

SANCTUARY *OF* SILVER SMITHS

In Yogyakarta's Kotagede enclave, a community initiative is reviving the traditional trade of silversmithing, forging a brighter future for the next generation.

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Anen engraving a pattern onto a sheet of metal by hand. The silversmiths of Jagalan village still employ traditional techniques to produce silver crafts.

My journey to the heritage enclave of Kotagede was less than a half-hour drive from Yogyakarta's city centre, and that too despite Saturday morning traffic. The wide streets of the city centre merged with country roads that transformed into even narrower lanes as I approached my destination. Despite my proximity to the commercial hub of the city, I felt as if I'd been transported into another realm, a different era. I was, after all, in the historic heart of a Javanese kingdom.

The former capital of the illustrious Mataram sultanate that ruled most of Java from the 16th to the 18th centuries, Kotagede, which literally means 'big city' was once an important seat of power and much more than that, a bastion of Javanese culture.

My driver negotiated cramped streets, at one point, backing up to the nearest junction to enable another vehicle to pass, before the city walls finally came into sight. It was market day, and on the perimeter of the settlement, villagers were out in full force, bargaining for wares – from batik (fabric featuring a wax-resist dyeing technique) sarongs to freshly slaughtered chickens, just as their forefathers might have once done. I alighted at the entrance of the centuries-old Kotagede Mosque, a place of worship whose grounds also house a sacred burial site.

A path through the mosque's leafy courtyard led to Jagalan, one of five villages that make up the core heritage zone of Kotagede. It was here, amid winding alleys and kampong houses that I met a small community of silversmiths, gifted with the knowledge of a craft passed down from generation to generation.

A LIVING HERITAGE My guide, Mayang, and I crisscrossed the maze of alleys that make up Jagalan village, ducking beneath drying laundry and stopping to greet children playing in the street. By the time we arrived at the home of brothers and silversmiths, Anen and Apri, we had amassed a colourful band of followers, made up of several curious kids and a scraggly feline. I felt like a rock star, with the children (and cat) watching my every move with eyes as wide as saucers.

Anen, the older of the siblings, patiently answered questions as his wife served us lemongrass-infused tea in their spotless and spartan sitting room. The brothers had inherited the art of silversmithing from an uncle skilled in the craft. Through constant guidance and years of honing their technique under his watchful eyes, Anen and Apri are now silversmiths in their own right. "Silversmithing requires patience and an eye for detail. It's hard work and every piece is precious. The work does not pay much but it is part of our heritage, something we have to keep alive or risk losing," he said.

Though figures vary depending on the specifics of an order, a full-time silversmith can earn up to IDR100,000 (less than USD8) on a good day. For the siblings, passion fuelled their interest to keep the tradition alive. "Many youngsters leave to pursue vocations with a steady income; some become car park attendants and those who make it to university prefer the certainty of an office job. But, what will be left of our heritage if all of us were to think like that?" he pondered.

As we sipped our tea, through the thin walls that divided the sitting room and kitchen, came the tap-tap-tap of silver being hammered into shape on an anvil. Next door, Apri was busy working on an order. He politely permitted me to watch as he fashioned an intricate ornament out of a sheet of silver. A shaft of sunlight streamed through a tiny window overhead, providing the barest of illumination as Apri hunched over his work table, focused on the task at hand. Working in a narrow galley-like space that also doubled as the family's kitchen, Apri did not seem to mind that his workshop was a less-than-ideal space for a silversmith of his calibre.

This is the reality for many of the silversmiths in the village, who labour day and night, crafting silver into fine works of art that though of exquisite quality, might never see the insides of a gallery. To learn more about the heritage of the silversmiths, I was once again led through weaving village paths, this time to the home of Pak Budi, the siblings' uncle.

OF HEART AND SOUL Now in his late 60s, Budi was the person responsible for stoking Anen and Apri's interest in silversmithing. When I asked about the history of Kotagede's silversmiths, he reckoned the craft went back centuries. "As the capital of the Mataram sultanate, Kotagede attracted master craftsmen from all over Java to fulfil the palaces' needs for brass, gold and silverware. The mastery of this craft was honed over generations and the art passed down from father to son," he enthused.

According to Budi, silverware produced in Kotagede received international attention in the 1930s, thanks to the wife of the Dutch East Indies' governor at the time who was reportedly enamoured by the work of the silversmiths. "Orders for silverware – mainly tableware and decorative items – poured in, and many of the products were shipped to the Netherlands, and now, are part of private collections or museum displays. World War II put a temporary halt to things but between the 60s and 80s, Kotagede silverware was once again in fashion." Before the advent of cheaper, mass produced silver jewellery and ornaments, Budi claimed that the silversmiths of Kotagede earned a decent living. "A day's work could feed my family for a week. Back then, almost every household in Jagalan was involved in silversmithing. At night,



you'd be able to hear a chorus of tapping as the silversmiths worked on their wares, but today, sadly, very few are still in the business."

In Budi's living room, a teakwood cabinet displayed several of the silversmith's handcrafted pieces and among his prized collection was an ornately etched bird with stunning detailing. Budi followed my gaze and opined in Bahasa Indonesia, "*Pengrajin perak mesti ada jiwa seni* (a silversmith must have the soul of an artist)". It was one of his favourite creations, the fine work a testament of a true artist who derived inspiration from nature and the world around him. The soft-spoken gentleman then pulled out a plastic folder filled with photographs of his work. Page after page featured stunning silverware, from trays and teapots with intricately carved handles to ornamental figurines commissioned by wealthy businessmen; Budi's creations spanned decades and a variety of styles.



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT

An ornamental gate leads to the royal cemetery complex of Kotagede.

Implements used in the engraving process

Gongs are an essential feature of Javanese culture. In the past, they were used as a means of communication.

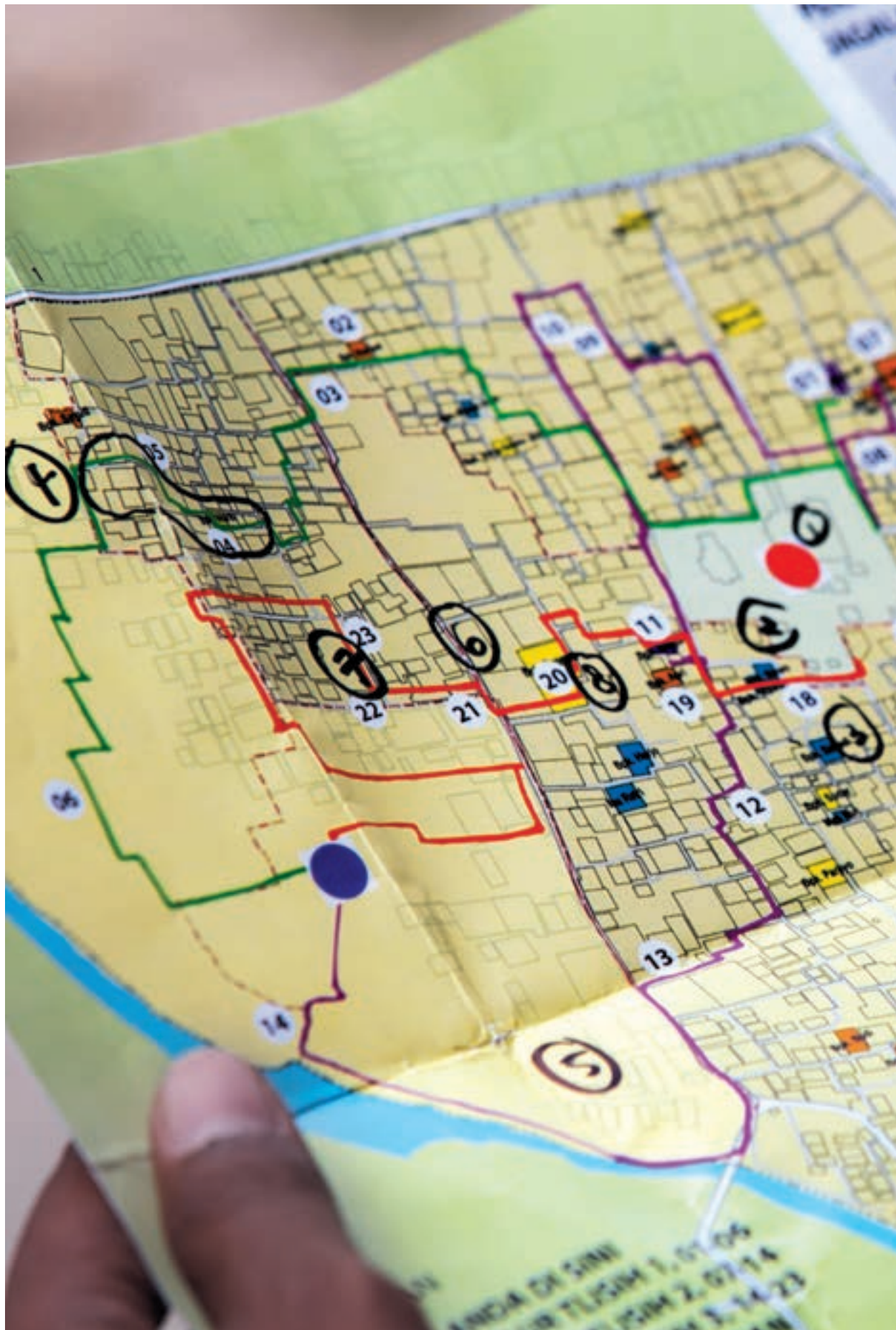
Before beginning reconstruction efforts in Jagalan, Yuli Kusworo, the coordinator of ArkomJogja was faced with the task of mapping the historic village - an endeavour his team accomplished with the help of local youth.

Within the walled city of Kotagede, are ancient bathhouses, traditional homes and sacred tombs. The area is also home to a community of artisans, mainly silversmiths.



CONSERVATION THROUGH ENTERPRISE

AirAsia Foundation, ArkomJogja and Karang Taruna Jagalan, a youth group from the village, have introduced the Jagalan Tlilih Heritage Walks – guided tours along three walking routes in Jagalan. Through these walks, visitors can learn about the rich architectural heritage of the village, visit silversmiths at their workshops and sample local culinary specialties. Proceeds from the tours are channeled towards funding future conservation activities, including the gradual restoration of traditional buildings for use as shared community spaces. To sign up for a heritage walk, email jogja@arkom.or.id





BELOW Apri is a picture of concentration as he works on crafting a silver charm in the workshop-cum-kitchen of his home.

ABOVE A silversmith blowtorches a piece of silver. Blowtorching is often used to soften the metal.

LEFT The Jagalan Tlilih walking map includes sites of architectural and cultural note such as heritage buildings, silversmithing workshops and kue (traditional cakes) vendors.



IRRESISTIBLE CHARMS

A selection of three silver charms made by the silversmiths of Jagalan, Kotagede, are now exclusively available on board all Malaysia AirAsia and Indonesia AirAsia flights. Start your own collection of handmade silver charms with these Javanese icons.



OMAH LIMASAN These traditional Javanese timber pavilions are commonly found in Kotagede and function as community gathering spaces.



BENDE and JAGUR Striking the *bende* (traditional gong) with a *jagur* (stick) results in a loud echoing sound that was once a means of communication.



MANGKORO A traditional Javanese mask, the *mangkoro* (a design often seen decorating the hilt of *keris* or traditional dagger) is believed to be a symbol of protection and good luck.





Silver charms produced by the silversmiths of Jagalan feature intricate detailing.



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT

Jagalan, one of the five villages that make up the core heritage zone of Kotagede, is home to a number of traditional Javanese *joglo* houses that have distinctive roofs and elaborate design elements.

A village elder plays the *gambang*, a xylophone like instrument.

The *cetak* (traditional mould) comes in handy when producing large batches of a product with a similar design. It is one of the few conveniences that traditional silversmiths employ in their work.

An ornamental glass panel decorates a heritage house in Jagalan, a legacy of the Indische style of architecture that combines local and Dutch influences.

A caliper is used to measure the size of a charm.





"Silversmithing is not an easy profession. It takes years to master the technique. Translating the image in our mind's eye into an actual work of art can be difficult at first, but practice makes perfect. The more a silversmith works at his craft, the better he becomes."

REBUILDING LIVES After our visit to Budi, Mayang and I headed to an old bungalow built in Javanese traditional style. In the *omah limasan*, a pavilion in front of the house that traditionally served as a gathering place, a workshop had convened for a group of silversmiths. However, instead of being taught the finer points of silversmithing (an area in which they did not need many pointers), they were learning ways to price and market their work – part of a series of workshops organised by AirAsia Foundation, in collaboration with ArkomJogja, a non-profit organisation whose mission is to

preserve the architectural and cultural heritage of Yogyakarta's rich past.

Coincidentally, I happened to be wearing a necklace decorated with a trio of silver charms – a horseshoe, heart and four-leaved clover – purchased from a fashionable jewellery label. With a practiced eye, one of the silversmiths appraised my set of charms and estimated their worth. I was astonished by the number he quoted and he in turn, was shocked to hear the actual price of the pieces – lesson learnt! Apparently, my 'luxury' charms did not require much skill to produce. The design was simple compared to the masterpieces produced here. So, why then was the work of this silversmith not in a high-end store?

Although highly skilled in their craft, silversmiths in Jagalan lack the proper channels to market their products for what they are truly worth. To revive and support the development of this traditional trade, ArkomJogja, founded by a community of architects who focus on post-disaster rebuilding and the upgrading of urban slums, stepped in to help realise the potential of these master craftsmen.

This all began when, with a social enterprise grant from AirAsia Foundation, the organisation began working on the mapping and documentation of heritage buildings. The village of Jagalan was selected because it housed a high concentration of heritage buildings, many with unique architectural features. Through this exercise, it was discovered that the silversmith population in the village, which was once famed as the heart for Javanese craftsmanship, had dwindled to less than 30 practising artisans from a community of over 300.

ArkomJogja identified some of the challenges faced by this community when they began reconstruction efforts here. I spoke to the body's coordinator, Yuli Kusworo, who briefed me on their work in Kotagede. "Yogyakarta is known as the soul of Java, rich in cultural and architectural splendour. The earthquake in 2006 devastated the region and many heritage buildings suffered damages as a result. Our work concentrates on reconstruction in marginalised communities, people who do not have the ways and means to rebuild their homes. Many artisans left the village in search of greener pastures after the 1997 Asian financial crisis and those who remained

were forced to supplement their income with full-time jobs as parking attendants or construction workers," he explained. The 2006 earthquake compounded matters, leaving this community of master craftsmen little choice but to pursue other vocations. With the cooperation of AirAsia Foundation and ArkomJogja, the process of reconstructing buildings and rebuilding lives has begun.

DESIGNING THE FUTURE The silversmiths of Jagalan are experienced craftsmen who can reproduce patterns and designs in silver based on drawings or pictures torn from the pages of magazines. Those in the know often bypass the larger silver workshops that advertise Kotagede Silver along the main street leading to the village for one-of-a-kind pieces that are unique to Jagalan silversmiths. But these orders are hardly enough to earn decent wages.

To create a sustainable future for the silversmiths, AirAsia Foundation and ArkomJogja embarked on an initiative focusing on conservation through enterprise in 2013. To start off, a silversmiths' collective was established to create new designs for a range of contemporary silver charms, which would be sold on board AirAsia flights.

Through design workshops, and drawing inspiration from the village's rich cultural past, several Javanese icons were identified, among them a mask, cowbell, traditional weights, musical instrument and even the *omah limasan*. While working as a collective to produce these exclusive silver charms, the silversmiths continue to take individual orders. By pricing their products right, and selling them via proper marketing channels, Yuli expressed hope that a sustainable future was in sight.

"The project is close to my heart. I remember sunny afternoons spent playing hide and seek with friends in the alleys of Jagalan, the tap-tap-tap of the silversmiths working on a project, a constant soundtrack. Though this initiative is still in its infancy, it is a step forward, an opportunity for the silversmiths of Kotagede to forge a sustainable future for their craft and their children." ☺

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AirAsia Foundation

SELAKA KOTAGEDE is the realisation of a unique collaboration between AirAsia's philanthropic arm, AirAsia Foundation, and its social enterprise grantee ArkomJogja, to revive one of Yogyakarta's oldest traditional trades by leveraging on the AirAsia Group's business and network strengths. Part of a wider Conservation Through Enterprise initiative funded by AirAsia Foundation, the Kotagede silver trade was selected for conservation focus after mapping and documentation of the historical zone by ArkomJogja found less than 30 active artisans in a village that was once the hub of Javanese silver craftsmanship. In March 2014, the Foundation and ArkomJogja co-organised a design workshop for the artisans with top technical experts from the United Kingdom sponsored by the British Council. The 17 silversmiths who went on to form the Selaka Kotagede collective were then guided by AirAsia Foundation to create a new brand identity and product range to appeal to a new generation of fans. In the process, they also received training on costing, pricing and marketing, as well as seed capital to build their new enterprise. For more information, visit airasiafoundation.com and www.facebook.com/AirAsiaFoundation