



# From manga Bible to Messiah: A pop-culture exploration of the Indonesian Christian comics

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## Abstract

*Comics culture has a long precedence in Indonesian art tradition. Earlier visual art appeared in the Hindu-Buddhist temples and in the colonial period. Once, Indonesian comics enjoyed the golden age in the 1970s and 1980s in which the comics sought inspiration from local legends and wayang themes. However, the flood of Western and Japanese comics eroded the supremacy of Indonesian comics. For the latter, it is part of the Japanophile, which later followed by Koreaphile as two global cultural forces overwhelmed Indonesia presently. Manga comics, for example, has become a dominant visual art in the comics market in Indonesia and influencing the style of Indonesian visual art production. Religion is another socio-cultural terrain affected by this cultural development. The present article is an exploration of the comics as a visual art in the religious landscape of Indonesia, especially among the Christians. Comics as the locus of the technology of enchantment renders the trace of religious shift among the average religionists. Employing visual rhetoric criticism, the article will look at the ideological and rhetorical elements of the visual production, and the cultural shifting in the Indonesian Christianity. It further touches upon the notion of cuteness (chibi) and gender as examples of religious rhetoric maintaining a certain ideological position.*

*Keywords: comics, visual art, Indonesian Christianity*

## Introduction

Comics can be seen as an end-product of print capitalism, as Ben Anderson put it.[1] It is probably true when discussing religious comics, in which it is not only disseminating text (as a visual artefact) but also creating an

“imagined visual community” through which fantasy, dream, religious self and value are projected, in the individual level and as a collective body.

The present article is an investigation of Indonesian Christian comics as an example of religious

comics. It sought to deal with the questions of (1) how Christian comics evolved into a Christian ministry? What were the social and theological conditions that allowed such development; (2) From it, what would be the shift in the Indonesian Christianity can be explained? (3) How Christian precepts encountered with the logic of popular culture, invested in the comics as a visual art and industry?

While the studies of the relationship and interaction between religion and art are legion, the examination of comics as a visual art and as a container of religious values are limited. Indeed, some studies explored the element of religiosity and/or theology in the images syntax of “general” (non-religious) comics, such as the work of Anthony Mills.[2] The work of Aruna Rao[3] and Hairus Salim, in the context of Indonesia,[4] are a few examples of the study that focused on comics that are specifically religious. The present paper is an attempt to fill the lacunae of knowledge in this territory.

Some perimeters need to be set up in order to limit the discussion. Religious comics is a category referring to a niche within comic production that the main theme is religious, be it the scriptural-inspired stories, religious sacred histories, or the stories of religious people, and the objective of it is endorsing religious values. Standing at the same terrain, hence the Christian comics is referring to the visual-

narrative works in the form of comics in which the plot of the story revolves around the values, lives, histories, religious vision, and experience of the Christians. Christianity in this regard embraced wide-ranged Christian denominations and streams, i.e. Catholicism, Protestantism, and other minor groups.

### **What is Comics?**

According to Will Eisner, comics is a sequential art.[5] Fall into this broad category were all the historical precedence of comics: Lascaux painting, panels of Egyptian hieroglyphs, pre-Columbian and Borobudur temple reliefs, Bayoux tapestry, and some others, all those testified the use of sequential images to tell story.

A quick stop at these milestones, images as the medium of religious messages, in particular the Christian tradition, which is the focus of the present discussion, has a long precedence. Since around the twelfth century, European cathedral created colourful stained glass windows, not only for accentuating the divine presence, but also a pedagogical medium for mostly illiterate parishioners.[6],[7] Those windows panels recounted the biblical and saints' stories juxtaposed one after another to give a sense of a plot of story. This materiality that incited mental processing of flowing images intensified

in the modern comic art and production.

However, at this point, a more elaborated definition is in demand, to set aside the precedence from the actual and unfolded industry. A refined definition introduced by Scott McCloud as he described comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer”.

[8] The power of this definition might be deflated before the new emergence visual presentation, among others *nomik* (novel komik, comic-novel), such as *Catatan Harian Olin* (Olin’s Diary, 2000-2005), multimedia comic, which combined images, text, audio, and even augmented reality technology, such as *Ensiklopedia Bocah Muslim* (Muslim Kids Encyclopedia, 2015), and infographical essays such as Felix Siauw’s *Khilafah: Remake*. [9] Nonetheless, in dealing with the “traditional” comics, McCloud’s definition is sufficient cf.[10]

Eisner argued that comics are a form of reading, hence fall into the clash of textuality. It is sequential and often repetitive images that also an interplay and montage of words and images, a “cross-breeding of illustration and prose ... regimens of art (e.g. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (e.g. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other”. [5].

Since comic is also a “text,” the

aesthetical interpretation and meaning production might be restricted by the cultural convention, though indeed this is also arbitrary. However, in the case of Indonesian comics in general, and Christian comics in particular, the cultural convention might determine the scope of creativity, especially to those immersed into the mainstream industry. The texture of convention might be visibly in the stereotypical presentation of female, and in the conservatism of its messages. Often, the narrative of religious figures tended to fall into what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett called, *distory*, “wherein only the best of the best, the most attractive” exemplary to be presented in. [11] Hence, not much room for critical inquiry.

The analysis of Christian comics owed from different approaches notably, the visual rhetoric criticism. Visual rhetorics studies the way images persuade the viewers. Charles Hill refined it by examining the “representational images work to influence the beliefs, attitudes, opinions – and sometimes actions – of those who view them”. [12]

## **Indonesian Comics**

Comics are also identified as graphic novels. In Indonesia once was called pictorial story (*cerita bergambar*, abbreviated as *cergam*). [13] Once comics is considered as marginal art, third-rate culture, in the orbit of pop-culture, hence “unimportant” topic for

research.[14],[15] During Sukarno's era, comics were even considered as "garbage and Western-induced poison, not at all conducive to building a national identity".[16]

Nevertheless, Indonesia has a rich history of visual culture, markedly by the present of relief in some Hindu and Buddhist temples, wayang kulit, and others.[14] However, the comics culture only appeared in the late 1920s/early 1930s and flourished between 1950s and early 1970s when the market was overrun by imported comics, notably Japanese manga. The first Indonesian comic was Put-on, the Chinese comic strip created and illustrated by Kho Wan Gie that was first published in 1931. [17]. However, the period between 1960s and 1970s is considered as the "golden age" of Indonesian comics.[16]

The expansion of comics consumption was partly explained by the presence of rental kiosks, which rented a variety of entertaining readings, including martial art novels, magazines, and etc.[14],[16] During the New Order, Indonesian comics in a sense became a space of hidden transcripts of oppressed people such as Indonesian Chinese who were stained by the failure coup of 1965. A comic artist such as Zaldy Armendaris, a Chinese, seemingly found in his romance comics, a "space" for unwarranted mourn of discrimination.[13]

The support of the government never sustained. Since 1993 at least,

the government endorsed the comics as Indonesian art in its entirety and in 1998 supported the nationwide art exhibition of comics and animation. [18] However, the support has been declining afterward.

Hikmat Darmawan, a comics observer, distinguished comics as an art activity and comics industry.[19] Indonesian comics as an art is well-established, as a fruit of a longer history of comics and visual art as earlier mentioned. But the comics industry still faces a huge challenge as the competition with the foreign translated comics remains an uphill struggle.

In the end of 1990s, some momentum gained in reclaiming Indonesian comics pride; the process undergone until the present days. Post-Suharto era opened up a range of new possibilities. John Lent registered several important developments in this regards: (1) New publishers are emerging, in several important cities such as Jakarta, Bandung, Solo, Yogyakarta, and Surabaya.[20] (2) The emergence of comic studios, comic artist communities and independent (indie) comics, and other non-mainstream actors. Indie comics provide a larger space for the artists to explore ideology, politics, and counter-culture. [21] Some of them are self-sustaining through outsourcing works. The creativity of young Indonesian comic artists is recognized. Many of them are engaging with the global comic

production such as with DC Comics. And from 1995 until the present days some local and national publishing houses supplied the market with local comics productions, hence to a degree supporting the local artists' creativity. [22] The initiatives to tip the balance against the flood of imported and translated comics remained an uphill battle however. (3) The emergence of the creation of Indonesian-style comics, with support of the large publishing house. It is marked with the popularity of local characters such as Panji Koming, Timun, Benny & Mice, and others); (4) The freedom of expression and more opportunities to publish artists' works, including through the self-publication technology; (5) The growing professionalism among the artists, including through the establishment of comics' community, associations, training schemes, conferences, and exhibitions; (6) Adaptation to the global creative industry and new media. Indonesian comic artists have all reasons to be proud of their works and the recognition of their creativity. A number of young artists involved in projects with DC Comic and Marvel. In the larger context, many of Indonesian youngsters are behind the creation of blockbuster animation movies such as Tintin (2011), and others. And (7) The emergence of female artists and writers.[16]

Additional observation however, needs to be mentioned that (8) the

emergence of new media and digital technology further enhance the comics presence through the mobile application (e.g. Webtoon by LINE), online comics, and others. An extremely famous comic's character, Si Juki (produced by Faza Ibnu Ubaidillah/Faza Meonk), initially an online comic, that later on published in books. Speaking of new media and digital technology, online comics and Webtoon are like memes, a kind of visual consumption that we can call "one-scrolled" consumption, especially when information and visual information are consolidated into smaller screens in tablet, smartphone and handphone. And "dense-condensed" kind of visual consumption, like memes.

Lastly, (9) there is a larger shift toward "visual culture" (television, visual art, etc.) in the public sphere in Indonesia,[4] "Visual language" presumably has a strong effect over the readers, compared to the oral and textual in rendering educational messages.[4] A shift from "deep readers" to "shallow readers" marked also the generational shift. The present generation is digitalized, visual and aesthetical-focused, and avid animated image consumers.

After the Indonesian television network went private in the end of the 1980s and it provided entertaining programs, the Japanese soft power of television programs, Japanese manga, and others became very influential for the new generation born in this era.[23]

This is the legacy of the next wave of Indonesian comics' art and industry that the influence felt as well in the Islamic comics. Presently, Korean soft power is increasingly felt.[24]

What is soft power? "It is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion and payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies" or "... the ability to get the outcomes you want without having to force people to change their behavior through threats or payments".[25] Nye further asserts that it is important for the present study. "... popular culture is more likely to attract people and produce soft power in the sense of preferred outcomes in situations where cultures are somewhat similar rather than widely dissimilar. ... soft power depends more than hard power upon the existence of willing interpreters and receivers. ... attraction often has a diffuse effect, creating general influence rather than producing an easily observable specific action".[25] The interpreters are also prosumers,[26] producers and consumers altogether that "active consumption as a kind of production". [27]

They are also to a degree a cultural broker, who go-between the two cultural conditions (sometimes contrast) in order to smooth the transportation of ideas, techniques, and values.[28] The most apparent of this process of adopting

soft power but at the same time transvaluation it and recontextualized it, not exclusively in the area of comics, is the phenomenon of fansubs, fanfiction, and comic independent translation by the comic fans. Fanfiction is not only an expansion of the constellation but also a new kind of entextualization to a new imaginary territory.

The power of Japanese comics style is not only appeared in the present day Indonesian comics, but also in the remaking of the celebrated Indonesian comics such as Panji Tengkorak (first published 1968) and Ramayana (first published 1950s) in the end of 1990s, in which those undergone the process of mangaization in order to compliant with the market's mood.[15]

The internal challenge encountered by local comics is tough. With reference to the earlier statements on cultural convention, a critical assessment is important to note regarding Indonesian comics in the 1990s. Noor Cholis remarked that Indonesian comics, "in the large part merely pictorial sermon ... it is full of advice on this and that. It renders black and white messages, full of superficial local fervour (semangat lokal) hence the adults felt uncomfortable and a boredom for the children".[29] He further asserted that Indonesian comics taken the theme of national heroism, folklore, and classical epic that outgrew from "[nationalistic] burden and inflexible imagination". [29] Those created a gap between the

artists and the readers. In the former days, local comics functioned to legitimate local values and pristine of the past history. The present day, comics depended almost entirely upon the readers' taste and economic power.

Another problem is the professionalism and “[nationalistic] burden and inflexible imagination”.[29] In an interview with a representative of a major publishing house, which is renowned as the largest publisher of translated comics revealed that it was very difficult to keep track with local artists as they have different understanding of professionalism. These conditions might sustain the supremacy of imported and translated comics.

### **Indonesian Christian Comics**

Most the Christian publication bodies might agree that their mission in publishing Christian materials, including comics, somehow related to the Gospel message – in what in Christian tradition is called The Great Commission (Amanat Agung). It is passages taken from the Gospel of Matthew 28:19-20:[30]

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age (New Revised Standard Version).

Undeniably, the meaning of this Commission, especially in the terms “make disciples” and “baptizing”

is interpreted in different ways by different Christian groups. By the outsiders, oftentimes these passages are the point of dispute, in particular within the discourse of “Christianization.” Indeed, some Christians embrace it as part of active missionizing activities and the target of it is Christians and non-Christians alike. The other contrast however, limits the meaning of missionizing and taking the Christian publications for the purpose of keeping the individual and community spiritual welfare. The rest dwell in between.

In this study there were twelve series of Christian comics observed, with a total of 60 volumes. To gauge the ideological position is rather complicated since there is a complexity process of publishing beyond the position taken by the publisher. For instance, *Teladan Kepemimpinan dalam Alkitab* (Biblical Leadership Model) is published by non-confessional/non-religious publisher, *Bhuana Ilmu Populer*, even though the content might reflect a progressive Protestant leaning. Another example is evidently Protestant publisher, *BPK Gunung Mulia*, published a manga Bible that seemingly took a cross-denominational/non-ideological position and focused on the delicacy of biblical imageries. A unique case was that of the comic *Kicauan Burung* (Bird's Chirping). It was a pictorial version of a Catholic priest's spiritual journey and reflection that strongly demonstrated an interfaith



sensitivity, as he embraced the spiritual experiences of the Protestants, Muslims, Chinese and Japanese religionists, Hindus, Buddhists, and Jewish. Even more wilder than that, the book is published by a Buddhist publisher.

*Perjalanan Musafir* is a translated from the famous and legendary story entitled *The Pilgrimage's Progress* that outright anti-Catholic. But the Indonesian translation removed the anti-Catholic element in the book, which probably reflecting the Indonesian relatively cordial relationship between Protestantism and Catholicism. An extreme example is one series of comics in an *Android* app that is openly published by a Jehovah's Witness' arm. Jehovah's Witness is a Christian sect that its position is at odds with mainstream Christianity, notably in the issue of the divinity of Jesus Christ and the name of God – indeed this group preferred Jehovah as the truest name of God. But the comic itself was taken from a Christian website that was not a Jehovah's Witness' and managed by a Methodist pastor and comic artist.

Indonesian Christian comics observed are mostly translated from other languages, notably English, and to lesser extent Korean and Japanese. This is presumably manifesting the market condition in which those three languages dominate the translated comic books. Five books employed Indonesian comic artists. *Perjalanan Musafir* is a translated from English version (*The*

*Pilgrimage's Progress*) but illustrated by Indonesian comic artists. The availability of foreign Christian comics is overwhelming, while translating is cost-effective rather than employing Indonesian authors and artists.

Translation is also an arena of contestation. The emergence of Japanese translation of Christian comics did not bear with it nationalistic contestation with the English translation comics. It is seemingly only an extension of Japanese soft power over Indonesian cultural engagement. However, Korean comics are another case. The Koreans' presence in Indonesia seems to be rising in the last decade. They came as investors, skilled workers, students, teachers, and Christian missionaries. If formerly, since the colonial period, Indonesia became the fertile soil for Christian missionaries from the West (Dutch, United States, British, Australian, Germany, and other Westerners), presently we testify the presence of Korean missionaries, even though the number is presumably small. The emergence of Korean publication material, including in translated comics, might be part of Korean soft power as well, notably with the popularity of K-Pop.[24] When a Korean translator interviewed with a question, why another Christian comic? She mentioned that the existing Christian comics are Western, notably American (in genre and figurine illustration). "Korean and Indonesian



are together Asians,” she concluded. This statement might be seen as an outcome of the complicated historical difficult relationship between Korean and American, with the Korean War and the element of anti-Americanism in Korean history. Observing the material itself – there are two Korean translation books – the affinity between Indonesian and Korean in fact superficial if not insubstantial. Especially in *Komik Kitab Suci* (Biblical Comics, 5 volumes), the biblical character overwhelmingly redressing into Korean culture. The Indonesian text and translation made this redressing even more contextual, hence rather seeing the contrast, it is a polyphonic work.

The tendency to translate the available foreign comic is to a degree understandable as well since Indonesian Christian market is not as promising compare to the Islam’s. But this is also the point of contrast compared to the Islamic comic publication. Since in Islam there is not much references for the religious visual art, as contending by an informer. Indonesian Muslim publishers hence to provide their own infrastructure including mobilizing the comic artists to produce specifically Muslim comics. In this regard, and considering the promising market share, Indonesian Islamic comics are more advanced than the Christians.

Indonesian Muslim comic productions apparently much more dynamic in term of visualization,

employment of technology, and further covered the wide ambient of Islamic streams. It is rather paradoxical as one of Muslim informer stated that Islamic comic learnt so much from the Christian counterpart.[31] Furthermore, Islamic comics have a strong sense of making a counter culture against the Western – sometimes it included Christians – “invasion,” and in line with that taking the lead on redefining nationalism.[4]

To know the first published Indonesian Christian comics/strip comics demands a more rigorous exploration. Among the Muslims, there were an indication of the presence of Islamic strip comics such as in the *Gema Islam* (Echo of Islam) journal, which published between 1950s and 1960s. It might be inferred that similar employment of strip comics also took place among the Christian publication. However, a firmer evidence was that in 1969 a Catholic publishing house, Jajasan Kanisius published a Christian history comic, entitled *Djalan Penuh Duri* (A Thorny Path).

One of the oldest comic publishers is *Yayasan Komunikasi Bina Kasih* (YKBK) following a principle, as rendered by a prominent Christian historian, Th. van den End of non multa, sed multum, not quantity but quality. Among those limited publications was the famous *Komik Alkitab* (Biblical Comics), as “*bacaan paling ‘ringan’*,” the most trivial.[32] *Komik Alkitab* was initially published in the 1970s and was

the most popular Christian comic.

As observed by some informers, earlier period Indonesian religious comics, tended to present religious precepts and value in the straightforward and often gross visual expression, especially in presenting religious punishment, such as hell ordeal.[19],[31],[33],[34] Some have remained in this pattern, such as two Christian comics observed, *Allah Itu Esa* (God is One, n.y.) and *Perjalanan Musafir* (2014 [1994]). Others, both the translated and local comics were transformed drastically to a more engaging visual, storyline, and contextual issues.

Comics are consumed by people from all walks of life, but Indonesian Christian comics almost exclusively targeted children and teens. Fraction of that is focusing on adults. An informer explained further this condition that Children and teens have lost contact with the bible since modernity removed the layer of communication through oral tradition of folk-taling (*mendongeng*). Contemporary Christians are trapped with time-consuming activities and have limited time to tell a bible story to their kids. On the other hand, the bible is inaccessible to the lay Christians, let alone children. Christian comics are filling this gap and becoming more familiar because of the engaging visual presentation.[35]

Indonesian Christian comics became a space of theological

contestation. Two comics, *Allah Itu Esa* (God is One) and *Manga Mesias* (Messiah) manifest a new development of Christianity in Indonesia that is a new sensitivity toward the original language of the Bible (c.q. Old Testament), the Hebrew and in a sense Judaic subculture. The former established Ten Commandments in Indonesian and Hebrew in the verso of the cover, and also a New Testament verse in Hebrew, Greek, and Indonesia. The latter employed Yeshuah as the surrogate traditional name of Jesus. This movement is a complex movement with so many branches of aspiration. The hardcore removed the usage of “Allah” (God) as justifiable Christian God’s name and adopting Judaic subculture – an echo of the struggle of Malaysian Christianity with the name of “Allah.” The two comics apparently represented a most lenient position on this, especially because the latter is a translation from Japanese, and published by a Protestant publisher in Indonesia. However, the choice is apparent in congruence with the aforementioned Christian movement. The demand to establish exclusive Christian lingos could not detach from the long and difficult relationship between Indonesian Christianity and Islam. This movement is overcoming the tension simply by barricading their identity and establishing distinct Christian lingo.[36]

Theological contestation also

appeared in the comic *Tentang Kita* (About Us). This comic is strongly critical toward Charismatic/ Pentecostal Christianity. The latter strongly emphasizes the spiritual experience and individual salvation. Even though most of the Protestantism also has an emphasis on individual salvation, Charismatic/Pentecostal boosting more on this issue. In fact, Charismatic/ Pentecostal Christianity is a complex religious system and has many branches. *Tentang Kita* apparently attacked some strands of this movement that opted for capitalism and developed what is called Prosperity Gospel (Injil Kemakmuran). The latter is very popular and marked with several megachurches in some big cities across the country.

### **On Coolness/Cuteness, Contestation of Interpretation and Gender**

Jesus Christ as the center of Christian worship for centuries portrayed as passive (not pacifist), humble, calm, harmless, as to represent God's lovingkindness. This perception gradually appeared in the Western imagination of Jesus that became a white male with blue eyes and long blonde hair, at any rate he is a cool guy. There is a process of "infantilization" of Jesus undergone.[37] These aspects have been stereotyped during the Christian history and basically put down the stern and revolutionary element

of Jesus.[38] only later recovered for instance, by Latin American teología liberación.[39]

While Jesus portrayed several comics in various ways. The most traditional "Western" Jesus was in the *Seri Komik Alkitab* (Bible Comics, ed. Oppusunggu, 1970s-2006), though in black and white drawing, the feature of Westernized Jesus is apparent.

Others have more creative, flexible, and imaginative portrayal and follow the genre of drawing. Hence, *Manga Alkitab* (Bible's Manga) illustrated by Siku, a Nigerian manga artist portraying Jesus as a combination of African features, cool, with small oriental eyes, light skin, thin and sporty. He portrayed no different from other fighters in manga stories. This familiarity indeed attracts the viewers and readers – notably the manga enthusiasts (otaku) – to pick him as one of the hero collections within the realm of manga/ comic.

However, in the ComicBible series, in one edition Jesus is miniaturized into a small man (*chibi*). He is also portrayed as a cute guy. Different from other comics, this series took entire passages of the Bible into the comic panels for dialogue and descriptive text, hence losing the element of contextualization. The paradox of cute (*kawaii*)-*chibi* character and dry textuality might be seen as the incongruence condition that presumably informed by the lack of competence on the part of the

publisher for translator and narrator, besides the religious vigor induced by the publication project. However, the function of *kawaii-chibi* style can be seen as a clever move to identify Jesus with the prospective viewers, which presumably are school-age children.

Paradigmatically speaking, both examples, demonstrated the Jesus stereotype as a cool guy shifting to a broader and varied portrayal, including the cute one, but apparently the imagination of calm, harmless Jesus remained. The “infantilization” and cuteness is not detached from the power of domesticating the character we adore.

Once *kawaii* culture in Japan became a form of rebellion since childishness as represented by the cutes was projecting the discursive time of freedom, free from distress that modern life whipped upon.[40] But in the case of the translated comic it is also to extend the stereotype of the calm and cool Jesus, though in a fun and engaging way. Indeed, Jesus was not the only character in the series, since there was also Samson, the powerful guy that also appeared in *chibi* form. Altogether, those comics provide a richer portrayal of biblical characters, though not much discrepancy over the traditional plot and perception.

A more complicated theological contestation was put forward by *Teladan Kepemimpinan dalam Alkitab: Elia* (Leadership Model: Prophet Elijah). Apparently the comic is

representing a more progressive stream of Korean Christianity. The story of the prophet Elijah/*Elia* (*Nabi Ilyas* in Islamic tradition) recorded in the book of Kings is full of wonders and supernatural episodes, such as fire stroke from heaven, prophet Elijah fed by crows and an angel, and ultimately he never naturally died but transported alive by heavenly chariot to the heaven. The comic version in *Teladan Kepemimpinan* on the other hand attempted to smooth out by limiting the supernatural elements, and reimagining those with a more rationally acceptable taste. Of course, this move could incite debate and shake the average Christian’s faiths. The presence of the book in Indonesian shelf, possibly informed by the ignorance of the publisher/translator upon theological complication appeared in it, as justified by an informer who considered a publication of a book merely from the perspective of business plausibility.

One interesting episode is that when the prophet escaped from his enemy to the desert. In the original biblical account, there were two occasions of this, and in each prophet Elijah sustained by the crow and an angel. In *Teladan Kepemimpinan*, the two occasions combined into one and the prophet got aid from a group of travellers. Interestingly that in this part, there is a degree of justification from the Bible, especially in its original language, Hebrew. When the original

story took crow as the rescuer of the prophet, the Hebrew word for “crow” is ברע (‘-r-b, as Hebrew like Arabic are consonantal language). Fascinatingly, the Hebrew for “the Arabs” is also ברע. As Hebrew (and also Arabic) produced meaning through the additional vowels over the same consonants hence “crow” and “Arabs” all depended upon the variation of vowels: ‘*orbim* (crows), and ‘*arabim* (the Arabs). Hence, in the comic it is justifiable to take account of the travellers (who could easily have related to “the Arabs”) as the helpers for the prophet over the traditional plot, which took the crows.

Most of the Christian comics observed, do not much pay attention on gender position and role, as those taking the stereotypical position of woman. But there is an exception in *Komik Kitab Suci* (Biblical Comics). Especially in the volume 1 on the story of Adam and Eve (Fig. 1), and volume 3 on the woman judge, Deborah (Fig. 2). On the account of Adam and Eve, Eve is representing a stereotype of manipulating woman

by using her power of persuasion, her tears, to lure her husband into the forbidden activity. But interestingly the way woman manipulate is very contextual, even more powerful when the Indonesian translation brings in contemporary adage “cowok itu nurut ceweknya” (“a boy obeyed his girlfriend”). While the portrayal of Eve as the primary seducer, a stereotype that has been prolonged since ancient times, but even powerfully endorsed in medieval Christianity, in the form of discrimination, entextualized in the comic, hence give multiple possibility of interpretations. Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs argued that a process of entextualization, i.e. detachment, removal, and placement “of this verbal discourse/text are a performance that is an act of control and an execution of power”. [4] Indeed, it is possible to interpret it as just another derogatory against the woman, but it was not a straightforward stereotyping. There was a complex space of negotiation, a space in the sense of Bourdieuan “field”. [42] Since it also can be read as a control of woman over the man and also the situation, something not available in some social settings in Indonesia.

This is also the possibility of reading on the role of Deborah as a powerful judge over Israelites and over the male army. The look of unbelief of the comic character is an index of a larger debate of women’s role in leadership. Something that remained



Fig. 1. “The Falls” of Adam and Eve



Fig. 2. Deborah the Judge

relevant in Indonesian context, probably also in Korea.

## Conclusion

Indonesian Christian comics can be seen as a clue of a larger shift in Indonesian Christianity. In terms of theology, Indonesian comics portrayed mostly the traditional values, if not conservative, with the exception of *Kicauan Burung* that is very much interfaith sensitive. There are some complications as mentioned earlier. However, to gauge the significance shift requires further exploration.

Nonetheless, as (digital) media developed so drastic the fate of printed comics is at stake. Furthermore, the Christian comics have to compete with the overwhelmingly non-religious comics that flooded the market and are available easily online. This requires a more tactical approach if comics is considered an effective medium for spreading religious messages.

Regardless many people never take into account comics as a justified and serious art and communication medium, it already broadens the discourse of taste since it no longer belongs to the ruling class as once argued by Bourdieu. It might be somehow, but it is in a more complex process, and those are simply not present in the Christian comics case.

The spectre of interreligious tension between Christianity and Islam thus far not so much reflected in comics, except in a delicate way. Intrareligious tension also appeared and it demonstrated the segment of theological line that was prominent in the actual interaction.

All in all, the printed comics industry is in decline. Christian comics themselves never had a strong basis in the Christian community except in the 1980s-1990s. The acquaintance with English – not necessarily to the level of mastery – by a significant number of the younger generations



(Gen Y and Z) makes non-translated comics, be it religious or non-religious, more accessible, hence furthering the

Christian comic industry. The next hope would probably be the animated Bible and Christian stories.[]

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