

Analyzing the Shifting Facial Expression of Ondel-ondel as the Cultural Icon of Betawi Community

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ABSTRACT

Ondel-ondel is one of the cultural icons of the Betawi community. It was first used to be pictured with a creepy expression because Ondel-ondel was believed to be a protective mascot that repels evil spirits and the plague in its time. However, the face of Ondel-ondel has undergone changes throughout time that lead to the popular visual form of Ondel-ondel nowadays, which later became known as one of Jakarta's visual identities. This study uses the iconographic method to analyze the design elements on Ondel-Ondel's face in the pre-iconography stage and compare them to the analysis presented in iconography stage to understand historical dimension of Betawi people and their values which will contribute to the interpretation concluded from these two stages. The result shows that the face of Ondel-ondel undergoes changes to avoid traces of mysticism and to shift the role of Ondel-ondel in the community towards entertainment purposes devoid of myths or beliefs, especially after the Betawi community incorporated Islamic teachings into their cultural identity which forbids imitating living things into a man-made object to be deified and revered.

Keywords: *Ondel-ondel, Facial expression, Iconography, Cultural icon, Betawi*

1. INTRODUCTION

Before the rise of Islam in Nusantara, many of the people living in the region practiced the beliefs of animism and dynamism which worship the existence of the spirits and the objects believed to be the medium for the spirit to dwell on. The Betawi community is no exception to this. One of the practices of animism and dynamism in the Betawi community is the creation of giant dolls that were eerily shaped to repel evil spirits which was believed to be the source of the plague and disaster. This giant doll was called *Barongan* which means procession or entourage. As a multicultural society, the Betawi community created this doll by incorporating many ethnical cultures within the Nusantara region such as the culture of Java, Bali, and Madura.

Throughout time, Islam as a religion was brought and introduced to the island of Java. Sunda Kelapa as one of the busiest ports in the island quickly became a haven for the proliferation of the Islamic teachings. The animistic beliefs in the Betawi community began to recede and the ritual of worshiping the spirits and deified objects began to fade. Afterwards, the Betawi community began to adhere to the Islamic teachings. [1]

The adoption of Islamic teachings as a part of identity within the Betawi community slowly changed the existence of *Barongan*. In the 1970s, *Barongan* experienced a shift in role, becoming a part of the festivity of circumcision, a vital moment in Islam for the boy of age, where it was celebrated in the Betawi community. Furthermore, according to the interview with Mr. Indra Sutisna on May 16th, 2019, "the name of *Barongan* began to be replaced by Ondel-ondel since a Batavian popular singer, Benyamin, sang a song called Ondel-Ondel".

Ondel-ondel is the creation of Betawi culture in the form of giant dolls. It was originally made using jackfruit wood for its frame and mask, while its head is made of palm fibers. The most distinctive form of Ondel-ondel is its facial expression. This facial expression is also the one who undergoes the most changes. One of the examples is the face of the male version of Ondel-ondel that eliminates giant protruding fangs found in the earlier face of this giant doll.

Ondel-Ondel is increasingly experiencing a shift in role and meanings their original functions and meanings has been lost in today's society. Even more so, this cultural icon has been further altered to be used as a tool for *pengamen* (singing beggars) to attract people in the streets of Jakarta. Because of these shifts throughout time, this study aims to examine the changes that occur from the

initial form of Ondel-ondel to the present visualization especially on facial expressions to uncover the social changes happening in the Betawi community.

2. METHOD

This study uses qualitative approach to collect the data needed through literature study, observation, and in-depth interview. The study observed the Museum which is located in the neighborhood of the Setu Babakan Betawi Cultural Village office to find the original design for the face of Ondel-ondel, as well as conducting in-depth interview with Mr. Indra Sutisna, the Secretary of the Betawi Culture Study and Development Forum. Aside of that, Sanggar Argawana which is led by Mr. Jazuri as an Ondel-ondel maker was also observed in order to collect the data on the current form of Ondel-ondel.

In discussing the history related to the design elements in Ondel-ondel, this study uses the iconographic method which refers to Erwin Panofsky's thoughts in his book "Meaning in the Visual Arts" which classifies the analysis of design objects into three stages: [2]

- 1) Pre-iconography stage which describes the design elements in the form of points, lines, shapes, textures, and colors on the faces of both male and female version of Ondel-ondel.
- 2) Iconography stage which analyzes the socio-cultural dimensions, religious dimensions, and the overall dimensions of the Betawi community in general.
- 3) Interpretation stage which laid out the interpretation of the analysis done in the previous two stages.

3. DISSCUSSION

As one of the icons of the Betawi culture since before the entry of Islam in Jakarta, Ondel-ondel is considered to house magical power that could repel or aid in the eviction of evil spirits, preventing crop failure and avoiding epidemics.

Ondel-ondel was made by using jackfruit wood alongside a traditional rite called *ukup* or *ngukup* ceremony. This ceremony uses red and white porridge offerings, 7 different fruits, 7 different flowers, followed by a mantra by burning incenses to determine the 'good day' in which the finished Ondel-ondel will be paraded around.

According to the interview with Mr. Indra Sutisna, the ceremony of parading the Ondel-ondel around must be led by indigenous elders where the Ondel-ondel will be exhibited which was known as *Jangjawokan*. Back then, the Ondel-ondel was known as '*Bebegig*'.

The name then changed due to the shape of their hands those who do not have a sturdy framework so that when they were paraded around, the hands will sway and flails around (this movement was known as *ondal-andil* in Batavian language). Later on, this movement gave them the name of Ondel-ondel.



Figure 1 The original design for the face of Ondel-ondel (Source: Personal documentation, 2019)

Since the initial role of Ondel-Ondel is to repel evil spirits, the convention surrounding the creation of Ondel-ondel is that it has to have a frightening face. Figure 1 shows that the face of the male version of Ondel-ondel was made in a red color complete with giant protruding fangs (or *caling*) which indicates anger, while the female version of Ondel-ondel is made in a white color which symbolizes purity.

Even though the base color on the face of Ondel-ondel has not changed, there are many differences in the expression in nowadays Ondel-ondel compared to the original ones. Some of the differences that can be seen in figure 2 are the disappearance of the protruding fangs, the presence of colorful crowns, and the lack of frightening expressions.



Figure 2 The face of Ondel-ondel nowadays (Source: Personal documentation, 2019)

3.1. Pre-iconography stage

3.1.1. Design Elements

3.1.1.1. Points

Every line started from a point and ending with a point. thus, points became a significant element to be observed in the design of the face of ondel-ondel. in the original design, the striking form of points are the pupil within the eyes of ondel-ondel. compared to the design of ondel-ondel nowadays, the pupil in the original design clearly form a full shape of a point. this shows that the original design put an emphasize in the importance of the eye for the design of ondel-ondel. meanwhile, the points used in the design of ondel-ondel nowadays are becoming

smaller and are relegated as a part of ornamental design in ondel-ondel's colorful crown. this reduces the significance of the eye in ondel-ondel nowadays while creating a more colorful and cheerful interpretation of ondel-ondel.

1) *Lines*

The lines in Ondel-ondel can be seen in the thick line forming the eyebrows in both the original and the Ondel-ondel nowadays. The line forming a mustache in the male version of Ondel-ondel can be interpreted as bearing the characteristic of firmness and courage, emphasizing the masculinity feature. Meanwhile, the lines forming the hair feature in the female version of Ondel-ondel can be interpreted as bearing the characteristic of charm and graceful, emphasizing the femininity feature.

The lines found on the ears are interesting to be observed as it is one of the differences found when comparing both versions. The original ones used two lines to depict the ears, resulting in closed-off ears. This was done to emphasize the protection from the temptation of the evil spirit. Meanwhile, Ondel-ondel nowadays uses one line to depict the ears, resulting in wide-open ears. These curved lines describe sharp hearing that symbolizes the openness to positive teachings.

2) *Shapes*

The facial shape of both versions of Ondel-ondel is partly elliptical or oval. The ellipse itself is the basic shape of an oval, creating an elongated round sphere. This symbolizes eternity and protection, as well as the creation of Ondel-ondel as a form of protection against evil spirits, as a mean to achieve eternal happiness in life.

The shape of the crown in the Ondel-ondel nowadays is in the form of coconut flower (*kembang kelapa*) which tries to imitate the usefulness of coconut tree, that humans must benefit other people and their environment. There is also triangular shape forming the teeth and nose, symbolizing the concept of the interconnected trinity which represents God, human, and nature.

3) *Texture*

The real texture of the Ondel-ondel resembles the shape of a human face, so that it is bumpy because of the curves of the face formed by the eyes, nose, and mouth. This symbolizes that life is not always smooth and will be filled by waves but can result in things that are balanced and harmonious.

4) *Color*

There are red colors both in the male and female version of Ondel-ondel. The red in the male version covered the whole face while the female version only covers the lips, earrings, and the crown. Red brings courage, power, and energy. The color of white which covered the face of the female version of Ondel-ondel represents peace, humility, and cleanliness.

3.1.1.2. *Design Principles*

1) *Size*

The size of Ondel-ondel is generally quite big as it is a giant doll with the height of 2.5 meters with the diameter of around 80 centimeters. Meanwhile, the face of Ondel-ondel

approximately fits in the dimension of 90cm X 90cm which is made from jackfruit wood (the original design) or fibers (Ondel-ondel nowadays).

2) *Scale*

In terms of the face alone, when compared to the adult human, Ondel-ondel has the scale of 6:1 which means it boasts six times the size of adult human's face. In terms of its weight, Ondel-ondel has the scale around 1:1 which means that it takes approximately two adult human to parade around one Ondel-ondel.

3) *Proportion*

The proportion of the face of Ondel-ondel, both in the shape and the limbs such as nose, eyes, ears, and mouths, are bigger, wider and longer than the normal human proportion.

4) *Pattern*

The basic form of Ondel-ondel is a stylization of human form. The ornamental design in the form of mountain represents the belief to the ancestral spirits. The pattern that was used in Ondel-ondel is made up of geometric shape in the form of triangle. This pattern has a magical function and was related to the concept of cosmic structure representing microcosmic, macrocosmic and metacosmic which contains portrayals from the worldly to divinity.

3.2. *Iconography stage*

3.2.1. *Historical Dimension*

As stated earlier, Ondel-ondel is one of the cultural icons of the Betawi community that existed from before the entry of Islam to Indonesia. Ondel-ondel was formed because of the beliefs in animism and dynamism within the Betawi community in ancient times. The Betawi community created Ondel-ondel by incorporating the various cultures in Indonesia since the Betawi people themselves were formed from tribes and cultures creating a melting pot of multicultural society. [3] Initially, Ondel-ondel was called Bebegig or Barongan which was also similar to concept of giant dolls used to repel evil spirits in several areas in Indonesia such as in Bali and Java. The name then changed into Ondel-ondel since the famous Batavian singer Benyamin Sueb sang a song called Ondel-ondel, taken from the flailing and swaying movement of the hand (Ondal-andil). Thus, it was popularized and then known by the public as Ondel-ondel. The facial expression in the original design of Ondel-ondel is very scary because it was used as a medium to repel evil spirits. Ondel-ondel was created as a pair because of the philosophy that humans will live a more balanced and harmonious life if they go hand in hand together in a pair. The male version of Ondel-ondel was painted red with eyes bulging with a sharp gaze and protruding fangs to represent anger. The intended expression of the male Ondel-ondel was fierce, strong, and frightening. The female version of Ondel-ondel was painted white that symbolizes purity. It shows that the Betawi community, especially the women, is always protected from impure things. Even so, the facial expressions

remained laden with sharp stares and a creepy smile. However, along the way, the expression in Ondel-ondel shifted from its frightening structure. This shift was initiated by Ali Sadikin, the former Governor of DKI Jakarta, in order to be more friendly to children and entertaining to the masses. [4]

3.2.2. *Religious Dimension*

The religious dimension of Ondel-ondel is related to the conditions of the previous Betawi community, which practiced the belief of animism and dynamism. The mentality of the Betawi community at that time was created through the belief of superstitions. These superstitions then entered their traditional rituals. For example, when creating the Ondel-Ondel, the indigenous elders must observe the day since Ondel-ondel can not be made in any normal day. They need to determine the 'good day' to make Ondel-ondel, preparing the offerings and chanting the prayers in the ritual of Jangjawokan to ensure the successful ceremony in creating and parading the Ondel-ondel to repel the evil spirits which causes disasters and plagues. However, the rise of Islam in Nusantara changed the way Ondel-ondel was made, as the majority of Betawi community adopted Islam as their identity [1]. This resulted in the unproportional form of Ondel-ondel to avoid the resembling of humans in general. This was done in order to not violate the prohibition of making an object in the form of human realistically and to deify said object. As mentioned in the hadith of Bukhari and Muslim, "Whoever in the world drew an image (living things), he will be required to blow the soul on that picture on the Day of Judgment, and he will not be able to do it". [5]

3.2.3. *Social Dimension*

The Betawi community at that time was bound by superstitions and myths. They believed that only the ancestral spirits dwelling within the Ondel-ondel can repel evil spirit that brings epidemics and plagues. The Betawi community deified the mystical figure of Ondel-Ondel because it relates to the belief of animism and dynamism before Islam was adopted, resulting in a massive shift in the social dimension. According to Liem [6], profanization can be interpreted as the inclusion of popular or modern cultural values in sacred religious activities, where the popularity resulted in a shallower form of meaning.

The meanings are reduced so that what can be digested is an instant and perverse experience, only in the state of temporal subjective consciousness. In relation to Ondel-ondel, the Betawi community who are used to be ruled with superstitions and myths began to shift and reduce the grip of superstitions within their social life with the rise of Islam. The adoption of Islam into the identity of Betawi community started the era that increasingly leads to the social dimension that is in accordance with the Islamic values.

3.2.4. *Interpretation stage*

In interpreting the design of the faces Ondel-Ondel, sepecially related to the visual of facial expressions, the analysis from the two previous stages was required. From the two previous stages, Ondel-ondel took form as a giant

doll with the original role of a symbol of strength to fight evil spirits that disturb the community which can cause crop failures and disease outbreaks. Thus, Ondel-ondel has been regarded highly by the Betawi community and its shape and color has been a part of their culture since ancient times. Through its mystical uses, the facial expression of Ondel-ondel has become the norm and is held in high esteem and attached to the history of Betawi community as a part of their culture in relation to their roots and a part of their ancestral heritages.

However, the shift in the facial expression of Ondel-ondel is inevitable. The social changes happening in the Betawi community from a practitioner of animism and dynamism to the adherents of Islamic teachings shift the role of Ondel-ondel greatly, from a part of ritual to drove away evil spirits to an entertainment medium. Modern Betawi community no longer bound by the superstitions. Their mystical roots have been eroded by the adoption of Islam as their identity. Thus, the mystical appeal of Ondel-ondel begins to fade and forgotten. Therefore, the design of Ondel-ondel, especially in relation to their facial expression, undergone a great change.

4. CONCLUSION

Visually, the initial design of the face of original ondel-ondel was made by stylizing human features and made them larger and more frightening. the shape of the eyes, eyebrows, nose, lips, and ears are larger in size and not made according to the proportion of a human face. this is because ondel-ondel was originally created to repel evil spirits by parading the giant doll around, so the design has to match with the belief system present at that time. However, the influence of islam which was adopted into a part of betawi identity brought changes to the visual of ondel-ondel.

The discussion shows that the visual of ondel-ondel in the pre-iconography stage reveal many differences that reflects the changes in values adopted by the betawi community. the iconography stage then reveals how these changes in visual elements were influenced by the changes in historical dimension, religious dimension, and social dimension. this stage shows the shift from a community bound by mythical belief to a community adherent to islamic teachings.

The interpretation stage concluded that ondel-ondel is originally a product of animism and dinamism civilization. Although the betawi community adopted islam as their cultural identity nowadays, the existence of ondel-ondel persisted within the community. This is because the mystical role of ondel-ondel experienced a profanization and the people of jakarta can see ondel-ondel easily without fear nowadays as many singing beggars use ondel-ondel as a tool to attract audience. thus, the facial expression of ondel-ondel is shifting from frightening to becoming more friendly to appeal to the children and to entertain the masses. However, their place as one of the cultural icons of betawi community remains strong.

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Interviewees:

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 Kampung Cipadak – Jakarta
 Profession : Sekretaris Forum Pengkajian dan Pengembangan Budaya Betawi

2. Name : Jazuri
 Date of Birth : 1977
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 Profession : Leader of the "Sanggar Argawana" (Ondel-Ondel Maker)