

IJOCA

VOL. 25, NO. 1, SPRING/SUMMER 2023

INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF
COMIC ART



AN INDEPENDENT PUBLICATION

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF COMIC ART

**Vol. 25, No. 1
Spring/Summer 2023**

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ISBN 1531-6793 / Website: <http://www.ijoca.net>

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Karimata 1890: Silent Comic with Nusantara Concept

Iwan Zahar

Toni Masdiono, who recently released the silent comic *Karimata 1890* (Zahar, *et al.*, 2022), was born in Malang on March 25, 1961, and is a well-known illustrator in Indonesia. He graduated from Bandung Institute of Technology's Art School. He and I have jointly published five papers in *IJOCA (International Journal of Comic Art)*. He uses the Nusantara concept in his comics. The Indonesian people's unique and strategically important perspective and attitude toward themselves and their environment is known as the "Archipelagic Outlook," which places national unity and territorial integrity at the forefront of social, national, and state affairs in order to achieve national goals. For instance, the 1957 Djuanda Declaration attempts to uphold Indonesia's sovereignty and geographical integrity. In the declaration, the so-called Archipelagic Outlook (Wawasan Nusantara) was added to further emphasize the nation's archipelagic identity. A lot of factors make up the Archipelagic Outlook concept, including the widespread concern about national disintegration, the resulting emphasis on unity, and the necessity for economic development, especially in the less developed provinces (Anwar, 1999). Actually, a number of Indonesian comic book artists, including Teguh Santosa (Masdiono and Zahar, 2017) and Ganesh TH, have used the Nusantara concept in the past (Zahar and Masdiono, 2020). Teguh Santosa, Ganesh TH, and Toni Masdiono are familiar with Indonesian geopolitics and work to depict it as well as part of the island's sociocultural. They don't attempt to represent the 1,340 ethnic groups or 13,000 islands that make up Indonesia, but they can portray Wawasan Nusantara in a comic book.

Iwan Zahar: Could you tell me when you got into comics?

Toni Masdiono: For the past 20 years, I've been illustrating novels for Gramedia (Indonesia's largest publisher), focusing on detective fiction and *Intisari* magazine. I produced 14 ways of making comics when I was 30 years old, and it became a best seller and is still used as references in many colleges.

IZ: Why would you write a book on developing 14 ways to make comics (Masdiono, 1998) when Indonesian comics have been disappearing since the 1980s?

TM: Indonesian comics were in their golden age in the 1970s (Lent, 2015), and have been dying for ten years since the 1980s, when American, Japanese,

and European comics dominated the Indonesian market. Many Indonesian comic artists did not make comics at the time; therefore, I devised 14 ways to make comics for the regeneration of comics.



Fig. 1. Toni Masdiono. *Karimata 1890*'s cover. Creativ Media. 2019.

Z: Many new comic artists I spoke with said they were inspired by your book. When will you be an international comics judge?

TM: Yes, I was aware of this when I led a comic workshop. I was asked to go to the Philippines, and all I know is that Prof. John Lent was introduced to



Fig. 2. Toni Masdiono. *Karimata 1890*. Fighting scene. Creativ Media. 2019.

me by Dwi Koen, a well-known Indonesian cartoonist. I was asked to offer a workshop under the title “Cergam.” I’ve been invited to be an international judge since 2008. Prior to then, I’d already served as a judge in comics in Bandung and Yogyakarta.

IZ: What is the difference between cergam and comic?

TM: Cergam is an Indonesian phrase that has a connotation that is comparable to graphic novel (Gunawan, 2013). The phrase “graphic novel” has been used in Indonesia since the 1960s. Will Eisner was the first to establish the graphic

novel, and John Lent suggested that I introduce the name graphic novel to an Indonesian version. Cergam has a more comprehensive nomenclature, because it combines comic and graphic book into one.

In fact, John Lent taught in Asia (Malaysia) and was aware that Indonesian tradition includes pictorial storytelling, particularly on temple walls (Borobudur and Prambanan temple). Following that, Asia-Pacific Association of Comics and Animation (APACA, founded by John Lent), appointed me as a member of that association. APACA is a non-profit organization that promotes the art of comics. For a decade, comic artists from all of Asia and elsewhere were invited to China for a conference.

Cergam is an abbreviation of the words “image” and “story.” Cergam is an image that tells a tale or tells a story with a picture, and it can be reversed. Cergam uses techniques that are comparable to those used in comic books. A word balloon is frequently present in a comic; however, it is not always included in cergam. Sam Nurdin was the first to coin the term “cergam” in 1967. In the 1970s, comic professionals rarely studied Indonesian cergam’s sequence. Cergam had a vertical format with two panels at the time; above and below. The cergam format evolved over time and was primarily available in two sizes: horizontal and portrait. The golden age comic artist is more impulsive when it comes to creating comics. I and other Indonesian comic artists have agreed to use the term *cergam* for comic art (fine art) and the term comic for the industry. One artist was responsible for drawing, writing the tale, and selling our cergam to the publisher during my time. The comic industry, on the other hand, employs a large number of artists with a variety of skills to create a single story.

All of their forefathers appear in cartoons, thus comics and cartoons are intrinsically intertwined. Sequences are the most significant comics. Cergam encompasses both graphic novels and comic books in one package. Comics can only be done by one person, but they can also be done by a group. Comic books are a part of the creative industry.

IZ: Many young comics are going digital, with American influences like superheroes and cos player’s clothing and character. What kind of story is best for Indonesia?

TM: In Indonesia, cergam’s readers are interested in both mystic and horror stories. Singapore and Malaysia have fewer comic artists than the United States, but they enjoy horror fiction. Legend stories such as *bawang merah dan putih*, which fall outside of the first two genres, are the third option. Which tale plot should we use? For example, similar stories to Romeo and Juliet may be found in China and Indonesia, where love did not survive long and there were no happy endings. Miyazaki Hayao’s “My Neighbor Totoro” is a film that is comparable to “Alice in Wonderland.” Mystic anime

is popular among Indonesians. We should dig the story out of ourselves. For example, my stories always begin with water. I started drawing the *ceriam* at the beginning of *Karimata*. The tale of Laosam began with *hujan-hujan* (hujan hujan is someone who plays with rainwater). I was unwell in the 1990s and couldn't draw for a long time. Then I began to construct a tale made a three-page *ceriam* on a person who made stamp prints in a muddy tiny roadway. I added a river to *Karimata*'s story after acquiring the concept from Baduy Village in Banten, West Java (Baduy people are natives who live without electricity similar to the Amish in the U.S.). I created *Ceriam Eyang Sobur* (Aspitono, et al., 2013) with my own children's stories and realistic illustrations.



Fig. 3. Toni Masdiono. *Karimata 1890*. List of characters. Creativ Media, 2019.

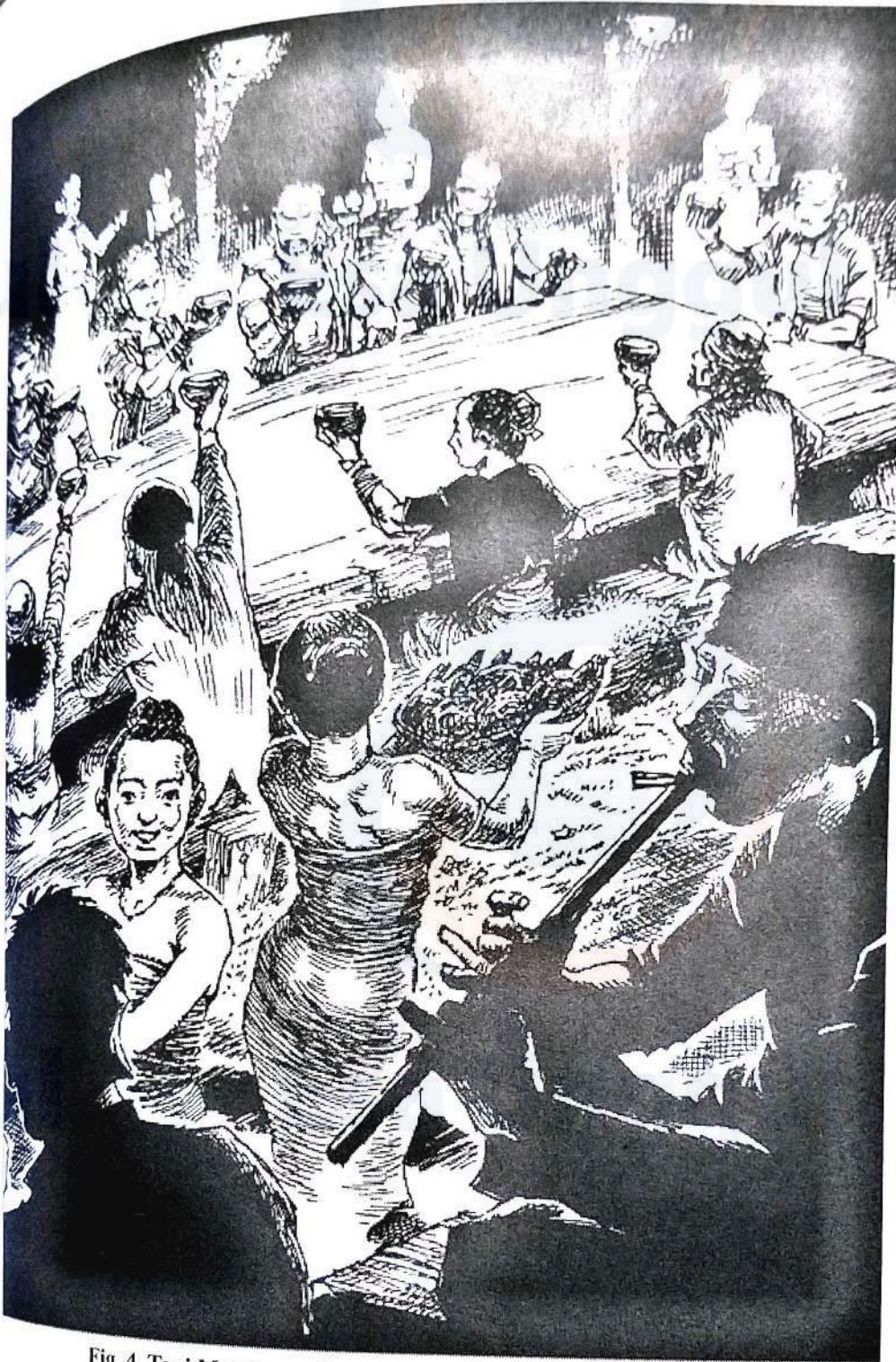


Fig. 4. Toni Masdiono. *Karimata 1890*. Creativ Media. 2019.

Despite the success of *Candy Candy* (an overseas comic), most Indonesian publishers refused to print realistic drawings for children. I told the publisher that children are open to many types of art, including realistic drawing. The publisher follows popular belief, and asks the comic artists to simplify their drawing. Many Indonesian comic artists, such as Troy TS, are also painters. Teguh Santosa's hatching has influenced me, and he was

an excellent illustrator, as well as a skilled draughtsman. What did I notice in Troy's drawing? When Troy creates his drawing's background, he tries to convey the beauty of Indonesian landscapes and culture. I was motivated by a true story when I created *Eyang Sobur's* cergam for children.

After finishing *27.03: kisah lain dari Situ Gintung* comic novel (Rhizie and Masdiono, 2011) from Kaifa Publisher, *Karimata's* idea began. The possibilities for making cergam from the Indonesian terrain will be



Fig. 5. Toni Masdiono. *Karimata 1890*. Creativ Media. 2019.

endless. I'd like to make cergam in the style of Teguh Santosa's *Sandora* (Masdiono and Zahar, 2017), which depicts life at sea during Dutch colonial days. I admired Frank Bellamy's *Garth*, which was based on true events and fashioned into a historical epic. Teguh advised, "Incorporate historical truths into your fantasy." Teguh Santosa of Cergam Sandora is unsure about the timeline. I'm looking for the dark side of the colonial era about 1890, which I define as occurrences that never happened or are unclear.

IZ: Why did you chose the Karimata Strait, which is close to Singapore?

TM: At first, I wanted to utilize the Karimun Strait in Java, so I studied the map and saw that the Dutch had used the Karimata Strait as a major commercial route since Cheng Ho. The *Karimata's* characters do not represent a single tribe, but their names come from all throughout Indonesia. This cergam represents many different civilizations, and plurality (*kebinekaan*) is one of the story's key messages. Regardless of the fact that there are 1,340 ethnic groups in Indonesia, such as the Javanese and the Sundanese, I didn't try to sketch each one individually or even the largest groups. I only utilize a few of their emblems, including their headband and martial arts. I attempt to depict the diversity in Nusantara or Indonesia rather than promoting the identity of any particular ethnic group. I'd like to continue our drawing tradition in great detail. The terrain has changed, and the city has changed as well. I wanted to draw an Indonesian-themed comic, and I was inspired by Malaysian comic artists who kept mentioning Nusantara Comics. Actually, Indonesian territory makes up the majority of Nusantara. Unfortunately, Indonesian comic artists are increasingly emulating the styles of Japan and the United States.

We are not a particularly nautical nation, and many tribes live in mountainous areas and rarely see the sea...finally, I discovered about the image of head ties (Javanese *udeng*). From time to time, the size of the object fluctuates. During Dutch colonial times, the Karimata Strait is the busiest. Oil exploration in Sarawak had already begun at the time. The United States company had already begun to look for oil. The native war had already begun. The traders crossed the strait via Bangka Belitung on their way to Batavia (presently Jakarta).

IZ: What is the significance of silent cergam?

TM: I was invited to Singapore in December of last year. I wasn't ready and just half-finished; fortunately, I didn't teach at the university any longer. Lim Cheng Tju is a comics curator who gave me the nickname "Liquid City." Gurnity and Karimata are two characters from an art work folder that I brought to Singapore. I never sketch with text. Because Cheng Tju is familiar with the story, he advised me against using text, because the order and time

can be read. I was hesitant at first, but I eventually finished drawing *Karimata* (Zahar, *et al.*, 2022). Until now, no one has complained about the cergam without a text. I wanted to use two languages at first, but I thought it would be tough to draw with balloon words. I'll leave it up to the reader to make their own interpretations.

IZ: After *Karimata*, what are your plans?

TM: I'm going to make a tetralogy. *Laosam* is the second title. 1896. I included a timeline, but Lao Sam remains quiet in the comic. I went to Lasem, which was an important harbor during the Dutch colonial period. The living *Karimata* characters will return, but the story will begin in the middle of Java. As a result, I'm following Teguh Santosa's story.

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Iwan Zahar has been involved in art and photography. He wrote 20 photographic essays for *Kompas* newspaper from 1996 to 1999. Zahar has produced two books: *Belajar Matematikaku* (Indonesian Edition), and *Catatan Harian: Kiat Jitu Menembus New York* (Photographic Notes: The Way to New York). He is a senior lecturer in Indonesia Esa Unggul. In the past three years, he produced 18 conference papers in art, art criticism, and art education.

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