

VIGNETTE ILLUSTRATION WORK ABOUT THE MEANING OF MACAPAT SONGS

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Abstract. Indonesia is a country rich in ethnic diversity, cultures, and customs. A large portion of its population is dominated by the Javanese ethnic group. However, many Javanese people today lack knowledge about their own customs, traditions, and cultural heritage, such as the traditional tembang macapat. This form of cultural expression should be preserved, as it contains a wealth of moral messages and noble values about human life. This paper aims to create vignette illustration works based on tembang macapat as a means of building public appreciation for Javanese culture and tradition through art exhibitions. In order to present visually appealing vignette illustrations of tembang macapat, the author followed several creative stages, including concept development and visualization, which involve sketching, outlining, adding details and accents, shading, and final touches. The author hopes that this vignette illustration work, which highlights the meaning behind tembang macapat, will be beneficial and serve as inspiration for many. In creating art, one should explore more with ideas/concepts, media, and techniques. It is also hoped that the outcomes of this work can contribute positively to the university, students, and art appreciators in the future.

Keywords: Illustration, Introduction to Hijaiyah Letters, Sunan Kudus

1. Introduction

Human awareness of their experiences drives them to develop concepts, boundaries, definitions, and theories about their way of life what eventually becomes known as culture (Kristanto, 2017). Indonesia, with its rich diversity of ethnic groups, races, languages, and beliefs, possesses a wide array of cultures and arts in each of its regions. According to Rahayu (2014), the Indonesian population is predominantly Javanese in terms of economy, society, and culture. This condition gives Javanese culture a significant role in the nation's life, making it essential to study and understand Javanese cultural values as part of academic and cultural knowledge.

In Javanese cultural traditions, tembang (traditional poetic songs) contain several elements, including aesthetic, ethical, and historical aspects (Wiratama, 2014). In Javanese literature, there are three types of tembang: tembang cilik (or macapat), tembang tengahan, and tembang gedhe. Macapat is the most well-known form and is particularly familiar to Javanese communities, especially in Central Java. The word macapat originates from maca sipat, which in Indonesian means "to read one's nature" (Kurniawan, 2017). Another interpretation of the term is maca papat papat, or "to read in fours," referring to a reading rhythm of four syllables, as macapat is a type of Javanese poetic literature sung in a melodic manner (Karina, 2018). Macapat consists of 11 distinct tembang, each representing different phases of human life: *Maskumambang*, *Mijil*, *Sinom*, *Kinanthi*, *Asmaradana*, *Gambuh*,

Dhandhanggula, Durma, Pangkur, Megatruh, and Pucung. Each tembang contains moral values, virtuous teachings, and guidance on ideal behavior throughout a person's life from birth to death aimed at achieving dignity and fulfillment in both the worldly and spiritual realms (Putra, 2020).

Essentially, tembang macapat imparts lessons about the fundamental values of a virtuous life. Today, however, tembang macapat is facing increasing competition from popular and foreign songs that emphasize modern lifestyles and fleeting pleasures, often exploiting the public's lower tastes. This condition is further exacerbated by mass media, which rapidly provides a vast space for the representation of modern culture, overshadowing traditional cultural forms such as tembang macapat. This situation inspired the author to explore and attempt a visual interpretation of tembang macapat through illustration artworks. Moreover, the author seeks to foster a broader public appreciation and recognition of tembang macapat by presenting it through compelling visual forms.

The choice of illustration as the medium of expression stems from the various elements within it that offer creative potential for further exploration. In general, illustration is a visual representation that serves to clarify a particular event or object through artistic expression (Salam, 2017). The primary function of illustration is to convey a specific message or intention to its audience, which aligns closely with the author's objective of visually communicating the essence of tembang macapat through art appreciation activities.

The Creative Illustration Handbook by UNNES (2016) explains that there are several stylistic developments or approaches that can be used in the illustration-making process, including vignette, silhouette, doodle, zentangle, and personification. In this creative process, the author adopts the vignette approach as the primary style applied to the illustration work. Generally, vignette illustration is an art form commonly used in books to fill empty spaces, making the layout appear fuller and more aesthetically pleasing (Harmadji, 2021). The author aims to further develop the vignette form by exploring a monumental and classical impression, which is considered especially compelling when combined with a historically nuanced theme such as tembang macapat.

Through the exploration of ideas, concepts, and interpretations derived from tembang macapat, this study attempts to express them in the form of vignette illustrations. The materials and visual objects presented in the artwork are not merely direct representations of the content found in tembang macapat, but are further developed through imaginative visual interpretations. The elements contained within the vignette illustrations serve as the author's expressive language, utilizing mastery of chosen media, tools, and drawing techniques. The creation of these illustrations is expected to contribute to the diversity of visual art forms while also serving as a meaningful personal artistic experience for the author.

The media used in this studio project include the tools and materials employed throughout the creative process. The materials used consist of paper, pencils, erasers, drawing pens, charcoal, and metallic paint. Meanwhile, the tools required in the creation process include rulers, compasses, sharpeners, cutting tools or cutters, and brushes.

The technique used in this creative process is manual or traditional, meaning it is carried out entirely by hand without the aid of computer or digital tools. Several tools and materials mentioned in the previous paragraph are applied directly through the author's personal experience and skills in creating vignette illustrations. Since the main visual element in this work is line, the drawing techniques implemented include outlining, hatching, smudging (dusel), and blocking. Outlining and hatching are used during the sketching phase and throughout the illustration process. The smudging technique is applied in the final stages to emphasize contrast between light and dark areas, making the image more prominent. The blocking technique involves applying paint with a small brush to add fine details as visual accents in the artwork.

The creative process or procedure outlines a series of steps in the creation of artwork, which the author has organized into several stages:

1. Concept Development Stage

This stage involves determining the theme, selecting the objects to be illustrated, and deciding on the artistic style or technique to be used. Before starting the artwork, the author carefully plans the concept and identifies the elements to be included in each piece to ensure a coherent and organized creative process.

2. Visualization Stage

The visualization stage begins with sketching, followed by outlining, adding details, applying accents, shading, and finally, finishing the work.

3. Presentation Stage

This stage includes pre-exhibition activities (such as publication and display preparation), the exhibition itself, and post-exhibition activities (such as evaluation).

2. Results and Discussion

This creative process resulted in eight vignette illustration works, several of which will be reviewed and analyzed by the author.

2.1 Third Artwork "*Tedhak*"



Figure1. *Tedhak*

Source: Author's Documentatation

Title : *Tedhak*
 Size : 50,5 x 75 xm
 Media : Paper (Pastel Paper)
 Year : 2024

Artwork Analysis and Meaning:

The third vignette illustration centers around the tembang macapat Sinom, which represents the phase of childhood where one begins to adapt, grow, and develop. This stage signifies the physical development and increasing strength of a child, from lying down, turning over, crawling, standing, and finally walking each milestone being a joyful experience. The artwork, titled "Tedhak", is inspired by the Javanese cultural tradition known as tedhak sinten, or the child's first descent to the ground. This traditional ritual is usually performed when a child reaches the age of seven months, a time when they are beginning to stand and place their feet on the earth (Jamila & Subairi, 2023).

The visual elements incorporated in this illustration represent the symbolic meanings conveyed in the tedhak sinten traditional ritual, including the attire, toys and books/scriptures, sugarcane plants, as well as a trellis background that subtly suggests confinement. According to Nuryah (2016), the tedhak sinten ritual begins with washing the child's feet and letting them step on the ground, symbolizing the start of life's journey to earn a livelihood in the future. This is followed by stepping on seven layers of colored jadah (sticky rice cakes), which symbolize the Earth and the diversity of life within it. In the artwork, this is symbolized by a flower with multiple petals representing life, and the inclusion of the number seven in Javanese script emphasizes the spiritual value of the number seven reflected in the ritual through the child's age of seven months, seven jadah, seven steps, and other elements involving the number seven.

The next procession involves climbing stairs made of tebu wulung (black-purple sugarcane). Sugarcane carries the meaning "anteb ing kalbu", which translates to a firm heart symbolizing determination and self-confidence. Therefore, the inclusion of the sugarcane plant element in the artwork carries the same symbolism. One of the most iconic parts of the ritual is the act of choosing objects from within a cage. In this context, the cage represents the real world the child will eventually enter as they grow up. The items selected reflect the child's aspirations or preferred occupations. This procession is represented in the artwork through the use of a trellis in the background of the main figure to symbolize the cage, while the presence of toys and books/scriptures placed in front of the main subject represents the objects chosen (Djaya, 2020).

The Javanese script featured in this illustration is taken from one of the verses of the macapat Sinom poem, which reads "*Amemangun Karyenak Tyasing Sasama*." This phrase means "to act in ways that bring joy to others" or teaches us to always strive to make others happy.

2.2 The Sixth Artwork "*Kang Nyata*"



Figure 2. *Kang Nyata*

Source: Author's Documentation

Title : *Kang Nyata*
 Size : 50,5 x 75 cm
 Media : Paper (Pastel Paper)
 Year : 2024

Artwork Analysis and Meaning:

This vignette illustration explores the meaning of the Dhandhanggula macapat song, which narrates a stage of life marked by social stability, where basic needs such as clothing, shelter, and food have been fulfilled and individuals begin to build personal capacity. After two individuals unite in the bond of marriage, they become new parents who start a journey resembling that once undertaken by their own elders. A family that has achieved well-being is represented in this illustration through the depiction of a large, fully bloomed flower. Inside the flower are a pair of human hands holding each other, with a child's hand nestled between the petals. This imagery is enclosed in a circular field marked with Javanese numerals that symbolize the number 30 and above an age range that, in Javanese philosophical thought, is considered the ideal period for achieving social stability.

On the left side of the artwork, the composition is filled with dense, intricate, and dark sulur (vine) motifs, symbolizing the Javanese script inscription that reads "*Dhandhang*." Linguistically, dhandhang refers to a traditional cooking vessel or kitchen utensil, typically characterized by a dark or scorched underside. This visual metaphor represents the bitter or complex aspects of life, particularly within the domestic realm, where various challenges and conflicts inevitably arise. In contrast, the right side of the composition features more orderly and dynamic golden motifs that appear bright and radiant. This side contains the Javanese script for "*Gula*" (sugar), referring to the sweetness added to dishes symbolizing the pleasant and joyful resolutions that follow domestic conflicts. This contrast between dhandhang and gula aligns with the thematic essence of the Dhandhanggula macapat song, which reflects the bittersweet nature of life in the pursuit of hope and aspiration.

2.3 The Seventh Artwork "*Murup*"



Figure 3. *Murup*

Source: Author's Documentation

Title : *Murup*
 Size : 50,5 x 75 cm
 Media : Paper (Pastel Paper)
 Year : 2024

Artwork Analysis and Meaning:

The Durma and Pangkur macapat songs are represented together in this artwork, as both reflect a stage in human life where the individual begins to shift focus away from worldly concerns. Durma, derived from the word *derma* (charity), symbolizes the spirit of generosity, compassion, and willingness to help others. Meanwhile, Pangkur, which means to withdraw or to turn away, reflects a conscious effort to distance oneself from worldly desires and temptations, and instead to move closer to the Divine. These two macapat themes together emphasize moral maturity and spiritual reflection as central values in the later phases of life.

The depiction of a middle-aged man wearing a turban and a draped cloth over his shoulder represents the stage described in the Pangkur macapat, in which a person begins to control worldly desires by increasing religious devotion and surrendering to God's will. The figure of the middle-aged man in this vignette illustration is inspired by Sunan Bonang, a prominent figure who influenced the creation of macapat songs, particularly the Durma. The use of this figure also symbolizes individuals entering the age range of 50 to 60 years, referred to in Javanese as *seket*, which in a metaphorical play on words (*kerata basa*) means "*seneng ketuhanan*" (joy in divinity or spiritual devotion), and *sewidak*, which signifies "*sejatine wis wayahe thindak*" (truly, it is time to depart). These interpretations are visually embedded in the artwork through the use of Javanese script representing numbers, placed in subtle elements of the composition.

The glowing lantern depicted in this vignette illustration serves as a symbolic representation of the moral message embedded in the Durma macapat, which emphasizes the virtue of sharing with others. When one is endowed with knowledge, they are encouraged to share it; when one possesses wealth, they are permitted to give alms; and when one lacks both knowledge and material possessions, offering a smile or a prayer becomes a noble act of charity. The lantern breaking through the fog symbolizes the idea that a person's life can serve as a guiding light for others, helping them avoid the darkness of arrogance and destructive behavior. In harmony with this concept, the Javanese script inscribed in the artwork reads *urip iku urup*, a philosophical expression meaning "to live is to give light." This reflects the belief that humans are not born merely to exist for themselves, but to share, support, and help others selflessly.

3. Conclusion

The significant moments in human life are beautifully encapsulated in the literary form of Tembang Macapat, where the depiction of life does not merely begin at birth and end at death. Instead, it reflects a cyclical journey that encompasses not only the present world (*alam madya*), but also the past (*alam purwa*) and the hereafter (*alam wusana*). Through the profound messages embedded in Tembang Macapat, the author gains a deeper understanding of life's philosophical meaning echoing the Javanese proverb *urip iku koyo dining cokro manggilingan*, which likens life to a turning wheel that moves forward with time and never spins backward.

There were many intriguing discoveries the author encountered throughout the creative process of this study project. The combination of various visual elements from different narrative backgrounds, composed into a single cohesive artwork, results in a piece rich in meaning and storytelling. This was further enhanced by the application of shading, smudging, and painting techniques on paper media, producing works that are both aesthetically pleasing and authentic. It is hoped that such works can attract public attention and contribute to the preservation and continued relevance of tembang macapat a cultural and traditional heritage that deserves to be practiced and sustained.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this article.

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