

# Timur Merah Project; Pilgrimage of Narrative, Memory, and Historical Legacy

## Timur Merah Project and the counter narrative to the Male Gaze in old cultural heritage

If history was written by the 'hero(es)' and it means not by the women. I believe that the lack of writing about the important role of women in the canonical text<sup>1</sup> is the forerunner of the patriarchal mentality and perspective. It has been taken for granted without question, without critical effort to discuss it. Historical archives, traditional classical paintings, or ancient manuscripts in Nusantara<sup>2</sup> are very difficult to access. Not to mention finding one that carefully discusses the role of women. The knowledge about the stories of women is also unevenly distributed. To treasure is like looking for an oasis in the middle of the desert. Thus far, women have always been ornaments or romantic narratives in stories. The women's portrayal is not far from being a heroic badge of glory in the king's and princes' reign.

For me, this reflection is the main reason for how the Timur Merah Project started 3 years ago, in 2019. I found too many texts about historical and cultural inheritance were written by the men. Especially by those who had an interest in authority, the palace elite. These texts have been passed down as a legacy in Nusantara since the 14th century. The women in the text are limited to the procreation role, and/or if not, they are sexualized (Helen Creese, 2004).

I started my journey to gather knowledge. It indeed requires effort to complete the pieces of information like a puzzle that slowly begins to unravel. In the initial research for the Timur Merah Project, there were limitations towards access and comprehension in reading the manuscript written in Ancient Javanese and Balinese. Therefore, I gain an understanding of narrative in two ways. First, by conducting interviews with priests and elders who have inherited knowledge. Second, through wayang narration. Some wayang narratives can be interpreted through Kamasan painting, a painting style or genre developed in Klungkung, Bali, from the 15th century until now. However, Balinese culture practices the *Wangsa* system, so only the Brahmins have access and knowledge of reading lontar texts and literary works in ancient languages. The Kamasan-style painters who live near the center of the

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<sup>1</sup> Canonical text refers to texts that are passed down from generation to generation and become authoritative sources of standards.

<sup>2</sup> Nusantara is literally translated as the archipelago. Nusantara does not mean Java or Indonesia. In the geopolitical context, the Republic of Indonesia existed after independence. Thus, the archipelago refers to the mapping of the distribution of texts in the trade routes that connect Bali and Java with other regions in Southeast Asia.

Klungkung royal government are required to depict the *pakem*<sup>3</sup> of the wayang and its composition in the painting. Just like a puppeteer who composes an image based on the storyline. These drawing experts of Klungkung have already inherited and will inherit the knowledge of narrative and how to read texts from generation to generation.

The story of Panji, a hero's journey of the princes of Kahuripan, is one of the canonized script that was written in great detail. The story tells about the princes' embarkation on an expedition and military invasion to expand the royal territory. As well as their marriage with princesses and beautiful women of the land they have invaded as one of their winning trophies. In addition, erotic visuals are often used to illustrate the story of Panji. For instance, the princes of Kahuripan is known to collect wives. Women's bodies are depicted as sensual creatures and like to seduce. The women are personified as nature as a concept; such as ripe fruits and exotic scenery. This etched the idea that masculinity deserves to dominate them.



(Pic. 1. Anonym, Kamasan, 23,5 × 397cm, 1961

A historical depiction of Panji Malat, the kings of Kahuripan and Kediri arrived at Gegelang and entered the abode of the princes with the king of Gegelang –

Permanent link to this image : <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/833265>)

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<sup>3</sup> *Pakem* refers to a cultural code that is omnipresent in various forms of everyday life. In this context, *pakem* is how wayang should be presented and depicted ideally. So that the essence can be transferred properly into the painting. This process plays a role in the repetition of narrative that can be taken for granted. This idealization is naturalized and create complex tension in cultural practice.



(Pic. 2. Anonym, Kamasan, 84,3 x 84,3cm, 1984

Erotic illustration from the Panji epic

Permanent link to this image : <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/151759>)

In my understanding about eastern erotica, sexuality is not only described as a procreative agenda for the survival of humankind. *Lingga* (penis) and *yoni* (vagina) are interpreted as spiritual forces. In some of the rituals, these symbols serve to protect human from the unwanted energies. Hindu rituals in Bali that remains to be practiced are attached to this meaning.



(Pic. 3. Anonym, Kamasan, 925 x 28 cm, 1940,

*Ider-ider (long painting) – depicting mythological and erotic scenes. This painting is usually installed around the ceiling of Balinese architectural buildings/pavilions. It consists of several sequential scenes, which are separated from each other by a diagonal line of mountains and visuals of clouds. The left half of the canvas illustrates male and female figures who seem to be talking to each other. At the end of the story, one of the women is taking revenge by conquering demons with her genitals.*

Collectie Georg Tillmann

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The Panji epic is legendary and was once a big commodity. The paintings were ordered to be made by the kingdoms in Bali. In addition to the function of decoration for royal and temple architecture, the painting in the Panji epic also played an important role in education. Especially in creating military strategies and training the royal troops to combat.

Another viewpoint regarding women in the wayang narrative of Kamasan paintings is the figure of a monster with evil powers. Knowledgeable women are associated with magical powers that spread the plague, terror, and catastrophic death, as is known in the famous Calonarang story in the 12th century. It is said that Calonarang was a widow and powerful in black magic. She worshiped Goddess Durga, *sakti*<sup>4</sup> of the Lord

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<sup>4</sup> *Sakti* refers to an attachment of duality of powers in Sanskrit. *Sakti* is a balancing partner in the divine power in Hindu spirituality

Shiva. She and her followers often harassed the farmers, spreading terrible diseases that caused sudden deaths. Calonarang was defeated after her spell book was stolen by her son-in-law, Bahula. He was a student of Mpu Baradah who was sent by King Airlangga to stop the terrors created by Calonarang. Binary opposition in the Calonarang story places women in the sole judgment as antagonists while men are the heroes.

If we delve into the narrative, the concept of *sakti* in the Calonarang text is one of the crucial markers of God in feminine nature. *Sakti* stands as a divine resource and power that supports the deity's life partner. *Sakti* symbolizes the power dynamic of a heavenly mother, i.e. the guardian of the universe and the caretaker of life. Rather destructive as in its visual interpretation all this time.



(Pic.4. Anonym, Kamasan, 136 x 171 cm, 1915)

A scene of Calonarang and her followers transformed into cruel figures with her magical force.

Permanent link to this image : <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/48152>

After reading these findings, I am aware of my attempt to take part in a discourse of the narratives that we have inherited. As an artist, I put women as central characters and protagonists to challenge the fixed single way of reading and interpreting narratives about women. I often transform masculine deities or mythological figures with supernatural powers commonly found in old Kamasan paintings to female figures.

In my work, “Timur Merah Project I; The Embrace of My Motherland” (2019), I raised the story of the famous chronicle in Nusantara that tells the creation narrative and the genealogy of kings in Java. I depicted God, the prophets, and the early humans in female figures. This depiction serves as a negotiation exercise for me, as an artist, with the people of community and/or people who appreciate art to mutually consider history, canon texts, and old cultural heritage. What if those texts featured the important roles of the women? Would discrimination toward women continue to this day? “Timur Merah Project I” presented this narrative through five painting panels measuring 90 x 400 cm and text painted using turmeric powder. It was also on display at the Biennale Jogja 2019, a biannual art event in Yogyakarta.



(Pic. 5. Timur Merah Project I; The Embrace of My Motherland, 5 panel traditional Kamasan canvas, 90 x 400 cm, the text on the floor was painted using turmeric powder)

My other work, “Timur Merah Project V; The Verge of Mortal Ground” (2021), was a painting installation I worked on during the pandemic. The work was exhibited at ARTJOG Resilience 2019, an annual art event in Yogyakarta. The theme was about the endurance of artists working during the pandemic. I respond to my reading about Calonarang. Calonarang recounts the tense situation of the spread of a mysterious disease outbreak which cause everyone locked themselves at home. Today, we know it as *kuncitara* (lockdown). At the same time as the Calonarang story, the texts on medicine and/or medicinal plants (*usadha*) were also widespread. The artwork was hung in the middle of a room and installed in a circular formation. The installation intended to entice the audience to step inside the painting's circle and reflect on a series of visual stories. The epidemic of the disease spread with no cure to be found, causing humans mobility came to a halt. This situation reminded us about the

restoration solution derived from Eastern knowledge and wisdom for modern human problems.



(Pic. 6. *Timur Merah Project V; The Verge of Mortal Ground*, 60 x 580 cm, traditional Kamasan canvas, 2021)

### ***Timur Merah Project and counter-narrative reading to the Colonial Gaze***

*Bali was exposed to the great early civilizing influences of Southeast Asia, but up until very late in the colonial era it was insulated against the intrusion of rude white barbarians. The island, furthermore, is as fertile as it is scenic, and the islanders are industrious as well as artistic. It must be conceded that ancient evils such as superstition, slavery, and suttee long persisted, but there have also been compensations – Willard A. Hanna*

“Divine Comedia” (2021) is a continuation project of “Timur Merah Project VII”. This project focuses on the reinterpretation of the *Bhima Swarga* script, which is an archetype of the same story as the epic poem *La Divina Commedia* (1320) by Dante Alighieri. *Bhima Swarga* tells the story of Bhima's journey to the underworld to save Pandu and his wife from the torments of hell and guide them to the upper world. In this quest, Bhima witnessed spirits being tortured and punished for their karma during their lifetime. The *Bhima Swarga* manuscript was painted on a ceiling of the *Kertha Gosa* (Hall of Justice). Now is a museum, *Kertha Gosa* was once the place where the kings conducted trials and judgments against criminals. The kings sentenced thieves, people in debt, or outlaws based on the interpretation of the ceiling paintings. Some

were sentenced to death and exiled to Nusa Penida. The most common conviction was enslavement.



(Pic. 7. Timur Merah Project VII; *Divine Comedia*, 90 x 600 cm, traditional Kamasan canvas, 2 antique pillars, 2021)

These historical facts has broadened my perspective in response to my hypothesis regarding the complex problems of patriarchy and women's social injustice in Bali. The *Bhima Swarga's* painting led me to explore the history and excesses of colonial remains in Bali. These colonial remains influenced the religious rituals, arts, and everyday life in Bali. The impact is apparent to date as the dark side of Bali tourism. For those who are familiar, Balinization or Baliseering, is an ethical politics constructed by the Dutch in 1920.



(Pic. 8. Bhima Swarga ceiling painting in Kertha Gosa Museum Klungkung, Bali  
Courtesy of pic by Citra Sasmita)

The enforcement of the unilateral policies by the Dutch colonial then encouraged the resistance efforts. The Dutch colonial mission was to control the ports in Bali for their economic interest. At that time, the most prosperous Badung kingdom ruled over three port areas, namely Sanur, Benoa, and Kuta. These areas attract many of foreign traders to visit as well. The Badung Kingdom then had a business arrangement with the Dutch colonial for weapons, platinum, and gunpowder supply to strengthen their military base. This lasted until the Dutch colonial cheated by smuggling slaves from Bali. This was one from the many reasons for the kingdoms in Bali to organize a resistance movement. The Klungkung kingdom led as *junjungan/ sesuhunan* (the head) of the kingdoms in Bali who together chose to fight to the end.

Another influential resistance to be mentioned was the literature and culture during the reign of Ida I Dewa Agung Istri Kanya, a queen from the Klungkung kingdom (1814 - 1878). She is the only female author record in history since ancient literature found in Java from 9th century. Dewa Istri Kanya translated ancient Javanese poetry into ancient Balinese as a propaganda medium for the Balinese people.

One of her poems, "*Prelambang Bhasa Wewatekan*", was considered erotic. As a matter of fact, the poem was a war strategy and a memoir about the manner of the Dutch colonial in Bali. Tantrism, an ancient belief before Hinduism and Buddhism, greatly influenced the nuances of eroticism in her poetry. Many people interpret her works as a representation of nature and life creation. However, some references interpret her works as depictions of the area of arms transactions with coastal people. Unfortunately, these references cannot be confirmed because the Dutch colonial also

took the manuscript written by Dewa Istri Kanya away, along with other artifacts from Bali.

The relationship between Bali and the Netherlands occurred since the first Dutch colonial ship landed in Kuta in the mid-16th century. Since then, the political dynamics between the Dutch colonials and the Kings in Bali emerged. One such big commodity practice was the slave trade. From the 17th to the 19th century, Bali was the biggest shipper of slaves. About 2000 Balinese shipped every year to Batavia (the capital of Dutch East Indies, now Jakarta), South Africa, and the islands of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The Balinese women were sold for US\$30 to US\$100 in today's exchange rate, which at that time was considered high prices. The Balinese women were famous for their beauty, work skills, mastery of playing musical instruments, and expertise in traditional medicine. This history of slavery is also written in "*Ni Rawit Ceti, Penjual Budak*", a novel by Anak Agung Panji Tisna (1935). The low casts, widows, and orphans were the vulnerable groups who were targets of the slave trade.



(Pic. 9. Photograph of Balinese and Papuan Slaves from the ruler of the Buleleng kingdom, source possibly by I van Kinsbergen, 1865

<http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:786205>)

Another important historical event was the Puputan war at Buleleng kingdom in the 18th century. It was an uneven battle. The Dutch colonizer killed the Balinese people with guns and cannons. Meanwhile, the Balinese formations and their Kings fought with keris and bamboo spears. The Buleleng King stabbed himself to death. It was then followed by other royal families and his adherents. The Dutch colonizer only took

an hour to subverted the Balinese formations. Puputan war was a mass suicidal deed. The action resulted in an absolute moral defeat from the Dutch colonizer.



(Pic. 10. *Puputan Klungkung* painting by I.B Wedana , 1992, collection of Museum Semarajaya, Kertha Gosa, Klungkung. Courtesy of picture by Citra Sasmita)

The end of the Puputan war in Klungkung (1908) was the turning point for Dutch colonialism. The Dutch turned their military aggression into the ethical politics of Baliseering. This cultural diplomacy was a strategy by the Dutch colonials. It was to repress the rise of the nationalists and the Islamic groups in the Java peninsula (1908 - 1928). That was when many political groups based on nationalism and Islamic ideology formed. The momentum of the movement reached its peak with the founding of *Sumpah Pemuda* (1928).

Baliseering politics began to be implemented in Bali (1920) after Puputan Badung (1906) and Puputan Klungkung (1908) warfares. One of the practices was in the field of art. The Dutch opened a route to Bali for artists, anthropologists, historians, and filmmakers from Europe. They recorded the natural landscapes and life of the Balinese people from an exotic and romantic point of view to obscure the Dutch atrocity against the Balinese. Some European artists who came to Bali were too lauded in the history of art in Bali, even to date. These include Walter Spies from Germany and Rudolf Bonnet and Arie Smith from the Netherlands. They were considered major contributors to the development of modern art in Indonesia and Bali.

The Baliseering mission was to build the Living Museum and to establish 'the authentic Bali' – be it the culture, the religious rituals, and the identities of social castes. The authentic Bali is actually a control system given by the Majapahit era. It has been occupying and rooted in Balinese society. Even when the liberal Islamic influence has overthrown Majapahit, the system remained in Bali. The Dutch centralized art in Ubud. They passed on Western perspectives and techniques to Balinese artists. This circumstance changed the paradigm of art in Bali from communal activities to become more individualistic and commercial. Where before, art was dedicated to making

offerings and decorating religious rituals. Through this ethical politics, the Dutch implied a dichotomy in the classification of high art and low art. The high art was the *Pitamaha*, a group of artists under the shade of the Dutch. The low art was the artists who created art for rituals and narrative heritage. The Baliseering was the Dutch colonizer's long-term agenda. The goal was to shape Bali into an exotic tourism center in the world. Not only the paintings, but the portrait of topless Balinese women also became the main attraction in tourism posters. A massive exploitation by framing Balinese under the concept of an uncivilized islander.



(Pic. 11. Fragment Timur Merah Project I ; The Embrace of My Motherland)

One of the fragments of "Timur Merah Project I" interprets the traumatic experience of Balinese ancestors from the invasion of the European to Nusantara. The European first invaded Nusantara in the 15th century. Two centuries before, in the 13th century, the *Geguritan Kebo Iwa* text enclosed the prediction of their arrival. Patih Kebo Iwa from the Bedulu Kingdom in Bali cursed Patih Gajah Mada from Majapahit kingdom when his kingdom was defeated. He said that the mission of expanding Nusantara by overthrowing many kingdoms would fall apart when the white people came. I would say that old manuscripts cannot simply be considered fictitious or only poetic. Prophecies and historical facts can be a way to read omens. Although elites politicize it for their own benefit.

Timur Merah Project is the embodiment of my resistance to Balinese cultural heritage that is heavily influenced by colonialism. The Balinese landscape is always described as exotic and noble, and continues to be the background in various writings and readings of history, art, and culture. The depiction is also used to glorify foreign

painters and artists who live in Bali with entitlement toward the Balinese artists and people. The foreign painters and artists are still holding the important positions in Balinese culture instead of the Balinese artists and people. This exploitation justifies that the West is the standard. Indeed, the counter-narratives to the colonial mentality in writings are urgently demanded. Although the effort required a lifetime, the contributions have to be made and continued to demonstrate the counter-discourses.

Bali, August 8th 2022

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