

Entrepreneur 'Mbok Mase' in The History of Batik Industry in Laweyan Surakarta

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Abstract—Javanese women have a quite interesting to be studied, both in the past and the present. One of them was Mbok Mase who worked as a batik trader put women in ordinate position and controlled almost all the joints of life in the village. This phenomenon is very interesting because it was outside the tradition of the feudal society at that time which leads to these questions; What was the motivation of Mbok Mase in Laweyan to break the patriarchy and the culture of the colonial society in the 18th century? and How Mbok Mase contributed the history of *Laweyan Batik Entrepreneurship*? This research used the qualitative method with a case study approach to reveal the problems related to one particular entity, taking into account the specific context of the existence of the entity. This study revealed that the resilience of Mbok Mase was to elevate women status not only as marginalized and subordinate human beings. Her motivation to do hard work, be thrifty and focus on work was due to intense feud with the nobles. In fact, the decision to be against the nobility of the palace made Mbok Mase successful in work. She became richer than the nobles. Mbok Mase's contribution to the history of entrepreneurs was seen as the control of the production of batik from upstream to downstream up to distribution and finance. The doctrine of marginalized women, as a means of man's pleasure and a '*kanca wingking*' that almost happened to most Javanese women, was finally broken.

Keywords—*female entrepreneur, Mbok Mase, batik, Laweyan*

I. INTRODUCTION

Javanese women of the past lacked a significant role and were only exposed by the public after Kartini's work to fight for equality with men in various fields. According to Carey and Vincent [1], Kartini complained that women at that time were only objects of male pleasure and as if they did not have their own thoughts, opinions and feelings. She described women as '*golek*' puppets, inanimate that were not treated as human beings [1].

Women as marginal beings, a means of pleasure for men or those who had domestic life (*kanca wingking*) [2] as Kartini complained were not seen in Laweyan female batik merchants or often called as Mbok Mase in the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th century. They even put themselves as ordinates and not subordinates. Men were only 'second class people' and almost had a formality in earning a living.

This out-of-the-ordinary phenomenon is very interesting to investigate. It also raises questions, such as what was the motivation of Mbok Mase in Laweyan to break the patriarchy and culture of the colonial society in the 18th century? And how Mbok Mase contributed the entrepreneur history of Laweyan Batik industry?

II. METHOD

The research conducted in Laweyan Surakarta, regarding the entrepreneurship of Mbok Mase was a qualitative. It did not use statistical or quantification procedures in analyzing the data [3]. This qualitative study was conducted in order to understand the natural phenomenon happened in the observed area where Mbok Mase lived. This case study relied on historical documents about batik industry in Laweyan as the primary data supported with the information and opinions obtained from the interview with some informants in Laweyan. All data and information were analyzed reconstructed to understand Mbok Mase motivation to fight the equality between women and men both in domestic and public sphere; and how she contributed the history of batik Industry entrepreneur in Laweyan.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This research found significant roles out of the tradition of Javanese society in general. The first referred the female role as an ordinate, 'against patriarchy'[4] and placed men in the subordinate position or the second class people in earning money in the family. The second placed women as big merchants, a profession that was very rare in Javanese society, where agriculture and royal bureaucrats were dominating positions.

The role of women in the batik business in Laweyan looked very dominating, even Soedarmono mentioned that the role of women as batik merchants as "Mbok Mase" reached 75% and the rest was "*Mas Nganten*," or the husband of a woman entrepreneur of Laweyan batik [5]. The success of batik in Laweyan was extraordinary, around 1930 was recorded by the researcher De Kat Angelino that a large batik company in Laweyan could produce 60,400 pieces of batik per year with a net income of more than 60,000 Gulden, this was far from the income of a *priyayi* or nobility.

Moeljanto stated, by mastering the batik business, Mbok Mase had a strong bargaining position when dealing with men. The Mbok Mase group also acted against the *priyayi* of the palace at that time. Although the first Islamic Mataram king came from this village, the Mbok Mase group acted in opposition to the nobility who liked going on a spending spree, was snobby and also polygamous. Meanwhile, merchant women work hard to achieve maximum results and competed with any material owned by the aristocratic palace [4].

Batik has been determined by UNESCO on October 2, 2009, as "masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity" [6]. This cultural heritage was formed because batik itself in the history of batik in Indonesia was allegedly related to the development of the Majapahit kingdom and the kingdom afterward [7]. Haryono argued that batik was a cultural work of Indonesian people, this was because long before Indonesian culture came into contact with Indian culture, batik had become Indonesia's cultural wealth in the past [8].

Laweyan, or often also called as Lawiyan, is the name of a village that is full of history. This area is historically a civil land (tax-free land), the gift of Sultan Hadiwijaya at that time as Raja Pajang to Ki Ageng Henis, as a reward for his services in defeating the enemy of the Kingdom of Pajang, namely Arya Penangsang (Adipati Jipang Panolan). Ki Ageng Henis is the son of Ki Ageng Selo, a descendant of Prabu Brawijaya V (King of Majapahit). Locals considered Ki Ageng Henis as someone who had special abilities in terms of magic (*linuwih*), so that the place of residence of the magician is called Lawiyan [9].

Ki Ageng Henis was an important figure in introducing batik outside the walls of the Pajang palace. Batik was usually used for royal rituals and only produced by the princes or princesses and *abdi dalem* (courtiers). Because of the increasing need, and since the palace could not handle it properly, he asked permission to introduce the production of batik to the *santri* or students of traditional Islamic schools (*pesantren*) and Laweyan people who were his students [10].

Mbok Mase was a respectable title for the merchant, who was a woman and an agent of family batik business. Why was the woman controlled it all? It was because the nature of the batik industry required carefulness, subtlety, and beauty that was very suitable to the nature of women. Gradually, not only in the field of batik processes that they controlled but they were skilled in managing the business, from the process of batik, marketing, managing finances to developing a business.

Baidi states that Laweyan grew up in the midst of royal bureaucrats and ordinary people. Sociologically, Laweyan community can be categorized as an *enclave society* because the existence of the community was very different from the larger communities around it. The Laweyan community had a closed social interaction to maintain their existence, which depended on themselves [11]. The Laweyan families were usually a big family whose economic power was controlled by the mothers who acted as *Mbok Mase Sepuh* [6]. The granddaughter, called 'Mas Rara', was also introduced to a family management and being prepared as the successor of the business. Even so, '*Mas Nganten*', as the head of the family or husband still existed even

though he actually only held a symbolic role for the moral guardian of the female merchants. Unlike those who still had a role, boys who were called '*Mas Bagus*' seemed to be very spoiled because they were not given a strategic role because they were considered inappropriate to get a job managing a batik factory.

According to Himawan and Prabowo in the Laweyan Mbok Mase society [12], the woman position was equal or even said to be higher than the courtiers of the palace, and a level higher than men, even though all actions required the husband approval. The social status below was a large group of workers in batik companies classified in accordance with their work expertise. Stampers occupied the top level and received preferential treatment from employers, therefore, often their status increased to medium or large entrepreneurs. Below this social status was for porters, dye collectors, batik workers, and employer's household servants. They were classified as core laborers. There were more statuses below them, such as some types of porters (*kuli mberet*, *kuli kerok*, *kuli kemplong*) who were permanent workers. While, the lowest status was a daily laborer, a roughneck as a housemaid [11].

According to researcher Soedarmono, women in Laweyan area were accustomed to working hard since they were young, frugal and painstaking [5]. In Javanese terms, "*Gemi*, *Nastiti*, and *Ngati-ngati*" or said Laweyan women can always manage finances rigorously, thoroughly and very carefully. All of that for grand design improved the economic condition of the marginal people in order to become rich merchants to improve their social status in the society. With this work ethic, they slowly mastered the village economy of Laweyan [5].

If there were strong motivations that underlay women in Laweyan to become distinguished, exclusive and breaker of patriarchy and culture of the colonial society in the 18th century. Why they played as opposition against the royal nobility of the feudal era at that time, while the nobility or *priyayi* had a very strong position of social status, feared, respected and always had their wishes fulfilled? The answer to this is in the following points:

- a. The desire of Mbok Mase in terms of gender equality was to have a strong bargaining position. The husbands were free to do anything outside the batik business, as long as they did not do things that were often done by the nobility, like going on a spending spree, being snobby and polygamous [10]. This attitude was taken as a smart attempt by Mbok Mase in order to avoid the oppression of men.
- b. There was a rejection of the categorization of Javanese society during feudalism, in which the profession of being a trader was underestimated. Recognized categorizations were the nobility (royal descendants) and *priyayi* (aristocracy, or royal clerks) who had a respectable place compared to the commoner caste containing farmers, laborers, and traders. The name "trade union" was deemed not honorable, even though at that time the economy in Laweyan region had been moving forward towards the direction of success.

- c. The competition between nobles and Laweyan's merchants eventually made them hate each other. Especially when there were gossips from the kingdom that position genealogical descent of Laweyan people as 'smell of Laweyan' genes, this designation was considered sarcastic to bring down the moral-economy of Laweyan people. The meaning of 'smell of Laweyan' in the tradition of Javanese genealogy was the descendants of female merchants who had the magical equipment, where men who married them, we're sure to die as ' sacrifices (tools to become rich) to encourage the achievement of excessive wealth. Whereas Mbok Mase worked hard 17 hours a day for recognition of prestige when they began to reveal success, in the form of abundant wealth.
- d. Different lifestyles between Laweyan merchants and nobility became a sharp conflict between the two. Laweyan merchants were seen as reflecting a practical lifestyle in the world of industrial economics, selfish and tended to show off wealth and this was considered inappropriate to live with socially feudal society. Meanwhile, the average life of nobility showed an established and set lifestyles reflecting the feudal economic system. Mbok Mase was considered showing off their wealth when they built a big house surrounded by high walls, or when they had luxurious jewelry, a lot of horses or even a European car.

The activities of Laweyan's women work before becoming a big merchant did dominate, especially in determining the economic barometer of Laweyan's clothing market. It was proven that the *gedhong* weaving industry in Pedan village, up to the range of Laweyan trade, as well as products outside the area were all dominated by women.

Laweyan's women also controlled in terms of *mori* cloth products or white plain cloth, as the basic ingredients of batik, until the processing of 'kendhal' or turning beef fat into the batik clay. Therefore, the role of women in the Laweyan batik industry was very dominating; it was feasible for them to be called as strong female entrepreneurs.

Klewer clothing market, one of the most famous ones in Solo, was one of the services of the women's gender equality struggle from Mbok Mase Laweyan and the wives of the village servants who eventually were oriented towards the batik trading business. They demanded the right of the clothing market to be born, even though they only gained market access, around the 1930s, at the former official residence of the servant of the palace of Secoyudho, the Chinese leader in the Kasunanan Kingdom.

The emergence of batik merchants in Laweyan had a significant impact on Laweyan's village, not only in the economic field but also in politics. Before independence, Laweyan's village played a very important role in the struggle for Indonesian independence. In Laweyan, in 1911, a political organization called *Sarekat Dagang Islam* (SDI) or Islamists Trade Union was established by KH. Samanहुdi. In the economic field, the batik entrepreneurs (Mbok Mase) in

Laweyan also pioneered the cooperative movement by establishing *Persatoean Peroesahaan Batik Boemiputra Soerakarta* (PPBBS) or the union of Surakarta Indigenous batik company in 1935 [13].

IV. CONCLUSION

Mbok Mase as a Javanese woman has obtained what the Javanese aspire to about position after they had grown up as powerful independent women who are frugal and careful (*gemi, nasiti, ngati-ati*) in running their business. Laweyan female merchants managed to break the feudal customs of the past, from subordinate women, became the center of the hierarchy and had a strong bargaining position against men. Their wealth exceeded that of the nobility, made their social status rise, even though it did not want to buy the status of nobility. For several decades the feud between Mbok Mase and the nobility increasingly narrowed. They positioned themselves as opposition parties against nobility who were considered to like going on a spending spree, snobby and also polygamous. Contradictions with the nobility made Mbok Mase work harder to show that their wealth was not due to family inheritance, but the hard effort in controlling the batik business from top to bottom as well as distribution of goods to financial arrangements. Finally, the role of Mbok Mase in the history of the batik industry in Laweyan has proven already, when they intensively since the late 18th and early 20th centuries as a pioneer in marketing the batik industry professionally, until contributing to the formation of the first clothing market in Indonesia, Klewer Market.

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