Lurik Peeking the Global Market

By Fitria Werdining Sih
A woman in her 50s came up to a handicraft exhibition stand. The woman was wearing a silk batik, kebaya, and carrying a Louis Vuitton handbag. She was standing in front of the stand, and holding the bag. She looked at a price tag, frowned, and then said, "It's just a lurik cloth, lady. Why is it so expensive?"

Herlin, the stand keeper, was stunned by the woman’s comment. For her, the woman’s comment sounded odd particularly because it was in contrast to her upscale look and the internationally branded product that she was carrying. Nonetheless she understood. This was not the first time that people could not appreciate the products made from lurik cloth that were on display.

"Most people consider lurik fabrics as cheap fabrics," Herlin said.

Indeed, most people still consider lurik fabrics are identical to cheap printed batik cloths which are often used as the raw material of handicraft. The fact is the lurik fabrics used by Lawe, a non-profit enterprise from Yogyakarta, were traditionally woven by village women who used natural fibers and dyes. Making a single piece of these traditional woven fabrics takes at least more than one month. Therefore the price becomes relative.

In the hands of Lawe craftsmen, those traditional woven fabrics were then converted into functional products that can be used every day.
"We changed the traditional fabrics into products as a way to promote Indonesian traditionally woven fabrics," said Adinindyah, a co-founder of Lawe.

Lurik is actually not the first material used to make Lawe products, although now it is its main material. The early Lawe products actually used traditionally woven cloth from West Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara.

The story of Lawe began when Adinindyah worked for a non-governmental organization in West Sumba. Her job was to assist the communities living around the forest so that they would not damage the forest by cutting down the trees. Adinindyah saw that these people actually had an economic potential from their woven fabrics. The women in the area produce beautiful fabrics, but they have a difficulty in selling them.

"It's probably because they are expensive that they are hard to sell. And then I got an idea that maybe if I make small things from them, people might want to buy because the price is so much cheaper, and the fabric also has additional functions," said Adinindyah.

And then she started to create a simple products of these fabrics such as bags, book covers and a few other small items.

Before her initial effort produced any significant results, Adinindyah had to return to Yogyakarta. However, her passion to produce items from traditionally woven fabrics was already flaming.

"I found it hard to abandon what we had started, but at the same time it was difficult for me to continue my effort in Sumba," said Adinindyah who then tried to find traditional woven cloth in Yogyakarta. It was then that she became acquainted with lurik.

With an initial capital of Rp 3.000.000, - collected from her and her four friends, Adinindyah founded a handicraft company called the Lawe in 2004. In the beginning of its establishment, Lawe experimented with stationery handicrafts such as book covers, memo pads, and other small souvenir items.
After just two years of Lawe operation, Yogyakarta was shaken by a strong earthquake. The lurik workshop which supplied the main materials for Lawe was damaged, both its building and all its production equipments. In fact, the owner was about to shut down his business. This was certainly a serious problem for Lawe which fully depended on the raw materials from the weaving workshop.

Eventually the Lawe managers tried to help by buying all the remaining stocks of lurik fabrics that were still in good enough condition for selling and producing handicraft items. They also tried to convince the workshop owner not to stop their business and continue to produce. After just a period of three months, the workshop was already back in operation and started producing again. "It's a relief to know they're back in business shortly," said Adinindyah proudly.

Since then, Lawe began to develop new product lines, such as large bags, purses, pillow cases, knick-knacks, and even receive orders to produce company merchandise items.

The idea of promoting the Indonesian traditional woven fabrics is very noble. The initiative to convert woven fabrics into handicraft products is an innovation. However, those Lawe products were not necessarily received well by the public.

"At that time, there were no other players who used lurik fabric. On the other hand, the handicraft market was dominated by printed batik fabrics that are much much cheaper. It's hard for us to compete," said Westiani, one of Adinindyah's friends who also co-founded Lawe.

Recognizing the market conditions that were still unfamiliar with lurik fabric products, the managers of Lawe used a different marketing strategy. "We didn't sell it to the mass market, but using a "guerrilla tactic" through our friends," said Westiani.

They contacted some friends who were considered able to understand the value of their products and help sell them. Most of them come from the non-governmental organizations. Westiani believes that activists are able to appreciate their products better than the market in general. So are numbers of expatriates who live and work in Yogyakarta.
"At one time we were given a table to sell our products in their internal meeting. In fact, on another occasion we were given an opportunity to present and introduce Lawe. It really helped our campaign," said Westiani.

Another strategy was to market the products through exhibitions. One of the exhibitions that were considered very important was INACRAFT which was held in Jakarta.

Due to limited funds, they were initially only able to place their Lawe products there through a business partner who participated in the exhibition. The result was never satisfactory which raised doubts as to whether the lurik products were marketable.

The opportunity to prove market acceptance of Lawe products came when they got a small grant from The Samdhana Institute to take part in the largest handicraft exhibition in Indonesia which was held in Jakarta Convention Center in 2007. "Now that we think about it, we were actually not prepared for it. It was such a big exhibition and none of us had any experience in marketing," Adinindyah said with a guffaw.

The direct experience of participating in an exhibition turned out to be important. The lurik woven products that they offer got a surprising response. Many people wanted to know and bought those products. "It was possibly because we were the only one offering lurik product on the exhibition," said Adinindyah.

The exhibition was an opportunity for the Lawe managers to learn. The responses of visitors become the basis for them to devise appropriate marketing strategies. There are at least three types of visitors that can be identified by them.
First, the type of visitors who do not know much about lurik fabrics will explore more about the specificity of the fabrics such as, asking about its origins, how it was produced, the traditional values, and things other than the price. Typically, this type of visitors will buy the products if stand keeper is able to explain the significance and uniqueness of lurik.

The second type visitors are those who are familiar with lurik fabrics but they have never seen the innovation of lurik used in craft products before. Typically, they will be keen to further deepen their knowledge about the coloring techniques and product processing. Because they already knew the value of lurik fabrics, these visitors usually don’t mind much with the price, but they rather pay attention to the designs. If the colors and designs are considered appealing and fit their taste, they will readily decide to buy the product.

The third type of visitors is the people as illustrated earlier in this article. They are the people who have known about lurik fabrics, but position lurik as low grade fabrics commonly worn by herbal tonic ladies or a clothing material of Kraton (palace) servants. Despite having the money and comes from a high social class, usually this type of visitors will try to bid the prices up to 50% cheaper.

The experience of taking part in the exhibition makes the managers of Lawe confident in promoting the their products. The invitations to participate in other exhibitions were eagerly accepted and they learn further that positive responses are not always be found in each exhibition. This means that their products do not always sell. And interestingly, or ironically, Yogyakarta is not the right place to sell lurik products.

No serious research has been done on the subject, but Lawe team suspects that it might be due to the low purchasing power of the people or because lurik is seen as an ordinary thing.
These lessons are important and they become the best teacher for Lawe managers. They become selective in choosing the exhibitions. Even if the exhibition is free, if the visitors are not the targeted consumers, it will be difficult to sell the products.

"We prefer to join the exhibition in Jakarta despite having to pay Rp 2,000,000,- to have a table for three days as opposed to a free exhibition in Yogyakarta with 3 x 3 meter stand for five days," said Adinindyah.

In addition to taking part in exhibitions, Lawe products are also marketed in a special showroom in Yogyakarta. Also Lawe distributes its products to six stores in Yogyakarta and three stores in Jakarta. Another marketing system is through a reseller business model. This is mostly for those who run an online business.

The future plan of Lawe is to expand its market overseas. "Export is the dream of every handicraft maker," said Adinindyah.

The dream was welcomed by Bali Export Development Organization (BEDO) Bali and the Center for the Promotion of Imports from Developing Countries (CBI), which provide training and mentoring programs. "For two years we will be assisted so that we will be able to export to Europe, especially for home décor products," said Adinindyah.

During the training and mentoring program, the Lawe team will be provided with the knowledge about export issues, such as how to dissect the identity of the product, how to determine a reasonable price, pack a product and to prepare for the exhibitions. To test the export market, Lawe products will be included an exhibition in Vietnam in April 2013 where there will be many buyers who come from Europe.

This is indeed an important step and a serious leap for Lawe. It is a way to prove the ability of Lawe managers to market lurik fabric to the global market and at the same time emphasize that lurik is not a low-grade fabric that can be underestimated.
Fitria Werdiningsih

Appreciating the work of the artisan is one of Fitria Werdiningsih passions. This friendly lady in short hair was born in Wonogiri 32 years ago. Fitri, that is how she is called, is a business unit manager of Lawe Association. Fitri wants to be known as Lawe’s “spokепerson”. Fitri is so flexible, a straightforward type of person, and she is always beaming with pride everytime she has to tell about each program and the works produced by Lawe.

Passion is one of the words that Fitri counts on during creating. The lady who had studied Communication in the University of Gajah Mada (UGM) has a dream of ‘Traveling all around the World’. Fitri feels that Lawe is “her bridge” to achieve that dream. Fitri hopes that Lurik Jogjakarta through Lawe’s works can go international and be an icon of Indonesia. Thus, impacting the artisans’ livelihood and making them improved and sustainable. Previously, not so many people knew Lurik (striated woven fabric) as a typical of Jogjakarta fabric, and not many lurik weavers were proud of their works. The weavers are usually elder people. Currently, Lurik has become famous and being transformed into interesting products by Lawe. Fitri and Lawe continue to campaign and encourage weavers in various regions of Indonesia through Lawe sisterhood program. Bali, North Sumatra, Riau, Palembang, Sumba, South Sulawesi and East South Central (Mollo, Amanatun, and Amanuban) are area rich with weavers and products out of the woven fabric has been successfully created by Lawe.