

ART, CULTURAL POLICY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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It is not easy to talk about cultural policy (kebijakan kebudayaan) in Indonesia, even-though the DPR had just agreed to release “Undang-undang Pemajuan Kebudayaan” (Regulations on the Advancement of Culture) a few months ago, mainly because cultural policy -as far as I know- had never been thought of seriously, or had ever become a hot topic in discussions related to culture or cultural matters. Nevertheless, I would like to draw our attention to it for its significance for Indonesian cultural affairs in the future, especially on the role of the government - both at the national and regional level (kabupaten level)- in advancing cultural activities, cultural products and cultural productions to strengthen and enhancing our national identities and national integration. Some theoretical concepts need to be elucidated before we go further.

SYMBOL, CULTURE AND ART

Discussion on the concept of “culture” cannot ever be separated from the concept of “symbol”, since the definition of culture should be based on our philosophical conception of man, and I will take Ernst Cassirer’s conception for our discussion here, which appeared in his *An Essay on Man* (1945). His analysis and interpretation of the results of research on the difference between man and animal done by scientists from various disciplines, led him to the view that man is both biological and cultural creature. Biologically man is part of what we call Animal Kingdom, but man is qualitatively different from other animals in that Kingdom. The qualitative difference is due to man’s capability to create, develop and use symbols as means of communication, as means to convey messages or information to the others. Thus, a man, a human being is basically an *animal symbolicum*.

Accepting Cassirer’s view, takes us to the question of “what is symbol?”. Various definitions have been given, but we can use the simple and the clear one, namely that a symbol is anything bestowed with meaning or anything that is given meaning (White, 1949). This means that a symbol has two aspects or dimensions, the aspect of meaning or the symbolized and the aspect of the symbolizer. The two aspects are related to one another, but the relation is arbitrary (cf. Saussure, 1966), which means that the meaning is not inherent in the symbol but is from outside. It is given or attached to the symbolizer by human being, because human being is the only creature that can symbolize, that is having capability to put certain arbitrary relation between meaning and its symbol, or between the symbolized and its symbolizer.

The meaning is an abstract thing. It is an idea. It needs to be materialized, to be expressed, in order to be known or understood by others. Our idea about certain thing that stands in front of our house which has trunk, leaves and branches, and sometimes has fruits, is expressed by using the sound 'tree' that we produce through our mouth. The sound 'tree' coming out of our mouth is the symbol or the symbolizer, our idea about the tree in front of our house is the symbolized. When we use the sound 'tree' to convey our thought about the tree, we unconsciously are putting arbitrary relation between the sound and the thought. Why arbitrary? Because other people use different sound to denote or refer our 'tree'. The Javanese choose the sound 'wit' or 'uwit', the Malay choose the sound 'pohon', the Dutch choose the sound 'boom'. Any people can choose any combination of sound for the idea of 'tree'.

However, since words are used by people for communication or conveying messages, ideas or information to other people, the arbitrary relation should not be used or accepted only by an individual, otherwise no one can communicate with another. It should be accepted by a community of speakers who agreed on the relations between certain symbols and their meanings. Thus, the relation between a symbol and its meaning, or between the symbolizer and its symbolized is a social one. It is based on a consensus.

Since a symbol can be anything, it has at least four manifestations, namely: material, behavioral, lingual and ideational. Material symbols are physical symbols, such as foods, clothes, things, etc, which existence are relatively stable. They are not always in motion nor change. Behavioral symbols are symbols in the forms behavior, action or activity, which can be individual, communal or social, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, planting, hunting, trading, etc. Lingual symbols are symbols which manifestation are sound produced by human mouth, to convey certain messages or information. Ideational symbols are symbols in the forms of ideas that we have in mind, including our ideologies, our views of the world, our knowledge about things in our world. Thus, symbols are not always concrete things. Abstract ideas or knowledge can become symbols because we can give them meanings.

Since culture are "that complex whole of things" (Tylor, 1898), then culture is actually a complex whole of symbols. Culture is set of symbols which man acquire through the process of learning, by which he set up reality to which he should adapt in his daily life. As set of symbols, culture consists of symbolic elements, which analytically can be divided into elements, sub-elements and sub-sub-elements.

One of these elements is what we call 'art', or I would say 'expressive' elements of culture, the function of which is to express our ideas, views, feelings, emotions which are inexpressible through our language. Art is thus an element of culture. It is a set of symbols consisting of material or physical symbols, behavioral symbols, lingual symbols and ideational symbols. The physical symbols are for instance, paintings, sculptures, films (movies), etc. The behavioral symbols are rituals, performing arts, etc. The lingual symbols are poetry, songs, myths, etc. The ideational symbols are our ideas about beauties, about aesthetics.

These four manifestations or dimensions or aspects of culture should be taken seriously, since each dimension has its own characteristics which will always have some influences on the way we treat that dimension. We cannot for instance treat material art in the same way as we treat behavioral or lingual arts. Transmitting or passing our material arts over to our children and grandchildren needs different methods from our methods of transmitting our behavioral arts or performing arts.

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As set of symbols art has always been given some meanings by its producer, the human being. Thus, art always has some values and functions in our life. As students of art, culture and society, one of our tasks is to elucidate what these values and functions are. These two concepts are in many cases used interchangeably, but they are actually two different things. Values can be defined as criteria by which we determine whether or not something is good or bad, necessary or not necessary, allowed or not allowed, beautiful or not beautiful. Since these criteria are different from culture to culture, or society to society, these criteria are always relative. In the case of art, values are always relative. What is good or beautiful for some people might be different for some other people. Some people can really enjoy Western classical music, but some others cannot. Some people like gamelan music very much, but some others cannot.

In many cultures arts are usually produced through a long and serious process of thinking, reflecting, trying, applying particular media or symbolic means to express certain ideas and feelings. That is why there is always meaningful relations between arts and their makers or the artists. In the process of producing particular arts, consciously or unconsciously the artists - whether it is an individual, a group, or a community- express their particular ideas and feelings through the symbolic media in such a way that they think and feel the arts they produce are part of their selves. Arts are thus manifestations, expressions of who and what they are. In this way, art has become a means to express individual, social or cultural identity. Art is thus strongly related to identity.

As Indonesians -who are raised within culturally plural settings with the awareness of “*bhinneka tunggal ika*”- we can rather easily identify Sundanese music, Javanese music, Balinese music, Sentani paintings, Dayak shields, Asmat sculptures, Torajas motifs, Sumba motifs, enz., because these arts have particular characteristics. These arts are considered as having “identities”, which mean they are expressions of those ethnic “selves”. In some cases the relation between these art characteristics and the makers are so strong that they become sacred and specially protected. An aura of secrecy is then attached to these arts, and they are strongly guarded. It is not surprising then to find some societies that consider arts productions as something secret and sacred.

Not only do art have strong relations with social groups as a carrier of their identity, but it has also a strong relation to their culture. Art is a special element of culture. It carries and expresses a society's ideas about beauty, about aesthetics,

about inspiration, about creativity, about humanity, about life, in such a way that members of society highly value their arts. Art becomes also part of a culture's identity. When we see certain paintings or motifs in Indonesia, in many cases we know pretty sure to which culture they belong, and the people who have that culture are mostly aware that those arts are theirs. The Balinese know quite well which kind of music is theirs, so do the Javanese, the Sundanese, the Malay, etc. Together with other kinds of arts, that music comprises of what we understand as 'cultural identity' (identitas kebudayaan).

In Indonesia, there are at least 720s ethnic groups, and each ethnic group has its own arts, which in many cases become an important signifier of their culture. Usually this cultural signifier is the element most developed by that ethnic group or the most distinctive. Among the Mentawaians for instance, their house and tattoo are their cultural signifiers. Among the Madurese it is the cow race (karapan sapi) and the traditional herbal medicines. Among the Minangkabaus it is the house and their food. These cultural signifiers become today the elements or cultural signifiers of Indonesian culture. The strong emotional and cognitive relations between a society and its culture and its arts, make many peoples put their arts in a respected position, and this enables arts to play important role in social and national integration

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The importance of culture in building and strengthening social integration is realized for instance by the European Community. As the community is struggling to forge new social solidarity among European nations, culture is increasingly realized as crucial factor in that process. This is clearly expressed in Culture program 2000, in which it is stated that "Culture has an important intrinsic value to all people in Europe, is an essential element of European integration and contributes to the affirmation and vitality of the European model of society and to the Community's influence on the international scene. Culture is both an economic factor and a factor in social integration and in citizenship; for that reason, it has an important role to play in meeting new challenges facing the community, such as globalization, the information society, social cohesion and the creation of employment (Decision 508/2000/CE)" (Sassatelli, 2007: 31-32). Art as one of the important cultural elements can be used to unite or strengthen social relations between peoples of different socio-cultural background. It is in this relation that cultural policy should play role.

In relation to that it would be appropriate to take a look at the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and UNESCO's views on culture, since they represent the world's views on culture. In article 27 (i) of Universal Declaration of Human Rights it is stated that: "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits". This is a clear statement on the right of man concerning culture, that is his participation in cultural life as well as its enjoyment and share its benefits. No one should be excluded.

Supporting and strengthening the UDHR, UNESCO's general director states that "it follows that the authorities responsible for these comments have a duty, so far as their resources permit, to provide him with the means for such participation". "It is therefore necessary that governments and other public authorities accept a clear responsibility for culture and formulate long term policies" (UNESCO,). Cultural policy is thus the key to the realization of universal human rights on culture.

But, what is cultural policy? Policy is "a systematized, regularized and regulatory position statement or guide for action that has been adopted by an organization as an instrument for achieving a goal"..."..it is bureaucratic, not creative or organic". Thus, a policy is firstly a guide for action to achieve certain goals. When it is related to art, it may also mean "organizations that teach, circulate, fund, define and exclude actors and activities that go under the names of artist or artwork, through the activation of policies" (Miller, 1994: 264).

Cultural policy is a particular kind of policy. One of the definitions says that it is "the conscious management of symbols towards establishing a unique cultural identity that is accessible to the population at large, that evokes in them a sense of national dignity and pride and that can ensure a strong regime legitimation" (Bhattacharyya, 1983: 499). This definition is quite suitable I think for Indonesia, and therefore we need clear, good, strong and well-executed cultural policy, because of its strategic role in building our national character. As other has also said cultural policies are "efforts by states to articulate and define national identity and a public philosophy. It concerns such questions as what it means to be an Indian, how Indians should live, what they should value, and how they can achieve the things they value" (Rudolph, 1983: 6)

Based on that definition, several things need to be considered seriously in relation to cultural policy, they are: a) management of symbols; that they are b) accessible to the population at large, and the symbols can c) evoke a sense of national dignity and pride. First, management of symbols. The cultural policy in this case is about management of symbols which related to our national identity. Since we have so many ethnic groups, with a great variety of culture, the first step to be taken is identifying symbols which are distinct, unique, or significant for the people.

As I have said before, arts are symbols. Thus, we may start with cultural policy on art. Since traditional, ethnic arts abound in Indonesia, our national cultural policy needs to give priority to them. They are our cultural heritage which unfortunately do not always get enough attention and recognition they deserve. Younger generation are not quite interested in them anymore. Therefore, the national and regional government should have clear policies and programs to preserve, maintain and popularize these arts. If the policies have not existed yet, the government should make them.

These ethnic arts should be attempted to become "a unique cultural identity" of a re-gency or region. This means research should be done on the potentials of the local arts to become an icon or a unique symbol of the region. Some regencies had already made decision on this, so that they can set up clear cultural

policies concerning their local art and artists. Those that have not done that can invite experts to do research on local arts to help them to determine which local arts are the most potential and suitable for the region.

When choice have been made, these local arts should be made accessible to every member of the society in that region. Thus, there should be cultural policies to popularize the arts or to support local art groups. Ethnic arts that have been recognized nationally should be given financial supports from the local or national government. The artists need to be given facilities to work, to do the exercises and to perform. Annual festival of particular arts, such as sculpture, paintings, music, dance, etc., needs to be held. Well-known artists need to be recognized and acknowledged by giving them awards.

To strengthen the creativity of the local artists, exchange programs and workshops can be set up. Artists from other the regions can be invited to work together with them, and the results of their cooperation are shown or performed to the people. Or, the local artists are sent to other regions to have new artistic experiences or to know other cultures, which will give them inspirations for their future works.

When various local arts or ethnic arts in Indonesia flourish, it is not only the local or regional identity that will be strengthened, but our national identity as well. Let us take for example the case of angklung, the musical instrument of West Java. Angklung had been known and played by the Sundanese in West Java from many years ago, and among the Indonesians it is always identified as Sundanese, along with their kecap and degung music. When angklung is taken abroad to be played in front of people from other country, these people do not see it as a West Javanese or Sundanese musical instrument, for many of them do not know about Sundanese. They see it as an Indonesian traditional musical instrument. So, it is identified as something Indonesian. Here, Indonesian cultural identity and Indonesian image becomes strengthened in people's minds. That identity will even become stronger when the people are allowed to take the instrument home as a souvenir. Angklung as a musical instrument is Sundanese in Indonesian socio-cultural contexts, but it becomes Indonesian in different socio-cultural contexts abroad.

We have so many traditional ethnic cultural elements in Indonesia that can become parts of our Indonesian cultural identity. They are our cultural reservoir so to speak. Some of them have become parts of our national identity. In the case of cloth, we have batik, songket, kain sumba. In the case of weapon we have keris, kujang, rencong. In the case musical instrument we have gamelan, angklung, kulintang, sasando. In the case of dance we have bedhaya, srimpi, golek, serampang dua belas, pendet, saman, and many more. In the case of performing art we have barong, sendratari, teater bang-sawan, wayang kulit, kecak and many more. Some of these cultural heritage have been acknowledged by UNESCO as world heritage.

CLOSING REMARKS

In closing our discussion, I would like to draw our attention to cultural policy in Indo-nesia. My questions are: do we have national cultural policy? If we do, do we know its details? Its philosophical views on culture in general, Indonesian culture and ethnic cul-tures in Indonesia? If the answers are negative, that may indicate our ignorance in our cultural policy, or that may indicate the absence of cultural policy, which is an indicator of our ignorance on the significance of cultural policy for the advancement of our culture

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