

Locality in Constructing Cultural Identity (a Review on Semarang Batik Art)

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Abstract

In the context of identity, batik is a form of expression of art with unique features that become the identity or may potentially become a cultural identity for either local or national identity. As the capital of Central Java, Semarang has built an identity through batik that depicts Semarang as having a batik culture. The construction of identity in Semarang batik began from searching for local identities by related actors, either personal or communities or organizations, who collectively explore ideas from locality. Locality includes natural, physical, and social-cultural environments. Through creativity in batik art, those ideas are conveyed in innovation and production of distinctive batik that is Semarang-style batik. This distinction represents Semarang locality that forms Semarang identity. The identity that is created as a product of that culture is continuously developed and preserved through enculturation by education in families, schools, and the society.

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INTRODUCTION

Every culture is unique, meaning that each culture has a set of characteristics that consist of distinct traits, personality, or certain identity that belong collectively to the society that supports it (Haviland, 1985). Art is a means of expression that reflect the uniqueness of the culture and values of its society. As an expression shown in society's creations, art always presents individuality that may potentially become local cultural identity and image. The potential of art as a means to affirm identity, as stated by Rohidi (2009: 10-11), means that art in fact wishes to convey symbolic forms, cultural messages, and unique characteristics. Therefore, art as an element of culture is an important component of cultural attributes or identity which is formed by the society that supports it. (Marshall, 2007; Clark, 2007).

In the context of identity, batik is a form of expression of art with unique features that could become an identity or may potentially become a cultural identity for either the region or the nation. The various artistic creations and uniqueness of batik generate the nation's grand cultural identity (Purba, 2009: 47).

Since the age of Dutch colonialism, batik in Java Island is classified into two major groups according to its region and distinct trait, i.e.: (1) *Voorstenlanden* batik (Solo an Yogyakarta batik), which is batik that is identical with the palace, and; (2) Coastal Batik which is batik that developed in the northern coast of Java Island (see Djoemena, 1990; PaEni, 2009; Karmila, 2010:14; Anas, 1997).

Semarang, located in the coastal area of Java Island, has unique characteristics of culture with a long history background. Semarang people manifest their sense of art as a form of aesthetical and creative expressions of their culture. As an expression and creation, art is presented in certain distinctive appearances and shapes. An example of this manifestation of art is batik, in which it is displayed in Semarang style better known as *Semarangan* batik (see Asikin, 2008).

Acknowledged worldwide, batik culture in Indonesia has provided political spirit and motivated several regional governments to do efforts of preserving and developing batik. A lot of regions in Indonesia strive to develop batik as their cultural identity. Many of them have even declared their cultural identity through batik, such as Pekalongan batik, Lasem batik, Jogja batik, Solo batik, and so on.

As the capital of Central Java, Semarang has yet to officially announce their cultural assets of batik. According to Yuliati (2010: 13), Semarang actually has a batik cultural heritage that went through a long history. However, an upheaval during Japanese colonialism caused Semarang batik to stop and slowly disappear. The tradition of Semarang batik perished, along with its batik identity.

With the spirit to rebuild Semarang's identity in batik culture, in 2006 the government and people of Semarang revived and reassembled batik activity, as well as revitalized Semarang Batik Village (Muspriyanto, 2007: 130). This spirit to build cultural identity through batik visibly restored Semarang batik activities. Numerous events and programs aimed to build an image of Semarang's batik culture were rallied. The government's political role held a vital and strategic position in upholding the vision. But building an identity in terms of culture and regional image surely is hardwork that involves many actors, including those who are directly engaged with the production of batik.

From a history point of view, the issue with identity of Semarang batik is that there is not any clarity on the exact characteristics of Semarang batik that could be said as a distinct "identity" of Semarang. There has been no consistent pattern or main attributes that could be claimed as "Semarang batik". The existence of Semarang batik is closely related to politics, which is a matter of trying to build a regional identity through positioning Semarang as a city which "also" has a distinct batic culture. Semarang batik is seen as a potential part of our

culture that may represent Semarang's cultural identity.

Shields (2013) states that policy-makers must acknowledge and utilize their regional identity mark as a label of complexity for the local cultural identity. It is a challenge for regions to show their identity mark in a different form and promote it through branding or labels that represent their regional identity.

Therefore, Semarang batik is an important topic, specifically on the issue of identity construction in building Semarang's local image. The construction of local identity in Semarang batik has become an interesting problem to assess and express. The purpose of this study is to find a factual portrayal about local identity construction in Semarang batik.

"Identity" literally means characteristic, mark, image, particular situation or personality of something/someone that makes it different than others. According to Barker (2004: 172), identity can be viewed individually, socially, and culturally. Beller and Leerseen in Voicu (2013: 161-174) state that identity is distinguishable and is closely related to ideas about unique, identical features about one self. Stes and Burke (2000) mention that identity is a process and result of identifying something similar or different that could be used to recognize one's self (also see Hamers & Blan, 1989). Thus, identity refers to any form of connotations, such as environment, social aspects, politics, and culture (Tomoidjojo (2012:14).

Barker (2011:12) expresses that in the context of culture, identity is a result formed from constructing a representation of things; identity is often made instead of found. Hence, identity construction is defined as a structure of self-identity. The cultural identity is not innate but assembled. An identity is not a set object that we can store, but it is a result of a process. In this case, identity is a part of initiation and as a winding road that has a clear goal with specific characteristics (Voicu, 2013: 161-174). Liliweri (2007) states that identity is always in motion, which means an identity is dynamic is providing self-meaning.

Identity should be seen as a result from a paradigmatic process of representing individuality, a process of building a culture which begins from having insight on one side and using geopolitics, local culture, economy, and aesthetics to define oneself one the other (Spiridon, 2010: 55-58). Identity is described as a collective culture, owned together by people who share the same history and origin. Identity is a nonstop chain reaction of change (Barker, Hall, 1997). Stuart Hall's thesis in Voicu (2013:161-174) mentions that besides being an accomplished fact, identity also goes through processes in practicing new cultures. Identity has always been a representation of what is within and not of what is on the outside. Regarding the culture of an identity, it is an accumulation of individualities based the production of rediscovering oneself.

In terms of culture, identity is a production process that is neither permanent nor established (Hall, 1997:51). Identity as something that was formed in the past could experience changes and renewal as a response to the demands of advancement without having to remove one's personality (see Ember and Ember, 2006:32). If the manifestation of self-identity was seen as a process, every society groups has a tendency to show their identity in dimensions of culture and space (Ismail, 2011: 10). Williams in Barker (2005: 50-55) affirms that culture is formed by values and practice that eventually becomes an identity. The importance of culture in life needs to be explored in the context of production, so it could form an identity of culture. An identity is formed through a chain of relative symbols. Being relative does not only mean it is a part of negotiation on how such values or practice could be applied, but also becomes a culmination point for change where the values shift from time to time into becoming more debateable and contestative.

More concretely, Shields (2003: 150-164) states three things about cultural identity, i.e.: first, a sign of culture basically provides a source of metaphors and concepts for showing identity. Substantially, a region or area could be viewed

affording many opportunities that provide various resources for cultural practices. Secondly, an area or environment is a source and opportunity to produce signs of culture. In this case, a region can offer certain aspects for cultural practices and production. Third, the concept of performativity shows that identity is always relative.

The search of identity, as stated by Manuel Castell (in Tomoidjojo, 2012:19), is a process of constructing value based on a set of cultural attributes. It is clear that identity is a dynamic process in building an image. Likewise, building an identity of regional culture is a collective culture.

Based on the above concepts, a theoretical construct could be formed, which is a construction of cultural identity in the context of art that goes through the following steps: (1) identity search, (2) from locality, (3) through creativity, (4) forming identity. First, identity search is exploring ideas that are identical to collective individualities that refer to one's uniqueness. In this case, exploration is related to problem solving done through examining the source of ideas, in depth comprehension, and possible basic ideas as a starting concept. Secondly, locality refers to any sort of local wisdom like the environment as resources and opportunities for production of cultural signs. Locality also concerns geopolitic, social, local culture, economy, and aesthetics. Thirdly, through creativity, particularly art in which the meaning of locality is explored in terms of innovation and production of art, eventually becoming local cultural identity. Fourth, forming identity is sought. Identity is formed through a variety of symbols and signs that are relative, resulting in metaphors and concepts as a local representation that shows identity. Fifth, development and sustenance, in which besides being an accomplished fact, identity also goes through continuous practices in practicing new cultures or it can change and renew according to time without having to remove personality.

According to Doellah (2002: 10), batik is a piece of cloth traditionally adorned with certain patterns that is made by dipping into

special wax called *lilin batik* as the coloring. Therefore, a colorful cloth (*wastra*) is called batik if it has two main elements, i.e. made using a certain dipping technique named *celup rintang* with wax as its coloring, and several decorative patterns that is unique to batik (See Purba, 2009: 48; Prasetyo, 2010: 2).

Batik is one example of traditional art that does not only has utility and meaning, but also beauty (see Toekio 1987; Prawirohardjo, 2011). In other words, batik is considered "ngravit", meaning it is beautiful, soft, and smooth (Soedarso, 2006: 171). Historically, the tradition of batik is solely Indonesian in which the technique to make batik was already well-known before Indian culture entered Indonesia (see Karmila, 2010).

Batik is an effective means to display the uniqueness of culture. The diverse array of batik designs which presents a distinctive style in each region is a form of art expression and creativity, adding up to Indonesia's treasured culture. The uniqueness of batik designs is generally influenced by several factors, i.e.: 1) Geographical location of the batik designer; 2) Characteristics and life system of the region; 3) Beliefs and customs within the region; 4) Natural environment of the region, including its flora and fauna; 5) The presence of contact between regions regarding batik (Karmila, 2010: 13).

In this case, the art style is the clear difference between regions. The specific designs in batik art become the differing substance that reveals each batik region's identity (see Sedyawati, 2014: 245).

METHODS

The suitable paradigm to find a solution for this study is through a qualitative study by looking for a clear and meaningful description. Elaboration is done by thick description on symptoms and relationships. Data were directly obtained with the researcher as the main instrument (human instrument) (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982: 27).

The setting of this study is purposive based on study needs. The setting used is the batik community within and outside of Semarang batik vilage. Observation, interviews, and documents were used in this study to obtain data. The data were validated by triangulation. Triangulation was done in four aspects, i.e. source, method, researcher, and theory.

Along with data collection, the data were analysed by reducing and classifying data through domain, taxonomy, and componential analysis, as well as finding themes to thoroughly describe the results and present meaning of the study focus which eventually considered interactions from the emic-ethics perspective or vice versa (Spradley, 1979; 1980).

Data analysis includes reducing, displaying, and concluding the data which was carried out interactively through data collection as a cycle (Milles & Huberman in Rohidi, 1992: 20), see also Rohidi (2011: 234-241).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identity Formation in Semarang Batik

Referring to the concept of cultural identity as a construction process as mentioned previously, Semarang batik can be seen as an effort to build identity within batik culture. It is an interesting phenomenon in which the formulation of regional image occurred through emphasizing local uniqueness into batik patterns. The study on identity formation in Semarang batik was done by examining linked components within the construction process, i.e. identity search, from locality, through creativity, the form of identity by representing locality, and further development. This discussion was based on previous studies, with each component further elaborated as follows.

Identity search

Identity search is exploring ideas on something identical to collective self-identity which stands for their own uniqueness. In this case, exploration implies problem solving through reviewing the source of ideas, intense and total comprehension, and concepts to be used for

basic ideas of designs of Semarang batik patterns. Reviewing the source of ideas for Semarang batik patterns was held by the actors involved in Semarang batik, both from the government and society. Idea exploration through identity search began when Semarang batik activity was restarted after being inactive for many years (since Japanese colonialism). In 2006, when Semarang government revitalized activity in Semarang Batik Village—initiated by the Head of National Handcraft Council of Semarang City, Mrs. Shinto Sukawi—the issue of batik patterns became an early challenge for designers to explore ideas of patterns that could represent Semarang. Till that moment, Semarang had yet to have a certain batik pattern that represents locality and identity of Semarang. The spirit to create Semarang batik with its own distinct pattern became the main focus for both the government and people (especially batik designers). Consequently, it was proposed that the pattern of Semarang batik was to be inspired by “individuality identical to Semarang”. From that moment on, it became an effort to rebuild Semarang’s image through its batik. This was related to the political spirit in which regional image of Semarang City had to be built, including through batik by looking for a unique pattern that represents Semarang. The source of ideas for Semarang batik patterns are described in the enclosed matrix.

From locality

Locality refers to any form of local wisdom, such as the environment as a resource and an opportunity to produce cultural marks. Locality is also related to geopolitical, social, local cultural, economic, and aesthetic aspects. In the context of Semarang batik, the uniqueness of batik patterns was built from locality which represents local wisdom, thus the emergence of patterns of Semarang “icons”. The initial idea of creating batik patterns from Semarang locality by exploring the city’s icons began from the designers’ “confusion” about Semarang batik patterns since there has not been any set pattern. By displaying locality in the form of Semarang City icons, it showed the effort of trying to find a

specific pattern based on Semarang locality in order to build an identity. Based on the preceding review, there are a lot of idea sources that could be used as a base for Semarang batik patterns. These ideas are classified into three theme groups, i.e. firstly, nature which include Semarang's flora and fauna; secondly, physical environment such as certain buildings and historical sites of Semarang; and thirdly, social-cultural aspects such as (1) Semarang art, (2) Semarang culinary, (3) *wayang* (puppets) exploration, (4) Semarang legends, (5) name of places in Semarang, (6) Adaptation of classic patterns and batik patterns of other regions, and (7) Exploration of Semarang geometric patterns, and many others. The exploration of ideas on Semarang batik patterns come from both the government and people, especially Semarang batik designer communities who wish for a joint effort in finding an identity based on locality for Semarang batik pattern.

Through Creativity

Through art creativity, locality is explored in terms of innovation and production in order to become local cultural identity. In the context of Semarang batik, the creativity of designers is expressed by exploring and developing the value of Semarang locality that includes natural, physical, and social-cultural environment All are explored in terms of innovation and production of batik art. Through the production process by applying batik techniques using *canting tulis* (stroke), stamp, and *caplis* (a combination of stamp and stroke techniques), medium, and the procedure of making batik, there is a wide opportunity for designers to express their creativity in creating patterns. Creativity in designs is really dependent on the designer's skills. Based on the results of this study, the skills of designers are different with one another. To date, the patterns of Semarang batik continue to develop and increase in variety. Designers' effort in seeking interpretative ideas about Semarang batik patterns is seen by how they attempt to present the uniqueness of Semarang in patterns using Semarang icons to represent the locality of Semarang The icons has become options for the

designers to use as unique pattern ideas, and even up till now, they are still exploring possible patterns using those Semarang icons.

Forming Identity

Identity is formed from a series of (relative) symbols or signs, producing metaphors and concepts as representation of locality which shows identity. In the context of Semarang batik, representation of locality is built as batik patterns. Semarang batik patterns emerges as symbolic representation on Semarang locality. After exploring ideas and identity search from Semarang locality, designers use their creativity to form symbols or signs in the form of various unique patterns called Semarang-style batik. Batik patterns that are developed from locality include: (1) patterns from nature which result in flora and fauna patterns. For instance, "asem" which is a flora pattern, and "Blekok Sronol" which is a fauna pattern; both available in various designs; (2) patterns inspired from physical environments, producing patterns in the shape of distinct buildings in Semarang, such as "Lawang Sewu", "Sam Poo Kong", and "Tugu Muda" in various designs; (3) patterns based on social-cultural environments, namely art, culinary, legends, sites, adaptation of other regions' patterns, etc. For example, "Warak" and "Gambang Semarang" which is inspired by Semarang art; patterns based on Semarang culinary include "Bandeng Presto" and "Lumpia" in many designs. These patterns made up from Semarang identity show that Semarang locality of nature, physical environment, and social-cultural aspects can become ideas for batik pattern designs. Each designer creates their own versions and in various patterns, thus providing space to be creative in making patterns with a personal touch. Despite the different, personal styles, all these designs still present Semarang's identity. Examples of such patterns are available in the enclosed matrix.

To sum up, ideas of Semarang batik patterns by designers is schematically described in chart 1. This chart explains that Semarang locality includes nature, physical, social-cultural

environments which could all become possible ideas for Semarang batik patterns. This locality could become a concept and subject matter in creating Semarang batik designs. However, the

similar root of ideas encourage designers to create their own versions of batik patterns, thus creating diverse personal styles and visuals.

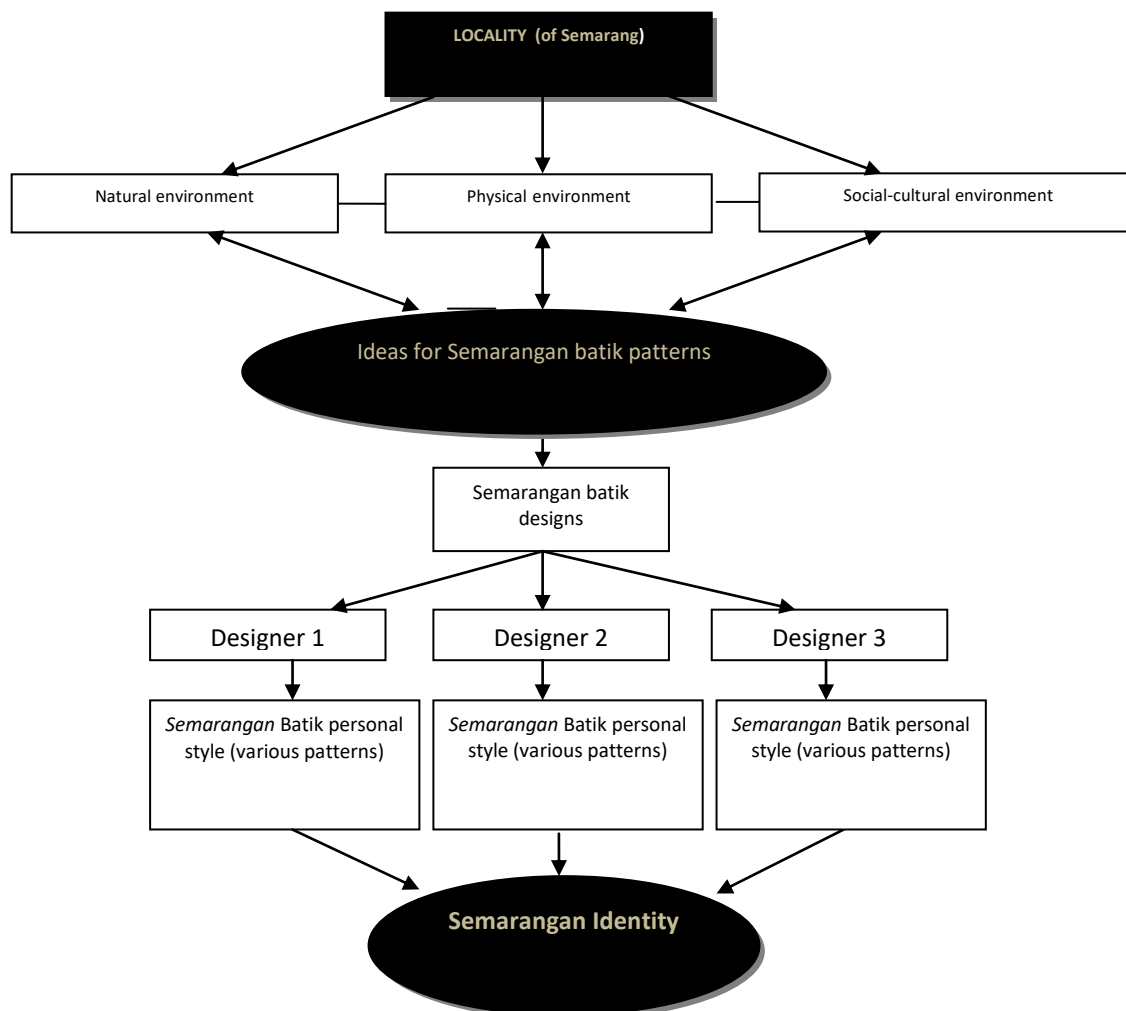


Figure 1. Ideas of *Semarang-style* batik patterns.

In terms of Semarang batik, development and sustainability of batik art affirmed Semarang's identity which has been made, as well as continuing processes in new cultural arts as a form of regeneration that occur in all aspects. Firstly, development is related to the involvement of many actors from society, government, and other institutions. Development programs cater human resources, productivity, and creativity in batik. Secondly, further enculturation, that is to educate within families, schools, and society on Semarang batik identity.

From all the steps in forming or constructing identity of Semarang batik as elaborated previously, a schematic model could be devised as seen in chart 2. In short, the chart described an identity construction pattern of Semarang batik which began from identity search by personal, institutional or community actors who explore ideas from locality together. Locality includes natural, physical, and social-cultural environments. Next, through creativity in batik art, the ideas are expressed as innovations and productions resulting in unique batik called *Semarang-style* batik. This uniqueness represents Semarang locality, thus forming

Semarang identity. This identity as it is continuously developed and preserved through presented in a cultural item, needs to be enculturation.

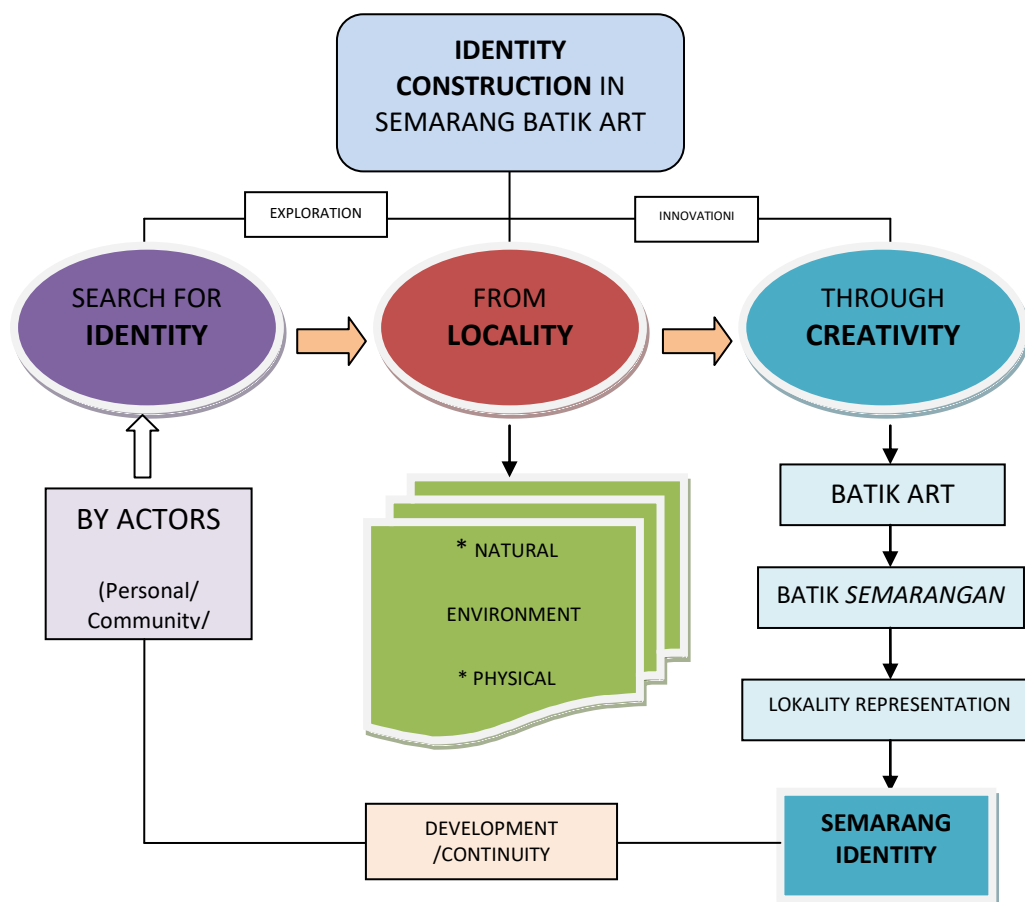













Figure 2. Local identity construction of Semarang batik art

Locality From Environment	Samples of Semarang-Style Icons (Source of Ideas of Batik Art)	Samples of Variations of Semarang-Style Batik Art	Description
Natural Environment <i>Asem</i> (tamarind) is one type of floral tree and has become the identity of Semarang City. According to “Semarang” history, it is a combination of two words, “asam” and “arang”. Even this asam tree has a symbolic meaning, to provide protection and comfort to all people in the community.	Flora  Asem (tamarind)		<i>Asem style by “Batik Balqis”</i> , with black as basic color, with the combination of white and red as patterns. This style has leaves, flowers, and fruits of <i>asem</i> (tamarind).
			<i>Asem style by “Batik Ngesti Pandowo”</i> , blue as the basic color, with the combination of white and orange, and green as patterns. This style has the flora of Semarang, consisting of fruit and

<p>Bangau or known as <i>Belekok</i> (Javanese word), is a type of fauna bird famous in Semarang City. Even it is considered to be identity ot icon of Semarang so it is later known as “Blekok Sronдол” which refers to the one place in Semarang where groups of these bird live and breed.</p>	<p>Fauna</p>  <p>Blekok</p>	 	<p>flower of of <i>asem</i> (tamarind)</p> <p><i>Blekok</i> style by “Batik Balqis”, black as the basic color, with the combination of white and orange as patterns. This style has the fauna of Semarang, consisting of <i>Bangau</i> bird dan <i>asem</i> leaves</p> <p><i>Blekok</i> style by “Batik Semarang 16”, brown as the basic color, with the combination of white and light purple as patterns. This style has the fauna of Semarang, consisting of <i>Bangau</i> bird dan plants</p>
<p>Physical Environment</p> <p>Lawang Sewu is one of the icons of a typical building in Semarang. This building was built during the Dutch Colonial government. It has a big structure, with unique European style, located in the centre of the city and becomes the identity of Semarnag City.</p>	<p>Old Building</p>  <p>Lawang sewu</p>	 	<p><i>Lawang Sewu</i> style by “Batik Semarang 16”, black as the basic color, with the combination of white and green as patterns. This style has Lawang Sewu building as typical building of Semarang, with cloud and plants.</p> <p><i>Lawang Sewu</i> style by “Batik Temawon”, blue as the basic color, with orange, white and combination of blue and red as patterns. This style has Lawang Sewu building of Semarang combined with <i>asem</i>.</p>
<p>Social Cultural Environment</p> <p><i>Warak</i> is one of typical and famous art in Semarang. The unique animal structure is attractive during the pre-fasting month of</p>	<p>Art</p>  <p>Warak</p>		<p><i>Warak</i> style by “Batik Figa”, brown as the basic color, with white and combination of red as patterns. This style has typical art of Semarang, consisting of Warak combined with plant stillation. tetumbuhan.</p>

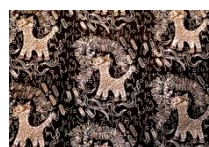
Ramadhan festival and has become the identity and icon of Semarang City.

Bandeng Presto, milk fish cooked in a high pressure pan, is one of very well known culinary in Semarang. This soft bone fish is typical as special souvenir and has become an identity and icon of Semarang City.

Culinary



Bandeng Presto



Warak style by “Balqis”, brown as the basic color, with white and combination of cream. This style has typical art of Semarang, consisting of Warak combined with Asem.



Bandeng Presto style by “Batik Ngesti Pandowo”, blue as the basic color, with white and combination of yellow, red and black. This style has culinary of Semarang, consisting of Bandeng combined with flower.



Bandeng Presto style by “Batik Semarang 16”, blue as the basic color, with white. This style has culinary of Semarang, consisting of Bandeng in a geometrical form.

Figure 3. Samples of Semarang-style Batik developed from Semarang Locality

CONCLUSIONS

The identity construction in Semarang batik takes place in a pattern that begins with searching for identity by related actors, both by individual person or communities and institutions, i.e. collectively exploring ideas and locality in Semarang. Locality includes natural, physical, and social cultural environment. Then, through creativity in batik art, the ideas are realised into innovation and production to obtain typical batik, that is *Semarang-style batik*. This typical characteristic represents Semarang locality that could demonstrate the identity of Semarang batik. This identity as a cultural product continue to develop by an enculturation process or socialized through education in the family, school, or society.

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