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Puppetmorphic: Incorporating Local Culture to Achieve Distinct Structure in Figurative Calligraphy

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Abstract: As one of the writing techniques, calligraphy spread throughout the world creating many styles and shapes influenced by local culture. One of the calligraphy styles known throughout the world is figurative calligraphy where decorations are made using calligraphy forming the shape of objects, such as humans, animals, plants, imaginary entities, buildings, or bridges. This article will discuss one of the schools in figurative calligraphy known as puppetmorphic where the calligraphy was made into the shape of a puppet. Indonesian people created the existence of Semar in their traditional puppet performances known as Wayang. Although Semar appeared in Wayang performances telling the stories of Mahabharata and Ramayana, the figure of Semar who always accompanied the Pandava was not found in the original stories which originated from India. The discussion will present puppetmorphic made while incorporating Indonesian culture and other cultures such as Indian and Arabic culture that formed a distinct structure of calligraphy. This paper aims to analyse the puppetmorphic with the calligraphy forming the figure of Semar made in Arabic and Jawi scripts using visual methodologies and typography approaches to see the distinct motifs and structure found within these experimental calligraphies. The result shows that the mixture of Arabic, Indian, and Indonesian culture creates a unique form of experimental calligraphy that can convey and preserve a sense of cultural identity.

Keywords: *Puppetmorphic, Figurative Calligraphy, Local Culture, Wayang, Semar.*

1. Introduction

Wayang is a form of traditional puppet originated in the Nusantara region in Indonesia. According to Achmadi (2003), the name of Wayang illustrates the spirit of “*wawayanganing manungso*” which translates into “Puppet is the symbol of life and human living”. Thus, by understanding the Wayang, it was said that human will be able to live a better life. On 7 December 2003 in Paris, UNESCO (The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) has decided Wayang as one of the highly valued cultural artifacts and the Masterpiece of The Oral and Intangible of Humanity (Habsy, 2017).

There are many forms of Wayang developed in Indonesia. However, one of the most famous Wayang is the Javanese Wayang Kulit. The Javanese Wayang Kulit or Wayang Purwa (*kulit* means leather and *purwa* means origin/beginning) are used to perform the Ramayana and Mahabharata tales (Basuki, 2006). The stories of Wayang came from the stories that are developed in Indonesian society. Thus, although Mahabharata and Ramayana are inspired from the same stories coming from India, the stories in Wayang performance underwent a slight change, especially in the character that appears within the stories. Some of the characters appearing in these two stories are the result of improvised storytelling done by the puppeteers. One of the characters in Mahabharata stories that originated in Javanese Wayang performances and not found in the original stories in India is the character of Semar.

Semar is one of the Punakawan characters, the character that always appeared alongside of the Pandava. Semar was pictured as distinctly chubby with a white face (Zaman, Sujana, & Ramli, 2016). Semar is one of the central characters in Javanese Wayang performances since Semar was considered as a very wise figure with many abilities. The opinions and thoughts from Semar were often followed and heeded by the Pandava. It was mentioned that Semar is the incarnation of Bathara Ismaya who descends to Madyapada to become a great Kshatriya (Purwadi, 2014, p. 4). Semar also has the understanding of the culture of Triloka (the three world) consisting of the world of gods, giants, and humans.

The Punakawan characters are intentionally created by the storytellers and puppeteers in Java Island to disseminate the Javanese wisdom to the audience watching Wayang performances. The rise of Islam in Nusantara region did not eliminate this cultural tradition. It assimilates and adds to the Javanese wisdom instead. One of the artifacts that shows these assimilations is the figurative calligraphy found in Java Island bearing the form of Wayang characters.

According to Syekh Syamsuddin Al Akfani, khat/calligraphy is a discipline that introduce the form and shape of letters, its structures, and how to string the letter together to form aesthetically structured writings (Sirajuddin AR, 1985, p. 2). Sirajuddin also stated that calligraphy is the writings written in lines, the way it was written, and to decide which

one to be written; to change the spelling and to decide how to apply these changes (Sirajuddin AR, 1985, p. 2). As one of the Islamic arts that developed in Indonesia, there are many calligraphies that was written in the form of Wayang using figurative calligraphy, or better known as puppetmorphic. The style used in these puppetmorphics is an experimental calligraphy done by the artists, creating a contemporary calligraphy style. Calligrams or figural calligraphy is most often connected to the Turkish art of the 16th century (Meliha, 2013). Because of the restrictions put by the Islamic rule in arts, especially concerning the drawing of human and living entities, figurative calligraphy tried to channel the artist's expressions in creating conceptual arts while conforming to the rule by creating a non-anthropomorphic form.

This article will discuss one of the puppetmorphic found in the Javanese culture where the calligraphy was made into the shape of a Wayang character named Semar. The discussion will present three puppetmorphics in the form of Semar taken from Cirebon glass paintings and the Daluwang (Javanese traditional paper). This paper aims to analyze the puppetmorphic with the calligraphy forming the figure of Semar made using the Arabic and Jawi scripts to see the distinct motifs and structure found within these experimental calligraphies.

2. Method

This study used the visual methodology with typography approach to analyze the visual artifacts in the form of puppetmorphic figurative calligraphy. Three puppetmorphic bearing the form of Semar will be analyzed. These puppetmorphic are found in traditional cultural products such as Cirebon glass paintings and the Daluwang papers. Qeis stated that visual imageries in cultural product can communicates identities and the image of communities (Qeis, 2014). Thus, visual methodology was used to understand the way visual arts made using scripts and the accompanying illumination can convey and preserve a sense of cultural identity. Since every country has their own unique form and style of calligraphy, the typography approach is needed to understand the way local culture was incorporated within the figurative calligraphy to make distinct structures that could represent a cultural identity. The typography approach was used to observe the structure of the scripts used in these three puppetmorphic. The structure of the scripts was observed by their strokes and the supporting elements that makes up the puppetmorphic of Semar.

3. Discussion

Semar is one of the famous mythological figures in the Nusantara archipelago which inspires some artists to make calligraphy based on the Semar figure. Wayang Semar should be seen

not as a historical fact, but rather a mythological and symbolic essence about the concept that refer to the sign of manifestation or appearance of expression, perception, and understanding of the divine (Purwadi, 2014, p. 22). Semar's expression and the manifestation of the divine in the form of wisdom was expressed through the calligraphy forming the figure of Semar.

The figure of Semar is often painted by glass painting artists in the village of Gegesik, Cirebon. Cirebon glass paintings bearing the Semar figure raise the theme of morality which is carried through the form of Wayang puppets in the form of Semar which is capable of containing many components of calligraphy within (Wulandari, Adriati, & Damajanti, 2012).



Figure 1. Semar Puppetchomorphic calligraphy in Glass Painting

Figure 1 shows the figure of Semar in Cirebon glass painting consisted of Arabic calligraphy bearing the words of Tawheed. The stroke used varies in width, with a rounded terminal shape. Each letter is intertwined, with several ornaments illuminated between lines of letters. Font pattern follows the flow of Semar body shape. In this picture you can see the acculturation of cultures from Islam and Hinduism. Semar in Indonesian Hindu mythology is a figure who is a protector of the warriors of Pandava. Besides that, his wisdom is respected by the knights and gods in *Khayangan* (the upper realm inhabited by gods). If Semar represented the Hinduism aspect of the glass painting, the Tawheed, a sentence that is a form of confession to the Oneness of God, represents the Islamic aspect of the glass painting. The glass painting was seen by the Cirebon's people as an association of the union of God and humans or better known as *Manunggaling Kawula Gusti* (mystical union of human and God). When examined further, there are flowers that contains the word "Allah" and

“Muhammad” in Semar’s hands. The calligraphy was made in such a way so that the form follows the shape of Semar, in which the letters were reduced, enlarged, extended, and shortened to fit. Therefore, this work is referred to as contemporary calligraphy or calligraphy painting which breaks away from the standard rules that apply on those found in Khat. However, this calligraphy falls under the type of figurative calligraphy (Zaman et al., 2016).



Figure 2. Semar Puppetmorphic calligraphy in Daluwang 1

Aside of the calligraphy found in glass paintings, some of Semar puppetmorphic calligraphy are also found inscribed on Daluwang or Kertas Saeh, a traditional paper made from mulberry. Figure 2 shows a picture of Semar made on Daluwang titled "Obat Hati" Jampi Kalimasada (The incantation of Kalimasada, “the medicine for the soul). The calligraphy formed the sentence of “*Syahadat jampi manah eling waspada, tamba urip urub*” which translates into “The incantation of Kalimasada is a *Syahadat* (a creed which becomes a Muslim’s ideology), a mantra of the heart to always remember the creator God and always be vigilant, and a mantra to always be helpful to others”. This semar figure is written using the Javanese Carakan script. Javanese Carakan script comes from the Pallawa script. According to Ahmadi, the Javanese letters contained 20 kinds of syllable with its own syllabic systems containing the letter of: ha, na, ca, ra, ka; da, ta, sa, wa, la; pa, dha, ja, ya, nya; ma, ga, ba, tha, nga. The letter gets its shape and form from the devanagari (Sanskrit) and pallawa letters that evolves to form the shape of *papak* (square), *bunder* (round), or *lancip* (pointed) motifs (Nur Awal, 2017). The construction of Javanese script uses bold type with a contrasting thickness resulted by the brush stroke, ending with rounded and some sharp terminal.

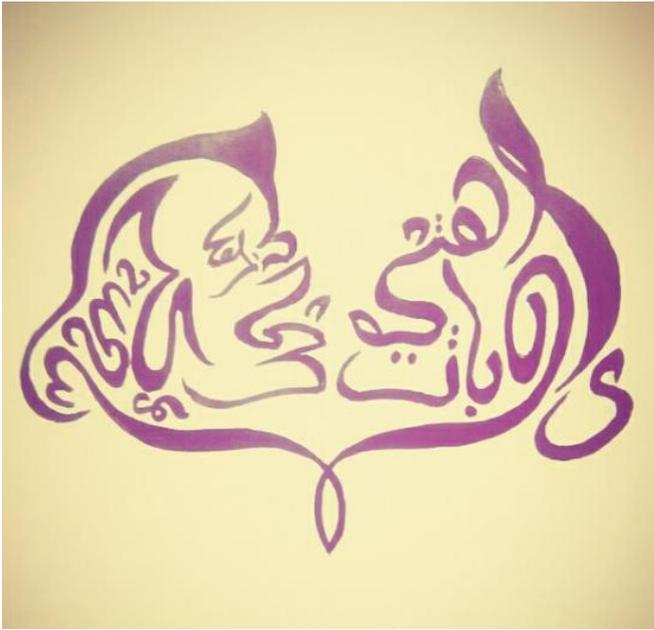


Figure 3. Semar Puppetchorphic calligraphy in Daluwang 2

Figure 3 shows another Semar puppetmorphic calligraphy made on Daluwang titled “Dialog Obat Hati” (dialogue to heal the soul). The calligraphy shown in figure 3 contains sentences in the form of *Pupuh Asmarandana*, a traditional poem or chant from Sunda (West Java) containing wisdom and messages about life. The *Pupuh Asmarandana* used in this calligraphy can be read as follows:

Ngudi mitra kang sejati, (To search for the true partner)
kanca donya lan akhirat, (Friend in the world and hereafter)
sejatine pancen angel, (Even though it is indeed difficult)
jer basuki mawa bea, (All success requires sacrifice)
benere nyata ana, (The truth is indeed real)
ora liya mitra ilmu, (None other by looking for knowledge)
ngelmu luhung tur mumpangat. (deep and useful knowledge)

In figure 3, the calligraphy shows the connection between the Javanese Carakan script and the Pegon Arabic Script. The strokes in each character are seen in contrast, although not as bold as those found in figure 2, with a round terminal and not too sharp. The purpose of the creation of Pegon Arabic Script is to help spread the teachings of Islam, so that Javanese who are not well-versed in Arabic can read and understand the intent of the teachings well (Pudjiastuti, 2009). Pegon Arabic Script contains 20 syllables to match with those found in Javanese Carakan Script (as opposed to the original Arabic script which

contains 28 syllables). However, the way to read the Pegon Script is the same as the Arabic Script. The Javanese Carakan Script and the Pegon Arabic Script can be seen in Table 1 below.

No.	Syllable	Java	Pegon
1.	ha	ꦲ	هـ ا ³
2.	na	ꦤ	ن
3.	ca	ꦚ	ج
4.	ra	ꦫ	ر
5.	ka	ꦏ	ك
6.	da	ꦢ	د
7.	ta	ꦠ	ت
8.	sa	ꦱ	س
9.	wa	ꦮ	و
10.	la	ꦭ	ل
11.	pa	ꦥ	ف
12.	dha	ꦢꦲ	د
13.	ja	ꦗ	ج
14.	ya	ꦪ	ي
15.	nya	ꦤꦚ	ي
16.	ma	ꦩ	م
17.	ga	ꦒ	ك
18.	ba	ꦧ	ب
19.	tha	ꦠꦲ	ط
20.	nga	ꦤꦒ	ع

Table 1. The comparison between Javanese Carakan Script and Pegon Arabic Script (Pudjiastuti, 2009)

The shape of Semar in the puppetmorphic calligraphy is easily recognized. This can be seen from the anatomy of his body which has a distinct identity. The relationship between Javanese, Arabic, and Pegon Script with the Semar figure contains a very high philosophical value. Tawheed, a sentence that has sacred values and meanings in Islam which is an acknowledgment of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad SAW, was inscribed in the form of

Semar, which was seen by the Javanese people as an incarnation of god named Sang Hyang Ismaya, a god who has a good influence in the Upper World (Khayangan).

Javanese Carakan script is a script that has philosophical values for Javanese people. The background of the Javanese Carakan script can be seen from the point of view of both myth and history. The myth surrounding this script is that it was created by Prabu Ajisaka, The myth of Ajisaka explains that one of the reasons the Javanese Carakan script was created is so that the script could be used to understand the concept of divinity (Nur Awalin, 2017). The Javanese believed this legend surrounding Prabu Ajisaka, thus, they believed that it was Ajisaka who conceived the form of Javanese Carakan script.

The Pegon script on the other hand, is a form of Arabic script albeit spelled with a Javanese syllable as seen in table 1. According to Thatcher (1942) and Gaur (1994), Pegon script was written like Arabic script. Letters are written (and read) from right to left. Several letters can be combined from one or both sides and the script do not recognize capital letters while vowel signs are placed above, below, or parallel to the consonant letters. Each letter has four variations in form: stand-alone letters, beginning, middle, and end (Pudjiastuti, 2009). Pegon Arabic script is a cultural product of the Islamic Era of Java.

Based on all the three Semar Puppetmorphic calligraphies presented above, we can see how acculturation plays an important role in shaping a rich culture of Indonesia. The form of Semar which was taken from the Hinduism Era of Indonesia, inspired by the story of Mahabharata and Ramayana from India, was incorporated with the Arabic calligraphy from the Islamic Era of Indonesia which was also adapted to the Javanese culture in the form of Pegon Script. This acculturation did not try to defeat and negate each other. Rather, it creates a distinct structure of calligraphy which consolidate each other's influences. The Islamic religiosity did not clash with the already established Hinduism religiosity and the more ancient values of Javanese culture. Together, they helped create a distinct identity of Javanese religiosity which was reflected in the cultural product that is the puppetmorphic calligraphy.

4. Conclusions

Puppetmorphic calligraphy is one of contemporary calligraphies based on a figurative form. The creation of Puppetmorphic with Semar figure is always related to the wisdom and other philosophies mostly found in Javanese culture since Semar in Javanese society is a figure that has its own charm. Semar as a figure used in these puppetmorphic calligraphies forms a new structure in the creation of calligraphy, showing that the calligraphy can be made not only using Arabic script but also using Javanese Carakan and Pegon scripts. The role of Semar which invokes the element of divinity makes these puppetmorphic calligraphies rich in

symbolic values, namely the concepts of Godhead which are brought into community life. These calligraphies also hold magical and mystical values since many Semar puppetmorphics are used as charms that are considered to have magical properties. These calligraphies also hold economic values as various forms of Semar puppetmorphic are made and created to increase economic needs in the form of paintings, t-shirts, batik, wood carvings and glass paintings.

The puppetmorphic calligraphy in the form of Semar was influenced by the mixture of different values, such as Javanese, Indian, and Arabic values. The spread of Islam into Indonesia has brought not only its religious system but also its cultural system. The interaction between Islamic culture and the already established culture in Indonesia created a distinct form in the style of calligraphy. The birth of Pegon Arabic script with a syllabic system of Javanese Carakan script proves that Islam entered Indonesia through peaceful assimilation, not through the process of war and colonialization. The idea of Ancient Javanese religiosity in the form of *Khayangan* (which basically translates into “the place where the ancestor resides”), was combined with the Hinduism story of Mahabharata and Ramayana resulting in the figure of Semar, alongside the gods residing within him (Sang Hyang Ismaya). This figure in turn was combined with the Islamic values in the form of puppetmorphic calligraphy. Thus, these calligraphies represent a unique transcendental concept which is the result of combining the three religious’ values, creating a distinct structure in figurative calligraphy influenced by the local culture.

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