

Geometric collection

A former lawyer is redefining the art of batik for a modern appeal, writes Aneeta Sundararaj

THE smell of hot wax, the stain of wax-resistant dyes and practising the same stroke with the chanting tool over and over again — these were some of the happy memories of making batik that Mohd Said Bani CM Din evoked during our chat at his office in Subang, Selangor. Today, he's the main force behind his collection of batik called Batique.

"You see," says the charming 48-year-old, "I always wanted to start my own collection and I've been designing for a long while. I even had the name ready a long time ago: Bani's Boutique. In short, it's Batique. I appreciate batik as an art form. Every element of it is interesting."

Bani wasn't always involved in the batik industry, though. In fact, his first career was as a solicitor in the UK. His legal career came to an abrupt end when he had to return home because his father became ill. "My holiday, which was only supposed to be for three weeks, kept getting extended until I knew that I couldn't do it anymore. My father needed me and I made the decision to stay back here."

Instead of legal practice in Malaysia, Bani decided to join the corporate world. For the next few years, he had a successful working life. "I enjoyed my work and I was travelling all the time. I was fit and I thought everything was going well."

His wake up call came one morning when he was in his mid-30s. "I collapsed outside my house and when I woke up, I was in the hospital. The doctor told me that I had had a stroke. I had to undergo physiotherapy and it took a long time."

However, he was disappointed that while his staff and colleagues visited him in hospital, none of his bosses did. "They didn't come; they just sent me baskets of flowers. They couldn't be bothered." He decided that he no longer wanted to work for such people.

Life became increasingly depressing for the divorcee. "I became housebound. I'd left my job and in one year I put on almost 30kg. One day, I realised that this couldn't continue. I rang a friend and told him I was almost broke. He gave me freelance work and slowly, things became better."

Once he regained his confidence, Bani ventured out on his own and is now the managing director of bzBee. Consult which is mainly a



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Mohd Said Bani CM Din

public relations, media and strategic communications company. Now that this business has been established, Bani is working on showcasing batik.

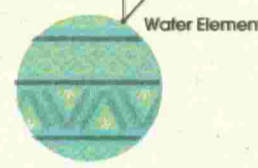
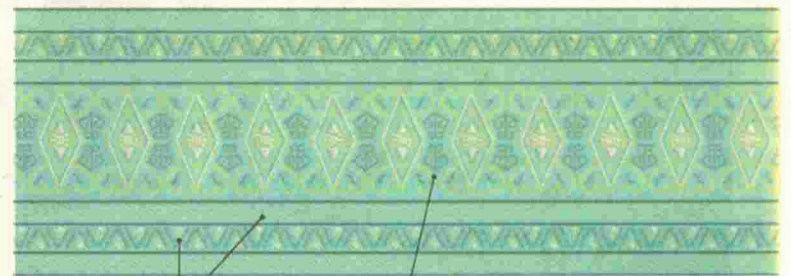
WHY BATIK?

Bani's introduction to batik wasn't very positive. "In the beginning, batik had a very negative connotation for me. My mother died when I was 3. I had one of her *kain batik*. It had a rebung pattern in a triangular shape and there were shades of rust, red and chrome yellow. But my father didn't like me keeping it and I didn't understand why. He was against men wearing batik because he thought it was very feminine. But I loved it and had it until I was in secondary school. I thought that it was not fair that batik was only for women."

Bani overcame his misgivings about batik as he entered adulthood and now believes that the true heritage of batik is in the technique of batik and designs created.

Malaysian batik today, believes Bani, tends to be underrated and overpriced. "Underrated because Indonesian batik is more well-known. But even when we do market it, the price is so high. I mean, the fee of the *penchanting* (artist who creates the actual batik piece) is between RM30 and RM40 per metre. Why then price them near RM1,000 per piece? The answer is the brand. Ok, I understand that the brand needs to make a profit. But so much?"

Such exorbitant prices have resulted in good quality batik being



Water element and pua kumbu element on a bed runner.



Shield Sarawak Motif



Hornbill Motif

The shield and hornbill motifs are used in the prayer mats and bed runners. PICTURES BY NIKHARIF HASSAN



One of Bani's more contemporary designs features the Rafflesia flower.

beyond the reach of the average Malaysian. "And the ones that are affordable are not attractive. They are too 'belia' or gaudy. For me, they're spoiling what batik should be. We must have good quality batik at affordable prices."

The other challenge he sees is that floral patterns don't appeal to the

younger generation. Holding up one of his more contemporary designs that features the Rafflesia flower, he says: "We've done some research and we find that they like more geometric designs, splashes of nothingness, elements of buildings..."

Not venturing into the fashion industry, Bani has chosen an

altogether different route: The first item he showcases is a bed runner. "Can you see the hornbill motif that we've used?"

An avid painter, Bani designed this image himself and says that he chose it as it was for a client based in Sarawak. Furthermore, they used another image that people will associate with the State: The shield. "We used that for the *sejadah* (prayer mats)."

The concept of making prayer mats morphed into something larger when Bani performed his umrah in Mecca. "I saw many Malaysians buying prayer mats that were made in China, India and Nepal. And they were willing to pay up to RM300 for good padded ones. That gave me an idea. So, when I came home, I started to design prayer mats and the canvas bags they come in using some of our own batik designs. Many of our corporate clients liked this and use it as gifts for their clients. Non-Muslims can use them as normal mats as there are no religious motifs."

As a spin-off, Bani and his team have also created a pocket-sized prayer mat made from water-resistant material. The cover has a compass sewn into it to help the faithful determine the direction Mecca at any given time.

Currently, Bani is working towards expanding his Batique line from hotel furnishing and corporate gifts to items that can be sold in retail stores. He intends to make Batique "a unique masterpiece that Malaysians can be proud of and showcase to the world."