

CHAPTER VII

SUPERNATURAL POWER

Introduction

The local is never static; its boundaries, both temporal and spatial, are subject to ceaseless change. It is characterised by a web of power plays, agonistic interests, pluralized histories, and struggles over polysemous and asymmetrical exchange. The local is constantly transforming and reinventing itself as it seeks to reach beyond itself and engage the translocal.¹

Culture is constantly being reproduced in complex social processes. The sinetron reflects these constant processes of cultural reproduction. As a television film, it is a cultural text, cultural statement and cultural carrier which communicate to huge and diverse audiences. What is interesting about studying cultural change in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is that it conveys images of the complex symbiosis between localism and globalism. The global flows of technology and media communication, engaging with local traditions, produce a complex negotiation of these traditions. This chapter develops a cultural analysis of this sinetron's representation of supernatural power. I argue that the popularity of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is due to the way it transforms the local, in this case the belief in supernatural power, and reinvents it so as to invite audience identification. As I have shown, globalization and commercialization in Indonesia have influenced entertainment production, focusing it more on spectacle and sensation. This chapter focuses on how this particular sinetron reinvents the tradition of belief in supernatural power along these lines and successfully communicates it to a diverse national audience.

¹ Wimal Dissanayake, "Globalization and the Experience of Culture: The Resilience of Nationhood," in *Globalization, Cultural Identities, and Media Representations*, ed. Natascha Gentz and Stefan Kramer (Albany: State University of New York Press 2006), 25.

There are many Western television series and Hollywood films exploiting supernatural power which are globally popular, such as the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Harry Potter* series, and television series such as *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, *Supernatural*, *Smallville*, or *Medium*. These films and series have aroused wonder with their presentation of magic and the occult as part of everyday life. In response to the popularity of global supernatural entertainment, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* exploits the indigenous belief in supernatural power and represents it as postmodern² entertainment. The further question I want to address is how this exploitation of supernatural power for entertainment appeals to and constructs a national audience.

Indonesia has a history of film and television production about the supernatural world; however this genre was not tremendously popular. Only recently mystery shows and sinetron have flourished until almost every day there is a program on the occult or a mystery broadcast on private television stations. Most of the mystery shows attract protest from the viewers, especially from the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Board of Indonesian Mufti) and NGOs. They protest against mystery shows because they tend to trivialize faith and belief. They are afraid of the impact of mystery shows on children because they do not teach children how to think logically and rationally. However, among audience responses posted on websites for a number of Indonesian sinetron, there have been no protests against the representation of the supernatural in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. This raises such questions as how is the supernatural communicated without controversy to Indonesian audiences which are 88 percent Muslim?³ Does

² Postmodern refers to postindustrialist era which is characterised by global economy and the domination of consumerism, fashion, advertising, and new leisure industries. Postmodern culture is distinguished by “a cultural contradiction”, for example “between hedonism in the arena of consumption and the remaining legacy of asceticism in the labour process”. It tends to emphasize “social constructionism, and knowledge and belief as relative and dependent upon perspective”. Dawn Heinecken, *The Warrior Women of Television: A Feminist Cultural Analysis of the New Female Body in Popular Media*, *Intersections in Communications and Culture* ; Vol. 7 (New York Peter Lang, 2003), 134.

³ Geertz argued that he “was not optimistic about the ability of kyai to be cultural brokers between Indonesia and ‘modernity’ ”. Luken-Bulls has objected to this argument, suggesting that *kyai* have an important role in “imagining modernity that needs to be reworked” and “(re)inventing an Indonesian Islamic modernity”. Ronald A. Lukens-Bull, "Two Sides of the Same Coin: Modernity and Tradition in Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Anthropology and Education* 32, no. 3 (2001).

the background of the scriptwriter, Abnar Romli⁴, influence the construction of supernatural in this sinetron?

As belief in supernatural power has been deeply rooted in Indonesian, especially Javanese culture, I begin my discussion of the Javanese and Islamic belief in the seen world and the unseen world. From these discussions I will explore the construction of supernatural power in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, in what way it exploits such beliefs as part of the tradition and in what way its presentation of such beliefs as entertainment is influenced by global popular entertainment.

Reinventing Tradition

The world we experience around us is more than what we sense with our five natural senses. The world consists of both the natural and supernatural. The supernatural of this world is evidenced by miracles and unexplained phenomena. Many miracles can be explained away, but many cannot. Supernatural powers have always been explored by people around the globe and throughout history. Though magic practice seemed hidden, it was always available to those who sought it, and for many people, it was a profession: Chinese *Kung Fu* masters and Japanese *Ninjas*, European witches, Native American medicine men, Indonesian paranormals, and many others from all over the world.

Kuntowijoyo explained that traditional Javanese obeyed nature. Because technology, knowledge and organization were still poor, the Javanese saw nature as great and unreachable. Nature was considered as subject and humans were only objects. That is why Javanese culture was full of *mitologi* (myths), *sakralisasi* (consecratedness) and *mistifikasi* (viewing everything as mysterious). The Western Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th century, brought by the Dutch during the colonial era, had introduced rationality to the Indonesians. The idea of

⁴ As I have stated in Chapter 4, Abnar Romli, the scriptwriter of this sinetron graduated from the Tegal Slawi Pesantren, in Central Java.

rationality as modernization has influenced many Indonesians to overtly oppose myths, consecratedness and mystification. All myths, mystifying and sanctifying are also rejected by Islam.⁵ However, he noted that these traditions had not totally disappeared from the life of the Javanese.⁶

In Java, 'supernatural power' refers to magical capabilities, such as forecasting, casting charms, flying in the sky (see Figure VII-2, from *Misteri Gunung Merapi*), moving from one place to another place in seconds, looking into the future, reading someone else's mind, seeing beyond into different locations or places or situations (Figure VII-1), destroying a huge stone or big tree just by using an empty hand, creating a fire or explosion without any medium, and similar feats. These special powers arouse awe because not everyone is able to access them.



Figure VII-1 : Mak Lampir's miraculous bowl



Figure VII-2 : Wak Bayau Flying

⁵ S. Kuntowijoyo, "Mitologisasi Dan Mistifikasi Dalam Pemikiran Jawa [Myth and Sanctification in Javanese Thought]," <http://dhitos.wordpress.com/2006/09/11/mitologi-dan-mistifikasi-dalam-pemikiran-jawa/>, (accessed 16 February 2007).

⁶ Kuntowijoyo noted that in 2000 the Gajah Mada University held a *ruwatan* (a ritual traditional event by performing a *wayang* puppet show with the story of *Murwakala*, with the purpose to live safely & happily) attended by the president and rectors from many universities. He also remarked on the continuing practices of many people going to holy graves for blessings, sanctification through the water used to wash a sacred carriage, sanctification of a holy person (such as *wali* and *kyai*), and belief in powers of special weapons.

The Javanese also believe that supernatural rituals or magic, in the forms of ceremonies, offerings, praying, mantras, can influence and master the world. The magician can force the gods to obey him. People believe that supernatural power can manipulate nature.⁷

In Java there are many ceremonies to call up supernatural aids to meet various kinds of situations, such as *midodareni* (the night before a wedding), *mitoni* (7-months into a pregnancy), *selapanan* (35 days after the birth of the baby), *tedak siten* (the first time a baby learns to walk), and so on. These ceremonies accompanied by special offerings⁸, are still held by people today and could indicate a belief in the existence of an unseen world and the power of the spirits as the inhabitants of that world. However, nowadays the offerings and ceremonies have lost much of their spiritual essence; they are still performed but only as traditional celebrations.

It has been claimed that Javanese people believe that “there is no sharp division between organic and inorganic matter”.⁹ If a person, through a series of ascetic disciplines, can master the organic and the inorganic, he or she is then not bound by space and time. Javanese belief is based on animist traditions before Islam and Hinduism, when people worshipped the spirits of the natural world. Although Islam is now the dominant religion in Java, for many Javanese the traditions of animism still continue to be practiced blended into Islam. In Ricklefs’ notion, “after at least a millennium of following Hindu and Buddhist mysticism, the Javanese aristocracy assimilated Islamic mysticism within their social, political, and religious life”.¹⁰ Javanese beliefs sit comfortably alongside

⁷ Onghokham, *Dari Soal Priyayi Sampai Nyi Blorong: Refleksi Historis Nusantara [from Aritocrats to Nyi Blorong: Historical Reflection of Nusantara]* (Jakarta: Kompas, 2002), 177-8.

⁸ When my mother celebrated my sister’s wedding party, she asked a respected person from our neighbourhood to lead the ceremony. He refused to do it because my mother objected to his suggestion to put a pair of banana trees in front of the door as an offering. However, when I asked about the meaning of offering, they were unable to explain, they just said that they just followed the tradition.

⁹ Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *Language and Power: Exploring Political Culture in Indonesia* (New York: Cornell University 1990), 22.

¹⁰ M.C. Ricklefs, *The Seen and Unseen Worlds in Java, 1726-1749: History, Literature and Islam in the Court of Pakubuwana Ii* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998), xx.

many other beliefs, which can make it difficult to separate whether a particular belief is part of Islamic or Javanese tradition, or whether current beliefs are better understood as having evolved within Islamic or Javanese tradition. However, modernist Islamists tend to “divorce themselves from worldly concerns and belief in magic or supernatural powers”.¹¹

Until today, belief in supernatural power is still strong in Indonesia. The website of ‘paranormal Indonesia’ (www.paranormal.or.id¹²) provides an electronic medium for any people who want to talk about supernatural powers. Another phenomenon which shows the strong belief in supernatural power is the following collection of comments by Indonesian paranormals on the eruption of Mount Merapi in 2006, which was broadcast by SBS Australia on 26 July 2006:

HARRY SURATAL (Translation): “*Wahyu* is a kind of approval that we Javanese believe to be an anointment from the gods. Possessing *wahyu* means that if a region or a nation is led by someone who doesn't have it, then no matter how smart they may be, nature and the nation will not be at peace.”

GEMBONG DANUNINGRAT (Translation): “Mystically, this disaster happened because my people in Java have forgotten their tradition, their old way of life. They have forgotten their Javanese spiritual tradition. For example, certain rituals have been abandoned.”

RUSTANTO (Translation): “Yes, it's certain the Goddess of the South Sea is furious. Because the latest one, the current one, I'm not saying the 10th Sultan but the current one has been neglectful. Neglectful as I said yesterday of his lowly subjects, his long-suffering subjects. In short, when people no longer care, it means they are negligent.”

¹¹ Evelyn Blackwood, "Gender Transgression in Colonial and Postcolonial Indonesia," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 4 (2005): 860.

¹² The discussion on this website is about how to get supernatural power, how to be invulnerable to any sharp weapon, cure a sickness, be immortal, interpret a dream, understand the spirit world, etc. The comments in every discussion could be in a Javanese or an Islamic perspective.

PERMADI (Translation): “Since SBY has become president there has been disaster after disaster, sickness after sickness. They have all occurred in fact, if SBY had the desire to see, he would notice all natural elements are reacting. First, the element of Wind...In Indonesia the wind has been whirling. There are storms, typhoons, hurricanes, cyclones and so on. Next Fire - there have been fires throughout Indonesia - factories, forests, homes, markets, malls. Fires are burning everywhere. Earth - earthquakes, landslides are occurring everywhere. And then Water - floods, tsunamis are also occurring everywhere. But SBY isn't aware of these things. Maybe his heart knows.”¹³

All of the comments point to the same idea that the tragedy occurred because so many Javanese and their leaders are now forgetting the tradition. They are too absorbed by modernity and forget to give offerings to the spirits who rule Mount Merapi. These opinions demonstrate the legitimisation of political authority through the supernatural world that Onghokham has discussed.¹⁴ These comments suggest that some people still hold this belief and the tradition can sit comfortably with modernity.

However, conflict between tradition and modernity also appears, for example in scholars' opinions on the mystical power of the ruler. The historian Onghokham wrote in his newspaper column¹⁵ that he felt upset by questions asked by Indonesian journalists about whether mystical power is involved in political authority, and by foreign journalists about how far Indonesian rulers were influenced by paranormals in taking political decisions. He also heard a rumour that the paranormal, Permadi, claimed that the power of Abdurrahman Wahid, when he still was in his presidency, was in his ring. As a historian, Onghokham

¹³ Bronwyn Adcock, "Java's God Must be Crazy". Dateline. (Australia: SBS TV, 2006).

¹⁴ Onghokham, *Dari Soal Priyayi Sampai Nyi Blorong: Refleksi Historis Nusantara* [from Aritocrats to Nyi Blorong: Historical Reflection of Nusantara], 181-7.

¹⁵ Onghokham is a distinguished historian and commentator. His columns, which appeared in the [name?] newspaper, were compiled in a book and published in 2003 under the title *Dari Soal Priyayi Sampai Nyi Blorong (From Javanese Officials' Problems to Nyi Blorong)*.

was often disturbed by the story of the mystical support of Nyai Rara Kidul or Sunan Gunung Lawu to the Javanese kings.¹⁶

As the supernatural is still part of Indonesian life, it is not surprising that supernatural entertainment is very popular in Indonesia.

The Supernatural as Commodity

The supernatural has been part of traditional performance in Indonesia. For example, Foley in her study of theatrical performances in West Java has found that the appeal of *Sintren*, *Dabus*, and *Kuda Kepang*¹⁷ are in the attraction of voyeurism and spectacle. Audiences are attracted “to see beyond their everyday existence into the normally hidden world of the spirits who perform – gods and demons, wild and mythical animals, and the dead” and “since these spirits are endowed with super-human powers, the entranced performers often engage in activities beyond the limits of mere mortals”.¹⁸ Although these theatrical performances¹⁹ have gradually disappeared with the popularity of television, we can still find them in some rural areas in Indonesia.

Supernatural phenomena have been part of global popular entertainment since cameras were used to portray hallucinatory images. The lure of supernatural

¹⁶ Onghokham, *Wahyu Yang Hilang, Negeri Yang Guncang* [the Lost Apocalypse, the Unstable Nation] (Jakarta: Pusat Data dan Analisa Tempo, 2003), 2-3.

¹⁷ Trance dances, involving the dancer and the mediator (*pawang*) to call the spirits, goddess in *sintren*, friends of the prophets or the spirits of Allah in *Dabus*, and the horse spirits in *Kuda Kepang* Kathy Foley, "The Dancer and the Danced: Trance Dance and Theatrical Performance in West Java," *Asian Theatre Journal* 2, no. 1 (1985): 36..

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 28.

¹⁹ When I was still a child, I sometimes watched *Kuda Kepang* performance in my kampong area. The performers moved from kampong to kampong and tried to attract audiences with their gamelan orchestra. Once audiences gathered, they began to dance. As the music beat, the *pawang* (spirit mediator) then did an offering to call a spirit to help the performer into trance. Once he was in trance, he could do something ‘magic’ such as eating glasses, opening a coconut using his teeth, and being hit by a whip without being hurt.

films is in the ability of the camera to create suspense through its power to suggest “dramatic stimulus toward tension and fright”.²⁰

Since about 2002, Indonesian television stations have broadcast ‘occult programs’. Ghosts became celebrities and almost every station has its own occult reality show. “The themes are usually gruesome events that seem to defy scientific explanation, but bear the authority of invited eye witnesses”.²¹ Occult reality shows such as *Percaya Nggak Percaya* (Believe or Not), *Pemburu Hantu*²² (Ghost Hunter), *Dunia Lain* (The Unseen World), *Gentayangan* (The Unstill Spirit), *Ekspedisi Alam Gaib* (Expedition to the Supernatural World) use audience participation to ‘prove’ the phenomena of the supernatural world. “There are ‘true life’ stories of mystical occurrences re-enacted by professional actors”.²³ Budi Sutjiawan, Director of SCTV programming said that mystery programs were very popular and in 2003 they dominated the top 100 TV programs - either as reality shows or mystery comedies or mystery sinetron. There were at least 45 mystery sinetron every week broadcasted by Indonesian private TV stations.²⁴ The popularity of mystery shows “may be interpreted as a reaction against the rigidity and formulaic nature of most broadcasting under the New Order”.²⁵ The programs offer different settings and involve people who are neither stars nor government officials. It may also be, as Alfadin, a TV director and scriptwriter, remarked that people are sick and tired of programs “which just portray wealth”.²⁶

²⁰ Curtis Harrington, "Ghoulies and Ghosties," *The Quarterly of film radio and television* 7, no. 2 (1952): 195.

²¹ Mark Hobart, "Entertaining Illusions: How Indonesian Elites Imagine Reality TV Affects the Masses.," *Asian Journal of Communication* 16, no. 4 (2006): 399.

²² “A team of idiosyncratically adorned, headscarf wearing, Muslim *ustadz* (religious teacher) each week visited a haunted house, where the perturbed owners reported on uncanny disturbances, after which, amid much drama and somersaulting, the *ustadz* chased down the ghosts, before finally capturing them in empty soft drink bottles.” Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Irawati Diah Astuti, "Tayangan Misteri Di Televisi: Saat Hantu Jadi Selebriti [Screening Mystery on Television: When Ghost Becomes Celebrity]," *Suara Pembaharuan Daily*, 5 September 2003, <http://www.suara.pembaharuan.com/News/2003/09/07/Utama/ut01.htm>.

²⁵ Hobart, "Entertaining Illusions: How Indonesian Elites Imagine Reality TV Affects the Masses.," 400.

²⁶ Ibid.

Imran has explained that the phenomenon of the ghost as commodity, which has been popular recently, is not new. However the difference is that ghosts and the supernatural world have been transformed from spiritual and personal experience into mass entertainment. Films with supernatural themes were popular in 1980s for the lower class segment of audiences. In 1990s, with the series, *Si Manis Jembatan Ancol* (The Beautiful Ghost from the Ancol Bridge), ghosts were not represented as horror figures; rather they were deconstructed as figures of fun or as objects of comedy. The terrifying sensations accompanying the appearance of ghosts have become the object of fun. Ghosts have become more humane and involved with human affairs.²⁷

Imran has also explained that the interesting phenomenon accompanying the popularity of ghosts in television is the broader appreciation from different segments of audiences, lower and middle classes or urban and rural dwellers. The difference, compared to the previous mystery entertainment, is in the way the stories present ghosts. Nowadays, mystery entertainment focuses more on the event rather than the problem. The supernatural is simplified as merely a terrifying creature and loses in meaning. By contrast, traditional belief in the supernatural could not be separated from the way of life of the people. The sacred place had a special sign, which lead them in the way they saw life and solved problems. Recent mystery entertainment does not problematize the supernatural as a sacred moment but just exploits mysterious everyday events, for instance the place where a person committed suicide is considered to be mysterious. The supernatural has undergone a reduction in meaning.²⁸

Muhammad has compared 1980s Indonesian mystery films with mystery sinetron. He concluded that there is a different motive for the presentation of the 'soul of the dead' in the 1980s films and in the sinetron. As I have mentioned previously, in the earlier mystery films the return of the dead body was to take

²⁷ Ahda Imran, "Masyarakat Dan Industri Hantu [Society and Ghost Industry]," *Pikiran Rakyat*, 9 January 2003, <http://www.pikiranrakyat.com/cetak/0103/09/khazanah/utama1.htm>, (accessed 12 August 2006).

²⁸ Ibid.

revenge and to exercise justice. In contrast, in the more recent mystery sinetron, the visualization of the return of the dead body is to show the torment of the grave, with the moral of the show being the punishment for the sins they have committed during life.²⁹

It has been suggested that modernity, which focused on rationality, has reached its highest point. People lack spirituality which was lost because of science and materialism. In the uncertainty of life caused by the modernist paradigm, people need different values which could bring a new enlightenment. Entertainment with nuances of the supernatural might feed the hunger for spiritual life.³⁰ However, the supernatural in entertainment is a typical product of postmodernism: it fails to explore the true meaning of spirituality. Fiske has argued that “postmodern culture is fragmented culture, the fragments come together for the occasion and are not organized into stable coherent groupings by an external principle”.³¹

For postmodernism the crucial part of the play of images is the sensuality of their surface. Postmodernism refuses a deep meaning that underlines the surface; like poststructuralism it refuses the difference between the signifier and the signified and thus avoids the debate of which is the more significant. In refusing depth, postmodernism is denying the power or even the existence of ideology, structure, and psychoanalysis as organizing structures beneath our experience of both society and culture.³²

In line with Fiske, Imran has argued that the popularity of mystery entertainments does not mean that the traditional belief in the supernatural has emerged and developed again to satisfy the people’s hunger for spirituality.

²⁹ Aulia A Muhammad, "Berharap Pada Yang Bangkit Dari Kubur [Expectation from the Dead Spirit]," *Suara Merdeka* 2004, <http://www.suaramerdeka.com/cybernews/layar/iqra/Iqra39.html>, (accessed 2 August 2006).

³⁰ Imran, "Masyarakat Dan Industri Hantu [Society and Ghost Industry]."; Muhammad, "Berharap Pada Yang Bangkit Dari Kubur [Expectation from the Dead Spirit]."

³¹ John Fiske, "Postmodernism and Television," in *Mass Media and Society*, ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (New York: St Martin's Press Inc., 1997), 56.

³² *Ibid.*, 57.

The supernatural is metaphysical: that is why how it operates cannot be seen by ordinary human eyes, although the influence of these workings in the natural can be. However, with the development of technology, especially in film making, imagined supernatural power can be visualized with the help of special effects. It can be concluded that the popularity of global supernatural entertainment generates the supernatural belief in the society, but it needs the help of special technical cinematic effects.

The Construction of the Seen World and the Unseen World

Misteri Gunung Merapi involves Javanese belief in the seen and unseen worlds, the world of humanity and the world of spirits. Although most people never see any spirits, still almost all of them believe that the world of spirits exists and only a few people with special powers can see and form relationships with them. Van Der Kroef argued that the foundation of this belief is animism, a belief that “everything in nature has a soul which can leave its habitat to roam at will and influence men’s lives”. With the coming of other religions, other spirits have been added, such as Hindu celestial nymphs, *widadari*, and the Islamic spirits and devil, *jin* or *setan*.³³ Traces of all these spirit worlds can be seen in this sinetron.

Javanese Paganism

In the Javanese concept there are the unseen worlds, the spirit worlds. As they are metaphysical, human eyes can not see these creatures of these worlds. The Javanese believe that there are two kinds of spirit: those which are born as spirits, and human beings who passed away and have transformed into spirits. However, in the Islamic concept, the soul of the dead body cannot be a spirit. Once the person passed away, the soul rests and will awaken on the Day of Judgment after Doomsday.

³³ Justus van der Kroef, "Dualism and Symbolic Antithesis in Indonesian Society," *American Anthropologist* 56, no. 5 (1954).

Many Javanese people believe in the existence of several supernatural creatures such as *roh leluhur*, *dhanhyang*, *dhemit*, *tuyul*, *lelembut*, and *memedi*.³⁴ Most spirits are considered as good and helpful for human beings. People believe that the *roh leluhur* look after their descendants. They believe that a *dhanhyang* is a protector spirit. People often come to the places where *dhemit* are believed to live for help when they get problems such as being sick, infertile, poor, or lonely. They also believe in the existence of bad spirits such as *lelembut* and *memedi*³⁵ because they often frighten humans.

Many people believe that there are seven worlds, and every world is inhabited by different creatures. Of the seven, it is only the human world which has the sun and is inhabited by humans, animals and all living beings. They believe that the inhabitants of the other worlds only have light as their bodies: these are supernatural creatures because human beings cannot see their bodily form. The six supernatural worlds are *merkayangan* (which is similar to the human world but more modern), *siluman* (a watery area such as a lake or sea), *kajiman* (the hot mountainous area), *demit* (the green and cool mountainous area) and two worlds for the good spirits.³⁶

People often offer the spirits food, drinks, flowers, money, cigarettes, and clothes to keep away their disturbance. They also create obstacles to prevent the spirits from bothering them by putting out some overripe fruits or smelly aroma. Some spirits are considered helpful because people can come to them for wealth and success. These include *Jaran Penoreh* (a horse with a backward-turned head), *Srengara Nyarap* (a biting dog), *Bulus Jimbung* (a big turtle), *Kandang Bubrah*

³⁴ *Roh leluhur* (the spirits of dead people), *dhanhyang* (the highest spirits who live in mountains, the water of springs, rivers, or hills), *dhemit* (powerful spirits who live in sacred places such as temple ruins, banyan trees, old cemeteries, the water of hidden springs, or big rocks), *tuyul* (a small naked boy with a forelock), *lelembut* (spirits who often disturb human beings by dissolving into their body and making them sick, mad, and even mortally ill), and *memedi* (spirits which often show themselves and frighten human beings).

³⁵ There are several bad spirits categorised as *memedi*, such as a *wedon* (a dead body in a white cloth), *banaspati* (a spirit who walks on his hands and squirts fire through his mouth), *sundel bolong* (a beautiful woman with long hair and a hole on her back), and *gendruwo* (which often changes into a human and comes to seduce a wife when her husband is away).

³⁶ Suryo S. Negoro, "The Worlds of Spirits (in Java)," <http://www.joglosemar.co.id/kejawen/binaji.html1999>, (accessed 30 January 2007).

(a broken stable), *Umbel Molor* (dripping mucus), *Kutuk Lamur* (a fish with blurred eyes), *Gemak Melung* (a special bird), *Codot Ngising* (an excreting bat) and *Bajul Putih* (a white crocodile).³⁷

Although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* mentions the names of spirits as topics of conversation among the villagers, this is more in order to build the image of the spirits as frightening figures (see Figures VII.3-4). These spirits are responsible for any disaster in a village. However, the spirits disturb the peace of the village because they are invited by a human who wants to destroy the village's harmony. The spread of disease is presented in an eerie way: someone is sick in the morning and dies in the afternoon, with a horrible sign left on the dead body. This symbol shows that the spirits have been the cause of the sickness. To solve such a problem, a *kyai* is most often portrayed as the person to ask for help. Alternatively, there are some *dukun*³⁸ *perempuan* (medicine women) who are able to understand the unseen world and communicate with the spirits, they can help the villagers to cure their sickness. According to the stories that circulate widely, Javanese people believe that spirits do not disturb humans as long as humans do not disturb the spirit life, such as cutting down an old big banyan tree where a spirit lives. However, all mysterious situations can always be solved because there are many people who understand supernatural creatures and can communicate with them.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “The word *dukun* is a generic term for those reputedly able to manage the supernatural forces involved in states of disorder or imbalance. Many types of *dukun* restrict their practice to one area, for example *dukun bayi* (midwife), *dukun wiwit* (harvest ritual specialist), or *dukun sunat* (circumciser). Those who are consulted for more unspecified matters, such as unusual illness or personal problems, are known simply as *dukun*. It is these practitioners who are open to accusations of sorcery, and who are liable to be labelled as *dukun santet*, with its possible stigmatising connotations.” Caroline Campbell and Linda H. Connor, "Sorcery, Modernity, and Social Transformation in Banyuwangi, East Java," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 34, no. 2 (2000).



Figure VII- 3: Siluman Ular (snake spirit)



Figure VII- 4: Teluh Raja Brangah (Black magic spirit)

Many Indonesian people believe in the power of paranormal practitioners to cure health problems. Traditionally people used to go to *dukun* for their health problems. The modernist New Order, through government-sponsored sinetron broadcast on TVRI, had campaigned to encourage people to come to the doctor for their health problems rather than going to *dukun*. The New Order also built a health centre with a doctor and nurses in every District in Indonesia. However, with the economic crisis of 1997 followed by devaluation of the rupiah and the rise of the price of medicine, the tradition of going to *dukun* for health problems has become popular again. There are a lot of stories circulating about the success of alternative medicines and of paranormals who could help people solve serious health problems such as cancer. There are also many advertisements in print and broadcast media about alternative medicine or paranormal practitioners. *Misteri Gunung Merapi* portrays this phenomenon through the presentation of male and female *dukun* and *kyai*³⁹ as paranormals. Some *dukun* use herbs for curing certain illnesses. However, some are constructed as making a pact with supernatural beings. Before curing the patient, they perform a meditation to invite a spirit and then have a consultation about how to cure the problem. Nyai Kantil, for example, considering that the cause of the wound in Basir's leg is an attack of a *siluman babi* (boar spirit), says that he should go to Nyai Rambe because she is the one who could solve such problem.

³⁹ As mentioned previously, the term *kyai*, in Javanese culture can refer to both a Muslim scholar and a person who is able to control the supernatural power.

As with the usual construction of paranormals in Indonesian films or sinetron, Nyai Rambe also meditates to consult with the *siluman babi* about how to cure this wound. However, the coming of this *siluman* is not accompanied with an eerie situation, such as a strange wind and cold or suggestive music. Basir and most other people in this room see that Nyai Rambe sits down quietly and closes her eyes. However, the camera portrays her shadow standing up and walking to welcome the arrival of the spirit. Only Sembara, sitting in a similar position to that of Nyai Rambe, can see what happens.

As I mentioned, in Indonesia it is sometimes believed that supernatural power can cure serious health problems. In *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, insanity or mental illness can be cured by supernatural powers. For example, in episode 7, Sembara's journey to find Farida is distracted by the disturbance of a psychotic person, Tarwa. He becomes insane after losing his girlfriend and accuses of everyone of stealing her from him. He attacks people with a sword and accidentally kills three of them. His father, then, decides to put him in the stocks⁴⁰ so that he could not injure anyone else. Sembara, feeling sorry for his fate, checks his condition, presses his toe, and hits his chest with his palm (see Figures VII-5 and VII-6). Some dark sticky blood comes from Tarwa's mouth and he collapses unconscious. However, after that treatment, he gets his mental health back.



Figure VII- 5 : Tarwa in the stocks



Figure VII- 6 : Exercising inner power to cure the insane

⁴⁰ In Indonesian, *pasungan* (a long log with holes for the two legs for the insane is locked in). Traditionally, it was the way to keep the insane from disturbing others.

The appearance of ghosts in the sinetron is quite similar to the way Hollywood films present the entrance of ghosts. There is an unusual and sudden chill felt by those present.⁴¹ It is always in the middle of the night and there is the sound of a barking dog. Their characteristic immateriality is demonstrated by their being able to pass through walls. However, a ghost or zombie in one of the episodes of the sinetron appears as a beautiful woman who seduces the night watchmen before killing her victim. Like the vampire in Hollywood movies, the beautiful zombie or ghost stuck her fangs into the victim (a playboy)'s neck, sucked his blood dry and left a bite-mark on his neck. In some way *Misteri Gunung Merapi* continues the tradition of Indonesian mystery films of punishing a *pria mata keranjang* (man who is not loyal to his wife), however it does not continue the tradition of the rise of the zombie to take revenge which was popular in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The Javanese also believe in the existence of *sundhel bolong* or *kuntilanak*⁴². However, in the sinetron, as I have described in an earlier chapter, a *kuntilanak* is not portrayed as in the Javanese belief but rather in an Islamic way. In the episode *Mengarak Pengantin Siluman* (Celebrating the Spirit Wedding), Ki Bongkok could not accept the death of his wife. He performs a sacred ceremony to resurrect his wife. Mak Lampir, from looking into her *bejana sakti* (sacred bowl), could see what Ki Bongkok is doing. She comes to help him resurrect his wife but asks him to help her in return for this favour. Mak Lampir then revives the wife's dead body but she needs to drink fresh blood to keep alive. However, when she needs to find her victims she will have the appearance of Farida, so that the people in the village will not be suspicious of her actions. Sembara in his journey then had to stay for a while in this village to help the people solve this mysterious problem. Unlike other people who see the zombie as Farida, Sembara could see it as Darmi, Ki Bongkok's wife. He then meditates, and from his body

⁴¹ Costa J. Efthimiou and Sohang Gandhi, "Ghosts, Vampires and Zombies: Cinema Fiction Vs Physics Reality," *arXiv* 5, (2006), <http://arxiv.org/pdf/physics/0608059>.

⁴² *Kuntilanak* (Indonesian), or *Pontianak* (Malay) or *Sundhel Bolong* (Javanese) refers to "a spirit in the form of beautiful woman, with a big hole in the back" Negoro, "The Worlds of Spirits (in Java)."

comes a purple light which attacks the zombie which collapses, and Ki Bongkok is killed by the villagers.

Candi Prambanan, near Yogyakarta in Central Java, is the largest Hindu temple in Indonesia. There is a legendary story that this temple was built in only one night by Bandung Bandawasa with the help of supernatural beings. This story is also exploited in the sinetron. After her long fight with Sembara, with her house having been burnt during the fight, Mak Lampir has decided to have a new palace in which she can open a school of martial arts. She gave praise to Bathari Durga and asks the supernatural being to help her building her new Jonggring Salaka. In a moment, from the area of burnt remnants the goddess erects a beautiful new building, Jonggring Salaka. Through the scene of the erection of Jonggring Salaka, the fantasy of the building of Candi Prambanan was visualised. However this building was not done by very rapidly building it up stone by stone; rather, the complete building just emerges from the earth as if it has been buried under the ground (see Figures 7-10).



Figure VII- 7 : The creation process of Jonggring Salaka



Figure VII- 8 : The first narrow opening up of the land



Figure VII-9 : From the opening appears the roof of a palace



Figure VII-10: The complete palace rises from underground

In Javanese belief, becoming rich is not forbidden or scorned. However, people believe that some get their wealth by *golek pesugihan*⁴³ (making a pact with a devil). Among the spirits who are believed to be able to make someone rich are Nyai Blorong, a *tuyul* (a small naked boy with a forelock), and *babi ngepet* (a fake boar, see footnote 43 below). Traditionally, someone who became rich instantly or even a merchant or businessman who is successful, was suspected of having made a pact with a devil such as Nyai Blorong or *tuyul*. From the Javanese

⁴³ Susanto et al have reported the account of a witness of people's belief that being rich happens with the help of a devil telling a story of what he watched in the past:

“Orang-orang berlarian, mengejar seekor celeng, babi hutan. Binatang itu terburit-burit, berlari kencang di perkampungan di kota kecil kami, Blora. Hewan itu masuk ke pekarangan rumah nenek saya, lalu meloncati pagar kayu setinggi orang dewasa, lenyap di tikungan lorong. Orang-orang bergedabikan. Mereka berteriak-teriak. Mencari-cari binatang yang entah datang darimana dan raib entah kemana itu. Mereka marah ketika menyadari binatang itu bagai ditelan bumi. “ Kurang ajar! Wong sugih ngendi maneh sing njaluk mati? Seru seorang lelaki seraya mengacungkan parang.

Fragmen itu saya saksikan lebih dari seperempat abad silam. Dan, itu bukan kejadian yang langka. Orang bilang, itulah celeng jadi-jadian, babi ngepet. Ya celeng itu penjelmaan orang yang mencari pesugihan, mencuri kekayaan orang lain, terutama saat ada warga desa punya hajat.”

Translation:

People ran after a boar. This animal ran into our village in Blora. It came into my grandmother's yard, jumped a wooden fence as high as a man is tall, and disappeared around an alley corner. People scattered everywhere. They shouted. They looked for that boar which had somehow just disappeared. “Shit! Who is the rich man who needs to die?” One of the people shouted while brandishing his sword.

This fragment I watched more than twenty five years ago. And, it was not a rare incident. People said, it was “fake boar”, babi ngepet. This boar was an embodiment of a person who looked for “pesugihan”, stealing other people's wealth when there was a party in this village. Astrid S. Susanto and others, *Perempuan Dalam Wacana Politik Orde Baru : Pilihan Artikel Prisma [Women in the New Order Political Discourse: Selected Articles from Prisma]*, Cet. 1. ed., Seri Prisma (Jakarta: Lp3es, 2004).

point of view, this wealth, especially a successful businessman's, is not legitimate; it is wrong because it has come from making such a pact. This may even lead to a rich man being considered as not Javanese any more and losing his status as a member of society. Thus belief in Nyai Blorong and *tuyul* can be used to reduce the status of rich men in Java. The traditional Javanese people believed that a rich man is likely to be a thief and it is his *tuyul* who does it for him.⁴⁴

One episode of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* was about the power of Nyai Blorong to make someone rich. Presented as a popularly circulated belief, the episode shows a desperately poor woman who decides to make a pact with Nyai Blorong. She is asked to kill a cock and does so without realizing that she is actually sacrificing her daughter. The common belief of the agreement people make with Nyi Blorong is that every year they have to sacrifice someone for Nyi Blorong and if they fail to send this sacrifice, Nyi Blorong will take one of their children. Sembara, with his sixth sense, is able to see that the woman is unknowingly attempting to kill her daughter, who is crying out for help. He tries to remind the woman that she is doing something wrong. But his attempt to stop the action is hindered by an old man saying that the woman has already made a pact with Nyai Blorong so that she cannot be stopped now. After killing the woman's daughter, Nyai Blorong then asks the woman to eat special food Nyai Blorong has cooked. To the bewitched woman, the food appears to be rice with many accompaniments, but in Sembara's eyes, the food is actually disgusting small reptiles. When I was still very young, there were many stories circulating of people gaining material wealth with the help of Nyai Blorong and *tuyul*. I came to believe in the existence of *tuyul*, although I never saw such a creature. When I was 7 or 8 years old, my mother often mysteriously lost coins from her piggy bank. One day she asked me to witness as she put a lot of coins into it and on the next day again when she found that there were only one or two coins left. She put some more in and, once again, the next day, her piggy bank was almost empty. She then had a consultation with a paranormal who gave her a bowl of water with

⁴⁴ Onghokham, *Dari Soal Priyayi Sampai Nyi Blorong: Refleksi Historis Nusantara* [from *Aritocrats to Nyi Blorong: Historical Reflection of Nusantara*], 182.

jasmine flowers in it and sprayed this water around the house. After this she never lost her money again.

Up to the present day there are still some stories in circulation conveying the belief that behind people with special ability, there is a *qadam* (magic slave) or *jin* who helps them. The belief is that they make a friendship with supernatural creatures which help them to master something extraordinary, such as putting people to sleep or putting people under their influence.⁴⁵ If a person has an extraordinary ability of to deliver speeches, for example, people often question whether it is innate ability or a *qadam* is helping. In one episode of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, Sarkali makes a pact with evil spirit to be a *maling sakti* (powerful thief). He can then change his appearance into somebody else and cheat the village people who run after the thief. His action always begins by spreading *sirep* (a magic sleeping gas) over the village so that everyone sleeps very soundly and nothing can wake them (see Figures VII-11 and 12). Just after finishing his activities the effect of the gas finishes, the people wake and realize that their belongings have disappeared.



Figure VII-11: Sarkali steals a box from Sembara



Figure VII-12: Sarkali stealing while carrying Farida on his shoulder

People also believe in marriages between humans and spirits such as the marriage between Nyai Rara Kidul, the Queen of the Southern Sea, and all the Javanese kings, and of Dewi Rengganis, the spirit of Mount Argopuro, with the climbers of the mountain. The children of such marriages usually become spirits.

⁴⁵ When the person speaks, people listen and respect every word said, but this is different from simple hypnotising.

When a woman is pregnant with a spirit, after the baby is born her stomach suddenly becomes small apparently by itself as no human can see when she has delivered the baby or where the baby is. In *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, Mak Lampir has kidnapped Farida and has tried to wed her with *Siluman Babi* (the pig spirit) because in Mak Lampir's belief, if Farida gets married with a spirit, her entity as a human will disappear and she will become a spirit. Through this, Mak Lampir believes that she can take revenge on Kyai Ageng Prayoga.

Belief that a place can be sacred is also exploited in the sinetron. The episode *Pengantin Lembah Hantu* (Wedding in the Ghost Valley), is based on a story of people's horror of a sacred silent place, the Valley of Ghosts. They believe that this place is the house of the spirits because it is isolated and solitary but during the night is often heard to be very noisy as if there were a party going on there. Human eyes can not see that this place is actually a crowded city of the spirit world. The character Basir only sees this place as covered with bushes which are nearly impossible to get through, while Sembara, after reciting some sacred words, can see that there is a beautiful palace inhabited by many spirits.

Javanese people also believe in the power of weapons, such as *keris*⁴⁶ and *benda bertuah*⁴⁷. M T Arifin said that *keris* are believed to have a power because of the process of making them is through a series of activities requiring asceticism,⁴⁸ while Sumodiningrat has explained that a *keris* is a union between physical and metaphysical material so that it has *pamor*, supernatural cosmic vibration.⁴⁹ In *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, Mak Lampir, although she acknowledges Sembara's power, is afraid of the whip, Amal Rasuli. She considers that Sembara will be easily defeated without it. However, in every fight Sembara tries to convince her that the weapon is only an instrument. He always repeats similar

⁴⁶ Or 'Kris', a dagger, usually wavy and with an ornamented handle.

⁴⁷ *Benda bertuah* refers to a material object which has a special power, such as a *keris* which is able to extinguish fire. Anan Hajid Triyogo, *Orang Jawa, Jimat Dan Makhluk Halus [Javanese, Talisman, and Spirit]* (Yogyakarta: Narasi, 2005).

⁴⁸ Wisnu Kisawa, "Tak Sekedar Wutuh, Tangguh, Dan Sepuh [Not Only Perfect, Powerful, and Mature]," *Suara Merdeka* 2004, <http://www.suaramerdeka.com/harian/0412/16/nas05.htm>, (accessed 16 January 2007).

⁴⁹ Triyogo, *Orang Jawa, Jimat Dan Makhluk Halus [Javanese, Talisman, and Spirit]*, 99.

sentences, that he does not fight against Mak Lampir but against her evil deeds. Through these words, Sembara is preaching against the belief that a weapon can be sanctified.

Rajah refers to a sacred inscription which is believed to have special supernatural power. Javanese also believe in the supernatural power of *rajah* to protect its owner from any danger. The webmaster of www.paranormal.or.id has explained that *rajah Kalacakra* originated from Mahayana Buddhism. After Islam spread across Java, the function of the *rajah Kalacakra* was transformed into the *ilmu hikmah*, which involved writing the inscription on a white piece of linen to protect the owner from any tragedy, while *rajah* came to be written on both the female body, especially on a woman's palm, and on the male body, especially on a man's back.⁵⁰ In *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, Nyai Bidara, to protect all the descendants of Kyai Ageng Prayoga, writes *rajah wahyu agung* on their palms (see Figure VII-13), which causes Mak Lampir to become very angry because she cannot then attack these people. Every time she attacks them a special light comes out from their bodies, which repels every attack.



Figure VII-13: Rajah Wahyu Agung

The construction of the supernatural in this sinetron shows that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* develops its stories either from popularly circulated stories or widespread beliefs in the society.

⁵⁰ "Forum Paranormal," <http://www.paranormal.or.id/viewtopic.php?topic=12&forum=22006>, (accessed 28 February 2007).

Myths and Mystics around Mount Merapi

Mount Merapi, located in Central Java, is still an active volcano. Javanese people living around the mountain believe that it is sacred. Some believe in the existence of Kanjeng Ratu Sekar Kedaton as the tutelary spirit of Mount Merapi. The Hindu people believed that this mountain was the place of the gods and goddesses, and many of the people around Merapi still believe that there is a spirit realm on the top of the mountain. It has been reported recently that the villagers of Kawastu and Korijaya believe that the spirit realm was led by Empu Rama and Permadi, while those of Wukisari believe it was led by Kyai Merlapa. According to Marijan (a cemetery guard) Prabu Jagad was the king of the spirits on Merapi. Many also believe in *Nyai Gadung Melati*, a spirit who guards the plants on Mount Merapi. This spirit often comes into people's dreams to give a sign of a volcanic eruption. There are also beliefs about *Eyang Sapujagad* who lives in Bubar market under the crater and arranges the nature of the mountain. There are also *Kyai Petruk*, one of Merapi's soldiers, *Eyang Antabaga*, the leader of the spirits living under the mountain and who guards the balance of Merapi's weight, *Eyang Megantara* who arranges the weather around Merapi, and other spirits.⁵¹

Beside their belief in the existence of such spirits, people believe that the souls of dead people still contact their living grandchildren, giving some help when people are facing disasters. People also believe in life after death. The souls of people fly around for about forty days after their death. If they have done good deeds their souls will live in Merapi's realm, but the souls of those who have done bad deeds will live in big stones or trees.⁵²

As the title of the sinetron is *Misteri Gunung Merapi* it obviously gives an impression to the Javanese that it will be presenting the myths surrounding the Merapi volcano. However, almost no episode verbally mentions Mount Merapi as one of the locations of the story. Yet the sinetron does mention Mount Sumbing or

⁵¹ Dylan Walsh, "Kepercayaan Masyarakat Jawa Terhadap Gunung [Javanese Belief to Mountain]," http://www.acicis.murdoch.edu.au/hi/field_topics/dylan.html2000, (accessed 12 June 2006).

⁵² Ibid.

Mount Lawu and the supernatural inhabitants of these. From my conversation with the sinetron's Production Manager, it seems that it could be that, because the beliefs in the spirits of Mount Merapi are still strong and to reduce the possibility of protests from viewers, they prefer to not mention Merapi but to create fictive characters for spirits inhabiting Mounts Lawu and Sumbing, which are now not active volcanoes.

People's belief in the possibility of transforming a human body into the form of an animal is exploited also in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. This belief basically developed in Tapanuli, Sumatra, where it was about the existence of a group of people who could transform themselves into tigers after learning special supernatural powers. However in this sinetron the Sumatranese belief about the existence of this group is combined with the belief in the supernatural power of the Javanese Mount Merapi. Through this, what is communicated is not an originally indigenous belief of Javanese but one constructed for the purpose of popular entertainment.

People around Merapi believe that the animals in the forest belong to *Eyang Merapi*. It is forbidden to kill or catch animals, especially white tigers. Some horses in Patuk forest are believed to be the spirit's carriage horses.⁵³ One episode of the sinetron, *Siluman Harimau* (the Tiger Spirit) tells about the prohibition of hunting and killing tigers on the forbidden forest⁵⁴. As a man with Western education, Mardian doesn't believe in the world of spirits, considering it as superstition. Although his servant, Ngatino, advises him not to go hunting in Mount Merapi's forbidden forest, he insists on going there, breaking the rule and killing a female tiger. He is cursed into becoming a tiger spirit. Every time the moon is full, he changes into a tiger and becomes hungry for blood. He kills anyone to satisfy his hunger by biting and sucking the blood from the neck of the victim, like a vampire.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ The sinetron does not mention "Mount Merapi" in any conversation, but the viewers can assume that the forbidden forest of the slope of the volcanic mountain in the sinetron refers to Mount Merapi of central Java, as the setting of this episode is the Mataram court which is located in Central Java.

The Javanese belief that every mountain has its own spirit who stands as the king of its mystical realm is also exploited in the sinetron. The episode *Mengarak Pengantin Siluman* (Celebrating the Spirit Wedding Party) tells about the spirit king and queen of Mount Sumbing who kidnap Farida to gain Mak Lampir's favour. These spirits had built their palace on the top of Mount Sumbing in a place which was no longer climbable. To most human eyes, the top of Mount Sumbing was only wild green forest but in Sembara's eyes it was a beautiful palace.

The relationship between the seen and unseen worlds can be seen in this series through the presentation of Nyai Rara Kidul and Nyi Blorong. The presentation of these spirits in the story also strengthens the idea of powerful women (which I will discuss later in this thesis). In *Misteri Gunung Merapi's* introductory episode Nyai Rara Kidul is shown advising Mak Lampir to surrender to the kingdom of Demak and Sunan Kudus because he is helped by the 'soldiers from the sky' (angels) to fight against evil. However, when Mak Lampir insists on asking for a weapon to defend herself, Nyai Rara Kidul gives her a whip which has to be soaked in blood and a sacrifice of seven babies made before it is used. In the second episode the popular belief in the marriage between Nyai Rara Kidul and the Javanese kings is clearly reflected. Sultan Agung, as the King of Mataram, has a problem in catching Mak Lampir. He meditates to ask Nyai Rara Kidul, who is his spirit wife, to come to him. She does, and advises him to find the whip Amal Rasuli to defeat Mak Lampir. The dual face of Nyai Rara Kidul, giving advice to Mak Lampir to surrender but also giving her a sacred whip, followed by her advice to Sultan Agung about how to catch Mak Lampir by taking the whip as portrayed in the sinetron, depicts how Javanese people see her. People respect her authority but are also afraid of her evil, especially when they break taboos related to her, such as wearing green when visiting the southern beach of Java, by her domain as Queen of the Southern Sea.

Jin, Iblis and Syaitan: The Unseen World in Islamic Perspective

Islam also acknowledges the existence of supernatural creatures: *malaikat* (angels), *jin* (genies), *iblis* (demons), and *syaitan* (satan). Unlike human beings who are created from earth, *jin*, *iblis* and *syaitan* are created from fire, while *malaikat* are created from light. The word *jin* comes from Arabic and means hidden creatures.⁵⁵ *Jin* were created long before human beings. As their velocity is faster than the speed of light, they are invisible to human eyes, which is why they are considered to be supernatural creatures, non-material and out of time and space. Their number is more than of human beings and their age is longer. Their form can be anything. As with human beings, God gives a *jin* a soul in order that this creature becomes smart, is able to think, and have a freedom to choose. Like a human being, a *jin* will also die.⁵⁶

Although *jin* are invisible, sometimes humans can see them when they appear in a human or animal form. Sometimes they appear as ghosts. They eat similar food to humans. They live in any place where humans live. There are two groups of *jin*, good and bad. A *jin*'s duty is similar to a human being's. They have to pray to God and follow God's rules. *Iblis* are considered as very evil *jin* which were created to live until the end of the world and which like to tempt human beings into evil actions, whereas a *syaitan* likes to cheat human beings to do this. In *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, there are several varieties of *jin*: good and bad, Muslim and animistic. The Muslim *jin*, such as Wak Bayau, also fight against evil and also remind bad *jin* to stop disturbing human beings and do something good for both human and spirit creatures.

Using a different categorisation, Abu Tsa'labah has distinguished between three kinds of *jin*, the ones which can fly, those which look like snakes or dogs, and those which like travelling.⁵⁷ *Misteri Gunung Merapi* presents these three

⁵⁵ Muhammad Isa Dawud, *Dialog Dengan Jin Muslim: Pengalaman Spiritual [Dialog with Muslim Spirit: A Spiritual Experience]* (Bandung: Pustaka Hidayah, 1997), 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Majdi Muhammad Asy-Syahawi, *Menjelajah Alam Jin (Trans) [a Quest into Spirit World]* (Bandung: CV Pustaka Setia, 2003), 18.

types in the characters of Wak Bayau (The Flying Queen), Siluman Serigala (the Wolf Spirit), Nyai Blorong (the Snake Spirit), and Kala Gondhang (the travelling *jin*). Wak Bayau is presented as queen of the *Atas Angin* (Summit of the Winds) with her palace floating in the sky. Nyai Blorong and her snake creatures are presented predominantly as spirits who like to disturb human beings.⁵⁸ Kala Gondhang is portrayed as a *jin* whose dream is to be the most powerful creature, and so it likes to travel everywhere to challenge any powerful spirit and defeat it.

Islam acknowledges some people who are able to communicate and make a pact with *jin*. This ability is recognized as *taskhirul jinn* (to confound *jin*).⁵⁹ Sembara is presented as the hero who is able to do this, for example by defeating and controlling Kala Gondhang through cutting off both his legs and returning them only after Kala Gondhang promises to stop his habit of challenging and defeating any creature and does good for others. After this incident, Kala Gondhang becomes Sembara's *qadam*⁶⁰ and obeys Sembara's orders to fight against evil.

Contrary to Javanese belief, in Islam human beings are not allowed to marry *jin* because their entity is different, although some people breach the rule. However, unlike the Javanese belief, the wedding between a *jin* and a human being cannot produce any children.⁶¹ This sinetron chooses to present the Islamic belief, for example through the possibility of marriage between Mardian⁶² and Rinata (tiger spirit).

⁵⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ An invisible servant.

⁶¹ Dawud, Dialog Dengan Jin Muslim: Pengalaman Spiritual [Dialog with Muslim Spirit: A Spiritual Experience], 117.

⁶² As I have previously discussed, Mardian is cursed to be tiger spirit after hunting and killing a tiger in the forbidden forest. Mardian should divorce Farida, because their entity is now different. Mardian can marry Rinata, as their entity is the same, both are tiger spirits.

Kyai, Santri and Pesantren

Misteri Gunung Merapi presents many *kyai* as central figures with their supernatural abilities. In the sinetron *kyai* are portrayed as figures who are able to communicate with the unseen spirits and travel between the seen and the unseen worlds.

The term ‘*kyai*’ refers to Javanese Muslim scholars, who are the founders and the leaders of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) with their *santri* (students) (see Figures VII-14 and 15). The role of a *kyai* is as a teacher and a preacher. He also takes a parental role with his students in which all aspects of personality development physically, psychologically, and spiritually are taken within his responsibility. Pre-Islamic Javanese traditions encouraged Islam in a mystical direction. In traditional Java, *kyai* could possess various degrees of proficiency in pre-Islamic and Islamic lore, dogma and practice. *Kyai* are the principal and charismatic intermediaries between the village masses and the realm of the supernatural. The charisma of a *kyai* comes from “the belief in his spiritual powers and ability to bestow blessing due to his contact with the world unseen; he is generally believed to retain this ability beyond the grave”.⁶³ There are divisions between *kyai*, those who merely instruct in Islamic law, those who teach mysticism and those who seek a reformed Islam with modern scientific concepts. As a result, there is a division between those who are orthodox in their Islamic belief and practice, and *abangan*, who have mixed pre-Islamic animistic and Hindu-Indian concepts with a more superficial acceptance of Islamic dogma. In the Colonial era many *kyai* were considered to be both powerful sacred heroes and influential secular personages to confront the Dutch authorities on behalf of the ordinary people.

⁶³ Martin van Bruinessen, "Pesantren Dan Kitab Kuning: Maintenance and Continuation of a Tradition of Religious Learning," *Texts from the islands. Oral and written traditions of Indonesia and the malay world*, (1994), http://www.let.uu.nl/~Martin.vanBruinessen/personal/publications/pesantren_and_kitab_kuning.htm.



Figure VII-14: Kyai



Figure VII-15: Kyai and santri

Both Mak Lampir and *kyai* pursued supernatural power through extreme asceticism. The difference between them is that, beside fasting, meditation, and the like, Mak Lampir absorbed or accumulated power which is categorized as evil because it involves the performing of certain rituals such as killing a baby, sucking the blood of a new bride, and sacrificing a boy who is born on a special day. In contrast, as a Moslem scholar, a *kyai* practices asceticism and the repetition of *dzikir*, recollections or remembrances of God's name.⁶⁴ The different ideologies and practices of accumulating power underlie the eternal conflicts between Mak Lampir and the *kyai*.

The extreme asceticism practiced by *kyai* and Mak Lampir also grants them an ability to communicate with the spirits. As in the seen world of human beings, there is also ideological conflict between good and evil in the unseen world. A powerful evil woman like Mak Lampir makes a pact with the evil spirits who help her create terror in society. As a very powerful woman, some spirits come to her to be her pupils. In contrast, the *kyai* build good relationships with the good spirits. Instead of asking for help from the spirits, the *kyai* cooperate with them to destroy evil in both worlds.

⁶⁴ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, "Islamic Education and Traditional Ideology on Java," in *Indonesia: The Making of Culture*, ed. JJ Fox (Canberra: Research School of Pacific Studies The Australian National University, 1980), 266.

Martial Art and Supernatural Power

In the Chinese tradition, there are two different kinds of martial art skills, and both of them need “the habits of discipline and endurance”.⁶⁵ The Northern Wudang school tend to concentrate on “feats associated with the marshalling of inner forces like weightless leaps and palm power” or inner disciplines while the Southern Shaolin style puts more emphasis “on physical prowess and endurance” or outer forces.⁶⁶ The softer Northern styles give the performance of “broad, sweeping dance-like movements”, in contrast to the harder Southern style’s focuses on “short fast punches”⁶⁷ (see Figures VII-16 and 17, both taken from popular films). Chute has also explained that to master martial arts can take up to ten years of an exhausting training process.⁶⁸



Figure VII-16: The Southern Shaolin



Figure VII-17: The Northern Wudang

Although there are these two different kinds of martial art, both of them focus on a highly disciplined training of the body. The spectacle of watching martial art movies involves the portrayal of the ability to control every movement precisely. Another lure (see Figure VII-18) is in the “combination of artful mastery over movement and ability to control a violent situation”.⁶⁹ One of the

⁶⁵ David Chute. "Heroic Grace: The Chinese Martial Art Films." ed David Chute and Lim Cheng-Sim. (UCLA Film and Television Archive, 2003), <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/newsletter/MartialArtsBrochure.pdf>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Robert Carl Schehr, "Martial Arts Films and the Action-Cop Genre: Ideology, Violence and Spectatorship," *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 7, no. 3 (2000), <http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcipc/vol7is3/schehr.html>.

cinematic effects involved is in how the camera should take the beginning of the leap and “emphasize the distance and the height of the jump” with a long shot.⁷⁰



Figure VII- 18: Controlling movement in martial art

As mentioned before, there are many different sects of martial arts, especially that of *pencak silat*, in Indonesia. Some of them not only offer martial art as a sport but also as a medium to exercise supernatural power. They promote that through the study of *tenaga dalam* (inner power) they can reflect away somebody else’s blow as if there was an unseen wall repelling the offender. There are supposedly many ways to exercise such an inner power, such as through exercising special breathing, or rubbing a foot on the ground to gain electromagnetic power from the earth.⁷¹ Some of them claim to exercise their powers through the help of *jin*, for which they have to learn special mantra and perform a series of fastings to gain contact with the *jin*.

Although martial art in the sinetron is not about the ability to control gravitation, fights are often screened as if in the air. Differently from the concept of the leap in the *wuxia* cinema, which actually is a special technique of climbing and controlling gravity, the concept of fighting in the sky in the sinetron involves a human ability to fly. That warriors could fly and create explosions is because of their exercising supernatural power through the help of spirits. The non-human capability of firing a force through an empty hand is made possible not through

⁷⁰ Aaron Anderson, "Violent Dances in Martial Art Films," *Jump Cut: A review of Contemporary Media* 44, (2001), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc44.2001/aarona/andersontextonly.html>.

⁷¹ "Unique Self Defense," <http://www.tridaya-innerpower.com/article.htm2004>.

the assistance of technology but through the help of spirits. (See Figures VII-19 and 20)

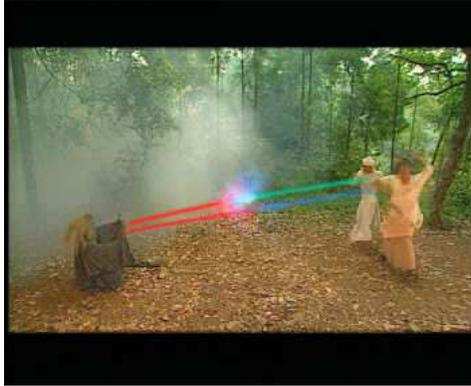


Figure VII-19: Visualisation of a conflict between supernatural power



Figure VII-20: Flying while fighting

One of the episodes in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* shows the process of transformation of a human from a weak figure into a powerful character. To become able to produce the supernatural power of a fiery blow, Banuseteta, a male antagonist, has to train himself by putting his hand in hot sands. Every time he has to put his hand in a big bowl of sand with a fire under it, he screams very loudly. Mak Lampir teaches him very strictly and orders him to repeat this action many times until he can handle the hot sand. The screening of his scream and burnt hand show how hard this training is. After he can control the burning feeling on his hand, he becomes able to send a distant hit to a tree which has the dramatic effect of burning it.

Banuseteta's training is not new in *wuxia* or *kung fu* TV series, as most of them emphasize such processes of transformation. The spectacle is in the steps from a powerless into a powerful figure. Although the emphasis on exercising supernatural power in fighting in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is different from those in the *wuxia* or *kungfu*, the sinetron imitates the *wuxia* and *kung fu* series in the screening of this story of Banuseteta.

In episode *Mata-mata Mak Lampir* (Mak Lampir's Spy), Mak Lampir trains Baka Wulung to gain special power, *Jagaraga*, which makes him immortal (see Figures VII-21 and 22). She orders him to recite some words and do some

meditation, while she showers his head and body with some water and flowers. After this special ceremony, Baka Wulung's human form disappears and he changes into a terrifying creature. Mak Lampir said that every full moon, his form will be as a monster until he drinks fresh human blood. He will need the blood from at least thirty humans to perfect his power.



Figure VII-21: Bakawulung practicing asceticism



Figure VII-22: Bakawulung practicing jagaraga supernatural power (his head could separate from his body and fly to spy the enemy)

In a recent forum discussion on the website www.paranormal.or.id, there was a question⁷² asking for any information about *ilmu pancasona*⁷³ or *rawarontek* or *Anjan Kumayan*. With this special *ilmu*, people believe, a very bad wound will be healed in a short time just by caressing it. An answer to this question, which shows that the supernatural in the sinetron is constructed utilising

⁷² The question was sent on 22 June 2001 and there were several responses from August 2001 – March 2004

⁷³ “Tentang Ilmu Pancasona.....kelihatannya memang seram yach...dengan menguasai ilmu itu kita bisa menutup luka yang sedemikian parahnya hanya dengan mengusapnya maka akan kembali semula, bahkan pemilik ilmu pancasona itu apa bila tubuhnya di potong² maka dalam waktu 7hari tubuhnya akan menyambung dengan sendirinya. yang intinya orang pemilik ilmu itu hanya akan meninggal apabila karena Allah SWT saja, selebihnya apabila luka atau musibah itu sengaja karena manusia maka luka tersebut akan kembali lagi kesemula alias langsung sembuh”.

Translation: About ilmu pancasona...it look terrifying...mastering this knowledge we could heal the very bad wound only by caressing it and the skin will return to normal, even for the owner of this knowledge, if the body is cut into pieces, within 7 days the body will be united by itself, in which the essence is that the owner of this knowledge only dies when God determines that it is his time to die, moreover if the wound or the accident is caused by a human it will be recovered soon.

strong cultural beliefs, was an assertion that in Sukabumi (in the hills of West Java) an old man could be found who had mastered this special knowledge.⁷⁴

Although in the sinetron *Bakawulung* masters very special supernatural power, in fighting against *kyai*, he is defeated. This is not depicted as through a sequence of fighting and exercising of supernatural power, but through a continuous recitation which makes him unable to control his knowledge. *Bakawulung's* head is trapped in a chicken cage and covered by white linen⁷⁵ at which he becomes helpless.

In the episode *Iblis Berambut Api* (Satan with Hair of Fire), *Mak Lampir* also makes a sacred offering to the grave of her sister (see Figures VII-23 and 24). She awakes her dead soul to ask it for help in her fight against *Sembara*. Her sister's soul then joins into *Mak Lampir's* body and adds her power as well. *Mak Lampir* changes into a woman with fiery hair. With this fire, she can easily shoot an explosion at her enemy. The conflict in the sinetron is not about how the martial art is exercised but the way two supernatural powers conflict between *Sembara* and *Mak Lampir*. The supernatural in the sinetron resembles the gun in Western films: both produce the same explosion effect but through a different medium, from the gun as instrument or the empty hand. There are not many movements because this exercise of supernatural power is done through asceticism and reciting mantra (sacred words).

⁷⁴"Forum: Seputar Paranormal Indonesia," <http://www.paranormal.or.id/reply.php?topic=17&forum=2&post=85"e=1&mod=32001>, (accessed 12 February 2007).

⁷⁵ White linen is considered as a medium for supernatural power, such as some Arabic passages written on white linen can function as protection, bringing invulnerability, and fortune to its holder.



Figure VII-23: Mak Lampir praying at her sister's tomb.



Figure VII-24: Her late sister's supernatural power is absorbed by Mak Lampir. Fire covers her hair, she sends fire at her enemy.

Conclusion

Most supernatural scenes and narratives in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* are constructed from legendary stories or based on popular beliefs which are reinvented for the purpose of popularity. As the majority audience in Indonesia is Muslim, the sinetron has been able to utilise contrasts between the Javanese and the Islamic beliefs in supernatural power, as represented by Mak Lampir and Sembara respectively. To an extent, the sinetron endorses a pure version of Islam at the expense of traditional Javanese belief in the supernatural. However, as is characteristic of popular culture products, Islam in the sinetron is simplified for the purpose of entertainment. Indeed, both forms of belief are exploited in this hybrid, postmodern form of entertainment: they are fragmented, simplified and sensationalised. The spiritual meaning is lost. Supernatural creatures and power are used as a medium to achieve worldly ends in both forms of belief.