

TRANSFORMING TRADITION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the possibilities of transforming the traditional knowledge into modern life. It focuses mostly on design in development area. My point of view will mainly Indonesian, but similar cases can be found also in other developing countries. Since there are many misleading product development cases –for the sake of ‘modernisation’— that in fact have contributed to more complex social and environmental problems, my paper will seek the understanding of this critical issue: what should be the spirit of any innovation or product development; should it be more targeted for enriching human values, or rather for stimulating human infinite drives? With emphasizing sustainability and environmental issues, this paper argues that the application of inventions, innovations, or product developments should not be driven only for economic advantages, but rather first for necessity that centred in people needs. The relationship between products and people then will emphasis more on the quality rather than quantity. To deal with this issue, this paper proposes two main discussions: to look back to tradition, and to explore the possible model for the implementation of particular valuable traditions into the product development process. The model shows five significant components of tradition that might be used to create the utility and image of the new product.

Introduction

Many objects, so-called *primitive, indigenous, or traditional* that have been inherited from generations, have shown their excellent qualities in practical use and design, even some are still in use today. In traditional and indigenous knowledge and practice, we often find undoubtedly harmonious balance between aesthetic and function, physical and ideological purpose, and economic and ecological decision, resulted by thousands of years accumulation of practice experience and collective wisdom. Howes (1980), a social anthropologist, in the past four decades has shown that various indigenous knowledge and practices often have a comparative advantage for sustainable improvements of people’s live, concerning to their ability and empirical understanding of localised eco-systems.¹ In Howes opinion, it is important to explore the use of such knowledge that might be assimilated with existing sciences and technology. Later on, in 1995, in “The Cultural Dimension of Development” a number of scholars from multi-disciplinary fields generated further discussion on indigenous knowledge system and its role in the development process.² The papers, which consist of evidence of collection of research from many countries and resources, show great variety of the usefulness of indigenous knowledge for improving sustainable live. They also note that in many areas, traditional and indigenous knowledge is far more relevant and functional than had been labelled as a primitive or inferior class of knowledge.

There are some factors why indigenous technical knowledge receives many great concerns. Tradition has become a tool by many countries to create identity as a ‘counter-culture’ against the dominant culture or globalisation. As Brynjulf Alver (1992) notes, “Giving tradition a new life

¹ Howes, Michael “The Uses of Indigenous Technical Knowledge in Development” in Brokensha, D., Warren, D.M., Werner, O. (eds.), *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Development*, Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1980.

² “The Cultural Dimension of Development: Indigenous Knowledge System”, Warren, D. Michael, Slikkerveer, L.Jan, Brokensha, David (eds.), London: Intermediate Technology Publications Ltd., 1995.

became a national pursuit...everywhere in local society today there is a strong need to state one's identity."³ Perhaps for today the most concern are the socio-economic, cultural and environmental arguments. Modernisation has not only brought many new advantages for human lives, but it also has resulted its dark sides: the man-made ecological disasters such as 'energy crisis', infinity of products and consumer goods that resulting disposal culture and degrading our environment.

The increasing awareness of the valuable traditional knowledge has also stimulated United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2001 to publish volumes of book concerning indigenous practices from different disciplines, such as economic, environment, agriculture, medicine, social policy, and appropriate technology.⁴ These volumes present the wide range of successful innovation projects that are based on local traditional knowledge in the developing countries like Asia, Latin America and Africa. Emphasising on sustainability, they promote local solutions, make use of local materials and knowledge, innovative in meeting social needs, and for the end, they can improve the livelihood of local community.

While traditional knowledge and practices have been widely explored, intensively studied, and implemented in various fields for development purposes, this is rather not yet a hot topic in design profession. Generally speaking, this issue is not quite new, as Viktor Papanek in 1972 has already proposed the use of design for revitalising 'vernacular design' to improve the quality of lives of local community.⁵ For Papanek, traditional knowledge is a valuable asset or capital for designer who works in the development area. He points out that design should be more sensitive to the masses of people who live in poverty spread in many parts of our globe. After Papanek, during the decades, a number of design scholars and institutions such as *Design Without Borders* and *Design for the World* have proposed the similar critical issues from various points of view.⁶ What all have in common is to argue that the role of design have been addressed too much for increasing competitiveness for industries, or stimulating more consumerism; design indeed has more responsibility also to the global social and environmental problems, so that it supports sustainable development of the majority of people. However, this vision has never become a mainstream. As Victor Margolin (2002) mentions, the proposals from Papanek and other scholars were remained marginal and did not bring significant impact on the industrial design profession.⁷ Still, urban modern societies and the industrial manufacturers are those who mostly receive the benefit of design services; the rest of the world remains untouched.

Based on this concern, this paper will seek the possible implementation of design for revitalisation of traditional knowledge. This aim is not for a romantic indulgence, anti modernism, or call for going backward to a primitive stage. It rather attempts to explore the possibilities of bridging modernity and tradition harmoniously while we, designers, shaping our material culture environment.

³ Alver, Brynjulf, "The Making of Traditions and the Problem of Revitalisation" in Kvideland, Reimund (ed.), *Tradition and Modernisation*, Turku: Nordic Institute of Folklore, 1992: 66-69.

⁴ See "Good Practices and Innovative Experiences in the South. Volume 1", Khor, Martin, and Lin, Lim Li (eds.), London: Zed Books Ltd. Third World Network Special Unit for TCDC, UNDP, 2001.

⁵ Papanek, Viktor, "Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change, London: Thames and Hudson, 1985.

⁶ See Victor Margolin discussion in chapter *Expansion or Sustainability: Two Models of Development* (78-89), and *Design for Sustainable World* (92-102). Margolin, Victor, "The Politics of the Artificial: Essays on Design and Design Studies", Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002. And also Haugeto, Å. Kari, Knutslien, S. Alice, *Design Without Border*, Oslo: Norsk Form, 1994.

⁷ Margolin, Victor, "The Politics of the Artificial": 94-95.

Design: traditional versus modern

The concept of traditional in this paper refers to a term according to or being tradition that covers any established method, practice, beliefs or customs, passed from one generation to the next.⁸ The word traditional is usually associated with things such as oldness, static, indigenous, or primitive; as contrasted with modern that expresses dynamic, newness, present, and progressive. Hilde Heynen (1999) in *“Architecture and Modernity”* describes the concept of modern that means present, current, new, or momentary as the opposite to the past, old, or the notion of no longer being which all might be an attribute for traditional. Thus, she also notes:

“Modernity is what gives the present the specific quality that makes it different from the past...Modernity is also described as being a break with tradition, and as typifying everything that rejects the inheritance of the past.”⁹

In *“Culture Against Man”* Jules Henry (1963) attempts to describe the essential different between the primitive and modern worlds.¹⁰ In primitive culture, as a rule, one does not produce what is not needed, thus objects are made in the quantity and at time required. As a contrast, resulted by contemporary dynamics, modern culture lacks of property ceiling. In Henry’s view, the most obvious gap between these two cultures is that while the primitive culture produces a fix bundle of wants that resulting stability; the modern culture creates infinity of wants that resulting restlessness. Nevertheless, Henry also defines two important poles of human life: one is ‘value’ and the other is ‘drives’. Value refers to all kind of things that most human being would like to be: love, harmony, kindness, quietness, fairness, contentment, fun, honesty, relaxation, and simplicity. Meanwhile, drives are other element of human being resulted by driven culture such as achievement, competitive, profit, expansive, progressive and mobility. It is drive that always demands security and a higher standard of living. People in the modern society live between the fight of this two poles. Unfortunately, the situation seems to be unbalance. In one side, there are so many institutions and supporting instruments available for facilitating human’s drives, while in the other side, there usually lacks of support if one seek for value.

When we try to reflect design profession from Henry’s model of cultures, design seems to operate by negotiating between two tensions of contrasting poles between ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’ culture, or between ‘driven culture’ and ‘values’; in which such condition often becomes a source of the essential dilemmas in design profession. In Margolin’s definition, design, now has to choose between two models of development: expansion or sustainability.¹¹ The ‘expansion’ model closely related to ‘driven culture’ in Henry’s term, and the ‘sustainability’ model fit with the ‘value’. The question is, can design combine these two contrasting goals in its activities? How should we deal with this dilemma? This paper, however, will not attempt to provide the answer, but it rather explores how design can contribute to minimise the problem.

⁸ “Oxford: Advanced Learner’s Dictionary”, Crowther, Jonathan (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995: 1267.

⁹ Heynen, Hilde, “Architecture and Modernity: A Critique”, Massachusetts London: MIT Press, 1999: 1.

¹⁰ Henry, Jules, “Culture Against Man”, New York: Random House, 1963.

¹¹ Margolin, Victor, “The Politics of the Artificial”: 78-89.

Problematic in design: Indonesian cases

In general, the process of modernisation in developing countries is fairly more complex than those in the developed countries.¹² In Indonesia, one of the common problems usually is that: industrialisation, new technology, and design, which have been imported from western culture, often operate without any correlation with traditional or local culture. Consequently, many implementations of design or technology, which is separated from cultural contexts, will usually become a main obstacle in reaching the goal of sustainability.

Sulfikar Amir (2002) argues that the significant problem has also occurred by the lack of design policy in most third world countries. In Amir's point of view, the problem cannot be solved only through the materiality of design. What more important is how to produce design policy in national level that placing design not only as a tool to increase the competitiveness that beneficial only for the minority (industrial manufacturer) but it should also be generated for empowering the majority of people, with their particular social and cultural conditions.

Generally speaking, people have already learnt a lot from a number of cases showing how important to consider the traditional knowledge when any action of modernisation was being implemented. In extreme, some cases have shown such conditions where we sometimes just have to look back to tradition, and re-apply its old methods and practices. We witnessed, for instances, in agricultural field, after long time of using pesticides, now the farmers start to re-adopt the traditional ways of organic farming, sometimes with combining it with new technology which are more ecological sounds. Nowadays, traditional way of using natural dyes for textile production is more recommended than using the chemical one. And there are still many similar cases have been found.

Focusing on design case, such as in architecture, the application of western concept of modern housing in Indonesia has changed most of traditional way of dwelling, affecting also the changes in wider socio-cultural and environmental contexts. In many parts of Indonesia, traditional houses are usually made of natural material such as wood and bamboo. Nowadays, modern houses that are made of concrete material have replaced many of them. Considering that Indonesia is a country where earth quake is the annual agenda, the use of concrete with lack of implementation of sophisticated building regulation, often bring more damage and lost of lives when the catastrophe happen. The report of recent earthquake in Nias Island Indonesia showed that the wooden traditional houses are proven to survive better than the concrete one. Furthermore, in the place where humidity is high, concrete houses have more risk in having mould problem comparing with the bamboo or wooden houses, which by nature, their structure provide sufficient ventilations. From social point of view, not surprisingly, the implementation of modern concept of interior might cause the change in the relationship between members in the family, and the family with its community such as the neighbour, and the visitors. The open space concept of most Indonesian traditional houses accommodates the family members to communicate and take care each other tidily. Inside the house where there are no strictly divided rooms, the mother can still look after her baby while working in the kitchen. She can even join the conversation with her husband and other son, which take place in the dinning room. She will also know right away which neighbour comes in front of the door. This concept of space keeps all the members always in a good contact. As a contrast, in a common modern house, this condition is often impossible. In most modern houses, there are many rooms inside the house, and spaces are rigidly divided

¹² Amir, Sulfikar, "Rethinking Design Policy in the Third World", Design Issues: Volume 20, Number 4, (Autumn 2004): 68-72.

into formal division with formal function. Each room has a door to provide more privacy to each member, but isolates the frequent 'in touch' and communication between family members as used to be.

Another case is in packaging design area. Like in many parts of the world, nowadays, everywhere in Indonesia even in a very remote area, goods that are made of plastics, include food packaging design, have gradually become part of daily life replacing the traditional one. It is very reasonable, since they are economically more practical to be produced and cheap. Thus, some traditional cakes that used to be wrapped in banana or coconut leaves, today are covered by plastic sheet. Most of them now have lost their original taste and get easily rotten in the place where the degree of humidity is quite high. Some similar problems occur also in some plastic kitchen utensils that are traditionally made of plaiting bamboo, rattan, or wood. Today, the use of plastic or styrofoam for meal boxes significantly increases replacing the traditional bamboo boxes. Compare to the traditional meal boxes, these new food packaging objects probably have no superior value but economical. Visually, the shape looks unattractive. From 'function' point of view, the common use of stapler nails for fixing the lid creates difficulties to open and re-close the lid properly. Ecologically, the waste material contributes more problems to environment. Furthermore, a great concern also should be addressed to the lost of social and cultural meanings of the objects. My aim, however, is not to argue that plastic should not be used in the field of food packaging design. In my opinion, the use of plastics, which has both advantages and disadvantages should be wisely controlled and planned, to fit with the condition of people and its nature.

These brief examples of design cases illustrate, first, how important design should serve and meet the environmental, social and cultural activities of the society. Secondly, for many cases, design should be based on tradition; means that local traditional and indigenous knowledge is a valuable asset for design especially when using it for development work in a specific condition. Design can effectively contribute to sustainable development of societies only if it can collaborate their traditional knowledge in its plan.

Design based on tradition

How we assimilate tradition with modernity? How to transform old tradition into our modern life? This paper proposes a model that specifies the components of tradition and its transformation process into a new object or product. In this model, there are at least five important components in tradition, which act as a foundation for creating a new object, product, or artefact. These components might be divided into two main groups as (1) physical category, such as *materials*, *techniques*, *gestalt*, and (2) immaterial category, such as *images*, and *hidden factors*.

Materials consist of all kind of raw materials that usually construct the traditional objects. It can be wood, ceramic, terracotta, bamboo, rattan, stone, natural fibre, rubber, glass, and metal. Techniques are any kind of indigenous technical knowledge, such as production technique, skill, tool, process, and all kind of facility. *Gestalt* covers the object usability, form, size, shape, or even idea and concept. *Images* can be any form of local nature, shape, ornament, colour, myth, story, people, or artefact. And finally *hidden factors* deal mostly with things that can only be measured qualitatively, such as local custom, belief, characteristic, ideology, and culture. Independently, each component has a ground for giving a shape and building the whole utility and image of the development of new object. In practices, the new object may represent whether only a 'single-dominant' component or a combination of components. Thus, the final result of the

development will be contextually characterised by the main premise of each situation and condition. Some development might be approached from revitalising traditional technique, and some might prefer to improve local material.

In a more concrete practice, transforming tradition can be described as following. To develop the new object or product, we can apply the traditional material, or techniques, or the combination of them. For instances, many traditional bamboo basketries, rattan furniture, and ceramic tableware might be re-designed whether based on local material with the improvement of production technique, or local techniques with combination with new material, or using both local material and techniques in generating a new form or function of product. New design of cooking utensil, like 'wok', can be inspired from the image, shape, and function of the old/traditional one. The new wok can be a combination of the traditional material such as wood and bamboo for its handles, with some new materials (for example aluminium-stainless steel), and perhaps with introduction of a new production technique. The new object sometimes also designed to represent the value of cultural identity by promoting local images (ornaments, colours); it is usually produced for tourism or souvenir goods. In this case, local image is highly exposed and functions as the centre of the product, allowing it to use also absolutely new shape, material, or technique. The examples of these might be found in many artefacts such as decorated ceramic jars, carved wooden boxes, or textile and clothe products. Conceptually, design might be represent very modern shape, but actually it reflects some hidden factors, such as local culture, belief, norm, or habit, which are visually unseen. Although it might be quite difficult to justify the content of tradition's transformation concerning that no strong identity appear, such as in the use of local material or technique, in this case, the essence of the object lays in the expression of its form language. It is said, a modern object with the spirit of tradition.

In this context, design is successful, only when it can generate sustainability. The mendong carpet is one example of successful design. In West Java, a team of designer has worked together with local community to develop their traditional hand woven carpet products using material called *mendong*. The new designs, which are based on local material with some little improvement in weaving technique, and exploration in various pattern and size, have opened new markets and also new working places for many people. More importantly, this project has brought the local community as the actor in sustaining their livelihood, by improving their own traditional practical knowledge.

However, great exploitation of particular raw material from nature may harm to the quality of environment. Dealing with this issue, in Cirebon, as centre of rattan furniture producer, besides continuously keeping the traditional technique, a new concept of design has been introduced, which applies new materials, such as metal and wood as a structure, reducing more than 35% the use of rattan in most furniture product.

This model of sustainable transformation of tradition, however, can only work effectively when local people, the craftsmen, or the producer are put as a centre in the design process. It is also very important that any improvement in material, process, or technique that belongs to traditional knowledge, should not express as a designer's expansion, but rather as collaborative exchange knowledge between designer and local people in fulfilling their need and desire. Closing the discussion, let us hear what Norman Uphoff (1996) notes:

“... process is often more important than product within indigenous culture spheres. How things are done is more important than what is done, with great emphasis placed upon

social relationships and preserving the harmony and integrity of the community and culture, more than on individual recognition or advancement.”¹³

Conclusion

Many traditional knowledge and practices that still exist in many parts of the world are valuable inheritances and lesson to life, due to their ability to suit with the people’ needs in harmony with their nature environment. Design, both seen as practice and policy, plays an important role in transforming and applying various traditional knowledge and practices, and sustaining the improvement of the people’s livelihood. Understanding the socio-culture and environmental dimension of particular society, will avoid any mal-application of design that often result contra-sustainability. This is to say that design should be based on tradition.

This paper proposes five components of tradition that can be transformed and revitalized into a new object or product, such as materials, techniques, images, gestalt, and hidden factors. Each component, or a configuration of some, can be formulated as a basic concept for further development of new product. From this model, however, there are many things still have to be explored. Some applications will probably fit better with artistic approach denying functionality or the economic benefit. Further study should be conducted to find out which approach (s) of this model can be applied for resulting the most appropriate sustainability.

¹³ In the Preface chapter presented by Uphoff, Norman, *Indigenous Organizations and Development*, Blunt, Peter, and Warren, D. Michael (eds.), London: Intermediate Technology Publications Ltd, 1996.