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## MOOI INDIE PAINTINGS: THE ANTAGONISM AND ITS POLITICALITY

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### ABSTRACT

For some people, Indonesia during colonial period is often imagined as a beautiful, quiet, peaceful, and harmonious country. Such imagination, for example, resides in the concept of Mooi Indie paintings which emerged out of Indonesian history during the Dutch colonial period. However, for other people, such representations were opposed because they were merely romanticized representation by painters patronized by the Dutch colonials who wanted to romanticize the memory of their past in East Indies. In this article, we discussed how the concept of Mooi Indie appears in certain Indonesian landscape paintings, how the antagonism comes into sight, and how its politicality works.

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## INTRODUCTION

Benedict Anderson (1991) stated that in order to exist, a nation must have an imagined idea about itself. This imagined idea regulates itself in the mind of its community, and accordingly influence its sustainers' way of interpreting their reality. The reality of a nation is manifested in different imagination. Hastings (1997) classifies the imaginations of a nation into first, literature (work of art) of its own, second, the right of political identity, and third, political autonomy and control of specific territory. Thus accordingly, to imagine a nation of Indonesia, one should imagine either Indonesian literature (Indonesian work of art), Indonesian political right and autonomy, or Indonesian geographical territory. Indonesian novels, paintings, political documents, or maps then can serve as the manifestation of the idea of a nation called Indonesia. One of the concepts that imagine Indonesia in a particular depiction is Mooi Indie. In this

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### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

For some people, Indonesia during colonial period is often imagined as a beautiful, quiet, peaceful and harmonious country. Such imagination, for example, resides in the concept of Mooi Indie which emerged out of Indonesian history during Dutch colonial period. The word “*mooi*” is a Dutch word which means beautiful, while (East) Indie is the name given by the colonizer Dutch to the territory that it occupied, Indonesia. Actually, the history of the word Indie itself is very problematic. During the Colonial period, Western European Countries competed with each other to find new trade routes to India. In the fifteenth to seventeenth century they sent their vessels to this “new” land called India. However, they stranded in different places or islands, and started to call the land and its people with a name associated to India. Columbus, for example, mistakenly thought the Native American in the land that he “discovered” as Indian (the people of India). At the same time, the European who landed in the Caribbean also called the place as Indie. Later the Caribbean islands were known as West Indie because other islands were also found at the East (South East Asia). The East Indie for Dutch colonialist was actually today’s Indonesia and its neighboring Dutch colonized areas. However, in this paper, we will use the concept of Mooi Indie as referring only to the idea of “beautiful Indonesia”.

There are different definitions on the term of Mooi Indie itself. The most prominent usually relates it to paintings. Mooi Indie can be defined naturalistic, romantic, landscape paintings particularly popular with members of European community in colonial Indonesia (Fast, 2004). However, Onghokham (2005), a historian from Indonesia, defines Mooi Indie in broad sense as the depiction of the nature and society of East Indie as being quiet, peaceful and harmonious. Thus, it includes not only visual depiction of beautiful Indonesia in paintings, but also cultural depictions in other forms, such as literature, social theories, and a typical colonial cuisine called *rijstaffel*. However, this writing will only limit the discussion to concept of Mooi Indie resided in paintings. Below are two examples of Mooi Indie paintings, Wahdi’s *Landscape* and Basar’s *Duck Pasture*.



Pict. 1: Wahdi’s *Landscape*



Pict. 2: Basar's *Duck Pasture*

According to Onghokham (2005), the first visual depiction of Mooi Indie appears in Raden Saleh's paintings. Raden Saleh (1814-1880) is a Javanese prince, regarded as the first Indonesian painter who jumped from the traditional art of batik and wayang painting into modern art of canvas painting. Raden Saleh is the first indigenous artist, to study art in Europe. He studied and lived in Europe from 1829-1851, receiving numerous honors at the Dutch, German, and French courts. During his twenty year stay in Europe, he was highly accepted by the European, especially the Dutch, elites. He was even honored as the *Schilder des Konings* (the Dutch King's laureate painter). He was very much influenced by Eugene Delacroix as well as Theodore Gericault's romanticism. See the pictures below to study the influence of Gericault on Saleh:



Pict. 3: Raden Saleh's *Deer Hunting*



Pict. 4: Theodore Gericault's *An officer of the imperial horse guard charging*

During Raden Saleh's period, the middle of nineteenth century European art was very much influenced by Romanticism and Realism, in which paintings are considered as picturesque depictions of reality, they are "actual" imitation of life (direct reflection of the casual order of experience). The main themes of this school are mostly portraits, wildlife and landscape, and the interest lies frequently in the mastery of forms, movement and color. The Romanticist is usually fascinated by the mysterious, the dark, the spectacular, and the wild. They often presented forces of nature as both physical and psychological challenge against man's will and control. Therefore, such black-and-white-allegory as the good versus evil often appeared. However, Romanticism's positioning of nature as a controlling force, and of human being as subject to social, economic forces in the family, the class, and the milieu into which he is born is criticized as being too deterministic. At the same time Realism's attempt to picture "natural" reality is later denounced as being partial, politically situated, limited, and context specific.

Raden Saleh paintings, for example—even though they paved the way to Mooi Indie movement in 1930s and go beyond cultural and national boundary—are accused of highly patronizing colonial elites and supporting the colonial romanticized representation of Indonesia. All of the paintings that he made only represent the pleasant, exotic reality of the Dutch colonial patron, or upper-class Indonesian Natives. Never can one find a portrait of poor people among his works. Furthermore, the landscape paintings are also all too beautiful that one can question the disappearance of "the other," the hideous reality in his works. To have a better picture of major criticism toward the school of paintings established by Raden Saleh, let us compare it with another school emerging during Indonesian independent struggle.

#### **ANTAGONISM FROM PERSAGI: ANOTHER IMAGINED IDEA OF INDONESIA**

On October 23, 1938 some groups of Indonesian Artist established PERSAGI or Persatuan Ahli-Ahli Gambar Indonesia (the Union of Indonesian Painters), the objective of the association is to create an art that would reflect the social and political reality of Indonesia at that moment and to discover a unique Indonesian style. The establishment of this Union is closely related to the nationalist movement against Dutch colonialism. Most of its members were national activists. To understand its nationalist background, it is important to firstly review the historical condition that gave its birth.

Since the period of Raden Saleh, there always existed class divide among European, Indo-European and indigenous artists, also between noble Indonesian and local Indonesian artists. *Kunst Kring* (foreign artists) deemed local artist as being socially and technically inferior. As a consequence, the scenario of the paintings was often taken from Western colonial view point. The Mooi Indie paintings, for example, celebrate the westerner's view of the wealth and richness of the Indonesian landscape, projecting an image of a society founded on virtues and qualities of rural lifestyle. They reflected the ideology of the middle class with classic imagery, and therefore lacked of meaning. Also, there was typical requirement for painters to master academic techniques such as the skill of taking perspective, the mixing of colors on the palette and the division of space on the canvas into careful consideration. In this sense, the art world belongs only to the exclusives. The fact that majority artists were excluded from the Dutch-organized Art Circles exhibitions had by itself resulted in nationalistic stance. Furthermore, the hierarchical Eastern-Western dichotomy of Dutch art critic also ironically encouraged Indonesian artists to question their identity.

As a response to such condition, some painters such as poster painters, comic strip artists, and others who had never been acknowledged as artists began to challenge the hegemonic style of Mooi Indie. Inspired by the gradual weakening power of colonial Dutch in the second world war, the painters saw the need to establish an anti-colonial organization which encouraged independent thinking—Persagi. To oppose the western exoticized view of Indonesia, they developed the idea of original, unique Indonesian style of paintings. Their ideas of Indonesian art identity were reflected in their art critiques and reviews, classes and discussion groups, and organized exhibitions. The major art critique and articles that shows Persagi's nationalistic antagonism is written by Sudjojono. Until now, his writing is always considered as a valuable source for understanding Indonesian art history.

Persagi's secretary and co-founder, Sindu Sudjojono (1913-1986), educated in Taman Siswa (The Pupil's Garden ), also an artist, takes a very deep pride in Indonesian Cultural Identity. After Persagi was disbanded in 1942, he was active in POETRA, an organization for Indonesian youth movement (until 1944, slightly before Indonesian independence). During Japanese occupation, he was active in Keimin Bunka Shidoso, the office established by Japanese for cultural affair. His rejection toward Mooi Indie paintings and painters is jotted down in some articles, later collected and published in two small volumes, *Seni Loekis, Kesenian dan Seniman* (Fine Art, Art and the Artist) and *Kami Tahu Kemana Seni Loekis Indonesia Akan Kami Bawa* (We Know Where We are Taking Indonesian Art). In his writing, Sudjojono condemned Mooi Indie paintings as tourist paintings:

The paintings we see nowadays are mostly landscapes.... Everything is very beautiful and romantic, ... pleasing, calm, and peaceful. Such paintings carry only one meaning: the beautiful Indies, the Indies that are the foreigner's and the tourist's.... [But] the new artist will no longer paint only the peaceful hut, the blue mountains, romantic or picturesque and sweetish subjects, but also the sugar factories and the emaciated peasant, the motorcars of the rich and the trousers of the poor youth; the sandals, trousers, and jacket of the man on the street. This is our reality. And the living artist... who does not seek beauty in antiquity - Majapahit or Mataram - or in the mental world of the tourist, will himself live as long as the world exists ... (Clark, 1993, p. 88).

When declaring Mooi Indie paintings as being romantic, Sudjojono did not completely detach himself from realism. However the kind of realism he proposed is



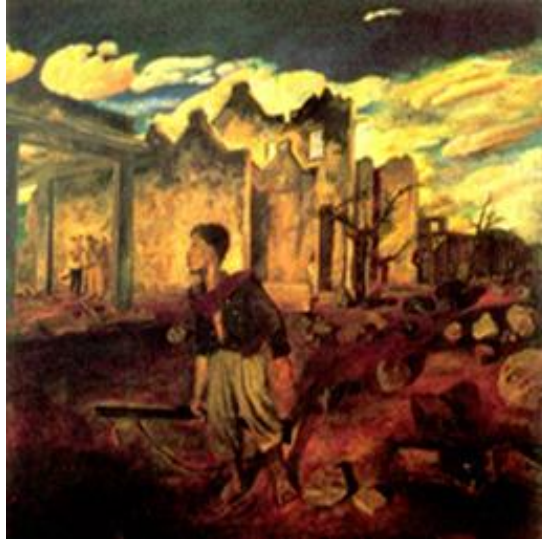
social realism, in which the beauty of art is considered as lying in the realities which is not beautiful. In relation to reality, art should help us understanding the actual world (Taylor, 2000, p. 54). Also he stated that art must not become a slave of a particular group moraliserende-mensen, art must be as free as possible from any bound of moral or tradition in order to live productively, and liberatedly.

According to Sudjojono, Indonesian nation did not yet have a uniting model of art, did not yet have a unique prototype because its indigenous form and style were still in the level of pseudo morphose. Further, he continued that an artist by itself should be a nationalist. It is the character that makes an artist artist, a character that is oriented toward the love for the truth. The truth for Sudjojono is none else than the struggle of one's right. In the context of oppression, one must have the nerve to reveal the truth; however the artist must courageously and enthusiastically reveal the truth in a delicate manner (Dermawan, 2000). The distinct scarcity of primary source material dating from Sudjojono's period makes his writing an invaluable tool for art historians, as evidenced by the fact that almost all of the literature that deals with the early modern period of Indonesian art cited or referred to it. However, apart from Sudjojono's impressive language and eloquence, he himself at times also painted landscapes in which commanding peaks rise up from the Indonesian land and villages as perfect metaphors for Indonesian strength and independence (Fast, 2004). Onghokham (2005) believes this shows how influential the concept of Mooi Indie is.



Pict. 5: Sindu Sudjojono's *Landscape*. A metaphor for Indonesian strength and independence

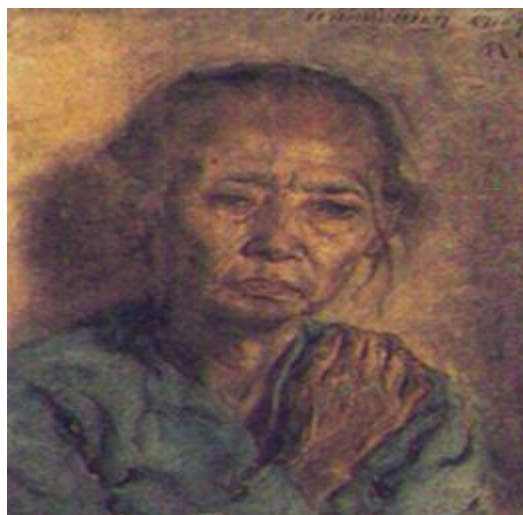
Persagi's propaganda affirmed that art exists to serve people. Therefore the theme of paintings was also shift to show the realities of the majority of Indonesians. The object of paintings are no longer a minority elite or beautiful landscape but rather the unique, every-day reality of Indonesia such as guerrilla fighters, hardworking farmers, kampong people, market women, fleeing people and troubled self-portraits.



Pict. 6: Sudjojono's *Guerilla Vanguard*



Pict. 7: Hendra Gunawan's *Beggar in the Market*



Pict. 8: Affandi's *My Mother*

However, Persagi artists, such as Affandi, Hendra Gunawan, Soearsono, and Popo Iskandar, ironically sought this style of paintings by using some techniques imported

from the West. Most of them use either the technique of realism, expressionism or impressionism. Since they cannot get into Dutch circle exhibition, they attached themselves more to international, though still European, model of art. Even though this is contradictory with their nationalist propaganda, yet many of the artists associated with Persagi then went on to help found other artists' groups and to teach members of the next generation of Indonesian artists; as a result, although the group itself was short-lived, evidence of the Persagi aesthetic philosophy can be found in Indonesian art produced well into the 1970s (Fast, 2004). It is this artists' orientation toward Western model that develop Indonesian paintings which is later noted as a significant stage in Indonesian art history, the establishment of two major Indonesian Schools of Art in Bandung (Popo Iskandar) and in Yogyakarta (Sudjojono, Affandi, Hendra Gunawan).

### ***NOTES ON THE ANTAGONISM: ON BEING NATIONALIST***

Apart from the response of Persagi, there are pros and contras on the antagonism launched by Persagi's artists toward Mooi Indie painters. Some people do not agree to the accusation that mooi Indie painters are not nationalist because their paintings, rather than represent the struggle of Indonesian people, highlight merely on the exotic aspect of Indonesia. Daoed Joesoef, once an Indonesian ministry of education, said that nationalism can also be shown through the beauty of nature. It must not have a picture of a shouting people with weapons. An artist that documented a beautiful nature is not less nationalist than social-realist artist, for example Joesoef mentioned the name Wakidi dan Syafei, an artist and a teacher in Bukit tinggi; though their paintings are classified as Mooi Insulinde, they are more nationalist than Soedjojono himself. Siegel (1996), an art critic, said that by not admitting Mooi Indie period, there will be some lost chain in the history of Indonesian paintings. Nevertheless, what is at stake when we talk about Mooi Indie paintings in terms of nationalism is not whether the painter is nationalist or not, but rather how the paintings constitute its politicality within the boundary of Indonesian nation. Therefore, let us analyze further the relation of the Mooi Indie concept with the historical topography of Indonesia.

### ***THE POLITICALITY OF MOOI INDIE***

Addriene Fast (2004) says that the a-nationalist indictment for the paintings is tenuous. Distinction must be made:

- about the ethnicities and politics of the painters themselves,
- about who consumed and valued these different styles of painting,
- and, about the ability of landscape to carry a political message.

It is generally assumed that Mooi Indie art was produced exclusively by Europeans most of whom were merely idle tourists in the Indies for brief periods of time, and could not therefore have had any real understanding of or connection with the people and places they painted; their art must then be, by definition, superficial and trivial. The tourist artist stereotype, according Fast, is indeed true for some Dutch artists like Isaac Israels who considered his journey to Java as useless. However, there are also some other artists, the Indo-European such as Willem Bleckmann, Leo Eland, and Ernest Dezentjé who have been raised in the Indies and were Javanese on their mothers' side and therefore have strong attachment to Indonesian landscape, politics, and people. The superficiality of the mooi Indie artists to Indonesian experience is also too feeble an argument because such claim cannot be applied to a handful of pure Indonesian Mooi Indie artists, most notably Abdullah Suriosubroto, Mas Pringadie, and Wakidi who cannot be considered as tourists.



It is also considered that Mooi Indie art was mostly consumed by Europeans—the retired Dutch who want to romanticize the memory of their past. According to Onghokham (2005), the details in Mooi Indie paintings often display an exotic image of Indonesia. For example, in Raden Saleh painting, *The Buffalo Hunting* (1851), the characters are pictured in oriental manner: Javanese nobles in Middle East costume.



Pict. 9: Raden Saleh's *The Buffalo Hunting*

Such orientalized image of Indonesia is favoured by Saleh's European patron since it provides the justified sense of East-West dichotomy, of "otherness". At the same time, the depiction of Indonesia as a mooi colony (harmonious, peaceful, quiet countryside) eternalizes the glorious moment of their occupation and domination in an archipelago hundred miles away from their country. Further, Onghokham (2005) said that the creation of mooi indie style is complicit with the colonial project as a whole. Iskandar Nugraha (2004) in his comment on Clockener Brousson's book *Batavia Awal Abad 20: Gedenkschriften van een oud-koloniaal* says that until the end of nineteenth century, the Dutch colonial government tried to prevent the coming of the European to "tropical Holland" by creating unpleasant images of the Indie, such as epidemic plague, volcano eruptions, native wars, etc. This phenomenon ended after English Revolution which triggered tourism: Europeans and Americans could no longer be banned from visiting colonial lands. After the fall of Aceh under the rule of Governor General van Heutz in early twentieth century, the Dutch colonial government began to propagate tourism in East Indie. The opening of colonial country for tourists and investors is complicitous with the attempt to control and regulate the representation or image of East Indie. In this context, the creation of Mooi Indie, can be seen as part and parcel of the attempt to shift from political domination to cultural subjugation. Along with other project, such as travel writing and book publications, the Mooi Indie art purposefully or innocently regulates the colonial past and memory for the European as well as for the colonized Indonesians.

Nevertheless, Mooi Indie paintings are not only consumed by the European, but they are also popular among the Indonesians from different class of society. One can easily find such beautiful scenery paintings (such as painted by Kumpul in Malang or R. M. Sayid in Solo) on the side of the street. James Siegel (1986) said that such paintings are commonly found in each house in Java [at least until 1980s]. Among the Indonesian collector of Mooi Indie paintings, the first president of Indonesia, Sukarno, is the most prominent one. Onghokham (2005) said that Sukarno has ambiguous relations to these paintings. The relation is antagonistic when we focus on his nationalist agenda: Sukarno's language when he campaigned on nationalist movement is not "mooi" at all.

His speech, “Indonesia Menggugat” (Indonesia Retaliates), are full of stern vocabularies such as bomb, dynamite, revolution—despite the fact that he has himself never had a gun, held ammunition or even had a revolutionary organization. However, the relation can be responsive as well, that is, when we focus on Sukarno’s Marhaenism. Marhaen is the name of a farmer that Sukarno met in the beautiful landscape of Parahiangan (most probably in a horse cart) who inspired Sukarno so much that later Sukarno squeeze all the ideas out in the well-known ideology of Marhaenism. Marhaenism is basically an idea of having independent life, plain but self-sufficient. Thus, the Mooi Indie paintings collected by Sukarno indicate his longing for beautiful, harmonious, peaceful Indonesia; an Indonesia whose dynamic is just like the life of Marhaen. In this respect, Sukarno’s view of nationalism is romantic and a bit populist as well, since it celebrates Nature and glorious past. If in Germany the populist characteristic appears in the myth of Niebelungen lied through the opera of Wagner, in Indonesia it appears in the myth of harmonious, traditional landscape through Sukarno’s collections of Mooi Indie paintings.

However, the next question arises whether paintings have the ability to carry political message. The political possibility of Mooi Indie art lies in the different interpretation of how the art is seen as sign. To interpret the landscape as merely symbol of tourist affair and romanticized colonial memory is superficial, because it closes the possibility of other symbolization. Most of mooi Indie painting represent the scenery in Indonesian villages. According to Onghokham (2005), villages have an important role in Vietnam War and Chinese revolution. In Asia, villages are the center of dynamics of society, just like European cities. In terms of colonialism, the Dutch saw Javanese socio-political events also from its villages. The subjugation of Aceh was also made possible by the information from Snouck Hougronje’s research on socio-cultural condition of Aceh’s villages. During colonial period there is a movement of Saminism from a group of farmers in Northern Shore of Java Island. It proved that Indonesian villages were very influential in the struggle of independence. However, in Mooi Indie art the vibrant, restless villages appear to be harmonious, quiet, and peaceful. By representing the beautiful village in the painting, the sustaining colonial reality is made perpetual.

Another symbol prominent in Mooi Indie paintings is mountain. According to Fast (2004) each artist’s painting is different. The Indonesian artists use the image of mountain more often than the (Indo-)European artists. The Dutch painter, Henry van Velthuisen’s, for example did not use any image of mountain at all, while Gerard Adolf use mountain only as a background for his paintings. However, Indonesian artists such as Basoeki Abdullah and Wakidi use mountain as the object of their painting.



Pict. 10: Velthuisen's *Countryside*



Pict. 11: Gerard Adolf's *Scenery in Modjo Agung*



Pict. 12: Basoeki Abdullah's *Mountain Landscape*



Pict. 13: Wakidi's *Landscape*

The mountain, rather than symbolize beauty, is a symbol of Indonesian psyche: a uniquely Indonesian spirituality and aesthetic belief. It is impossible to ignore the topographical omnipresence of mountains and volcanoes in the region, particularly in Java and Bali, but for those for whom the spiritual and symbolic importance of the mountain has been emphasized over many years and through successive cultural and religious contexts, the image of the mountain will be particularly sought out; for such people who express themselves through the arts, it should be expected that the image of the mountain will be a recurring theme.

## CONCLUSION

We can understand the standard of beauty for each person is different. What is beautiful for the Europeans does not necessarily beautiful for the Indonesians. For some Indonesians, the palm trees and the bamboo bush in Mooi Indie painting, rather than showing the beauty of a landscape is representing a fearful atmosphere. There is a belief in Javanese culture that bamboo bush is "the palace" for the unknown. Siegel (1986) did a very thorough analysis about the meaning of symbolism in painting such as Mooi Indie. It carries in itself the concept of *wedi* or *serem* which mark a notion of threat. So, behind such beauty there is a concept of catastrophe. Some of Javanese myths also acknowledge the concept of beauty which goes together with disaster, for example in the Myth of Nyai Dasima, and Jasmine van Java, each a beautiful woman, a figure of beauty with the capability of casting their charm and "spell" that brings catastrophe for men's heart.

As a text, Mooi Indie paintings can be interpreted differently. In terms of Indonesian national identity, the painting might re-present the visual materiality of the space that marks the existence of Indonesian Nation. However, when it comes to the terms of nationalism, Mooi Indie art has an ambiguous position. Since representation is always limited, the beautiful landscape depicted by Mooi Indie art can only accommodate partial idea of nationalism. Realized or not, the partiality will create certain political position. But the politicality itself varies; depend on the way one makes relation. Furthermore, since nationalism itself has no fix boundaries, then it is difficult to also fix a rigid position of Mooi Indie paintings in the history of Indonesian nationalism.

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