

Karawo Art as Gorontalo's Cultural Identity in the Context of the Archipelago

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to find out about the importance of local wisdom as strengthening the identity of a region that will have an impact on the form of recognition in the context of the archipelago. The local wisdom of *karawo* art was born which has become an icon of Gorontalo products born from the long process and toughness of the embroidery craftsmen. Along with the development of science and technology, efforts and innovations have been made, especially in the visualization of decorative motifs to support the continuity of this *karawo* art. This thinking is based on the consideration that there are several Indonesian embroidery products including filigree from Tasikmalaya, Padang, and Manado. The method used was descriptive qualitative and the data were analysed interactively. The identification stages, namely: examining the activities of the Gorontalo community in responding to *karawo* art as a cultural identity in terms of local knowledge, and government support. The results show that the activities of the local community play a role in responding to the art of *karawo* through strengthening the visualization of decorative motifs that carry local values in order to strengthen the concept of identity which is later expected to be of value in gaining recognition as a cultural variety of the archipelago.

Keywords: *Karawo* Embroidery Art, Identity, Culture, Archipelago

Introduction

One of Gorontalo's identity as a result of community resources and a cultural wealth that has been passed down from generation to generation since the 1600s is the art of *karawo*. The sustainability of *karawo* art needs to get attention as a local potential that has particularities especially in the art of embroidery. *Karawo* is used in embroidery, the origin of the

word *mokarawo* means slicing or punching this term from the mother language of Gorontalo. The process is a handmade masterpiece that requires perseverance and thoroughness at every stage (Rahmatia, 2015). The manual process causes a lack of public interest in the profession of *karawo* embroidery, as stated by one of the craftsmen, Yuni Bototihe (interview, June 15, 2021). This phenomenon is responded to by various parties, both among academics and the industrial world as well as local government and private institutions as an effort to develop local arts. Efforts in the form of training as a means of developing resources and various events are carried out to introduce local art to the national and international levels to avoid claims to this cultural heritage.

Archipelago embroidery art is the result of the activities of the local cultural community with its uniqueness, both in terms of various motifs and techniques. The resulting uniqueness becomes a marker or identity marker that we often know as local wisdom. Other names for local wisdom include local policy (local wisdom), local knowledge and local genius) (Riadi, 2017). Local wisdom which is a product of past culture, although it has local value, the value contained in it is considered very universal and is formed as a cultural advantage.

Karawo art is the hallmark of Gorontalo's local culture with its unique workmanship that has not been replaced by modern industrial tools. Various innovations are carried out to strengthen the character as well as become a differentiator by various groups, especially for academics. This consideration is based on the idea that there are several Indonesian embroidered products including filigree from Tasikmalaya, Padang, and Manado (Waty, 2019). This is a challenge and requires the support of various parties in maintaining its sustainability as a local cultural identity of Gorontalo.

Literature Review

Karawo is one of the typical Gorontalo embroidery products, derived from the Gorontalo regional language which means filigree, which is a type of embroidery on fabric that is translucent or can be "interpreted". The process starts from one by one the fibers in the fabric are sliced to produce loose fiber fabrics to facilitate the calculation of the ratio of horizontal

fabric fibers and vertical fabric fibers before the fabric is embroidered with various colors of yarn (Waty, 2019). This *karawo* art relies entirely on hand skills, so that it won the category award as the most difficult and unique embroidery in the archipelago at the embroidery festival at the Jakarta Elephant Museum (Rahmatiah, 2015). In addition to the uniqueness of the technique, also the craftsmen, mostly women, especially housewives. Reviewing *karawo* as local wisdom that has become part of the noble culture of the Gorontalo community in maintaining traditional values. So the term art is pinned on *karawo* in order to position it as an artistic phenomenon, because the *karawo* phenomenon, both processes, techniques, and products produced are very similar to artistic phenomena, especially craft arts, even though the workers (designers and craftsmen) only refer to this phenomenon as the term *karawo* only (Sudana, 2019). In this paper, we review the local art of *karawo* embroidery in its efforts to become a part of the diversity of the archipelago.

Identity and Culture

According to Rutherford (1990), identity is a link in the past with social, cultural, and economic relations in the space and time of society. Identity is now one of the central themes of discussion in the era of globalization, related to the element of acceptance of something that can be different. This is a concern, especially the issue of identity as the main point in the formation of identity, one of which has an impact on local culture. Identity is a key element in the formation of subjective-social reality, so that it has a dialectical relationship with society (Berger & Luckman, 1981). The formation of an identity is largely determined by social patterns, it will crystallize if it is maintained, modified, or undergoes changes through social relations, depending on the structure of the community of its followers. While cultural identity can be indicated as a process that focuses on the symbol system used and the meaning given to symbols and ideas that are appropriate or inappropriate (Colier in Dadan Iskandar, 2004). These two approaches are focused on the efforts of the Gorontalo community individuals in playing their role in supporting the formation of identity in the local art cultural tradition of *karawo* embroidery.

Nusantara Diversity

Indonesia has a variety of archipelago cultures that are often found in every region and are better known as local wisdom. The cultural diversity of the archipelago can be in the form of writing, batik, songket, carving, weaving, and various other handicrafts. This variety eventually becomes a hallmark of the cultural unit in the area (Sitoresmi, 2021). In some areas, local wisdom that has become a cultural tradition has become a variety of the archipelago which is a common property whose existence is always maintained, for example batik. This is the thought of the people of Gorontalo in elevating the local wisdom of the art of *karawo* embroidery to be one part of the diversity of the archipelago in order to support sustainability as well as strengthen identity. Various efforts and innovations were made, both from academics, designers, and *karawo* embroidery craftsmen themselves. So that *karawo* as a work of art that has difficulties and uniqueness in the process of making it different from other types of embroidery in Indonesia (Niswatin, 2018).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach and the data were analysed interactively. The data used is primary data identified by observing community activities related to *karawo* art in an effort to innovate the application of motifs and product displays, as well as local government policies and efforts made to build identity and introduce them to people outside Gorontalo. The secondary data was obtained from several documentations in the form of product photos and coverage of *karawo* art.

Karawo as a Cultural Identity in Gorontalo

The activity of making *karawo* art was initially only an activity to fill free time for the local community, especially mothers, this was done after completing the main household work. This phenomenon has become something that is common and occurs in the past until now. This is something that is natural, because the art of *karawo* grows and takes root in life among ordinary people due to the demands of life to fulfil the family

economy. Nevertheless, this local art is able to develop dynamically from time to time. Therefore, it is stated that the art of *karawo* is the only art field in Gorontalo that has been saved and has developed dynamically to women (Niode, 2007).

The theory of cultural arts works refers to three things consisting of ideas, activities, and artefacts. The artefacts are the results of human cultural works, including the products of cultural arts crafts which are the collective work of the supporting community (Husein Hendriyana, 2018). Most of the works of art and culture are owned by each region, including the Gorontalo community in the form of *karawo* embroidery. These types of works of art are naturally manifested and formed by the people who become a tradition. In *karawo* art which characterizes collectively. In addition to manual techniques, it is also in the application of the motifs of community creativity as an effort to give local genius characters by elevating regional icons into decorative arts. Therefore, a work (art) in the process of making it is not based on good sensitivity and skill, so there will be no opportunity for us to enjoy the work as a work of art. One of the efforts made by developing a variety of motifs and product appearance. In general, by looking at the results of embroidery, people will spontaneously be able to distinguish the *karawo* motif from other embroidery motifs (Hasiru, 2018). This is because the *karawo* embroidery motif is made using a pattern technique by arranging lines to form boxes as seen on streaming fabrics. The types of motifs in *karawo* embroidery consist of geometric shapes, plants, animals, humans, creative motifs taken from several characters who are still confused, for example *Doraemon* cartoon motifs.

The application of motifs that carry the theme of tradition as a strengthening of regional character and contemporary creative motifs in order to bring local art closer to the wider community, especially the younger generation. This motif variation is the implementation of adaptation and expression as well as a marker of traditional and modern motifs (Isnawati, 2018). The contemporary themes are taken from something that is becoming a trend, from depicting the lifestyle of modern society to social media icons or booming themes. The designers explored the socialite women's style motifs ranging from head-to-toe accessories, Facebook icons, and the *Janda bolong* leaf motif. The leaf

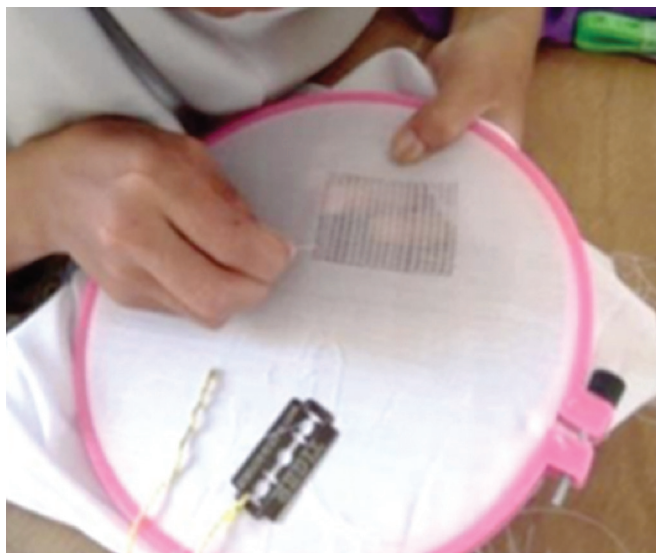


Figure 2.1 The Process of Slicing Fabric Fibers Before Filling with *Karawo* Embroidery Motifs

Source: Author's Reproduction, 2021



Figure 2.2 The Process of Making *Karawo* Embroidery Motifs

Source: Author's Reproduction, 2021



Figure 2.3 *Karawo* Embroidery with Amethyst Motifs on Traditional Women's Clothing in Gorontalo

Source: Agus Lahinta, 2019

motif is outlined in a *karawo* embroidered ornament which was used as the theme by designer Tethuna at his fashion show in Turkey at the A Hybrid Fashion Event in 2021.

Product display innovation is also carried out by modifying *karawo* embroidery with batik techniques as an effort to raise the high class



Figure 2.4 Innovation *Karawo* Embroidery Motifs and Product Display
Source: Agus Lahinta, 2020

of local art that has the potential to become part of the diversity of the archipelago. Batik which is a form of the archipelago that is already well-known in various foreign countries, both from the variety of motifs and the technique of making it. The development of batik which has reached very high values as a national identity and has become an attraction for the fashion industry was modified to *karawo* embroidery. This innovation effort is carried out in line with the development of science, technology and art to produce a new design concept of *karawo* embroidery. Exploring



Figure 2.5 *Karawo* Embroidery Innovation with Batik Technique

Source: Riden Baruadi, 2019

the local potential of icons, traditional and customary ornaments in Gorontalo, apart from being a source of creative ideas, is also useful for strengthening the identity of *karawo* embroidery (Waty, 2017).

***Karawo* as a Cultural Diversity of the Archipelago**

The concept formed in the art of *karawo* to support this continuity becomes a self-actualization process in order to give birth to a statement in the form of “confession”. We can modify the famous French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) phrase *Cogito Ergo Sum* (I think therefore I am). The change to “I act, therefore I exist”, this can be interpreted if we do not remain silent then other people will take into account existence as a

form called existence. Likewise, the art of *karawo* which has now become a commodity to be considered. The results of a study by the Gorontalo's Bank Indonesia branch (2009) identified *karawo* as one of the local genius that has the potential to be developed into an industrial cluster under the coordination of the Ministry of Cooperatives and Industry of Gorontalo Province. Government support is also provided through the policy of wearing *Karawo* uniforms on certain days and wearing the uniforms of pilgrims from Gorontalo. At various events, the *karawo* art movement has been recorded, both in national and international scale activities and has received a sufficient response for the community, especially outside the Gorontalo area. The participation of *karawo* art in national-scale events Exhibitions at national galleries in 2018, Indonesian Fashion Week in 2017, as well as local events in the form of exhibitions and *karawo* festival which have become an annual activity. As for participation in international events at New York Fashion Week in 2017 and at Turkey a Hybrid Fashion Event in 2021.



Figure 2.6 Exhibition at the National Gallery of Jakarta

Source: Hardisk, 2018



Figure 2.7 A Hybrid Fashion Event in Turkey

Source: Tethuna, 2021

Conclusion

The sustainability of *karawo* art needs to get attention as a local potential that has particularities especially in the art of embroidery. This phenomenon was responded to by various parties, both among academics and the industrial world as well as local government and private institutions as an effort to develop local arts. Innovations are carried out starting from the application of motifs that carry the theme of tradition in order to strengthen the character and contemporary themes as an effort to introduce to the wider community, especially the younger generation, as well as efforts in the form of training as a means of developing resources and introducing them in various events both locally, nationally and internationally. This concept was formed in *karawo* art to support continuity which is a process of self-actualization in order to produce

statements in the form of “confessions” and to avoid claims and create potential for the diversity of the archipelago.

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