

Original Article

Colonialism and Cultural Change in Indonesia

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Abstract:

This article discusses the entry and development of European cultural influences in Indonesia from the arrival of the Portuguese to the Dutch colonial period and its impact on social and cultural changes. The expansion of Europe driven by economic, political, and religious interests brought about changes in the fields of trade, administration, education, art, and culture. However, the people of the archipelago do not accept these influences passively, but respond to them through the process of acculturation. This process gave birth to the Indis culture as a form of mixing European and local cultures reflected in architecture, lifestyle, art, traditions, and culinary. This article emphasizes that the colonial cultural heritage in Indonesia is the result of cultural interaction and negotiation that forms Indonesia's multicultural identity.

Keywords: European colonialism, cultural acculturation, Indis culture

Introduction

Colonialism has been one of the most decisive historical processes shaping the social, cultural, and educational landscape of Indonesia. From the late fifteenth century onward, European expansion into the Indonesian archipelago marked the beginning of long-term interactions between Western powers and local societies. Initially driven by the rapid development of maritime technology and the pursuit of spice trade routes, European involvement gradually transformed into a complex system of political domination, economic exploitation, and cultural intervention. The Portuguese, followed by the Dutch through the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), established structures of power that reshaped indigenous social orders and introduced new cultural frameworks that continue to influence Indonesian society today (Poesponegoro & Notosusanto, 2019).

The urgency of examining European cultural influence in Indonesia lies in the enduring legacy of colonialism that remains visible in architecture, legal systems, education, language, culinary traditions, and artistic expressions. Recent international studies emphasize that colonial encounters were not merely processes of domination, but also sites of negotiation and cultural exchange that produced hybrid identities and practices (Rooyackers et al., 2024). This perspective challenges earlier colonial narratives that portrayed local societies as passive recipients of Western culture. Instead, contemporary scholarship highlights the active role of indigenous communities in adapting, modifying, and localizing foreign elements to suit their socio-cultural contexts (Ali et al., 2024).

One of the most significant outcomes of this interaction is the emergence of acculturation, defined as a dynamic process in which different cultures interact and influence each other without completely losing their original identities. In the Indonesian colonial context, acculturation gave rise to what is commonly referred to as Indis culture—a hybrid cultural formation combining European and local elements. Indis culture manifested not only in elite lifestyles but also in tangible forms such as architecture, urban planning, clothing styles, culinary traditions, and ceremonial practices. Studies in heritage and cultural history demonstrate that Indis architecture, for example, represents an adaptive response to tropical climates by blending European structural design with local environmental wisdom (Nugroho et al., 2023).

Beyond material culture, European colonialism also profoundly affected education and the arts. The Dutch colonial education system introduced Western-style schooling, literacy, and administrative knowledge, albeit with discriminatory access and colonial objectives. Nevertheless, these systems later became foundational to Indonesia's national education after independence (Gultom et al., 2020). In the field of arts and culture, colonial encounters facilitated the transfer of artistic techniques, themes, and institutional frameworks, which were later reinterpreted during the post-independence period to foster nationalism and cultural identity (Setyaningsih et al., 2011). Recent international research underscores that post-colonial art education in Indonesia cannot be separated from its colonial roots, as it reflects both resistance and adaptation to Western paradigms (Rooyackers et al., 2024).

Although numerous studies have addressed colonial influence in Indonesia, many tend to focus on specific sectors—such as architecture, law, or education—without integrating them into a broader cultural framework. Furthermore, existing research often discusses colonial heritage as static remnants of the past, rather than as living cultural elements shaped by ongoing processes of negotiation and reinterpretation. This gap highlights the need for a more comprehensive analysis that connects colonial cultural penetration, acculturation processes, and their long-term implications for Indonesian identity and cultural education.

Therefore, this article aims to analyze the process of European cultural entry into Indonesia and its subsequent acculturation with local culture, with particular attention to the emergence of Indis culture and its manifestations in

social life, arts, education, and material heritage. The novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach, which positions European cultural heritage not merely as a colonial legacy, but as a dynamic cultural product shaped by local agency and adaptation. By situating colonial influence within a broader framework of cultural negotiation, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Indonesia's multicultural identity and the historical roots of its cultural resilience.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative literature review method to analyze European cultural influence and acculturation processes in Indonesia during the colonial and post-colonial periods. The research design is based on secondary data obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and reputable scholarly publications relevant to colonialism, Indis culture, and arts and education in Indonesia. Data collection was conducted through systematic searches in academic databases using keywords such as "European colonialism in Indonesia," "cultural acculturation," and "Indis culture." The selected literature was limited to publications in English and Indonesian published within the last ten years to ensure relevance and academic credibility.

The inclusion criteria consisted of qualitative or historical studies that discuss material and non-material cultural aspects, including architecture, lifestyle, arts, education, and culinary traditions, with an emphasis on cultural adaptation and hybridity. The analysis technique used was thematic analysis, in which selected studies were grouped into key themes to identify patterns and synthesize conclusions from previous research. This method allows for a comprehensive interpretation of colonial cultural dynamics while maintaining analytical rigor suitable for historical and cultural studies (Riley, 2024).

Results

1. European Cultural Entry into Indonesia

The results indicate that the entry of European culture into Indonesia was closely linked to the development of European maritime technology and the expansion of global trade networks at the end of the fifteenth century. The Portuguese were the first European power to establish a presence in the archipelago, motivated by the desire to control spice trade routes that were previously dominated by Islamic kingdoms in the Middle East. Their arrival was marked by the construction of forts and churches, symbolizing the dual mission of trade monopoly and religious expansion (Poesponegoro & Notosusanto, 2019). This pattern of *fortaleza e igreja* became a visible marker of early European cultural penetration in regions such as Maluku.

The decline of Portuguese dominance paved the way for Dutch expansion through the establishment of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) in the early seventeenth century. The VOC introduced a more systematic and centralized form of colonial governance, emphasizing administrative efficiency, logistics, and territorial control from Batavia as its headquarters. These strategies

resulted in significant transformations in local political structures, urban organization, and economic systems (Harkantiningih, 2014). The findings confirm that European cultural entry was not merely cultural diffusion, but a structural process intertwined with power, trade, and governance.

2. Cultural Acculturation and the Emergence of Indis Culture

The results further reveal that European cultural dominance did not lead to total cultural replacement, but rather generated processes of acculturation between European and local Indonesian cultures. This interaction produced a hybrid cultural form known as Indis culture, which emerged particularly among Indo-European communities, Dutch elites, and indigenous aristocrats (*priyayi*) during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Gultom et al., 2020). Indis culture functioned as a social strategy, allowing indigenous elites to negotiate status and legitimacy within the colonial hierarchy while maintaining elements of local identity.

Manifestations of Indis culture are most clearly observed in architecture, lifestyle, rituals, and culinary practices. Indis architecture combined European symmetrical layouts with local adaptations such as wide verandas, high roofs, and natural ventilation suited to tropical climates (Nugroho et al., 2023). In everyday life, European dress codes and social etiquette were modified to suit local environmental and cultural contexts. Culinary acculturation is evident in dishes such as Javanese soup and *bistik*, which adapted European recipes using local spices and tastes, reflecting cultural negotiation at the most intimate social level (Susanti & Purwaningsih, 2013). These findings demonstrate that Indis culture represents a negotiated cultural synthesis rather than passive imitation.

3. Arts and Cultural Education during the Colonial and Early Independence Periods

The literature reviewed shows that European colonialism significantly influenced the development of arts and education in Indonesia, particularly through the introduction of Western education systems. During the Dutch colonial period, education was highly stratified and primarily designed to serve colonial interests by producing a skilled but low-cost labor force (Zuhairini, 2010). Nevertheless, colonial education introduced literacy, modern administrative knowledge, and Western artistic frameworks that later became foundational for post-independence educational development.

Following Indonesian independence (1945–1950), the results indicate a major reorientation of art and cultural education toward national identity formation. Artistic expressions in visual arts, literature, music, and performance were used as tools to promote nationalism, resistance, and collective memory of struggle (Setyaningsih et al., 2011). The establishment of art organizations and institutions such as ASRI and various artists' unions played a crucial role in shaping Indonesia's post-colonial art education landscape (Suradi, 1986). These findings

highlight that colonial legacies in education and the arts were not rejected outright but reinterpreted to serve new ideological and cultural goals.

4. European Cultural Heritage and Its Contemporary Significance

The final results emphasize that European cultural heritage continues to shape contemporary Indonesian society across multiple sectors. Architectural remains such as Lawang Sewu, Gedung Sate, Fort Rotterdam, and Batavia's old city illustrate the enduring material legacy of colonial urban planning and architectural styles (Nugroho et al., 2023). In addition, European influence persists in legal and administrative systems, particularly through the adoption of the Continental European legal framework, including the Criminal Code derived from Dutch law (Poesponegoro & Notosusanto, 2019).

The findings also show that European cultural influence extends to religion, education, language, culinary traditions, and technology. Christian institutions established during the colonial period remain active, while Western-style education systems became the basis of Indonesia's national education framework after independence. Linguistic absorption of Dutch vocabulary and the integration of European-derived foods into everyday cuisine further demonstrate the depth of cultural interaction (Harkantiningasih, 2014). Overall, the results confirm that European cultural heritage in Indonesia represents a dynamic legacy shaped by adaptation, continuity, and local agency, contributing to Indonesia's multicultural identity rather than merely reflecting colonial domination.

Conclusion

This study concludes that European cultural influence in Indonesia developed through a long historical process beginning with trade expansion and colonial domination, which later evolved into complex social and cultural interactions. The findings show that European presence, particularly during the Portuguese and Dutch periods, introduced new systems in governance, education, arts, and daily life that reshaped local structures. However, these influences did not eliminate indigenous culture, but instead encouraged cultural adaptation and negotiation that resulted in hybrid forms such as Indis culture. Therefore, European cultural heritage in Indonesia represents a dynamic legacy formed through interaction, resilience, and local agency that contributes to the multicultural identity of Indonesian society.

Suggestion

This study suggests that future research further explores European cultural heritage in Indonesia using interdisciplinary approaches and localized case studies to deepen understanding of cultural adaptation processes. Greater attention should also be given to the role of arts and education in preserving and reinterpreting colonial cultural heritage within contemporary Indonesian society. Such efforts may support the development of cultural

education and heritage awareness that aligns with national identity and historical continuity.

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