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Social and Cultural Popularity of *KKN di Desa Penari* (2022): A Structural Analysis of Myths and Beliefs in Indonesian Horror Cinema

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Abstract

*This study aims to analyze the factors contributing to the popularity of *KKN di Desa Penari* (2022) from a social and cultural perspective. Using qualitative methods, the researcher examines various narrative elements within the film that reflect social and cultural themes, drawing on Lévi-Strauss's structural theory for analysis. The findings reveal that the film's popularity is rooted in its depiction of local myths, beliefs, and values, such as customs, human relationships with nature, and the supernatural. Additionally, the film modernizes traditional myths, making them resonate with contemporary audiences. This research contributes to the understanding of how horror films can serve as a medium for preserving and communicating cultural myths within the Indonesian context.*

Keywords: culture, horror film, local myth, narrative elements , society.

INTRODUCTION

Horror films have become a favorite genre of Indonesian people. It can be seen how the development of the Indonesian horror film industry is growing rapidly. In addition, Indonesia has so many myths related to culture and beliefs that it makes the audience feel connected to daily life. There have been many horror films about culture and tradition in Indonesia. One of them is the film *KKN di Desa Penari*. According to Caesaria & Adit (2022) the presence of the film *KKN di Desa Penari* (2022) has succeeded in shaking up the domestic film industry. The film directed by famous producer Manoj Punjabi has successfully attracted more than 8 million viewers in less than a month of screening. *KKN di Desa Penari* became the highest-grossing horror film of all time. Responding to the success of the film, Wibawa (2022) explained that there were several factors that influenced the success of the film *KKN di Desa Penari*. First, the Twitter thread. According to him, the Twitter thread certainly had an effect because people already knew and understood the thread, just like a successful novel or short story. The difference is that this is a thread. Second, the audience's curiosity and impatience to find out the visual form of the viral thread because the film *KKN in Penari Village* had its screening postponed several times. Third, at the same time there were not many other Indonesian films appearing. So this momentum was very fitting for the film *KKN in Desa Penari*. Therefore, many people flocked to watch the film.

This movie tells the story of 6 students named Nur, Widya, Ayu, Bima, Anton, and Wahyu who decided to take part in KKN activities in a remote village on the island of Java. Initially Pak Prabu (Village Head) was hesitant to allow them to carry out KKN activities in his village, but after conducting discussions Pak Prabu finally agreed and put forward conditions for them not to cross the agreed forbidden boundaries. And the boundary is marked by a gate (customary gate) that serves to separate the village and *tapak tilas*. The beginning of their activities went well and normal, but as time went on they began to experience strange events. Until one day the mystical events they experienced began to claim their lives and the reason for some of the mystical events they experienced was revealed.

This horror movies have a very impressive story, with the students involved adding this movie more interesting, not only the students who make this movie interesting, with the culture and beliefs that the villagers believe, making us want to know and learn whether the myth exists or not, starting with the *sinden* who occupies the pavilion in the village, and also the dancers who are chosen to dance in the realm of the supernatural. The story in this movie contains a lesson, which is that we must respect a place that has a history or myth, even though we do not believe in the existence of mythical things, respect and obey the rules of the rules in that place must be obeyed, so that nothing unwanted happens, nature has its own wealth, including the creatures that inhabit it, the same as humans, they (supernatural beings) do not like it if their nature (place) is destroyed.

KKN di Desa Penari is interesting to study because in a cultural and social perspective this film reflects several important phenomena in Indonesian society, such as myths, local wisdom, and social dynamics. The film features elements of Javanese culture and mystical traditions, such as the existence of occult beings and local customs norms. Showing how customary prohibitions (such as taboos and abstentions) play an important role in maintaining harmony between humans and nature, which is typical of traditional Indonesian society. The film's success illustrates how

strongly the public's interest in mystical and horror themes is. This shows that pop culture in Indonesia is still influenced by spiritual heritage and traditional beliefs. Through a cultural and social perspective, KKN in Penari Village is not just a horror movie, but also room to understand the dynamics of Indonesian people who are still interacting with local traditions and beliefs amid the current of modernization.

According to Storey (2021), suggests any definition of popular culture will bring into play a complex combination of the different meanings of the term 'culture' with the different meanings of the term 'popular'. The history of cultural theory's engagement with popular culture is, therefore, a history of the different ways in which the two terms have been connected by theoretical labour within particular historical and social contexts. As elaborated elsewhere Heryanto (2008), he argue the term "popular culture" to refer to a variety of genres of communicative practices widely and prominently circulated for a large number of the people, or by such people, or a combination of both.

Popular culture is also distinguished from the state-sanctioned "official" version of national cultures (as often propagated in schools and ceremonies) or the "avant-garde" or "high" cultures of the nation's intelligentsia (as found in the academy, theatres and prestigious galleries). This is not to say that there is no borrowing or mutation of particular elements between one category and another. The contrary is true; borrowing of elements from one category to another has been common throughout history.

Horror film is a film genre that presents things that are frightening, tense, and horrifying. The idea of horror film is basically to terrorize the audience through various terrifying acts or actors. Horror films in the beginning are closely related to stories rooted in the cultural of Europe, especially English literature. The definition of horror in the beginning was a story that presented uncomfortable feelings to the readers. This definition changed with the development of film. Horror film developed into a genre that came to stand side by side with drama, comedy film, gangster film, and action film.

According to Nur (2016) some of the past horror films used local social settings, especially Javanese culture, both from the storyline and the names of the cast. Based on this context, a horror movie was born with the characters: Nyi Roro Kidul, and Nyi Blorong. It is clear that Javanese people have long been familiar with mystical horror stories. Even for Javanese people, mystical stories have become a belief until now. The emphasis on this mystical dimension is then narrated by the film producer with a new design and knick-knacks by adapting to the current context. The myth of the spirits is solidified as a representation of Javanese culture that adheres to animism and dynamism. On the other hand, horror films, such as the two titles in this paper, show that bad deeds committed will have a bad impact on themselves. Historically religious, this phenomenon is contrary to Islam, but sociologically it has the meaning of self-evaluation in determining attitudes and behavior, as happened at the beginning of the entry of Islam in Java.

For Javanese people, belief in to religion is contained in their understanding of of kejawen mysticism which is reflected in the daily habits and traditions of the Javanese community. As stated by Endraswara (2003), kejawen mysticism is a Javanese spiritual practice based on love and real human experience. In this spiritual practice, belief in myths is a natural thing to be passed

down from one generation to another. Mythical beliefs are related to belief in events, places, and creatures that have supernatural powers that are sacred and haunted (Subagya, 1981). Local beliefs are often correlated with the mystical and supernatural. In modern rhetoric, the mystical tends to be defined as animistic and dynamic, putting local beliefs in a marginal position with the assumption that culture is irrational and needs to be rationalised. Thus, local beliefs are often stigmatised, marginalised, and even in some cases suppressed. In addition, local beliefs in Indonesia have a complicated history with colonialism, politics, science, religion and other aspects of society. Local beliefs in this study refer to beliefs that are often associated with mystical things to be correlated with horror films in the context of popular culture.

According Setiawan & Halim (2022) Indonesian horror films from 1990-2010 show that horror films at that time held dominant values of sexuality so that the sacredness of the story carried became ambiguous and lost the meaning of the story itself. The presence of adult film stars further aggravated the situation by emphasizing sexiness. Because of this, there is strong opposition from both the public and certain community organizations, who consider horror films to have violated existing boundaries and not following the norms prevailing in Indonesia. Along with the shift in values in society, the development of Indonesian horror films not only presents fear but also presents elements of female sensuality. Judging from the title, today's horror films are not like the titles of horror films in general, instead the title is assumed by researchers to contain elements of sensuality.

Winarno (2013) shows that the depiction of female sensuality is represented through costumes and the appearance of female characters that emphasize the sexual appeal of women. In addition, there are many scenes of female characters doing erotic movements that are deliberate to arouse the sexual imagination of men, supported by dialogues that contain the sexual imagination of male characters, where women are only placed as objects to satisfy their lust. In this study, researchers also found that the role of movies can build the image of women's bodies and sexuality as part of pornography. The horror genre often features female protagonists who play the role of ghosts, monsters, or villains. This is in line with Creed's (2015) statement that the horror genre, especially in film, is largely populated by female monsters who are an evolved form of images that have haunted dreams, myths, and artistic practices for centuries. He argues that horror is a manifestation of patriarchal anxieties and men's fear of female sexuality.

Women in horror films from a psychological perspective, one of which is as a fulfillment of developmental tasks and to self-actualize, which is the highest hierarchy of needs in Maslow's theory. However, in fulfilling this, women often experience unpleasant things such as violent harassment and so on. The image of women in horror films is often predominantly negative (Lasty, 2020). Perhaps one thing that will never change in horror films is the consistent presence of vengeful female characters in the form of ghosts, supernatural beings or psychopaths. This is because the film reflects the changing social, political and economic situation in Indonesia as well as changes in filmmaking. In the horror film genre, the movie posters presented should only contain symbols of mysticism, horror, fear, and horror. However, in Indonesian horror movie posters, these symbols are also added with sensual female bodies that are presented as object objects. The sensual female body in Indonesian horror movie posters shows the image of women who are visually objectified. Thus, the context of this research presents visual signs in horror movie posters with a semiotic framework. The theory used in this research is the theory of

feminist literary studies that seeks to place women in their proper position within the framework of a patriarchal society through a system of signs and symbols (Isnaini, 2022).

Lévi-Strauss developed structural linguistic analysis as a model of analysis. This is what he later introduced to the academic world as structuralism (Lévi-Strauss, as cited in Turner, 1983). Lévi-Strauss developed a structural theory of myth analysis. Lévi-Strauss concluded that the myths that exist in the world are basically arbitrary. Lévi-Strauss concluded that the myths that exist in the world are basically based on the interrelation and connection between mythological elements through a combination of mythological elements. Myths can be divided into languages. Myths are like languages, consisting of several units similar to the linguistic structure of a language. There are three basic concepts to consider when analysing myths. Firstly, if myths have meaning, then that meaning lies not in their independent individual elements, but in how they are combined. Secondly, although myths fall under the category of language, they are more than just language. That is, only certain mythological features correspond to the features of language. Thirdly, these features are not in the language setting itself, but in the setting above it. These characteristics are more complicated and complex compared to other forms of language.

Sokantara & Marantika (2023) state that setting is everything that happens somewhere or sometimes. Setting is an element of fiction which reveals to the audience where and when of an event. Based on Wellek and Warren (1956) concerned setting with the places where story take a place. Setting refers to geographical location of the story, time period, daily lifestyle of the characters and climate of the story in other words, the term setting refers to the point in time and space at which event of the plot occurs involving the character. In developing the whole story, setting and plot are primary importance and it makes the story more realistic and alive. Setting and plot are important because when the setting and plot are understood very well, reader or audience got the story line clearly.

According to Alysiha et al. (2023) describe the plot is a series of events in a story. How a certain event effecting for all stories and how a certain event affects another event cannot be ignored, since the event will be affecting all stories. The plot is the sequence of events in a story from the beginning, middle, and end. With plot, the audiences know how to a drama storyline is delivered. Conflict and problems can be interpreted as a barrier faced by the protagonist to achieve his goals caused by the antagonist. Thus triggering physical conflict (confrontation) between the protagonist and the antagonist. The plot is important in making the arrangement of the story. The plot is the idea that determines how the story will flow. The plot will relate one action to another in order to make a good organization of the story. A story's core, or plot, is what enables us to comprehend the entire narrative and all of its underlying reasons. Naturally, readers cannot comprehend the emergence of events or other occurrences if any component of their observation is disconnected. A person will find it simpler to comprehend the story given in a work of fiction if they have a basic comprehension of the plot. There are three different kinds of plots: flashback plots, backward plots, and forward plots. According to Freytag's idea, a story's plot can be divided into five distinct phases: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

Rahmah et al. (2021) state that character is someone who appears in a story, such as in short stories, novels, dramas, or movies. Abrams (1981) revealed that the people who appear in narrative or drama where the readers interpret is having certain moral qualities and inclinations which delivered in a speech and action that we called it as 'character'. Characters are also known

as 'the actor' of the story. The characters that appear in the story have different characteristics. It's supported by Nurgiyantoro (2010) that there are some characteristics that the characters have, namely protagonist and antagonist. A protagonist is that a character who has a good personality that always appears in the whole story. While antagonist is a character who has a bad personality and it usually contradicts with the protagonist. Characterization is literally different from character and characteristic because it has a wider meaning. Characterization is covered all about who is the characters, how is the characteristic, and how does the illustration of the story tell us. There are four kinds of characters based on the differentiation of characterization, namely main character & peripheral character, protagonist & antagonist character, flat character & round character. and static character & developing character.

Semi (1988) as cited in Prakarsa (2022) expresses the meaning of point of view as the point of the story which is the author's placement and position in the story. Atar Semi also stated that the story point in point of view or point of view is divided into four types. The four types of division of point of view are: (1) author as main character, (2) author as side character, (3) author as third person, and (4) author as narrator or player.

Herijauhari (2013) as cited in Sidabutar (2020) says that the point of view is also called the narrative center, which determines the tone and style of the story. The character and personality of the storyteller will then determine much of the fairy tale presented to the reader. An author's decision in determining who tells the story then determines what is contained in a story. If the storyteller is different, then the details of the fairy tale chosen will also be different. Apart from that, according to Abrams (1981), the meaning of point of view refers to the way in which a story is told. The point of view technique is a method or point of view used by the author or author as a means of presenting the story in a work of fiction to the reader.

METHODS

This study uses descriptive qualitative research methods. According to Sugiyono (2022), descriptive qualitative research is based on the philosophy of postpositivism. This approach is used to examine natural object conditions (as opposed to experiments), where the researcher is the key instrument. The research is conducted in natural settings, meaning it takes place in real-world environments rather than in a laboratory. The data collection techniques focus on sources of credibility, specifically the *KKN di Desa Penari* film, ensuring valid and reliable data. The results of this research involve content analysis of the social and cultural values presented in the film.

This qualitative research is not widely generalized but rather aims to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The method used is literature study, as described by Sugiyono (2017), which involves gathering library data, reading, recording, and processing research materials from various sources to obtain information relevant to the issue being studied. In this study, literature study is used to process research materials by extracting social and cultural values from the *KKN di Desa Penari* film and using the film as a primary reference for data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The film *KKN di Desa Penari* tells the story of six students who carry out KKN in a remote village full of mysteries. They are warned to abide by local customs, but their violation triggers the disturbance of supernatural beings, especially Badarawuhi, a mystical dancer who influences Bima. Strange and frightening events escalate, culminating in tragedies that befall some of them as a result of the customary violations. The film depicts the consequences of humanity's relationship with tradition and the supernatural world.

Therefore, the filming of *KKN in Desa Penari* (2022) takes place in a remote village in East Java, Indonesia. The village is surrounded by dense forests and has a mystical atmosphere. In the story, the village becomes the site of the students' community service programme (KKN), where they experience a variety of strange and horrific events. Although the film and story are based on a viral story claimed to be a true experience, the specific location of the village is never explicitly mentioned to preserve the privacy or mystical elements of the story. However, many speculations mention locations such as in the Banyuwangi area or its surroundings as inspiration, although this has never been confirmed by the makers of the story.

Characterisation in *KKN di Desa Penari* is a key element that strengthens the atmosphere of the story and supports the development of conflict. Nur symbolises morality and common sense, while Widya reflects the human fascination with the supernatural world. Ayu represents the arrogance of humans who violate customs, while Bima illustrates vulnerability to supernatural temptation. Anton brings logic in the midst of chaos, and Wahyu provides humour in contrast to the tense atmosphere. The conflict with Badarawuhi as a mystical symbol of adat reinforces the relationship between humans, tradition, and the supernatural world, making the film's characterisation a key element that supports the tension of the story.

Moreover, in the film *KKN di Desa Penari*, the protagonists are six students who are the main characters of the story: Nur, Widya, Ayu, Bima, Anton, and Wahyu. They are portrayed as characters who struggle to deal with various conflicts, both internally and externally, while undergoing KKN in a mysterious village. The main antagonist is Badarawuhi, a supernatural being who is the main source of tension. She acts as a temptress and threat to the student group, especially with her involvement in influencing Bima and Widya. In addition, the village's mystical customs and rules also act as indirect antagonistic elements, creating obstacles that the protagonists must face.

Nur is a character who has supernatural abilities, such as visions of the supernatural. From the beginning, Nur has a bad feeling about the village and often experiences visions or strong intuition about the dangers that threaten her group. She is sensitive to the presence of supernatural beings and often senses oddities or threats that her friends are unaware of. This ability makes her a character who is more alert to the mystical phenomena that occur in the village.

The interesting thing is that the point of view in *KKN di Desa Penari* is the use of the perspective of a group of students who see and feel mystical events differently, depending on their beliefs and experiences. The film shows the contrast between characters who believe in the

supernatural and those who are sceptical of it. Nur's perspective, who is more sensitive to the supernatural, gives the audience a more intense view of the mystical threat, while portraying her feelings of fascination and fear of the supernatural forces present in the village. The moments when she begins to experience strange occurrences, such as the appearance of a supernatural dancer, show how this character begins to be caught in a tug-of-war between reality and the other world that she cannot escape. Her perspective shows how temptation or the influence of the mystical world can make a person change, even if they don't believe it at first.

Furthermore, mbah Buyut acts as the oldest figure and shaman who has a deep understanding of the customs and supernatural beings around the village. Her presence is very important in providing admonition and guidance to KKN students. In addition, mbah buyut helped widya escape the interference of Badarawuhi who tried to bind widya spiritually. With a deep understanding of the supernatural world, Mbah Buyut performed a special ritual to break the attachment between Widya and Badarawuhi. He also instructed Widya to stay away from forbidden places and watch her behaviour for the rest of the KKN. Mbah Buyut's help is crucial because without him, Widya will not be able to escape the influence of Badarawuhi who is eyeing him as a 'replacement' or part of Badarawuhi's world.

KKN di Desa Penari falls into the category of supernatural horror because the main terror in the story comes from supernatural forces and mystical creatures. In this film, the students face a variety of strange and frightening events that cannot be explained logically, such as sightings of supernatural beings, mystical influences, and violations of village customs that carry supernatural consequences. The existence of Badarawuhi as a mystical dancer with supernatural powers, as well as the various invisible phenomena experienced by the characters, are at the heart of the tension and fear in the film. The film emphasises the mystical world, spirits, and local beliefs involving supernatural forces.

KKN di Desa Penari succeeded in capturing the audience's attention by highlighting local myths, especially those from East Javanese culture. These myths, such as the presence of Badarawuhi, the supernatural creature at the centre of the film's terror, are important elements that enrich the story and give an authentic feel to the horror experience. The use of local myths not only adds to the suspense, but also introduces traditional beliefs that are rarely the main focus of modern horror films. The existence of mystical creatures such as Badarawuhi, who is often portrayed as a dancer, and the customary rules that must be respected by the students, create a close connection between the story and the myths in the community.

In addition, the film also features mystical aspects related to the violation of village customs, which in many Indonesian local myths, the violation of rules or taboos often brings fatal consequences, both spiritually and physically. This creates a tension between the real world and the supernatural world, where local myths serve as a force that controls the fate of the characters. As such, the film is not only a horror entertainment, but also introduces the audience to myths that may not be widely known, and shows how local beliefs can play an important role in shaping the atmosphere of the story and characters.

CONCLUSION

For the conclusion, horror movies are a genre that is no less in demand by humans, horror is a genre in which each film has a characteristic where ghosts can appear in the film, generally horror films are made based on true stories or urban legends that are well known in a place, especially horror films produced by Indonesia, it is not uncommon for Indonesian horror films to tell stories from true stories or urban legends that exist somewhere, such as the existence of local myths, for example the island of Java, must have a lot of stories in ancient times that were recognized by the community and eventually became the belief of the people in the area, people who still adhere to these myths are not without reason, they have also felt the truth in the myths that are in their place. It's not strange that places in Indonesia still have a lot of traditions related to mystical things, that's why Indonesian horror films tell stories from various myths that appear in these areas. the audience's interest is different, there are also viewers who like horror films whose stories do not come from areas that have these myths, not a few Indonesian horror films are also taken from ideas that make the film a horror genre. As Indonesians, we must respect and protect the places that our people believe in, because wherever it is, nature must remain sacred.

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