

Review on Matja Exhibition

Recalling on the selection of artwork at the beginning, I was a little surprised with it. Looking at the title of the exhibition, “*MATJA, Seni Wali-Wali Nusantara*” and “*Islam Nusantara*”, obviously it’s purely talking about Islam in Indonesia before their independence. I expected it to be the Arabic kind of exhibition with picturing the Arabic calligraphy, or those related to Islam believes and teaching and I had the wrong mindset about it. They have works of installation, paintings, sculptures and photography with the elements of religions, cultures, traditions and many more. Then, there is a brief explanation about the idea of the exhibition, something new to me of understanding and knowing the practice of Islam here in Indonesia. They practice the culture of others as well. Indonesia is an archipelagic country which has a diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and languages. Hindu-Buddhist civilizations was the early kingdom in Indonesian archipelago therefore, the Islamic saint which is called the “*Wali-wali*” tried to spread the Islam religion by combining the local traditions and cultures practice of the people in any region in Indonesia. The reason for them to do so is because they want to find harmony ways to mix well with the locals by not forcing them but with a respective manner. This is so much different comparing with Malaysia. In Malaysia, for example Islam does not do offerings or it’s called “*Tumpeng*” in Indonesia. *Tumpeng* is mostly done by the Buddhist, Hinduist and Taoist but not Islam. As in Indonesia centuries ago, Islam practices the offering ceremony in their own way and many other more.

Matja Exhibition was held on the 27th of July 2015 until 30th of July at Jogja National Museum, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The exhibition was curated by A. Anzieb and Hasan Basri and it is part of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Conference 33rd entitled "Islam Nusantara" in Indonesia with holding the theme of “*Islam Nusantara*”, in English called the “*Islam Archipelago*”. The NU was established on January 31, 1926 as a response to the rise of Wahabism in Saudi Arabia and Islamic modernism in Indonesia. NU is also one of the largest independent Islamic organizations in the world especially in Indonesia. They act as a charitable body, helping to fill in many of the shortcomings of the Indonesian government in society. Besides, it funds hospitals, schools, and organizes communities or villages into better community in order to help the issue of poverty. The NU exists to spread Islamic teaching and actively involved in economic and agricultural

studies, and social activities including family planning. Furthermore, NU is also known with the combination of Islam practice and culture with the other culture which can be found in Indonesia. There are a number of new Islam organizations which follows the original teaching of Islam from Arab and they want to purify about the originality of Islam in Indonesia. In my point of view, meeting a point where the differences perspective of Islam practice occurring in Indonesia indirectly has become the main concern and the reason of choosing the idea or concept of Islam Nusantara as the theme for the 33rd National Conference of NU. Through having this exhibition, it will make the audience think back about the origin of their practices and cultures. It is believed that there is a close relationship between art, culture and people because Islam religion is spread by the Wali-Wali centuries ago through the medium of art.

In this exhibition, the main idea is to bring the awareness to the people in Indonesia as not to forget their traditions, culture, spirituals and roots. As everyone understands, Indonesia is known for their multicultural geographically. It is rich with many things and the main focus of this exhibition is to remind people about the culture of Islam Nusantara which they have this understanding in-between every believes and cultures. The designs and patterns in Nusantara culture cannot be separated from its natural design. Open geography makes all the groups in the region meet each other and exchange with each other. With the title of the exhibition "*MATJA, Seni Wali-Wali Nusantara*" which "*Matja*" refers to "Read" and "*Seni Wali-Wali Nusantara*" which mean "the art of the Islamic saint in Indonesia" in Arabic language.

The opening of the exhibition has a few performance arts. One of the performance art is by the international artist Heri Dono a collaborative work with Wiwiek Poengki Art Fashion. Graffiti Performance by Alex tmt with the title of "Tetap Matja Tetenger" and others. There are a number of estimated 50 artists with 66 artworks in list. The artists including Agus Sunyoto, Aan Gunawan, Abas Alibasyah, Abdul Syukur, Agus 'Baqu' Purnomo, Agus Kamal, Agus Suwage, Ali Umar, Bob Yudhita Agung, Bunga Jeruk, Dedi Sufriady, Edopop, Endang Lestari, Entang Wiharso, F Sigit. Santosa, Isa Perkasa, Ivan Sagita, Januri, Jeihan Sukmantoro, Joko"Gundul" Sulistiono, Jupri Abdullah, KH. D. Zawawi Imron, KH Ahmad Tohari, Lucia Hartini, Luqman, M . Lugas Syllabus, Muhamad 'Ucup' Yusuf, Nano Warsono, Nasirun, S. Teddy D., Saepul Bahri, Samsul Arifin, Sekarjatiningrum, Stefan Buana, Tarman, Tisna Sanjaya, Toto Juharto, Tri Purwanto and others.

The exhibition is categorized into three major trends in transforming the spirituality. First, is the work that attempted transcendence of spiritual phenomena with the use of common language, symbol and icon. Secondly, transcendence is done by taking the spirituality that has been merged into the traditions and practices in daily life. Lastly, is the effort of bringing spirituality in daily reality of paradoxes that work is speaking in the wider context of value, ideology and discipline. There are many works which relates purely with the symbol and religious language which goes well with the theme of the exhibition and some has the quality of it.

The work I remember most which uses the icon of tiger in his painting titled *The Champ* by the artist named Agus Suwage.



The Champ, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 2013

Agus Suwage's work in the form of a tiger figure portrayed on the table. Visually, picturing the shadow of the tiger as the actual side of it where through the cover or outlook of the tiger, it seems to be calm but in real, the thought or soul is wild and free. Tiger is an icon of triumph and power, as well as a device of various mystical and magical which related to spiritual strength. Perhaps, the artist is portraying the people with ranking in Indonesia where they actually seek for freedom and not wanting to be the champion of all.

Furthermore, I was attracted by the works talking about Gus Dur. There are few artworks which talks about Gus Dur which are "*Telapak Kaki Gus Dur*" by Jupri Abdullah, "*Diriung Ku Sarung*"

by Isa Perkasa and “*Pancasila*” by S. Teddy. Gus Dur as the former president of Indonesia. His actual name is Abdurrahman Wahid. He as the former president of Indonesia has been the role models for most of the people in their country. Despite he was an Islam religious person a part from NU, people from other races still respected him while he was ruling their country. This clearly speaks about the value of Gus Dur as he gave the same attention and rights to the other races. For the work of “*Telapak Kaki Gus Dur*” by Jupri Abdullah, he portrayed Gus Dur’s feet.



Telapak Kaki Gus Dur, Acrylic on Canvas with Gold Detail, 2009

The story of the artist went to meet Gus Dur waited so long just to get the mold of his feet. It shows how people respect and made him as a role model. In personally think that this work is talking about as a human; we should follow the steps of Gus Dur. Despite what religion are we in, we should not condemn others. Try to respect and accept others and the world will be a better place to live.

Back to the selection of artwork for the exhibition, there are people who think the exhibition is not very successful in the sense that it did not really reach to the theme of the exhibition. The theme of *Islam Nusantara* which means the entire of Indonesia. Yet, the selection of artists are mostly based from Java but not those out from Java. Besides, the hot topics are mostly talking about the culture and believe in Java. I personally think that the theme of Islam Nusantara and the title of the exhibition where reading the art spread by the *Wali-Wali* in Indonesia shows a connection by how they chooses the artists and artworks. This has become the main concern of the artists, the idea of *Wali-Wali* started to spread Islam in Java Island with the medium of art, so

by connecting the culture in Java is the safest idea. Perhaps, they should discuss more on the wider context. Overall, I think that the exhibition is quite a success in bringing back the actual meaning of *Islam Nusantara* relating with the theme of the exhibition with the discussions and sharing by professors, writer, curators and others. Lastly, it reaches the main idea of NU.