

Religion as a Theme in Indonesian Art

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Assalamualaikum Wr. Wb.

Religion and spirituality are two crucial topics in Indonesian visual arts. Since the early stage of art and cultural development in the archipelago, religion has been a basic creative conception held by artists. Many cultural artifacts came into being based on it. Borobudur temple was created based on Buddhism, while the Hinduism Mataram Kingdom bequeathed many temples across East Java. In Bali, paintings of *Kamasan* style told about Hinduism teachings. *Keris* (name of a metal weapon) was as if a book telling the lives and beliefs of Javanese and Balinese people. In Cirebon, there was a glass painting tradition built in the Islam development in the island of Java. In Sumatera, Islam existence can be seen from many tombstones where Arabic inscription were crafted on. The art of craft has been there in worship houses, mosques, churches, temples, and pagodas throughout the country. Those artworks are inseparable parts when discussing how religions are related to arts. Even it can be claimed that traditional art is both the starting point and proof of the developments of religions in Indonesia.



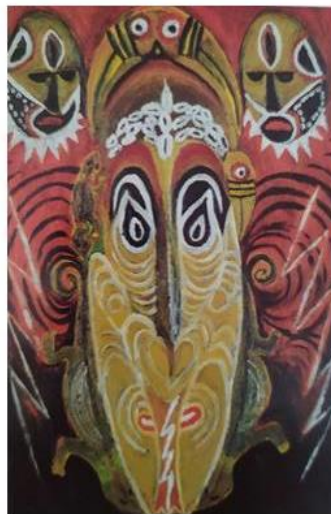
Why is Indonesia home to such diverse cultures and religions? Some answers can be proposed to respond to this question. First, it is because of Indonesia's geographical position. It is located between two continents, Asia and Australia, and two oceans, the Pacific and Indian, makes it easy for various cultures and religions to come in. The people of the Indonesian archipelago have been very tolerant to changes. The second factor is because Indonesia is a tropical and fertile archipelago. Having a tropical climate makes Indonesia rich with natural diversity. Countless floras and faunas live there. Limitless kinds of fish swim in its oceans. Living separately in about 17,000 islands, Indonesians live in different tribes and sub-tribes.

The life provides Indonesians with good hopes. Because they live near to volcanoes and wide oceans, it is easy for them to welcome new people along with their cultures. Those

changes teach Indonesians to live in high tolerance. They are respectful and demonstrate good attitudes toward others. History records that they welcomed foreign traders and religion preachers (including those who came with gold, glory, and gospel). This condition led Indonesians to have a cultural synthesis.

European Painters

In visual art, Indonesia has an interesting history. European painters who worked in Indonesia during the 17th – 20th century initiated painting on the theme of religion and belief. Painters portrayed the Javanese and Balinese local religious activities. Most of them painted in the romantic- naturalistic style. On their canvas, they showed activities done in temples, mosques, or churches. They also depicted gods and goddesses of the local beliefs and many cultural events. Borobudur was the most favorite object. It can be found in the works of GP. Baker, W. Purser, C.W. Meiling, H.N. Sieburg, and many others. WOJ. Nieuwenkamp painted Borobudur from a philosophical perspective and also visualized a Balinese *pedanda* (Hinduism leader) praying. W. Quidort painted *Balinese Women at the temple*.



Painting by C.W. Meiling after AJ. Bik, *Boro Boedoe* (left) and G.L. Tichelman, *Thunder Spirit* (mid) and WOJ. Nieuwenkamp, *Putjoeng* (bottom left) and W. Quidort painted *Balinese Women at the temple* (right).

Unlike the local traditional arts, these paintings were not created for worshipping. Moreover, the painters were foreigners; not local people. Those artworks functioned more as a documentation of the cultural events as a part of research carried out by European society (especially the Dutch). In addition, the paintings were used as promotional media of tourism in the Dutch East Indies. Thus, it can be concluded that in that era, paintings around the theme of

spirituality served as an effort exercised by Westerns in describing the local atmosphere and people. They were not produced based on spiritual concepts.



The 1940s

It was in the 1940s that Indonesian modern artists worked on spiritual and religious themes. They explored the content of the holy books, the life after death, heaven, calligraphy, and religious aesthetics in a modern way. In the initial stage, Indonesian painters continued to use the already existing traditional concept of beliefs. However, they started to use newer media, for example calligraphy that had been painted on glass was applied on canvas. The visualization style shifted from decorative to realistic-representative. Anonymous paintings became paintings with the painters' name on it. For instance, two works of the famous painter Basoeki Abdullah entitled *Bunda Maria dalam Kebaya Jawa (Virgin Mary in Javanese Dress)* painted in 1940s and *Nyi Roro Kidul* created in 1950.



Basoeki Abdullah, *Bunda Maria dalam Kebaya Jawa (Virgin Mary in Javanese style)*, oil on canvas, c. 1940 (left) and *Nyi Roro Kidul*, oil on canvas, 1950 (right)

The painter worked on these two pieces at the early-stage of Indonesian modern art development. Instead of using a decorative illustration like in traditional paintings, he--who was a devout Christian--visualized the Bible using a modern realistic style. He also carried out an appropriation by depicting Virgin Mary--who was definitely not Javanese--in *kebaya*- a Javanese style blouse. In the second painting, Abdullah presented a character based on the local Javanese belief, *Nyi Roro Kidul*. Traditionally, *Nyi Roro Kidul* was believed to be the queen and the ruler of the “Southern Sea” (Indian Ocean). The painter realistically visualized this mythological character as a beautiful slender woman.

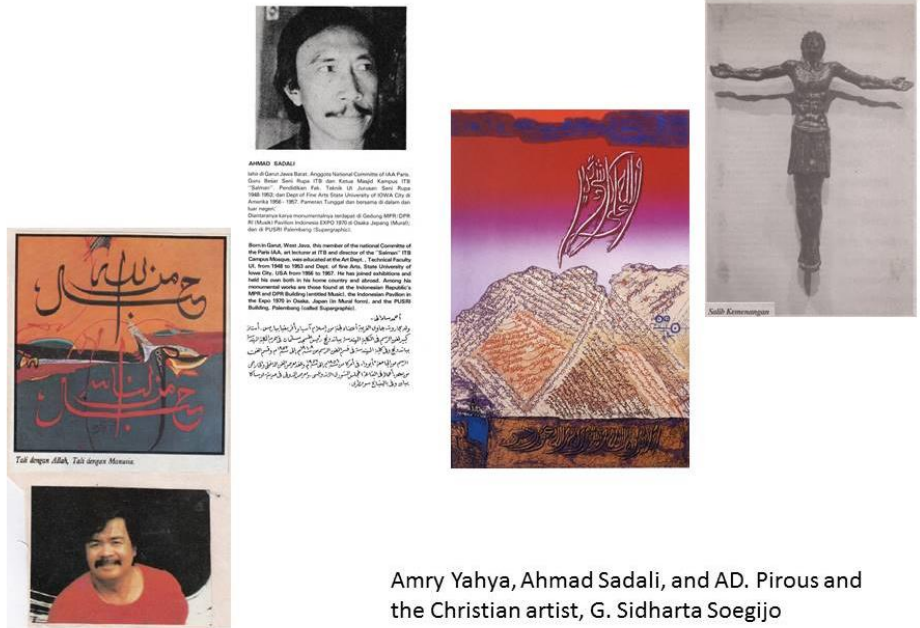


Agus Djaja *Tari untuk Vishnu/ A Dance for Vishnu* (1946)
and *Dalam Taman Nirwana/In Nirvana Garden* (1950)

Another painter named Agus Djaja painted the two artworks *Tari untuk Vishnu* (*A Dance for Vishnu*) (1946) and *Dalam Taman Nirwana* (*In Nirvana Garden*) (1950). Both paintings explored Hinduism in the modern art sense. Agus Djaya was not a Hindu, but he successfully represented that religion with a “new look” by accommodating Western nuances. Basoeki Abdullah and Agus Djaya are two examples of how artists marked art development by presenting themes of spirituality with new taste, i.e. shifting from decorative to realistic, in that era.

1960s to 1980s

After their time, the Indonesian modern art was flooded with spiritual themed arts. This happened especially between the 1960s and 1980s. The prominent figures in that era were the Muslim artists Amry Yahya, Ahmad Sadali, and AD. Pirous and the Christian artist, G. Sidharta Soegijo. Later on we can find the famous artist: Arahmaiani. The created artworks, however, can not be automatically claimed as a part of the exploration of traditional art and religious romanticism but they did offer critical concepts that opposed tradition.



Amry Yahya, Ahmad Sadali, and AD. Pirous and the Christian artist, G. Sidharta Soegijo



Arahmaiani with her works

An interesting phenomenon in this regard was the founding of art organizations named by including the words Islam, Catholic (or Christian), and other names of religions. Since 1960, this could be observed because art was also part of political practices in Indonesia. Artists conducted their art activities in affiliation with political organizations, for example *Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* (People’s Cultural Institution), often shortly mentioned as *Lekra*, that was a division the Indonesian Communist Party. However, *Lekra* inspired religious artist or artists who were members of religion-based political parties to establish “counter” art institutions in order to compete *Lekra*’s domination in the art scene. Some of them were *Lesbumi* (organized by *Nahdhatul Ulama*, the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia), *Laksmi* (under *Partai Syarikat Islam Indonesia/PSII – Party of Indonesian Islamic Cooperation*), *Lembaga Kebudayaan Katolik Indonesia/LKKI- Indonesian Catholic Cultural Institution* (under *Partai Katolik/ Catholic Party*).

Muhamadiyah, the second largest Islam community-based organization in the country, also managed two cultural divisions: *Himpunan Senirupawan dan Budayawan Islam/HSBI* (Association of Islamic Visual Artists and Cultural Practitioners) and *Ikatan Seniman dan Budayawan Muslim/ISBM* (Moslem Artists and Cultural Practitioners Association).

In the 1960s, there was a very dynamical turbulence of discourse about art, politic, and religion. It resulted in disintegration within groups and even among individuals. The art divisions of political parties were in charge in attracting people’s attention so that they joined the parties. The end goal was to be the ruling party in the country. Triggered by the September 30th movement, *Lekra* disbanded. After that, religion-based art organizations receded and were replaced by artists holding religious theme independently.

The Case of Bali

Looking outside of Java, Balinese-Hindu artists worked in a different way from visual artists in Java. They had engaged in creating religious themed pieces for a very long time. If you ask contemporary Balinese Hindu painters, they will say that painting is a part of religious rites. Since the emergence of the Balinese traditional art, religious themes have been frequently displayed. Contemporary Balinese artists are also illustrating Balinese Hindu teachings in modern and contemporary works of art. Although the word ‘Hindu’ is not used in exhibition titles as ‘Islam’ is used in exhibitions related to Islamic topics, Balinese Hindu artists consistently pour their ideas in the religious domain.



Exhibition and works by Contemporary Balinese-Hindu artists community organization

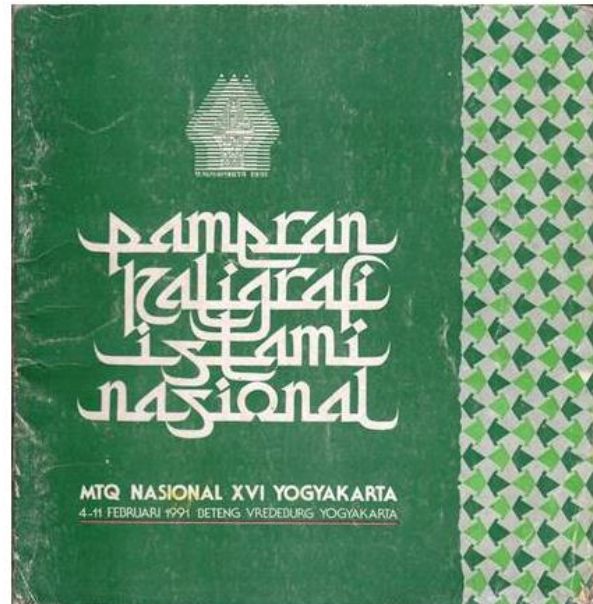
Religious Themes in Exhibitions

One interesting phenomenon in Indonesia are religion-based visual art exhibitions. Almost every year, such an exhibition, mainly focusing on Islam, are organized. Muslim visual artists

often take religious holy days as a momentum to organize an exhibition. Other than being a space to display and sell their artworks, this kind of exhibitions also facilitate them to do *silaturahmi*, a major teaching in Islam that people should meet relatives and friends to keep good relationship among them. An exhibition might be held for Eid Al-Fitr celebration, a conference or congress of religion-based institutions, *Musabaqat Tilawat Qur'an* (Quran reading festival), for welcoming people back from pilgrimage to Mecca, or an opening of mosques or Islamic institutions.



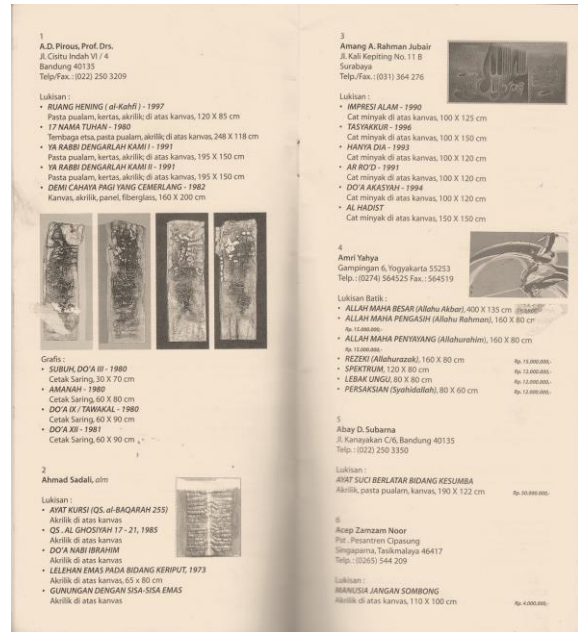
7-14 Juni 1981, Musem Negeri Provinsi, Banda Aceh: Islamic calligraphy exhibition in held for Musabaqah Tilawatil Qural (MTQ) #12. Source: documentation of AD.Pirous



An exhibition entitled "Islam Visual Arts"

Exhibitions focusing on Islamic Visual Arts have been held for over six decades. Some of them were organized by Islamic community-based organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama. One examples is the exhibition "*Pameran Lukisan Islami*" (Islamic Paintings Exhibition) organized for the 40th Muhammadiyah Congress in 1978 in Surabaya. The Arabic calligraphy exhibition titled "Indonesia Islamic Calligraphy" forms another example. It was brought to many cities in Indonesia, including in 1980 in Balai Sidang Jakarta building, in 1981 in Banda Aceh, and in 1986 in Yogyakarta. There were also some other exhibitions labeled 'Islamic' but without any ideological limitations like the one held in 1990 at the Grand Mosque of Kauman, Yogyakarta in which 84 artists joined. Another example was "Pameran Enam Kharisma Pelukis Muslimah" (Exhibition of 6 Charismas of Muslim Women Painters) on August 4-13, 1993 in Taman Ismail Marzuki building Jakarta.

Both national and international agendas to support promoting Islam were also carried out, for examples the 1991 and 1998 Istiqlal Festivals in Jakarta. In 1997, Yustiono, Wiyoso Yudoseputro, Mamanoor, and Merwan Yusuf curated an exhibition titled "*Seni Kontemporer Islami*" (Islamic Contemporary Art). Students also took parts in running other exhibitions such as the ones held in 1999 by Student Press Institute of *Universitas Islam Indonesia* (Islamic University of Indonesia) and in 2000 by the Islamic Student Association of ISI (Fine Arts Institute) Yogyakarta.



Annual "Festival Istiqlal" in Istiqlal Mosque Jakarta catalogue

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the development of religious themes in visual arts cannot be fully analyzed in a simple way. Indonesia still lacks references because there is limited research available on this topic. There are many research objects such as artworks, visual artists, and exhibitions that can be worked on to develop discourses related to art and religion. We sincerely invite you, researchers from all over the world to map the development of art in its correspondence with religion, including the cultural diversity in Indonesia. It must be challenging and interesting for you. Thank you very much. +++

Yogyakarta, October 22, 2021 - National Santri Day

Wassalamualaikum Wr. Wb.