

VISUAL ART AND THE PERSPECTIVE OF ANTI-COLONIAL INTERNATIONALISM IN INDONESIA, 1950-65

Asep Topan Mulyono

Faculty of Arts and Design, Jakarta Institute of The Arts

e-mail: aseptopan@ikj.ac.id

Abstract

This research is concerned with how the Indonesian visual artists articulated the anti-colonial internationalism ideas in their works during 1950-65. Presumably, there are key moments considered significant to this research topic, such as the establishment of LEKRA (Institute for the People's Culture) in 1950, The Bandung Conference in 1955, and the G30S movement in 1965 followed by the turmoil of the anti-communist purge in Indonesia, which resulted in the banning of leftist artists. As for the 1955 Bandung Conference, the event indicated that President Sukarno (1901-70) articulated nationalism in an internationalist way by calling for decolonization in world politics, therefore incorporating the idea of Third World nationalism in the changing of global political order. This conference also had its specific agenda on the cultural sector as it highlighted the importance of international cultural cooperation. The term 'visual art' (seni rupa) for this research is not limited to the notion of 'fine art' (seni murni) that is synonymous with paintings and sculpture. Therefore, this research primarily examines visual expression as part of popular cultures such as prints, or illustrations in the media.

Keywords: *Anti-colonial movement, visual art, Internationalism*

Introduction

The 1950-65 era was a tempestuous period for cultural life in Indonesia. From multiple perspectives, one can see its entanglement with socio-political upheaval in this period such as the decolonization struggle, international relations activities, to the Cold War intervention. In a wider lens, 1950-65 can also be seen as the period within the period (Lindsay, 2012). The apparent cultural debates have shaped this period on the idea of Indonesia-ness (*keindonesiaan*), which expands the discussion of modernity to its interrelation with traditional cultural aspects since the independence days (Alisjahbana, 1961; Holt, 2000). Later, the revolutionary period influenced the birth of the 'revolutionary culture' idea brought by leftist artists that were endorsed by President Sukarno. Identical to the political arena, the leftist was leading the cultural sector, and to some extent, they dismissed those of different convictions. Artists and cultural practitioners sought alignment with political groups and parties, creating intellectual and cultural polarization. At its peak, with the intervention of President Sukarno, the leftist dominated the cultural arena with the official disbandment of the Manifest Kebudayaan (Cultural Manifesto) on May 8, 1964, as they cast doubts on the revolution (Dahlan & Yuliantri, 2008; Susanto, 2008).

This research contextualizes the idea of anti-colonial internationalism within the relationship between the state's foreign policy and its ideology. It also delves into how the policy and the ideology influenced the artistic practices throughout 1950-65 in Indonesia. Key moments considered significant to these research topics, such as the establishment of LEKRA (Institute for the People's Culture) in 1950, The Bandung Conference in 1955, and the G30S movement in 1965 that was followed by the turmoil of the anti-communist purge in Indonesia, which had resulted in the banning of the leftist artists. While this research inclines to focus on the work of LEKRA artists, it does not exclude the examination of the work of other artists with the spirit of anti-colonial internationalism.

This study perceives Bandung Conference in 1955 as the key intersection between the idea of anti-colonial internationalism and culture, as they have a particular agenda on cultural life as written in their second point of Final Communiqué (1955) on *Cultural Cooperation*. The Bandung Conference was conceived as an attempt to counter the dominant world order at that time, which were colonialism and the oppressive Cold War (Hardt, 2002). The conference took note of the fact that the existence of colonialism in many parts of Asia and Africa, in whatever form it may transpire, not only prevented cultural cooperation but also suppressed the national cultures. Co-operation was among the most powerful means of promoting understanding among nations and it had been interrupted in the past centuries, and the Conference condemned racialism as a means of cultural suppression. Relevant to this discussion, Umar (2017) introduced the concept of 'anti-colonial internationalism' as

the ideological resource of Indonesia's foreign policy between 1950-65. This event indicated that Sukarno articulated nationalism in an internationalist way by calling for decolonization in world politics, therefore incorporating the idea of Third World nationalism in the changing global political order (Sena Utama, 2017; Umar, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). Therefore, this research concentrated more on the alternative idea of internationalism based upon decolonial lenses and anti-colonial struggle in Third World countries (Umar, 2017). Moreover, the term visual art (*seni rupa* in Indonesian) in this study is not limited to the notion of 'fine art' (*seni murni* in Indonesian) such as painting or sculpture—rather it looks into wider mediums of expression such as drawing, illustration, posters, and prints made by the artists that may not be considered as 'fine art' (Yuliman, 2001).

Against this backdrop, this research aims to write specifically on how Indonesian artists in 1950-65 expressed the perspective of international solidarity through their works; as well as addressing the inter-relationship between Indonesia's cultural traffic abroad and its development at home.

Research Method

The proposed modes of research for this study are literature review and archive study. On one hand, a literature review is to read through, analyse and sort literatures to identify the essential attribute of materials related to the topics. On the other hand, archive study methods include a broad range of activities applied to facilitate the investigation of documents and textual materials produced by individuals or institutions related to the research topic. The expected type of materials includes text, images, memoirs, documentation, notes as well as archives from cultural magazines within the period. In its most definitive meaning, archival methods are those that involve the study of historical documents created in the relatively distant past, providing researchers access, which they might not otherwise have, to the organizations, individuals, and events of that earlier time.

Discussion

Indonesia in 1950-65

The 1950-65 period in Indonesia was marked by the multiplication of two systems of government under the leadership of President Soekarno, namely *Demokrasi Parlementer* or *Demokrasi Liberal* (Parliamentary Democracy or Liberal Democracy, 1950-59) and *Demokrasi Terpimpin* (Guided Democracy, 1959-1965). When Indonesia adheres to a Parliamentary Democracy system, the government is led by the prime minister, and the president is the head of state. Parliamentary Democracy is a system of government in which the state parliament has an important role. In this system, the people have the freedom to interfere in political affairs and may form political parties. In addition, cabinet members are also

allowed to criticize the government if they disagree. It turned out that the Indonesian state had adopted this system from 17 August 1945 to 5 July 1959. Indonesian figures who believed in the need for Parliamentary Democracy, also known as Liberal Democracy, included Mohammad Hatta and Sutan Syahrir. For both of them, the government system can create political parties that can argue opinions in parliament and can create a true form of democracy, namely from the people, for the people, and the people. According to Mohammad Hatta (2008), Indonesia was in the form of a republic based on people's sovereignty at this period. Parliamentary Democracy was implemented and based on the Undang-Undang *Dasar Sementara 1950* (Provisional Constitution or UUDS). During this period, new political parties emerged that were free to express opinions and criticize the government. Although at the beginning the birth of all these parties was the spirit of revolution, in the end, it resulted in unhealthy contestation. Therefore, at that time Indonesia was experiencing government instability.

Furthermore, the Guided Democracy period (1959-1965) in Indonesia is closely related to the *Dekret Presiden* (Presidential Decree) of 5 July 1959. This political and governmental system was centralized which made President Sukarno's power stronger. The Parliamentary Democracy (1950-1959) tended to be unstable; the cabinet changed frequently which ultimately resulted in the unimplemented cabinetwork programs. During this period of Parliamentary Democracy, political parties competed with each other and brought them down. Meanwhile, the Constituent Assembly formed through the 1955 General Election (*Pemilu*) had not yet completed its task of drafting a new Constitution. Guided Democracy is an idea of reforming political, social, and economic life. This idea is known as the *Konsepsi Presiden* (Presidential Concept) of 1957. There are two main ideas in this conception, including the renewal of the political structure must apply a Guided Democracy system that is supported by forces that reflect the aspirations of the people in a balanced way. The Guided Democracy system aimed to reorganize political and governmental life based on the 1945 Constitution. The Guided Democracy system began to be abandoned after the events of the 1965 September 30th Movement (G30S) which marked the beginning of the weakening of President Sukarno's influence and power. The '30th September Movement' was immediately countered by anti-communist army forces led by General Suharto who assumed command when these forces regained control of Jakarta. The coup was blamed fully on the Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia or PKI; the coup became known in Indonesia henceforth as G30S-PKI), and a violent purge followed over the following four months, with mass killings of at least half a million people as communists and leftist sympathizers, including artists, cultural practitioners, and intellectuals who had or were perceived to have had communist or leftist connections.

Decolonization and Anti-colonial Internationalism

Decoloniality means acknowledging coloniality and seeking to understand the persistence of coloniality in the legacies of imperialism and current world structures. It aims to comprehend how western modes of thought and knowledge systems have been universalized. At the same time, decoloniality means to detach from structures of coloniality and to (re)establish old and new ways of thinking, languages, ways of life, and being in the world that coloniality rejects. Decoloniality and decolonial thinking seek to highlight the plurality of systems of knowledge and thought, the simultaneous existence of multiple frameworks of knowledge, and thinking beyond the framework of coloniality (Mignolo and Walsh 2018).

Indonesia declared independence in 1945 through its armed revolution against the fascist Japanese occupation. The independent Republic of Indonesia was declared by Soekarno and Mohammad Hatta on 17 August. Shortly after the capitulation of Japan, however, a contingent of Allied Forces disarmed the Japanese and repatriate Allied internees and prisoners of war. Under the assistance of British forces, the Dutch landed troops in Indonesia to restore colonial rule, which they had surrendered to the Japanese on the eve of the Pacific War. Generally put, the Indonesian revolution can be divided into two extents, political decolonization (1945-1949) and economic decolonization (1950-1960).

Conscious of the heavy losses and difficulty that would inevitably arise if their countries immediately precipitated a war of resistance, the Indonesian leaders endeavoured to save their fledgling independence through diplomatic negotiations. Initiatives to begin the fight were given to the Dutch, who sought a military victory to enforce the implementation of the Linggarjati agreement. Between 1947 and 1949, the Dutch launched two major military offensives, in Dutch historiography known as the First 'Police Action' (20 July 1947 - 4 August 1947) and the Second 'Police Action' (19 December 1948 - 5 January 1949). These military actions resulted in the conclusion of the Renville Agreement of 17 January 1948 and the subsequent agreements at the Round Table Conference of 2 November 1949. Although the Netherlands agreed on the transfer of sovereignty to Indonesia, the newly independent government had to shoulder a substantial war debt (4.5 billion guilders or \$ 1.1 billion) (Meijer, 1994: 536) in addition to the responsibility of guaranteeing the continuing operation of Dutch enterprises. The economic side of the Indonesian revolution only came to an end in the late 1950s, when most of the Dutch firms were taken over by the Indonesian military and labour unions. (Thuy, 2017).

Regarding the Indonesian foreign policy implemented by the Indonesian Government soon after its independence, Umar (2017) introduce the concept of "anti-colonial internationalism" that emerged as a prominent feature between 1945 and 1966. This form of internationalism was arguably practiced by newly independent states, such as Indonesia or Ghana, to articulate

their ideological vision of “anti-colonialism” in world politics. Moreover, he defines “anti-colonial internationalism” as the international engagement that aims to put forward the anti-colonial ideology in world politics, primarily through diplomatic means or through alliances with other states or non-state actors. According to him, it shows that Indonesian foreign policy has been historically shaped by particular ideologies, including those of the anti-colonial nationalists, communists, or even, perhaps, right-wing nationalists and the military elite. The clear manifestation of anti-colonial internationalism, in the case of Indonesia’s foreign policy, was the 1955 Asian- African Conference (famous as the “Bandung Conference”).

Visual Art in Indonesia 1950-65

For Indonesians, the country’s modern history begins in 1945 when independence was finally achieved. However, actions to build an orderly and peaceful existence could not begin before 1950. In other words, after the end of World War II and 5 years of the Revolution era. Almost every Indonesian artist’s life at that time had unforgettable experiences when they were carried away by revolutionary overflows and lived through a period of heroism.

Although the upheavals in the early days of the revolution continued, artists still had the opportunity to form various artistic groups. In Yogyakarta, the *Pusat Tenaga Pelukis Indonesia* (Centre for Indonesian Painters) was established under the leadership of Djajengasmoro. S. Sudjojono put together a group of painters in Madiun, where they formed the *Seniman Indonesia Muda* (Young Indonesian Artists, SIM). The association moved first to Yogyakarta, then to Solo, and in 1948 it returned once more to Yogyakarta. SIM members produced anti-Dutch and revolutionary posters, often distributed behind enemy lines. An organization called *Seni Rupa Masyarakat* (Art of The Community) was founded by Affandi and other artists, and his group was affiliated with SIM. Then in 1947 Affandi and Sudjojono parted ways when Affandi joined forces with Hendra Gunawan to found *Pelukis Rakyat* (People’s Painters), the art group that was the most active in Indonesia until 1957 (Holt, 2000: 291).



Figure 1. Indonesian National Revolution 1945-1949, poster by Affandi, 1945.

Source: <https://www.volkpop.co/pendidikan/pr-2102327928/kisah-di-balik-poster-propaganda-boeng-ajo-boeng-garapan-seniman-perjuangan-indonesia>

To support the fighting spirit, these artists make posters to spark the imagination of the people with the available materials. The revolution has given them an unprecedented opportunity to express their feelings; the revolution also paved the way for a burst of artistic activity (Holt, 2000: 293). After 1950, the revolutionary upheaval ebbed away, and the ideological differences between the various political parties that had flared up during the revolution were then more open.

Lekra

The People's Cultural Institute (Lekra) was formed on the initiative of, among others, D.N. Aidit, M.S. Ashar, A.S. Dharta, and Njoto on August 17, 1945, or six months after *Gelanggang Seniman Merdeka* (Merdeka Artists' Arena) was declared on February 18, 1950. The early members of Lekra were its administrators, such as M.S. Ashar, A.S. Dharta, Njoto, Henk Ngantung, Sudharnoto, Herman Arjuno, and Joebaar Ajoeb. Lekra emerged to prevent further decline from the Revolutionary line (Dahlan & Yuliantri, 2008: 21), and it is believed that this task should not only be assigned to politicians, but also cultural workers. Lekra was founded to gather forces that are obedient and firm in supporting the Revolution and national culture. Lekra as a cultural institution has a political role and social practice based on art and culture as its formal form. That is, art and culture are tools used to achieve goals brought by their ideology. This goal is not only a local but also an international idea. As a movement that started in Indonesia, it will join forces with similar movements internationally (2008: 27).

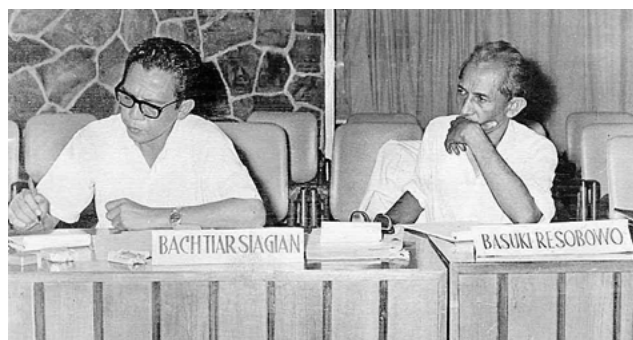


Figure 2: Indonesia in 1950-65. Lekra members, Bachtiar Siagian and Basuki Resobowo.

Source: <https://www.berdikarionline.com/memahami-seni-untuk-rakyat/>

Lekra also introduces the concept of *kebudayaan rakyat* or people's culture as the basis or formal form of its struggle. *Kebudayaan rakyat* is the voices of the people who are 90% oppressed and colonized and are the largest part of the Indonesian nation. The culture in question is all forms of science, art, and industry that exist and are still controlled by a certain group of elites. Within this idea, art, science, and industry must belong to the

people and be used for the benefit of the people. It seemed to them that these goals could be achieved through revolution. This goal is international because it is not only aimed at the Indonesian people but other communities, namely farmers and labourers. For this reason, as stated in the preamble to Lekra, the function of the people's culture is to make it a weapon of struggle in destroying imperialism and feudalism. *Kebudayaan Rakyat* was used as a mover and motivator, teaching, and educating the people. Moreover, views on foreign cultures by Lekra include all foreign cultures that are not antagonistic to Lekra. However, when taking a good foreign culture, Lekra will not completely imitate it. They took the culture critically based on the needs of the people. Furthermore, Lekra has received a lot of attention from official state institutions and foreign institutions, especially from socialist countries. This institution from a socialist country often provides opportunities for Lekra member artists to travel abroad to study, or to take part in various events. Since 1951, Lekra has built international contacts by involving its members in the World Youth and Student Peace Celebration in Berlin, 5-19 August 1951. Six people were sent as envoys: Henk Ngantung, Hendra Gunawan, and S. Sudjojono for the fine arts section, Sudharnoto from sound arts, as well as M.S. Ashar from literature (Antariksa, 2005).

The Lekra delegation reportedly presented the World Peace Council in Berlin with a painting of 20 doves painted by 20 member painters of the Yogyakarta branch of Lekra. In the same year, Lekra sent its delegation to China with the aim of "introducing Indonesian culture, studying Chinese culture, and strengthening Indonesia-China relations." Another foreign contact recorded in the report is the establishment of relations between Lekra and cultural organizations in London, Amsterdam, Prague, and Peking. Thus, Lekra became a competitor of the Dutch government's Cultural Cooperation Foundation, STICUSA (Stichting voor Culturele Samenwerking), which so far had been the main organization that provided scholarships to study abroad to Indonesian artists and was accused of being stooges of colonialism and cultural imperialism. Sukarno banned the existence of STICUSA in Indonesia in 1956, and the artist Lekra described this event as a "victory for the forces of progressive culture." (Antariksa, 2005: 40).

As quoted by Antariksa (2005), Martin Aleida, a writer member of Lekra, said that the role of local figures and the mass media is the right local strategy. On the one hand, these local figures are dedicated to bringing their cultural work to the villages. On the other hand, mass media such as *Harian Rakyat* can provide opportunities for young writers and also for works of art such as illustrations to be widespread. According to the records and reports of welcoming the Cultural Congress, in 1951 the works of the thinker and artist Lekra had indeed spread widely through the media in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Medan. *Madjalah Lekra* (Lekra Room) is published weekly as an annex to the weekly *Zaman Baru* (Surabaya) and is

also broadcast by *Harian Rakjat* (Jakarta), *Rakjat* (Medan), *Republik* (Surabaya), and *Sunday Courier* (Jakarta). The editors of this magazine are Iramani (Njoto), Klara Akustia (A.S. Dharta), and M.S. Ashar (2005: 32-33). Meanwhile, in terms of style, the style of journalism promoted by *Harian Rakyat* is confrontational journalism with explosive language, direct shooting, and hitting on the spot (Dahlan & Yuliantri, 2008: 77).

Apart from publishing writings and works of art by Lekra artists, several of these mass media also present works by artists from abroad as a manifestation of their internationalism and revolutionary solidarity. Some of the woodcuts below are examples of how the idea of anti-colonialism is in dialogue through works of art in the mass media. The presence of works by foreign artists reflects the exchange of artistic ideas and political attitudes from both parties.



Figure 3. Itji Tarmizi, *Madju terus, djangan mundur sedjaripun!* (Keep advancing, don't retreat even an inch!).

Source: *Harian Rakjat*, May 3, 1964, front page.

In *Madju terus, djangan mundur sedjaripun!* (1964), Itji Tarmizi described a group of men marching as if they were carrying out a mass demonstration. The figure at the very front is a young man carrying a hammer in his right hand, and holding up the figure of a man dressed as Uncle Sam, or the symbol of the United States of America. This leading figure is depicted with quite stiff gestures, as often seen in Soviet Union poster illustrations, with muscles and body lines that look strong like a worker. National identity is added by wearing a cap on his head. Beside him, another man is depicted holding a sickle on his left, and paddy and saplings on his right. He is also depicted wearing a hat like a farmer. These two figures explicitly depict the ideology of communism through the hammer and the meaning that is depicted, and the gesture of destroying foreign imperialist powers as symbolized by the figure of Uncle Sam. At the rear, a crowd of people was seen carrying banners

reading “Bentuk Kabinet NASAKOM” (Form a NASAKOM Cabinet), “Ganjang Malaysia” (Crush Malaysia), and “Tanggulangi Kesulitan Ekonomi” (Overcome Economic Difficulties). These writings reinforce the idea of anti-imperialism that is presented visually, with statements regarding political, economic, and foreign policy in Indonesia.



Figure 4. Arifin, *Ganjang Malaysia, Ganjang Film Imperialis AS* (Crush Malaysia, Crush Imperialist US films).

Source: *Harian Rakjat*, June 7, 1964, front page.

Arifin’s work entitled *Ganjang Malaysia, Ganjang Film Imperialist US!* again showing the theme of the work with criticism of anti-imperialism and Indonesia’s conflict with Malaysia. Interestingly, in this work, Arifin raises the theme of “bad” foreign cultural influences from the left’s viewpoint, namely American films. Instead of depicting artists or cultural figures, this work shows several figures of soldiers in uniforms and weapons in their hands. The front looks typical of a female figure—long hair with smoother facial lines. But this could also be the depiction of male guerrillas, who are used to being depicted by artists as longhaired men. The two large arms, which are the subject matter in this work, seem to have been released from the iron chains that restrained them, with the image of a film tape behind them. One figure appears to be wearing a sarong and a cap, wrapped around the film tape with the body upside down. The temporary interpretation of this figure is an illustration of the Malaysian symbol with its traditional clothing.



Figure 5. Kuomintang Burns Books, by Yang Na-Wei.

Source: Harian Rakjat, September 1, 1963.

Yang Ne-Wei began making woodblock prints in 1937, without having received formal training, and he played an active role in promoting woodcuts in his native Guangxi Province. A member of the All-China Woodcut Artist Association for Resistance, he created a number of works depicting the wartime devastations of the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45). Born in 1912, Yang Na-Wei was predominantly inspired by the 1930s. During the 1930s, many political ideologies such as Marxist Socialism, Capitalist Democracy, and the Totalitarianism of both Communism and Fascism were involved in struggles for power and characterized the political atmosphere of the era.¹ This work describes the situation that may occur around the Chinese Civil War and describes members of the Kuomintang party who are burning books that are banned or whose ideology is opposed to theirs. The Chinese Civil War was fought between the Kuomintang-led government of the Republic of China and forces of the Chinese Communist Party, continuing intermittently from 1st August 1927 to 7th December 1949 with a Communist victory in Mainland China. Like the two works above, this work tries to describe the “enemy” from a different perspective. The appearance of Yang Ne-Wei’s works in Harian Rakjat indicates his alignment with the Chinese Communist Party, even though the All-China Woodcut Artist Association for Resistance, the group he belongs to, tends to be neutral.

¹ See the artist profile: <https://www.artland.com/artists/yang-nawei>



Figure 6. Alberto Beltrán, Pancho Villa (1947).

Source: *Harian Rakjat*, October 27, 1963.

Alberto Beltrán is one of the most prolific and successful Mexican graphic artists of the twentieth century, producing engravings and political cartoons for several leading newspapers and magazines, founding and co-founding several progressive publications, and actively promoting literacy and education. Much of his public commissions were executed in Veracruz, a region for which he had a particular affinity. In 1944 Beltrán, a reserved and solitary man became a member of the Taller de Gráfica Popular and remained active in the organization until 1959. His strong belief in progressive social engagement and a selfless attitude toward wealth persisted throughout his life and career. In 1944 Beltrán, a reserved and solitary man, became a member of the Taller de Gráfica Popular and remained active in the organisation until 1959. His strong belief in progressive social engagement and a selfless attitude toward wealth persisted throughout his life and career.²In this work, Beltran depicts the figure of Pancho Villa, a Revolutionary general from Mexico. Pancho Villa was a key figure in the revolutionary movement that forced out President Porfirio Díaz and brought Francisco I. Madero to power in 1911. In life, Villa helped fashion his image as an internationally known revolutionary hero, starring as himself in Hollywood films and giving interviews to foreign journalists. After his death, he was excluded from the pantheon of revolutionary heroes until the Sonoran generals Obregón and Calles, whom he battled during the Revolution, were gone from the political stage.³

² See the artist profile: <https://brierhillgallery.com/alberto-beltran-1923-2002>

³ Pancho Villa. (2022, November 27). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pancho_Villa

Conclusion

In practice, the anti-colonial awareness that existed in the minds of Indonesian artists, especially Lekra members in 1950-65 can be said to have been caused by several things. In the explanation above, the aspirations of organizations like Lekra that put forward the idea of international solidarity with fellow workers, farmers and fishermen are the main foundation. This is strengthened by the closeness of this organization to foreign governments and cultural institutions that have the same ideas and ideology as them. Several activities involving artists and youth and were carried out by anti-Western countries were attended by Lekra artists from various fields. This helped encourage the exchange of ideas both artistically and ideologically. Apart from that, several publications show concretely this exchange by publishing the works of foreign artists with the same ideology in the mass media published by Lekra. The closeness between Lekra and the PKI, which at that time was the largest party in Indonesia, was very important. With this, he has an "internationalism" agenda that can be said to be in line with what Soekarno aspired to be, namely an attitude of internationalism with a foundation of anti-colonial and anti-imperialism solidarity.

This paper presents excerpts from several examples of events and works that can be found so far. Further research still needs to be done to understand in more detail the ideas of each artist's work and the reasons why these works circulate in the mass media as part of the spirit of the times and important ideas in Indonesian social life.

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