

Anthropomorphic Arabic Calligraphy: *The Elements of Srabad in Cirebon*

Agung Zainal Muttakin Raden^{1*}, Wirawan Sukarwo², M.S. Andrijanto³

¹*Visual Communication Design Program, Faculty of Language and Art, Universitas Indraprasta PGRI, Indonesia*

²*Visual Communication Design Program, Faculty of Language and Art, Universitas Indraprasta PGRI, Indonesia*

³*Visual Communication Design Program, Faculty of Language and Art, Universitas Indraprasta PGRI, Indonesia*

*corresponding author: agung.zainalmr@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

As one of the cities located in the northern coast of Java Island, Cirebon welcomed many foreign ships, especially in the Sunda Pajajaran Kingdom era. Cirebon saw its glory under Syarif Hidayatullah, better known as Sunan Gunung Jati. Nowadays, many intercultural artefacts from the Sunda Pajajaran Kingdom era can be seen in Cirebon. One of them was called *Srabad*. *Srabad* was a prayer or lauds in the form of Arabic calligraphy bearing a distinct figure. In Cirebon, many *Srabad* can be found etched in stained glass or glass paintings. *Srabad* was actually a talisman which disguised aesthetically so people can only see them as an artisan craft. This research focused on the elements contained within *Srabad* and how it was perceived into anthropomorphic Arabic calligraphy to see the esoteric and exoteric elements of the *Srabad*. The result showed that the esoteric elements were influenced by Arabic culture, while the exoteric elements influenced by a mixture of Middle East, Chinese, and Javanese culture.

Keywords: *Srabad, Anthropomorphic, Arabic calligraphy, Cirebon*

1. INTRODUCTION

Cirebon has been a bustling port town, before and after Islam came to Cirebon. Being a port town, Cirebon was blessed by a rich tradition brought by foreign nations visiting the port. Atja argued that the word "Cirebon" originated from the word "Sarumban", later changed into "Caruban" which means a mix of many things [1]. This word then underwent a change in pronunciation to "Carbon", and then "Cerbon", and finally into "Cirebon". Cirebon was a bordering area of two great culture, Javanese and Sundanese [2]. The development of Islamic influence in Cirebon gave a rich expression to the daily life and culture of Cirebon's society.

Islamic art developed in Cirebon was a mixture of many cultural expressions. One of them was *Srabad*. According to the interview with Opan Safari [3], *Srabad* in Javanese means "*mingser saking abad*" or shifting from the Hindu era into the Islamic era. The work of *Srabad* can be found in glass paintings, wooden crafts, batik, ceramic, and steel artworks. *Srabad* can also be understood as an anthropomorphic Arabic calligraphy, since it contains the element of Arabic calligraphy to decorate the illustration depicting the figure of human, plants, flowers, animals, or many abstract forms and

imaginary entities. Cirebon glass paintings, especially within its earliest years, has been influenced greatly by Islamic expression [4].

The visualization of Quranic verse in the form of calligraphy fill these figures ranging from Nusantara cultural figures like *wayang* character such as Semar, to the mythical beings. The people in Cirebon incorporated mysticism into their daily life. Although living very close with magical beliefs, some of the practices involving talisman usage show a relation to the belief found within the Islamic faith. This was seen in the use of Quranic verse to adorn these talismans. For example, Ayat Kursi scribed within a piece of cloth using a particular means to ward off negative influences when hung above the door [5].

Mystical life in Cirebon was expressed in the use of cultural and artistic symbols such as proverbs, writings, visual arts, performance arts, and ritual ceremony [4]. Based on these descriptions, this paper will focus on the elements contained within the *Srabad* and how it was perceived into a distinct anthropomorphic Arabic calligraphy to see the esoteric and exoteric elements behind the *Srabad*.

Previous research related Anthropomorphic Calligraphy to some features extracted from the Jawi paleography. Calligraphy and illumination are two close aesthetic expressions. Calligraphy is a form of technique

to make beautiful handwriting [6]. Azmi argued that Calligraphies and illuminations in ancient manuscripts were used to express the aesthetic quality of the manuscripts, and the status of the writers and the kingdom they represent [7]. Rispul then researched Arabic calligraphy in artworks that was rooted from the Qur'an. Aside of its artistic form, he argued, Arabic calligraphy from the Qur'an also has religious meaning since it was used to convey the words of God [8].

2. METHOD

This paper uses descriptive analysis as a method to understand Srabad illustration contained within Cirebon glass paintings. This paper will also analyze some examples of Srabad to better understand the esoteric and exoteric elements behind them. Qeis stated that visual imageries in cultural product can communicate identities and the image of communities. Thus, visual methodology in this paper was used to understand the way visual arts made using scripts and its accompanying illumination convey and preserve a sense of cultural identity [9].

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Semar

Anthropomorphic Arabic Calligraphy was a form of figurative calligraphy. Anthropomorphic calligraphy was resulted from the transformation of human figures into non-human figures. Semar was a non-human figure. However, in the story of *wayang*, Semar was the incarnation of god who came to earth to mingle with human. Semar was the incarnation of Sang Hyang Ismaya who underwent the path of mortals [10]. Semar was a humorous character, wise, and also charismatic. Semar was one of the central characters in Javanese *wayang* and was perceived as a very wise figure with many abilities [11].

The figure of Semar in anthropomorphic calligraphy was not found in Islamic arts. Cirebon glass paintings and calligraphy depicting Semar were the results of the syncretism of two ethics, morals, and theological perspectives: visual representation of *wayang* which was influenced by Hinduism and calligraphy as a non-figurative aesthetic expression influenced by Islam [4]. Figure 1 shows the figure of Semar whose body filled with calligraphy of Tawhid verse. Semar was one of the Punakawan characters that always appeared alongside of the Pandava. Semar was depicted with distinctly chubby and white face [12]. Semar was infamous mythological being in Nusantara archipelago who inspired some artists to make calligraphy based on his figure [11].

The calligraphy of the Tawhid verse had an underlying meaning to remind us of the existence of Allah the mighty creator. The dynamics of this calligraphy followed the shape of Semar's body depicting the faith toward Allah that followed in every bodily movement. The colors in this figure included white, red, black, gold, green, and grey which gave Semar a sense of greatness. The symmetrical balance can be found within

since the figure of Semar was placed right in the center in front of the light turquoise background.



Figure 1. Semar

Wadhasan ornaments in the form of coral reef decorated the space facing upwards as a stepping stone for Semar. The *wadhasan* was done in red, black, green, gold, blue, grey, and their gradations. The ornament of *mega mendung* (cloud) was seen at the upper right corner in green, red, black, white, gold, blue, and their gradations.

3.2. Bulus

Bulus was a soft-shelled turtle originated from Belawa, Cirebon. This animal was one of the sacred animals of Belawa. Bulus or *labi-labi* was an amphibious animal. The soft-shell of Bulus looked like human cartilage. The myth surrounding Bulus in Belawa made Bulus an endangered species. The people of Cirebon called Bulus as "Kuya". Kuya was derived from a saying of "*Kudu Yakin*" which was literally translated as the need to be faithful.



Figure 2. Bulus

Figure 2 shows a giant Bulus wearing crown. Arabic calligraphy decorated its shell. The calligraphy showed a strong and rigid image. This calligraphy suggested that human should have a strong faith. The face of Bulus was stylized as a scary red-faced giant with long nose and sharp fangs. The Bulus was shown in red, gold, blue, black, and their gradations. These colors represented a strong and powerful character.

The illustration also showed a symmetrical balance with the Bulus placed right in the center in front of a white background. The *wadhasan* ornament was delivered in brown, white, blue, black, purple, and their gradations. The *mega mendung* ornament was placed above the Bulus in red, white, purple, and their gradations.

3.3. Buraq

Buraq was an infamous creature from the story of the Prophet Muhammad SAW's journey to the heaven in one night (*Isra* and *Mi'raj*). The depiction of Buraq was naturalistic with beautiful and proportional detail and plasticity [4].



Figure 3. Buraq

Figure 3 shows a four-legged figure with wings, tail, and beautiful female face wearing shawls and crown. In Islamic mythology, this figure was known as Buraq or Al Buraq, or Burak in Cirebon language. This creature can move in the speed of light and was very strong. However, it also shows beauty and smooth figure. By looking at the Buraq image people will be motivated to see God or be close to God [4]. This illustration also showed a symmetrical balance with the Buraq placed right in the center in front of a light turquoise background. The Buraq was visualized in red, dark red, black, green, blue, white, purple, gold, grey, and other gradations.

These festive colors show a rich, elegant, smooth and beautiful Buraq. *Mega mendung* ornament were placed at the above and the bottom with red, white, green, yellow, purple, blue, and other gradations.

Those three figures in glass painting expressed an acculturation with a mixture of Cirebon culture. The Islamic influence was shown on the Buraq figure, the Hinduism influence was shown on the Semar figure, and the local Cirebon influence was shown on the Bulus. Islam forbids visualizing entities, thus the glass painting artisans created Anthropomorphic Arabic Calligraphy.

There were four perspectives to unravel the elements in the Srabad contained in glass paintings, namely religion perspective, psychological perspective, economic perspective, and cultural perspective.

3.3.1. Srabad in Religion Perspective

The spread of Islam in Indonesia has brought not only its religious system but also its cultural system [11]. The concept of divinity embraced by the people of Cirebon came from Al Qur'an. The role of *pesantren* (Islamic schools) in Cirebon was crucial, especially in developing Islamic teachings and studies [6]. The influence of Islam in Cirebon created a new expression in Srabad as a prayer or lauds full of mystical beliefs. The religious teachings taught by the Nine Saints (*Wali Songo*) at the time also contained a lot of mystical elements,, facilitating contact with long-accustomed populations of mystical concepts and thoughts [13]. In addition to Islam, other religions that developed the pre-Islamic Cirebon also used Srabad or other symbols praising God. The glass painting artisans usually carried out a *tirakat* (meditation) to clean their soul and body before starting their creative process.

3.3.2. Srabad in Cultural Perspective

The glass painting was one of the growing arts in Cirebon. Sunan Kalijaga was believed as a saint who spread Islam through puppet show (*wayang*). The art was developed in Cirebon with the emergence of Srabad into glass paintings, wood carvings, and batik.

Srabad contained verses praising Allah and Prophet Muhammad SAW in the form of calligraphy. Aside from being an ornament, these *wayang* appearances also function as an atmosphere purifier in the house or as a barrier to the entry of supernatural elements of evil [4]. Cirebon glass painting contained aesthetic value, magic and religion sourced from its local wisdom and mixing with other cultures such as China, Egypt and Java.

Religious system is one of the main elements that shape a culture. There is no culture that does not have a religious system. Particularly for the Cirebon people, a religious transformation took place massively and made Islam the main feature of their culture [6].

3.3.3. Srabad in Psychological Perspective

According to Opan Safari [3], one of the glass painting artisans interviewed in this study, there was some *tirakat* like fasting and *dhikr* to do before an artisan began the process of making glass paintings. This was intended to cleanse the heart and soul of negative things.

Purity of heart and peaceful state of mind will affect the works on the making so the works will possess power and function as desired. The mystical and magical functions contained by such ornaments were synonymous with the paper-like talisman (*azimat*) containing sentences written in Arabic [4].

The existence of the relation between the cleanliness of the soul and the local wisdom of the people of Cirebon made these works survived. In traditional communities a mental continuity between life itself with nature do exist [13].

3.3.4. *Srabad in Economic Perspective*

Glass painting was one of Cirebon's cultural heritages. It was a form of appreciation of art and tradition that has positive values. Glass painting has aesthetic value, so this work can be used as interior decoration. Accordingly, glass painting has enormous potential to be developed in terms of economy, art, and tradition.

4. CONCLUSION

Srabad in glass paintings has positive values. The mixture of various cultures provided the painting with distinctive style and identity. The element of Arabic calligraphy was derived from Islamic culture, rock and cloud ornaments were derived from Chinese culture and integrated into the works as *wadhasan* and *mega mendung*, the figures of *wayang* and mountains were derived from Javanese culture, believed by the people of Cirebon to be brought by Sunan Kalijaga. Dark colors and gradations were derived from European culture [6]. The influence of European culture can also be seen from the harmony of color shape, anatomy of the figure, and the existence of dark shadow effect. Srabad has both esoteric and exoteric elements. The esoteric elements can be seen on its aesthetic value, while the exoteric elements were present in the form of anthropomorphic Arabic calligraphy.

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