

# Going Beyond Celebratory Multiculturalism *Developing a Self-Reflective Children Story Project*

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Abstract: Among the few Indonesian children stories out in the market nowadays that talk about differences and tolerance, most have not gone beyond the mere perspective of celebratory multiculturalism. In a political situation where issues of intolerance are used to win political gains, celebrating multiculturalism seems to be inadequate. As argued by most children literature scholars, children story books are strong tools to (re)build the younger generation's understanding of differences and help them to articulate ways to react toward these differences. It helps them to create new spaces in their everyday lives to be able to have an engaging conversation with those who come from a different cultural background with them. The main focus of this article is to explore how children story books in Indonesia, particularly in urban settings like Jakarta, could accommodate children's creativity and self-reflectivity in understanding differences while going beyond celebrating multiculturalism.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is experiencing multiple intolerant incidents which make a number of media claiming Indonesia to be in a “*darurat toleransi*” (emergency in terms of tolerance) condition. In March 2016, *Desk KBB Komnas HAM* conducted a research in several municipalities in Indonesia and professed that intolerant behaviours are growing rapidly in urban areas in comparison to rural areas (Putra, 2017). Some of these intolerant behaviours involve preventing minorities to do religious activities and also intimidating and forcing others to embrace particular beliefs. Another research done by the Ministry of Education and Culture from July to September 2016 in several schools in several areas in Indonesia reveals that even though the number is quite small, there are potential developments of intolerant behaviours when a number of students, teachers and even principals stated that they do not want to choose a leader from a different religion. The research was done through interviews, questionnaires, observation and focus group discussions (Suryowati, 2017).

From these research findings, we argue that the most problematic issue is how children, as the most elusive members of the society, are at risk of embodying intolerant demeanours in their everyday

lives. However, children are also the most potentially empowered group in the society as they are still in a very productive developmental stage. Despite all of these intolerant incidents in Indonesia, several grassroots movements have been done to reinstate tolerant behaviours particularly for the younger generation. For example, *Komunitas Bhinneka*, based on their slogan “*Beda itu Biasa*” (being different is ordinary), has been conducting study tours for High School, Junior High School and Elementary School students to visit a number of house of worships (Viranda, 2017). In every visit, there are usually students from several schools and they will visit 5 to 6 churches, mosques, temples or monasteries in the *Jabodetabek* area. Students are given the opportunity to go to every nook and cranny and ask any questions they would like to ask to the priest or other religious leaders. At the end of the study tour, students are asked to reflect on their experiences orally or by drawing some pictures.

By exposing children to different cultures, they are able to reflectively and actively make meaning out the multicultural environments they have in their day-to-day activities and one way to do this is through literature, particularly children storybooks. A number of scholars, such as Perini (2002), have argued that children, who are exposed to multicultural

storybooks, seemed to have the most affirmative attitudes towards differences. Therefore, the main focus of this article is to explore how children story books in Indonesia, particularly in urban settings like Jakarta, could create new spaces for children to creatively and reflexively make use of these existing storybooks in understanding differences while going beyond celebrating multiculturalism. This article aims to problematize and examine the reflective process from our preliminary research and a community service program we are currently doing in order to propose the most effective narrative strategies and story-telling methods, which would be constructive tools for Indonesian children literature practitioners and scholars.

## 2 RESEARCH METHOD

Our preliminary research was done from May to August 2017 by analysing a wide range of children storybook in Indonesia in order to see the narrative formulation or strategies used by authors in articulating issues of multiculturalism. Afterward, based on our research findings, we are compiling materials to make a module to be applied in our community service program in late 2017. This article consists of the results of our early research and how we reflect on the process of compiling the module in order to capitalize on accessible children story books in Indonesia.

## 3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Contextualizing Multiculturalism in Indonesia

The discussion about multiculturalism in Indonesia is also very contextual because it has different ideological implications. Budianta (2014) argues that multiculturalism as a slogan is insufficient to address the complexity of cultural diversity in Indonesia. In her work, she argues that, multiculturalism in Indonesia has gone through numerous stages and milestones; however, in most cases, it only focuses on recognizing differences without any substantial ground works.

“...Indonesia as a nation needs to go beyond recognition and celebration of cultural identities, and do ground work in addressing adverse social inequality, and in rebuilding the goals and foundation of nationhood. Only in that way it can survive the trap of

identity politics and emerge as a global player in today’s growingly inter-dependent world.” (p.188)

The main problem is the unequal distribution of resources which, according to Budianta, could be the cracking base of diversity and complications of intolerance in Indonesia. In order to truly embody multiculturalism, the goals and foundations of the nation-building process need to be re-established and she offers a comprehensive trajectory of Indonesian history in terms of multiculturalism.

Throughout its history in Indonesia, Budianta explains that multiculturalism has always been an organic feature in the society’s development as migrations; settlements and cultural assimilation of peoples of diverse backgrounds in the islands are the roots of Indonesian nation-state. Unfortunately, in its development, the main issue in managing diversity in Indonesia is the dichotomy of us (natives of the land (*pribumi*)) and them (the newly arrived “others” or *pendatang*). The main premise is the ownership of the country or particular region. This is in contradiction with the actual history of Indonesia in which the process of identity formation is multi-dimensional. For instance, during the pre-colonial times, there had been various cross-cultural exchanges. Borobudur temple is an evidence of how religions coexisted peacefully because it was finished during King Rakai Pikatan, a Hindu King’s reign, who was married to Pramodawardhani, a Buddhist queen. Furthermore, when Islam was first introduced in Java, it absorbed the Hindu-Buddhist cultural elements reflecting the implication of religion as one aspect of cultural diversity.

During the Dutch colonization, diversity was utilized as a colonial strategy with their *divide et impera* policy, which later on caused a significant withdraw on how Indonesians perceive diversity. In order to ensure the monopoly of the market, during the colonization era, different groups assigned different roles in which the Chinese was given the power and serve as economic intermediaries. In the city, such as Batavia, the society was segregated according to ethnic/racial lines, for instance by assigning a Chinese captain to control and making sure the member of the community obtain permits just to travel beyond their quarters. After independence in 1945, the main goal was to unify the country and Pancasila (five guiding principle of the nation). The country’s slogan, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, written under the symbol of *Garuda Pancasila*, was actually taken from a Javanese manuscript called *Sutasoma* written during Majapahit Empire, which adopted the philosophy of religious tolerance between Buddhism

and Shivaism. However, as explained earlier, the balance between unity and diversity has always been problematic in Indonesia due to the imbalanced distribution of power, the control of the central government and dissemination of resources. Budianta (2014) argues that the absence of State in weak governance of cultural diversity is the reason why in Indonesia there will always be a limit of multicultural tolerance.

We started this article by providing two research results done by two state institutions, the Ministry of Education and Culture and Komans HAM (Indonesian Commission of Human Rights). Both research findings reveal this bleak situation in the discussion of multiculturalism in Indonesia urging scholars, practitioners and most importantly policy makers to produce radical or at least speedy solutions in dealing with this problem. As a team of scholars and practitioners who are most concerned on how this problem affect the younger generation in Indonesia, we have conducted a preliminary research on existing and accessible story books for children in Indonesia. The aim is to map out existing children story books and synthesize what strategies they used in articulating differences and inviting their readers to be tolerant to others.

### 3.2 Indonesian Children Storybook: Articulating Multiculturalism

Indonesian multiculturalism needs to go beyond recognition and celebration of differences. Based on this premise, this article explores potential strategies that could utilize children story books to invite children in actively understanding how differences should not be a reason to develop intolerant behaviour. One of the first steps to be done is to build awareness of the diversity by providing knowledge about different cultures not superficially or even in a stereotypical manner. After the phase of recognizing differences, the next step is to concede that every group has its own cultural values that should not be imposed to other groups in other words differences should be recognized, respected and embraced with active agency. In mapping out the story books in Indonesia, this section will look at the narrative strategies used in each book and how it invites children to learn about other cultures in the spirit of solidarity.

#### 3.2.1 Selecting Multicultural Story Books

Salas, Lucido and Canales (2002) defines multiculturalism literature as "...literature about

people who are considered outside of the mainstream of society and have been in some manner marginalized" (3). Groups of marginalized people include diverse cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. However, even though the selected books are telling stories about different cultures, there is always the threat that they narrations or characters that propagate stereotypes. It is essential to select quality multicultural children's storybooks which portray "...accurate and authentic portrayals of cultural groups." (4)

Our research findings show that in Indonesia, there have not been a lot books carrying the same criteria explained in the earlier paragraph. From what we have found, there are two categorizations: books focusing on cultures from fairly unrecognized backgrounds (mostly are from the Eastern part of Indonesia) and books which symbolically talk about differences without any references to a particular culture. SLJ's Reviewer Editors (2014) have categorized the first type of multicultural storybooks as "culturally specific" books, consisting of books that "illuminate the experience of growing up a member of a particular, non-white cultural group" (1). There are "culturally generic/neutral" books "...in which the main character(s) "just happen" to be a member of a non-white, non-mainstream cultural group. These stories, rather than informing readers about individual cultures, emphasize cultural common ground." (3). In our findings, there are books that we were not really able to categorize as "culturally generic/neutral;" therefore, we categorize them as books with symbolical narrative strategies as they convey differences in multi-layered meaning making processes.

Examples of culturally specific Indonesian children story books are some books published by *Bhuana Ilmu Populer*, particularly the two titles: *Kisah dari Alor* (Stories from Alor) and *Kisah dari Bangai* (Stories from Bangai) which were published in 2017. These two books are a part of a project, *Lintas Nusantara*, which introduces Indonesian children to local cultures from other parts of Indonesia, which they have never been exposed to. *Kisah dari Alor* is written by Hanny Kusumawati (illustrator: Thalia Lembong) and tells the story of Alor, a small island in Nusa Tenggara Timur (Eastern Indonesia). The first page of the story book has the map of Alor, which works as an introduction to this small island. There are five short stories that bring the readers to get to know children in Alor and their everyday lives. The stories expose to readers a culture that they might not have known before reading this story book. Another story book, *Kisah dari Bangai*,

written by Devi Dwi Kurniawati, et.al. (Illustrator: Khalida Hanum), shares similar narrative strategies focusing on exposing underexplored cultures from Bangai (in Sulawesi, also in the Eastern Part of Indonesia). The storytellers in these books are children from Bangai emphasizing authentic cultural experiences as one of the criteria of multicultural story books. Besides story books from Bhuana Ilmu Populer publisher and Lintas Nusantara project, there are other books that also utilize the culturally specific narrative strategy. *Ataturi, Si Prajurit Tepuk Tangan*, written by Sri Widiyastuti (illustrator: Stella Ernes), tells the story of Ataturi, a son of the chief of Asmat tribe in Papua and his adventures in hunting. In our analysis of this story book, we uncover that through the character of Ataturi, readers are invited to see how even though he is different in skin color, the clothes he wears and his life style, and he is just a child like the readers with many similar struggles in his everyday lives.

*Yayasan Litara*, a non-profit organization working on education and children literacy, has also published culturally specific children story books which embody similar narrative strategies. In an article written by Jayalaksana (2017), it is explained that the story books *Litara* publishes aim to explore local cultures in which they expect children who read their published books to be social agents that change the multicultural landscape in Indonesia. So far, this foundation has published 16 children books that entail local culture elements. Some of the titles are *Barong Kecil* (about the culture of *Reog* from Ponorogo), *Di Mana Songket Kakak* (local culture from Palembang), *Jangan Sedih, Bujang* (local culture from Jambi), *Mandala* (local culture from Pulau Sumbawa) and *Cap Gomeh* (Chinese Indonesians culture), which has been selected as the core story book for our Self-Reflective children Story Book Project (to be elaborated in the next subsection).

Other books are not as specific in determining the types of cultures that are being represented, such as the book *Ya Kami Berbeda*, which is written by Asa (illustrator: Evi Shelvia) and published by Aksa Bersama Pustaka. This story books actually invites readers to look at differences unlike the previous story books. The main character is depicted as a child with different hobbies in comparison with his friends. Even though the story line is simple, there is an idea that for children, they do not really care about social and cultural backgrounds. They only see differences when their friend has a different hobby from them and not their skin colour. This is a similar premise with the story book *Tetap Teman meski Beda: Kumpulan Cerita Indahnya Perbedaan* (Still Friends Even

Though We're Different: A Collection of Stories about Differences) by Nurul Hidayati which was published Tiga Serangkai in 2015. In 10 short stories, a variety of differences are discussed, such as physical, social class, learning ability, taste in food, habits or physical ability (disability). However, the story book does not explicitly pinpoint these differences. For example, in a short story "*Dia Mudah Membaca, Aku Sulit Membaca*" or "She Can Read Effortlessly, I Cannot Read Effortlessly," instead of using medical words such as "autism." In these books. Words and illustrations complement each other and could be powerful tools as children are able to not only read but also see representations of "other" children/people.

### 3.2.2 Emphasis on Similarities, Exposure to "Other" Cultures and Deconstructing Stereotypes

Based on previous research, one strategy that is used to increase awareness of differences in children story book or literature is by emphasizing on similarities. Cai (2002) has done a number of research and conclude that "... if people can appreciate their common bonds (goals, dreams, desires, needs, feelings, and challenges), it is believed that they will come to celebrate their differences" (120). By emphasizing on "human commonalities," these books reflect that in spite of the differences, human beings have more similarities and by understanding and respecting these similarities, differences are celebrated and embraced.

In the selected book for our early stage of community service project, *Cap Go Meh* (2014), the difference between the main characters' identity, Nisa and Lili, are signified through their clothes (Nisa is wearing hijab, Lili is wearing Cheongsam). Their physical depiction is also emphasized as Nisa is illustrated as a young girl with round eyes while Lili has more oval and narrow eyes. However, the whole basis of the story is about how similar they are even though they have different cultural backgrounds. Food, as reflected by the title, is a symbol of similar cultural element. *Lontong Cap Gomeh*, which is more known as food coming from the Chinese Indonesian traditions, is shown as a typical meal during the Ied celebration in Nisa's hometown even though she is not Chinese Indonesians. The story ends with this statement: "*Imlek atau lebaran, makanan favorit kita ternyata sama*" or "Imlek or Ied, our favourite food is similar." The word "similar" is written in large fonts which reflect how the story book emphasizes on similarities between the different characters.

Scholars have also thrown words of caution in this narrative strategy of emphasizing similarities to build solidarity because it also has several limitations. Cai (2002) explains that if the story book only focuses on similarities, the recognition of differences is merely a superficial one and does not explore the complexity of the multicultural issue. For instance, it would deduct the capacity to disassemble the stereotypes, bias and prejudices that are potentially creating conflicts. Furthermore, understanding similarities does not mean that we are able to cross or overcome cultural barriers. This strategy tends to oversimplify the struggle of crossing cultural borders or depict the process of overcoming cultural differences as an easy thing.

What differentiate *Cap Go Meh* (2014) with the other story books is mostly because it is telling the story of Chinese Indonesians culture, a minority culture which has gone through a systematic discrimination during the New Order Era. *Cap Go Meh* uses the third person point of view (omniscient) that benefits the narration. The point of view provides an equivalent in the exposition of each culture that is being narrated: Nisa and Lili's cultural backgrounds even though the story book clearly tries to emphasize more on Lili's stories. Minority cultures, which have been forced to assimilate into the majority culture or have been less-represented, in this story book, are represented in the same intensity or even more in comparison to the majority culture. The explanation about Imlek has more proportion in comparison to the explanation about Ied. For instance, the cultural symbols of Chinese Indonesian traditions are not only mentioned in the text but also carefully illustrated. As argued by Cai (2002), "... the priority is for the mainstream culture to get connected to the parallel cultures, because children from parallel cultures have been, and still are, victims to alienation in an educational system dominated by the mainstream culture." (119) If the exposure to Chinese Indonesians culture, in their daily lives, is limited or perhaps is not as visually detailed, this story book helps the readers to recognize, celebrate and respect these cultural symbols.

Besides emphasizing on similarities and exposing to "other" culture, the selected multicultural story book also has to deconstruct stereotypes and present cross-group images. In multiple forms of media, minority (and sometimes majority) characters are still depicted in negative stereotypes simplifying the complexity of individuals. A number of researches have been done in establishing how to do interventions or what kind of practices we can do to improve intercultural relations among children. One

important message that children need to get is how they could identify with different group of people with different cultures in order to bring about changes in their attitude. Story books need make positive connections across ethnic, racial, religious, social class and also gender differences. If this is absent, story books are sending the message that children should only play with other children who come from similar cultural backgrounds. Aronson and O'Brien (2014) explain that the inclusion of minority images does not encourage cross-group play.

In their study, they investigate how children react to cross-cultural portrayal in picture books. There were two groups and the first one was read books that portray stories of children having fun while playing together and they come from different racial background. Meanwhile, the other group was read the same story but the characters are from similar racial backgrounds. After the study ends in a six week period, research findings reveal that those in the first group reflect a more comfortable interest to play across racial differences in comparison to the second group. It suggest an effective cross-group story book must represent children who are identifiably different from each other engaging in normal, everyday activities that readers can relate to, such as playing games and having fun.

The selected book, *Cap Go Meh*, embodies these criteria in which the theme is relevant to the readers' everyday activities, a religious holiday. The story book contains sufficient cultural elements to enable readers to unswervingly obtain new cultural knowledge and increase recognition, understanding and respect. It also allows reader to learn to appreciate the minority culture, in this case Chinese Indonesians and the depiction of Lily is positive and simple yet not simplified enough that reduces her individual characteristics. The illustration also reflects "authentic" portrayals of physical features of minority groups and depicts details of their culture (Wan, 2006). Most importantly, the strong illustration and story line open possibilities for readers to do creative and active activities or projects, such as annotating, naming the characters, drawing or painting, role-playing or creative writing. These multiple activities and perhaps other visual tasks allow children to use their creative and imaginative tools to represent and make sense of their own multicultural experiences and they could link them to their reading of the story book.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Research findings reveal that every story book has its own potential in building recognition of differences and celebration of tolerant behaviours. Some books use the strategy to emphasis on similarities while portraying differences. Other books are highlighting the exposition of minority cultures to ignite respect and increase solidarity. From the story books that have been published in recent times in Indonesia, the book *Cap Go Meh* (2014) was chosen to be the fundamental book in the Self-Reflective Children Story Book Project because it fits the criteria of a multicultural story book utilizing both illustration (visual) and text in conveying its multicultural themes.

By selecting a text depicting a minority culture which has been marginalized or being less-represented, the project aims to help readers to go beyond the surface and form a relationship with the depicted culture. First and foremost, the text and the series of activities in the module are expected to disassemble negative stereotypes in the mainstream and dominant representations. Therefore, these stereotypes are no longer considered as “authentic” representation of the minority culture opening new spaces for dialogs to nourish ways of respecting and understanding one another. For these children, as they read and interact with *Cap Go Meh*, they are exploring the way they could see “others and be seen by “others” and at the same time using their own words, through the activities of annotating, naming and predicting, to reconstruct pre-existing discourses of minority culture.

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