

Reading Postcolonial Liminal Space in the Euphoria of Characteristic KNIL Soldiers of Surabaya Reenactor Community

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Abstract

Homi K. Bhabha in his postcolonial study mentioned liminal space as the “third space” for the relation between the colonizers and the colonized. This space becomes the embodiment of mediation and negotiation. This liminal space is described to be very contrasting, ironic, and opposing to Fanon’s or Said’s postcolonial study which is very rigid and clear-cut in differentiating the perspectives of the colonizers and the colonized as to make the relation between the two very strained and replete with conflicts. The relation in the liminal space is a ‘fun’ one for both the colonizers and the colonized, in which they enjoy the relation in the form of hybridity, mimicry, and various forms of resulting ambivalence.

At the present time, the relation between the East, which is generally ex-colonized people, and the West, which is usually the colonizers, is “accidentally” preserved in many forms. One of them is the euphoria in applying visual characteristics as KNIL soldiers in the contemporary social activities, such as leisure bicycling on Sundays, or visiting a wedding party, watching movies, and others.

This article will elucidate and analyze the phenomenon applying Bhabha’s postcolonial perspectives and interpreting the euphoria of postcolonial liminal space in the KNIL reenactors’ activities in Surabaya. I use a qualitative research and apply observation and interview with reenactment practitioners as the technique of data collection. The analysis is done by using a descriptive explanatory method as an interpretation of material objects.

Keywords: liminal space, postcolonialism, KNIL soldiers’ visual characteristics, Surabaya reenactors.

I. Introduction

In addition to functioning as a criticism toward the colonial that divides the position between the colonizer and the colonized, in which the colonizer is understood as a stronger superior than the inferior colonized, postcolonial theory also uncovers the various effects or influences of colonialism toward certain culture or society. Postcolonial study appeared in the 1970s pioneered by Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), which revealed the Western’s perspective in looking at the East. The effect of orientalism as Said explained is severe psychological alienation and marginalization, in which the West and the East will never meet, and it brings about a wider gap in-between.

The postcolonial study proposed by Franz Fanon, a psychiatrist, focuses on the sociopsychological effects toward the colonized people as the result of the West and the East dichotomy. It explains the psychological effects suffered by colored people as marginalized

victims in the midst of the White’s domination. The phenomena of inferiority complex (dependent, unconfident, retarded, reduced character, and experiencing the loss of identity) bring about effects that are still felt up to the present.

Postcolonial study was also initiated by Homi K. Bhabha through his book *The Location of Culture* (1994). It was then continued by Bart Moore-Gilbert in the book *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (1997). Bhabha’s postcolonial study is about two main phases of postcolonial practices as the object of his analysis. First, around 1980-1988, Bhabha focused on colonial discourse analysis in the cultural exchange in the history of English governance in India. Second, in 1988 Bhabha’s thought was focused on the cultural consequences of neo-colonialism in the contemporary era and on the ‘enmity’ between postcolonial and postmodern discourse.

Homi K. Bhabha criticizes a binary model of colonizer-colonized relation as laid out

by Edward Said and Franz Fanon. Said focuses on the colonizer discourse, while Fanon on the colonized. Both perspectives create a unified and stable pole for different conflicting conditions. Bhabha's criticism applies the concept of cultural assimilation, in which the colonizer-colonized relation produces a representation of cultural hybridity. The colonizer-colonized relation is not stable and unified, but it always changes and 'each supports the other'. This kind of relation occurs in the "liminal space" or "third space". However, there is a criticism on Bhabha's postcoloniality in that the subjects as colonizers try to understand the colonized in order to perpetuate their colonizing power.

Bhabha finds a connection and tension between the two as the point of hybridity appearance as a new form of resistance and negotiation among them. Hybridity is understood as a term to describe the fusion of the two to bring about certain features out of each form and at the same time to eliminate certain features of both forms. Postcoloniality in Bhabha's perspective is used as a tool for the analysis on the cultural phenomena and system related to the use of colonial artefact replica.

2. Hybridity and Mimicry of KNIL Soldiers' Visual Characteristics

Bhabha's liminality concept is used to describe the "third space" that is made possible by a cultural change. The 'third space' becomes like a 'territory' in which there is a continuous process of movement and exchange among different statuses. All expressions and cultural systems are built up in that space. The movement and exchange of cultural system applies hybridity strategy that later on produces new forms of culture and identity with their own history and embodiment. The movement and exchange of cultural system uses hybridity strategy that produces new forms of culture and identity with their own history and textual embodiment. The example of hybridity can be seen in the adoption of various forms of culture such as clothing, food, and others.

Reenactors are people who carry out and act out historical activities and war events that happened in the past. The reenactors' activities are well-known as reenactment. This

research interprets hybridity that appears on the characteristic objects of KNIL soldiers by Surabaya reenactor community as shown in Picture 1 and Picture 2.



Picture 1

Indigenous Characteristic KNIL Soldiers mimicking Characteristic Dutch Soldiers done by Surabaya reenactor community in 2015. Source: HvB Collection, 2015

Picture 1 and Picture 2 are pictures that represent two communities of reenactor that come from different region. They were dressing like the Dutch soldiers in the colonial era (1946-1950). Picture 1 shows Surabaya reenactors who were wearing the Dutch soldier uniform replica. Surabaya reenactors who are local people (read: colonized) were acting out by using visual characteristics of their colonizers. In this research, the colonized group is interpreted as doing 'hybrid activities' since they become mixed characters. Meanwhile, the Dutch reenactors in Picture 2 use characteristic replica of their ancestors in the colonial era in the Dutch East Indies. Therefore, they are interpreted as doing hybrid activities of the present moment and the past, a hybridity that mixes the different characteristics in terms of time frame.



Picture 2

The picture on the top shows the characteristics of the Dutch *reenactors* in 2012, who mimicked a documentary historical picture (Below). Source: picture collection of *Nederlands-Indië Re-enactmentgroep 'Het Vergeten Leger'*, 2016

The hybridity presented by Surabaya and Dutch reenactors is done through visual mimicry namely imitating the characteristic visual forms based on the documentary picture. Picture 3 shows the Dutch reenactor members (left) who imitated a mannequin picture of KNIL soldier in the era of 1946-1950 who wore a camouflaged uniform available in a museum in the Netherlands (middle). While the picture on the right is the appearance of a Surabaya reenactor wearing a camouflaged uniform that also imitated the mannequin look (right).



Picture 3.

Source: the collection of *Nederlands-Indië Re-enactmentgroep 'Het Vergeten Leger'*, 2016

2. Methodology.

In order to make an analysis that suits the purpose of this research, the data collection is done through observation and library research to get the visual data in the form of documentary pictures of Surabaya and the Dutch reenactors' activities. Observation and documentation was carried out on the activities documented in the social media Facebook and Instagram. The data are also collected from an interview with 5 reenactor informants in Surabaya and the Netherlands by sending private messages to their Facebook accounts. To get the formal data to support the argument and analysis I make a library research discussing the perspective of liminal space applying Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial study. The analysis on the data is carried out applying a descriptive explanatory approach, namely an interpretation of material objects related to formal objects of liminal space of Bhabha's postcolonial study.

3. Liminality as A Negotiation Space of Contemporary Culture.

War brings out various visual identities such as uniforms and attributes that mark the identity of soldiers. The identity functions as an identifying marker for parties in opposition. The visual identity in the contemporary perspective becomes a visual characteristic form that is imitated, replicated, and well-liked by common people. The visual identity in the past created fear, horror and terror, but at the present time the replicated visual identity gains appreciation and popularity instead. People at present even like the military characteristics of the enemy soldiers. The enemy characteristics

are no longer objects to be hated, opposed, and feared, but they are even interesting to be felt and liked. The replica of becoming colonial Dutch soldiers are preferred by Surabaya reenactors to the replica of fighters' uniform since their visual features and characteristics reflect strength and valiance. The visual characteristics of KNIL soldiers with the appearance of various insignia and gears become an element of admiration to be celebrated as a military fashion.

War uniform in the historical perspective on the colonial conflict in Indonesia normally becomes a marker of identity between the colonizer and the colonized. In this perspective, I interpret it to be a maker of identity between the West and the East that attract each other in the postcolonial study. In the very perspective, the colonial soldiers' uniform of the West group will produce superiority, but it will create trauma and terror for the East group as they suffer from the colonization. However, in the perspective of Bhabha's 'cultural location' regarding the material object of the reenactors, the Dutch war uniform then becomes a tool for 'cultural exchange'. The replicated uniform at the present time becomes an object of imitation as a hybridity creation (in Bhabha's term it is called mimicry).

Table 1 below is a basic understanding on the concept of 'cultural location' of postcoloniality as proposed by Homi Bhabha. The Table gives a formal understanding about liminal space as a basis for the analysis on the material object in this research. It describes a concept in postcoloniality that operates with hybridity strategy (mixing various elements), mimicry (imitation) and it brings mimicry-mockery (imperfect imitation). The Third Space operates as a postcolonial cultural location that produces representation and articulation between the colonizer and the colonized in epistemological and praxis relation.

Mimicry produces various hybrid figures that ignore elements of indigenusness, time frame, and historical reference which result in ambivalence. Visual hybridity that applies visual mimicry strategy becomes an expression of different representation, which contrasts with the object of mimicry reference, namely the West soldier's uniform. Hybridity is created from mozaic 'pieces' that are coerced to integrate as an articulated expression of cultural 'exchange' that enables cultural acculturation

practices between the West as the colonizer and the East as the colonized.

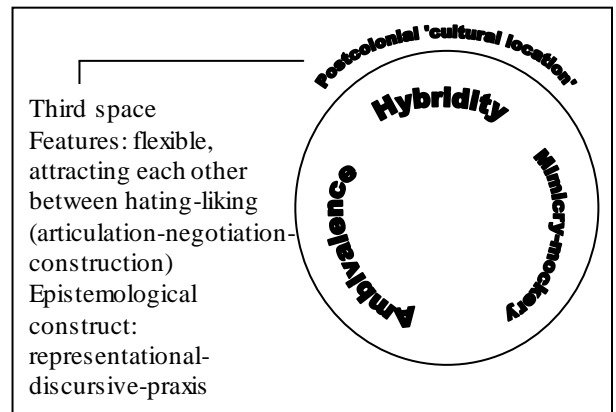


Table 1.

Reenactors use social media such as Facebook and Instagram to spread their impression. Both local and the Dutch reenactors often post pictures of their reenactment activity. Especially for the local reenactors, they use the characteristic replica of KNIL soldiers of 1946-1950 in various activities that actually have no connection at all with the reenactment, which can be seen in Picture 4. KNIL costume replica is worn to attend a wedding party according to Javanese moslem customs (Top) and an anniversary celebration of old bike fans club in Surabaya (Below). The replica of the Dutch soldier costume functions as a tool for the reenactors' hybrid activity in their social activities.



Picture 4. Source: Andrian's collection, 2015

The pictures above can be interpreted that hybridity as the result of applying visual mimicry becomes a field of negotiation of western culture in order to achieve an understanding that benefits both sides. The pictures of reenactors' activities become contemporary artefacts which contrast with historical artefacts replete with colonial tensions.

In line with Bhabha's concept that hybridity and mimicry have the potential to produce ambivalence, the visual expression of hybridity and mimicry in the euphoria of contemporary soldiers' replica also bring about various forms of ambivalence. The hybridity-mimicry phenomenon as presented in the pictures above shows that the reenactors unconsciously or even consciously enjoy the ambivalent situation and they play with it through the imitation. Thus, mimicry is not only an imitation, but it is a form of mockery on the West characteristics and it becomes an expression of the reenactors' resistance. It is a mockery on the reenactors' inability to create a perfect mimicry.

4. Visual Mockery in the Contemporary KNIL Soldier Characteristics

The liminal space as a space of cultural negotiation between the West and the East in the material object of the characteristic KNIL soldiers' replica has the potential to produce repeated patterns that are different and contrasting with the characters of the colonizers and the colonized. It is no longer the West that is superior or the East that is inferior, but both become superior in the creation of contemporary characters. The East can afford to buy the very expensive imported uniform replica. The contemporary impression produces a satisfaction of 'superior feeling' that overcomes the inferiority as people of the East.

On the other hand, the West characteristics are no longer considered by the East as an enemy or frightening group, but they are seen as quality costume provider, whose products are very expensive and must be imported. The West now becomes the producer of costume and visual characteristics, not a colonizer anymore. The West provides various choices of powerful and fashionable military characteristic replica. The contemporary West creates war game and its characteristic accessories which are adored by the East. The West creates various alternative action figures

for the East and both celebrate hybridity through many forms of mimicry. The contemporary West also 'imitate' the contemporary East in engineering contemporary hybrids. The example can be seen in Picture 5.



Picture 5

Imported products of emblems and patches (Top) and Yogyakarta's products (Below).

Source: Totok Sudiyanto's pictures, 2015



Picture 6,

Source: collection of *Nederlands-Indië Re-enactmentgroep 'Het Vergeten Leger'*, 2012

The photo on top in Picture 6 above is an example of many contemporary hybrid figures in which Surabaya people wear costume replica of the Dutch soldiers' uniforms. Meanwhile, the photos underneath show the Dutch reenactors wearing local KNIL soldiers' costumes and playing a war game. The game makes use of various replica attributes that are interesting for the local people to imitate and to import. The war game makes Indonesian people spend some expenditure that benefits European producers. Independence War (colonial war) was won by the Indonesians through negotiation meeting, but the war game done by the reenactors (read: soldier replica) at the present time is won by the West as the producers and distributors of characteristic KNIL soldier military fashion products. In Picture 7, 4 local and European reenactor figures were making an impression as KNIL soldiers taking a picture at Yogyakarta Vredenburg Bastion in commemorating *Serangan Oemoem* (Battle of Jogjakarta 1949) in 2014.

The hybridity carried out through visual mimicry strategy produces visual mockery resulting from imperfect mimicry. The imperfection of mimicry results from the reenactors' internal factors such as: people who live at present cannot fully live the life of KNIL soldiers at the colonial war time, the activities of KNIL soldier replica are no longer real KNIL military activities. Meanwhile, the external factors are due to the fact that the costume replica is not a part of the colonial war, but it becomes a military fashion euphoria taking up a colonial theme. Picture 7 below shows how the mimicry-mockery is celebrated.



Picture 7.

Source: Agung Setiawan, 2015.

5. Conclusion

Independence War passes down a memory to most of Indonesian people about the excellence and valiance of the West military forces possessing marvelous war strategy. The valiant West was defeated only through a negotiation meeting, not through a face-to-face battle. The memory of the valiant West is unconsciously perpetuated and passed down to the next generation in the form of psychological residues of some Indonesian people. They come out to the surface at the present time in the form of military fashion fetish for the activities by using characteristic KNIL soldier replica, which become hybrid objects through mimicry-mockery replica.

The feeling of becoming valiant through hybridity and mimicry at the present

time turns to be a form of capitalism negotiation between the ex-colonizer and the ex-colonized, in which both do not perpetuate the past status as the colonizer and the colonized anymore. 'Liminal space' at the present time in the form of KNIL material object is the West and the East's contemporary euphoria, functioning as a kind of new perspective on the relation between the ex-colonizer and the ex-colonized. The pleasure of war game in the activities by using the characteristic KNIL visual replica becomes an expression of mimicry-mockery since the resulting hybridity turns to be a form of imperfect mimicry that mocks. This is interpreted as a form of the East and the West's

resistance that occurs in the contemporary postcolonial liminal space.

6. References

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