

Indonesian Comic Strips, Localities in Global Popular Media

Comics that published in dailies usually called comic strips because of its limited panels, 2 to 4 panels (boxes of drawings) placed in one strip. Usually, those strips, after a long run and became popular, compiled and republished as a book. Some comic strips were a continuing story and some were fragments. Some were just a counterparts of American Comics, an Indonesian version of the well-known fictions such as science fictions, superheroes, wars, romances and many others, but some themes and style were indigenous. The Indonesian comic strips are the mirror of the era. The setting, the situations, and the characters in the strips reflected the reality in a dramatized, exaggerated styles. The topics brought up in the strips made us relate the stories and the visuals to the context, where and when the stories were taken. Thus we constructed the situation of the era. The comic strips traditions in Indonesia existed before the national Independence. The discussion had it been continued will end up in an argument on what is "national identity" in Indonesian comics like. Considering the limited pages, in this writing, I will not go any further than to give a brief presentation on Indonesian comic strips from the era before 1945 until the 1990s with a stressing on how the comics stand between unique indigenous style and more general ones.

Before 1945, Indonesia was occupied by Japan for three and a half years. Before the Japan era, Indonesia was under Netherland government for hundreds of years. At that times, starting in the 1920s many important comic strip titles were made and published in mass medias. Many were made under the influences of American comics in drawing styles, genres, and storylines. It is important to mention Comics from the colonial era because the styles and approaches of early Indonesian Comics (called Cergam) were mostly inspired by American comic strips. Flash Gordon, along with Tarzan comics was the ones that often mentioned by senior Indonesian artists as their inspirations. Flash Gordon published in D'Orient, a local (Netherland Indies) magazine between the 1920s until the 1940s. This magazine also posted original comic strips made by Dutch and American artist specially invited to Batavia to make comic strips with local settings and themes. In the 1940s, in order to campaign Japanese culture in Indonesia, the government sent an artist to Java to do a propaganda promoting Japanese culture and custom to Indonesian peoples. Also, the local Chinese publishers played important roles in brought up some good comic strip series that became milestones in Indonesian comics history. They started their business since pre-independence, and some survived the publications until now. In its printed medias, comic strips and cartoons were made. The adoptions process not only happened in the early days. The American comic strips continuously gave inspiration to the world, and to the Indonesian artists in creating new comics from years to years.

[image]

***Put On* in Pantjawarna magazine by Kho Wan Gie, March 1953. *Put On* was published in *Sin Po* weekly since February 1930 until the Japan era. Later, in 1947, *Sin Po* transformed into Pantjawarna magazine.**

Before the Indonesian independence in 1945, I found some strips that existed in colonial magazines. There were three dominant ethnic groups that acknowledged by the government at that time in Dutch Indies (Batavia); Dutch, Chinese, and the "natives". The Dutch had their magazines. The Chinese publishers also produced their magazines in Chinese and in Malay (Indonesian) language. The natives Indonesian also have their own daily and magazines. One of the weekly magazine published by the Chinese community was *Sin Po*. There was a comic strip featuring a chubby bachelor character that already existed in *Sin Po* since January, 2nd 1930, but *Put On*, the character's, introduced on January 17th, 1931 edition. This *Put On* character was in the paper every Saturday. The story itself was humorously told the reader about the daily life of *Put On*, a Chinese descendant Batavia

citizen living in the 1930s to 1960s, with his family and friends. The existence of Chinese descendant peoples in Batavia was important to complete the picture of Indonesia. Kho Wan Gie, the creator portrayed the culture from the insider point of view, so he can perfectly demonstrated the factual situations in the community through the dialogues (Chinese-Malay), the clothing, and the settings.

The 1920s to 1940s was the era when the native's (ethnic) custom and civilization are being confronted by the Dutch point of view. Western concepts of modernization such as "logic" and "efficiency" were the standpoints to criticized and mock the local situations. Some examples were pictured by the cartoons of Billy Cam, an American illustrator that hired by D'Orient, a Dutch magazine in Batavia, to do the comic strips. Obviously Billy Cam commented the social situations from Western points of view and passed to Dutch readers. D'Orient itself was a magazine for Dutch speaking readers. The series called CAMouFLAGES, published from 1935 to 1940. It was fragments of stories from a westerner living in Batavia. In CAMouFLAGES we can see the awkwardness of CAM while adapting with the modernization process in Batavia. Elements of eastern cultures and western cultures were bumped into each other and created a unique universe based on both cultures.

[image]

CAMouFLAGES by Billy Cam, D'Orient 1938 Batavia, Netherland Indies

[image]

Impression of *Tjap Go Meh* event in Batavia by Billy Cam, D'Orient 1940

In 1942 to 1945, Indonesia was occupied by Japan. The Japanese started a campaign in Asia, that Japan was the big brother of Asia and will bring prosperity to all Asia nations. In order to support the propaganda program, artists were sent to Indonesia. Saseo Ono one of the artists sent to java. He created the Papaya Pa`chan (Pi `chan) comic strip in Kana Djawa Sinbun magazine, 1944-1945. The story was a little boy and a little girl living in the Japanese occupation era, giving comments on the encounters of Japanese custom and Indonesian in Java. The magazines were in Japanese, and so were the dialogues of the comic strips.

[image]

Papaya (Pi Chan) comic strips by Japanese artist Saseo Ono in Kana Djawa Sinbun 1943

[image]

Cartoon page in Djawa Baroe magazine (1943)

There was another magazine, Djawa Baroe (1943), an Indonesian language magazine that also has cartoons and comic strips. The visuals and contents of the comic strip seemed to be in the same flavor with Papaya Pa`chan cartoons. Most of the contents also telling us about Japanese (army) in Indonesia. The name of the artists was unknown, and it did not use text or dialogues, so I presumed that the cartoons might be made by Japanese. Both the cartoons from Kana Djawa Sinbun and Djawa Baroe gave us a certain atmosphere that aroused from it, a feel of classic Japan cartoon with local characters and settings.

The 1950s was the era when the national leaders intensively discussing and questioning the "national" identity. Department of Education and Culture organized three congress' on Indonesian culture from 1948 to 1954, and one Cultural Conference in 1950. Maybe, this atmosphere influenced the artists and the publishers to construct a "national" stories and characters in their own interpretations of localities. So, even though that most Indonesian

Comic Strips influenced by the American comic strips, there was always a “local” aspect. The artists tried to make their comics look local, either in the themes, settings or the characters. The efforts lead to many creations that grew and had made strong localities in Indonesian, especially in themes. The media itself (comics) are an established set of system and form that was a western origin so that the elements of local “played” along that system and form. At this point, comic artists were trying to make their creations to be in line with the global by continuing the lead from the US comics but on the other hand, make their comics to be local. The comic strip *Tamu jg Membawa Maut (Aliens That Brings Death)*, 1953, was one example of how a global trend in theme - that came from the US, actually – developed by Indonesian artists. This theme, “Alien Invasion”, was very popular in America during that time.

[image]

***Tamu jang Membawa Maut (Aliens Who Bring Death)*, Gembira Magazine, 1953, was one of the comic strips inspired by the “invasion of alien” trend in American popular culture in the 1950s.**

After the independence, the Indonesian comic strips continue to grow in many mass medias published by locals in various genres and themes. Themes that will instantly create impressions of “localities” were mythologies or folk tales. The visuals; design of the characters and settings were taken and developed from traditional ethnical dance or puppet theater. *Ganesa Bangun* was a story that based on Hinduism mythology of Ganesa. Hinduism was once a dominant belief hundreds of years ago in Indonesia region, and along with other pre-Hinduism cultures in Indonesia, it contributed a strong basis for what we know now as “traditional” in Indonesia. The characters design and the visual atmospheres mostly was developed from Javanese traditional dances and puppets theater. This kind of themes, local mythology, legends, and folklores experienced sales and productions booming in the 1950s.

[image]

***Terdjebak di Pulau Dewata (Ambushed in Bali)* by ARZ Majapada magazine, 1970, a love romance adventure comic strips**

The other thing that will give the reader a sense of local was the stories itself. For example when it was a romance story, then the names, settings and the problematic of the stories were uniquely local, even when the characters wear western style clothing, or in western like settings. Some romance stories crossed with mythologies or mysteries aspect in it.

[image]

Nasroen AS, *Mentjari Poetri Hidjau (searching for Poetri Hidjau [Green Princess])* Ratoe Timur magazine 1939, a mix of romance adventure with the local myth of Poetri Hidjau.

[image]

***Ganesa Bangun* by RA Kosasih, published in Sunday Courier, 1953**

[image]

An advertisement for a Comic Magazine (to be published in 1954) in which will continue to publish the *Ganesa Bangun* story along with other titles

[image]

***Erlangga* by A. Ruhijat, published in Gembira magazine, April 1954. The story was an interpretation of the history of King Airlangga (1049-1042).**

Elements of local were very obvious and visual in comics with a historical setting. Automatically the artists will try to create pictures with factual accuracies, and it will give us the impressions of ethnicities. One of the comics with historical background that show us a

taste of Balinese was *Serodja dari Bali (Serodja from Bali)*, a series by Delsy Sjamsumar, an artist with a strong expressive drawing style. Delsy called his creation as “Historical Romance from the 19th era”.

[image]

Serodja dari Bali (Serodja from Bali), by Delsy Sjamsumar, 1954, from Pelangi magazine. This was one of the earliest works of Delsy Sjamsumar. He then created many comics. His favorite seems to be historical ones or comic strips that were about movies news and the gossips beyond the news.

Until 1949, the time of “Dutch aggression” in Indonesia, this region experienced many wars and battles for Independence. From 19th of December 1948 to 29th of June 1949, *Kedaulatan Rakjat* dailies contains a comic strip *Kisah Pendudukan Jogja (The Occupation of Jogja Story)*. The Story and art were created by Abdoel Salam. The theme, wars, and battles were popular until the 1960s era. The collective memories of wars ten years ago brought up interest on war stories. So the stories were created based on facts and some were fictions or a mix of both.

[image]

Abdoel Salam, one of the best Indonesian comic artists recorded the Dutch aggression in Yogyakarta through the comic strip *Kisah Pendudukan Jogja* in *Kedaulatan Rakjat*, 1949. The strips were compiled into a book publication then.

[image]

A genre of war, *Pagar Kawat Berduri* by Trisno Juwono, *Trio Magazine*, January 1962

Comic publishers began to flourish in the 1950s, especially in Jakarta, Bandung, and Surabaya. In Medan, the capital city of North Sumatera, there were some publishers that took advantage of dailies that succeeded in developing comic strips. Some publishers in Medan compiled the comic strips and published it in book format, and also succeeded once again. Taguan Hardjo and Zam Nuldijn were two amongst the many Medan artists that popularized the term “Medan Comics”. Their books usually printed one strip per page so the format was oriented horizontally. Many other publications even when it was not originated from strips, produced in the same form as this “Medan Comics” in order to have the same feel and it might mislead the reader to think that it was a “Medan Comic”. The other Medan artists that were very productive were Arry Dharma, Bahzar, Djas, M. Ali S., Si Gajo.

[image]

Zam Nuldijn, *Merak Djingga*, *Mimbar Umum* newspaper, 1959. Zam was known for his detailed and delicate artworks. It was a pity that Medan printing qualities were very poor that Zam’s energy poured into the artworks could not fully passed on to the readers. Zam was also an artist that used to

[image]

Taguan Hardjo, *Badai di Negeri Seberang*, *Waspada* newspaper, 1960. Taguan Hardjo was an Indonesian artist who grew up in Suriname. When starting to make a career in Indonesia, he studied Indonesian ethnics stories and cultures into his works, but his studies and interests on other cultures still reflected in his choice of themes.

Besides the characters, problematic, and settings, localities also expressed by its language used. In the 1950s and 1960s, Javanese used in comic strips published in central and east Java.

[image]

Dagelan PS, Denmas Djangkung, was one comic strip by Bambang Sudjiman in a page of Penjebar Semangat, January 1954, a magazine that used the Javanese language. Below the comic strip was the text that elaborated the story. Dagelan PS, Denmas Djangkung was a continuing story.

In the 1980s to the 2000s, there was a decline in Indonesian comic industry. Compared to the booming in the 1950s to early 1980s, this era was very saddening. With an exception for some senior artists, the majorities of the existing surviving comics were made with insufficient exploration on story and art. The bold move from some publishers to print translated comics from Europe and Japan might be another reason for the readers to change their choice of comics. The situation worsened when many good comic artists convert to other professions such as visualizer in advertising agencies, and this actions also (vice versa) accelerate the dawn of local comics. Some artists design their comic in such a way that the visuals and storytelling in line with the manga style, but until the 1990s, this effort seems to be failed.

[image]

STOP magazine cover by Dwi Koendoro, 30 September 1972.

Luckily, mass medias were still here, saving spaces for good comic strips. If we flashed back to the early years of Indonesian comics, we will find that there were many comic magazines published in Indonesia since the 1950s, such as Majalah Komik, Melodi Komik, Tjergam, Eres, and many others. Those magazines usually contain comics from popular artists at that time. In the 1970s, the time when Indonesian comics was flourishing, Jan Mintaraga, Ganes TH, Teguh Santosa, Hans Jaladara, and Zaldy were known as “the big 5” in the industry. It was said that those names were the guarantee for a successful sale, besides from the qualities of their works that were also above the average. In the late 1980s, good artists like Jan Mintaraga or Teguh Santosa, found their way to continue making good comics in dailies such as or magazines, like Ananda or Hai. Children magazines also became the place for Indonesian comic artists to put their artworks. Ananda, a magazine for kids, print titles by many well-known artists coordinated by NBC Sukma. Hai magazine, lead by the pioneer of Indonesian comic history writer, Arswendo Atmowiloto, also important to be mentioned as the one that continuing the “tradition” of Indonesian comics. Since 1977 to the 1980s, Hai magazine invited many good artists to create new comics. Now, Hai of that era was one that looked for by the collectors for its comics. Those names were the ones that most collected by the collectors nowadays.

[image]

Dibawah Naungan Flambojant (Under the Flamboyant Tree) by Ganes TH, Varia magazine, 12th April 1967

[image]

Devi Savitri by Jan Mintaraga in Sunday Sinar Harapan 24 September 1978

[image]

Prahara Kurusetra by Teguh Santosa in Sunday Sinar Harapan 24 September 1978

The genres among the magazines were varied, and there were some that specialized in humor, such as Stop and Astaga magazine in the 1970s, Humor magazine in the 1980s. The approach and concept of those humor magazine mentioned were similar to the Mad magazine. In the late 1980s, there was a trend in Indonesia to publish media in a tabloid format, and so some comic tabloids such as Tablo, Komik, and Komika published at that time. Many humor comic strips and single panel cartoons by many unknown artists can be found in Indonesian Newspapers and magazines.

[image]

James Djon Detektip Cartoon by Johnny Hidajat, Varia Baru 26th February 1971. Johnny Hidajat was very productive, created many comics for STOP magazine and also the dailies Pos Kota. Johnny Hidajat was an artist that very consistent in producing cartoons. His artwork style was unique and the topics brought up were the popular issues at that time.

The newspaper that succeeded in raising comic strips in its pages was Pos Kota. In 1971, the editors had an idea to allocate full four pages to comic strips. They called the pages as Lembergar, an acronym for Lembaran bergambar (pages of pictures). The editors then gathered up illustrators to fill the pages. The genres were varied, mostly chose humor theme. Two of the most popular character's series were Doyok and Ali Oncom. Doyok was a character wearing Javanese attribute commented the social problems in urban Jakarta, while Ali Oncom was a punk styled character experiencing problems in a social relationship with others (especially with his girlfriend). The decision to create Lembergar turned up to be successful in term of sale. Amir Bait, the Lembergar editor from 1988 to 2001 told me that there was an increase in print after the Lembergar added to the newspaper. In the 1970s to the 1980s Pos Kota circulation was 100.000 to 15.000 copies, and in the 1980s to the 1990s Pos Kota circulation was 300.000 to 400.000 copies. He also mentioned that there was information from the 1990s research department that some readers of Pos Kota bought Pos Kota only for the Lembergar, and some cunning agents even sell the Lembergar separately from the newspaper. Following the declining of print media in the 2000s, Pos Kota also reduced in circulation, but the Lembergar still existed until now (2017).

[image]

Many approaches and genres of comic strips in Lembergar, daily Pos Kota, 8 September 1992

In 1996, two artists from Jakarta Institute of the Arts, Benny Rachmadi and Mice (Misrad) made their entrance at the right moment when there was a scarcity of local comics in major bookstores. They created a serial comic called *Lagak Jakarta (Jakarta Style)*. Their unique approaches to creating the comic-cartoon of Jakarta peoples made it stand out of the manga piles. Their comic strips, then published weekly in Sunday Kompas, a national major newspaper, along with other strips such as Panji Koming by Dwi Koendoro and *Konpopilan* by Ade Rastiadi. Benny and Mice styles of narratives in the 90s gave inspiration to many artists to do satirical humor.

[image]

Panji Koming by Dwi Koendoro (above) and Benny Mice by Benny and Mice in Sunday Kompas, September 30th, 2007. Pandji Koming commented on political situations using a classic "Majapahit" characters and settings. Benny Mice, auto criticized themselves, as they were Jakarta citizens, making fun of Jakarta urban people.

[image]

Geger Madjapahit by Taruna HP, Aneka Magazine 1950s. An example of comic strips that integrated the Burne Hogarth's Tarzan style drawing, while telling a story about Madjapahit, a kingdom in Java, 1500s. On the first panel, the artist said that "this story was his imagination with no relation to historical facts. It was just a writing".

The characters of the comic strips in Indonesia were very diverse and dynamic. As I mentioned before, even though that Indonesia has a long tradition of visual narrative medias such as the reliefs panel of Borobudur temple, the comic system itself was rooted in western print media tradition. It was US comics such as Bringing Up Father and Flash Gordon that became the early references for Indonesian artists in the 1920s. Many styles had been incorporated in Indonesian comic strips. Some evolved and acknowledged as the artists'

characteristics. Amongst them, there were Kho Wan Gie, Teguh Santosa, Jan Mintaraga, Ganes TH, Dwi Koendoro, Johnny Hidajat, Benny and Mice. The artists then adapted the styles while incorporating the local context, things like myths, problems, places, customs, cultures, beliefs, and other unique aspects into their comics strips. The languages used were also the attribute localities. Those expressions of localities facilitated by the visual narrative of the universal comic system created a mosaic of Indonesian comic art, that will continuously evolve.