

## Islands, Archipelago and the Postcolonial Subconscious

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Island fascination is age-old. Writers, artists, musicians have explored islands in their artistic creation and what they have produced certainly reflect their imaginings and to a larger degree, desire on islands. From works of literature such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) to music, Warumpi Band's *My Island Home* (1988) and Hollywood's *Castaway* (2000) starring Tom Hanks, nearly all uniformly introduce the trope of islands as a place of adventure and escape from the hectic modern life.

But islands are of course, more than just fantasy or a creation of artists and writers; islands are real physical entities, often historically and geopolitically complex and the island can be a very forbidding place to live because of its isolation and remoteness. Paradoxically, it is because of the isolation that perhaps, it is not us that are looking/longing for islands but rather it is 'island' that holds our imagination captive. Jose Saramago (1999) has suggested that the 'island' really own us, for in seeking it we are more often than not in search of ourselves.

The essay will discuss how the imaginings of 'island' are linked to the postcolonial subconscious of an Indonesian modern painter, Emiria Sunassa (1894-1960) through an examination of her indigenous portraits. The artist who is regarded as one of the few female painters that was active in post-independence Indonesia has created a body of work that highlighted the limitation of the (masculine) imaginings of the Indonesian archipelago.

Maria Gonzalez (2008) suggested that islands have been read as a metaphor for the Modern understanding of identity, namely that islands were/are perceived as something that is fixed and always surrounded by stable borders. But other scholars have criticised that given identity itself is a process, not a fixed entity or autonomous object (Braidotti 1994; Butler 2006); indeed, to see islands as a metaphor for identity is no longer appropriate.

Gonzalez instead proposed that archipelago can be seen as a closer approximate to a metaphor for identity. Drawing from Iris Marion Young's criticism on the formulation of identity, she stated that:

The modern way of understanding identity implies the idea that one part of the collective can represent the whole

entity. In the identity model of the island, the capacity of representation emerged from the island's center. As there is no center in the city or the archipelago, no one has the "true" definition of identity. There is no one unique, true definition, but different positions in the scope of power of a collective. Thus collective identity and collective definitions must be negotiated among the different components of the archipelago (Gonzalez 2008: 33).

The discussion on Emiria Sunassa's works below shall expand from Gonzalez's exploration of island and archipelago through a feminist reading on Indonesian art history to challenge a fixed sense of identity as established through the canons in modern art history.

### **The dark archipelago: Emiria Sunassa (1894-1960)**

In *The Question of Lay Analysis*, Sigmund Freud infamously referred to the sexual life of the adult woman as the 'dark continent' (1926: 212). The comment, made because of the lack of clinical materials on the sexual life of girls and women for psychoanalysis, also acknowledged Freud's half-knowledge and, furthermore, his curiosity about the topic. The expression 'dark continent' referred to virgin, hostile and impenetrable dark forest, taken from the African explorer Henry Morton Stanley. Freud's fetishising of women as mysterious and impenetrable also drew attention to psychoanalysis' roots in the age of colonialism.

Ranjana Khanna (2003) links the deep anxiety over women in psychoanalysis to anxiety towards the primitive. Khanna expands Freud's notion of melancholy into what she terms as colonial melancholia. Melancholia, or the refusal to mourn, is a form of incorporation, that is swallowing whole something that cannot be assimilated or expelled (Khanna 2003: 166). Khanna argues that the colonised subject is unable to mourn the loss of his or her culture or tribe, as it is made unknown or invisible to him or her by Western hegemony. One of the resulting symptoms is haunting, in which the lost object haunts the subject in the form of hallucination. History, memory and trauma experienced by postcolonial subjects cannot be eliminated by state nationalism alone.

I want to extend Freud's metaphor of the 'dark continent' into the 'dark archipelago' to suggest that the discussion of Emiria Sunassa's indigenous portraits can be framed within the notion of colonial melancholia as well as an attempt to challenge the conventional reading of identity that is framed within national-masculine perspective. Moreover, the metaphor of archipelago could also serve as a cautious reminder on the question of representation: who and what determine identity.

Emiria Sunassa (1894-1964) or Emiria Sunassa Wama'na Poetri Al-Alam Mahkota Tidore, also known as Emma Wilhelmina Pareira/Emmy Pareira, is one of the few women painters active during the early years of Indonesian modern art.<sup>1</sup> Background information about her works and biography is scant and existing

<sup>1</sup> The various names of Emiria Sunassa derive from the multiple narratives of the artist as explained in Arbuckle (2011). Because there are several possibilities concerning her origin, these names are not only markers of her identities but also of her constructed subjectivities.

sources often disagree, but a general outline can be constructed from the diverse oral and written evidence available.

Born on 5th August 1894, Emiria claimed to be the daughter of the Sultan of Tidore of the time, Sultan Sahadjuan.<sup>2</sup> She was Dutch-educated and attended the *Europese Lagere School* (European Elementary School) until the third grade only. Her attendance at the *Europese Lagere School* suggests that her family had some rank and influence within the colonial administration of the time, as the school was exclusively for the children of Dutch and foreign officials and residents.

Emiria had a diverse career as nurse, secretary and administrator, and travelled widely in the Dutch East Indies and as far as Europe before she became a painter. She claimed to have been married several times, though there is no conclusive record of these marriages. She travelled to Brussels and Austria against the backdrop of World War I in 1914-1915, studying the Dalcroze method of eurythmics. Before her travels in Europe, Emiria had trained as a nurse in Cikini Hospital, Jakarta from 1912 to 1914. Later in the 1920s and 1930s, Emiria travelled in the Dutch East Indies where she worked in plantations, mines and factories, then lived with ethnic groups in Papua, Kalimantan and Sumatra. During her travels in the archipelago she often stayed in remote villages and lived with local tribes where she would later paint portraits that reflected her various encounters. When she settled down in Batavia in the late 1930s, she became involved in the Persagi – the first Indonesian indigenous artists' association.<sup>3</sup>

Emiria participated in Persagi's inaugural show in 1940 and also in the group's breakthrough exhibition in 1941. The artist later on had a solo show at the Union of Art Circles (*Bond van Kunstkringen*) shortly before the beginning of the Japanese occupation of Indonesia and continued to paint well into the occupation period.<sup>4</sup> Her last exhibition was in 1959 in Taman Seni Rupa Merdeka, Kebayoran, Jakarta. Emiria reportedly left Jakarta some time in the same year, possibly to travel to Sumatra for unknown reason. It was later reported that she died in Lampung in the southern part of Sumatra in 1964. She left all her possessions with her neighbour, Jane Waworuntu, in Jakarta. Through Jane's descendants, researchers can gain access to the majority of Emiria's works.

Emiria was commonly associated with Persagi, although she did not train or work with the group as reflected in her choice of subject matter.<sup>5</sup> Persagi's nationalistic vigour came from an unmistakably masculine perspective; most of the paintings represented common subject-matter: self-portraits, still-lives and most importantly, the portrayal of the Indonesian people during and after the revolutionary period – and yet, these depictions were limited to the island of Java.

Indonesian modern art during its early years was strongly embedded within the nationalist movement. Nationalism, as noted by Cynthia Enloe (1989), has been regarded as a male phenomenon so that masculinised memory appears embodied in the representation of warfare in Indonesian art history.

<sup>2</sup> The source of confusion concerning Emiria's background can be attributed to scant official information on her childhood. Arbuckle in her study pieced together Emiria's background from oral histories from various people connected to Emiria. Although she clearly originated from Eastern Indonesia, Emiria's exact birthplace and ethnicity are still shrouded in mystery. See Holt 1967; Arbuckle 2004, 2011; Bianpoen, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Holt, Claire, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 251-2.

<sup>4</sup> Persagi (Indonesian Painters Association) was founded in 1938 by Sudjojono and Agus Djaja. After Persagi members were absorbed into *Keimin Bunka Shidoso* (Cultural Centre during the Japanese occupation), Emiria held a solo show (1943) organised by Poetera (*Pusat Tenaga Rakyat* – another cultural organisation, this time established by Indonesians and headed by Sudjojono). In 1946, Emiria held another solo exhibition, this time for charity with the Red Cross in Jakarta. *Ibid.*, 251-2.

<sup>5</sup> Sudjojono and other painters are known to have studied under the tutelage of more senior native painters or directly under a Dutch artist. There are contrasting opinions about Emiria's artistic training. She was assumed to be an autodidact by Indonesian scholars yet Arbuckle points to several historical sources that indicate that she was trained under Guillaume Frederic Pijper (1893-1988) who as an Assistant Adviser of Native Affairs. In Arbuckle's study, Pijper is credited with mentoring Emiria into taking up painting.

The paintings by Sudjojono entitled *Sekko* (c. 1949), Hendra Gunawan's *Guerilla Fighters* (1955), or Dullah's *Guerrillas Preparing* (1949) are a fair representation of a common subject-matter where men are portrayed as being engaged in various activities as fighters and heroes during the revolutionary period. The elevation of participation in armed conflicts in the visual arts is seen as the ultimate contribution of citizenship by artists and also served as the quintessential gendering activity (Speck 2004: 11).

Emiria's works produced during the 1950s were characterised by her (mostly male) peers and writers as 'mysterious' and 'out-worldly'. Her subject-matter was dominantly figurative portraiture, both in groups or individual setting. However, her portraits were atypical of what were painted by her peers during the time which were, during the 1940s-1950s, warfare or other armed conflict scenes as well as nationalistic propaganda posters.

Emiria's portraits convey a sense of directness and character. It is important to consider how the artist managed these by comparing her works with two works by her male contemporaries, namely Nasyah Jamin (1924-1994) and Suptoheodojo (1925-2003)<sup>6</sup>. A closer look and comparison between Nasyah Jamin's<sup>7</sup> *Gadis Makasar* [sic] (*A Makassar Girl*, 1965) with Emiria's *Wanita Sulawesi* (*Sulawesi Woman*, 1958) underline some of the differences.

Jamin's sitter adopted a conventional sitting pose with the sitter's hands crossed on her lap and her eyes averted from the painter/viewer. The careful rendition of the traditional shirt and sarong that blends harmoniously with the saturated yellow background emanates a feeling of softness and femininity as well as an idealised image of a Makassar woman.

In Emiria's portrait of a woman from the same island, the sitter is portrayed in a classic frontal view and she is also wearing the customary *baju bodo*<sup>8</sup> the traditional loose shirt, and sarong against a geometric background. The woman's pink shirt and geometric sarong are rendered in tight, broad brushes while her right hand clasps the edge of the sarong, holding it upright in a gesture of pride or modesty. The pink, green and blue geometric background echoes the sarong's pattern, which creates a sharp contrast to the dark monochromatic rendering of the woman's head. In this particular work the right hand appears to be left unfinished and is also out of proportion to the rest of the body.<sup>9</sup> The painting's focus point centres on the woman's dark impassive face, staring straight at the viewer, and her two large earrings, which are painted in detail. Emiria seems to focus more effort on the sitter's face through smaller and softer brushstrokes to catch a certain life-like quality.

While Holt has suggested that most of Emiria's works from her later period seemed to have been painted from memory (1967: 252), this painting shows that Emiria was able to capture the strength of character of a Sulawesi woman through that memory alone. If we compare this work with another work painted at the year, namely *Kembang Kemboja di Bali* (*Frangipani Flower*

<sup>6</sup> Djamin and Suptoheodojo's works were collected by the National Gallery of Indonesia and the two paintings discussed in the essay were shown during the gallery's inaugural exhibition in 1999. In an extended version of this essay, I argue that the inaugural exhibition of the National Gallery of Indonesia is part of canon-making within Indonesian modern art history. Thus the paintings by the two male artists are part of the mainstream nationalist discourse as conceived by Indonesian curators and art historians.

<sup>7</sup> Nasyah Jamin was a painter and author from West Sumatra, Indonesia. He was more widely known for his literary works such as *Hilanglah Si Anak Hilang* (1950) and *Gairah untuk Hidup dan untuk Mati* that won the highest literature prize in 1970 from the state.

<sup>8</sup> *Baju bodo* is a traditional loose billowy shirt worn by women from several ethnic groups in South Sulawesi.

<sup>9</sup> Arbuckle (2011: 246) has suggested that Emiria possibly had difficulties in drawing hands and feet well. A number of Emiria's paintings show simplified hands or feet, sometimes they are simply omitted or hidden. In *Pengantin Dayak* (1946) the artist simply placed the hands of the figures behind the long table. Nonetheless, she seems to have resolved this problem in her latter works in the late 1950s.

of Bali, 1958), the painting *Wanita Sulawesi* conveys the artist's confidence in presenting the inner character of her sitter.

In *Kembang Kemboja di Bali*, a woman is portrayed in three-quarter view and is wearing traditional Balinese attire. Her head is garlanded with white frangipanis. She is wearing a dark blue *kemben*<sup>10</sup> that stops below her bare breasts and her shoulders are draped with pink shawl-like fabrics; on the right shoulder the fabric appears to have been decorated while the left one is of transparent quality, half-covering the left breast. Against three dark vertical planes, the figure almost appears to blend with the background but the impression is interrupted by the bright white horizontal garland on her head. The depiction of her face has similar formal qualities to the *Wanita Sulawesi* painting, in particular the nose, eyebrows and lips, which may have been painted from memory as well. Again, the artist appears to concentrate more on the face, but in this work, the focus is slightly altered by the striking flower garland, thus bringing together the visual depiction of the flowers and the title of the painting.

In *Kembang Kemboja di Bali*, despite the emphasis on the flowers as a marker for her ethnic identity and gender, the artist's portrayal of the figure appears to have been at odds with the idea of exoticism and femininity commonly associated with the flowers. Instead, the bare breasts and the dark brown skin of the figure seem to emphasise a strong tribal quality.

We can compare this work with Suptoheodojo's<sup>11</sup> depiction with a similar subject-matter: the painting of a girl in *Gadis Bali (Balinese Girl, 1954)* that highlights innocence and youthful beauty. The sitter is painted sitting in a three-quarter view, wearing Balinese traditional attire. In contrast to Emiria's portrayal, the breasts are fully covered with *kemben* and one shoulder is covered with yellow *selendang*<sup>12</sup>. Her hands are crossed on her lap above a green piece of cloth and she is holding a white frangipani. The figure demurely averts her eyes from the viewer amidst a background of frangipani trees, some of which have started to bloom, thus emphasising the freshness of her youth.

Although Emiria's painting of a Balinese woman shares with Suptoheodojo's painting some visual references such as Balinese traditional dress and hairdo, it does not conform to the conventional depiction of Balinese women. Instead, it emphasises the otherness of the figure. Emiria's figure, painted in 1958, evokes a not so-far and perhaps an idealised past where Balinese women were still unencumbered by the trappings of modernity, while Suptoheodojo's figure, painted in 1954, seems to have been moulded by the sociocultural values of the time through the covered breasts. Significantly, in contrast to the two paintings by Nasyah Jamin and Suptoheodojo, Emiria's figures gaze straight at the painter/viewer, forcing the viewer to engage with the paintings. The artist arguably represented her female figures as subjects with agency rather than the essence of her being.

<sup>10</sup> A *kemben* is a traditional body covering made by wrapping yards of fabric bandage-style on the upper part of the wearer's body.

<sup>11</sup> Suptoheodojo was an Indonesian artist who was renown for his diverse art making. Based in Yogyakarta, Central Java, paintings by the artist were mostly in Realist style which was characterised by idealised representation of his subject-matter.

<sup>12</sup> The *selendang* is an Indonesian sarong-type shawl traditionally used to carry babies.

## Concluding remarks

By her distinctly atypical portrayals of women that deviated from the nationalist imaginings of her contemporaries, Emiria not only proposed a more inclusive vision of the newly emerging nation but also suggests the artist's cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism, as explained by Kwame Anthony Appiah, is a 'duty' to live with all the other people in this world and the moral challenge that humanity should rise up to (Appiah 2006; Papastergiadis 2012). Appiah further explains that cosmopolitanism consists of two strains of thought. First, we have an obligation to others beyond those to whom we are related by kith and kin. Second, we take the values not just of human life but also of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance (Appiah 2006: xv).

Emiria's cosmopolitanism thus can be assumed from her portrait works. Painting the subjects of her portraits at close quarters, portrait style, instead of within a particular situation or events (although they may have been recalled from memory), reveals Emiria's empathy towards them. Artists have used portraiture as a genre since the Renaissance era not only to capture a likeness of their sitter but also to convey their character. In Emiria's case, the identities of her sitters are unknown and nothing is known about the exact location or date of their meetings. Thus it is debatable whether Emiria intended to capture her sitters' physical likeness through her portraits; it is quite likely that it was an act of recollection by the artist from her various journeys.

By acknowledging the otherness of those who are culturally and ethnically different, her portraits suggest the kind of haunting or the inability to mourn as proposed by Khanna (2003) in the previous section. Moreover, the figures in Emiria's portraits might be interpreted as representing the artist's view of the nation's Other/new citizens who were rarely taken into account in mainstream history, including art history.

Her indigenous portraits did not fit into the masculine imaginings of the mainstream history and yet they were and are part of the nation. Furthermore, her paintings also reveal the repressed elements of the nation, from its peripheral members to its traumatic formation. The haunting in the artist's works shadows the notion of a united, patriarchal Indonesia. Moreover, her narratives of mobility and cosmopolitanism underlined the often forgotten negotiation in forming a collective identity within the narratives of the archipelago.

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Emiria Sunassa in 1942 (Source: Djawa Baroe Magazine, 1942, p. 17).  
Image courtesy of IVAA (Indonesian Visual Art Archive) Yogyakarta.