

MAGIC AND WITCHCRAFT IN CURRENT INDONESIAN HORROR FILMS***Diah A. Esfandari***Telkom University
esfandari@telkomuniversity.ac.id/esfandari@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

During the former President Soeharto's regime (or the New Order) in 1966-1998, films were vehicles for the creation of a national culture intended to implement its development policies and more generally its authoritarian rule. There were guidelines on what to say, what not to say and who could speak in which medium. Every film produced during the New Order, had a narrative structure that moved from order through disorder to a restoration of the order. However, since the fall of the New Order, there is a re-emergence of Javanese cultural identity (known as *kejawen* or *kebatinan*) through the second boom of Indonesia's horror film in cinemas. As Mulder (2005) explained, the revival and vitality of 'kebatinan' mysticism in the immediate post-independence period can best be seen as a search for cultural expression and identity in a time of transition and change. One of the examples of Indonesia's current horror film is *Jelangkung* (2001) which is based on a Javanese folklore, and has reawakened once again the overall Indonesia's film industry that has been stagnant since the monetary crisis in 1996. This paper aims to find out how Indonesian horror films (2001-2008) more specifically: *Jelangkung* (2001), *Kuntilanak* (2006) and *Titisan Naya* (2008) have provided a significant means for the reassertion of Javanese cultural identity. It is a part or chapter of a bigger paper or dissertation that is still an ongoing process.

Key Words: *Indonesian horror film, the New Order, magic, witchcraft, Javanese culture*

1. Introduction

During former President Suharto's regime (or The New Order) from 1966-1998, films were vehicles for the creation of a 'national culture' intended to implement the nation's development policies and more generally its authoritarian rule. There were guidelines on what to say, what not to say and who could speak in which medium.¹ Every film produced in the New Order had a narrative structure that moved from order through disorder to a restoration of the order². No film could be screened before it is reviewed by the National Censor Board.³ Many filmmakers were obliged to follow what the government told them to do. They were also forced to submit their films to the Board of Censorship and obtained its approval sometimes with many lost scenes (being cut or modified). However, in the last decade of the New Order, the government was losing control of media products in a more general sense, due to the changes in media technologies and economies⁴. According to former censorship board chairmen Martono, RM Soetarto and Soemarmo, "What was considered objectionable in the past is no longer so today. Of course the censors must not be ahead of time or else there could be public outcry"⁵.

Since the fall of the New Order, most of the restricting rules that correlate with media had been lifted⁶. The period from 2000 to the present is regarded as the 'come back' period of Indonesian film industry⁷. Unlike movies in the 1990s, contemporary Indonesian movies are dominated by teen drama and horror which are viewable for audience age 13 years and older. Whereas in the 1990s, there has never been a crowd of youth lining to purchase tickets for Indonesian films in upper-class cinemas, in 2000 – starting with the screening of *Petualangan Sherina* (Sherina's Adventure, 1999) by Mira Lesmana and Riri Riza – youth, kids and adults are queuing up to watch the film for weeks, even months, in middle and high class cinema⁸. Suyono and Arjanto (2003) explain that, there was also a craze among Indonesian moviegoers for (cinema and TV) films peppered with elements of comic mysteries, mysticism and horror, ranging from the box office hit to a mixed repertoire of "mystery stories" flourishing on all TV channels.⁹

Current development of the film industry shows that horror films are among the favorite themes screened in cinemas. Based on several reports¹⁰, the craze for mystery and horror films must have been caused by the success of *Jelangkung* (the Uninvited, 2001)¹¹ a full-length film made by Jose Purnomo and Rizal Mantovani, where a search for ghosts has become the object of merriment for a group of youngsters has become the trend for mystery and horror films. Very similar to the cartoon series Scooby Doo or the film *Ghostbusters*, this group of youngsters travels to find ghosts, read books on the mystical world and try to conquer spirits. It must be noted that no fewer than 2

million moviegoers¹² across the country have seen the movie, thus contributing in bringing back the overall Indonesia's film industry that has been stagnant since the monetary crisis in 1996.

2. The phenomenon of the film *Jelangkung* (the Uninvited, 2001)

Jelangkung (the Uninvited, 2001) tells a story about four young people (Fery, Gita, Sony and Gembol) looking for ghosts. They are curious about the supernatural world so they embarked into a series of ghost hunting in Jakarta in hope of finding what they are looking for. After several attempts, they are not satisfied with their findings so they decided to head for a more challenging phenomenon situated at Angkerbatu, West Java. One of them (Sony) brought a wooden puppet toy called "Jelangkung" to call spirits which changes their life upon returning to Jakarta. All teenagers experienced seeing dead-spirits around them that they finally could not handle¹³. To appease the *Jelangkung* spirits, a shaman, suggested that they go back to the site and plant the *Jelangkung* wooden toy on the unknown cemetery in Angker Batu. Yet, when they arrived at their destination the *Jelangkung* sprits attack them all and the film ends with the terrible death of Fery, Sony, Gita and Gembol. Nowhere in the film are: God, prayer, religious shrines, or other institutionalized religious symbols mentioned in the film. Only a shaman, not belonging to any institutionalized religion and not functioning to overcome the ghost's terror was depicted. In short, the film gave a very different line of story and ending from the ones audiences were used to see¹⁴.

It was reported that the success of *Jelangkung* (2001) was unexpected. The directors predicted that it would only last for about one month before being withdrawn. However, the film screened for more than three months at prestigious cinemas at JABODETABEK (four major cities in Java – Jakarta, Bogor, Tangerang and Bekasi). It triggered other filmmakers and producers to follow its footsteps. The formula that they used in their films: pop, funk music and the new trend of teenagers' interest in all things magic, replaced the old one which relied heavily on women's sensuality and sex scenes. The adjustment from previous horror films featuring sex scenes is largely to appeal to a new market segment which is the upper-class audiences.¹⁵

Yet, it must also be noted that before its boom in Indonesia, horror films proved enormously successful, in many other countries of Southeast and Northeast Asia countries such as Japan, Thailand and Korea. The released of *Ringu* (1997) directed by Hideo Nakata from Japan, turned out to be the birth of J-Horror. Realizing that there was a potential market for such films in Indonesia, many Indonesian directors and producers began producing such horror films with local belief transposed onto them. To name a few, *Jelangkung* (2001), *Kuntilanak*¹⁶ (2006), and *Takut* (Faces of Fear, 2008).

However, each culture and era has its own characteristic of horror. What frightens one's society or generation might differ from another. Depending on the audiences, horror film could only be (successfully) frightening if the audience understand the correlation for 'fear' in the scenes with their state of minds. To the Japanese audience, the film *Jelangkung* (2001) would not probably generate the same feeling of 'fear' as it does for the Indonesian audience, and vice versa. It is therefore safe to say that films are intricately concerned with culture.

They are cultural texts, embodying within their frames the entire range of cultural behavior from artefacts to motivation. They are cultural statements, communicating messages to huge audiences. Films are cultural carriers, as well, bringing their messages to an entire nation or language area or even the world, although different audiences may read different messages from the same statements.¹⁷

Karl G. Heider, a professor of anthropology at Harvard University, stated that there is something unique in the expression of Indonesian horror films. He believes that the mentality of Indonesians, as viewed in Indonesia's horror films, is inclined toward mysticism.¹⁸ In other words, they are set in the present, but resemble the legend genre films in their strong roots in traditional Indonesian folk beliefs, especially, those involving supernatural power.

According to Kusumaryati (2011) horror mysticism has always been a popular theme up until today¹⁹. All sorts of devils from the wealth of Javanese ghosts such as *pocong* (dead body in a white shroud), *kuntilanak* (a female spirit who died in childbirth with a hole in her back) and *sundel bolong* (a female spirit with a hole in her back) have all made their appearances. Sacred Javanese days have also become a popular theme, for example in the films *Malam Jumat Kliwon* (Night Before Kliwon Friday, 1986) and *Malam Satu Suro* (Night Before First of Suro, 1988).

3. Magic and witchcraft in current Indonesian horror films *Kuntilanak* (2006) and *Titisan Naya* (2008)

Despite living in a 'modern' age, nowadays, folklores and urban legends still live and exist in Indonesian's daily lives. The horror film that dominates Indonesia's cinemas in 2007-2008 is evidence of this, largely because the majority of the films are based on the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc. of Javanese olden times. To name a few: *Kuntilanak* (2006) and *Titisan Naya* (2008) in which provided a significant means for the reassertion of Javanese cultural identity (known as *Kejawen*²⁰ or *Kebatinan*)²¹.

Kuntilanak (the Chanting, 2006) is about a troubled young woman, Samantha, who is plagued by highly disturbing recurring nightmares and unease feeling. The film, directed by Rizal Mantovani, is about Samantha who is a gifted modern-young woman in summoning *kuntilanak*. It is a gift that

has been passed on from generation to generation. The summoning of *kuntilanak* was believed to enrich the bearer (and his or her family) however there is a catch to this gift. The bearer has to make a human sacrifice regularly, at a certain time. In this movie, Samantha does not want to bear such a gift. She denies herself of having it but each time she is being confronted or threatened she would unconsciously chant a Javanese song that would summon *kuntilanak*. Usually after the summon, the one that confronted or threatened Samantha would bleed to death or have a tragic death.

The practice of keeping *kuntilanak* in one's family is common to the Javanese people²². In the beginning of the movie, Samantha was introduced to several *kejawan*'s belief such as positioning a chair in a certain way (leaning against the wall) by her landlord. She was also told that if she hears a *kuntilanak*'s laughter that is near her ears, it means that the *kuntilanak* is far away from her. However, if the *kuntilanak*'s laughter is far from her ears, than it means it is close to her.

Similar to *Jelangkung* and *Kuntilanak*, the existence of supernatural power *Titisan Naya* (Incarnation of Naya, 2008) is the ingredient for the plot. However, in this film, the spirit or supernatural entity is a Javanese traditional *keris* which is passed on from one generation to another. Whilst the *jelangkung* and *kuntilanak* need a human sacrifice so that the bearer could have the upper hand from the spirit/ghost, in *Titisan Naya* the *keris* needs to be cleanse at a certain time (such as during *Jumat Kliwon*²³ or Friday *Kliwon*).

The story is about a girl who goes to a relative's house with her mother for the ritual of washing *keris*, traditional Javanese weapon (knife) on a certain day. As a modern girl, Naya dismisses the ritual as nonsense. She later finds herself in a strange realm that can only be accessed by chanting, burning incense and spilling chicken blood. Elegantly spun, the story beautifully binds the charm and the terror of Javanese mysticism, and its final dance sequence is definitely one of the most memorable scenes.

Directed by Riri Riza²⁴, *Titisan Naya* became one of the Indonesian contemporary horror films skillfully made²⁵. The plot on the subject of washing *keris*, is simple and focused which makes it easy for the audience to follow, thus making the film a strong one. Its ending convey the message that during traditional ritual (in this case Javanese ritual), the process should be done respectfully and genuinely since its reason alone is to purify a sacred heirloom weapon. It is believed that in a *keris* a certain spirit dwells, therefore it should be treated with respect.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, concerning the issue of different era and generation, current Indonesia horror films (1998-present) differ from the ones that were previously made (before 1998). The most significant differences lie in the presentation of the context, the visual aesthetic and the music

composition. Prior to *Jelangkung* (2001) horror stories were based on folklore in small town settings while the more recent ones are based on urban legends with the metropolitan city as their settings.²⁶ Whilst it was common to see a 'religious figure' (usually an Islamic hajj) at the end of the film in order to defeat the evil spirit, the recent ones no longer show any institutionalized religious person or symbols.

Regarding visual aesthetics as well as music composition, the recent horror films are more aesthetically striking and sophisticated possibly because of the new technology in which filmmakers are able to use effortlessly. Such is also the case for music composition, wherein the current horror films, have more upbeat tempo and dynamic tunes. The rationale behind the 'differences' or 'conscious changes' made by filmmakers, is that the targeted audience nowadays are teenagers and middle to upper class audiences. "Cinema is a young person's occupation and a teenager's entertainment," explained Heider (1991). As such, the 'old ways' of making horror films need to be revolutionized in order to make the film successfully accepted by the new market.

However, it must be noted that the current Indonesian horror films such as *Jelangkung* (2001), *Kuntilanak* (2006), and *Titisan Naya* (2008) are still based on the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, etc. of Javanese olden times. The reason is that according to Mulder (2005), "the revival and vitality of *kebatinan* mysticism in the immediate post-independence period can best be seen as a search for cultural expression and identity in time of transition and change". Indonesia has gone through a significant transition since the fall of Soeharto's New Regime in 1998. His sudden fall has never been anticipated by anyone, whether Indonesian or foreign observers. The most common expectation was that President Soeharto would be succeeded by another general heading a regime not very different to the New Order²⁷. As such, by the time he was forced to resign in May 1998, Indonesia was not prepared for the outcome.

In the absence of strong and legitimate government, the country appeared to be moving toward disintegration²⁸. With its economy, socio and political conditions in disarray, it was difficult to remember that Indonesia was once portrayed as one of the Third World's success story. Thus, in terms of Indonesian films as the product of Indonesian culture, the recent ones provided a significant means for the reassertion of Javanese cultural identity that binds Indonesian people together, at least in cinemas up until now.

Notes

¹ Sen, K. & David T. Hill (2000). *Media, culture and Politics in Indonesia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

² Heider, Karl G. (1991). *Indonesian Cinema: National Culture on Screen*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

- ³ Sumarno, M. & Nan T. Achmas. (2002). *Indonesia in Two World: Being and Becoming the Cinema of Asia*. New Delhi: MacMillan.
- ⁴ Sen, K. & David T. Hill. (1997). *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- ⁵ Rianto, Tony. The Jakarta Post. 21 February 2003. *Film Censorship: The Past and Present Outlook*. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/288202371?accountid=8330>
- ⁶ At the end of October 1999, President Habibie's new reform included: liberalisation of the press, repeal repressive of the press, and democratic elections. (Aspinall, Edward and Greg Fealy (eds). 2010. *Soeharto's New Order and Its Legacy: Essays in Honour of Harold Crouch*. ANU E Press).
- ⁷ Amin, Ali (2010). *Religion in Indonesian Cinemas: The Representations of Religion in Indonesian Box Offices 2000-2006*. Germany: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.
- ⁸ Ibid
- ⁹ Suyono, Seno Joko and Dwi Arjanto. Tempo (Jakarta). 24 February 2003. *Indonesian Horror Films: From Babi Ngepet to Jelangkung*.
- ¹⁰ Budiman, Irfan and Andari Karina Anom (Tempo, February 2003). *Ghost, the Prima Donna*. Jakarta: PT Tempo Inti Media Tbk ("TEMPO") <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198932614?accountid=8330>; Suyono, Joko Seno and Dwi Arjanto (Tempo, February 2003). *Indonesian Horror Films: From Babi Ngepet to Jelangkung* (From Monster Pig to Monster *Jelangkung*). Jakarta: PT Tempo Inti Media Tbk ("TEMPO") <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198933111?accountid=8330>.
- ¹¹ This film also marked the second boom of Indonesia's horror film in cinemas since its last horror film screened in 1994 titled *Si Manis Jembatan Ancol* (Sweet Girl from Ancol Bridge) by Atok Suharto¹¹.
- ¹² Yan, Wijaya. (Majalah Film, June, 2007). *Box Office and Super Box Office Film Indonesia*.
- ¹³ Such as *Tuyul* a naughty five-year old spirit and *Suster Ngesot* (literally translated into *Nurse Ghost*) who is portrayed as a woman ghost crawling in order to move around.
- ¹⁴ Horror films in 1980s to 1990s reflected the old regime power that restricted the film industry as means for political control. Horror films had to represent the orientation of the New Order toward development policies. It was not allowed to establish controversial interpretations of religion and culture in Indonesia. Presenting *kyai* or *ustadz* (religious leader), and catholic priest in the last scenes was filmmakers' interpretation of supporting the national censorship body's religious mission. In other words, "the plot must be drawn up in such a way that it will suggest to the viewers that bad people must suffer defeat in the end while good people will triumph and enjoy happiness" (Suyono and Arjanto, 2003). However, their presence could also represent Heider's concept of order and disorder.
- ¹⁵ In those days, there was a great demand for horror films featuring sex scenes from film distributors in Medan, Central Java and East Java. "True. As we believed the films would be intended for the middle and lower classes, we did not care much about the quality of the plot and other elements of the dramatic structure." (Joko and Arjanto, 2003).
- ¹⁶ A female spirit who died in childbirth with a hole in her back.
- ¹⁷ Heider (1991).
- ¹⁸ Heider, 1991.
- ¹⁹ Kusumaryati, Veronika (2011). *Mau Dibawa Ke Mana Sinema Kita? Beberapa Wacana Seputar Film Indonesia*. Jakarta: Salemba Humanika.
- ²⁰ *Kejawen* is a traditional Javanese belief or mysticism that is unrecognized in the state ideology of Pancasila (Five Principle) in which acknowledged only the existence of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity as state religion. Nevertheless, despite its circumstance, *Kejawen* still survives and coexists with Islam in central and eastern Java. The Javanese who practices *Kejawen* would consult the *primbon* or registration book to choose the best time and place for important events. He or she also lives by the principles and values from the Hindu epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabrata* that are depicted by *wayang* or shadow puppet.

²¹ Throughout his government, Soeharto wanted to promote 'national culture' which is the Indonesian culture, however, his Javanese lifestyle (*Kejawen*) has influenced the populace in general in which non-Javanese become Javanese in attitude. After his resignation, the local culture (outside Javanese) came around from its slumber and is being embraced as another identity that local people is proud of. However, since the government transition did not diminish any turmoil (economically, politically and socially) the Javanese culture that once dominated the Indonesian culture, re-emerged again as Mulder (1994) explained, "the reworking of Javanese cultural themes becomes attractive again since the image of the Indonesian nation has become distant and vague, while offering little to identify with other than development, government propaganda, and censorship".

²² Other than *kuntilanak*, they also like to hold supernatural powers through other medias such as *keris*, *stone* and *artifact objects*.

²³ The Javanese have their own lunar calendar months and days. (Woodward, Mark (2011). *Java, Indonesia and Islam*. New York: Springer).

²⁴ One of the most prominent directors who insist on creating qualified films, despite the pressure of making profitable ones from producers.

²⁵ Aside from *Jelangkung* (2001), *The List* (2008), *Dara* (2010).

²⁶ Darmawan, Hikmat. *Mengapa Film Horor (2)*. www. rumahfilm.org. (Accessed on the 1st of August, 2008).

²⁷ Crouch (2010)

²⁸ Ibid

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