

CHAPTER IV

THE MAKING OF MISTERI GUNUNG MERAPI

Introduction

Misteri Gunung Merapi can be considered a very popular sinetron, having achieved top ratings in the first years it was broadcast, and continuing double-digit ratings since then (see figure III-2 and III-3). These ratings suggest that audiences everywhere in Indonesia, whatever their ethnic background and whether they are from rural or urban areas, prefer this program over any other program, either local or imported. It also suggests that this sinetron is capable of entertaining different segments of audiences despite their differences of class, ethnicity, age and gender.

Can its popularity be explained entirely in terms of its commercial success? Barker raises the question of whether economic determinants can, by themselves, explain successful commercial television products.¹ There are further questions to be considered about popularity and conformity to dominant social values. Sanders argues that members of a production team are likely to censor themselves in order to stay within the boundaries of the dominant value system.² As well as this informal self-restraint, Best has pointed out that “media industries must contend with a variety of social control agencies which supervise their activities at each major stage in the industrial process” from the production stage, to the distribution stage until the consumption stage.³ If this is the case, how can

¹ Chris Barker, *Global Television: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 5.

² Clinton R. Sanders, "Structural and Interactional Features of Popular Culture Production: An Introduction to the Production of Culture Perspective," *Journal of Popular Culture* 16, no. 2 (1982): 68.

³ Joel Best, "The Social Control of Media Content," *Journal of Popular Culture* 14, no. 4 (1981): 611.

media industries ever produce television that is innovative and creative as well as popular? Such questions underlie the discussion which follows.

It is indeed an achievement for *Misteri Gunung Merapi* to have maintained its high ranking position ever since it first appeared on the 1st of November 1998. Given that the product is put together by a team, in many ways this is a collective rather than an individual achievement. In this chapter, I will discuss the making of the long-running *Misteri Gunung Merapi*: the producer and the production team behind it and the producer's formula, a formula which includes a degree of self-regulation so as not to offend sections of his audience. I will then discuss the history of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* as it evolved from comics to radio drama to film and then to sinetron, an evolution which explains its use of dubbing. Finally I consider its success in terms of prime-time television programming: how it negotiates public expectations about the representation of violence and sexuality.

The Producer and the Production Team

Misteri Gunung Merapi has always been produced by PT Genta Buana Pitaloka, which is owned by Budi Sutrisno. The first episodes were produced when Indonesia was experiencing the 1997-8 economic crisis which resulted in a fall in the number of sinetron productions. Unexpectedly, this sinetron was immediately very popular and, according to SRI AC Nielsen, obtained the top rating in 1998. It is believed that it succeeded because it presented a different genre of sinetron which gave the audiences more about local culture and tradition rather than the usual depictions of modern Indonesia. Unlike the characteristic settings of most sinetron, displaying the glamorous life-styles of the rich in the modern era, rather it is set in villages and forests in a far-away past time. The other lure of this sinetron is the action scenes, which need which need particular technological 'tricks' to shoot and present them.⁴

⁴ Veven Sp Wardhana, *Televisi Dan Prasangka Budaya Massa [Television and Mass Culture Prejudice]* (Jakarta: Diterbitkan [oleh] Media Lintas Inti Nusantara untuk Institut Studi Arus Informasi, 2001), 413.

Sindu Dharma, the Production Manager of PT Genta Buana, explained to me that, initially, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* was a trial production by Budi Sutrisno. The economic crisis which attacked Indonesia in 1997 had a major influence on the private television companies. The disastrous changes in exchange rates made imported programs very expensive. However, these conditions supported a flowering of local production, including Budi Sutrisno's *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. One of the reasons for trialling this particular sinetron was the previous popularity of the story in a radio drama version in the 1980s. Dharma said that the target audiences of this sinetron were adults who were already familiar with the story from that earlier radio program. It could be said that the producer hoped to visualize the way audiences had imagined the radio story of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. However, he never expected that this serial would be so popular and would attract so many viewers from different age groups, because he saw that the three episodes of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* which were made into a film were not popular.⁵

Being successful in producing *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, PT Genta Buana subsequently specialised in producing sinetron *kolosal laga* or epic sinetron. For shooting purposes, the producer rents 8 ha area in Cibubur of Jakarta for building a property including such settings as a cave, river, bamboo houses and horse stables and has involved hundreds of people. To build this outdoor studio it is rumoured that he invested 7 billion rupiah.⁶

After looking at the popularity of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* and the boom in VCD players in Indonesia, the company started to produce a VCD version of the serial. There are now 37 episodes available for purchase. The story in the VCD version is not identical with the television version, with some editing to make it more appropriate for home entertainment. Also, only the most popular episodes

⁵Personal conversation with Sindu Dharma in October 2003.

⁶ Agus Susanto, "Tiada Hari Tanpa Sinetron [No Day without Sinetron]," *Kompas Cyber Media*, 4 August 2002, 2, <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0208/04/Latar/tiad13.htm>, (accessed 20 April 2006).

are produced for the VCD version. This is the version I have used for detailed analysis in later chapters of this thesis.

Indosiar have recently broadcast *Misteri Gunung Merapi 3*. The number added in the title signifies only the business agreement between the producer and the television station about the broadcasting of the sinetron. This is the same as when the first contract of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* ended⁷, considering that this serial was still popular and attracted many advertisements, a second contract was made and the number 2 added to the title. It should be noted that *Misteri Gunung Merapi 2* was not a part 2 of the story nor a second serial of the stories, but only indicated the second business agreement between the producer and the station.⁸

The production team is large and varied in their ethnic and professional backgrounds. The story of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* was originally from comic serials written by Asmadi Sjafar published by PT Elex Media Komputindo. Although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* takes Central Java as the setting of the story and is rich with nuances of Javanese culture, Asmadi Sjafar has a Padang (West Sumatran) ethnic background. The sinetron scenes were written by Abnar Romli, a Javanese who also directed the first two episodes. He graduated from the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) Tegal Slawi in Central Java. Then the producer decided to ask Ucik Supra to be the director while Abnar Romli concentrated on writing the scenes of the sinetron, which he has continued to do up to now. Ucik Supra directed episodes 3 to 34 and then his position was taken over by Edward Pesta Sirait⁹. The cameraman of the first two episodes was Fauwzy Wahyudi, who was then replaced by Y. Maningka. Harry Sabar, well-known Indonesian musician, has always worked as the sinetron's music director. Artistic direction has been under Abdullah Sadjad's responsibility. The production

⁷ The production manager could not inform me about this because everything to do with the contract is the producer's responsibility.

⁸ Personal conversation with Sindu Dharma, the production manager in October 2003.

⁹ In my conversations with the production manager, I got an impression that the producer changed the team production, such as the director and the cameraman when the ratings were low. In my conversation with the cameraman, he said that he previously worked for *Dendam Nyi Pelet* production, then the producer asked him to join his company to work for producing *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. *Dendam Nyi Pelet* is considered as *Misteri Gunung Merapi*'s competitor.

team is very large, with at least 15 people working as make-up and costume artists alone.

As a producer, Budi Sutrisno is not intimately involved in the day to day production process. He takes an active role in selecting the actors and the actresses and their casting in the sinetron, but seldom comes to the studio to watch the process of the shooting. He delegates the control of production to the production manager who directly deals with the directors, actors, and other production team members. However, it seems that he takes an active role in the editing process, because he often asks for an additional scene to be shot for an episode that looks ready for broadcasting. He enforces his critical standards which make the production team feel under pressure. However, Budi Sutrisno is not a type of producer who challenges moral standards to produce a sinetron which might attract debates. He prefers to produce something which does not offend anybody. It can happen in Indonesia that a sinetron which offends moral standards will attract a lot of viewers because they are eager to know which part of the sinetron has been categorised as containing offensive materials. But Budi Sutrisno does not want to attract this kind of attention.¹⁰

Sanders has argued that the producer functions as the production gatekeeper. In some way he employs creative people for his production to strive for innovation, however, there is ambivalence because innovation is also limited by a commercial necessity.¹¹ Although most members of the production team seldom meet him, Budi Sutrisno often visits the Indosiar television station for discussions with the staff. Nevertheless, while it may seem that the producer does not participate actively in the production process, the director still feels that in the production of the sinetron his talent is not being fully exercised. Edward Pesta Sirait, well-known as a talented movie director when Indonesian cinema was still in its glorious era, told me that his is not the key role in the production. He could not be categorised as an *auteur* because his role is limited to the directing of new

¹⁰ My impression was drawn from my personal conversation with the production manager.

¹¹ Sanders, "Structural and Interactional Features of Popular Culture Production: An Introduction to the Production of Culture Perspective," 68.

inexperienced actors and actresses. His creativity and innovation are limited by convention and a variety of formulas for satisfying market demands.¹²

As ratings drive the sinetron industry, the producers use ratings to justify changing the actors or the story or asking for some additional scenes to increase selling points. For example, because a young man with a haircut like the star of the Taiwanese soap *Meteor Garden* is very popular, they ask the directors to give the actors a similar haircut. Sometimes it can happen that a producer asks the director to imitate some scenes from a Hollywood film which he considers to be good and interesting.¹³ This has also happened in sinetron *Misteri Gunung Merapi*: the producer changed the director and the cameraman in order to increase the ratings.¹⁴ Following the popularity of teen sinetron, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* also changed the story to focus more on the conflict between teens and their parents.¹⁵

There are many actors and actresses involved in this production. Most of them are new faces in Indonesian cinema or television film. Only Farida Pasha who performs as Mak Lampir has been a popular actress for mystery films since the Indonesian cinema was in its glorious era. She was also cast as Mak Lampir in the cinema version. Most of the others are stock actors or actresses because they are cast in different roles for different episodes. Most of them are in their early and late twenties and have finished high school. Some are enrolled in university but have flexible schedules so they can meet the demands of production. The producer prefers not to work with well-known actors or actresses because he needs them to be constantly available and well-known actors and actresses are often late or absent for shooting. He requires the actors and actresses to work only in his production house and to concentrate on performing in his sinetron as their main job. The actors and actresses are under contract for a certain period to

¹²Personal conversation with Edward Pesta Sirait in October 2003.

¹³ Arif Rusli and others, "Kemilau Produk Kodian [the Glamour of Mass Product]," Media Kerja Budaya, http://mkb.kerjabudaya.org/mkb-102003/mkb-pokok-102003/pokok_1_102003.htm2003, (accessed 27 February 2006).

¹⁴ My personal conversation with the director, the cameraman and the production manager.

¹⁵ Personal conversation with Edward Pesta Sirait in October 2003.

perform many characters for different sinetron. For example, Lyra Virna in episode 28 is cast as 'Corry', a Dutch girl, while in episode 31 she becomes 'Ganda Suli', a powerful girl. Similarly Aldona Tonic in episodes 1 and 2 has a role as 'Nyai Rara Kidul' then as 'Karen' in episode 14 while in the other episodes she performs as 'Nyai Blorong'. People who do not watch this serial regularly may be confused to see the actor performing a different character.

To sum up, a large production team, a large expenditure on outdoor studios, one or two famous names in the cinema world and a large caste of characters and extras, shows that producing sinetron is a large investment. As a result the producer insists on making a good profit. My brief conversations with the production team have strengthened my opinion that, as Selby and Cowdery argue, "the reality created in a television program is itself the product of various cultural pressures and constraints", with profit being a prime requirement.¹⁶ Certainly, a television program, as part of an industry, should create profit. As well, to a considerable extent they need to consider censorship and public taste, and I will discuss these pressures and constraints in the following section.

The Formula: Success and Self-regulation

In relation to sinetron production, the term "formula" refers to the producer's recipe for placing their production in a top rating position and attracting a lot of advertising. In relation to the high cost production of media, Best has argued that a formula can be insurance for the producer to gain audiences with "its uncertain taste" and thus it decreases the risk of failure.¹⁷ According to Cawelti, formulas are "a conventional system for structuring cultural products".¹⁸ Formulas come into existence and become important because "they represent

¹⁶ Keith Selby and Ron Cowdery, *How to Study Television* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995), 4.

¹⁷ Best, "The Social Control of Media Content," 616.

¹⁸ John G. Cawelti, "The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature," in *Popular Culture: Production and Consumption*, ed. C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001), 207.

syntheses of several important cultural functions which, in modern cultures, have been taken over by the popular arts”.¹⁹ That is why, he has also argued, a formula has “close connections to a particular culture and period of time” as it is related to its audiences.²⁰ Much earlier, he had also argued that a popular culture product can be considered successful if it offers enjoyment to its audiences, and familiarity is an important component of enjoyment.²¹

Even so, it is not easy to understand what viewers want. Since the audience taste in Indonesia is still “volatile” (Widodo’s term), many production houses do not want to take a risk by trying to be creative and producing distinctive programs. Instead, they tend to produce programs imitating those with high ratings.²² A producer creates a formula as a “compromise” or “standardizing production” to avoid risks.²³ Indonesia has a long tradition of imitating successful programs: “illegal copying of foreign programming, including formats, has been going on for a long time”.²⁴ Helmi Yahya, a television program producer, said in relation to quiz programmes that adapting programmes for the local market “is an art and the only people who can do successfully are Indonesian people”.²⁵ When the Australian mini-serial *Return to Eden* was very popular, an Indonesian producer produced a similar story in a cinema version with the title *Pesona Natalia* (Natalia’s Charm). The successful Taiwanese drama, *Meteor Garden* was the model for the sinetron *Siapa Takut Jatuh Cinta* (Who Fears to Fall in Love). *Kutunggu Kau di Pasar Minggu* (Waiting for You in the Minggu Market) is very similar to the Hollywood film *Notting Hill*. Surprisingly, *Siapa Takut Jatuh Cinta*

¹⁹ Ibid., 209.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ ———, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 6.

²² Amrih Widodo, "Consuming Passions: Millions of Indonesian Must Watch Soap Operas," *Inside Indonesia* 2002, <http://www.insideindonesia.org/edit72/theme%20-%20Amrih.htm>, (accessed 26 February 2006).

²³ David Paul Nord, "An Economic Perspective on Formula in Popular Culture," *Journal of American Culture* 3, no. 1 (1980): 24.

²⁴ Philip Kitley, "Closing the Creativity Gap - Renting Intellectual Capital in the Name of Local Content: Indonesia in the Global Television Business," in *Television across Asia*, ed. Albert Moran and Michael Keane (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 147.

²⁵ Ibid., 148.

achieved ratings of 11.4% of the total potential audience and a 30% share of the total audience viewing at that time, which means that it attracted large audiences, and consequently many advertisement slots. Considering such phenomena, imitating a successful sinetron has become more common in Indonesia.²⁶

Nevertheless, although some producers tend to simply imitate popular programs, others, especially those who have long experience of producing entertainment, have developed special techniques to make their production appeal to audiences. In 2002 Susanto published a report on interviews with several sinetron producers who were willing to describe their formulas. Most of the producers made drama sinetron. According to Raam Punjabi, a sinetron tycoon and the director of the production house Multivision Plus, building a television industry is not easy. Making sinetron means creating entertainment. Technically, to produce appealing sinetron, at least three elements are needed: interesting story, beautiful actresses, and a good director, although, even if this formula has been applied, the resulting sinetron may fail in the market. Believing that, of the three elements, the main key to a successful sinetron is the beauty of the actresses and actors, Punjabi makes exclusive contracts with many popular stars. In contrast, Chand Parwez Servia, the owner of the production house Kharisma Starvision Plus, said that popular and expensive actors or actresses or extravagant costume and decoration do not guarantee the popularity of the sinetron. Instead, a creative program could appeal to audiences. He will produce a sinetron of just 6 episodes and wait for the audience's responses. If this sinetron fails in the market, he will stop the production. Another producer, Gope T. Samtani, the director of Rapi Film chooses to produce 26-episode sinetron because he always wants to produce a different story. Like Parwez, he said that expensive and popular stars are not the key to producing popular sinetron, rather strong conflict and character will be more appealing. To attract more viewers, he makes a contract with an Indian actor and actress to cast in his sinetron with the other Indonesian actors and actresses. To create distinctive backgrounds, shooting is done not only in Indonesia but also, for example, in Sri Lanka and India, as these two countries are rarely chosen for

²⁶ Totot Indrarto, "Ketika Rating Menjadi Tuhan [When Rating Becomes God]," *Kompas*, 2 June 2002 2002, <http://www.pakde.com/Sinetron%20Jiplakan.html>, (accessed 24 March 2006).

shooting locations. In contrast, for Leo Sutanto, the owner of Prima Entertainment, advertisements in print media and trailers are the key for successful sinetron. Seven days before the broadcasting, he will aggressively advertise this sinetron to attract audiences. His other formulas are exploiting popular songs as the themes of his sinetron, and also using popular film stories and popular Indonesian novels for his sinetron production.²⁷

As a specialist producer of *sinetron kolosal laga*, Budi Sutrisno has developed his own formula.²⁸ He has a different target audience. The popularity of martial art stories, VCD *kung fu* serials, and *kung fu* television serials shows that this segment of the genre is relatively big in Indonesia. Since the early episodes of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* were broadcast just after the broadcasting of several popular *kung fu* television serials, Indonesian audiences were entertained by seeing a similar genre but from their own culture. The producer also chose to produce a sinetron version from a popular martial arts radio drama, with the expectation that he would gain the audiences who favoured that. As he employs a lot of actors and actresses to perform in his production, which is the reason why the sinetron is defined as '*kolosal*', he prefers to hire faces new to sinetron or film production, rather than making any exclusive contracts with already popular actors or actresses like Punjabi does.

It seems that there is unwritten agreement between sinetron producers about the content of the formula. A good interesting story, in Punjabi's formula is full of conflict, black and white characterization, some love affair interest, the presentation of an evil intention on the part of the antagonist to make the main protagonist suffer, and punishment for this.²⁹ According to Punjabi, an educational sinetron will not appeal to the audiences because they watch sinetron for entertainment. A good story, in his opinion, contains a character that is available for audience identification. *Tersanjung* (Flattered) could be produced for

²⁷ Susanto, "Tiada Hari Tanpa Sinetron [No Day without Sinetron]."

²⁸ My description of his formula is based on my impressions drawn from my conversation with the production team and some readings in online newspaper articles.

²⁹ Veven Sp Wardhana, *Dari Barbar Sampai Timor Timur: Mengeja Budaya Massa* [from Barbar to Timor Timur: Reading Mass Culture], Cet. 1. ed. (Yogyakarta: Galang Press, 2002), 245.

356 episodes because the audiences felt sympathetic with the suffering of the main female character, Indah. Similarly, for Leo, audiences are entertained by a representation of everyday life problems, such as *Perkawinan Dini* (Teen Marriage) which directly presents a problem of family with teens.³⁰

A formula is not a single or a simple entity. Nevertheless, the sinetron producer often ignores complexity for pragmatic reasons. Although Budi Sutrisno produces *sinetron kolosal laga*, his formula is quite similar to the drama sinetron producers. In some ways he develops his formula from his reading of *kung fu* serials and action cinema. However, he also presents romantic love issues like drama sinetron. In other words, in sinetron whether they are action, drama, mystery, or comedy, the discourse of romantic love is always present.³¹ The similar pattern applied by most Indonesian producers is in line with Eco's argument that "there is no basic variation, but rather the repetition of a habitual scheme in which the reader can recognize something he has already seen and of which he has grown fond".³²

Like most action cinema, the lure of Budi Sutrisno's productions is in the domination of action as spectacle rather than narrative. However, the concept of action in this sinetron is not like John Fiske's definition of action-adventure films which "highlight the physical excesses, the emphasis on the body, the grotesqueries and the immoralities, the offensiveness".³³ The concept of action in this sinetron is more about fighting. Indeed, *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, like other popular sinetrons, does not present a thoughtful and complicated story which needs the reasoning mind.

³⁰ Susanto, "Tiada Hari Tanpa Sinetron [No Day without Sinetron]."

³¹ Nuraini Juliastuti, "Dalam Ruang Pribadi Penonton: Romantisme Dan Ekonomi Politik Sinetron Indonesia [in the Personal Space of Viewers: Romanticism and Politic Economy of Indonesian Sinetron]," KUNCI Cultural Studies Center, http://www.kunci.or.id/esai/misc/juliastuti_sinetron.htm2001, (accessed 13 January 2006).

³² Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995), 104.

³³ Paul Rutherford, "Action Adventure Shows," The Museum of Broadcast Communication, <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv//A/htmlA/actionadvent/actionadvent.htm>, (accessed 12 March).

Although the action or the moving body is dominant, the narrative is also strong. As in other sinetron, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is also full of conflict, black and white, and evil intention to make the main female character suffer. Although the background story is Java in the seventeenth century, the story is similar to many drama sinetron. It invites the female viewers to identify with Farida, the main female character. As Java is rich with narrative, there are many characters in popular Javanese legend that can be exploited for this sinetron story. Javanese people are familiar with characters such as Nyai Blorong and Nyai Rara Kidul³⁴. However, the production company PT Genta Buana, as Sindu Dharma explained, does not produce any historical or legend sinetron of the kind which require accuracy and authenticity. Rather they produce fictional stories and use some traditional characters in the narrative to enrich the story.³⁵ That is why, although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* was criticised for its depiction of Nyi Rara Kidul as being different from the traditional Javanese image,³⁶ PT Genta Buana did not feel a need to revise this depiction. However, when they produced the sinetron *Wali Songo*³⁷, the production company did decide that it needed to get advice from scholars who know about the history of these revered Islamic missionaries.

It is difficult to understand audience tastes, especially as they change over time. Intuition is the key to producing successful programs, since most production houses do not do audience research. A production house, such as PT Genta Buana, has to develop various business strategies for dealing with the uncertain market. As Sindu Dharma explained, PT Genta Buana, like other production houses, never does formal audience research to find out the market demand. The key is that they are sensitive to any issue which has the potential to create conflict in society.

³⁴ Nyi (Nyai) Blorong and Nyi (Nyai) Roro (Lara/Rara) Kidul are Javanese legendary women, described a greater length in later chapters of this thesis.

³⁵ Personal conversation with Sindu Dharma in October 2003.

³⁶ From a reader's letter to Indosiar in January 2004

³⁷ The Wali Songo (Nine Muslim saints or first Muslim missionaries) were: Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Sunan Giri, Sunan Bonang, Sunan Ampel, Sunan Kudus, Sunan Kalijaga, Sunan Gunung Jati, Sunan Muria, and Sunan Drajat, who spread Islam in Java in the 15th century. They are recognised as important figures in the transformation of Javanese religion and culture. People still come to their tombs to honour them.

They also create a set of standards for acceptable content: “We do not want to offend any people”.³⁸ This opinion is in line with Best’s statement that for several reasons, especially the risk of losing a segment of the potential market, media producers always take care not to offend the dominant morality of society.³⁹

Although producing entertainment is business it differs from other commodity production. Entertainment, sinetron especially, sells images or stories which the consumers can enjoy. There is a possibility that the images they produce suggest what the society considers to be taboo, such as violence, sadism, pornography, mysticism, sexual permissiveness, consumerism, hedonism or feudalism. Television representation “must be sensitive to, and can only survive legitimately by operating within, the general boundaries or framework of what everyone agrees to: the consensus”.⁴⁰ PT Genta Buana had to stop and edit some scenes of another of its sinetron, *Angling Dharma*, because some Hindu-Balinese sent a letter of protest to Indosiar asking them to stop broadcasting this sinetron. After this incident, Indosiar then sent two Hindu scholars and one historian to watch the process of production.⁴¹

Producing sinetron in Indonesia has not always been free from pressure. In the New Order era, pressure came from state regulations. Certainly under the New Order era most media was required to glorify the state ideology imposed through the Board of Censorship (LSF), as was mentioned in the previous chapter. There was also a 1996 broadcast regulation which controlled the materials of the programs. In this Regulation the elements of broadcasting were required to build national morality and character, enhance the unity of Indonesia, and empower *nilai-nilai luhur bangsa* (the nation’s supreme values), national discipline, and a love of science and technology, but should not incite conflict in religious affairs or

³⁸ Personal conversation with Sindu Dharma in October 2003.

³⁹ Best, "The Social Control of Media Content," 613.

⁴⁰ Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery Of "Ideology": Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," in *Culture, Society and the Media*, ed. M M. Gurevitch, T Bennett, J Curran, and J Woollacott (London: Methuen, 1982), 87.

⁴¹ Akhmad Sekhu, "Wali Songo [the Nine Saints]," *Republika*, 5 October 2003, http://www.republika.co.id/koran_detail.asp?id=141909&kat_id=103&kat_id1=&kat_id2=

lower the national culture.⁴² This regulation constrained producers because prior to the production, before the shooting started, they were required to report all details of production to the Censorship Board.

A problem of media as an industry is that it offers an experience rather than an object. People are worried about “the effect of exposure to images of sexuality, violence, or (an) unorthodox world”; also “any member of the audience is qualified to judge the quality of media”.⁴³ Nowadays most production houses in Indonesia are free to develop their own creativity, however they are still held in check by social expectations.

As well as the state Censorship Board, which apparently still exists, with the same powers and procedures as under the New Order, there is an independent regulatory body, the *Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia* (KPI: Indonesian Broadcasting Commission) which keeps close watch on the content of television programs. The KPI is not a censorship board which can cut parts of a television program. It can send a letter of admonition to the television station if a program contains offensive features such as violence, pornography, or denigrating religion. The KPI also collaborates with police to carry out sanctions in the form of prosecutions or fines of television stations which continue to broadcast programs containing offensive features. Viewers’ successful protests against certain media productions broadcast on television, such as the NGO protests against the sinetron *Bunglon*⁴⁴ (Chameleon) or the fundamentalist Muslim group protest against the film *Buruan Cium Gue*⁴⁵ (Kiss Me Quick), show that the media industry is not free from

⁴² Wardhana, *Televisi Dan Prasangka Budaya Massa* [Television and Mass Culture Prejudice] 41-4.

⁴³ Best, "The Social Control of Media Content," 612.

⁴⁴ 6 NGOs protested against the broadcasting of *Bunglon* because women were represented only as victims of violence and sexual objects and there are some explicit images such as free sex between an adult and a high-school student, between high school students, and an abortion carried out on a high school student, as well as anti-social actions such as scenes of children excessively fighting against their parents, and of drug transaction and use. Following the protests the *sinetron* was then banned after the first few episodes Haryati, "Upaya Menyorot TV Sehat [an Effort to Look at Healthy TV Shows]," *Pikiran Rakyat*, 21 January 2006, <http://www.pikiran-rakyat.com/cetak/2006/012006/21/0903.htm>, (accessed 26 March 2006)..

⁴⁵ Muslim groups were offended by the title which, they said, encouraged adultery. They pushed the government to ban this movie, although the Censorship Board (Lembaga Sensor Film/LSF)

attempts at social control. Failure to conform to such requirements could lead to a ban on broadcasting by the television station, which would mean failure to gain profits. That is why the media industry often operates self censorship to keep from offending the dominant morality.

In summary, as producer of *sinetron kolosal laga*, Budi Sutrisno, with his Indonesianised *kung fu* genre, presents to his audiences a distinctive genre he developed by exploiting specifically Javanese legend and narrative or epic history. As what he produces is distinctive and in the area of myth and beliefs, he seldom attracts criticism as other drama *sinetron* or film producers do. Another aspect of his successful formula for *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is its development out of earlier popular comic books, a radio serial and film.

The Evolution of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*

It is common to translate popular radio drama into television format. Episodic stories and soap opera had their origins as radio drama before they were aired on television. This is possible because both radio and television dramas are “designed to consider the commercial break”. Indeed, early television drama was “considered radio with pictures”.⁴⁶ Indonesia has a long history of adaptation. Indonesians have been used to producing cinema or television drama based on other popular media, as is also common in the Western tradition of producing films based on drama or novels such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *Pride and Prejudice*. The first Indonesian film, *Loetoeng Kasaroeng* (Fake Monkey), was adapted from a popular folk story. Similarly, *Si Tjonat* was first a martial arts comic book published by Drukkerij Hoa Siang In Kiok which was adapted into a martial arts

had already passed it with no cuts. The producer of the movie then withdrew it and then re-released it with a different title *Satu Kecupan* (One Kiss) ———, "Hak Publik Mengontrol TV [the Right of Public in Controlling TV]," *Pikiran Rakyat*, 5 December 2005, <http://www.pikiran-rakyat.com/cetak/2005/1205/05/0803.htm>, (accessed 1 December 2006)..

⁴⁶ Muriel G. Cantor, *Prime-Time Television: Content and Control*, Sage Commtext Series ; V. 3 (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980), 29.

film in the 1930s. This film can be considered as the first martial arts film in Indonesia.

Misteri Gunung Merapi was first a comic serial written by Ashmadi Sjarif. The comic serials were republished by P.T. Elex Media Komputindo. The most recent publication of this comic is the second serial, *Harimau Siluman* in 2002. In the 1970s martial art comics were popular in Indonesia. The Indonesians were entertained by the superhero with his ability to have contact with the supernatural world, such as *Kelelawar*,⁴⁷ *Jaka Lola* (The Orphan), *Lembah Seribu Bunga* (The Valley of a Thousand Flowers), *Sinar Perak dari Selatan* (The Silver Glow from the South) and *Misteri Gunung Merapi*.

In the 1980s radio drama could be considered the most popular Indonesian entertainment. Most radio drama was sponsored by medical companies such as PT Kalbe Farma or PT Medifarma. Most stories were fictional, however there were small elements of Indonesian history that did not need to be an accurate narrative as it only functioned as the background of the story. With 30 minutes' duration and 3-4 advertisement breaks, radio dramas, which were mostly martial arts stories, entertained listeners and stimulated their imaginings of supernatural power. There were many popular radio dramas in 1980s such as *Saur Sepuh* (Wise Advice), *Tutur Tinular* (Circulated Advice), *Babad Tanah Leluhur* (Legend of the Ancestry), *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, *Mahkota Mayangkara* (The Mistaken Crown) and *Kaca Benggala* (Mirror for Learning). Most of the stories are about the journeys of noble warriors with their chivalrous fight against evil. Most are very similar to each other, and only in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is found the element of mystery, which created a stimulus of terror with the laugh of Mak Lampir, the sound and the music.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ceres E. (Ceres Embate) Pioquinto, "Dangdut at Sekaten: Female Representations in Live Performance," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 29, no. 1-2 (1995).

⁴⁸ "Sandiwara Radio: Dari Kuping Turun Ke Hati [Radio Drama: From the Ears Come to the Heart]," 80-an, <http://lapanpuluhan.blogspot.com/2006/02/sandiwara-radio-dari-kuping-turun-ke.html>, (accessed 3 February).

Because of its popularity, radio drama was then filmed. *Saur Sepuh*, as the most popular radio drama, was the first story to be produced in a cinema version. The cinema version attracted large audiences because they wanted to see the visualization of their imagination. The popularity of the cinema version of *Saur Sepuh* was a spectacular phenomenon. Most legend-based films, such as *Sangkuriang*, *Siluman Buaya Putih* (White Crocodile Spirit), *Kutukan Nyai Rara Kidul* (The Curse of Nyai Rara Kidul) were not shown in ‘first class theatres’ such as Theatre 21, as most of the audience of such films were from the lower classes.⁴⁹ However the four films of *Saur Sepuh*⁵⁰ were able to fill the theatres and created a long queue for both the first-class and second-class theatres. Imitating the popularity of *Saur Sepuh*, in the 1990s the three episodes of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*⁵¹ were produced: *Penghuni Rumah Tua* (The Dweller of the Old House), *Titisan Roh Nyai Kembang* (The Reincarnation of Nyai Kembang), and *Perempuan Berambut Api* (Women with Hair of Fire) but unfortunately they failed in the market.⁵² As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* as a radio drama is different from the sinetron version, especially in the setting. The setting of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* in the radio drama, as it was written by the West Sumatran Asjmadi Sjafar, is West Sumatra in the 19th century⁵³ while in the sinetron it is Java in the 17th century. The story of *Misteri*

⁴⁹ "Eighties in Action: Dari Gigitan Barry Sampai Tendangan Eva [Eighties in Action: From Barry's Bite to Eva's Kick]," 80-an, <http://lapanpuluhan.blogspot.com/2005/10/eighties-in-action-dari-gigitan-barry.html>, (accessed 3 February).

⁵⁰ In 1993, *Saur Sepuh* was produced for *sinetron* and broadcast on TPI (Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia) but it was not as popular as either the radio drama or the cinema version. The other *sinetrons* of a similar genre screened by TPI were *Mahkota Mayangkara* (1994) and *Kaca Bengala* (1995) and both of them were not as popular as *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. Around the same time, PT Genta Buana produced *Tutur Tinular* and it was broadcasted by ANTV. Similar to *Saur Sepuh*, although as radio drama *Tutur Tinular* was very popular, as a *sinetron* its rating was low. In my opinion, it was not broadcast on the right television station as the target audiences of ANTV, suggested by most ANTV programs being MTV or similar music programs, are the young and modern Indonesians.

⁵¹ In the cinema version, Sembara was played by Fendi Pradana, Farida was played by Ida Iasha, Faridha Pasha was cast as Mak Lampir, as in the sinetron version, and the director of the cinema version was Lilik Sudjio.

⁵² "Sandiwara Radio: Dari Kuping Turun Ke Hati [Radio Drama: From the Ears Come to the Heart]."

⁵³ As Farida Pasha, the actress taking the part of Mak Lampir told me, some people believe that a real Mak Lampir lived in the past. She was a Sumatranese who worked as a housekeeper in a

Gunung Merapi for the sinetron was written by Abnar Romli, a graduate of the Tegal Slawi *pesantren* in Central Java, and that makes the nuances of Javanese culture and *pesantren* stronger.

With the success of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, in 2000 and 2001 almost every Indonesian television station aired epic action serials. SCTV broadcasted *Misteri Ni Pelet* (The Mystery of Ni Pelet) and *Prahara Prabu Siliwangi* (The Catastrophe of King Siliwangi). Indosiar, beside *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, also screened *Dendam Nyi Pelet* (The Revenge of Nyi Pelet) and *Angling Dharma* (King Angling Dharma). TPI aired *Badai Laut Selatan* (The Storm of the South Sea) and RCTI *Borobudur* (Borobudur Temple). All of these gained double-digit ratings.⁵⁴

The fact that the sinetron of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is recognised and acknowledged as an adaptation from earlier versions does not mean that its production merely involves a filming of the story line of its predecessors. Adaptation for sinetron in Indonesia can mean two things, direct adaptation of an existing story from book or radio to screen and indirect adaptation as a ‘spin off’ when a new, but imitative, story is composed based on an incident or character or a general style and setting of the original.⁵⁵ In the process of direct adaptation, there is a concept of conversion, choosing, focusing, re-conceptualizing, rethinking, and understanding between one medium and the other. As in the process of adaptation the dramatic structure is re-conceptualized there is a new process of production, which is why in adaptation there can be originality. Similarly, in a ‘spin off’ there is a process of adaptation because in imitation there is a process of recreating which needs redefinition and recomposing of the

Dutch family in the colonial era. Because she made a mistake she ran away and people never knew her name again. Some people believed Mak Lampir ran away to Java but they did not know her location.

⁵⁴ Antariksawan Jusuf, "Action Serials and 'Me Too' Programming in Local TV," *the Jakarta Post*, 6 May 2001 2001, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/Archives/Archives-act2.asp?Search=action+serials+and+me+too+programming&Method=AND&SearchIn=Title§ion=all&range=custom&month1=01&day1=01&year1=1998&month2=05&day2=15&year2=2006&Sorting=DESC>, (accessed 26 March 2006).

⁵⁵ Garin Nugroho, *Kekuasaan Dan Hiburan [Power and Entertainment]* (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Bentang Budaya, 1995), 154-9.

materials.⁵⁶ That is why people find many differences between *Misteri Gunung Merapi* in radio drama and in sinetron. As I have discussed in the previous section, the audiences lose the nuance of Sumatranese culture in the sinetron, and they also miss the horror sensation of the radio drama. It can be said that although the sinetron tried to reproduce the radio drama, in the process of its adaptation, there was a process of recreation which can produce a very different result. One aspect of this adaptation is the use of dubbing in the sinetron.

Dubbing has been popular in Indonesia since 1990s. Most *pengisi suara* (voice over specialists) were voice actors and actresses from the radio dramas of the 1980s. The popularity of *telenovela* and *wuxia* TV series in Indonesia of the 1990s opened a new career for voice actors to dub these programs. The dubbing of the imported non-English programs initially was to carry out the government regulation in promoting *bahasa Indonesia yang baik dan benar* (proper Indonesian language). Then, because with dubbing the audiences easily understand the narrative without reading the sub-title text, dubbing continues to be popular today.⁵⁷

Although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is a local production, the producer chooses to use voice actors and actresses for the characters in the sinetron. The purpose of this is to bring the aura of the radio drama into the sinetron. The voice actors and actresses of the sinetron are mostly from Sanggar Prathivi, the same ones who performed in the radio drama version of the 1980s. The choice to employ the same voice actors and actresses would enable the adult viewers, especially, to recognise and identify with the characters of the story. It also suggests that the producer has tried to attract the same audience as the radio drama version and arouse nostalgia for the popular story of the radio drama, which will flow on to his sinetron production. This may be related to his decision not to employ stars to perform the characters in the sinetron, but rather inexperienced

⁵⁶ Ibid., 92-4.

⁵⁷ Susi Ivvaty, "Bilingual Dengan Sulih Suara Tanpa Greget [Bilingual: Dubbing without Character]," *Kompas*, 16 April 2006, <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0604/16/hiburan/2567186.htm>, (accessed 12 December 2006).

actors, new faces in sinetron or cinema. He does not want the audience to identify with the star but with the character, to create the same effect as the radio drama. With voice actors and actresses, weak acting is covered by the strong performances of the voices. A requirement for successful voice actors and actresses is that they should understand the characterization and the intonation of the character that they play. When they speak, they should look at the movements of the lips of the character so that it seems like that it is not being dubbed.⁵⁸

The evolution of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* from radio drama is not the only cause of its popularity. Rather it is the combination of choosing the right television station to air it and the right time to broadcast it.

Prime-time Viewing: Violence and Sex

The VCD version of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is categorised for adult viewers, however, as a television program, it is broadcast at family viewing time. Thus it can be classified as family program. Certainly, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is popular not only for adult viewers but also children. I remember that many young children liked to imitate the way Mak Lampir laughs, although in radio drama her laugh created terror for the listeners.

Misteri Gunung Merapi was first broadcast every Monday at 8-9 p.m. WIB⁵⁹. Then it was changed to every Sunday at 7– 8 p.m. (WIB). Thus it has been broadcast in ‘prime time’ and in ‘prime access time’. The 8-9 p.m. slot is the first hour of the evening prime-time in which the audiences are family and adult and 7-8 p.m. is considered as prime access time as many children join with their parents to watch television.⁶⁰ It could be that since this sinetron is popular among

⁵⁸ Hir, "Voice Over: Suaranya Harus Berkarakter [Voice Over: The Voice Should Have Characterization]," *Republika Online*, 24 Nopember 2004 2004, http://www.republika.co.id/cetak_berita.asp?id=179086&kat_id=105&edisi=Cetak.

⁵⁹ WIB (*Waktu Indonesia Bagian Barat*) or West Indonesia Time, which is the time in Jakarta.

⁶⁰ James A. Brown, "Family Viewing," The Museum Broadcast Communications, <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/F/htmlF/familyviewin/familyviewin.htm>, (accessed 12 March 2006).

children, Indosiar has changed its broadcast time to an hour earlier to accommodate this viewer group. In this way it broadens the segment of the audience likely to be ready to watch something on television.

Most programs broadcast in Prime Access⁶¹ (7:00-8:00 P.M.) are “children’s programming: infotainment, game shows, comedies; syndicated, local” while in Prime Time⁶² (8:00-11:00) are comedy, into melodrama, and action adventure”⁶³, as the viewers are not limited to adults but include a large number of children.⁶⁴ Although the concept of ‘prime time’ is a US television network station convention, Indonesian private television stations apply the same convention. *Misteri Gunung Merapi*, as an epic sinetron, has the elements of comedy, melodrama, and action adventure which are suitable for broadcasting in prime time. As it is broadcast in ‘family hour’, the content of the program should avoid “obscene, indecent or profane language” and “explicitly to visual depiction” of sex and violence.⁶⁵ As *Misteri Gunung Merapi* was broadcast in what is both prime time and family viewing time, it responds to parents’ concern to protect their children from objectionable material. So far the costumes and the scenes of this sinetron are fairly polite.

Prabowo, as cited by Collins, had stated that Indonesian culture generally is a violent culture. Indonesians will use violence quickly when they have a problem.⁶⁶ Fighting between families, village members, ethnic groups, and religions is common in Indonesia and all of these shows that the culture of Indonesia is full of violence and the military system is a mirror of the society. As

⁶¹ Audience: busy adults in the home, children Michael Sae, "Programming," The Museum Broadcast of Communication, <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/P/htmlP/programming/programming.htm>, (accessed 12 March).

⁶² Audience: first hour, "family"; progressively "adult", Ibid. .

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Stacy L. Smith and others, "Prime-Time Television: Assessing Violence During the Most Popular Viewing Hours," *Journal of Communication* 52, no. 1 (2002).

⁶⁵ Brown, "Family Viewing."

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Fuller Collins, "Indonesia: A Violent Culture?," *Asian Survey* 42, no. 4 (2002), <http://caliber.ucpress.net/doi/pdf/10.1525/as.2002.42.4.582>.

violence is part of everyday news in Indonesia, people's sensitivity to violence is less than to sexuality.

Most action serials have elements of violence. When an action serial is broadcast in prime time, the element of violence is usually "more graphic, contains less humour, and less likely to feature unrealistically low levels of harm". This is also true for any other genre. And it seems that there is possibility that violence will be imitated by children.⁶⁷ However, although *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has many fighting scenes with aggressive behaviour, it is bloodless violence. The violence in this sinetron is without pain or harm although there is an element of punishment. That may be why, unlike any other action serials which have been severely criticised for violent scenes, there is no such criticism of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. However, it could be, referring to Prabowo's opinion, that Indonesian viewers are not sensitive to violence.⁶⁸

According to a 1979 study, the term 'sexuality' in television refers to "a wide range of behaviours, the coding scheme included relatively casual acts such as supportive touching, kissing and hugging as well as more controversial behaviour and lifestyles such as homosexuality, rape, and prostitution".⁶⁹ Like any other action adventure shows there are some sexual scenes in *Misteri Gunung Merapi* but like other prime-time television programs the sex is not explicit.⁷⁰ There are some scenes of rape but it is not portrayed physically or verbally so that only adult viewers could understand that the scenes refer implicitly to rape behaviour. There are also some suggestions of intercourse and flirtation scenes in this serial but these are considered reasonable for children watching with their parents.

⁶⁷Smith and others, "Prime-Time Television: Assessing Violence During the Most Popular Viewing Hours."

⁶⁸ In personal conversations with a number of parents about watching films which are categorised as M (15+), most of them let their children (under 12 years old) watch these movies or TV programs as long as there is no element of sex in it.

⁶⁹ Theresa L. Silverman and others, "Physical Contact and Sexual Behavior on Prime-Time TV," *Journal of Communication* 29, no. 1 (1979): 34.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*: 41.

As a prime time program, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* also attracts female viewers, although the action genre normally seems to be targeted at male viewers. This shows that *Misteri Gunung Merapi* does not simply follow the conventions of action drama. Its main structure is the romance between the main male and female characters, Sembara and Farida, surrounded by foil figures who try to break up their relationship. This structure is popular in ‘female genres’ such as melodrama or romance, but not for action drama. However, the combination of romance and martial arts is popular in *kung fu* or *wuxia* drama, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Conclusion

Although with the end of the New Order the government does not now supervise the production of sinetron, the ideology of market demand employed by the television station influences production houses from the early stages of production to the distribution stage and directs the creativity of production teams. When they aim for an innovative production they still have to consider the values of society because if they challenge the norms their production will get a lot of protests which may entail the end of the broadcasting. This also shows up in how at the consumption stage the sinetron still has to deal with attempted social control in the form of protests made under the banners of the defence of public morality and consumer protection against offensive material.

The success of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* can be best understood in terms of Best’s argument about the social controls operating in media industries. As its production team said⁷¹, although government no longer produces regulations which control their creativity and innovation, the producer, with ratings as his reason, has developed various business strategies to deal with the shifting tastes of the audience. With the producer’s motto that he does not want to offend any people, he is always sensitive to any recent issue in society. While innovation

⁷¹ The production manager and the director, in conversation with the author.

might be the aim, the dominant morality must still be maintained. In Chapter IX, I will explore how this sinetron negotiates the dominant morality in screening sexuality and the female body.

I also agree with Keane and Moran that “adapting already successful materials and content offers some chance of duplicating past and existing success”.⁷² In part the success of this sinetron derives from its evolution from a popular radio drama with the same title and general theme. However, as Indonesia is still in its infancy in producing entertainment, the next issue to consider is adaptation. How is the simply aural repertoire of the martial arts genre of the radio drama translated into the combined visual and aural repertoire of sinetron? Does the sinetron apply a creative response to the popular global entertainment genres of *kung fu*, *wuxia* and Hollywood action-adventure? The next chapter will be about genre and narrative in *Misteri Gunung Merapi*.

⁷² Michael Keane and Albert Moran, "(Re)Presenting Local Content: Programme Adaptation in Asia and the Pacific," *Media International Australia*, (2005), <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00002432>.