

# DERMAYU BATIKS A SURVIVING ART IN AN ANCIENT TRADING TOWN

by Paramita Rahayu ABDURACHMAN

## INTRODUCTION

In the eastern corner of West Java, where the Cimanuk River pushes its way into the Java Sea, leaving its sediment to form an estuary in the course of time, a river-harbour village called Dermayu came into existence. It was to play a small but recognizable role in the trade of textiles and other merchandise. Its location near the sea and on the river made it important for both the coastal and inland trade. It thus served as an entrepot for the goods that were carried by vessels upstream or by bullock-carts and other means of conveyance into the interior. The road led southwards via other small villages, clustered near the harbour, on the West side of the river. They had come into existence in the same period as the harbour-village, at the end of the 14th century. The area was part of the realm of the Hindu kingdom of Sunda, of which the boundaries at that time were the Ci Pamali in the East, near Brebes and Sunda Strait in the West.

The Cimanuk River and some villages in that neighbourhood were first mentioned in the narration of Bujangga Manik, a monk who in the 14th century traversed the island of Java from West to East on two consecutive trips (Noorduyn 1982).

A more detailed description of the port that was located on the Cimanuk is given by the Portuguese author, Tome Pires, who accompanied the first Portuguese fleet in its search of the Spice islands in 1511. His findings have become the famous "Summa Oriental".

It seemed that the villages were founded and settled by people who had come from different parts of the kingdom and even of the world. Most of the latter group

were traders like "Parsees, Arabs, Gujaratees, Malays and other nationalities, there being many Moors among them" In another part of the book, Pires says that:

*"The port of Chi Manuk is the sixth port. This is not a port in which junks can anchor, but only at the harbour bar, so they say; others say "yes". Many Moors live here. The captain is a heathen. It belongs to the king of Sunda.*

*The end of the kingdom is here. Chi Manuk has good trade. Java also trades with it. It has a good large town".*

It is obvious that a number of political and social changes had taken place between the end of the 14th century and 1512. The kingdom of Sunda was still an important force, having a number of important harbours. However, it had lost part of its realm, so that the Cimanuk had become its eastern border.

This may have been caused by the rise of Cerbon as an independent force which was consolidating itself as a sultanate. Cerbon was the "sixth port" on the north Java coast mentioned by Pires. It had its own harbour-master called "captain" while in local narrations he is called "lurah". Another term applied to a harbour official was "shahbandar" indicating influence from the Middle East. By this time Islam had come to these parts. Muslim traders and religious men had been active in that area, and had settled there since the 14th century.

Until then the name of the port (Dermayu) was never mentioned. It appears for the first time on Portuguese maps of the 16th century. According to local legends the name "Dermayu" was taken from the name of the wife of the harbour-master. She was called "Darma Ayu" and excelled not only in physical beauty but also in possessing a compassionate personality and was revered by the local people. It is in fact this name Dermayu, that is still used until the present by the local people to designate the oldest part of the area of the town. Together with Dermayu, other old villages are part of the original area;

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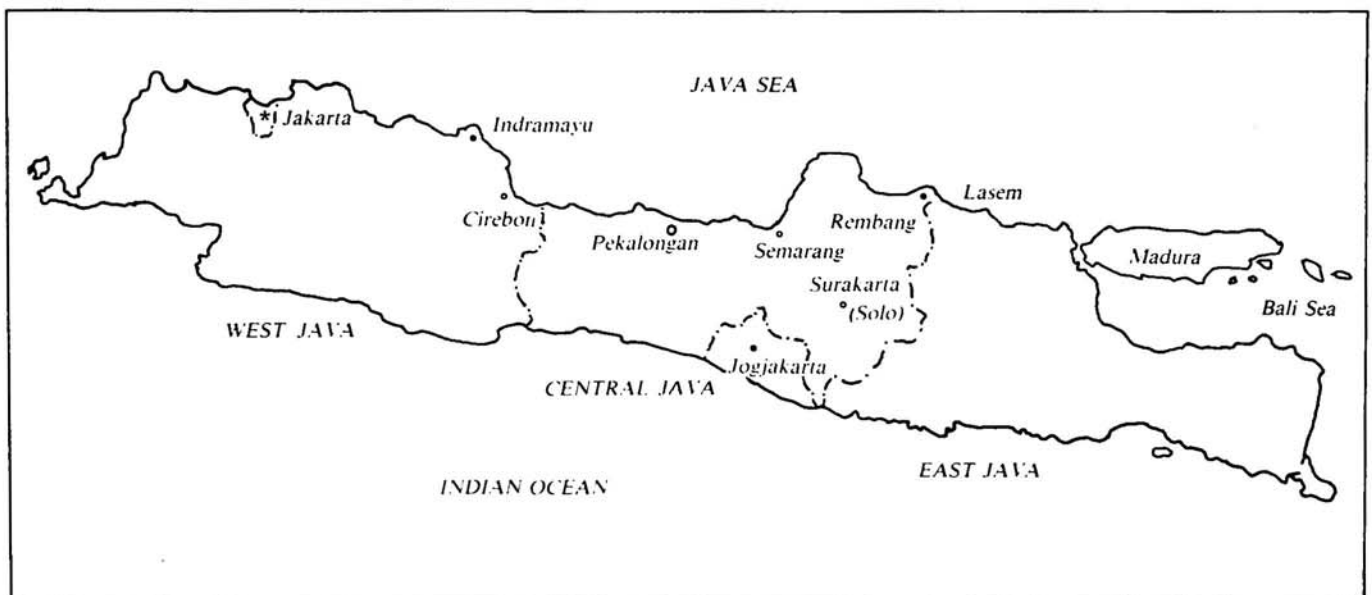
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they are linked by family, trading and religious ties. These are the villages of Panganjang and Pauman, north of Dermayu, Sindang and Babakan south of it. They are all situated on the west bank of the river. On the eastern bank, still being part of the old Dermayu area, other communities sprang up. They were Chinese, Javanese and other people who may have arrived at a later date, possibly in the 15th and 16th centuries. They occupied the lands that had been formed by the sedimentation of the river and had become firm land. This was a connecting point which linked the harbour via the east coast with the new harbour villages that had come into existence on the road to present-day Cerbon, namely Singapura, Gunung Sembung and Muara Jati. From these points the settlers had moved southwards to establish a new capital of a Muslim kingdom, named Cerbon. This again was linked westwards by a road that led through Plered, Plumbon and Palimanan and met with the road from Dermayu southwards through Jatibarang. From the junction of these roads, one road led westwards through the mountains to Sumedang, another led southwards, along the eastern slopes of Mount Ceremay and again cutting through mountainous area to Galuh. Both Sumedang and Galuh were principalities, centres of political and cultural power, but still forming part of the kingdom of Sunda. But the triangle formed by Dermayu - Palimanan - Plered (and later Cerbon) was the original area of religious and cultural life of the northeastern part of West Java. Here the arts flourished and they exerted influence on the trends that Dermayu and Cerbon culture should take.

Although Cerbon used her claim of descendancy from the Hindu Kingdom of Sunda, she never succeeded in gaining political domination over Dermayu. Cultural and

social relations between Cerbon and Dermayu thrived and strengthened, but Dermayu retained her independent status. Times were changing rapidly with the rise in power of the Dutch East India Co. in the 17th century. After having established a fortress at the seat of the former harbour of Kalapa and renaming it Batavia, the Dutch East India Co. set out on a policy of establishing itself as a force along the coast, and also to curtail the kingdom of Mataram in Central Java. Mataram, in answer to this challenge embarked on a military campaign in 1621, to besiege and conquer the Dutch fortress at Batavia. The ruler of Mataram, Sultan Agung took farmers and their families along and had them settled on the areas along the north coast in order to plant paddy and other food-crops that would be needed to sustain the military campaigns. The Dermayu area received a quota of about 40 families; they became the nucleus of the peasants in that area, and also served as the link with Central Java.

Mataram's efforts met with ill luck and it gave the D.E.I. Co. the opportunity to consolidate its military and political strength to bring the north coast under its control, and to attack the strongholds of the opposing interior principalities, Sumedang and Galuh. For this purpose the harbour of Dermayu was used as the strategic base from where to go upstream and further inland. It seems that a redoubt was built on the east bank of the Cimanuk. The campaigns met with fierce resistance and were only ended when the Prince of Sumedang ceded Dermayu to the Company in 1678. Since then it became one of the Company's official harbours and due to its position on the trade routes from the West to the East, it became an even more important trading station, collecting produce from the hinterland and dispersing foreign trade goods. It retained this position until the early 20th century when it lost



Map of Java

its position because of the growing sedimentation which made the river unnavigable for modern vessels. One reminder of the Dutch period was the name given by the Dutch to the town, calling it **Indramayu**. In 1641 the term "Indermayo" appears in a Dutch document (Haan, I, 1910) it may have been a corrupted form of the original Dermayu. Whatever the origin, ever since the 17th century the town and surrounding area have been known as "Indramayu"

The Dutch settled in the eastern part, across the river from the old parts of town. Here they developed their centre of trading and administration and built there warehouses and offices. The new town grew, especially in the late 19th century when it became the official seat of the (Javanese) Bupati and the (Dutch) Assistant-Resident. It had now become part of the Residency of Cheribon. The town itself assumed the quasi-cosmopolitan character like so many other coastal towns and is still so until today. Many new settlers were constantly arriving, finding a new livelihood there.

Dutch administration and Chinese families settled in this new town, each forming their own community within the city boundaries. The Dutch civil servants, the estate holders and those involved in trading occupied the best residential parts, so did the Indonesian civil servants and other newcomers. The Chinese had their own "Pecinan" completed with klenteng, Chinese temple.

On the west banks of the river, which had still to be crossed by ferry until about 1930, other groups of newcomers settled. These were people who for reasons of their own did not want to settle in the Dutch section of the city but preferred to assimilate with the original settlements. They were small traders, artisans, political refugees and religious preachers who had come from different parts of the archipelago: Palembang, Aceh, Bugis, Goa, North Moluccas, Kalimantan. Their integration into the local community contributed to the varied cultural expressions as have continued to live in Dermayu.

Dermayu, now part of modern, lively city, Indramayu, retains much of its old, almost medieval character, with its old mosque, graveyards of the original founders and old families, wooden houses, wood-carved mimbars (pulpits), doors and windows, home food industries with a very typical cuisine and of batik, fruit, orchards and fishing communities. The name "Dermayu" thus means for the local people the traditional way of life with its old families, its crafts, the old beliefs, as opposed to what modern Indramayu stands for.

## DERMAYU BATIKS

There is very little known about the history of Dermayu batiks. There is little doubt, though, that a resist dyeing technique was known in West Java for at least a millenium. The technique of rice-paste glued on to rough homespun, handwoven cotton is known in areas as far West as ancient Banten. The cloth was dyed indigo-blue or mengkudu

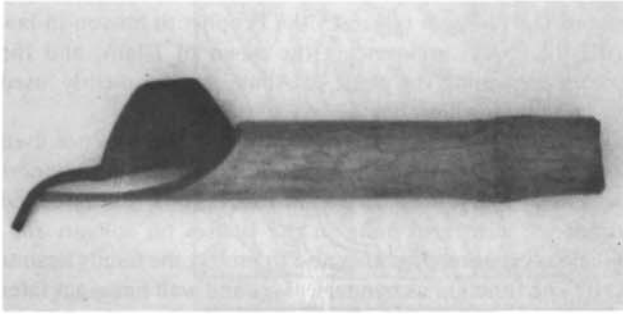
(*morinda citrifolia*) red, while the covered surface remained white. Besides rice-paste, other semi-fluid substances, like bean-paste and vegetable paste made from several kinds of leaves may have been used too. The finished products were probably used mostly for ceremonial purposes, such as temple decorations or religious banners and draperies. The motifs were mainly dots and circles, linear and geometric patterns, reflecting a cosmology of the traditional cultures of Indonesia. To make these ornaments, perhaps a bamboo stick was used as a pen.

Dermayu which formed part of the Hindu kingdom of Sunda in the 14th century, may have known the technique of batik by the beginning of the A.D. era. In addition, its position as a harbour town saw a flow of trade goods passing through, part of which were textiles. They came from the Middle East, Gujarat and Pulicat in India, from China and mainland Southeast Asia. Often they were painted textiles, coloured painted cloth like palamporis from Persia and kalamkaris from Gujarat. These were the "pintados" as called by the Portuguese. But other cloth like embroidered textiles from China were also part of the trade items.

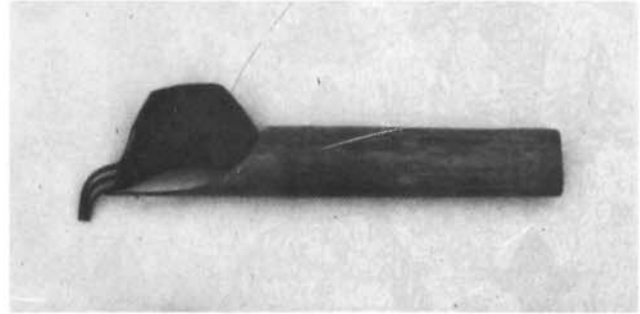
These imported cloths were generally meant for the use of the well-to-do and social upper classes. The peasant used either beaten barkcloth from the gebang tree (*Corypha utan lamk*) for daily wear, weavings from home-spun, home-woven cotton and, if batik was made, it was still of this same material.

Besides painted and other types of coloured cloth, white cloth was also imported. They were coarse or fine, unbleached or bleached. Wax was also a trade item, coming from the island of Timor, and could be used as a covering agent.

It is believed that the art of making batik may have been introduced into Dermayu by people who came from Lasem. However, it is not clear which exact place is meant, because in the 15th century there were two places with that name, one near Tuban, the other one near Sedayu, which were at that time important ports. One should not overlook the geographical location of Dermayu at the northern point of the artistic-religious triangle formed by Palimanan in the Southwest and Plered near Cerbon in the Southeast. Within this triangle there are a number of centres which are known for the artistic expressions of their different communities. Many of them lived as religious or craft guilds, headed by a leader and observing rituals that had been handed down to them for generations. Each of these communes had its own line of art or craft. Thus one would find kilns near Palimanan, painting on cloth (which developed into batik) in Trusmi and Kalitengah. Plumbon was a well known batik-centre in the old days but is now better known for its music and dance, sharing its reputation with Arjawinangun. Gegesik became famous for its glass painting and wayang puppet making. Plered also used to make pottery, but is now more of a market town. A further development were the small communities which sprang up within the boundaries of Cerbon town, like Kanduruan which produced batik for



*A single spout canting*



*A multi spout canting*

the Chinese community. In Dermayu itself, batik developed in the same fashion, also in Sindang and Babakan, and then in Pauman, which have kept the tradition alive until the present. A network of religious, artistic and family affiliations developed between these communities, and it is no wonder that a common artistic language sprang into life. Its main characteristic is an openness, boldness, which can be immediately recognized whether in batik, dance, music, glass-painting or related arts. Its expressions are forceful, yet never vulgar. Refinements and embellishments are incorporated into the composition but never deter from the original design.

Thus if it is true that there are Dermayu batiks that look like Lasem copies, these are only part of the whole spectrum that the region has retained for a long time. But it is particularly the “non-Lasem” type that makes a Dermayu batik stand out and in which one will find the characteristics of Dermayu art. Designs may fit different categories made by outsiders, geometrical, calligraphic, and free-form. In addition to those one would find a range where influences from West Java and Central Java are apparent. These are batiks that became the prerogative of families who originated from outside Dermayu. But whatever the designs and motifs, or their origin, foreign or local or just across the nearest border, by the time that the Dermayu artisans started designing, they had been conversant and probably influenced by whatever style or motif passed through their area, and in which they recognized universal motifs and symbols. In the hands of the local artisans these motifs developed into designs that assumed a meaning relevant to the philosophy of life of the artisan. Thus, also the outsider would speak about a Lasem influenced batik, a Mataram motif, a Chinese, Indian or Middle-Eastern design, the phoenixes, banzis (swastika), peonies, lotuses, lars (wings) and Quranic sayings were not merely copies of conventional motifs but were the interpretation of the artisan’s own perceptions.

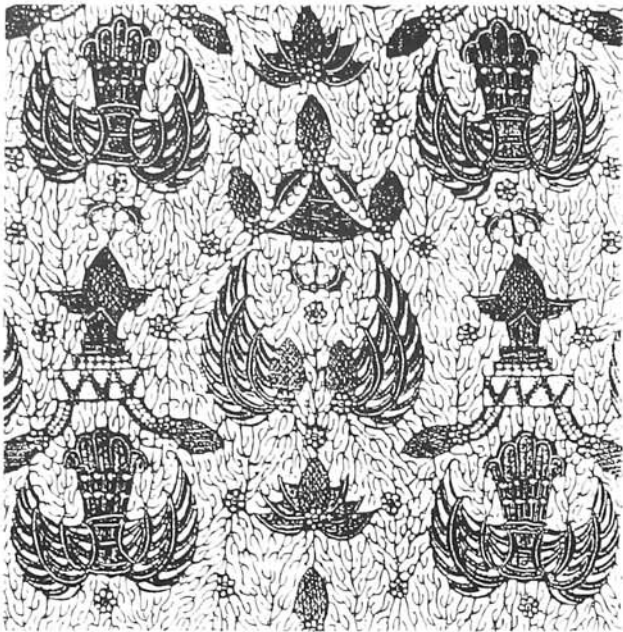
One of the distinguishing characteristics of Dermayu batik is the continued production of “village batik.” This “village batik” is made from home-spun cloth usually of unbleached cotton called *blacu*, and decorated with designs made with *canting*\* with wider spouts. This type of rougher

cloth is believed to be the earlier prototype of batik cloth which in time tended to become more and more refined. In any case, “village batik” is still being manufactured in Tuban, Gresik, Madura and Bantul (South of Jogjakarta) and in many other villages in Java. The production of batik cloth utilizing finer cotton cloth (*mori*) and the finely-spouted canting for applying the wax were a later development. In the case of Dermayu known more for its “village batik” finer batik is only made upon special order. Another peculiarity of Dermayu batik is the absence of space-filling motifs in the forms of dots, lines, and other tiny motifs called “*isen*”. In Central Java “*isen*” motifs are indispensable to a composition, hence Central Javanese batik makers are known for having explored all possible variations of these tiny and minute space-filling motifs. By contrast, Dermayu and Cerbon batik makers try to avoid using too many “*isen*” motifs but if ever called upon by customers to use these motifs, they see to it that the space-fillers will not distract attention from the main design. For this reason, Dermayu and Cerbon batiks are characterized more for their use of one or a few dominant but bold designs against a more open, relatively empty ground.

However, to please the customers from outside the region who prefer designs with “*isen*” the Dermayu and Cerbon batik makers employ a new device the *cemplongan* made up of 10 to 200 fine needles welded together into a handle that can be used to apply scores of dots and lines (*cecek*, *colok*) and other space-filling motifs in one stroke. The *cemplongan* has been improved from a heavy and cumbersome implement to a streamlined tool which a child can easily manipulate. And to assure thorough waxing, the cloth is placed on a banana trunk as the working surface through which the fine needles of the *cemplongan* can penetrate. The introduction of the *cemplongan* has led to the employment of space-filling motifs into Dermayu batik, although not to the same extent as in Central Java.

The predominant colours of Dermayu batik are blue and red. Blue colour is derived from the indigo plant, while red

\* *Canting* (pronounced like the English word chanting to sing) *Canting* is an implement used to apply molten wax on cloth; it is made of two components, a wooden or bamboo handle, and a small, spouted cup-like portion which holds the melted wax.



Example of wing motifs stylized from the mythical bird, Garuda the vehicle of the God Visnu. The simplified wings are called "lar", "mirong", or "sawat" combined with "meru", the sacred mountain.

is obtained from the mengkudu tree (*Morinda citrifolia*). Soga (*Peltophorum pterocarpum* Backer), the source for reddish-brown colour obtained from the bark is the usual dyestuff for Central Javanese batik. However, because of the heavy salinity of the local water, Dermayu batik workers do not use soga bark and therefore produce no reddish-brown colours characteristic of Central Java. If there is any demand for soga-dyed batik, the waxed cloth will have to be sent to Central Java for the dyeing process. With the introduction of artificial dyes, batik makers have experimented with many new colours. But either the water formula or the unsophisticated local artist has not yet achieved the results similar to the batik centres from Central Java.

A few words should be said about the different designs which for the sake of clarity can be put into different categories. They are mostly grouped into calligraphic, geometric and free-form designs.

The least known and therefore less appreciated Dermayu batiks are those with Arabic calligraphy. Yet, in these batiks one would find the true nature of Dermayu society as it once was. The end-products may not have been as overpowering as the calligraphed batiks of Cerbon, but in their simplicity they are equally beautiful. The designs, as a rule, centre around the writing of *asma al husna*, (the ninety-nine most beautiful names of Allah) as well as the names of the Prophet, his kin and the Imams (Welch 1979).

Also a rendering of the "bismillah" ("In the name of Allah") often intertwined forming a rosette in the middle of the cloth and its four corners, while the remaining space is filled with the word "Allah". Unlike Cerbon calligraphs where the lion frequently appears, Dermayu concentrates

more on the non-figural design. However, the double-bladed sword *Dul al Faqar* (given by the Prophet to his son-in-law Ali), the cock, announcing the dawn of Islam, and the parrot, repeating the name of Allah, are frequently used in Dermayu calligraphs.

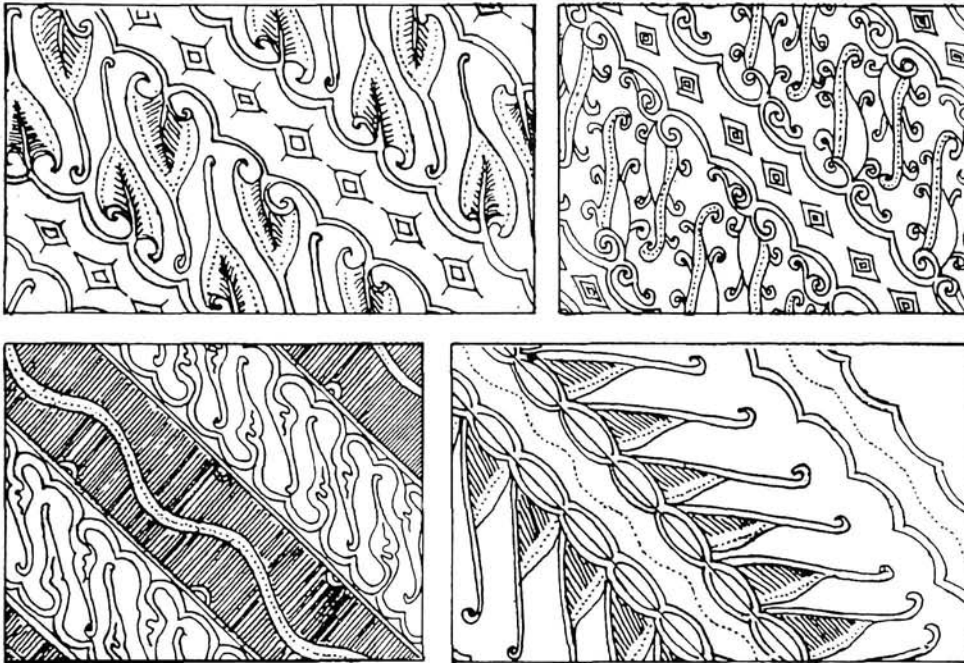
Batik with calligraphic designs were as a rule not used as clothing material, but were specially made for banners and flags which were carried in processions. Calligraphed draperies were also hung in the houses on solemn and, religious occasions, at times also to protect the family against evil. The function as banners, flags and wall hangings later changed to that of clothing, especially for going to the mosque or to a religious function within the community. Later, Arabic calligraphy in a combination with geometric motifs were used for making headcovers and shawls. These batiks were also a large export product to regions outside Dermayu. From the number of such cloths found in Sumatra, it is evident that they were much in demand there.

Geometric designs are still very popular, although there are only a few left. Their forms suggest that the designs once represented spatial symbols but their names refer to practical functional uses of these symbols. Names that survived are such as "mata angin" (weather vane), "pintu ratu" (door of the king), which looks like a compass. Another wellknown motif shows a field of Chinese seals, bordered by swastikas, phoenixes and flowers. The name is "Si Jaring". "Jaring-jaring" are airvents in the walls of houses, bringing fresh wind in an otherwise hot, enclosed area. The cloth bearing *jaring-jaring* designs was used as a bedsheet for sick people. According to local belief the design had the power to cure diseases, as it brought coolness to a feverish person. Often these motifs are executed with the "cecek" (cemplongan) technique.

Free-form designs are part of an extensive group that includes the flora and fauna of the Dermayu area. It is very striking that there are more representations of water rather than land animals. Patterns with fish, crustaceans, eels and fisherman's boats are more predominant than designs with deer, elephants and mythical animals. Even monkeys find



Cloud motif called *megomendung*, one of the most characteristic decorations used in batiks of Cerbon.



Samples of *parang* motifs characterized by diagonal lines in steeply inclined composition. Originally *parang* motifs were restricted to the nobility of the courts of Central Java, but they are now worn by almost everybody and has thereby lost its earlier connotation.

their way only very occasionally into the animal world of Dermayu batiks. As mentioned before, cockerels and parrots are portrayed, but only in connection with calligraphy, peacocks appear as symbols guarding the gate to paradise.

One interesting group is that where Central Javanese influence is apparent. They appear in the typical Mataram heraldic designs such as the Garuda wings, in its modes of "lar", "mirong" and "sawat". However, not being bound to the protocol of the Central Javanese courts, the forms and sizes of the motifs are altogether different. The Garuda outsized wings of Dermayu batiks are uncommon in Central Java. The wing motifs are also more outspread, bold, in contrast to the Central Javanese, which show a more quiet aspect of the Garuda, as if in repose. In the same fashion, other Central Javanese motifs are portrayed differently, reflecting the attitude and perception of the local artist.

Two motifs popular in Central Javanese courts, "lereng" and the "parang" did not become part of Dermayu batik vocabulary. "Lereng" (meaning sloping, the slope of a mountain) is a favourite design among West Java's elite circles. It may well be related in symbolism with the Central Javanese "parang", which is associated with the kris. Both motifs are regarded as contrary to the normal horizontal, vertical or a circular direction in which ordinary mortals move. The diagonal line is only meant for those who have been able to move against these pre-set directions. "Lereng" and "parang" used in batik motifs were mainly used by the nobility, aristocracy and later certain elite groups. Since there never was a court in the Dermayu area and the aristocracy that later developed were not indigenous to the

area, whenever lereng and parang motifs are used they are incorporated into the design upon request of those who deem it necessary to display status and symbols associated with the Javanese courts.

Although Indramayu has become a modern town, the art of batik-making is still surviving. In the Dermayu area, the village of Pauman has become a batik making centre. Sindang and other villages along the old Western trade road are also part of this continuing tradition. However, it is only a home-industry engaged in by women for obtaining additional income while their husbands are away for a length of time, as fishermen or labourers. In addition to making the typical Dermayu batiks, they also make batiks for the workshops at Trusmi and Cerbon, but will not engage in the soya-dyeing and the finishing of the cloth.

Efforts are being made by official agencies to step-up these home-industries and convert them into bigger workshops so that the batik artists can earn regular income. Hitherto the batik makers have not been enthusiastic to accept this change in attitude to an age-old craft, in which they have the role of artist. This is clear from the fact that they pride themselves that no "cap" (block-print) batiks are ever made in their area.

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