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Arps, A.

DOI

[10.5204/mcj.2924](https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2924)

Publication date

2022

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

M/C Journal

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Arps, A. (2022). Performative Memories: Costume, Media, and the 'Image' of Indonesian Historical Re-enactment. *M/C Journal*, 25(4). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2924>

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Performative Memories

Costume, Media, and the 'Image' of Indonesian Historical Re-enactment

Arnoud Arps

University of Amsterdam

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[Vol. 25 No. 4 \(2022\): fashion](#)


Articles

Introduction

Indonesian cultural productions use the Indonesian War of Independence (1945-1949) as inspiration for the war's remembrance in popular culture such as in films (Arps; Irawanto), music, and mobile games, while a special emphasis on wearing historical costumes is made during the anniversary of Indonesia's declaration of independence. Nowhere is this clearer than in Indonesian historical re-enactment. Although Indonesia has seen a rise in historical re-enactment groups for the last couple of years, the absence of scholarly research on the topic

reflects how Indonesian historical re-enactment is still an understudied mode of cultural remembering in the nation. Yet in their uses of costume and media, these groups construct a complex form of remembering where local interests and national aspirations play a key role.

Based on principal fieldwork carried out over a period of seven months in 2017 and 2018, the central case study here is the remembrance of the *Serangan Umum 1 Maret 1949* ("General Offensive of 1 March 1949", hereafter: *Serangan Umum*) by the Yogyakarta-based re-enactor group Komunitas Djokjakarta 1945. On the basis of participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis, this article critically analyses the re-enactors, their performances in public spaces, and the representations of their performances on social media.

The one-hour interviews were conducted in Indonesian or English, whichever the respondents preferred. The re-enactors (six male, five female) were between eighteen and thirty-four years old. Most recently completed levels of education ranged from a high school diploma to a university's Master's degree. Amongst them were university students, a high school student, an elementary school teacher, an entrepreneur, an artist, a photographer, and a manager. With a special emphasis on claimed authentic clothing and attributes, they present their 'image' through two main media: *teatrikals* (public street performances) and the use of the social media Instagram. 

The performance of memory, or "doing memory", is related to agency (Plate and Smelik 2-3; 15). Even though such doing-acts are at times habitual, cultural memory can be understood as the product of collective agency (Bal vii). This is indeed prevalent in historical re-enactment communities where the collective constructs a version of the past. More important still are the role of narratives herein as "narrative memories, even of unimportant events, differ from routine or habitual memories in that they are affectively colored, surrounded by an emotional aura that, precisely, makes them memorable" (Bal viii). The collective act of Indonesian historical re-enactment becomes a memorable form of cultural recall that is consciously performed and constructed as a narrative memory.

The body in historical re-enactment functions as a vehicle for meaning-making (Agnew, Lamb, and Tomann 7). As the body becomes the medium upon and through which memory is performed, the individual historical re-enactor becomes a producer and consumer of cultural memory. Subsequently, historical re-enactment communities can be seen as user communities that actively participate in content creation. As such, the role of the consumer, user, producer, and creator is inextricably interwoven through the performance (Bruns). This is performatively demonstrated by Indonesian re-enactment groups through both costume and media.

This article answers how *teatrikals* and Instagram, as different forms of mediation, shape performative memories of the Indonesian War of Independence. Drawing from media, re-enactment, and cultural memory studies the article lays bare how embodied and mediated memories are created by combining local and national identity formation through a drive for authenticity in clothing and story. I argue that there is no clear divide between embodiment and mediation of the past, as both are folded into each other for the re-enactors.

Komunitas Djokjakarta 1945

Komunitas Djokjakarta 1945 (hereafter: Komunitas D45) is a historical re-enactment community, comprised of approximately sixty-five core members of whom practically all are

male, although its composition varies. They re-enact the history of Indonesia and in particular the Javanese city of Yogyakarta, focussing on the violent era from 1943 until 1949. The community is modelled after the Brigade X, which was once led by lieutenant colonel Suharto, later the second president of Indonesia. In their re-enactments, they try to be as authentic as possible towards their clothing and attributes of that specific period in time. The combination of Yogyakarta as décor of significant historical events during the war; the subsequent widely circulating representations of these events in popular culture; the city's role as cultural node for the performing arts within the country; and the commemorations in the city itself (Ahimsa-Putra 165) add to the significance of Komunitas D45's representations of the past. This significance also lies in a paradox: although the reasons above give Yogyakarta gravitas when it comes to representing the war, community members are adamant that the city is undervalued in national commemorations of it.

Komunitas D45's main annual re-enactment is that of the Serangan Umum, which was partly re-enacted during the re-enactments I studied in 2017 and 2018. This specific battle is significant as it is seen as a crucial moment during the Indonesian War of Independence. The Serangan Umum was an offensive in the early morning of the first of March 1949 in which Indonesian fighters attacked Dutch-occupied Yogyakarta. The Indonesian fighters were able to take hold of Yogyakarta for six hours, before retreating and with that returning control back to the Dutch.

With their practices, Komunitas D45 is a memory community which is based on the establishment of an experiential site during their performances. A historical re-enactment consisting of re-enactors, fireworks, sound effects, and an engaged audience can be considered an experiential site where prosthetic memory emerges, meaning artificial memories (as opposed to memories based on lived experiences) that are sensuous and based on the experience of mass-mediated representations (Landsberg 20). Costume is a means to mediate the past and it is one of the key elements for the re-enactors of Komunitas D45.

The *teatrikal* of the Serangan Umum 1 Maret 1949

"That, that's an A1 gun. From England," one re-enactor explained as he showed me a gun. "This is a Sten Gun, Mk. II," he continued, "that one is usually used by regular soldiers. This one is usually used by someone that portrays lieutenant colonel Suharto." The relationship between re-enactors and their possessions are "deeply contextualized in the knowledge and use of these objects, embedded in the sense of themselves as creative individuals." (Hall in Gapps 397). This is on the one hand demonstrated by the re-enactors' historical knowledge of the costumes worn and weapons used, and on the other hand by their ability to build lifelike imitations of these attributes.

To make sure that the battles look as authentic as possible, the re-enactors of Komunitas D45 make use of various props and attributes. Some of the actors use sachets of fake blood, made by mixing honey and food colouring or condensed milk, to recreate being shot. During the re-enactments, they bite the sachets and let the fake-blood run down their faces and clothes, imitating being wounded. The military costumes they wear are based on historical books and photos. Some weapons are bought, others are self-made imitations from wood and metal, which cost about a month or two to create.

Just like other re-enactors they "go to extraordinary lengths to acquire and animate the look and feel of history" (Gapps 397). Stephen Gapps addresses this need for authenticity as 'the Holy

Grail' for re-enactors although he mentions that they "understand that it [authenticity] is elusive – worth striving for, but never really attainable" (397). While authenticity indeed seems to be the 'holy grail' for Indonesian re-enactors, what authenticity looks like and how it is performed differs. In the case of Komunitas D45, authenticity is firstly constructed in terms of costume and attributes, although the desire to be authentic also resonates in the construction of historical veracity of the narrative and in costumes as a pedagogical tool to create embodied memories.

This interplay between narrative and costume is needed at the risk of objects remaining inanimate (Samuel 384). Objects, Raphael Samuel writes, must be "restored to their original habitat, or some lifelike replica of it, if they are to be intelligible in their period setting" (Samuel 384). This is precisely what re-enactors do with costume and props, resulting in the re-enactment of events "in such a way as to convey the lived experience of the past." (Samuel 384). Yet these re-enactors have not lived experiences of the war, and hence prosthetically embody memories of the past.

The desire for authenticity structurally returned in the interviews I conducted with the community members. Thus, the whole performance is produced with the community's underlying desire to be as authentic as possible with the main focus on their costumes and attributes. This is common for historical re-enactors as they are able to "describe their clothing and equipment in great detail, for the authentic object is deeply bound up with the way history might feel" (Gapps 398). Stephen Gapps goes even further by suggesting that "like historians, reenactors not only tell stories but also cite evidence: the footnote to the historian is the authentic (recreated) costume to the reenactor" (398). The costume is a means to construct a memory narrative, to perform a memory, for re-enactors. Costume is thus a mnemonic device and the central argument has to do with 'the image'.

An analysis of the community presents conflicting statements on the exact role of authenticity. There is not a clear course for it as it reveals a jumping nature. There are multiple authenticities and veracity is only one of its intentions. During the re-enactments, costume and prop are the things that enable claims about authenticity. In the photographs on social media, the affordances show something different. What appears to be more important than historiography or studying an authentic past, for instance, is the so-called 'image' of historical re-enactment. This has an equivocal and concomitant meaning in that it means image as a resemblance of the past; image as an impression to others; and image as visual reproduction. Image, thus, crosses boundaries between re-enactment and photographic representation.

It is through conventions of authenticity that re-enactors comprehend, translate, and appreciate one another's creativity. Through a desire for authenticity, the past is made concrete and perceptible. Yet, interestingly this 'authenticity' does not only refer to the re-enactment itself, but extends to the photographs they publish and circulate via their Instagram account, or what the re-enactor Mas Nicholas (M, 18, high school student) called "the image later". When I interviewed Mas Nicholas, I asked him whether a uniform or gun could be part of the *teatrikal* when it does not resemble those from that historical period. "Don't do it. Don't do it.", he answered, "It will *merusak citra nanti* ("ruin the image later")".

Authenticity and Authority over the Past

The drive for authenticity also plays a role in selecting "one or more best pictures" for their personal social media. During the *teatrikal*, many photographs are taken and they present a

careful selection publicly via their Instagram account. When modern items such as mobile phones are spotted, the re-enactors deem the photographs as "*foto bocor*" ("leaky photos"), because the present seeps in. Similarly, in previous *teatrikals*, smiling passerby and pens forgotten in pockets of costumes have made the photo "*bocor*" ("leak") or "*mengurangi nilai keindahan foto*" ("reduce the value of the beauty of the photo").

Besides the importance of re-enactment and costume in their photos, their Instagram page also constructs a discourse of authenticity by using Instagram's affordances and through the content of the photographs. Social media affordances can be seen as the perceived range of possible actions linked to the features of a social media platform (Bucher and Helmond 3). On the basis of such an understanding, three patterns can be discerned with which a discourse of historical accuracy is constructed, which invokes historical veracity.

The first pattern is constructed through the use of a filter, making photos black and white. This is a common technique in popular culture to simulate the look of historical photographs. It is also used in the second pattern that evokes authenticity: the re-enactment of historical photographs. Again, the Instagram filter is used to create a sense of authenticity, but memory is also actively embodied by positioning themselves similarly to the people on the original photo as well as copying the dress of the original photographed people.

The last pattern that can be recognised is the portrayal of the community's ostensible secondary activities. These range from visiting independence museums to clean weapons in the collections and taking detailed pictures of them; cleaning of monuments dedicated to the Indonesian War of Independence in fear of neglect; performing *teatrikals* at schools to educate the public; and conversing with the Chief of Staff of the Indonesian Air Force signifying military approval. All whilst dressed in historical costume.

This shows that there is no clear distinction between how the *teatrikals* are staged in costume and the activities beyond it. The images of these activities function as an additional argument for a claim to truth. It displays a further engagement with history and shows their relation with authoritative persons and institutions, constructing them too as authoritative. The image constructed on Instagram is one of diligent volunteers, thorough researchers, and good patriots. In all, this validates the re-enactors and their re-enactments. Costumes are thus continuously used in the discursive image of historical re-enactment.

In their use of Instagram's affordances and the careful selection of photos, media is used to perform a specific memory that combines local and national identity formation. A key aspect of this mediated culture of remembrance is how it is grounded in the concrete location that is Yogyakarta. The Indonesian historical re-enactments by Komunitas D45 are an example of such regional remembrance, producing local memory from the region of Yogyakarta. The secondary activities in particular underscore the politics of remembrance. It is a feeling, explicitly communicated by several community members, that the role of Yogyakarta in national history is underplayed when it comes to the Indonesian War of Independence. In particular, the idea that the Serangan Umum was not only an important battle for the city of Yogyakarta, but for the whole nation, as Indonesia put itself on the world map due to the battle. Authenticity and authority over the past is combined here into one event.

The 'Image' of Indonesian Historical Re-Enactment

I have tried to illustrate how Indonesian historical re-enactment forms performative memories through costume and media. Komunitas D45 constructs an idea of authenticity through the look and feel of their costumes. Moreover, in the way in which they position themselves through media, authenticity is constructed by black and white imagery, re-enactments of historical photographs, and their secondary activities. With this authenticity, Komunitas D45 creates a discourse of historical accuracy. But how do embodied memories and mediated memories come together?

There is no clear divide between embodiment and mediated memories as they are folded into each other for the re-enactors. Embodiment and mediated memory are two parts of the same coin. That coin being a mnemonic image-event. Re-enactment (costume) together with how it is subsequently presented (media) can be considered as what Karin Strassler has called an "image-event", that is, "a political process set in motion when a specific image or set of images erupts onto and intervenes in a social field, becoming a focal point of discursive and affective engagement across diverse publics" (9-10). The circulating depictions of the Serangan Umum, both through costume and media, constitute an unfolding mnemonic image-event that negotiates with democratic ideals from Indonesia's Reformasi movement such as "openness-accountability, authenticity, the free circulation of information, and popular participation" (9). In short, Komunitas D45 deals with the complex question of how to remember the Indonesian War of Independence.

Strassler's emphasis on the political in image-events, "in which images become the material ground of generative struggles to bring a collectivity into view and give shape to its future", not only relates to the past, but also the present (10). Both the local Yogyakarta and national Indonesian past during the Indonesian War of Independence are remembered simultaneously through the historical re-enactments. Authenticity in clothing and in the constructed online narrative is used as a tool for authority over the image of historical re-enactment in its threefold meaning: the likeness of the past they re-enact; how others perceive their re-enactment; and how they circulate the re-enactment to others. Thus, while Indonesian historical re-enactment searches authenticity in the past, it performs prosthetic memories for the future.

Acknowledgements

The research for this article was funded by a 'PhD in the Humanities' grant from the Dutch Research Council (NWO).

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Author Biography

Arnoud Arps, University of Amsterdam

Arnoud Arps is a lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Amsterdam. His PhD-project is funded by the Dutch Research Council and investigates how cultural memories of the Indonesian War of Independence are produced, constructed, and consumed through contemporary Indonesian popular culture.

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