Rituals of Banishment in Indonesia: Mysticism in the Film "Pengabdi Setan"

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Abstract

This study examines the narrative structure, characterization, and cultural significance of the Indonesian horror film Pengabdi Setan (2017), directed by Joko Anwar. By integrating modern horror filmmaking techniques with traditional mystical beliefs, particularly the concept of pesugihan (a supernatural means of acquiring fortune), the film reflects Indonesia's ongoing negotiation between ancestral traditions and contemporary rationality. Through a qualitative analysis of plot structure and character arcs, this research highlights the film's exploration of universal themes, such as familial sacrifice and the moral consequences of human choices. Furthermore, this study situates Pengabdi Setan within the broader context of Indonesian cinema's cultural identity and its role in preserving and reinterpreting local myths. This analysis contributes to understanding how Indonesian horror cinema bridges local and global audiences, revitalizing the genre with culturally resonant narratives and global filmmaking techniques.

Keywords: *Indonesian cinema, horror film, Pengabdi Setan, cultural analysis, mystical beliefs.*

A. Introduction

The title *Pengabdi Setan* translates to "Servant of Satan," reflecting an individual's conscious decision to submit to evil forces in exchange for personal gains such as wealth, power, or supernatural abilities. This act of devotion signifies not only loyalty but also a complete abandonment of moral and social values. Within the context of Javanese

culture, this concept parallels the community's intrinsic desire for harmony, as highlighted by Poerwanto (2010). However, when an individual's actions disrupt this balance—whether through selfish pursuits or moral transgressions—the societal harmony is disturbed, resulting in what the Javanese call *gègèr* (social unrest).

The idea of *pesugihan*—a supernatural pact aimed at acquiring material wealth—serves as a powerful metaphor for these disruptions and their consequences. This ritual reflects a broader cultural understanding of sacrifice, morality, and social harmony, particularly in the Javanese worldview. Its inclusion in *Pengabdi Setan* not only enriches the film's narrative depth but also provides a lens to explore the tension between individual desires and collective well-being in Indonesian society.

Directed by Joko Anwar, *Pengabdi Setan* (2017) reimagines the 1980 Indonesian horror classic, breathing new life into a story deeply embedded in the country's cultural consciousness. By blending traditional horror motifs with elements of family drama, Anwar creates a film that is as unsettling as it is poignant. The narrative centers on a family of six—comprising a father, mother, grandmother, and four children—who live in a remote, dilapidated house. The mother, once a celebrated singer, is rendered incapacitated by a mysterious illness that confines her to bed, leaving her to communicate through the eerie sound of small bells.

This domestic setup, fraught with emotional and financial strain, forms the backdrop for the unfolding horror. The family's struggle becomes more dire following the mother's death, as supernatural disturbances escalate, revealing a dark connection between their mother and a satanic cult. This revelation propels the narrative into a desperate battle for survival, where familial bonds and individual resilience are tested against the forces of evil.

The plot of *Pengabdi Setan* weaves together elements of supernatural horror and psychological tension, focusing on the family's unraveling in the wake of the mother's death. Apparitions resembling the mother, cryptic voices, and the omnipresent sound of bells create an atmosphere of dread. The story's turning point comes when Rini, the eldest daughter, discovers her mother's pact with a satanic cult. The pact stipulated that her children would be claimed by the devil in exchange for fulfilling the mother's desires during her lifetime.

This revelation deepens the stakes, transforming the haunting into a narrative about betrayal, sacrifice, and survival. The climactic struggle between the family and the supernatural forces underscores themes of resilience, familial duty, and the cost of

ambition. Even as the family escapes immediate danger, the unresolved nature of the haunting leaves the audience with lingering questions, amplifying the film's emotional and psychological impact.

At its core, *Pengabdi Setan* is more than a horror film; it is a complex exploration of universal themes like familial bonds, sacrifice, and morality, intertwined with uniquely Indonesian cultural and mystical narratives. The film's use of *pesugihan* as a central motif offers a nuanced critique of greed and betrayal while reflecting the socio-cultural dynamics of Indonesian society.

By juxtaposing the familial and the supernatural, the film delves into the fragility of trust and the enduring impact of personal choices on collective harmony. This thematic richness, coupled with its exploration of culturally resonant rituals, positions *Pengabdi Setan* as a significant contribution to the horror genre, both locally and globally.

Syaiful Bahri (2017) identifies five key factors contributing to the film's widespread acclaim. These include its emotional complexity, Joko Anwar's masterful direction, the absence of explicit content (making it suitable for broader audiences), its reliance on practical effects over CGI, and its critical success, evidenced by 13 nominations at the 2017 Indonesian Film Festival. These elements collectively establish *Pengabdi Setan* as a benchmark for Indonesian cinema, demonstrating the potential of the horror genre to balance cultural specificity with universal appeal.

The film's ability to modernize classic horror while preserving its essence underscores its role as a cultural artifact. It reflects the evolving landscape of Indonesian cinema, where traditional narratives are reinterpreted through contemporary lenses, creating stories that resonate with both local and international audiences.

Despite its critical and commercial success, *Pengabdi Setan* remains underexplored in academic discussions, particularly regarding its cultural and narrative elements. While previous studies have examined Indonesian horror films through themes of urban legends, mystical beliefs, and gender dynamics, limited attention has been paid to the intersection of traditional rituals, such as *pesugihan*, with contemporary cinematic narratives.

Numerous studies have explored themes in Indonesian horror films. Tiwahyupriadi and Ayuningtyas (2020) highlighted that recurring elements in Indonesian horror films, such as urban legends, reflect the public's deep-rooted interest in traditional folklore. These elements not only preserve cultural heritage but also encourage critical thinking by allowing audiences to evaluate the shortcomings of such films. While *Pengabdi Setan*

(2017) features classic motifs like empty houses and female ghosts, it innovates with themes of family and *pesugihan* (supernatural pacts).

Kuniawan and Santabudi (2020) examined Javanese cultural aspects in horror films like *Mangkujiwo*, linking them to myths and symbols embedded in Javanese society. In contrast, *Pengabdi Setan* focuses on the mystical consequences of *pesugihan*, delving deeper into its societal and spiritual impacts.

Hendrik et al. (2018) analyzed legal challenges in addressing black magic in Indonesia, highlighting the societal fear and impact of mystical forces that defy rational explanation. Similarly, *Pengabdi Setan* portrays the struggles of characters facing unexplainable supernatural threats, echoing these real-world challenges.

Kurniawan and Minanto (2019) compared *Pengabdi Setan* to *The Conjuring*, focusing on the ghosts' origins and methods used to combat black magic. While *The Conjuring* relies on exorcism, *Pengabdi Setan* emphasizes *pesugihan* as its central theme, showcasing the consequences of selfish pursuits.

Imran (2012) discussed audience interpretations of religious and mystical elements in *Pengabdi Setan*. The film fosters social dialogue by connecting religious symbols to individual beliefs. Similarly, this study focuses on how *pesugihan* reflects Indonesia's mystical traditions and their societal impact.

Fajar and Lestari (2021) found that horror films can negatively affect children's emotions, leading to fear, anxiety, and irrational thinking. While *Pengabdi Setan* is designed for mature audiences, it similarly uses strong horror elements that evoke fear and tension.

Pieter (2023) explored how horror films like *Pengabdi Setan* reflect collective memory, delving into themes of trauma, family, and cultural beliefs. The film uses horror to explore universal fears while addressing uniquely Indonesian concerns.

Debby et al. (2020) discussed *desacralization* in horror films, noting that religious figures often fail to overcome evil forces. In *Pengabdi Setan*, supernatural forces dominate, portraying a desacralized religious setting and challenging traditional notions of power and morality.

Pengabdi Setan combines classic horror with innovative themes like family and *pesugihan*. It reflects local mystical beliefs and their socio-cultural implications,

providing a profound commentary on human relationships, trauma, and societal values. Through visual symbols like the bell, the film conveys ideas of attachment and unresolved familial bonds, offering rich material for cultural and cinematic analysis.

This study addresses this gap by situating *Pengabdi Setan* within the broader context of Indonesia's negotiation between tradition and modernity. Using Stuart Hall's theory of representation, it explores how visual and narrative symbols—such as the bell and the recurring motif of sacrifice—reflect societal values and collective fears. By analyzing the film's portrayal of *pesugihan*, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Indonesian cinema preserves and reinterprets cultural identity in a globalized world.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative methodology to examine the narrative structure, characterization, and cultural significance of *Pengabdi Setan* (2017), directed by Joko Anwar. Primary data were collected through multiple viewings of the film, while secondary sources, such as reviews and scholarly articles, provided cultural and historical context. Narrative and character analyses focused on themes of familial sacrifice, moral dilemmas, and the tension between tradition and modernity, with Stuart Hall's representation theory framing the exploration of how the film uses visual symbols and narratives to reflect societal values. Comparative and thematic coding highlighted recurring motifs, such as the bell and supernatural pacts, and situated the film within Indonesia's cinematic landscape. Findings, validated through peer consultation and triangulation, reveal how the film bridges traditional beliefs and modern horror techniques, contributing to the preservation and reinterpretation of local myths in a global context.

C. Findings and Discussion
1. Protagonists and Antagonists

Pengabdi Setan (2017) presents a multidimensional conflict through its ensemble cast, with five protagonists representing a nuclear family. The family members—Rini

(the eldest child), Bahri (the father), Tony (the second child), Bondi (the third child), and Ian (the youngest)—serve as the focal point of the narrative, each adding depth to the storyline. The antagonistic forces are twofold: Mawarni (the deceased mother who returns as a vengeful spirit) and the satanic cult that seeks to claim Ian as part of a supernatural pact. Mawarni's haunting reflects unresolved familial conflicts and societal criticism of the selfish pursuit of power through mystical means, specifically *pesugihan*. The cult's interference escalates the tension, emphasizing the vulnerability of the family against external and supernatural forces.

2 Narrative Structure and Themes

The film follows a conventional three-act structure:

1. Exposition: The family's struggles with financial hardship, the mother's illness, and her eventual death set the stage for the supernatural events.
2. Rising Action: The family's encounters with apparitions and the discovery of Mawarni's ties to a satanic cult intensify the stakes.
3. Climax and Resolution: The family confronts the haunting and the cult's influence, culminating in a bittersweet survival but leaving an open-ended conclusion, reflecting the inescapability of past actions.

The narrative structure is reinforced by themes of familial sacrifice, morality, and the consequences of choices. These themes are intricately tied to Indonesia's cultural identity, particularly the societal value of harmony (as highlighted by Poerwanto, 2010). Mawarni's decision to engage in pesugihan disrupts this harmony, making her an allegorical figure for greed and betrayal.

3 Characterization

The film's characters are carefully developed to reflect individual and collective responses to supernatural threats:

- Rini: The central protagonist, Rini embodies strength and resilience. Her role as a caretaker underscores the theme of familial sacrifice, as she navigates the terrors to protect her siblings.

- Mawarni: Though deceased, Mawarni's presence dominates the narrative. Her pact with the satanic cult positions her as both victim and villain, complicating the family's grief with supernatural terror.
- Bahri: The father's passivity contrasts with Rini's proactive stance, highlighting shifting familial roles in the face of crisis.
- Tony and Bondi: These siblings provide a spectrum of reactions to fear—rationality and innocence, respectively—reflecting the varied human responses to trauma.
- Ian: As the youngest and most vulnerable, Ian serves as a conduit between the living and supernatural realms, his innocence heightening the stakes of the haunting.

4. Setting and Cultural Context

Set in a remote, decrepit house in 1980s Indonesia, the film's setting amplifies the sense of isolation and helplessness. The era's lack of modern technology further enhances the family's vulnerability. The house itself, with its decaying architecture and dimly lit hallways, becomes a character that mirrors the family's deteriorating unity and the omnipresence of death. The cultural backdrop is deeply intertwined with Indonesian beliefs in mysticism and communal harmony, with pesugihan serving as a narrative device to critique the societal costs of selfish ambitions.

5. Supernatural Elements and Symbolism

Pengabdi Setan falls squarely within the supernatural horror genre, eschewing gore for psychological and cultural horror. The ghostly figure of Mawarni and the undead from the cult underscore the consequences of moral transgressions. Symbols such as the bell (used by Mawarni to communicate) signify attachment and unresolved trauma, while the recurring motifs of darkness and confinement evoke feelings of claustrophobia and inevitability.

6. Representation of Religious Elements

Religious figures, such as the Ustad, play a pivotal role in the family's survival, offering a counterbalance to the cult's malevolent influence. However, their inability to

completely vanquish the evil forces underscores the limitations of institutionalized religion in addressing deep-seated societal and moral dilemmas. This ambiguity reflects a broader desacralization trend in Indonesian horror, where religious figures are portrayed as fallible.

7. Socio-Cultural Commentary

The film intelligently weaves local myths with social critique. Mawarni's pact and subsequent haunting expose the fragility of familial and societal bonds when disrupted by greed. Themes of sacrifice, morality, and redemption resonate universally while retaining cultural specificity. The narrative's focus on a mother's betrayal and its impact on her children critiques gendered expectations and societal pressures.

8. Contribution to Indonesian Cinema

Pengabdi Setan revitalizes the Indonesian horror genre by blending local folklore with global cinematic techniques. Its success, both commercially and critically, highlights the viability of culturally resonant narratives in appealing to diverse audiences. The film's emphasis on practical effects over CGI and its nuanced storytelling set a benchmark for future horror films in the region.

Discussion

This study situates Pengabdi Setan within the broader framework of representation theory, as articulated by Stuart Hall. The film uses visual and narrative symbols to reflect and critique societal values, particularly the tension between tradition and modernity. Mawarni's character, as a mother who defies societal norms for personal gain, becomes a vessel for exploring moral and cultural dilemmas. Her transformation into a vengeful spirit symbolizes the inescapable consequences of disrupting social harmony.

The film's narrative also aligns with genre theory, showcasing how Indonesian horror can integrate universal themes with local specificities. The use of *pesugihan* as a central plot device bridges folklore with contemporary concerns, such as the erosion of

communal values in the face of individualism. By presenting a family's struggle against supernatural forces, *Pengabdi Setan* engages viewers in a dialogue about morality, sacrifice, and the consequences of human choices.

Pengabdi Setan (2017) exemplifies the potential of horror cinema to serve as a cultural lens, reflecting societal anxieties and moral conflicts. By integrating traditional beliefs with modern filmmaking, the film offers a rich narrative that resonates with both local and global audiences. Its exploration of familial sacrifice, moral dilemmas, and cultural identity positions it as a pivotal work in Indonesian cinema, contributing to the preservation and reinterpretation of local myths. This study underscores the importance of analyzing such films within their socio-cultural contexts to appreciate their narrative and symbolic depth.

D. Conclusion

Pengabdi Setan (2017) stands as a powerful representation of Indonesia's cultural and social complexities, masterfully blending horror with themes of family, devotion, and mystical beliefs. The film's success in exploring local myths, such as *pesugihan*, highlights its deep connection to Indonesian supernatural traditions while also presenting broader, universal themes of fear, sacrifice, and family ties. By intertwining traditional elements with modern cinematographic techniques, *Pengabdi Setan* not only revitalizes the Indonesian horror genre but also bridges past and present anxieties, offering both entertainment and cultural reflection. The film's portrayal of family dynamics amid supernatural threats creates an emotional core that resonates beyond the typical horror experience. It reflects the ongoing tension between traditional beliefs and contemporary life in Indonesia, where the mystical and the rational coexist in complex ways. In this regard, *Pengabdi Setan* is not just a horror movie but a narrative that invites audiences to contemplate the implications of their own beliefs and the haunting legacies of their cultural past.

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