

where we came from / where we have landed
by Azlan Nur Saidy & Kira Saragih

It is often said that it is difficult to find cohesive Nusantara communities overseas because the archipelagic region is home to thousands of different cultures, languages, worlds and realms. Crossing from one island to another can sometimes be akin to journeying to a different reality inhabited by different spirits, natural laws and ways of relating to one another. Why travel overseas when the region is already home to a pluriverse?

Peoples across the region have criss-crossed the modern day borders of what are now Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, southern Thailand, the southern Philippines, as well as the Australian Territories of the Christmas and Cocos (Keeling Islands) since before the western fragmentation of time, when our ancestors relied on natural time-keeping technologies such as faces of the moon, animal song, monsoon winds and changing tides. Our ancestors have travelled so much that in some Nusantara cultures, it is expected of young people who come of age to leave their homelands to seek good fortunes, life experience and wisdom elsewhere in the region, before their eventual balik kampung to their villages to share their newly found material, emotional, and intellectual wealth with the community. One of the more well-known traditions is called Merantau, which originates from the Minangkabau peoples of Western Sumatra.

With the staggering number of languages and worldviews that call the region home, it is no wonder that batik came to serve as a complementary lingua franca to Bahasa across the region, that did not require learning a new verbal language to communicate with other cultures. In many styles of batik, the motifs often represent stories of the people making them, their connection to the land, their understanding of the world around them, as well as their hopes, dreams, prayers and grief. Batik motifs often symbolize shared stories such as separated lovers hoping to be reunited again, prayers for those experiencing loss, and lessons from observing nature such as the value of resilience from seaside rocks withstanding relentless waves. In cultures where batik is traditionally produced, it is often said that one is wrapped in batik from cradle to the grave. Through a shared visual language, batik stitched the Nusantara pluriverse together.

With the fragmentation of the Nusantara pluriverse by competing western colonial imperialists, the drawing of hard borders through colonial treaties such as the Singaporean Treaty of 1819 and the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, tore these universes asunder. The crossing of the Strait of Malacca from present-day Malaysia to the East Coast of Sumatra, which used to be as familiar as crossing a lake to visit family, became a grueling ordeal. Travellers were required to show papers with last names that people had to invent because last names did not exist in their cultures and gregorian calendar birthdays were demanded of people who kept track of their time on earth through the seasons. This resulted in the slow disintegration of the pluriverse into competing nationalisms defined by colonial power structures left behind by overextended and decaying empires.

In an effort to consolidate power and project strong national governments in the wake of newly found independence, many nations across Nusantara sought to protect their borders and differentiate themselves from their neighbours. Shared cultural elements soon became points of contention and conflict between neighboring countries. Batik was not spared from this, and became a key point of differentiation, instead of its prior use as a shared visual language across Nusantara.

The impulse to differentiate oneself from the “other” and to protect power structures rooted in western colonialism soon turned inward, as ruling elites turned the machinery of the state to displace, harm and coerce communities they were meant to govern. This included razing the very rainforests that these communities relied on for logging and agricultural uses, causing region-wide hazes from forest fires that have continuously crossed national borders. Some communities from Nusantara soon found themselves on unfamiliar shores, most often in countries of the western imperial core, escaping violence and repression, in a sort of merantau of necessity. Those perantau (wanderers) that landed on Turtle Island, or what is colonially known as Canada and the United States, often found that their cultures preceded them—not by prior Nusantara migrants, but by non-Nusantaran peoples who had visited the region and presented Nusantara cultural practices as their own, excavated of their cultural meaning and presented merely as a technique and aesthetic.

Those that landed on these lands would have also entered stolen, unceded, and ancestral x^wməθk^wəyəm, skwxwú7mesh, and səlilwətaʔl territories, colonially governed as a logging and mining colony known as “Vancouver” and “British Columbia”, a part of the wider Canadian settler colonial project. Settlers from Nusantara would have also noticed a similar pattern of the state, often without the consent of Indigenous Governing Bodies, desecrating and extracting logs from old growth forests for short term gain. Forests that have been growing for thousands of years, and that have continuously nourished Indigenous communities who have stewarded them since time immemorial. It is said that more than an area the equivalent of 100 soccer fields of old growth forest is logged everyday in British Columbia,¹ resources and relationships we can never truly recover. Often precious old growth trees that have lived for thousands of years are made into products like roofing shales and shingles that only last for thirty years before they rot. Wildfires currently consuming many parts of British Columbia are also a familiar sight and smell for many Nusantara migrants to these lands, a result of the same capitalistic impulse that causes wildfire hazes throughout Southeast Asia.

On the one hand, facing systemic racism, and oftentimes Islamophobia, while on the other hand, grappling with their role as settlers on stolen and unceded Indigenous territories, Nusantara communities in so-called Vancouver are faced with the challenge of making sense of their place and role on these lands and their relationship to the western colonial project. As a land-based sense-making, communication and spiritual technology, batik is a prime medium for Nusantara communities to explore what it means to be in solidarity and seek belonging with the land and Host Nations, instead of the Canadian state. Confronted with new landscapes, laws, customs

1 Karen Price (PhD) and Dave Daust (M.Sc., RPF), *Closer to the Brink: The state of the forest in BC in 2025* (Sierra Club BC), <https://scbc-qa-space-hetzner.sfo3.digitaloceanspaces.com/content/uploads/2025/11/27175952/Closer-to-the-Brink-The-State-of-The-Forest-in-BC-in-2025-web.pdf>

and values that both differ and overlap with their own, Nusantara batik artists have a new socio-economic, political and spiritual context in which to ground and girder the sacred geometries of their batik patterns.

For many diasporic settlers, sense-making in a new land too often leads to assimilation, a quiet erosion of traditions set aside in order to blend in and survive in a society that demands conformity in exchange for belonging. Yet throughout history, migration has often deepened culture rather than dilute it, allowing traditions to not only survive but transform into new forms that carry a higher capacity for life. The proverb “Dima bumi dipijak, di sinan langik dijunjuang” teaches us to re-ground ourselves in new lands by upholding local laws, customs and traditions. But, there is a crucial distinction to be made here between genuine engagement with local customs and state-sanctioned Canadiana multiculturalism that tells us what belonging should look like.

Vancouver is an incredibly culturally rich and diverse city, yet our cultures are often treated like a static monolith. Traditions are treated with a sense of purity that serves the colonial Canadian multiculturalism project—a project that celebrates diversity as a spectacle, while systematically denying the rights and lands of Indigenous Host Nations as well as Black, Brown and racially oppressed communities. In this framework, our cultures are welcomed as long as they remain decorative, contained and unchanging, exhibited as proof of Canada’s benevolence. This is the contradiction we inherit: our traditions are celebrated in name but stripped of their living context, their connection to struggle, and their capacity to respond to the realities of places we now call home. To practice tradition as if this violence does not exist is not only ignorance, it is complicity to the development of a narrative that ultimately excludes us.

There is a particular grief that comes with this knowing, when we realize the system we were told to assimilate into is itself the problem. This grief emerges from the same wound of ecological and climate collapse, inflicted by the same colonial logic that severs people from place, culture from land, and spirit from body. Batik has offered us a way to sit with this tangle of grief, anger, and hope. The act of membatik compels the artist to slow down and sit with their feelings; for many traditional artisans, *ketenangan batin* is critical to the process. The *malam* is believed to imbue the inner emotional state of the artist as it flows from the *canting* onto the cloth.

We ground our practice in the ancient Javanese philosophy of *Tribawana*: an understanding that we exist across three interconnected worlds: *Jagad Alit* (the microcosm of the self), *Jagad Ageng* (the macrocosm of nature), and the unseen divine realm (the ultimate source of all creativity). These realms became the guiding force that made this process become more than just making material objects: they are a result of collective meditation, critical observation, and reclamation of culture. This philosophy is as inseparable from our batik practice as the *malam* is from the cloth; to remove any part of the process would be an act of unmaking.

As recorded in the *Kakawin Arjuna Wiwaha*, an 11th-century text composed by Mpu Kanwa estimated to be from around 1030 CE, the 1000-year-old *Tribawana* philosophy emerges from the same temporal depth as the old-growth forests in so-called BC. This parallel is not coincidental: for many Indigenous cultures around the world, cultural preservation and ecological preservation are not separate endeavours, and the connection between them is not abstract—it is practical, embodied, and rooted in everyday life.

Culture emerged from the intimate relationship between people and place: what grows, what is harvested, how it is prepared, what heals, what sustains. These relationships carry knowledge that took centuries of trial, error, observation and transmission to accumulate. We carry these teachings with us, bringing along contemporary understandings of climate science, social justice and collective care. In doing so, we open a door to something powerful: innovation that is grounded, and change that is generative rather than destructive. We learn that meaning is not something we invent in isolation, but something we co-create with those we are with, those who came before and those who will come after—a reminder that we belong to something far greater than ourselves.

For us, returning to Tribawana enables the cultivation of a union between mind, body, intuition, the natural world and the realms beyond. Creating from a place of alignment and balance between the three realms allows us to make work that pays respect for life, creation and the more-than-human. It is an approach that views batik as not just a technical skill to be mastered, but a cultural practice woven into how we relate to the land, to each other, to the knowledge of those who came before, and to the benefit of those who will come after.

In reconnecting with this marginalized aspect of batik-making, we are able to process our cultural and ecological grief, transforming it into works that carry both memory and possibility. Through this exhibition, beyond the presentation of material objects, we channel the transformative aspects of batik, reclaiming it as a fruitful and generous sense-making technology—one that helps us understand where we come from, what we've inherited, and how to use those teachings to become good guests, or perantau, wherever we land. In that carrying, we contribute a Nusantara strand to the dreamweave of an expansive and decolonial future, whether near or far from our ancestral mother tree.

- *The Merantau Arts Collective, 2026*