence of batik in Indonesia. Thanks to Malaysia, Indonesia arose from its batik hibernation caused by the 1997 economic crisis and the fall of Suharto in 1998. The new era has begun. The (re)claiming of batik through the UNESCO designation further strengthened batik’s position as an Indonesian icon and asset.

3. Conclusion

Our investigation into the significance of batik in Indonesia revealed several tipping points in the process that has resulted in batik becoming the national icon of Indonesia, shedding light on how, when, and why batik became so important in Indonesia and to Indonesians. We initially questioned why the Indonesian government presented batik to UNESCO as a distinctive Indonesian product and why this claim was vindicated. Our findings suggest that the real issue was not whether batik was an Indonesian invention, or how long ago it had started being produced in the Indonesian archipelago, but rather how and why batik became a symbol of Indonesian identity.

Our study shows that the reign of Agung was a crucial tipping point, because batik became a product produced on Java, and a symbol of local power, challenging the Dutch. Another crucial period was the establishment of the four *Vorstenlanden*, since they all developed their own batik style and symbols. But perhaps the most crucial period was the era from the invention of *tjap* to the end of Sukarno’s era, certainly for the production and spread of batik and the discourse about

the relation between batik and Indonesian identity. This period had several intertwined tipping points, including political shifts, technological innovations, social revolutions, and economic transformations. The growth of batik production and the introduction of the Ethical Policy led to the formation of a batik labour union (SDI), which became one of the leading political forces behind Indonesian independence. Batik served as a potent symbol of Indonesian heritage and identity, and its tradition was chosen to form the national identity of Indonesia.

Suharto's era turned batik into a visible identity symbol of the Indonesian state. That is why Malaysia's alleged claim to batik as a national product caused such a huge shock in Indonesia and led to efforts to consolidate the claim to batik as an Indonesian icon by recording it as a cultural heritage with UNESCO. It is also important to note that, from our study, we show that historical facts and imagined histories were constructed over time and strengthened one another into an overall narrative that elucidates batik's journey to becoming an icon for Indonesia.

Furthermore, the results of this study indicate that the use of the tipping point concept was very valuable. First, the identification of tipping points helps the researcher to become sensitive to context and transformative events, by picking out the main crucial breaking points that result from earlier developments and coincidences and characterise the end of one era and the beginning of another. Second, the tipping point concept helps the researcher to analyse the combination and interconnectedness of different crucial breaking points, including political shifts, technological innovations, social revolutions, economic transformations, and other events and developments that lead to an important change in a particular narrative or system.

In conclusion, our findings provide insights into the importance of using the tipping point concept for understanding the dynamics of change in complex systems, thus for social and history-related research.

Further research on the subject of tipping points could explore, for example, the potential use of new methodologies to identify and analyse tipping points as a crucial part of socio-historical research. As our research has highlighted the importance of batik making for the Indonesian identity, much work also remains to be done within the world of batik. The current pivotal position of the traditional batik industry in Indonesia, from the perspective of production and consumption, could be further explored to provide insight into the current state of the industry, including its opportunities and threats. This is a challenge we also have taken up in two articles in the making.

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Notes

1. A Dutch bill of lading of 1641 mentioned "batik" to describe polychrome textiles shipped on a sailing vessel from Batavia to Bengkulu on Sumatra's west coast.
2. In Javanese mythology, Ratu Adil or Just Savior or Just King is the traditional Messiah who it was foretold would bring justice and prosperity to his people (see Dahm, 1969, p. 16).
3. Although the KORPRI's uniform is categorised as a textile with a batik motif—not a fine batik—given its method of production, people still refer to the uniform as *batik KORPRI*.

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