

# REINTERPRETATION OF TURI PUTIH SONG BY SUNAN KALIJAGA IN CHINESE METICULOUS PAINTING

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## ABSTRACT

The Turi Putih is a Javanese song composed by Sunan Kalijaga. Currently, The Turi Putih song popularity has decreased and is no longer well known. The Turi Putih song has a deep spiritual meaning for Indonesian Muslim. This research tries to visualize the Turi Putih song in the Chinese meticulous painting technique. This research used a qualitative descriptive analysis and semiotics approach. The result of this study is an artwork that represents of the Turi Putih song by Sunan Kalijaga. In this painting, several objects containing symbols of death are displayed. The *turi putih* is the symbol of the *pocong*, the *kedasih* is the bird that brings death news, and the *besurek* batik is used to cover the corpse. The results of this research-creation are expected to enrich the treasure of global art diversity that continues to grow.

**Keywords: Reinterpretation, Turi Putih Song, Sunan Kalijaga, Chinese Meticulous Painting.**

## INTRODUCTION

Fine art is a branch of art that can teach something, provide information, convey messages, and touch feelings through visual works. Even though works of art are in the form of inanimate objects, they are not mute. Works of art can be read and searched for the values contained in them through symbols. Symbols are used to replace invisible artist ideas and expressions with visible forms. Miftahul Munir (2020) argues, because of expression, the symbols of art are not frozen and mute but speak to describe the spirit that represents the event, place, the mood of the artist, and also describes the subjective imagination of the audience.

Asian societies such as China and Indonesia have similarities

in terms of the concept of art. One of the characteristics of Chinese and Indonesian art is that it is spiritual, traditional, and symbolic. The unity of a group with all its cultural values is expressed by using symbols. Symbols are a particular center of attention, a means of communication, and a basis for common understanding. Every communication, by language or other means, uses symbols. Cassirer gives an opinion about human nature regarding symbols, which are always related to (1) the idea of symbols (based on consideration of empirical principles to visualize ideas in the form of symbols), (2) the circle of symbol functions and (3) the symbol system (as a system, contains various threads that make up a symbolic web) (1987, p. 36-40). Symbols do not only have a horizontal-immanent dimension, but also have a transcendent dimension, so they are horizontal-vertical; symbols with metaphysical dimensions (Daeng, 2000, p. 82). In this research work, symbols are used to present an interpretation of one of the popular traditional songs in Java, namely the song Turi Putih by Sunan Kalijaga in the form of a painting.

The interpretation of a song could be made by various groups, such as experts, researchers, and the general public. In art, people are free to interpret an artwork based on their knowledge and experience of all matters relating to the artwork. Therefore, the results of the interpretation of one work may differ from one person to another. However, the quality of the results of the interpretation is largely determined by the way a person dissects an artwork.

In dissecting a work, or perhaps creating a work related to symbols, art observers or artists can use art criticism, semiotics, or hermeneutics. In the process, one can dissect an artwork starting from its visuals such as color, object, shape, composition, and so on so as to produce a conclusion about the meaning of the work under study. Or vice versa, an artist can look for the meaning or message he wants to convey first, then apply it to artworks through related symbols.

The Turi Putih is a song composed and popularized by Sunan Kalijaga. Sunan Kalijaga is one of the saints who spread Islam in Java. Currently, the popularity of Turi Putih song has decreased and is no longer well known, especially among children and young people. In fact, the Turi Putih song has a

deep spiritual meaning, especially for Muslims in Indonesia. In ancient times, this song was often sung by children, especially in Islamic boarding schools or villages in Java which were far from cities. Therefore, the visualization of the Turi Putih song in this Chinese painting is done to reintroduce the song to the public.

This research will try to visualize the meaning of the Turi Putih song in the form of a painting using the Chinese meticulous painting technique. Perhaps, there are some people who have already interpreted the Turi Putih song verbally. However, no one has yet interpreted the song in a visual form, especially using the Chinese meticulous painting technique which is popular in China, which in terms of visual and meaning is far from the Indonesian cultural context. Therefore, this research is interesting to do.

Apart from those mentioned above, another interesting factor in this research-creation is the existence of a connection between a genre in Chinese Painting and the Turi Putih song, namely the use of flowers as a symbol. Based on the depiction of objects in Chinese Painting, the genre is divided into three, namely birds and flowers, figures, and landscapes. Later, the results of the author's interpretation would show birds that have a correlation with the Turi Putih song.

This study has several problem formulations, namely: 1) how is the interpretation of the Turi Putih song? 2) how to visualize the results of the interpretation of the Turi Putih song in Chinese Painting? It is expected that the results of this research-creation can add insight to readers, as well as add to the treasure of global art diversity that continues to grow. In addition, Chinese painting with the theme of local Indonesian culture is one of the artistic commodities that has the potential to continue to be developed. This study is also part of the efforts to strengthen cultural relations between Indonesia and China.

## **METHOD**

This study used a qualitative research method in the description of the analysis. The descriptive method is a method

for examining the status of human groups, an object, a condition, a thought, or a class of events in the present (Nazir, 2003, p. 54). Descriptive analysis methods are statistics that are used to analyze data by describing or depicting the data that have been collected as they are without intending to make general conclusions or generalizations (Sugiyono, 2014, p. 21). This study also used a semiotics approach. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) described semiotics in his *Course in General Linguistics* as “the study of the role of signs as part of social life”. Implicit in this definition is a relation that sign is a valid part of social life. There is a sign system and there is a social system, both of which are interrelated. In this case, Saussure talks about social conventions that regulate the social use of signs, namely choosing the combination and use of signs in a certain way so that they have social meaning and value (Alex Sobur, 2016, p. 7). The main discussion in Saussure’s most important theory is the principle that language is a system of signs, and each sign is composed of two parts, namely the signifier and the signified. The sign is a unity of a form of marker (signifier) with an idea or sign (signified). In other words, the marker is a “meaningful sound” or “meaningful stroke”. Thus, signifiers are the material aspects of language: what is said or heard and what is written or read. Meanwhile, signifieds are mental images, thoughts, or concepts (Bertens, 2001, p. 180, as cited in Sobur, 2013, p. 46).

According to A.N. Whitehead in his book *Symbolism* quoted by Dilliston, the human mind functions symbolically when some components of its experience evoke awareness, beliefs, feelings, and descriptions of other components of its experience. The previous component set is the “symbol” and the component set which then forms the “meaning” of the symbol. The organic function that causes the transition from symbol to meaning is called “reference”. The real symbol takes part in the reality that makes it understandable, its high value lies in a substance along with the idea presented. The symbol more or less connects two entities. Each symbol has the characteristic of referring to what is highest and ideal. An effective symbol is a symbol that gives light; its power is emotive and stimulates people to act (Dillistone, 2002, pp. 15-28).

In the process of creating fine art, the form to be produced

is closely related to the method of creation. Although every artist or visual artist follow different steps, , these steps can basically be pigeonholed into three main stages, namely the search for an idea or ideas, deepening or maturing the idea or ideas, and the embodiment of the artwork.

For the creation, the researchers used Chinese painting techniques. Chinese painting is a painting technique that was produced and developed in China. Chinese painting is divided into two types: freehand and meticulous (Suqiang Jiang, 2006). Both have their own characteristics in terms of techniques and painting media used. Freehand painting techniques are often more expressive, with less attention to details. On the other hand, Chinese meticulous painting uses this technique to pay attention to the details of the objects being painted. The Chinese Meticulous Painting technique uses a special medium for painting. For example, paper with a high degree of water absorption is not recommended. Sketch paper or special watercolor paper will also not work optimally. In addition, Chinese Meticulous Painting uses special Chinese paint. Black ink is usually used. It is this type of ink that is characteristic of Chinese painting. Painting with meticulous painting techniques requires extra patience and perseverance. When painting, meticulous techniques generally take longer than the freehand method. This is done by making every line and every color as detailed as possible to resemble the original object.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Interpretation of the Turi Putih Song**

Turi (*sesbania grandiflora*) is a small tree originating from South Asia and Southeast Asia. Turi is a tree that has soft wood and is short-lived. The tree's height is about 5-12m. Turi has flowers that are crescent-shaped and large. Turi flowers are white, red, and pink. Turi also has pod-shaped, hanging fruit of about 20 to 55 cm long. On Java Island, turi trees are commonly found in rice fields or plantation areas. Based on its function, Javanese people are used to consuming turi flowers as side dishes. In addition, turi flowers can be used as an analgesic, antipyretic, anticancer, skin softener, laxative, skin conditioning, antidepressant, medicine for

dizziness, and cataracts and blindness (Choiriyah, 2022, p. 140).

Symbolically, the white turi is a symbol of *pocong*. *Pocong* is a corpse that has been wrapped in a white shroud in Islamic religious beliefs. The white turi flower as a symbol of *pocong* refers to an ancient Javanese song entitled Turi Putih which was composed by Sunan Kalijaga. Sunan Kalijaga (1460-1513) was one of the saints who spread Islam in Indonesia, especially in Java. Sunan Kalijaga employed an artistic approach in spreading the religion with the use of *wayang*, music, architecture, and literature. The song of Turi Putih is one of Sunan Kalijaga's artworks that we can enjoy today. In fact, now the Turi Putih song continues to develop and has been remade in various styles, both traditional and modern.

The Turi Putih song has simple lyrics but has a very deep meaning. Broadly speaking, this song tells about planting turi flowers in a garden so that eventually they can bloom. This can be seen in some of the lyrics which are clearly stated. However, if examined further, this song has a message about death and how to deal with it from an Islamic perspective. This song tells about the short life of the world, and how humans will eventually die and be buried. From an Islamic perspective, death is not the end of a journey, but a phase to live another life, so humans need to do good while in the world so they can be safe and happy in the hereafter.

Here are the lyrics of the Turi Putih song:

*Turi putih. Turi putih.*

*Ditandur ning kebon agung*

*Ono cleret tibo nyemplung*

*Mbok iro kembange opo.*

*Wetan kali kulon kali*

*Wetan kali kulo kali*

*Tengah-tengah tanduran pari*

*Saiki ngaji sesuk yo ngaji*

*Ayok manut poro kyai*

*Tandurane tanduran kembang*  
*Kembang kenongo ing jero guwo*  
*Tumpak'ane kereto jowo*  
*Rudo papat rupa menungso*

*Wedang kopi gulane jowo*  
*Gulo jowo eh eh katutan ketan*  
*Yen ngaji ojo podo sembrono*  
*Yen sembrono kancane setan*

The following is the interpretation of the Turi Putih song:

1. The first stanza tells about planting turi in a garden. The word 'turi' comes from the word *pituturi* which means advice. While white is the color of the shroud. Turi Putih planted in a beautiful garden means *pocong* buried in a cemetery. Planted quickly as fast as lightning. This means that life in the world is very short. Then after death, the corpse must be buried immediately. Once planted, what will flower later? This is a question for every human being, what good deeds has he done during his lifetime? This means that humans during life must always do good so that in the end they get the goodness too.
2. The second stanza contains advice about actions that must be done before humans die. This advice is conveyed through *pantun*, where the first two lines are the *sampiran*, and the last two lines are the contents. The words from *sampiran* are not really related to the advice that will be expressed. In the contents of the *pantun*, then the advice is given for Muslims to continue reciting the Quran, studying, worshiping and obeying the teacher.
3. The third stanza contains contemplation of death. *Sampiran* contains symbols from the journey of human life, especially a Muslim. The words *Tandurane tanduran kembang*, *Kembang kenongo ing jero guwo* means that a Muslim must behave well, and good deeds must always be instilled in oneself. The contents of the poem are a reminder that humans will die and be buried. The lyrics of *Tumpak'ane kereto jowo*, *Rudo*



*papat rupa menungso* are manifestations of the journey of a deceased Muslim to his grave. He will be stretchered using a coffin, and carried by four people.

4. In the fourth stanza it is explained that if a Muslim is not serious about studying and worshiping, then he will get a very big loss. The last sentence, *Yen sembrono kancane setan*, even mentions that people who are careless in studying are friends of satan.

The white turi symbolizes the shroud in reference to the deceased. Anything related to the dead is considered sacred, as is the case with tombs called “kebon agung”. Agung is a word that is used for things that are important or sacred. Life in the world is only for a moment, as the saying goes, life is like stopping by for a drink. In a very short period of time, we strive to become human beings who are useful, behave well, and increase faith and piety. In the grave everyone will be confronted by angels and asked about their faith and piety. Good advice from someone is instilled in our lives as a reflection upon us not to behave in a bad way. The teacher is our role model whose essence is to be imitated and listened to for good advice (Nur Hayati, 2018, p.29). That’s how Sunan Kalijaga conveys the message of death through the symbolism of the turi flower. Turi Putih is a simple song but has a very deep meaning.

## Concept of Artwork Creation

### 1. Object Selection

In this study, several objects have been chosen for the creation of paintings. The selected objects relate to the theme of death in Java. The selected objects are symbols of the results of the interpretation of the Turi Putih song. Some of the objects used in the creation of works include:

#### a. Turi Putih

Turi (*sesbania grandiflora*) is a small tree originating from South Asia and Southeast Asia. Turi is a softwood tree, with a height of around 5-12 m. Turi has flowers that are crescent-shaped and large.



Figure 1. Turi Putih

(Source: [www.pertanianku.com](http://www.pertanianku.com), accessed in 2020)





Figure 2. Cuckoo Bird

(Source: flickr.com, accessed in 2020)

In Sunan Kalijaga's Javanese song entitled *Turi Putih*, the white turi flower represents the *pocong* (a corpse wrapped in a shroud). Usually, white turi is also used as a flower to decorate coffins when the corpse is brought to the grave. This refers to the symbol of the theme of death, so the choice of white turi flowers in this artwork is appropriate.

#### b. Cuckoo

Cuckoo is a bird belonging to the *Kangkok* bird tribe (*cuculidae*). Several types of *cuculidae* are known to have breeding behaviors that are detrimental to other birds. This bird family often lays its eggs in the nests of other birds. The owner of the nest will incubate the eggs and care for them. The *kedasih* bird has many names or nicknames, namely *kedasih* or *daradasih*, *kedasi*, *sit uncuing*, *sirit uncuing* or *manuk uncuing*, and *manuk emprit ganthil*. In English, this bird is called the plaintive cuckoo because of its lilting voice, while the Dutch call it *piet van vliet* following its distinctive call. Its scientific name is *cacomantis merulinus*. (Puspayani, 2022, p. 47).

For the Javanese people, the cuckoo bird is a bird that brings sad news. This bird is believed to have the power to see someone's death and communicate it through chirping. Even though it has a beautiful body and a melodious voice, the sound of this bird was quite feared by ancient Javanese people. Even in today's modern era, some people in Java still believe that the cuckoo bird is known as a bird that brings news of death. Therefore, the choice of the object of the cuckoo bird in this artwork is considered suitable because it represents a symbol of death.

#### C. Besurek Batik Pattern

Besurek batik originally came from the Javanese palace environment. In Java, the making and wearing of batik was originally a ritual activity. Initially, batik was only made by the princesses of the palace. Batik is made on the basis of spiritual values that require concentration of mind, patience, and cleanliness of the soul and is based on a request for guidance and the pleasure of God Almighty (Doellah, 2002, p. 54). Some batik patterns are also considered forbidden

patterns that cannot be used or made by just anyone. Pattern restrictions are related to the wearer and historical occurrence. The Parang pattern is a prohibited pattern because this pattern is commonly used by kings, while the Sembagen Huk pattern is a prohibited pattern because historically this pattern was created by Sultan Agung Hanyokrokusumo (Doellah, 2002, p. 55).

The existence of batik is related to the view of life or philosophy of the people who own it. Javanese batik motifs have a relationship with the Javanese philosophy of life, especially the palace. Semen Rama motifs are in fact related to the way of life of the Javanese who adopted the story of Ramayana with the teachings of Hasta Brata (Sarwono, 1997, p. 61). This teaching is Sri Rama's teaching on the concepts of governance. This is of course very different from Besurek batik, which did not grow among the ruling court.

The *surek* fabric is associated with Islamic religious rituals. There was a technical change in making *surek* cloth from the old system using the batik system to ..., hence the term *besurek* batik appeared. This type of batik is an old and distinctive batik. This type of batik is not used for clothing, but specifically for the ritual of caring for the corpse and the ark event. Besurek batik is also used for upper clothing during circumcision as a symbol of Islamic ritual. The verses written on the clothing are meant to bring the circumcised children closer to Islamic values. Traditions like this exist in Jambi and also Bengkulu. (Nanang Rizali, 2015, p. 272).

## 2. Composition

Composition is the placement or arrangement of visual elements or 'material' in a work of art, distinct from the subject matter (Rumbyarso, 2023, p.139). It can also be considered as the organization of the elements of art according to the principles of fine art. Composition in fine art means the principle of compiling the elements of art by arranging and organizing them into a good, orderly, and harmonious arrangement. Of course, all the elements must be intertwined, so that they are related, and build a structure constructively so that it will present a composition in



Figure 3. Besurek Batik

(Source: reynaldipratama12blogspot.com, accessed in 2020)



Figure 4. Sketch of Artwork

(Source: Farid K.Nz, 2020)

a work of art that has value and is in accordance with its aesthetic principles and rules. Composition in fine art is important so that a work looks good and aesthetic.

Based on the composition of this work, there are three main objects in the painting, namely cuckoo birds, flowering white turi trees, and Besurek batik motifs. The depiction of the white turi tree is placed on  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the painting's composition. The bottom and right of the painting are filled with turi leaves. In some parts, there are also turi flowers painted on the sidelines of turi leaves and stems. The cuckoo bird is painted in the center facing left. On the left, there is a Besurek batik motif as a background which is painted vertically.

### 3. Coloring

Analogous harmonic color compositions are compositions that use color arrangements that are not much different (do not lead to black and white). Analogous colors are color levels from dark to light in the order of several colors, for example, the sequence of blue, turquoise, green, yellowish green, and yellow. This harmonious composition does not usually use a lot of contrasting/primary colors. Apart from the analogous color, this work also looks monochromatic. Monochrome color is a degradation of the tone of a basic color that does not mix with other basic colors.



Figure 5. Chinese painting of the Song Dynasty

(Source: pinterest.com, accessed in 2022)

In the process of creating this work, the author took color references from Chinese painting from the era of the Song dynasty. These paintings have dark analogous monochromatic colors. In addition, the colors of Song Dynasty paintings are also used to convey an age-old impression on the works created. Apart from that, the darker colors also represent the theme of death in the painting.

### The Final Result of the Artwork Creation

Representation can be defined as the use of signs to describe something, namely musical characters that have elements, including playing techniques and cultivation/processing.



Meanwhile, signs are everything (symbols) that represent something (Dwi Arini, 2015, p. 187). The philosophical conception is basically the meaning that becomes a reference for the existence of music (Sunarto, 2013, p. 118).

This artwork is a representation of the results of the author's interpretation of the Turi Putih song by Sunan Kalijaga. The Turi flower in the painting is a representation of a *pocong*, a person who has died and is wrapped in a shroud. Turi flowers have various colors such as white, red, and pink. However, the turi *putih* (white) flower is shown as a symbol of the *pocong* because, in Java, where the majority of the people are Muslim, only a white shroud is used to wrap the corpse.

The shroud that wraps the corpse can embody all kinds of things, one of which is humility. *Pocong* cloth has no pockets, the dead don't bring any wealth. Therefore, as the best human beings we need to give alms. *Pocong* cloth has the same color and size. This means that basically, humans are equal. Therefore, humans are not encouraged to be arrogant.

The depiction of the turi *putih* flower as a symbol of death is associated with the existence of the cuckoo bird perched on the turi tree branch. The cuckoo bird has long been considered a bird of death by the Javanese people. They believe that if the bird sings somewhere, then someone somewhere nearby will die.

Finally, the Besurek batik motif in this painting is a prayer for everyone who has died. Basically, for Muslims, after death, they will return to God. Therefore, the sentence of creed in the painting is an affirmation of the concept of returning to God. As is characteristic of Besurek batik, the Arabic writing is slightly disguised although it is still legible. In this way, the message to be conveyed from the society's ideology can be conveyed without any sense of blasphemy against religion.

In terms of theme and meaning, this painting elevates traditional Indonesian culture, namely death from the perspective of Javanese Islam, using the Chinese meticulous painting depiction techniques. In China, Chinese painting usually depicts the beauty of flowers and birds typical of China or has a special meaning to China. But here, the selection of painting objects uses typical Indonesian objects. The amalgamation of the two



Artist: Farid Kurniawan Noor Zaman

Title: Turi Putih

Year: 2020

Size: 60x60cm

Technique: Chinese Painting

Figure 6. Hasil karya

(Source: Farid K. Nz, 2020)

traditional Indo-Chinese cultural arts is interesting and of course, can add to the diversity of the world's current art repertoire.

## CONCLUSION

The Turi Putih song is an Islamic song composed by Sunan Kalijaga. Sunan Kalijaga is one of the figures who propagated Islam in Java. This song symbolically represents the process of death and how Muslims deal with it. The first stanza talks about planting turi in a garden. Turi *putih* (white) planted in the garden means *pocong* that is buried in a cemetery. It is planted with the speed of a lightning flash. This means that life in the world is very short. Then after death, the corpse must be buried immediately. Once planted, what will flower later? This is a question for every human being, what good deeds has he done during his lifetime? This means that humans must always do good in their lives so that in the end they get the goodness too.

The second stanza contains advice for Muslims to continue reciting, studying, worshiping, and obeying teachers. The third stanza contains contemplation of death. *Sampiran* contains symbols from the journey of human life, especially a Muslim. The contents of the poem are a reminder that humans will die and be buried. The lyrics of *Tumpak'ane kereto jowo, Rudo papat rupa menungso* are manifestations of the journey of a deceased Muslim to his grave. He will be stretched on a coffin, and carried by four people. In the fourth stanza, it is explained that if a Muslim is not serious about studying and worshiping, then he will suffer a very big loss.

In this painting, there are three main objects displayed, namely white turi flowers, cuckoo birds, and Besurek batik. The turi *putih* is the symbol of the *pocong*, the cuckoo bird is the bird that brings news of death, and the Besurek batik is the batik used to cover the corpse.

The colors used in the paintings are analogous and monochromatic. The painting's color reference is inspired by Chinese painting of the Song Dynasty. These paintings have analogous monochrome colors with dark tones. In addition, the

colors of Song Dynasty paintings are also used to convey an age-old impression in the works created. In addition, the colors that tend to be dark also represent the dark theme of death in the painting.

This work is a representation of the results of the author's interpretation of the Turi Putih song by Sunan Kalijaga. The Turi flower in the painting is a representation of a *pocong*, a person who has died and is wrapped in a shroud. Turi flowers have various colors such as white, red, and pink. However, the turi putih flower is shown as a symbol of the *pocong* because in Java, where the majority of the people are Muslim, only a white shroud is used to wrap the corpse. The depiction of the turi *putih* flower as a symbol of death is associated with the cuckoo. The cuckoo is considered a bird of death by the Javanese people. Finally, the Besurek batik motif in this painting is a prayer for everyone who has died.

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