

# Typography as a Reflection of Cultural Imprint in Indonesian History

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**Abstract:** The paper will investigate the possibility of finding new letterform based on three different major culture that ruled in Indonesia. Cultures bring their unique characteristics when encountering other culture. Letterform are the visible artefact of a culture that can be seen spreading across the world. There are cultures that interact with Indonesian cultures are being absorbed and modified before it can become fully accepted. The culture acceptance in the letterform in Indonesia is changing depends on who is having the authority. Even the current letterform used in Indonesia is the Latin letterform, but the history shown that there are also other letterform being used, such as Pallava and Arabic. The attempt is to create new letterform that can be a symbol of harmonious cultural dialogue, knowing ourselves as Indonesian and try to contribute to the identity of Indonesia as *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, unity in diversity.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Historical journey is one of significant aspects to create an identity (Berger, 2007). Based on historical perspective, a country develops in parallel with the development of globalization. The globalization has made a country to have interaction with another country, together with their culture, has influencing each other. From the interaction happened, a new culture or mixed-culture can be formed. As in every culture has created their specific and unique artefacts. Furthermore, the culture can be recognized by the artefacts they created (Sampson, 2009). Letters are one of the artefacts of a culture can created which can be seen in the culture daily activity. Letters, as a visual representation of the sound and meaning, carried over by verbal communication culture. The communication for each culture, has their own history and meaning, specific to their origin. To ensure the communication conveyed correctly, a set of visual form, called letters, are created to help people to communicate clearly. By using visual approach of communication, people can transmit more abstract and in more emotional level compared to verbal. Letters, have a feature to narrowed down meanings

during communication between the sender and receivers (Carter, R., Day, B., & Meggs, 2012).

Typography, an approach of human knowledge to arrange letters into visual compositions, has been able to empower a culture to create their own identity showing a culture's geographical ancestor and specific time stamp. During the period of pre-Indonesia era, there are various cultures enter Indonesia, bringing their visual communication culture. The culture enters Indonesia together with the arrival of different people and culture background, during the ocean trade route. Various culture, strongly related to specific religion, Hindu, Islam, and so on until the arrives of western culture brought by VOC, Dutch Trade Company. Different ruler in Indonesia in their own time stamps of Indonesian history, has introduced different particular way of living. During the time, the authority of the culture implemented were also including the culture of communication. Verbal and visual communication were entering into Indonesia culture. From the perspective of written communication culture, typography and letters, have their important mark and role. A typeface can show the time period of use and also the identity of a

nation that uses it, slowly it influenced a nation's identity (Sampson, 2009).

Different period of time and culture have gone passed Indonesia's history, but there are less cultural artefact that are properly archived, especially using digital media. Typography, in this current of time, have become a taken for granted artefacts. By the development of technology, the distribution of knowledge can be more impactful if using digital media. Digital media has its own opportunity to become one of the ingredients of forming Indonesia identity. This research will take standpoint of how typography has become a common ground for different culture from visual communication design perspective. The research will try to knot the missing peace of different culture that had ruled in Indonesia.

The shape of a letter, is the focus in this research. From the perspective of historical cultures that have been entering Indonesia, there is an opportunity to translate the typographic form and translates it into more today and current situation. It is important to keep observing the development and evolution of culture, especially when encountering different culture with each other unique background and values. One way the effort of translating a culture to be more relevant is by using digital medium. Digital medium has offered different dimensions of what paper and print can offer. By using digital mediums, artefacts can be preserved, translated, studied and developed to keep a culture relevant to the society. One of the strongest point of digital is how it is easy and accessible for people to have interact with, and have more opportunities of more engaging interactions (King, L., James, S. F., & Cooke, 2016). This research an attempt to not only preserving national culture, but also can be used as a ground to respond the current and future national identity issues. The historical journey will become a historical and cultural record of how an artefact formed from the occurrences of diverse cultures and good intercultural dialogue (Sampson, 2009).

## 2 METHOD

The reinterpretation effort will certainly start by revisiting some of the letters used by previous dominant culture in the history of Indonesia. The study will use study case approach, because most of the study is being experienced by the researcher, reflecting on the journey of the history. The reflection of the experience and information will be converted in visual communication design work. In the writing of this paper, letters of the past will be

shown the details of their shape. The extraction phase is used as a ground for further design development. By using dominant culture that have existed in Indonesia, as have been mentioned above, the culture of Hindu, Islam and Western, as a starting point to develop letter design that will relevant with current era. The final design will be in digital form, so that the result can be easily accessed and improved in the future (UNESCO, 2018).

The semiotic approach will be used especially in terms of form and context. The excavation of the content is not considered as major factor in developing the final design, because the content will relate with wider considerations. The goal of the research is to create new set of letter, based on letters used in the history of Indonesia. The process of developing this new form will use artistic approach, in the same time the process will maintain the basic design principles related to visual communication design (Carter, R., Day, B., & Meggs, 2012).

A descriptive explanation will be used in the phase of creating the new visual shape of the typography. Detailed explanations will tend to have qualitative approach and processes, although the study of the letter anatomy will be more measured and quantitative. The researcher background as visual communication designer contributes to the constructive way of interpretation. The design will gain its value by using design principles in developing new design form (Lidwell, W., Holden, K., & Butler, no date).

The design process starts from observing the existing letters of Pallava from Hindu culture, Arabic from Islamic culture and Latin letter from western culture brought by the Dutch. Anatomical studies are performed to dissect and take each letter unique form and characteristics. Each culture has long history of interaction with Indonesia culture, even while Indonesia name was not existed. Indonesia has long history of culture with Hinduism Kingdom in the past. The Arabic culture is entering Indonesia from the traders from India. The Arabic letter, even has successfully permeated into the pronunciation of Indonesia language but using Arabic letters, instead of using Arabic letters for Arab language, marked by the book called 'Kitab Kuning' (Laffan, 2008). The Dutch, which has the longest period of colonizing Indonesia, has the most powerful influence in the letter used even until today. Japanese culture is not included because the culture assimilation is not happening across time, only existed during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia. Letters chosen are from the cultures that

have already pervaded into daily life and culture of Indonesian peoples (Raab, J., & Butler, 2008).

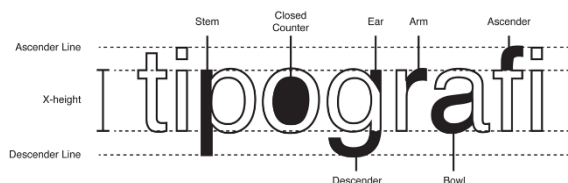


Figure 1: Modern Latin letterform anatomy (typographical anatomy).

The final letterform is determined by the researcher interpretative and aesthetical experience, by take into consideration of design principles in typography. Does not matter how decorative a letter form can be, the main function of typography is readable (Kana, 2001). Typography, as one of the form of communication, is important to be ensured that the message have to be delivered between the sender and receiver of the visual message (Carter, R., Day, B., & Meggs, 2012).

### 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study will start from understanding basic and unique characteristic of different letters mentioned before. Hereby we will see different letterforms will be studied so each of them will be taken each and specific part to design new letterform. Different letterform will be presented, and there will be some remarks for each letterform from different culture.

#### Section 1.01 Pallava letterform

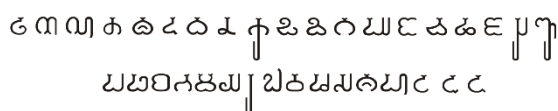
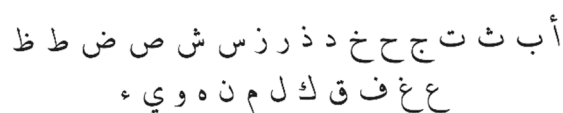


Figure 2: Pallava letters.

The anatomy of Pallava letterform shows that there is a dynamic outer shapes and structure between letters. Although, it can be recognized that the letters are still constructed from basic visual forms such as circles and squares. The thickness of the line of the letters has minor differences, due to this, it is a bit difficult to accurately measure the thickness. The different thickness gives the letterforms better visual balance and composition. All of the letters, has rounded corner and curved shapes which gives the experience of organic form. In contrary, the height consists only two heights.



#### Section 1.02 Arabic letterform

Figure 3: Arabic letters.

The letters are written from right to left, and use consistent slanted angle of strokes. Even though there are variety of the letterform, it is clearly seen that there are a pattern of shape. Some letter has the same form, and they are marked differently with the use of prism dot. Each amount of the dot, represents different type of letter. The stroke width has extreme contrast of thickness. There is no contrast size of height between Arabic letters.

#### Section 1.03 Latin letterform



Figure 4: Latin letters.

Currently used in Indonesia as the main letter for Indonesia language. There are varieties in the development of Latin letterform. The most classic letterform widely used for reading materials is letters with serif. There are two main categorizations in typography, serif and sans serif. The most common used in daily life of current modern culture is the one displayed above, the sans serif letterform. The letter was created during the era of industry revolution, which has focus on the easiness of mass-production.

The characteristic of modern Latin letterform is they have more simplified form. The letterform has more thickness in vertical stroke compared to horizontal. The height has few variations, only on specific letters that has ascender and descender (figure 1). The capital letter, or used to be called as upper-case, has no variation in height.

#### Section 1.04 Letterform comparison study.

It is crucial to be able to identify basic forms which become the identity of each letterform of Pallava and Arabic. Each separate part of a letter from the letterform was studied and collected into one database of unique part of a letter. Different part of letter is being used for different letter in Latin letter, this is the phase where the researcher finds different part should be suitable for which letter in Latin letter.


Figure 5: Study of anatomy letters used in Latin letters.

*Section 1.05 Letterform merging study*

Observation and study of different letterform has shown that different letterform has their own unique and recognizable form. There is opportunity of combining the different form to create new set of letterforms. The basic letterform which will be the base of the design is the Latin letterform, because the letter is the one used and will be identified easily by Indonesian people or culture that uses Latin letterform as their main letter. In the process of synthesizing the different form, gestalt visual perception is being used to support the visual communication design principles. The methods of adding, subtracting and eliminating visual elements are used constantly during the creation process of the letterform.

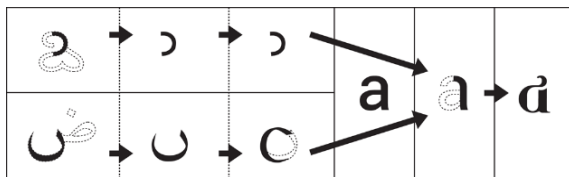


Figure 6: Study of unique visual character into Latin.

*Section 1.06 Final result of new letterform*

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Figure 7: Final new letterform.

The letterform created has undergone several development stages. The final form presented here is the best collection of letter that shows the balance of visual aesthetic and also the readable function of letterform. As shown above, there are different parts from other letterform comes from different culture. The Pallava characteristic has more dominant influence compared with the Arabic letters. The Arabic letters subtly inserted in the different widths of the strokes. The most prominent visual appearing for the Arabic letters will be in the dot for the letter “i” and “j”. There are several separations of shapes created, this was done to give a dimension and form related construction with the Pallava letterform.

**4 CONCLUSIONS**

The result of the design could contribute the sustainability of Indonesia history in visual culture context. Furthermore, the visual design offers possibility for the upcoming generation in how maintaining history and culture. By offering new visual shape in a relevant way with current generation, open possibility for further development by current and following generations. The new letterform has been showed to several respondents to gain input for further development in different research. The comments are that they can see the characteristics of the Pallava letterform easily, but the challenge for the reviewer was to find the characteristic of the Arabic letterform. Even though the letterform is considered as decoratively interesting, most importantly was the new letterform is successful in the readability factor in transferring local values using digital format. As visual design is expected to an ever-expanding communication environment (Kana, 2001). With the successful achievement of combining different culture into one letterform has shown that different cultures can be a harmony in hybrid culture, with the consideration of cultural negotiation (Raab, J., & Butler, 2008).

For future research development, the area of the combination of letterform can be widen into other factors than only history of Indonesia. It will be interesting to see the methods of creating the letterform in this research is being used in geographical factor. If the approach is used to explore new possibilities of finding other hybrid typography in different area of Indonesia, the result is Indonesia will have its own set of letterform, which will contribute to the identity of Indonesia as *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, unity in diversity.

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