Lines of Meaning

Three calligraphic paintings by Didin Sirojuddin

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Artikel ini menganalisis tema teks dan gambar tiga lukisan Didin Sirojuddin. Tujuannya adalah untuk memperlihatkan kompleksitas antarhubungan antara elemen yang tertulis dan terlukis dalam karya tersebut dan tataran pengertian rasional dan spiritual bagi pembaca serta penikmat. Empat aspek lukisan dipilih untuk analisis, yaitu unsur pokok, tema teks, gambar visual, dan cahaya.

Kata kunci: lukisan kaligrafi, ekspresi kreatif, ikonografi, Al-Qur'an, Didin Sirojuddin.

This article analyses textual themes and images in three paintings by Didin Sirojuddin. The aim is to show the complex interrelationship between the written and painted elements of the works and the levels of rational and spiritual insight possible for the reader-viewers. Four aspects of the paintings have been selected for analysis: constituent elements; textual themes; visual images; and light.

Key words: calligraphic painting, Al-Qur'an, creative expression, trigger images, iconography, Didin Sirojuddin.

> "Islam's concentration on geometric patterns draws attention away from the representational world to one of pure forms, poised tensions and dynamic equilibrium, giving structural insight into the workings of the inner self and their reflection in the universe".[1]

Introduction

Calligraphic painting is a relatively new form of Islamic art in Indonesia. From rather hesitant beginnings in the 1970s it flowered during the 1990s culminating in highly successful exhibitions such as Festival Istiqlal I and II.[2] The excellent catalogue of an

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[1] Keith Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach*, London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., reprinted 1999, p.8. I thank Jane Ahlquist for providing me with a copy.

[2] See for example Kenneth M. George, *Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld*, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

exhibition, entitled *Dari Tulis ke Lukis* (From Writing to Painting) at Bayt al-Qur'an & Museum Istiqlal (Jakarta) between December 2010 and March 2011, provides more recent examples.[3] Paintings which focus on a written text, in this case the Holy Qur'an, are challenging for critics to describe. This article argues that to do justice to the complexity of the levels of representation in this kind of religious expression requires several steps of analysis. Recognising that most Muslims aim to interiorise the divine words of the Qur'an, the article also argues that the dual mediums of words and images in calligraphic paintings enrich the possibilities for creating "lines of meaning" for the reader-viewer to connect with, remember, and assist them to absorb the revelations of God into their own spiritual being.[4]

Islamic calligraphy is expressed as a balance between the circle (or point) and lines which intersect the circle. This article will use the concept of "intersection" to outline some of the (inter-) relationships between Islam, personal piety and artistic expression. An "intersection" is a point where lines connect at the same point. It is appropriate in the context of Islam and Islamic art for two reasons. First, because it is a term in geometry – the underpinning principle of Arabic calligraphy – where the technical meaning is "to have one or more points in common". Second, because Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, has a significant root *ʻ q d* , whose range of meanings extends the concept of "intersection" (Arabic *maʻqid*) and "knotting', "tying," "interlinking" into Islamic theology. Derived forms like *ʻaqida* and *iʻtiqad* mean "doctrine", "faith", "belief," "conviction".[5] Another derivative, *ʻuqda*, means "contract" or "knot" – in the sense of bringing various elements together. Thus a knot, in English and Arabic, is a point of intersection where two or more inputs are tied together and form a new, integrated connection. The outer manifestation of the knot is visible and obvious. However, the inner surfaces, which form the core and

[3] *Dari Tulis ke Lukis: Pameran Kaligrafi Islam, 7 Desember 2010-31 Maret 2011*, Bayt Al-Qur'an & Museum Istiqlal, 2010.

[4] Anna M. Gade, *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur'an in Indonesia*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004 is a thought-provoking study of this phenomenon.

[5] Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, (ed. J.Milton Cowan), Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1966, pp.628-29.

essential part of the knot, are invisible and the exact nature of the interior of the knot has to be imagined. Both Arabic and English recognise that "complexity" is an essential element in the concept of "tying", or "intersecting" as is evident in phrases like "a knotty problem."

We will continue exploring the possibilities of "intersections" and "knots" as ways of conceptualising relationships in later sections of this article. Before we can do this we need to describe the three calligraphic paintings of Drs. H. Didin Sirojuddin AR which have inspired this study. Sirojuddin has devoted his life to developing the study of Islamic calligraphy in Indonesia. An internationally recognised calligrapher, he established an institute for the teaching of calligraphy in 1985 (Lembaga Kaligrafi Al-Qur'an – Lemka) and in 1998 was able to found Pesantren Kaligrafi Al-Qur'an Lemka, a college in Sukabumi with recognised courses for full and part-time students. His calligraphic paintings have been shown nationally and internationally and he takes pride in the achievements of his many students.[6]

Three Radiant Circles

Among the works prepared by Sirojuddin in 2001 are three paintings which he created as a set. They were exhibited in 2003 and 2005 in Jakarta.[7] In 2007 Sirojuddin presented them as a gift to MB Hooker when he and the author visited Pesantren Kaligrafi Al-Qur'an LEMKA, in Sukabumi, West Java. The paintings were intended to be hung in the following order: *Basmalah II* on the right hand side, then *Kuasa Sang Maharaja*, with *Perisai Iman via Ayat Kursi* on the left hand side. The paintings were thus to be read and viewed from right to left, following the same direction as reading Arabic script.

The paintings are each the same size, 30 cm square and each features a handwritten Qur'anic verse in Arabic calligraphy. They share a similar combination of soft colours and are expressed in

[6] For more information on Sirojuddin and examples of his work see Ali Akbar, "Dari Tulis ke Lukis: Kaligrafi Islam Kontemporer", in *Dari Tulis ke Lukis: Pameran Kaligrafi Islam, 7 Desember 2010-31 Maret 2011*, Bayt Al-Qur'an & Museum Istiqlal, 2010, pp.5-9.

[7] At Hotel Grand Melia in 2003 and at Menara Kebon Sirih in 2005, information supplied to the author by Drs Sirojuddin, 21 August 2011.

mixed-media with montages of fragments of written texts. Each is signed by the painter-calligrapher (Sirojuddin AR 2001, in which the two zeros are written as dots to indicate Arabic numerals).

The following sub-sections describe and analyse the paintings in four stages, each of which goes to a deeper level of the paintings. In the first, the component elements of each painting are described. The second sub-section analyses the textual themes, while the third introduces the concept of "trigger images" and also identifyies some images which function as icons. The fourth and final sub-section briefly examines the representation of light and its spiritual effects and functions. Throughout the article we use the term "reader-viewer" to emphasise that text and image form an inextricable "knot" of meaning for the calligrapher-painter as he makes lines of meaning with his audience.

1. Component elements

True to its title, *Basmalah II* (In the name of God II), the first line of this painting is in simple black Arabic calligraphy which reads, "*Bismillāh ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm*" (In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful).[8] The word "Allah" is written in outsize script so that it dominates the whole painting and it is balanced on the upper circumference of a large circle whose lower edge exceeds the boundary of the painting. The completion of the circle's circumference must be done in the mind of the reader-viewer.

Within the circle is a montage of eight (possibly nine) written fragments, in different scripts and languages, including Indonesian and English. The latter two are in printed romanised script, rather

[8] English translations are from Abdallah Yousuf Ali, *The Glorious Kur'an*.

than handwritten calligraphy. The main block of text in the circle has the appearance of Arabic script but is challenging for contemporary Muslims to read. There are no diacritics, that is vowels signs and dots which the majority of readers of Arabic script need to identify individual letters. This is the clue that the script, with its characteristically stretched horizontal lines, is a form of ancient Kufic script, the script used to write the earliest versions of the Qur'an.[9]

Basmalah II

[9] For examples see Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2006, p.15, Titus Burckardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, Westerham, Kent: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976, plate 23 p.51 and D. Sirojuddin, *Koleksi Karya Master Kaligrafi Islam*, Jakarta: Darul Ulum Press, 2007, pp. 409-414, especially p.453.

Unable to understand the meaning of the ancient Kufic extract of text, the reader is drawn to fragments of text around the block of Kufic letters. Bordering the left hand side of the Kufic letters is a fragment of very legible, Arabic calligraphy in clear Naskh (Indonesian Naskhi) style calligraphy.[10] The full use of diacritics (including vowels points) and the inclusion of the numerals "11" in a small raised circle suggest this is an extract from the Qur'an. It is a portion of Q.S. Yasin/36: 10-11, a passage commonly recited to comfort those who are approaching death and by Indonesian Muslims on Thursday nights to protect them during the week to come. The extract in the painting is in the form of a fragment of text and is incomplete but there are sufficient words to show it is a fragment of verses 9 to 15 and thus has some words from each of those verses. An English translation of the core sections reads:

(Verse 10) *The same is it to them/ Whether thou admonish them/ Or thou do not admonish/ Them: they will not believe./* (Verse11) *Thou canst but admonish/ Such a one as follows/ The Message and fears/ The (Lord) Most gracious unseen:/ Give such a one therefore,/ Good tidings of Forgiveness/ And a reward most generous./* (Verse 12) *Verily We shall give life/ To the dead and We record/ That which they send before/ And that which they leave/ Behind, and of all things/ Have We taken account/ In a clear Book (Of evidence).*[11]

Balancing the verses from Q.S. Yasin, on the right hand side of the block of ancient Kufic script, is a fragment of printed text in romanised Indonesian. It is also incomplete but the words that are legible indicate it is part of a quotation from Ibnu Abbas. He is recounting the words of the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. concerning fear on the Day of Judgement and the comforting response of the Angel Al Farah, who says there is no need to be afraid. The text is too fragmentary to extract further meaning. Two lines of printed English text are superimposed on the end of this Hadith. Although the English fragment is incomplete, the reader can clearly see the words "the very fear of *Allah*" as if these words reinforce some of the meaning of the Hadith. Below the English are two lines of

[10] For examples see D. Sirojuddin, *Koleksi Karya Master*, pp. 3-4 and following pages, where he explains that the clear and flowing Naskh style replaced ancient Kufic as the preferred style for daily writing and remains the preferred style for teaching beginners.

[11] Abdallah Yousuf Ali, *The Glorious Kur'an*, pp.1170-1172.

clearly written Arabic script. In English the lines read, "in the laws of sharia and the problems concerning the use of reasoning based on legal sources (*ijtihadiyah*), the scholars of substantive law (*ahli'l-furu'*)…".[12]

Diagonally opposite the fragment about legal scholars, in small-sized script placed above the Qur'anic verses from the Yasin Chapter, is a montage of three or four interposed textual fragments. The top-most fragment is five partial lines of printed Indonesian whose meaning is unclear because too many of the connecting words are missing. Interposed with the Indonesian are three partial lines of printed English in which the words "Gabriel Baer"; "the Israel Oriental Society);" and "Some aspects of the Ottoman Fetwa" are legible but make no coherent meaning. Directly below is a thin thread of tiny Arabic script, in which the date (in Arabic numerals) 1979 is the only distinct feature. The final section in this assemblage of textual fragments is two incomplete lines of clearly written Arabic script. Their meaning is fragmentary (the gaps indicated with dots) , but when translated into English includes the following: "…[among] some of the expert [scholars] in independent legal reasoning and *qiyas* are those who permit … they have the principles of *sharia* concerning what is permitted and what is not permitted they begin to use independent legal reasoning…".

We move now to a description of elements in the next painting, the central one in the trio painted by Sirojuddin. The second of the set of three paintings has an Indonesian title *Kuasa Sang Maharaja* (The Power of the Mighty Ruler). The focus of the painting is again a golden circle surrounded by a halo of golden light. The lower circumference of the circle in this painting is complete, but the upper one is hidden by a broad band or border of textual fragments. As in the first painting, the circle encloses a Qur'anic verse, but in this painting the clear and very legible Naskh script (rather than archaic Kufic) is used for the verse. It is from Q.S. Ali 'Imran/3:26 and translated into English it reads:

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[12] "Literally signifying 'branches', the term *furu'* eloquently expresses the relationship between legal theory and substantive law", Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University press, 2003, p. 153.

[Say: "O God!/ Lord of Power (and Rule),]/ Thou givest Power/ To whom Thou pleasest,/ And Thou strippest off Power/ From whom Thou pleasest:/ Thou enduest with honour/ Whom Thou pleasest,/ And Thou bringest low/ Whom Thou pleasest:/ In Thy hand is all Good./ Verily, over all things/ Thou has power."

Kuasa Sang Maharaja

The lower circumference of the golden circle is penetrated by two lines of strong and arresting Arabic script, the first is thick letters which read *Allāhumma* (O God) and the second is a set of tubular letters, whose space is not filled with ink, reading "*Mālik al-Mulk*" (Lord of Power). Both sets of letters rest on pillars (or a cube) of intense black, which will be described below.

The border which runs across the upper art of the painting contains three fragments of text in Arabic calligraphy (of various

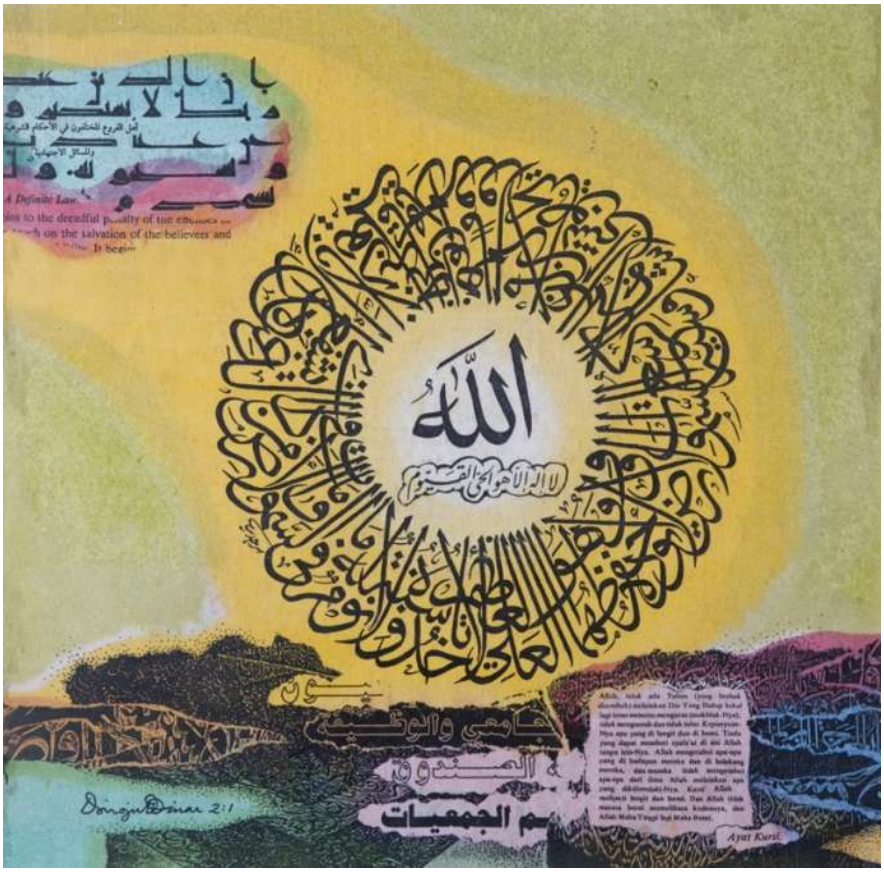
styles), too fragmented to be understood, although in one fragment the Arabic numerals 2510487 stand out clearly. One piece of text in English is easy to read and includes the words "'Arafah is the most important part…" and "…prophet said "pilgrimage is 'Arafah". One small piece of Indonesian text is too disjointed to understand, but next to it is the word "SCRIPT" in upper case, standing out boldly against a black background.

Another border composed of textual fragments runs across the bottom of the painting and provides the foundation for three black (or one large?) cubic structure(s) which seems to rise out of the textual fragments. There are eight pieces of text in a variety of Arabic scripts, in romanised Indonesian, and in English. The Arabic numerals for the number 1989 and the name "Muhammad 'Abdul…" are clearly visible in one of the fragments. In the only fragment of text in English are the words "…toe or finger nails, covering…," "*tawaf*" [in italics], "Stone" and "seven times". The easy to read printed Indonesian text is almost complete and so is easy to understand. It is an Indonesian translation of the Qur'anic verse written in Arabic in the golden circle above.

The third and final painting in the set is entitled *Perisai Iman via Ayat Kursi* (Shield of Faith through the Verse of the Throne). An intricately calligraphed circle in Thuluth (Indonesian Ṡuluṡ) script dominates the painting. The word "Allah", in thick black script is placed in the centre of the circle of calligraphy and at the heart of the painting. This is the first word of the Qur'anic verse inscribed around it. The verse is taken from Q.S. al-Baqarah/2:255 and Muslims refer to it as "Throne Verse". In a band of clouds below "Allah," are the Arabic words "*Lā ilāha illā Huwa*" (there is no god but He), the words which complete the first line of "The Throne Verse".

Translated into English, the verse reads:

God! There is no god/ But He – the Living./ The Self-subsisting, Eternal./ No slumber can seize Him/ Nor sleep. His are all things/ In the heavens and on earth./ Who is there can intercede/ In His presence except/ As He permitteth? He knoweth/ What (appeareth to His creatures/ As) Before or After/ Or Behind them./ Nor shall they compass/ Aught of His knowledge/ Except as He willeth./ His Throne doth extend/ Over the heavens/ And the earth, and He feeleth/ No fatigue in guarding/ And preserving them/ For He is the Most High,/ The Supreme (in glory).



Perisai Iman via Ayat Kursi

Beneath the circle is a band of textual fragments. One section immediately below the central circle of the Throne Verse has three partial lines of text in a modern form of Kufic script.[13] Reading from the top line to the lower lines, the words have the following English meanings: "university and lesson"; "pay office/funding body"; "associations/societies". Although these words are legible and easy to read in Arabic, they make no sense as isolated words.

In contrast to this disjointed text is the neat square of printed Indonesian placed next to it. The Indonesian is a translation of most

[13] For further examples of this type of Kufic script see Sirojuddin, *Koleksi Karya Master*, p.481 and following pages which give examples taken from magazines and newspapers published in the Middle East.

of the Throne Verse, with its title "Ayat Kursi" appended at the end.

The last textual fragments in this painting are placed in the upper left section and are composed of five lines of ancient Kufic with two lines of modern Arabic script placed between them with two and a half lines of printed English. Several of the words in the lines of modern Arabic script are the same as those in the fragment in the first painting, *Basmalah II*, (lower right hand corner). The fragment in the *Bamalah II* can be translated as: "in the laws of sharia and the problems concerning the use of reasoning based on legal sources (*ijtihādiyah*), the scholars of substantive law (*ahl al-furū'*)…". The fragment in this third painting reads: "…the scholars of substantive law (*ahl al-furū'*) have differing opinions about the laws of sharia and issues concerning the use of reasoning based on legal sources (*ijtihādiyah*)…". These are the same words but in a different order. The lines of printed English are disjointed and read, "*A Definite Law*…. point to the dreadful penalty of the enemies… touch on the salvation of the believers and… It begins…".

This concludes the description of the component elements in the paintings: the extracts from the Holy Qur'an, the words (where legible) in the textual fragments, the structure of the forms in the paintings (circles, cubes), and the borders or bands across the upper and lower sections of the paintings' surface. We now move to a consideration of the meanings and themes encoded in these elements.

1. Textual themes

Each reader-viewer will respond to the themes of the Qur'anic verses in their own ways, depending on how the words of the Qur'an intersect with their own life experiences, their own needs at that moment, their own intellectual understanding of the Islamic theology, and their familiarity with interpretations (exegeses) associated with those verses. However, the calligrapher-painter chose to inscribe his paintings with verses which are familiar to nearly all Muslims because they are verses that speak of human need and are often recited to bring comfort and protection.

The "*Bismillāh ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥīm*" is technically the first verse of the first chapter of the Qur'an (Q.S. al-Fatihah/1:1) and for

that reason it is given a verse number. [14] It marks the beginning of the Holy Qur'an, is often the very first words of the Qur'an children learn to read and recite, and is recited by adults to mark the beginning of any new enterprise. Reciting these words acknowledges the awesome majesty of God and also His compassion and reminds the speaker that the outcome of any human undertaking will depend on God's will. There is also a famous Hadith which promises the calligrapher blessings when the *Basmalah* is written beautifully.[15]

The significance of the *Basmalah* is beautifully described in a saying attributed to the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib: "The whole of the Qur'an is contained in the Opening Chapter, the Opening Chapter in the *basmalah*, the *basmalah* in the *ba'*, the *ba'* in the diacritical point, …" (referring to the calligraphic dot below the first letter of *basmalah*).[16] The short phrase is thus seen by many Muslims as encapsulating the whole Qur'an, with the diacritical point of its first letter representing the centre and origin point of all circles, and thus of creation itself.

Also in this first painting are words from Q.S. Yasin/36: 10-11 which provide assurance that if a person believes God's message and tries to follow it there will be a reckoning of good and bad deeds, forgiveness, and life after death. These are the verses read to the dying. The two Qur'anic passages written in this painting are thus associated with beginnings and with endings.

The reader-viewer has to move very close to the painting to engage with the other small fragments of text. On the right hand side is the Indonesian fragment of Hadith about fear on the Day of Judgement and the Angel's reassurance that there is no need to be fearful. "Fear" is also one of the words in the tiny fragment in English. However, the last fragment in Arabic refers to the practice of specialised legal reasoning (*ijtihād*) by scholars who are expert in Islamic substantive law.

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[14] Although it begins all other chapters of the Qur'an (except the ninth), it is only given a number in the first chapter.

[15] "He who writes beautifully *Bismillah* obtains innumerable blessings", quoted in Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1970, p.3.

[16] Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, Albany: State University of New York Press,1987, p.24.

To summarise: the first painting presents two sets of very familiar Qur'anic verses about God's Compassion and about God's power to restore life after death. These verses are accompanied by small sections of other texts which refer to the fear of Judgement Day, with reassurance that fear is not necessary, and references to scholars of substantive Islamic law who practice *ijtihād*.

In the second painting, the reader-viewer focuses immediately on the Qur'anic verse Q.S. Ali 'Imran/3:26 which emphasises that God alone is responsible for the bestowing and removal of power as He is the Mightiest of the Mighty. This is reinforced by the large tubular Arabic letters which proclaim "Lord of Power – Indonesia: pemilik kekuasaan." Several lines of Arabic text in the lower border, in the form of rhyming and rhythmic prose (*saj')* describe God's creation of humankind, the sun and the moon. The only English fragment includes words which refer to obligations which must be performed by Hajj pilgrims in the Holy Land, such as the state of ritual purity involving special garments and ritual purification, the seven-fold circumambulation of the Ka'ba, and the seven pebbles to be thrown at the pillars (in Mina). The pieces of text in the upper border of the painting are very difficult to read. The legible parts of the fragment in English include the word "'Arafah" with reference to its central role in the pilgrimage rites.

In summary: the Qur'anic verse establishes God's Omnipotence while the textual fragments describe the rites to be performed by pilgrims in Mecca who are fulfilling one of the "pillars" of Islam. The rites performed in Mecca remind Muslims of the compassion of God[17] and of his Omnipotence, symbolised by the seven-fold circling of the Ka'ba like the angels circling the Throne of God in Heaven.

This bring us to the subject of the Qur'anic verse which dominates the third painting. The "Throne Verse" describes the Omnipotence of God as symbolised by His Throne (Kursi) which "doth extend over the heavens and the earth." The Qur'anic verse in the second painting extols God as "Lord of Power" and the third painting continues the theme of God as "the Self-Subsisting, the Eternal One" whose symbol of sovereignty, His Throne, is so vast it

[17] Such as the re-enactment of Hajar's desperate running between Safa and Marwa, seeking water for Ishmael and then finding the spring that God provided for their sustenance.

encompasses not only the earth, but all the heavens as well. Truly, the verse reminds Muslims, God is the Almighty One. Indonesian Muslims are particularly fond of the "Throne Verse" and together with the "*Basmalah*" is the verse most often chosen as a calligraphic decoration in people's homes.[18]

The lines of modern Kufic script in the lower border with single words about universities, funding, and associations are puzzling and it is very difficult to find any thematic link between them and the Throne Verse. The lines of ancient Kufic in the upper left hand corner of the painting are not decipherable to the majority of Muslims, but the interlinear lines of modern Arabic script repeat phrases which appear in the first painting, phrases concerning the scholars of substantive law who make use of their own powers of reason to interpret legal sources in order to make legal rulings. The English words include a reference to salvation for "the believers".

To summarise the textual meanings conveyed in this last painting: God is omnipotent and eternal and His power is beyond human imagining — His Throne extends over everything, yet protecting all that it encompasses causes Him no difficulty. This third painting repeats two elements present in the first painting, as if to emphasise their message. These final words concern salvation (on the Day of Judgement) and legal scholars using their own specialised knowledge of jurisprudence to make legal rulings for Muslims.

The textual messages in the three paintings offer their reader-viewers some material (Qur'anic verses) which is familiar and some material which is probably not familiar. Intersections of understanding can occur only when the reader-viewer recognises (because it is in their memory) what they see. These connections are likely to be made at the following points: the *Basmalah* and Yasin verses in the first painting, the "Lord of Power" verses in the second, and the Throne Verse in the third painting. All these verses remind Muslims of God's compassion and His omnipotence which He also offers believers as a protective power. The Qur'an's words

[18] The Throne Verse is widely used in public spaces throughout the Muslim world. It was chosen, for example, to decorate the highest point of the dome in many Ottoman mosques, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979, p.4.

intersect with the human need for re-assurance about the challenges of living and the fear of death.

The fragments of non-Qur'anic texts which appear in each of the paintings are difficult to read and mostly too disjointed to follow. The opportunities for intersection with the reader-viewer's knowledge are restricted to single words or phrases. Thus in the first painting the legible words concern "fear", "Judgement Day", and "legal experts who draw use their own reasoning and knowledge of legal sources to make legal rulings". In the second painting, the words concern Hajj rituals in the Holy Land, and in the third painting the words in the textual fragments repeat themes evident in the first painting about salvation and legal scholars who use *ijtihād*.

If reader-viewers are moved to think more deeply about the meaning of what they see they might notice the contrast between the Qur'anic verses (which offer comfort) and the textual fragments with their seemingly incomprehensible messages (which cause puzzlement and a sense of disquiet). There is a tension between what is known and familiar and what is unknown and not familiar. This contrast, the author suggests, is a conscious decision by the calligrapher-painter. His possible purpose will be discussed in the Conclusion.

3. Images and visual cues to memory and meaning

So far we have been focussing on the textual elements in the three calligraphic paintings. It is time to consider the non-textual elements which are in the form of colour and shapes. Colour will be discussed in the following section "Light upon Light", here we will focus on the images formed from shapes.

Handwritten texts (manuscripts) which are decorated with non-textual images have a long history in human civilisation. In the decorated manuscripts of medieval Europe, to take just one example, images were seen (literally) as vital parts of the texts. The images served to assist the process of memorising texts so that they could be fully integrated into understanding. Mary Carruthers, a leading scholar of illuminated medieval manuscripts, has studied the interrelationship between images and text to explain the critical role memory played in medieval learning and philosophy. She writes that "before a work can acquire meaning, before a mind can

act on it, it must be made memorable, since memory provides the matter with which the human intellect most directly works".[19]

Carruthers argues that in order to make meaning from a text, the memory must be "hooked up" or "hooked in" to the "associational play" of the creator of the text. And to attract the attention of the mind (and therefore to create memory) the creator of the text includes ornaments (images) which she says are also the basic principles of mnemonics. These "devices" include surprise and strangeness, orderliness and pattern, copiousness, similarity, and contrast. These devices are "deliberately playful and surprising" because mnemonics and recollective techniques rely on emotion "as the quickest and surest way to catch the mind's attention."[20]

She quotes a Christian scholar from the late 11th century CE who wrote that, "Just as letters are the shapes and signs of spoken words, pictures exist as the representations and signs of writing." [21] As Carruthers explains, the function of a picture or image is not primarily to imitate an object but rather, to recall (or remember) something that is "past to memory".[22] As she says, " … picturing and reading, have as their goal not simply the learning of a story, but learning it to familiarize and domesticate it, in that fully internalized, even physiological way that medieval reading required". In the context of medieval manuscripts, she argues, images are not referential to an object but to a text.[23]

These observations about the contribution of image to textual understanding and interiorization are very helpful to an understanding of the "painterly" elements and images in calligraphic paintings. Sirojuddin is a prize winning Qur'anic calligrapher who has dedicated himself to teaching Indonesians to write the Holy Qur'an in the classical styles of Arabic script. For

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[19] Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images 400-1200*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.144.

[20] Mary Carruthers, 1998, p.117.

[21] Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p.222. She is quoting from Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster (London) from 1085-1117.

[22] Carruthers, 1990, p.222.

[23] Carruthers, 1990, p.222.

him the Qur'an is the inspiration for life.[24] For him, as for the medieval scholars, writing is the vehicle for representing the text so that it can be taken into the mind and the memory.

The scholars and clerics of medieval Europe believed that the mind could be assisted to memorise text by illustrating it with images that were "deliberately playful and surprising". It was believed that in the process of transfer from page to mind, signs and images entered "the house of memory" through different doors. A 13th century French cleric believed that all humans desired to gain knowledge but because their span of life was limited they had to draw on the knowledge of others as well as their own. "To gain such knowledge, God has given the human soul the ability of memory. Memory has two gates of access, sight and hearing, and a road particular to each of these portals. These roads are called *painture* [painting] and *parole* [word]."[25] These concepts are of direct relevance to memorisation and understanding of the Holy Qur'an. Its words are interiorised through recitation and, in calligraphic paintings, the reader-viewer is further prompted by images associated with, or extending, the messages of the Qur'anic verses. Sirojuddin, we suggest, uses images in his calligraphic paintings to help the reader-viewers interiorise the words of the Holy Qur'an.

We will use two of Carruthers's concepts to analyse the images in our three paintings. The first concept is that of a "trigger image" (Carruthers terms it a "cueing image").[26] These are images which trigger associations of words and ideas stored in the memory of the reader-viewer. The trigger image, Carruthers explains, is only successful if it creates an emotion or strong response in the reader-viewer. "That combination of image and response makes up the memory image, and *only then* [sic], when the fully formed image is in memory, can it become a subject of interpretation."[27] The second concept is the icon. As Carruthers explains, an icon refers to interpretation rather than memory retrieval. An icon is an image

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[24] Didin Sirojuddin AR, *Nuansa Kaligrafi Islam: Kumpulan Tulisan Sekitar Ide-Ide pengembangan Seni Kaligrafi Islam di Indonesia*, Studio Lemka, Fakultas Adab UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Ciputat, Jakarta Selatan, 2005, p,7, p.11.

[25] Carruthers, 1990, p.223.

[26] Carruthers, 1990, p.227

[27] Carruthers, 1990, p.257,

representing something that has the same meaning for all reader-viewers. "Iconography", she writes, "in art as well as literary criticism, treats images as direct signs of something, as having an inherent meaning that will be universal for all readers". [28] We will use both concepts to analyse three images selected from Sirojuddin's paintings. The images are: letters written to represent ancient Kufic script; the Ka'ba; and the large circles which dominate each painting.

The representation of ancient Kufic letters appears centrally in the first painting and in the upper sector of the final painting. As individual letters the calligraphic forms cannot be read as words by modern reader-viewers, even by Muslims who have been educated in Indonesian pesantren.[29] However, most educated Muslims are aware that ancient Kufic script was the script used to write down the earliest copies of the Qur'an. So although the letters in this ancient script cannot be understood they still convey meaning to viewers. The Kufic letters trigger the memory that the Holy Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. directly, not through writing. The revelations had to be collected and written down so that they could be preserved and transmitted. The strength of this chain of recollection triggered by the ancient Kufic script depends on the memory-knowledge of the individual reader-viewer. The image of a form of Arabic script which is both familiar and unfamiliar to modern Muslims causes an emotion (surprise) which might cause them and question why has the calligrapher chosen to use that kind of writing in his paintings. The use of a "strange" script has triggered a question and an emotion. It has thus been "hooked in" to their memory and will be able to be re-called and become "the subject of interpretation".

The second image we are considering is the black cube-like structure, in the second painting, *Kuasa Sang Maharaja*. Most Muslims would immediately identify the structure as a representation of the Ka'ba which is almost in the centre of the great mosque of Mecca. It is the most famous sanctuary of Islam, the House of God. Ibrahim and Ismail were ordered by God to

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[28] Carruthers, 1990, pp.256-257.

[29] Five Indonesian IAIN lecturers, currently studying at the Australian National University, also looked at the paintings but they could not make the letters form meanings although they agreed the script resembled Kufic.

construct it and the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. reminded people to return to the religion of Ibrahim, as the religion of *tawḥīd* or Oneness (Q.S. al-A'raf :161).[30] Its central role in Islam is described thus, "The Ka'ba's role as the liturgical centre of the Muslim world is bound up with the fact that it demonstrates Islam's link with the Abrahamic tradition and thereby with the origin of all the monotheist religions."[31] The focal nature of the Ka'ba as a unifying presence in Islam is emphasised by the fact that Muslims wherever they are face its direction to pray and it is the pivot around which pilgrims walk seven times to perform the *ṭawāf* in the great mosque. It is a powerful symbol of the unity of the Muslim world and reminds Muslims of their obligation to travel to Mecca to perform the rites of the pilgrimage. The image of the Ka'ba has the same meaning for all Muslims, thus it is an icon in Islam.

The Ka'ba's iconic role in Islam as symbol of "centre" means that it can also function as a trigger image. For Muslims with memory-knowledge of Islamic sacred geography, the Ka'ba's image might remind them of the Ka'ba's axial role. It "is situated at the lower extremity of an axis which traverses all the heavens; at the level of each heavenly world, another sanctuary, frequented by angels, marks this same axis, the supreme prototype of each of these sanctuaries begin God's throne, around which circulates the chorus of the heavenly spirits; but it would be more exact to say that they circulate within it, since the divine throne encloses all creation".[32] The Ka'ba as trigger image helps the engaged reader-viewer to re-call the link between the Ka'ba and the throne of God, and prepares them for the subject of the third painting, God's throne.

The last example will be the image of the circle which appears in each painting to frame the Qur'anic verses.[33] In an artistic sense

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[30] Harun Nasution (ed), *Ensiklopedi Islam Indonesia* Jakarta: Djambatan, vol 1, 2nd rev ed , 2002, p.334.

[31] Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, Westerham, Kent: World of Islam Festival Trust, 1976, p.3.

[32] *Ibid*., p.4.

[33] In the theory of calligraphy, an imaginary circle (whose diameter is determined by the size of *alif*) becomes the measure for the size of letters the calligrapher chooses to use, see Abdelkebir Khatibi and Mohammed Sijelmassi, *The Splendor of Islamic Calligraphy*, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008 reprint, p.47.

the circle provides a "spotlight" for the Qur'anic verse, emphasising that it is the central focus of each painting. In a more general sense, however, the image of the circle is a powerful icon which represents Islam's central principle of the absolute Unity of God (*al-Tawḥīd*). For Muslims, the perfect form of the circle reminds them of the perfection of God.

As a trigger image the circle brings to mind "centredness" or the central point of matter (and being) which lies at the heart or source of all things – and therefore reminds a reader-viewer of God. As Critchlow, a scholar who has immersed himself in the geometry of Islamic patterns, writes, "the circle has always been regarded as the symbol of eternity, without beginning and without end, just being".[34]

The presentation of the Throne Verse as a circle which is created from the shape of the letters themselves, without the use of a confining circumference, rotating around the word "Allah" strengthens and deepens the iconic meaning of the circle. The double circle (Allah is in its own circle surrounded by the second circle of calligraphic script) thus defends, shields and protects those who use it. Indonesian Muslims who see this calligraphic circle do not need to read its individual letters (which are so densely calligraphed that it is very difficult to do so) to recognise immediately that the verse is *Ayat Kursi*.

This analysis of three images in the paintings using the concepts of "trigger image" and "icon" by no means exhausts the possibilities for interpretations, and therein lie the richness of possibilities for individual intersections between image and reader-viewer. Nor does it do justice to the other images which appear in the paintings. One obvious, shining example is the portrayal of light – as a nimbus for the circles and as a golden glow or radiance. It is not possible to do attempt a fuller discussion of "light" here, but here it will serve to lead into the last section of this article which will move from consideration of the physical and rational aspects of the paintings to the metaphysical and spiritual.

[34] Critchlow p.9

4. "Light upon Light"[35]

The Qur'an is wrapped in symbolism and expressed in symbolism.[36] Calligraphic painting expresses this symbolism through word and image so that the possibilities for connecting, or intersecting with the experience of the reader-viewer is doubled. So far in this article we have described and analysed the calligraphic paintings, text and image, using logic and *ratio*, or the power of reason. Islam is a religion of balance. *Shari'a*, for example, the outward expression of Islam is balanced by *tasawwuf*, the inner, interiorised experience of faith. Together they provide guidance for a pious life supporting the worldly and other-worldly, spiritual needs of believers. It is the "other-worldly" or the mystical dimensions of the calligraphic paintings that we now seek to address. And it is the painterly, or artistic elements of the works that appeal directly to our senses and emotions rather than to our reason. One scholar suggests that to achieve mystical awareness requires even more than our senses. The goal of the mystic, she says,[37] cannot be understood by "normal" means. "A spiritual experience that depends upon neither sensual nor rational methods is needed. Once the seeker has set forth upon the way to this Last reality, he will be led by an inner light." Poetry and narrative texts are often regarded as the principal sources of attempts to describe mystical experience, but painting must be included among these.

The three paintings of Sirojuddin are washed in soft colours. The dominating colour, centrally positioned in each work is a gentle yellow. This golden glow reminds the reader-viewer that "The Light" is one of the ninety-nine names of Allah and that His power illuminates in metaphysical as well as a physical ways. The Qur'an describes this quality in the Chapter "The Light" (*al-Nūr*).

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[35] Q.S. al-Nur/24:35

[36] Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1994, p.xii-xiii writes, "as the Koran proclaims repeatedly, God teaches by means of comparisons, parables and likenesses to draw the human heart beyond the external, peripheral faces of creation."

[37] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, New Delhi: Yoda Press, originally published University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p.4.

God is the Light/ Of the heavens and the earth./ .../ Light upon Light!/ God doth guide/ Whom He will/ To His Light/...[38]

Light is without form and having no form is the perfect expression of the inexpressible, of inner, spiritual experience.[39] Represented in the paintings as a nimbus or halo encircling the holy words it triggers emotions of awe, wonder, gratitude for beauty, and the comfort of warmth and life. It awakes mindfulness of the godliness of God, whose essence is reflected to His creation through His Light. The light that bathes the holy verses in the paintings can also bathe the viewer who stops to experience its deeper meaning.

Imam Ghazali (died 505/1111) was moved to write a mystical interpretation of the Verse of the Light (Q.S. al-Nur/24:35) entitled *Mishkāt al-Anwār*.[40] Imam Ghazali reminds Muslims that physical light is only a reflection in this world of the true light of God. The physical eye sees the light of the physical world that is transitory (sunlight, firelight) but from the material world using our spiritual eye we can rise through the world of Intelligence to the celestial world.

The golden light of the paintings can serve as a trigger image for viewers to awaken their spiritual eyes and seek mystical understanding of God as Light of Light. The intersections of Light, Eternal Truth, Oneness, Unity are tied together inextricably in the knot of faith (*'aqīdah*).

Conclusion

The author of this paper is not a Muslim although she has spent many years reading about Islam, in primary sources (such as Raja Ali Haji's 19th century history *Tuhfat al-Nafis*) as well as more contemporary works. She has also enjoyed many discussions with Indonesian and Malay Muslim friends. Unlike them, she has not had a Muslim education nor lived life daily as a Muslim so she

[38] Q.S. Al-Nur/24:35.

[39] See the many works of Henry Corbin on the complex understanding of divine light in Middle Eastern religions, including Islam. A more general and accessible study is that of Barbara Weightman, "Sacred Landscapes and the Phenomenon of Light", *Geographical Review*, Jan 1996, Vol. 86 No.1, pp.59-71.

[40] I have relied on a summary of this work given by Abdallah Yousuf Ali in *The Glorious Kur'an*, pp. 920-924.

cannot experience Islam as they do. Nevertheless, the strength and depth of calligraphic paintings such as those by Sirojuddin intersect with enough points of her academic knowledge of Islam and her own spiritual beliefs to communicate directly with her own experience of life and beauty. If the themes, symbolism, and spiritual depth of the paintings can touch the mind and spirit of a non-Muslim, their potential for intersection with the beliefs and experiences of Muslims familiar with the "trigger images" and icons must be even greater.

This article has tried to develop a framework for analysing calligraphic painting. The concepts of "trigger images" and "icons" used by a scholar of medieval manuscripts proved helpful as a method for describing the associative elements of non-textual images in three of Sirojuddin's paintings. We have argued that lines of meaning can be triggered by images as well as words and that these lines of meaning flow from intersections between the Qur'an and personal piety to form "knots" of faith. These "knots" have visible, external expressions as well as invisible, hidden and inexpressible forms.

One final point arises from our engagement or intersection with the paintings. It concerns the "trigger image" of ancient Kufic script which is incomprehensible to most modern Muslims. The image creates an emotion (in this example of surprise of bewilderment) which Carruthers says is essential for an image to be "hooked in" to memory. The image thus remains with the reader-viewer. One interpretation this author offers is that the inclusion of ancient Kufic in the paintings script is a powerful and graphic reminder of the Mystery of the Divine. A reminder that the gulf between the omniscience of the Divine and human understanding is too great to bridge. Not everything in the Qur'an, the Words of the Divine, is intelligible to human minds. Yet the non-Qur'anic textual fragments about religious scholars who exercise their reason when applying Islamic law might encourage the reader-viewer to do the same when trying to understand the meanings in the three paintings. Ultimately the paintings remind reader-viewers that only God knows all things, *wallāhu a'lam*.[]

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