

# Retrospection of Historical Traces: A Hypersemiotic Study on the Use of KNIL Uniforms in Contemporary Social Discourse

Andrian Dektisa H.

Visual Communication Design Petra Christian University

*Email* andrian@petra.ac.id

## ABSTRAK

Rumusan permasalahan dalam kajian ini digunakan untuk menjawab pertanyaan bagaimanakah seragam tentara kolonial Belanda pada jaman perang kemerdekaan yang digunakan oleh anak muda pada jaman kini. Aktivitas sosial kontemporer yang dilakukan insan-insan berkarakteristik tentara kolonial itu menghasilkan tanda-tanda yang digunakan untuk mengkaji ulang stigma sosial tentang serdadu KNIL. Mengapa hipersemiotika digunakan dalam pembentukan opini yang kontras dengan pandangan mainstream turun temurun yang berlaku di Indonesia tentang tentara kolonial Belanda yang kejam dan jahat pada bangsa Indonesia? Tujuannya untuk menjelaskan aktivitas sosial kontemporer yang dilakukan beberapa anak muda Indonesia yang mempunyai riwayat keturunan tentara KNIL. Menjelaskan aktivitas sosial kontemporer melalui unggahan di media sosial milik para anak muda tersebut dalam upaya penciptaan sikap-sikap retrospektif pada jejak-jejak historis eksistensi tentara KNIL di Hindia Belanda. Hasil kajian ini adalah menjelaskan aktivitas yang dilakukan objek penelitian sebagai konstruksi tanda dengan konsep yang merujuk pada pengaburan batas-batas antara tanda, simbol, dan kenyataan, di mana makna dapat menjadi ambigu atau memiliki banyak lapisan interpretasi. Tanda itu adalah perwujudan dari apa yang dipahami sebagai tanda yang melampaui semiotika klasik serta menjadi bentuk hipersemiotika. Konstruksi-konstruksi tanda baru itu menghasilkan suatu artikulasi yang dimaknai sebagai bentuk resistensi pada kondisi yang sedang berlaku. Stigma yang diwariskan turun temurun tentang serdadu KNIL yang kejam dan jahat akan diubah dengan cara pandang positif. Suatu ungkapan retrospektif tentang serdadu KNIL dalam eksistensinya pada masa kolonial Belanda.

**Kata kunci:** impresi serdadu KNIL, sosial kontemporer, hipersemiotika, retrospektif

## Introduction

A reenactor, known in Indonesian as a "peraya," is a term for history enthusiasts who engage in the practice of donning costumes and embodying or reenacting battles from the past. The impressions they create are meant to replicate the persona of soldiers from bygone eras. In one social media account, a researcher discovered a photograph of an Indonesian reenactor dressed authentically as a KNIL soldier from 1940. The photo was accompanied by a narrative describing himself and a friend, who happens to be the great-grandchild of a spandrig, a low-ranking officer in the KNIL. His friend's great-grandfather served from 1929 until his retirement and passed away in 1946. Another great-grandfather also served in the

KNIL, stationed in Kedungkebo, Purworejo, at the same military barracks as his friend's ancestor.

The narrative reveals that these two individuals are immensely proud and deeply enjoy life as the great-grandchildren of KNIL soldiers. Much of Indonesia's independence history tends to discredit the Dutch and the KNIL forces. Some former TNI officers, who were later declared national heroes, are known to have concealed their KNIL backgrounds.

What these two young men express stands in stark contrast to the prevailing narrative. To them, being the descendants of KNIL soldiers is a source of pride. Their KNIL ancestors are not seen as mere colonial oppressors. Like many other Indonesians who take pride in their ancestors' lives, they view the KNIL as professional soldiers rather than a brutal, bloodthirsty entity waging war against their own people.

The social media post by the reenactor is just one of many portrayals of visual impressions of life as a KNIL soldier. It is part of the euphoria surrounding the excitement of reenactments related to historical battles that took place in Indonesia during the colonial era. The practice of reenactment, or the re-enactment of battles, has become a favored and popular activity in Indonesia over the past decade. This is especially true during the commemoration of national holidays, such as the August 17 Independence Day, the November 10 Heroes' Day, the March 1 General Offensive, and others. During these commemorations, reenactors dress as authentically as possible to represent the military groups involved in the conflicts. For example, during the November 10 Heroes' Day commemoration, some dress as freedom fighters, while others don the uniforms of British forces. The use of costumes and impressions during the commemoration of national historical events prioritizes authenticity, with a focus on creating visually and interactively engaging impressions. This approach has become an appealing alternative source of learning. Reenactors create educational content on history through their reenactment activities, which they share on social media.

In the research conducted, it was found that the commemoration of battles, besides being linked to national interests, is also associated with destination branding, historical education (Hagijanto, 2021), contemporary urban lifestyle activities, and more. It was also discovered that the choice of impressions by certain groups of soldiers was not solely due to the reenactment scenario. Instead, Dutch or British military uniforms were chosen because they were perceived as more prestigious and "cool." Wearing them made the wearer appear more gallant and handsome, especially if the costumes were authentic and adhered to the original standards. Instantly, a fashionable visual character impression is created. Beyond their high cost, authentic imported uniforms also convey an image of wealth. From a postcolonial study perspective, this phenomenon represents a form of hybridity linked to psychoanalytic factors (Hagijanto, 2017).

The material object of this research is the phenomenon of reenactors donning KNIL uniforms and openly expressing personal reasons for doing so, such as portraying their great-grandfather, a spandrig from the Kedungkebo barracks. The photos and narratives posted by reenactors on social media were done outside the context of reenactment activities. It appears that this has become an expression of contemporary lifestyle, portraying colonial soldiers not merely as part of a nostalgic military costume activity. Today's youth openly imagine and visually replicate the figure of their great-grandfather, expressing appreciation and proudly sharing their KNIL heritage along with narratives of pride in being a KNIL descendant.



**Image 1.** Various activities of the material object's figure in the impression of a KNIL soldier alongside fellow descendants of KNIL spandrig.

**Source:**

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2175025969528786&set=a.314242882273780>

This is not merely an impression of the KNIL figure within the living history activities but, in this research, it is interpreted as a form of articulation. This activity is seen as an expression of signs in re-examining the social stigma against KNIL soldiers. In other words, the material object becomes a phenomenon related to a "semiotic event." This is an intriguing aspect and serves as an operationalization of syntactic concepts, wherein the structure allows the event to transcend its visual object status and transform into a sign—a sign that interrelates with others. Consequently, there is an opportunity for new configurations and meanings to emerge, turning this into a semantic event because it offers specific and contextual meanings—meanings that can be expanded or renewed over time.

Ultimately, the phenomenon of fantasizing about the figure of a KNIL great-grandfather is a form of pragmatism that seems to highlight the importance of context in the use and interpretation of signs to create meaning. This relates to how signs are used and interpreted

within the context of real-world communication, including the sign user's intent and the sign's effect on the recipient. It encompasses the social use of signs, such as the role of context, communicative intent, and the recipient's response, which is highly dynamic and evolves with time. In this research, the concept of pragmatism is employed as a preliminary hypothesis for the emergence of signs that are complex, profound, and not easily understood. The visualizations posted on Facebook about a grandchild fantasizing as their KNIL great-grandfather demonstrate that media plays a role in shaping and disseminating these signs. The photos of reenactors portraying their KNIL great-grandfathers and the accompanying narratives of pride in these ancestors on Facebook illustrate how the meaning of historical events can be disseminated and reinterpreted in a modern context. Social media becomes a space where historical symbols can interact and shift in meaning as public discourse evolves.

### **Research Methods**

This research is qualitative and employs a descriptive analysis approach. The data collection techniques used include literature review, observation, and interviews. Data collection was conducted using the Facebook application. Data analysis was performed using Barthesian semiology, where the material objects posted on the interviewee's Facebook account were treated as the denotative aspect. The researcher captured images of these posts to facilitate analysis.

The theory of hypersemiotics from a visual culture perspective serves as the formal object, functioning as the connotative aspect. The interpretation of the relationship between these two objects forms the basis of argumentation or myth. The initial hypothesis is that the visual culture operating on the material object creates new signs, which the researcher understands as complex and intricately created signs that emphasize the narrative of a retrospective attitude toward the KNIL soldier figure from the pre-World War II era in Indonesia's historical trajectory. This type of research model is an alternative that can be used as a form of visual studies within the discipline of Visual Communication Design.

### **Content/Results and Study**

#### **1. KNIL Ancestor Soldiers**

On December 4, 1830, Governor-General Van Den Bosch issued the decree *Algemeene Orders voor het Nederlandsch-Oost-Indische leger*, which established the militia forces known as the *Oost-Indische Leger* (East Indies Army). This force was composed of indigenous soldiers stationed in the Dutch East Indies. Following a recommendation by King Willem I, these indigenous militia groups were incorporated into the Dutch Royal Army. In

addition to the indigenous troops, members of the KNIL were also recruited from slaves originating from Ghana, Africa. This force operated outside the structure of the Royal Army and was solely responsible for protecting Dutch East Indies interests from rebellions and security threats both within and beyond the archipelago.

When Hendrik Colijn was appointed Prime Minister of the Netherlands in 1933, the East Indies militia was officially recognized and became part of the Dutch Royal Army under the name Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger (KNIL). This recognition came about because Hendrik Colijn was a former officer in the Oost-Indische Leger. The KNIL subsequently served alongside the Koninklijk Landmacht, which was composed exclusively of Dutch personnel. The KNIL (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army) was an official military organization of the Dutch Kingdom from 1830 until its dissolution in 1950. Its members were of various ethnicities and races, including indigenous people from the Dutch East Indies, Indo (mixed Dutch descent), other foreigners not of Dutch origin, and ethnic Dutch who were typically appointed as officers or leaders. Among the KNIL units, the proportion of Dutch soldiers was the smallest compared to other ethnicities. Besides the KNIL, the Dutch also had another unit stationed in the Dutch East Indies known as the Koninklijk Landmacht (KL). The KL soldiers were exclusively Dutch, with no mixed-race or other ethnicities included (van Meel, 1990:65-66).

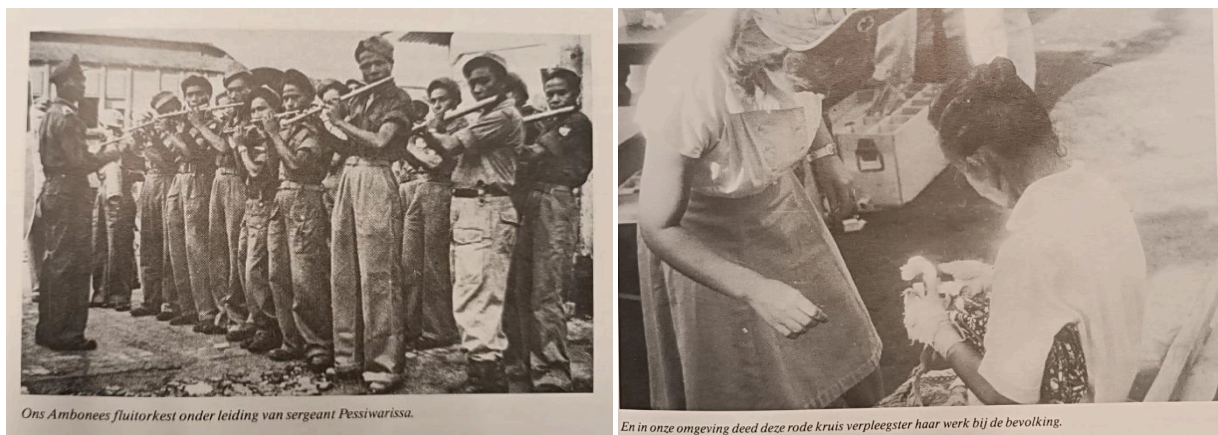
According to Frederick and Soeroto (1983) in (Matanasi, 2012:108), the ratio of European to indigenous officers and soldiers in the Dutch military in 1830 was as follows: only 5% of all officers were indigenous. The number of indigenous non-commissioned officers and soldiers was 60%, while Europeans made up 40%. After the Diponegoro War, the Dutch army consisted of 603 European officers, 37 indigenous officers, 5,699 European non-commissioned officers and soldiers, and 7,206 indigenous non-commissioned officers and soldiers.

By 1936, the number of indigenous soldiers in the KNIL had reached 33,000, or 71% of the total KNIL force, including about 4,000 Ambonese, 5,000 Manado, and 13,000 Javanese. KNIL soldiers received a relatively high monthly salary compared to the average income in the Dutch East Indies. In 1930, a newly graduated indigenous KNIL soldier earned 105 guilders per month, a significant amount at that time, which led many to lead a lavish lifestyle. Although indigenous officers received the same salary as their European counterparts, they faced different social treatment. Indigenous officers were prohibited from using public facilities such as ballroom rooms and swimming pools, and were not entitled to the same leave rights as European officers.

Several national figures were recorded as members of the KNIL and some later became national heroes, including Soeharto, Mangkunegara VII, Sultan Hamid II, Oerip Soemohardjo, Alex Kawilarang, Abdul Haris Nasution, Gatot Soebroto, and Tahi Bonar

Simatupang. Some of these individuals played significant roles in the Indonesian National Army. There were thousands of names not recognized as national figures due to their service in the KNIL. Being part of the KNIL was one of the career choices during the colonial period, alongside other professions such as trading, farming, labor, and teaching. Serving as a KNIL soldier was a prestigious and honorable profession, especially during the time when the Dutch East Indies was part of the Dutch Kingdom.

This situation continued during the KNIL era after the Japanese occupation. The Dutch were part of the Allied forces. The portrayal and image of the KNIL are generally understood to be associated with warfare. The KNIL was part of the enemy forces, creating only brutality and horror. The KNIL Andjing NICA was remembered as a bloodthirsty enemy force. There is a significant difference between the KNIL soldiers before World War II and those after World War II. The conflict in the KNIL between 1946 and 1950 (post-World War II) was colored by the collective awareness of the Indonesian people defending their independence and rejecting the Dutch. The inevitability of being a free nation since August 1945 meant that the KNIL was not 'accepted' as it was before World War II. Post-World War II KNIL faced increasing conflict escalation and was heavily involved in fighting against the people who wanted to remain independent. Due to pressure both domestically and internationally, and with the acknowledgment of Indonesia's sovereignty by the Dutch, the KNIL was disbanded in 1950. Some soldiers joined the TNI (Indonesian National Army), while others returned to the Netherlands. Not all KNIL soldiers were combatants; some served as medical personnel who assisted and helped people in their duties, while others were religious workers and musicians. As illustrated in S.A. Lapré's book titled "*Het ANDJING NICA Bataljon (KNIL) in Nederlands-Indië (1945-1950)*", the book contains photographic documentation of KNIL personnel who served in non-combat roles, as shown in the following photo:



**Image 2.** Historical Exposé of KNIL Soldiers in Non-Combat Activities  
**Source:** Pages 47 and 91 of the book *Het ANDJING NICA Bataljon (KNIL) in Nederlands-Indië (1945-1950)*



The KNIL soldiers before World War II (WWII) generally did not face serious threats compared to the conditions after WWII. They were involved in several internal military conflicts against indigenous rebels, including the Padri War (1821–1845), the Java War or Diponegoro War (1825–1830), the Bali War (1849), and the Aceh War (1873–1904). After the Diponegoro War, the situation in Java was relatively stable with fewer disturbances from rebellions.

Being a KNIL soldier with a relatively high salary was a source of pride for many. The salary provided a comfortable and secure lifestyle at that time. The history of the KNIL soldiers, from a visual communication perspective today, has become a text—one full of discourse and ripe for interpretation. There are many aspects of this topic that might still be unknown or underexplored. The profession of being a KNIL soldier during the Dutch East Indies era was considered a prestigious and well-paid occupation among the local population. This is evident in the following poster



**Image 3.** Recruitment Advertisement for KNIL Soldiers in 1910 (Pre-WWII KNIL), Featuring High Salary Offer. **Source :** <https://www.google.com/search>

As a mercenary tasked with maintaining security and order against internal disturbances, such as rebellions within the Dutch East Indies, the KNIL has continued to attract significant attention as a historical entity. Many young enthusiasts and historians of Indonesian history explore and seek out new, previously unexposed aspects of this history. One notable example is the active involvement of Indonesian reenactment groups.

## 2. Narratives and Characteristics of KNIL Soldiers as Signifiers

War not only generates conflict but also propagates advantageous propaganda for the warring parties. Media typically portray the enemy as wrong, cruel, and instigators of war. Similarly, the media of the opposing side do the same. The notion that history is written by

the victors is a classic understanding still believed today. However, this dictum can be challenged over time as various perspectives, discourses, and alternative studies on war events emerge.

Various perspectives continue to reinterpret war events from different viewpoints. War events become deconstructed and redefined (Hagijanto, 2022). Alternative and even contradictory war narratives to the established ones appear. Counter-discourses against the status quo perspective proliferate. The definition of the victor is no longer rigid. Historical writing is no longer exclusively from the viewpoint of those who defeated their enemies but also from those who suffered the most in the war. Historical accounts also emerge from groups that were not involved in the conflict at all. History can be written by those who chronicle the stories of those utterly defeated in warfare. Everything is possible within the framework of ontological concepts characterized by deconstructivist-postmodernist approaches.

In the current era of freedom of expression and social media euphoria, the way history is written has become extraordinary, even unimaginable before. Historians can come from those who lack a deep understanding of history. In the name of content enthusiasm, anyone can present history. Historical content can be written with great freedom. Historical distortions are also created, and fake or hoax content about history is produced. The authenticity of history is blurred for specific interests, to gain a platform or as a gesture of appreciation for certain groups. Politically contested entities also build false narratives. Lies are created by discrediting or glorifying certain groups related to their role in historical events. This includes dramatization of heroic figures using specific visual articulations. The glorification of figures as national heroes or role models is part of the effort to form idealized images of heroes, founding fathers, and so on. This represents a typical New Order perspective on historical representation (Hagijanto, 2021).

In the world of reenactment in Indonesia, historical exploration is also conducted. It involves a visual interactive strategy of learning history through reenactment. This takes the form of recreating past wars. Reenactors mimic the characteristics (or popularly known as impressions) of soldiers involved in the wars they are reenacting. In making impressions, reenactors use comprehensive and highly detailed historical documentation, prioritizing authenticity. Small details that may be overlooked by mainstream media often become subjects of debate. For example, whether camouflage uniforms or the M-1 Garand rifle were used during the November 10th battle, or critiquing details in war films after watching them together. This type of historical exploration also generates critical discourse on historical presentations, particularly narratives that tend to accommodate regime interests. Generally, military history and the history of Indonesia's independence struggle written by the New Order regime often face challenges to their objectivity and critical perspectives.



The impression of Pre-WWII KNIL soldiers receives less interest compared to impressions of Post-WWII KNIL soldiers. Although there is no existing research to explain this phenomenon, it is suspected to be related to artificial factors. The visual representation of pre-WWII KNIL characteristics appears less engaging. Reenactors tend to favor impressions that convey a sense of modernity, popularity, completeness, and sophistication. Impressions of KNIL from 1946-1950 clearly reflect the styles of American and British troops, further supported by their status as victors of World War II. The outfits resembling the winning characters enhance psychological appeal. The following is a comparison of the characteristics of KNIL appearances before and after WWII.



**Image 4.** Characteristics of KNIL troops before WWII (left) and after WWII (right).

**Source:** <https://historia.id/militer/articles/knil>.

The Allied troops' appearance gained popularity due to its exposure in Hollywood war films, evolving into a military fashion trend. Reenactors naturally prefer impressions that appear more fashionable. It seems that pre-WWII KNIL impressions are less popular due to the limited scope of the conflicts involved. The wars fought by pre-WWII KNIL soldiers were primarily against rebellions, not nation-to-nation treaties. Additionally, the weaponry used for reenacting pre-WWII soldiers appears outdated, old-fashioned, and traditional. This makes the impression seem less glamorous as it lacks the modern arsenal that both impresses and creates a fetish among reenactors.

Therefore, if today's youth express their fantasy by imitating pre-WWII KNIL soldiers, which is considered less attractive, it seems to be a sign of something specific. This sign is interpreted as unique, different, quirky, and certainly intriguing for research. Particularly, the impressions created by reenactors with KNIL heritage reflect a joyful attitude and a sentimental expression of affection and longing for the experiences of their great-grandparents. Reenactors appear to be reliving their ancestors' lifestyle, showcasing their love and pride for their forebears, who were esteemed for their profession as soldiers, just like ancestors who were teachers, religious leaders, or local officials. It is a

demonstration of pride in a profession that continues to be aspired to today. The military remains a pillar of societal order and security, a fact that has been true since the Dutch East Indies era. Most people at that time had not yet contemplated the notion of independence or considered the soldiers as adversaries to be fought against.

Reenactors or enthusiasts, who are generally history lovers, often use visual impressions of wartime figures as a form of historical learning euphoria. Many reenactors enjoy portraying enemy forces from the Indonesian War of Independence, including KNIL troops, who are traditionally viewed as antagonists or enemies. This stigma is inherited and preserved in the minds of many Indonesians. However, it is intriguing that the impression of KNIL, known as villains, is expressed with pride and enthusiasm. This is a departure from the norm, as in many countries, people avoid or even disdain the characteristics of former enemies. In Indonesia, however, enemy costumes are celebrated and admired as fetish objects. This phenomenon is fascinating and represents an articulative expression. It represents the beginning of a sign—one that is not easily understood or merely an artificial but complex sign. It is a sign that requires detailed explanation of its creation, the relationships between signs, and its pragmatic context. Hence, the expression of pride in 'becoming' a villain and the narrative of being a KNIL descendant, as showcased on Facebook, is a layered and complex sign.

Yasraf Amir Piliang (2003) explains that hypersemiotics is the study of the roles and meanings of signs in social life. People generally understand semiotics better than hypersemiotics. While both deal with objects, signs, and meanings, hypersemiotics encompasses a broader scope than traditional semiotics. This expansion arises from additional dimensions brought by digital interactions and mass media. The fundamental difference lies in the prefix 'hyper,' meaning 'more' or 'beyond,' as semiotics studies the relationship between signs and their representation of reality. Semiotics views meaning as relatively stable and predictable based on existing rules and conventions. In contrast, hypersemiotics sees meaning as dynamic, dependent on context and interaction within a network of signs. This represents a complex and layered relationship. While semiotics focuses on analyzing sign systems in a structured and systematic manner using verbal and visual language, hypersemiotics relies on the context of digital and mass media, where interacting signs are unstructured, patterned, unpredictable, and unconventional. Semiotic analysis, aimed at understanding signs and their meanings, appears more systematic, while the approach of hypersemiotics is more flexible and critical, as it considers the influence of technology, media, and popular culture. To examine signs created by individuals, Hanafi presents an analytical framework that begins with an analysis of individual signs, then proceeds to typologies of signs (indexes, icons, symbols) and analyzes the meaning of signs to produce the desired representation (Hanafi, 2019). Both semiotics and hypersemiotics fundamentally seek to study how humanity engages with things and imbues them with meaning.

Meaning-making implies that objects, aside from communicating, also constitute a structured system of signs (Sobur, 2001, p. 15). Barthes' semiotics represents an evolution of Saussurean semiotics, focusing on the relationship between the signifier and the signified within a sign. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is not one of similarity but of equivalence. Thus, it is not a matter of transferring meaning but of how the relationship between the two unites them (Kurniawan, 2022).

A sign is essentially a representation of phenomena possessing criteria such as names, labels, roles, functions, purposes, and desires. Signs can take the form of words, gestures, lights, flags, films, buildings, literature, or songs. In the data analysis for this research, the system of signifiers involves characteristics of KNIL soldiers before World War II and writings on Facebook, while the signified refers to the mental image or concept associated with the sign. The relationship between the physical presence of the sign and its mental concept is termed signification. In other words, signification is the effort to assign meaning to the world. Therefore, in this research, which focuses on meaning within signs or signification, Barthes' concept implies that hypersemiotic analysis still employs semiotic methods. Hypersemiotics thus represents the expression of the form of the signified, while uncovering signification as its relationship remains within the realm of semiotics (Djamereng, 2018).

Hypersemiotic study is also described as the science of exploring the relationships between hyper signs and their representations in social life, where meanings transcend the boundaries of reality, as discussed by Rahardjo & Damajanti (2016). As social dynamics and media evolve, semiotics has also progressed to become more modern. Beyond classic issues of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic understanding, hypersemiotics is often seen as a form of 'modern' semiotics due to its consideration of the additional complexities arising from the interaction of signs within the digital and mass media era. Technology is considered a crucial factor influencing how signs are used and interpreted.

Hypersemiotics is often associated with critical theories that view signs as dynamic and contextual entities. Hypersemiotics examines signs within complex networks of interaction, particularly in digital media, where signs are continuously produced, reproduced, and reinterpreted. The emphasis of hypersemiotics lies in how digital technology, social media, and popular culture influence the usage and interpretation of signs. Hypersemiotics is particularly useful for understanding the new complexities and dynamics of modern communication, where meaning is perpetually unstable and unstructured. Meaning is always open to reinterpretation without limit. This is further elucidated by Piliang (2009: 54-59) in defining the scope of hypersemiotics (Hanafi, 2019). Both forms of semiotics can evolve into what Peirce describes as an unlimited semiosis. In hypersemiotics, the rapid and expansive nature of technological influence facilitates the easy and swift distribution and modification of signs. Every interpretation on social media can trigger new interpretations and evolving meanings. Additionally, signs created through this process become

interconnected within a complex and limitless network of meanings, leading to increasingly intricate and layered layers of meaning.

This unlimited semiosis indicates that meaning is never final. Signs are always open to new interpretations. This process fosters significant flexibility and dynamism in meaning creation. Similar to hypersemiotics, when signs and meanings are viewed as dynamic and ever-evolving entities, unlimited semiotics reveals a continuous process of endless interpretation. Signs generate other signs (i.e., new signs) in an unending cycle, creating an ever-more complex and multilayered network of meanings.

### 3. The Euphoria of Retrospective Signs of the Enemy

Reenactors, aiming to be as authentic as possible in their events, transform into contemporary figures who seem to mimic the conflicts depicted in the epic history of the Indonesian War of Independence. These dramatized conflicts, presented as theatrical or socio-drama performances, have become popular objects of historical education today. Nationalism is not only learned, understood, and preserved through books and historical war films; authentic military uniforms and reenactment games serve as modern educational resources. This contemporary approach to learning history is more interactive and visually oriented. Learning history by becoming a reenactor is an extraordinary method. It involves not just replicating figures and impressions but also delving into historical artifacts that have yet to be exposed. Such artifacts include stories behind the construction of ancient colonial buildings, historical manuscripts stored outside museums, and other historical elements that remain undiscovered. For instance, the Tugu Pahlawan Museum has recently added collections sourced from the heirs of soldiers or from artifacts unearthed during construction excavations.

In further developments, reenactors no longer merely replicate soldiers from the past but in reenactment, individuals often portray not only military figures but also civilians or non-military personnel from the colonial era, such as district officers, traders, or plantation staff. These non-military characters, with their distinct and authentic visual traits, offer a different perspective compared to the military costumes and accessories. Their unique characteristics, prominently featured in historical visual documentation, include specific styles of clothing, grooming, and accessories like shoes and pocket watches. This approach to reenactment, known as living history, diverges from traditional war commemorations. It focuses on the everyday lives and roles of people from the past rather than military conflict. Such reenactments are increasingly popular among enthusiasts and content creators, with social media playing a significant role in supporting and amplifying this interest. Major cities with colonial artifacts are now promoting their old town areas as heritage tourism sites, and photography communities are actively capturing these historical settings. Living history

and reenactment have become integral to contemporary social life, reflecting significant changes driven by technological advancements, globalization, sociopolitical shifts, and growing environmental awareness. These transformations present new challenges and opportunities for individuals, communities, and governments alike.

Social media and contemporary phenomena create complex interactions between social and technological elements. On these platforms, signs are highly flexible, and their meanings can shift rapidly and become varied. Interpretation of these signs is equally flexible. For instance, a photo of a reenactor in a KNIL uniform, accompanied by various hashtags and contextual references, can be linked to a range of meanings beyond the costume itself. Anything can be attached to it—such as a travel destination brand, a playful comparison to a “playboy” character, or even culinary references. The photo transitions from being merely an object to a sign with broad, unrestricted meanings that evolve with trends or current events. Moreover, when considering the potential for a photo to go viral, the sign can spread quickly and influence many people. This creates a potential for new, unexpected meanings that are difficult to predict.

Social media creates opportunities for direct interaction between sign creators and their audiences. Users can comment, share, or add new meanings to existing signs. This results in a dialogue between signs within the same object and has the potential to create dynamic and layered signs or meanings. Social media connects people from various cultural backgrounds, leading to diverse interpretations of signs. A symbol or expression with a positive meaning in one culture might have a contrasting meaning in another.

Social media and contemporary phenomena significantly influence the creation and evolution of signs and new meanings within the context of hypersemiotics. Hypersemiotics allows signs to be understood not just as creations or usages in the digital realm but also in how they interact, evolve, and change within a broader, more complex, and dynamic environment. Through interactions among users, digital technology, and social changes, signs continuously transform and dynamically evolve in modern communication.

A contradictory sign arises from the material object of a reenactor dressed in KNIL uniforms with a narrative of his ancestor, a spandrig officer. This position was relatively high for native soldiers within the Dutch forces. Most laypeople might view this as an opposing object, an antagonistic figure that seems glorified. This enemy soldier, honored and exalted by his descendants in the name of historical learning, represents a contemporary phenomenon of sign and meaning play from a hypersemiotic perspective. This is akin to well-known social and political movements on social media. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement is an international activist effort against racism, discrimination, and inequality faced by Black people in the United States (Sulfihas, 2021). Another example is the Me Too movement, initiated by Tarana Burke in 2006 to combat sexual harassment and

violence. Both of these movements have created new signs and symbols with strong social impact and serve as important communication tools for addressing social and political issues.

In hypersemiotics, the creation of signs and meanings can occur freely and dynamically. Reenactors create signs that oppose the typical stigma of KNIL soldiers as colonial oppressors. This underscores that signs and meanings can be reshaped and interpreted differently from conventional understanding. It becomes a form of juxtaposition, placing two elements side by side to highlight their contrasts or similarities. The KNIL figure as a colonial oppressor contrasts with the KNIL figure reinterpreted as something other than an oppressor.

The sign creator views the colonial soldier from a different perspective—not as an oppressor but as an ancestor to be objectively regarded and appreciated. This signifies a complex experience not common to most people. The creation of an alternative narrative for the KNIL soldier could shift the focus from the role of colonial soldiers as oppressors to something more positive and constructive, akin to the philosophy of ‘mikul duwur mendem jero’—honoring and remembering one’s ancestors.

Thus, the figure of the KNIL ancestor is used by reenactors to create a symbol and meaning of value. The KNIL ancestor becomes a symbol representing colonial soldiers in a different context—one of family exemplary status. The history of the nation's struggle can also be learned from the exemplary figure of the ancestor. The proud KNIL ancestor, who never fought against his own people, becomes a symbol of honor and military expertise, enriching the narrative with positive connotations.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations.**

The use of costumes and impressions mimicking the KNIL ancestor is no longer merely for show or admiration. Posts on social media featuring these impressions are accompanied by expressions of longing and admiration for the nostalgic figure of the ancestor. This nostalgic fantasy creates a new sign and meaning. The dominant old symbol that stigmatized colonial soldiers has been deconstructed, giving rise to a new meaning. This new symbol is not directly tied to colonialism. Social media enables the exploration of objects, transforming them into new signs and symbols that achieve social consensus. Contested symbols lead to new affirmations. It is a given that the meaning of signs is never final and is always subject to reinterpretation, as dictated by the notion of unlimited semiosis.

In hypersemiotics, the figure of the KNIL ancestor is no longer rigidly viewed as a colonial soldier, contrasting with traditional semiotics. Instead, this figure is seen as a courageous



individual who had a career for the benefit of his family—a responsible man who achieved a dignified and high-quality life socially and economically. Such meanings are aimed to be understood and affirmed through interactions on social media, including comments and discussions, which may lead to new interpretations and expressions of meaning. Thus, the process of meaning-making becomes expansive and appreciative.

In a family-oriented society, stories or content about colonial soldiers may not be easily understood as appreciative. However, from an appreciative perspective, such signs accommodate the human and empathetic side of understanding a family's true nature. This approach also triggers the creation of retrospective attitudes towards the KNIL figure—soldiers perceived as humane and empathetic, rather than as cruel and malevolent colonizers.

On the other hand, the figure of the KNIL ancestor creates a new discourse in relation to historical objectivity. It involves unearthing and examining historical truths from various perspectives to create a more comprehensive and open understanding. While it is undeniable that new interpretations may spark public debate and discussions, potentially leading to opposing discourses, particularly from groups who feel marginalized due to their colonial suffering, it is believed that differing interpretations will open spaces for dialogue and reconciliation. Groups previously opposed to a constructive view of KNIL history may become more aware of alternative discourses. Through retrospective discourse, these groups might come to accept and understand the new perspectives. This becomes part of the societal experience in relation to life. Societies continuously encounter various perspectives and learn from historical events. From this learning process, they can gain insights into the past to build a more comprehensive and objective future regarding historical events related to the KNIL.

In a dynamic and complex process influenced by social interactions, digital technology, and cultural contexts, hypersemiotic studies hold significant potential as a channel for creating new signs and meanings that lead to retrospective narratives. These narratives are 'constructive,' presenting opposition and contrast to common stigma. This opens up new opportunities for dialogue in the pursuit of objective understanding, becoming a conduit for historical learning. Hypersemiotics also allows for more flexible and rich explorations of meaning. It enables the emergence of new, contrasting signs and meanings that are retrospective or revisiting history to create a positive depiction of the KNIL's historical footprint.

Recommendations for future research include:

Quantitative Methods: Measure the effectiveness of audience understanding of signs and meanings of the impressions on social media users regarding the material objects of the

reenactors. This could involve assessing how effectively these signs are communicated and understood.

**Comparative Studies:** Compare reenactment impressions of KNIL soldiers with historical wartime KNIL figures to gauge the level of authenticity and similarity in impressions.

**Qualitative Research:** Explore postcolonial hybridization theories regarding the authenticity of reenactment impressions of the KNIL ancestor. This could involve analyzing how these impressions fit within the framework of postcolonial theory.

**Cultural and Visual Theory Analysis:** Analyze costumes and props used in reenactments from the perspective of visual culture, particularly using Malcolm Barnard's theory of fashion as visual communication tools.

**Simulation and Simulacra Theory:** Employ Baudrillard's theory of simulation and simulacra to analyze the objects and impressions used by reenactors. This could provide insights into how these impressions create and reflect meaning in a hyperreal context.

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