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Nostalgia Made Material: The Social Life of Retro Crafts in Postcolonial Java*

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Abstract. This study explores how retro craft objects in postcolonial Java materialize collective nostalgia through their social life across domestic and public spaces, with Surakarta and Yogyakarta serving as key ethnographic sites. Through material culture analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, we reveal how these once-neglected artifacts gain

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renewed cultural legitimacy through two interconnected processes: first, as vehicles for personal and communal nostalgia that aesthetically transform living spaces through references to Java's craft heritage; second, through institutional "retrotification" where art establishments consecrate these objects as valuable cultural capital. The research demonstrates how these retro crafts operate as tangible mediators of memory, bridging colonial-era craftsmanship with contemporary identity formation while reflecting postcolonial society's negotiation of modernity through material culture. Their circulation between private homes (as markers of individual taste) and public venues (as statements of collective heritage) underscores their dual role in Java's nostalgia economy, with local art institutions acting as crucial legitimizing agents that transform obsolete items into aesthetic commodities. This work contributes to material culture studies by theorizing retrotification as an institutional practice, to postcolonial urbanism through its spatial analysis of nostalgia economies, and to heritage studies by documenting vernacular preservation outside formal state frameworks.

Keywords. Material nostalgia, retro crafts, postcolonial heritage, spatial practice, cultural consecration, and java.

1. *Introduction*

In postcolonial Java, a unique cultural phenomenon has emerged in which retro craft objects are revitalized as material manifestations of nostalgia, deeply embedded within both individual and collective memory (Guffey [2006]: 24). This resurgence of traditional Javanese crafts, ranging from architectural elements such as *joglo* and *limasan* houses to *gebyog* room dividers, has transformed them into more than just functional objects. They have become deliberate aesthetic statements, reflecting contemporary efforts to reconnect with Java's artisanal heritage (Mieke *et al*., [1999]: VII). Cities like Surakarta and Yogyakarta have seen this shift not only in domestic spaces but also in public realms, where traditional batik attire is worn at formal events and old buildings are repurposed to accommodate modern businesses while preserving their historical facades (Batcho [1998]: 430).

This revival illustrates a dynamic interplay between past and present: buffalo cage materials are now used as garage fences, antique furniture lines urban sidewalks, and vintage-style streetlights light up modern thoroughfares (Nikelly [2004]: 192). These retro craft objects, while retaining their practical utility, also serve as powerful symbols of cultural continuity, mediating the ongoing negotiation between memory and modernity in a rapidly evolving society (Davis [1979]: 73). Through a process we call "retrotification", what were once overlooked remnants of the past have been reimagined as legitimate cultural artifacts, recognized for their aesthetic and historical value by cultural institutions and market forces alike (Fort-Rioche, Ackermann [2013]: 497).

This study explores how these retro craft objects function within postcolonial Java, examining their circulation in domestic decoration, urban design, and sartorial practices (Alexander, Bowler [2021]: 3). We investigate how they embody

and express postcolonial identity, fostering a sense of continuity with Java's rich artisanal past while simultaneously addressing the demands of modern life. By examining these material objects, we aim to understand the complex relationship between nostalgia, memory, and social identity in contemporary Indonesia (Cross [2015]: 5).

2. *Literature review*

The concept of *retro* has evolved into a significant cultural phenomenon, acting as a bridge between the past and the present through material objects. Often defined as "old style", "ancient", or "classic" (Guffey [2006]), retro transcends mere aesthetic preference to embody a cultural tendency toward preserving and reinterpreting historical styles (Doll [2012]). This phenomenon, which traces its roots back to the revival of Art Nouveau in the 1960s (Guffey [2006]), has since permeated various aspects of contemporary life, including fashion, design, architecture, and popular culture (Harris [2015]; Weiss [2013]). In the Javanese context, retro craft objects serve as powerful material representations of nostalgia, evolving from functional items into symbols of cultural identity and historical continuity.

Retro craft objects, as man-made artifacts (Rissati [2007]), include traditional Javanese creations such as textiles, wood carvings, ceramics, and furniture (Boden [2000]). These objects gain cultural significance through three primary modes of production: reproduction (exact replicas of historical designs), reinterpretation (adapted versions of traditional forms), and creation (new works inspired by historical aesthetics) (Fort-Rioche, Ackermann [2013]). What distinguishes Javanese retro crafts is their dual role: they maintain practical utility while simultaneously serving as material anchors for collective memory (Jenß [2004]). This dual function is particularly amplified in postcolonial Java, where retro crafts act as sites of negotiation for modern identity, blending traditional forms with contemporary cultural expressions.

The theoretical framework of this study builds on the concept of "retrotification" – a process through which previously neglected craft objects gain new cultural legitimacy (Doll [2012]; Reynolds [2011]). In postcolonial Java, retro crafts serve as tangible connections to pre-colonial heritage while adapting to the aesthetic demands of modern society. The process of retrotification reveals how these objects become re-contextualized within contemporary cultural and socio-political frameworks, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity. Through the social life of these objects (Appadurai [1986]), we see how material culture plays a central role in mediating the tensions between historical preservation and modern reinvention, particularly in urban centers like Sura-

karta and Yogyakarta. Here, traditional crafts are reimagined and incorporated into both domestic and public spaces, reflecting the ongoing negotiation of postcolonial identity.

In postcolonial Indonesia, specifically in Java, retro crafts have come to symbolize not only aesthetic revival but also the reclamation of cultural heritage in the face of colonial history and modernization. The interplay of memory, nostalgia, and materiality within the production and circulation of retro crafts demonstrates how objects become active agents in the construction of postcolonial cultural narratives.

3. *Research method*

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to investigate the social, cultural, and material dimensions of retro crafts in contemporary Java. The focus of the research is on how retro craft objects function as both material and symbolic representations of nostalgia, memory, and postcolonial identity. The research method combines ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and material culture analysis, all situated within Java's postcolonial context.

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in key cultural hubs such as Yogyakarta, Surakarta, and Jepara, where retro craft production centers, antique markets, and retro-themed businesses are concentrated. This fieldwork allowed for direct observation of the practices and processes involved in the creation, distribution, and consumption of retro crafts. Observations focused on both domestic and public spaces, exploring how retro crafts are incorporated into Javanese households, as well as how they are used in public spaces to shape collective memory and cultural identity (Baumann [2007]: 49).

In addition to fieldwork, in-depth interviews were conducted with various stakeholders in the retro craft ecosystem, including local artisans, craft producers, antique market vendors, aesthetic entrepreneurs, and consumers. These interviews provided insight into how these individuals engage with retro crafts as material embodiments of cultural continuity and identity in postcolonial Java (Alexander, Bowler [2021]: 3). Special attention was given to understanding how retro crafts are perceived as markers of nostalgia and memory, as well as their evolving role in contemporary Javanese society.

Material culture analysis was another crucial method employed in this research. Retro craft objects – such as furniture, ceramics, textiles, and metalwork – were analyzed for their design features and material composition. This analysis aimed to uncover how these objects mediate the materialization of cultural memory and the transformation of historical styles into contemporary forms of expression (Guffey [2006]: 15). The visual analysis was extended to both private

and public spaces, focusing on the role of retro crafts in beautifying domestic interiors and public spaces, such as offices, streets, and markets (Cross [2015]: 11).

The study also contextualized the phenomenon of retro crafts within the broader historical and cultural framework of Java's postcolonial history. By considering the legacy of colonialism on craft production and the subsequent reimagination of Javanese cultural heritage, the research explores how contemporary society repurposes traditional crafts as expressions of modern identity, shaped by the socio-political forces of the postcolonial era (Niemeyer [2014]: 3).

By employing these complementary research methods – fieldwork, interviews, material culture analysis, and historical contextualization – the study provides a comprehensive view of the social life of retro crafts in postcolonial Java, revealing their dual function as both practical objects and potent symbols of memory, identity, and cultural continuity.

Results

In postcolonial Java, retro craft objects are increasingly integrated into both private and public spaces, creating a distinct aesthetic trend. This phenomenon, known as authentication (Welsch [1996]: 2, 7), transforms everyday objects into cultural symbols. Rooted in nostalgia, retro crafts materialize past cultural references into tangible items that carry memory and identity, reflecting the complexity of postcolonial identity (Neumark [2003]: 43; Cahill [2003]: 43). These objects bridge modernity with historical past, serving as aesthetic statements.

Beautification, as an artistic process aimed at evoking aesthetic responses (Brielmann *et al*., [2021]: 1), is not just about beauty but also about engaging with the past and reshaping collective identity. Retro crafts become tools for negotiating postcolonial identity, allowing individuals and communities to assert cultural continuity while adapting to contemporary realities. These objects, found in both domestic spaces and public areas, maintain practicality while symbolizing nostalgia and memory (Neumark [2013]: 238).

In Java, retro craft objects like ceramics, batik, wood carvings, and vintage-style furniture are recontextualized in modern settings, demonstrating retrotification (Doll [2012]). This process revives traditional craft objects to serve both functional and symbolic purposes in contemporary Java (Reynolds [2011]). For example, traditional wooden furniture is incorporated into modern homes and public spaces, while batik is used in both formal and casual wear, evoking cultural pride and signaling postcolonial identity.

The social life of retro crafts is shaped by local artisans, antique markets, and aesthetic entrepreneurs. As Baumann (2007: 49) and Alexander and Bowler (2021: 3) note, the production, distribution, and consumption of these objects are influenced by a broader social context. Artisans in cultural centers like Yogya-

karta and Surakarta produce retro crafts through reproduction, reinterpretation, and creation. Antique markets and repair hubs, found in both urban and rural areas, play key roles in circulating these objects, fostering connections between the past and present.

The appeal of retro crafts extends beyond the elite, resonating with the broader public. Retro objects often symbolize cultural literacy and serve as identity markers in a rapidly changing society (Baumann [2007]: 52-53; Alexander, Bowler, [2021]: 3). In postcolonial Java, retro crafts mediate between historical memory and modern identity, offering a space for cultural preservation and transformation.

5. *Materializing nostalgia: Retro crafts in domestic spaces*

In postcolonial Java, domestic spaces serve as arenas for negotiating identity, memory, and cultural heritage (Ureta [2007]: 314). Objects like furniture, textiles, and decor act as material representations of the past, with retro crafts playing a key role in bridging the gap between past and present. These objects are more than functional; they contribute to memory-making and create a nostalgic atmosphere.

Beautification in domestic spaces goes beyond decoration, involving the reimagining of past objects to reflect personal and cultural histories. Retro crafts, such as old-style furniture and ceramics, symbolize continuity with the past and are adapted within the home to reflect both personal taste and broader cultural narratives (Neumark [2013]: 238). For example, house fences and doors, often repurposed from traditional materials, become markers of personal and collective histories, embodying the owner's memories and aspirations (Omar *et al*. [2012]: 329). These retro craft objects transform domestic spaces into places that reflect cultural identity, nostalgia, and personal engagement with history.

Inside the home, retro craft objects like old furniture, tables, and lamps become more than functional items; they evoke memories and create an atmosphere that reflects both individual and collective postcolonial identity (Hurdley [2013]: 81; Neumark [2013]: 245). In postcolonial Java, retro crafts are integral to beautifying and personalizing domestic spaces, acting as tangible links to cultural heritage and identity. Their placement reflects a process of self-expression, cultural reclamation, and the negotiation of personal and cultural identity (Money [2007]: 367; Woodward [2001]: 121). In this way, retro crafts transform domestic spaces into sites of memory and nostalgia, embodying the ongoing dialogue between the colonial past and the present desire for cultural continuity and transformation.



Figure 1. House Entrance. The House of Dr. Ranang Agung Sugiharto, S.Pd., M.Sn., 2021.
Photo by Guntur.



Figure 2: Workspace. The House of Fatmawati, M.Sn., Surakarta, 2022.
Photo by Taufik Murtono.

6. *Nostalgic artifacts in public spaces: Retro crafts and cultural identity*

Beautification extends beyond private spaces into public urban renewal projects, aiming to restructure public spaces like parks and streets to create a sense of community (Neumark [2013]: 238). In postcolonial Java, urban beautification efforts in cities such as Yogyakarta and Surakarta integrate retro crafts to materialize nostalgia and reflect cultural identity (Azis, Ahmad [2012]: 275). These objects – such as street furniture, ceramics, and statues – serve as cultural symbols, linking the past and present while reinforcing the city's cultural identity (Espuche *et al*. [1991]: 149; Stewart *et al*. [2019]: 200).

The streets of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, for instance, feature ornamental stone paving, Javanese script, and traditional motifs that embody the region's heritage. These retro crafts are recontextualized in modern urban settings to foster a tangible connection to the past, reflecting an ongoing cultural negotiation (Munro [1966]: 92). Objects like teakwood chairs, carved street lamps, and figurative statues evoke nostalgia, marking the artistic traditions that shaped the region's identity (Hurdley [2013]: 81).

Public spaces such as parks, food stalls, and coffee shops further materialize nostalgia by incorporating retro craft objects. In Yogyakarta and Surakarta, the transformation of traditional homes into restaurants uses items like *cobek* (stone grinding plates) and *kuwali* (cooking pans) to evoke past culinary traditions, enriching the cultural experience (Routledge *et al*. [2013]: 45). Similarly, coffee shops use retro furniture and decor to create a nostalgic atmosphere, allowing customers to connect with Java's material culture while reinforcing cultural identity and psychological well-being (Neumark [2013]: 245).



Figure 3: Beautification of City Street in Yogyakarta. Malioboro Street, Yogyakarta, 2022. Photo by Wahyu Novianto.



Figure 4. Restaurant Exterior. Gedhang Kepok Resto, Karanganyar, 2022.
Photo by Taufik Murtono.

7. *Nostalgia and memory in retro crafts: Anchoring postcolonial identity through material culture*

The retro phenomenon is deeply tied to nostalgia and memory, which serve as anchors in connecting individuals to their cultural heritage (Guffey [2006]: 24). In postcolonial Java, retro crafts materialize nostalgia, offering tangible continuity and identity through the preservation and reinterpretation of past cultural artifacts (Nikelly [2004]: 192; Plate, Smelik [2009]: 6). These objects, imbued with historical and emotional significance, foster a connection to important moments and cultural narratives, reshaping memory within everyday life (Alexander, Bowler [2021]; Batcho [1998]).

Nostalgia, which stems from the Greek words for "return home" and "longing" (Sielke [2019]: 5), acts as a powerful force in preserving cultural identity, especially in postcolonial contexts. It offers emotional comfort and a sense of belonging, deepening the connection to one's heritage (Batcho [1998]: 430).

Retro crafts, as materialized nostalgia, serve as cultural capital, embedding past aesthetic experiences into daily life and facilitating the negotiation of identity and social life in postcolonial Java (Davis [1979]: 73; Sielke [2019]: 8).

The concept of retrotification (Niemeyer [2014]: 13; Pickering, Keightley [2014]: 91) explains how retro crafts preserve and reinterpret past cultural forms through repetition, reinterpretation, and creation. These processes allow retro crafts to merge past and contemporary aesthetics, offering a symbolic connection to the past while adapting to modern contexts (Fort-Rioche, Ackermann [2013]: 497). Nostalgia, therefore, is not only a longing for the past but also a defense mechanism in postcolonial identity formation, providing continuity and protection against modern changes (May [2016]: 4-5).

In postcolonial Java, retro crafts are tied to cultural memory–both personal and collective. They embody the memory of colonial history, with objects like souvenirs, antiques, and family heirlooms contributing to shared history and identity (Jenss [2015]: 1; Sturken [1997]: 9). These objects, serving as memory technologies, interpret and reinterpret history in societies where cultural legacies are contested (Brown *et al*. [2003]: 19; Kwint *et al*. [1999]: 2). Retro crafts, as living memories, become symbols of cultural resilience, preserving and transforming the past to create a meaningful present.



Figure 6. Converted Traditional Mortar. The House of Fatmawati, M.Sn., Surakarta, 2022. Photo by Taufik Murtono.

8. *Artistic legitimacy and the social life of retro crafts in postcolonial Java*

The legitimacy of retro crafts in postcolonial Java is shaped by the socio-cultural context, where traditional and colonial legacies continue to influence cultural identity (Baumann [2007]: 57). In postcolonial societies, legitimacy emerges through a complex interplay of discourse, ideology, and institutional frameworks, reflecting societal values that are often contested or redefined after colonialism (Hadjinicolaou [1978]: 94; Baumann [2007]: 58).

In Java, retro crafts gain legitimacy not just through production and consumption but by how they are framed in public discourse. These objects, embodying nostalgia and cultural continuity, align with societal values that either embrace or challenge colonial aesthetics (Johnson *et al*. [2006]: 57; Suchman [1995]: 574). Retro crafts, once marginalized, are now reasserted as expressions of Javanese identity, resisting colonial legacies and fostering local pride (Alexander, Bowler [2021]). The legitimacy process is dynamic, with retro crafts slowly gaining recognition as an integral part of Java's evolving artistic landscape (Baumann [2007]: 48).

Achieving artistic legitimacy involves more than material resources or institutional support; it requires reframing retro crafts within the context of local values, historical continuity, and resistance to colonial influence (Baumann [2007]: 49). This reframing allows retro crafts to be repositioned as symbols of cultural resilience and vitality. Baumann (2007) highlights three key factors for legitimacy: opportunities, resources, and discourse. In postcolonial Java, these factors help retro crafts navigate the tension between traditional Javanese forms and foreign influences, transforming them into symbols of social life and redefining Java's artistic identity (Baumann [2007]: 51-52). In conclusion, the social life of retro crafts in Java involves constant negotiation and reinvention. These crafts, once deemed outdated, are now reimagined as powerful cultural expressions that embody nostalgia and resilience, contributing to the postcolonial artistic landscape.

9. *The retro craft industry and its social life in postcolonial Java*

The retro craft industry in postcolonial Java is shaped by memory, nostalgia, and cultural identity, materializing the past through crafts that evoke both personal and collective memories. Retro crafts draw inspiration from the past as an alternative to innovation, helping Java reconnect with its pre-colonial identity and cultural roots often suppressed during colonialism (Guffey [2006]: 15; Castellano *et al*. [2013]: 385). These crafts are not mere commodities but are imbued with symbolic and postcolonial meaning (Fort-Rioche, Ackermann [2013]: 497).

This industry is fueled by a blend of cultural heritage, nostalgia, and a desire for revival, helping Java assert pride and resilience in the face of moderniza-

tion (Castellano *et al*. [2013]). Retro crafts serve as tangible links to Java's diverse cultural and historical memories, reconnecting the present with the past (Reynolds [2011]).

Retro craft objects are produced in various craft centers like Kasongan, Plered, Laweyan, and Jepara, where traditional craftsmanship blends with modern retro design influences (Baumann [2007]: 54-55). These areas become hubs for creating objects that reimagine cultural forms through modernity, producing artifacts that maintain cultural significance and historical memory.

The legitimacy of these crafts is shaped by both material resources, like art institutions and equipment, and non-material resources, such as labor and prestige. Retro crafts are supported by markets and cultural entrepreneurs, including antique shops and repairmen, who restore and transform retro objects for contemporary consumption, ensuring their cultural relevance (Baumann [2007]: 54-55).

The consumption of retro crafts in Java reflects both elite taste and popular culture, with these objects seen as symbols of cultural literacy and postcolonial identity (Alexander & Bowler [2021]: 3). The elite's engagement with retro crafts elevates these objects to legitimate artistic forms, ensuring their continued relevance and social significance in both local and global contexts.

10. *Conclusion*

Based on the discussions above, it can be concluded that the past is an inseparable component of both present and future life in postcolonial Java. The past, particularly in the context of retro crafts, serves as a repository of nostalgia and memory, continuously accessible and adaptable to enrich the present while simultaneously shaping future cultural and social identities. This connection to the past is not just a personal or individual experience, but a collective one that links Javanese communities to their heritage and postcolonial struggles.

Nostalgia and memory function as powerful driving forces of aesthetic enhancement, influencing both private domestic spaces and public domains. These elements are reanimated through retro craft objects, which evoke and revive past emotions and memories. Within domestic spaces, objects like furniture, decorative items, and artifacts become material manifestations of memory – helping to anchor personal and family identities to a shared cultural past. In public spaces, such as marketplaces, offices, streets, and shops, retro crafts serve as tools of aesthetic expression and social cohesion, reinforcing Javanese cultural identity while also adapting to modern, postcolonial life.

Retro crafts gain legitimacy as a form of art due to their tangible presence in contemporary life, not only in private homes but also in public environments that intersect with daily life. The legitimacy of these crafts is supported by the

craft industry, which produces these objects through processes of reproduction, reinterpretation, and creation. However, their legitimacy is also bolstered by a network of cultural actors – markets, traders, aesthetic entrepreneurs, and craft repairmen – who act as both distributors and custodians of the retro craft industry. These actors contribute to the social life of retro crafts, ensuring their continued relevance and accessibility to a broad community, while simultaneously preserving cultural memory and engaging in postcolonial identity construction.

In this way, retro crafts do not merely serve as aesthetic objects; they are social agents that engage with memory, nostalgia, and identity. They help bridge the gap between past and present, reviving cultural continuity and facilitating a deeper understanding of postcolonial Java's complex heritage. Through their materialization, retro crafts embody the resilience of Javanese identity, transforming nostalgia from a mere emotional longing into a material force that shapes both personal and collective experiences.

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