

The Conceptual Foundation of Creation by Lombok Diaspora Artist in Contemporary Painting

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Abstract

The postmodern thought on pluralism influences contemporary art while providing opportunities for diaspora artists from Lombok to engage in it. This study aims to describe the foundational concepts and practices of diaspora artists from Lombok in the realm of contemporary art. The research method employed is qualitative, focusing on artists Saepul Bahri and Wisnu Aji Kumara, who have been active in the arts for over 14 years. The findings indicate that the artistic foundations of both artists are shaped by personal, social, and cultural experiences, as well as awareness of local values. Despite their differing approaches, both artists demonstrate a strong connection to Sasak traditions. Their concepts are enriched by aesthetic understandings gained from academic and non-academic environments, addressing contemporary issues within Sasak society while exploring cultural identity. Their works aim to apply Sasak aesthetic concepts of 'semaik' and 'pemolek'. This research documents the perspectives of diaspora artists from Lombok in understanding, adapting, or developing their creative concepts in a contemporary context, highlighting their contributions to expanding the narrative of contemporary art and maintaining the relevance of local culture in a global context.

Keywords: Conception of art creation, Lombok artists, Contemporary art.

A. Introduction

The conception of artistic foundation explains the form, object, and theme that serve as the basis for creating art (Sunarto, 2014, hal. 12). The conception of art creation rooted in values, beliefs, and philosophy aligns with the principle of plurality in contemporary art in expressing local culture and cultural identity. In this context, contemporary painting triggers new tendencies in expressing creativity. Contemporary art plays a role in expressing local culture. Artists not only question tradition but also explore local identity, diversity, and the uniqueness of their own culture. According to Honnef (1990) in Karja (2020), questioning the dominance of Western thought raises discussions about cultural diversity and differences. Local context also receives attention. Local traditions and "other" cultures that might previously have been considered irrelevant in modern art have now become important focuses. Saidi (2008:319) argues that tradition plays a significant role in the development and form of Indonesian contemporary art. This indicates that in Indonesian contemporary art, traditional elements are still valued and integrated.

One of Indonesia's regions with existing traditions and developing arts is Lombok. Art in Lombok in the 1960s developed a realist style. The dominance of realism that developed during that time had a significant impact on artists' works in subsequent stylistic developments (Gunalan, 2019: 183). In the 1970s, there was an influence from the previous period of artists that was maintained as part of the creation pattern. Saepul Bahri and Aji are among the Lombok diaspora artists who have been actively engaged in the field of art for more than 14 years.

This research needs to be conducted to investigate artists' conceptual foundations in the contemporary art field. Therefore, the principles of contemporary art need to be recognized to understand the character of artistic experience for Lombok diaspora painters who engage in creative processes in Yogyakarta and Jakarta. Exploring local artists' conceptual foundations will certainly enrich the formation of archipelagic aesthetics. The emergence of their conceptual foundations also means examining the representation of their symbolic concepts as their personal artistic character in the contemporary art field. Artworks will be seen as manifestations or reflections of the personality, values, or identity of local artists, which then create symbols that speak about the interaction of self-expression in contemporary art.

Based on the background issues that have been described, it is important to formulate the problem to determine the objectives, methods, and expected results. The main question in this research is, what is the conceptual foundation of Lombok diaspora artists creating paintings in the contemporary art field? The purpose of this research is to describe the conceptual foundation of Lombok diaspora artists in the context of contemporary painting.

The theoretical framework in this research consists of aesthetics and the character of contemporary art. Aesthetic theory is needed to understand artists, including in this case, their conceptual foundation of creation. Suryajaya (2016: 840) explains that aesthetics has a definition, namely, as principles of beauty. Aesthetics emphasizes the appreciation of artworks compared to nature (Junaedi, 2016:27). This is because aesthetics is a study that focuses on the basic principles of art and understanding the artwork itself (Ali, 2011:2). Human response to their aesthetic needs is influenced by culture and environment, making aesthetics cultural in nature (Sucitra and Lasiyo, 2023: 7). This is affirmed by Suryajaya (2016:5) that aesthetics contains values, norms, and

cultural experiences. The meaning is that beauty in art is understood and expressed based on the principles, rules, and life experiences of the society concerned.

Aesthetics in the process of art creation can be identified in historical, geographical, and chronological contexts, as well as within the framework of socio-cultural values that influence it (Sucitra and Lasiyo, 2023:7). This means it is important to consider and understand these contexts. The process of creating artwork can be understood through the influence of environmental history, geographical location, specific cultural beliefs or characters, values, and norms. The process of creating artwork involves artistic experience. Artistic experience is something that is felt, thought, experienced, and done by the artist when creating artwork as an aesthetic object (Junaedi 2016:130). Artistic experience emerges from cultural and non-cultural aesthetic objects, and that experience is used by artists as a conceptual foundation for creating artwork (Junaedi, 2016:134).

Aesthetics and the process of art creation can be understood within a specific time range, for example, by identifying trends or changes in style, technique, or theme that were dominant during that period, including in the context of contemporary art. The creation of contemporary artworks with understanding and application of local values is based on the recognition and appreciation of the postmodern concept of plurality. The plurality of art refers to the diversity or variation in expressions and views about art (Osborne, 2013: 81). Some contemporary aesthetic values are explained by Mujiyono (2021:43-56), including: rejecting uniformity, respecting differences, appreciating local uniqueness. Atkinson (in Mujiyono, 2021:55) adds that contemporary art opens new spaces for free and innovative experimentation, allowing the creation of dynamic works that reflect the complexity of the contemporary world.

All forms of artwork are bound by certain social and cultural conditions (Jazuli, 2014:37). This means that artwork is not created in a vacuum but is always influenced by its surroundings. Environmental conditions, culture, or social and political changes around it influence the theme, message, and style of artwork, providing inspiration, norms, and limitations for artists. In the selection of contextual subjects, contemporary artwork often responds to cultural, traditional, local, social, political, and controversial issues, raising current and fashionable issues as commodities for discourse and news actuality (Mujiyono, 2021:56-59).

The method used to process data in this research is the qualitative method. Qualitative research is defined as research that aims to understand real events without

manipulating or changing them (Latour, 2005; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Patton, 2001, in Sarosa, 2021: 9). The population in this research is Lombok diaspora artists. The sample consists of two Lombok diaspora artists. The author chose the sample based on availability and their strong belief in Sasak local values. The sample that became the object of research are painters from Lombok, Saepul Bahri and Wisnu Aji Kumara. Saepul Bahri is an academic artist who completed his art education at Senior Art School (SRMR) Denpasar Bali, and the Indonesian Institute of the Arts Yogyakarta in 2006. The next Lombok artist who became part of the diaspora in Yogyakarta is Wisnu Aji Kumara. Aji was born in Praya Lombok, September 3, 1991. He completed his undergraduate art education at Yogyakarta State University majoring in Fine Arts and his graduate education at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts Yogyakarta Department of Fine Art Creation until graduating in 2016.

Data in this research were collected from: (1) Direct interviews with Lombok diaspora artists. An interview is a conversation between two or more parties conducted to achieve specific purposes (Kahn & Cannell, 1957, in Sarosa 2021: 21). Interviews with artists are necessary to deepen the understanding of the purpose of creating artwork. (2) Observation. Observation in this case is carried out through careful examination of the creative process and observing the works produced by Lombok artists. (3) Literature Study and Documentation. The author needs literature materials that will help answer the formulated problems, as well as documentation to collect written and unwritten information. Data will be collected manually and with electronic tools. The collected data can be in the form of notes, videos, recordings, and photos.

B. Discussion

The creation of artwork is influenced by the socio-cultural environment and historical context in which the artist works, and this also influences the artist's conceptual foundation (Sucitra, 2015, hal. 13). Therefore, the next sub-discussion will discuss the cultural background of each artist, their thought process, artistic understanding, and the influence of these factors on the conceptual foundation of their work creation.

1. Saepul Bahri's Conceptual Foundation of Creation

Saepul Bahri is familiarly called Epul. Growing up in a culturally rich environment at that time, Epul lived with various arts, as well as religious rituals and strong traditional customs. His childhood as a village child who at all times played and made traditional games such as kites, tops, *beledokan*, *pletekan*, and others, has shaped him to this day.

"The activities of traditional games as a village child have built me up to this point" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsGOs8KaXqM&t=492s>). Epul has an interest in body anatomy. Additionally, he likes visual depictions of the sea, waves, and tides (<https://mayinart.com>). "*Aku no sebenar ne demen gitak laut lengan kodek* - I actually have loved the sea since I was little" (Epul, Lombok Artist, Sewon, Yogyakarta, in a personal interview on June 2, 2024). Epul also mentioned in an interview with the author that his paintings are inspired by several famous figures in the art world. He mentioned HR Giger, Rene Magritte, Antonio Blanco, and Dullah.

Epul's artistic experience did not only take place in Lombok but also in Bali, Yogyakarta, and Jakarta. In an interview with the author, he stated that Sasak has many unique local wisdoms to learn and practice through ancient books or traditional activities. Therefore, through his work, he tries to spread these local values, especially to the Sasak people themselves, as well as as an identity for the Sasak community. Epul believes that as a Sasak Muslim, in his work, he should provide benefits to many people through art as his way of preaching (Epul, Lombok Artist, Sewon, Yogyakarta, in a personal interview on June 2, 2024). Epul is a steadfast artist in his principles. For him, Sasak identity has merged with his being. This was conveyed through a personal interview with the author.

"I am Sasak, wherever I am, I remain Sasak, my spirit is Sasak. My past, Sasak values, which have made me present until now, those values that have never been lost. The artwork doesn't have to directly show Sasak, but the spirit, soul, color, and enthusiasm are Sasak" (Epul, Lombok diaspora artist, Tamantirto, Kasihan, Bantul, Yogyakarta, in a Personal Interview, June 28, 2024).

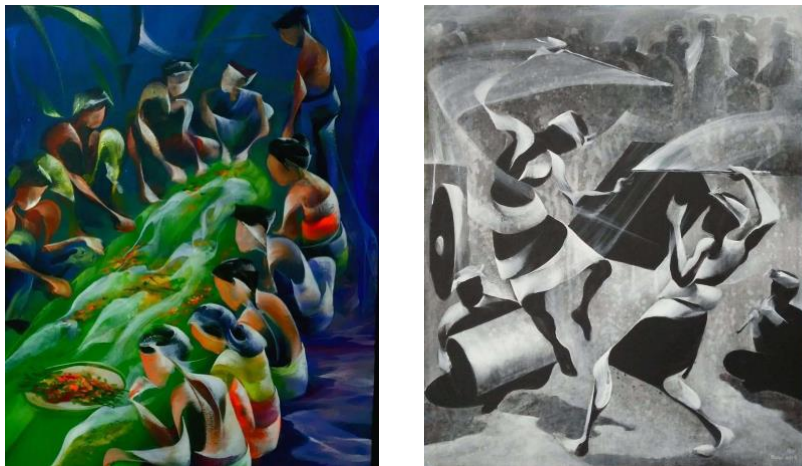
Epul's paintings basically depict the identity and essence of Sasak culture. The local Sasak culture has a very strong influence on his work. The traditional life of the Lombok community during his childhood, the openness to other cultural views after he lived in Yogyakarta, support from elders, and historical stories of where he lived in the past. These environmental factors gave birth to a strong sense of responsibility and identity in Epul as a Sasak human. Epul, as a diaspora artist, had to adapt to the cultures of Bali, Yogyakarta, and Jakarta. However, Epul has a strong knowledge of Lombok's traditional arts. This knowledge led Epul to the artistic process he is currently undertaking. The creative approach in his works is dominated by that influence. Not only that, the perspective attached to Epul's thinking is the cultural view that has been with him since childhood.

My Lombok Magazine Issue 19 (2015:29) explains that Epul pursues contemporary themes. Epul tries to combine elements of local Sasak culture with the influence of modernity and globalization. This means that his works reflect the unique identity of Sasak but remain relevant to the global context. He believes that Sasak culture has values that are relevant to the present and can be applied in the context of contemporary art. The potential values in the Sasak tradition can be applied in daily life. He has a great and sustainable desire to work and experiment with various techniques, explore new ideas, and continue to innovate in his artistic process. In addition, Epul also tries to reflect, comment on, or criticize changes through his work, pursuing ways to make audiences more emotionally or intellectually engaged with the work.

The concept of beauty is analogized by Epul as *semaik*. The word *semaik* is also a traditional aesthetic concept of the Sasak community (Gunalan, 2019:33). *Semaik* is associated with a form that is as it should be, and not excessive. This indicates that Epul's aesthetic experience is influenced by his social environment. Epul's perception of the concept of beauty is the result of interaction between himself and his social environment. The following are images of three works produced.



Picture 1. Saepul Bahri, "Preparing for the Festival", 2018, Acrylic on Canvas, 80x70 cm
(source: Saepul Bahri's documentation)



Picture 2. (left) Saepul Bahri, "*Begibung*", 2020, Acrylic on Canvas, 60x70 cm, (right) "*Sasak Spirit*", 2019, Acrylic on Canvas, 80x70cm
(source: Saepul Bahri's documentation)

Epul's paintings show high technical mastery in representing Sasak culture with a contemporary approach. Epul uses smooth brush strokes, geometric shapes, and dynamic compositions that create depth and a sense of movement. Futuristic and expressionist styles dominate, presenting movement and strong emotional expression. The style used by Epul gives a dynamic and modern impression, while still maintaining the essence of local tradition. The futuristic style is an approach that focuses on movement, sound, and lighting (<https://serupa.id>). The approach to form and style taken by Epul is a way of representing the meaning he wants to convey.

These three paintings are in line with Epul's conceptual foundation. These paintings become a reflection of his social environment and his belief in making art a tool for spreading benefits. Epul is influenced by many social factors in the formation of his artistic conceptual foundation, from his childhood life to the urban environment he experiences. His open and optimistic attitude, as well as a strong desire to continue learning from others and being beneficial to others, strongly encourages him in his work. For him, art is not only a medium of expression but also a tool to spread benefits and positive messages. He connects social experiences and cultural values in every work he produces.

Epul's creative actions are highly motivated by his grandfather, his living environment, and his social environment. His personal desires and cultural responsibility to provide benefits to others also become strong motivations. These are the things that drive him to be creative. The contemporary cultural situation as an external factor of

creativity supports Epul in behaving as a free individual, both when working and being freely inspired by various things, as well as being free to explore and experiment with non-conventional techniques and media. He also adds, free in the sense of no longer being bound by old rules that he once followed (Epul, Lombok diaspora artist, Tamantirto, Kasihan, Bantul, Yogyakarta, in a Personal Interview, June 28, 2024).

2. Wisnu Aji Kumara's Conceptual Foundation of Creation

Throughout his life, Aji often received negative presumptions. These assumptions came not only from the Sasak community but also from people outside the Sasak community. The assumption that the beliefs held by the Muslim community in Lombok are still in the evolutionary stage and still have a mixture of elements from previous cultures. These presumptions made him try to get clarification or further information to ensure the truth of the presumptions he heard. At the beginning of his artistry (2016), Aji's artwork adopted a decorative style by raising Sasak story themes inspired by the rich culture and traditions of the Sasak community. After processing decorative paintings, Aji's current paintings tend to have an expressionist style. The expressionist style allows him to express various techniques and forms of deformation. The use of expressionism gives him the freedom to express emotions that are subtle, calm, and full of control. This style emphasizes the emotional aspect compared to physical reality (Kumara, 2020:78).

The strength of the art field in Yogyakarta also encouraged Aji to continue working. Not only that, Aji pays attention to the activities and work patterns of other artists in Yogyakarta. He observes how artists process ideas, explore media, and express themselves through their works. Aji has a dynamic and flexible artistic concept. In addition to exploring various media and techniques, he also explores themes such as urban and social politics. Although Aji is open to various themes, he states, "*dekwah laguq lepas langan tema budaya tiye, tetepk doang to laik* - I have never detached from the theme of culture, always heading in that direction" (Aji, Lombok Artist, in an interview with the author on July 11, 2024, in Palbapang Yogyakarta). The cultural theme he means in this case is the Sasak theme. Sasak becomes the common thread in all of his works; even though he experiments with other themes, he always finds a way to relate them back to cultural values.

Educational and cultural backgrounds influence Aji's approach to art. His work combines visual elements with literature and culture. Some paintings raise stories or symbols derived from Sasak narratives that are full of spiritual meaning. Aji, in the

process of exploring his work, is also based on Islamic teachings and values. Aji explained in an interview with the author that religious norms, especially Islam, have a big influence on his art creation process. He limits himself to not drawing vulgar things, respecting other religious beliefs, not mocking or demeaning the teachings of Islam and other religions, and avoiding painting things that might become slander for himself and others (Aji, Lombok Artist, in an online interview on October 16, 2024, in Palbapang Yogyakarta).

Aji's attitude towards religious norms in his creative process is influenced by the original beliefs of the Sasak community, which have been monotheistic from the beginning. Aji also feels compelled to explore the combination of original Sasak beliefs and Islam that influences the cultural identity of the Sasak community. This spiritual view becomes one of the central themes in the artwork he produces. For Aji, Islam and Sasak not only shape the way of life of the community but also build character and values that are passed down from generation to generation. Aji sees the cultural identity of the Sasak community developing through traditional monotheistic beliefs—such as *Neneq Kaji Sak Kuase*—with Islamic teachings that are then widely accepted by the community. He seeks to express the essence of this spiritual transition process in his artwork, by exploring symbols, narratives, and philosophies that reflect these beliefs.

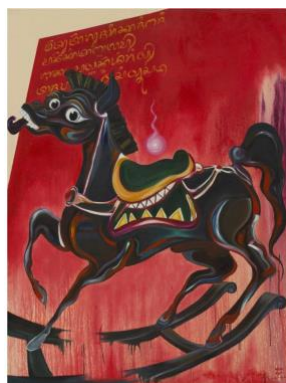
Aji tries to show the harmony between local traditions and Islamic teachings by exploring these beliefs. The concept of *semaik*, which emphasizes simplicity, harmony, and balance in creation, is part of the traditional Sasak values that he tries to apply in his artwork. Aji carefully chooses objects and character forms in his work, considering harmony with the principle of *semaik*. Aji also follows another aesthetic concept, namely *pemolek*, which means "glorification." The concept of *pemolek* is applied by Aji in the finishing stage of his artwork. At this stage, after the visual elements are well arranged, Aji gives maximum attention to the final details. *Pemolek* reflects more attention to artwork by ensuring that every aspect—from object to presentation—is handled meticulously and worked optimally. Aji—by applying the principles of *semaik* and *pemolek*—not only focuses on visual creation but also the process of filtering and perfecting the artwork as a whole, in accordance with Sasak aesthetic values.

The artwork produced by Aji through the art creation process ensures that every element in his work, whether color, composition, or form, plays a role in strengthening the message he wants to convey. Success in creating artwork for Aji is not measured by

how technically beautiful the work is, but more by when the artist becomes a good artist. A good artist, according to him, is when he is able to connect elements of art in his creative process into a whole and meaningful unity. His desire is also supported by the art environment in Yogyakarta. He finds many opportunities to hone his skills, gain recognition, and build a reputation as an artist. Inspired by many artists, Aji is influenced by the approaches and styles of several other artists. Some of them are S. Teddy, Heri Dono, Chiharu Shiota, and Arahmaiani. Here are some works produced by Aji in the exhibition "From Sasak Seeing Sasak" 2020:



Picture 3. Wisnu Aji Kumara, "*Lampan Lahat*" (left), "*Fire Eyes*" (right), 2019, Acrylic on Canvas 100x100 cm
source: Wisnu Aji Kumara's documentation



Picture 4. Wisnu Aji Kumara, "*Mulud Cahye*" (Birth of Light), 2019, Acrylic on Canvas, 120x160 cm
(source: Wisnu Aji Kumara's documentation)

These three paintings are a form of Aji's effort to straighten out misunderstandings that occur related to Sasak beliefs or traditions. The contexts taken include: from the painting *Lampan Lahat*, Aji tries to provide knowledge to the community that the character of *Lampan Lahat* is not a frightening thing and contains the value of self-

awareness and guidance for goodness. In the painting *Fire Eyes*, Aji educates that women also have the same rights in the social order. As for the painting *Mulud Cahye*, it tries to straighten out misunderstandings about the celebration of the traditional mauid of the Sasak community, especially in the *Wetu Telu* belief. This painting attempts to clarify presumptions that consider the tradition to be inconsistent with Islamic teachings in general.

Art is a medium to communicate the perspective and understanding of the artist to others. Aji views art not only for himself. He feels that if the meaning of artwork is not shared, its value will be reduced. Through his work, he wants to give others the opportunity to understand the perspective, experience, or thoughts that he presents. For him, art has more meaning if it can be shared and understood by others. The artwork he creates also offers space for others to find understanding or meaning that may not even be fully realized. Thus, art becomes a way for others to read his self or his perspective.

C. Conclusion

The tendencies in the works of Epul and Aji are still rooted in their original traditions and culture. In the contemporary art space, they as Lombok diaspora artists not only express local cultural values but are also the impact of postmodern pluralist thinking that appreciates local uniqueness in a global context. Although the conception of the works of Lombok diaspora artists raises themes of tradition and local culture, they try to implicate this into current reality so that the works produced have relevance to the current context. This conceptual foundation is built from aesthetic understanding, both sourced from tradition and contemporary thought. Contemporary art expands the approach of Lombok diaspora artists through the diversity of styles, formation, and their symbolic approach. That flexibility provides space for artists to respond to the complexity of culture and time.

The conceptual foundation of the creation of Lombok diaspora artists is formed through personal, social, and cultural experiences. Saepul Bahri shows a strong influence from the social environment in his works. Childhood experiences form a strong cultural foundation, interaction with the social environment, and the influence of urbanization broaden his view. This experience also becomes an inspirational driver that encourages him to continue working. As for Aji, with his artistic understanding, Sasak monotheistic belief, and through his interaction with others, feels the need to clarify negative assumptions related to the beliefs and traditions of his native community while exploring the truth about these beliefs.

The artistic experiences of Epul and Aji are also formed through interaction with other cultures and a deep awareness of local values. These experiences enrich their knowledge about the art world while enhancing understanding of the meaning of tradition owned by Sasak culture. Awareness of Sasak traditional values forms the foundation in their works. This awareness then arises in the representation of the artwork they create. The representation of their work shows the connection between tradition, spirituality, and social reality. The approach taken is in line with the characteristics of contemporary art, which utilizes and explores local values in the creation of artwork.

The aesthetic understanding of Epul and Aji is also shaped by the Sasak concept of beauty, namely *semaik*, which refers to harmony and balance. Their artistic behavior is never detached from Sasak local themes. The aesthetic objects in their work are inspired by personal experiences as part of the Sasak community. Cultural values, rituals, beliefs, and daily life become sources of their artistic inspiration. Their artistic experience when creating aesthetic objects is conveying meaning through symbols that define Sasak identity and spirituality.

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