

# Exploring the Philosophical Values of Rifa'iyah Batik Form with 'Pelo Ati' Theme

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## Abstract

"Batik Rifa'iyah" is a fine art product that can be categorized as a rare batik. This kind of batik is produced by batik craftsman communities which is located in Kalipucang Village, Batang, Central Java. Ahmad Rifai (1786-1870) is a figure who had an important role in Islamic propagations to enhance knowledge, aqeedah, character and moral life in Kalipucang society. One of Rifai's propagations was "inserted" through batik visualization, and because of his strong influence also, Rifai's name was taken as the name of a batik, namely: 'Batik Rifa'iyah'. To find the meaning in a batik work, the research focused only into the batik's form concerning to its colors, shapes and patterns. To facilitate the initial search, it was done by inventorying the quantity of forms that always appear in several types of rifa'iah batiks, which a number were approximately 30 themes. "Pelo Ati" was one of the batik titles chosen for the study of aesthetic principles and artistic methods. It was considered as one of batiks which has a philosophical value that the source came from Tasawwuf/Sufism teachings of Ahmad Rifa'i. To know further about Ahmad rifai teachings, it was done by studying the books written by him, namely *Tarajumah* and *Riayatul Himmat*. The form of batik 'Pelo Ati' from its colors and the visual object sides shown that it was very special and different from other batiks in the North coast of Java Island.

## INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

Batik-making tradition in Java Island has lasted long enough that can be traced since the Hindu-Buddhist era, before Islam entered Java. Batik-making tradition is hereditary inherited with a 'special pattern' and delivered in the family environment from parents to their children or in a surrounding community for those who want to learn the batik-making process.

### Background

Nowadays, batik as one of the cultural forms and arts of Indonesian archipelago has become the prima donna of researchers. "Batik Rifaiyah" from Batang is one of research objects that always attracts researchers from local to abroad for the benefit of study such as theses of Bachelor (s1), Master (s2) and Doctoral (s3) degree or other benefits such as books, articles, journals or even short films. The content of those research generally talked about the tracing of batik history until the aspects of batik-making delivered in the form of general research or workshops. However, a deeper research about Rifaiyah batik from philosophical sides through the approaches of fine art science has not been done yet. This situation becomes an important domain that has not been touched by other researchers. Therefore it gives a strong impetus to find the formula of philosophical values in Rifaiyah batik besides the awareness to preserve the culture and art of Indonesia.

### Literature Review

In the writings of Ahmad Syadzirin Amin (1997: 120) Shaykh Ahmad Rifai composed 500 *Tanbih*, 700 *Nadzam*, prayers and the answers, and 65 titles of ahlu sunnah's books, he wrote

those works in 1275 Hijriyah/1837 A.D. The writings became the main reference of this research to reveal the meaning in Rifa'iyah batik's form. The book that was used is "Tarajumah", which is a book in the form of translations from several books that Rifai acquired when he conducted a study in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Another book was "Riayatul Himmat". It was the source of inspiration for Rifa'iyah Batik (Pelo Ati) form, the book contains the science of *Ushuluddin*, Jurisprudence and Tasawwuf/Sufism in the form of poetry and has 26 *koras* or 496 pages. Books of Ahmad Rifai were deliberately made in Arabic pegon letters. Arabic pegon letters are Arabic letters that are modified to write the Javanese language which were aimed to facilitate the transfer of knowledge (teachings of Islam) to the local community at that time.

Because the source of inspiration of "Pelo Ati" batik was the teachings of Tasawwuf/ Sufism therefore Islamic aesthetics book "*Islamic Art and Spirituality*" by a Muslim thinker Seyyed Hossein Nasr was considered to be able to dismantle the philosophical meaning behind "Pelo Ati" batik. Another literature that addresses the meaning of spirituality was Henry Corbin writing entitled: *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*. This Sufistic study was needed in connection with Batik "Pelo Ati" as an art nuanced by Sufism.

### **Methodology**

In series of field research, several information were obtained from several informants, The first informan was Miftahutin, as a senior craftsman, who understands about the ins and outs of rifa'iyah batik- making as well as the teaching method that has a unique pattern and it is very traditional. The second informant was, K.H Al Nahri as a public figure in Batang who had given much information through "Riayatul Himmat", a book which was directly related to 'Pelo Ati' batik. Because books of Ahmad Rifai were written in Arabic *pegon*, to facilitate those books translation, the research was done by a master degree student of Philology from Universitas Indonesia who is also our research member. The other general method such as taking pictures or documenting was carried out to reinforce the data and the required findings.

Furthermore, the method through the fine art science was began by describing elements or the elements of art on colors, shapes and patterns in "Pelo Ati" batik, to be analyzed and interpreted based on the information contained in *Tarajumah* book especially in *Riayatul Himmat*. The next step was to build a new discourse as research findings that provide benefits to enhance the knowledge in the field of fine art (batik). Philosophy of Art, in particular the aesthetic of Islam, Semiotics and Hermeneutics, are sciences that were used to reveal and interpret the signs in "Pelo Ati" batik until the meaning behind the batik was found.

### **Result and Discussion**

According to Alfred Louise Kroeber (1952: 118-135), culture is a realization of the thought that exist in many people. Meanwhile, according to Leslie A. White (1973: 337), culture is an integrated system in the form of technological systems, social systems and ideological systems. One form of cultural expressions in the North coast of Central Java is "Batik Pesisiran" and the quite famous among those batiks is Rifa'iyah batik. 'Pelo Ati' is one of many Rifa'iyah batiks'; the shape that appears on the batik contains a system of ideology which includes ideas, beliefs, technical knowledge and so forth.

According to Mihtahutin, the informant, the teaching patterns about batik-making and Rifai's teaching were given since childhood, began with the introduction of various materials and batik tools which were tested into small-sized fabrics. Meanwhile, the teaching of Rifai was

taught in the form of a song that was sung at the time of batik-making. It was an effective method to maintain the tradition of batik as well as to remember/memorize the book of Ahmad Rifai. The mission to teach a religion which one of them was done through batik-making was urged by Ahmad Rifai's concern with the situation in Batang society at that time, in which education became a rare item and it was not easily to be obtained by the society of Kalisalak, in Batang. However, Ahmad Rifai's religious movement at that time was assumed to be an action against the Dutch government therefore some of his books were confiscated and Rifai was put into a prison. Lastly he was exiled to Ambon and then he was transferred to Tondano, a village in North Sulawesi, until his death. However, this condition did not dampen the spirit of his disciples and society of Kalisalak, in Batang at that time. The tradition of Rifaiyah batik-making and practice of Rifai's teachings still continues until today.

According to Seyyed Housein Nasr (P.254) works of art tradition have a source of knowledge that is derived from the deepest interiority of man (esotericism), where kindness itself is the expression of beauty. Nasr associates the art with sacred knowledge or *scientia sacra*, so his own art form is called *the sacred art* to distinguish it from other arts. *The sacred art* has a perennial character as a relic of past tradition containing the noble messages of the values contained in a religion.

The main finding to be achieved was philosophical values of Rifaiyah batik (Pelo Ati) which were traced through the approach of philosophy of art (aesthetics). The stage itself was begun with:

a. Description and analysis

This stage parsed the elements of art/visual elements as well as to find the principle of design or aesthetics used in the creation of batik 'Pelo Ati' which in its form consisted of a field combination that was lined up with diagonal directions. At one end of the fabrics there was a rectangular field (plank) splitting perpendicular to the length of the fabric of the batik resulting in asymmetrical composition, as a result from the juxtaposition of the shape and size. One side as the body of batik is the main form of the batik, while the other side with the *tumpal* shape (isosceles triangle was arranged lined up/in series) is called the head of batik. That composition is a typical form of the batik and it was deliberately made like that because it is related to the focus of the display when the batik is worn. The combination of magenta, white and turquoise green or are commonly called as *bang-bangan* (reddish) dominated the entire color of *Pelo Ati* batik. Brown, blue, black and beige colors became complementary colors that also adorned the batik. Overall Batik 'Pelo Ati' in its depiction is not a naturalistic mimesis visual, or something that is very similar to the forms in nature. To decorate all parts of the batik, the form of distilled ornaments from the flora such as foliage and flowers was made. Meanwhile the form of fauna (a fowl) which was also abstracted was found as the main focus.

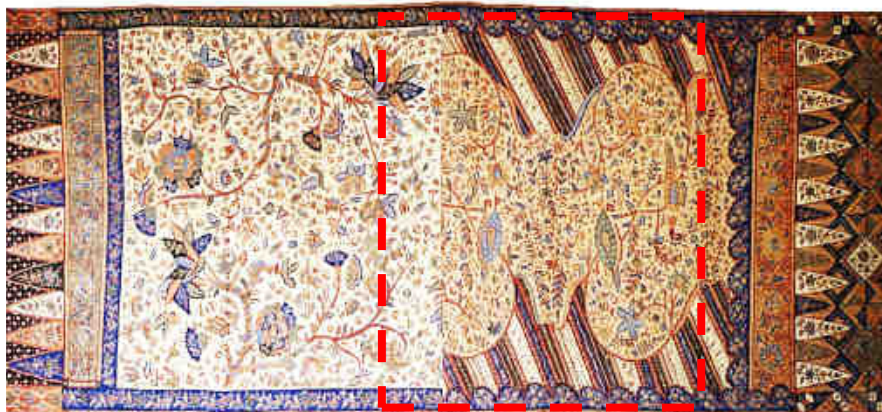


Figure 1: Batik 'pelo ati' as batik 'early-morning' while study focus on the line halting

#### b. Spirituality of “*Pelo Ati*” art

The meaning of the word *Pelo Ati* was obtained from the interview with Haji Ali Nahri, a religious figure who is quite familiar with Ahmad Rifai's teachings, said that *Pelo* (Javanese language) is the same as *ampela* or a gizzard while *ati* (Javanese language) is a liver. *Pelo* or a gizzard in a fowl is a place where the dirt is while *ati* or a liver is a place where something is clean or good. Both of these organs in a fowl are just symbols of good and bad in human nature. Two determinants of human behaviors that must always be recognized and realized that both are need to be controlled.

'Pelo Ati' batik as one of the many Rifa'iyah batiks is the only batik that has a strong spiritual characteristic that is different from other batik. In the gizzard and liver drawing, the liver was kept in the body of an animal body which forms as a fowl with its crested, legged and tailed characteristics like a bird or a chicken. However, the description of the fowl had undergone abstraction and simplification that was away from the original form. This was made in such a way because the hadith forbids the description of animate beings.

The spiritual meaning itself according to Sayyid Housein Nasr (1993), which is called *ruhaniyyah* (mysticism) in Arabic and *maknawiya* (the essential) in Persian, has an opposite meaning with the word 'visible'. This means that spirituality is something that goes inward, not outward or it means a 'movement' or 'journey' to the inner which is not a material. The same definition was also found in the writings of Henry Corbin (2002: 4): Spirituality is related to the deepest and the most secretive soul life. Thus if the spirituality in *Pelo Ati* batik means an art that has a character directing to cases inside the body, therefore something hidden behind visible things becomes a part of the virtue (a truth). Anatomically *pelo* (gizzard) and *ati* (liver) are organs that exist in the body of a fowl, but the meaning it is not just about that. "Pelo and Ati" in batik is actually a symbolic manifestation of something that is not just a lump of meat, but it says about an inner entity of every human being.

The depiction of those two appeared on a full form in the shape of leaf which was divided into two halves. Both forms were filled with white spots, which symbolize how the inner things are filled whether it is related to the good thing or the bad thing. In addition, the source of *pelo* and *ati* visual inspiration in the book *Tarajumah*, Rifai especially in *Riayaatul Himmat* book which contains the teachings of Tawheed, fiqh and Tasawwuf/Sufism, specifically about Rifai Tasawwuf/Sufism, Ahmad Syazirin Amin (1996: 207) said that his Tasawwuf/Sufism has a feature of an ethic rather than a mystic. His teaching always invites to make a reformation to behaviors, ethics and morals through the heart as the main source of human



behavior because the heart is the inner space that has life values and supports (spirituality). In the book (Tarajumah p. 8) it was said that: Sufism/Tasawwuf that had been delivered was actually a command to fix the heart.

Talking about life that is inward (inner life) is assumed to be something that is mysterious. *Sufism* as a term better known in the West rather than *Tasawwuf*, also resembles mysticism in Christianity, and the word *mystical* itself according to Schimmel was derived from the Greek *myein* which means “to close the eyes” in order to see the mysterious life in the inner life. Thus *Tasawwuf/Sufism* is the study of how to understand a life inside a human conscience, knowing his/her-self to find the essence of human existence in order to know his/her God (*al-bidāyat*). It is in line with the sayings in a hadith, *Man 'Arafa Nafsahu Faqad' Arafa Rabbahu*. Referring to the sense in *Kadisyah Tareqaat*, the sentence can be found in the book of *Misbah Shari'ah* from the great-grandson of Muhammad (pbuh), Ja'far as-Shadiq. Muhammad (pbuh) conveyed these great words to the companions of Ali (R.A.) *Nafs* as a mental entity that is known and interpreted as a soul that is aware of its *nafs* then it will become wise to his/her Rabb (God).

Therefore the mission of *Pelo Ati* was an invitation to know your self (awareness). *Pelo Ati* was interpreted as a soul (*nafs*) that is always tempted or influenced by a lust (a power derived from the body), which gives effect to the *nafs*. So the *nafs* has a hierarchy starting from good to bad position in accordance with its quality. *Nafs ammarah bi'su* is the *nafs* which is ruled by the lust. *Nafs Lawwamah* is a *nafs* influenced by the lust whereas the *nafs muthma'innah* is a *nafs* that free from the lust, even the lust has been obedient to the *nafs*. Here is an excerpt from the book of *Tarajumah* (p.361) on matters related to the heart.



Figure 2:  
'pelo & ati'

Cleanse the hearts dirtiness and establish intention in your heart only for Allah, so you may get the benefits in the afterlife. Half of the praiseworthy based on shari'ah and the disgraceful behaviors that cause the sins of the heart as the elaboration of a commendable character because it is useful to (run) the Shari'ah. There are eight characters: *Zuhud*, *Qana'ah*, *Patient*, *Tawakkul*, *Mujahadah*, *Ridha*, *Gratitude*, *Sincerity*. Whereas the description of disgraceful behaviors *Hubbud dunya*, *tomang itbangul hawa*, those will cause misery.

In addition to lust there are also a lot of lusts in the form of various desires without control that can cause a bad attitude, disgrace and bad behavior such as: angry, arrogant, self-proud, lazy, revenge, despair and so forth. In the book of *Tarajumah*, the duty to war

against a lust was found in on pages 374 - 376, which is in line with (Surah Al-Qasas: 50): “And who is more astray than one who follows his/her desire”

To achieve an independent soul (*nafs muthma'innah*), it can be gained by disciplining the soul which begins with the repentance and purification of the evil and disgraceful traits known as emptying the soul (*takhalli*), to be filled with good qualities (*tahalli*), so the heart will be opened to receive the light of truth from Allah (*tajalli*). For those who have experienced enlightenment are called *ma'rifah*, a close relationship/familiar with God. The requirement of proximity to God must be redeemed through repentance that is in line with the concept of Islam itself that is "self-surrendered".

Nothing else to be followed except the commands of Allah (swt), erasing all desires within oneself to be able to live in God sole *Ridha* and solemn will or it is called *al-ittihād* or *al-fanā wa al-baqā*. The path refer to Quran in An-nisa: 66 “Kill yourselves” and “Leave your village”. Associated with that Islamic concept, therefore in the description in "Pelo Ati" batik, the fowl body was cut/beheaded so that between the body and the head was drawn separately. Even in other parts, the body of the fowl was portrayed without a head at all and the fragment of the head was laid apart each other.

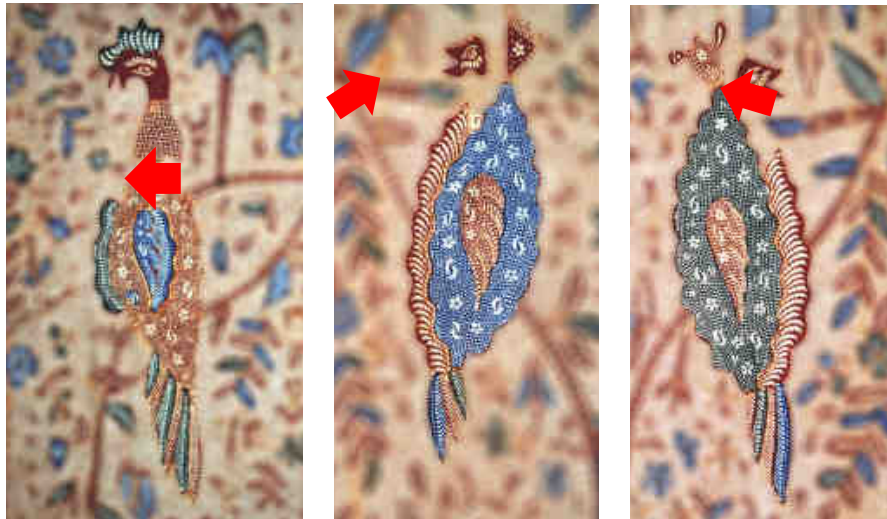


Figure 2 : Poultry motif with beheading the neck on batik 'pelo ati

That beheading was a symbol of a basic concept of “surrendered” doctrine. Cutting/beheading the neck was a 'self-dead' invitation or the same as turning off all desires other than living on God. In the teachings of Sufism it is called “*learning to die before dying*”, a moral action (*adab*) to replace all human behaviors with God’s behaviors and names. This is the way for the soul to get near-close-to-its-God's position.

### Conclusion

Tracing through art artifacts is one way to discover the treasures of knowledge, one of which is through the search of the language of form. Batik as a work of fine art will become the way to study in research to find the knowledge contained in the artifact. The meaning behind the batik form can be related to the important issues such as preaching (*daqwah*). The truth that comes from a religion (Islam), and it is packaged in an artistic expression based on the reference from a religion, local wisdom and so forth. Therefore, batik as a cultural product is the whole system of ideas, actions and human works that become a part of life in understanding the universe. All were reflected in 'Pelo Ati' Batik as one of Indonesian traditional artworks which are full of high symbolic values on behaviors, ethics, morals (*akhlaq*) and *adab* teachings. The source of the ideas was born from Ahmad Rifa'i ethical Tasawwuf teachings, so that the 'Pelo Ati' batik becomes a model of the transformation of religious knowledge (religion propagation) through a typical characteristic of art, which enriches and complements the previous studies so it gives an insight from other sides which are mutually reinforcing.

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